

燐々 S U N イラスト ももこ

7

Когда-нибудь
ты всё-таки
выберешь
меня, да?



隣のアリヤさん
ロシア語でデレる
時々ボソッと

Иногда Аля внешне
выглядит по-русски

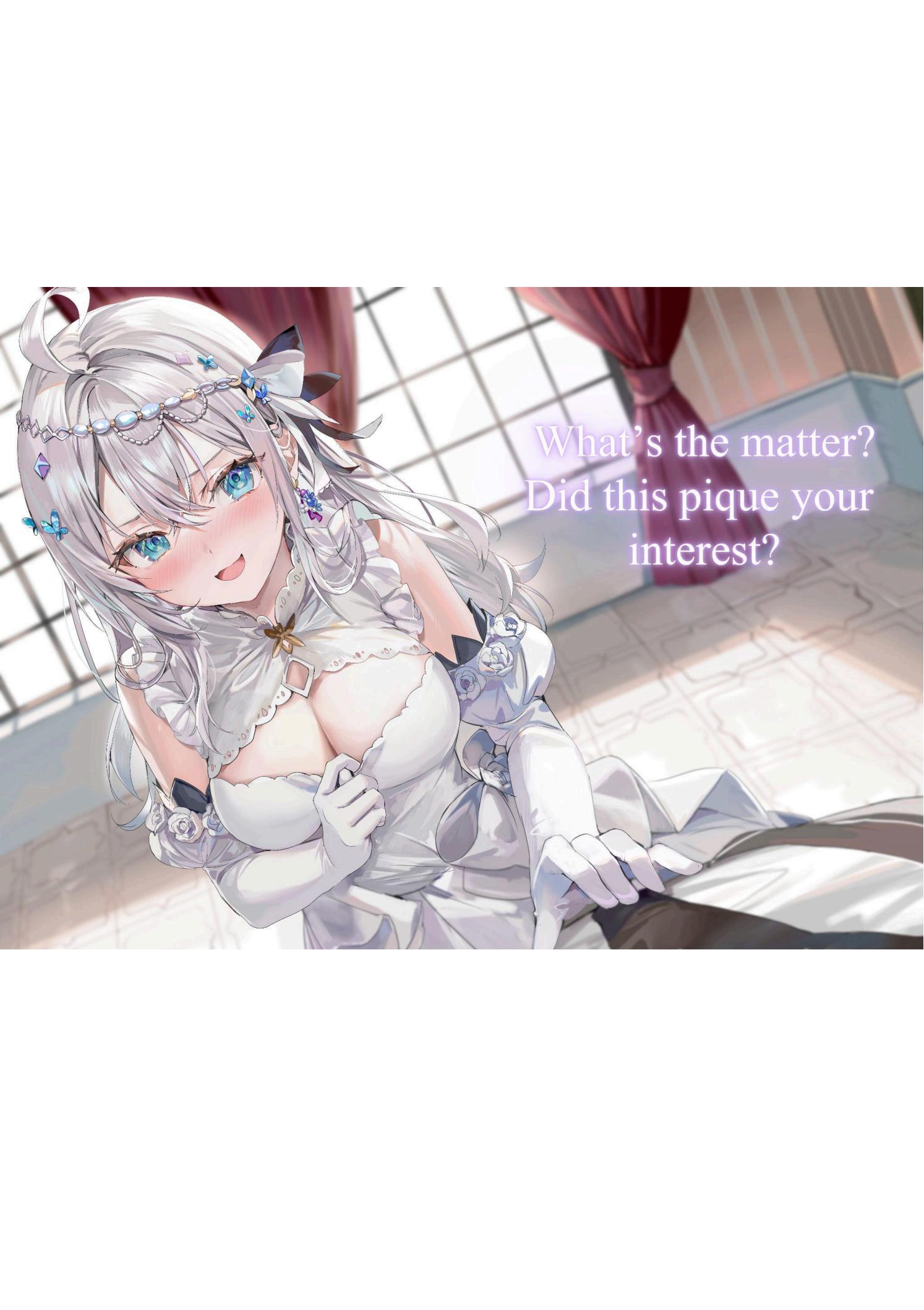
時々ボソッと
ロシア語でデレる

Иногда Аля внезапно кокетничает по-русски

隣のアーリヤさん

7



A white-haired anime girl with blue eyes is shown from the waist up, wearing a white maid uniform with a large bow at the neck and a white apron. She has a headband with butterflies and roses, and butterflies are scattered around her hair. She is looking towards the right with a slight smile. The background shows a window with red curtains and a tiled floor.

What's the matter?
Did this pique your
interest?



“It’s... yeah, that’s fine.”



Ohohoho, victory
is mine~!

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時々ボソッとロシア語でデレる 隣のアーリヤさん7

燐々SUN

角川スニーカー文庫

23787

Alya Sometimes Hides Her Feelings in Russian Volume 7, Fan Translation

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Prologue - This Is

“Alright then, take your time~”

Saying that with a meaningful smile, Slit-paisen left the Handicraft Club room. The sun had completely set, and the only source of light illuminating the room was the electric light pouring in from the schoolyard, accompanied with faintly audible voices of students from the distant schoolyard.

“Um... Are you sure you don’t want to go to the schoolyard?”

“...Of course. After hearing such a rumor, there’s no way I could go. We’d definitely be misunderstood in a weird way.”

“Well, yeah...”

Even without saying it out loud, Masachika understood what she meant by “misunderstanding”. That is, the rumor that Slit-paisen had told Masachika earlier, about Alisa and him. If the two people in question, the subjects of the rumor themselves, appeared in such enthusiastic outfits, many students would surely think, “Those two are definitely a couple.” In fact, if they were to say, “We’re not dating,” in this situation, they might be met with dubious questions like, “Eh?! That’s a lie, right?”

“And... while this dress is beautiful, its design is a bit too immodest for me to wear in public...”

Alisa shyly averted her gaze as her words trailed off. Following her gaze, Masachika’s eyes were drawn to the two large hills that immediately caught his sight, causing him to quickly look upwards.

No, well, that’s true. Seriously...

It felt embarrassing to say it out loud, so he silently agreed with her in his thoughts.

Even though Alisa’s band outfit had a somewhat daring neckline for her, the dress she currently wore was even more revealing. Frankly

speaking, about half of her upper chest was visible. Quite the amount of cleavage.

Yeah, I see. Reminds me of that thing where sexy Onee-san characters in manga sometimes store and retrieve their phones from their cleavage. I feel like she could pull that off.

He instinctively tried to escape with his usual otaku-like thoughts, but it immediately backfired as the image of an Onee-san character in his mind was swapped with the current appearance of Alisa, and Masachika quickly shook his head to quell such thoughts.

But seriously! With that much cleavage showing, you'd definitely see her bra, right?! If not, then could she maybe be a bra with that kind of shape, or maybe... could it be a braless—

He almost found himself wanting to double check, but he quickly slapped his own cheeks and forced himself to face forward before he could do so. Then, the image of Slit-paisen saying "I made it," flashed in his mind, and Masachika clenched his back teeth.

Oi, Slit!!! You can't expect her to appear in an outfit like this in front of all the other students! Who said she should go this far?! But it's an incredibly splendid job! Thank you very much!

As he mentally shouted in frustration, Alisa shot him a cold, piercing gaze.

"Is this maybe to your preference?"

"No, it's probably more accurate to say it's something to do with Slit's hobby. Or rather, her trade."

"...Hmm."

Masachika answered immediately so as not to be misunderstood, yet he still couldn't help but feel a skeptical gaze poking at his cheeks. But just then, music began playing from the schoolyard, and both of them instinctively turned their gaze in that direction.

And then, almost simultaneously, their eyes met.

"Ah."

Locking eyes, once again becoming struck by Alisa's dream-like beauty, Masachika's heart raced. Even in the dim light, her skin was white as fresh snow. And despite being in a faintly lit room, her blue eyes sparkled like the stars. The dress emphasized her beauty so much that it felt surreal, like that of being in the presence of a fairy. Alisa's delicate waist appeared fragile, enhancing her cursory impression... Yet at the same time, it harbored a destructive power capable of shattering that very impression—

“Ahem!”

Clearing his throat to dispel such distracting thoughts, Masachika made an effort to not let his uneasiness show on his face. He then gently extended his left hand to Alisa.

“Umm, let's try again this year... Shall we dance?”

“...Sure, why not?”

With Alisa placing her right hand on his hand, they faced each other. As he gently put his other arm around Alisa's back, Masachika felt a sense of tranquility wash over him. Stepping in time with her breath, he gazed at Alisa's face, the distance between them almost allowing their breaths to intermingle.

“...You seem rather reserved this year.”

Playfully asking, while recalling her fiery attitude from last year's post-festival dance, he watched as Alisa furrowed her brows slightly.

“I can't be reckless while wearing borrowed clothes, can I? Or perhaps you'd prefer a more intense dance?”

“Haha, that'll be pretty nerve-wrecking, so let's take it easy today.”

Drawing closer to each other, they maintained eye contact and stepped to the rhythm with a sense of tranquility. Suddenly, Masachika was hit with childhood memories, triggered by a sense of nostalgia.

This feeling... reminds me of the social dance lessons I used to take. Was Ayano my practice partner back then?

In an instant, Alisa boldly pushed herself forcefully against him, pressing her body close. Masachika hurriedly backed away in surprise,

but for some reason, the distance between them didn't increase. They were so close that their legs might bump at any moment.

"Alya-san? Aren't we a bit too close?"

"Really? Isn't it just your imagination?"

"No, it's too close!"

As he spoke, she pushed herself onto him again, causing Masachika to hastily retreat. At this point, there was no dancing left. Masachika was simply doing his best not to trip on Alisa's legs or fall over.

I thought she'd be much calmer than last year!

He struggled to concentrate on his footwork, but the soft sensation of her legs pressing against his was distracting.

Geez, isn't she more aggressive than last year!?

Although his mind was in turmoil from the soft pressure against his chest, even so, Masachika didn't lower his gaze. He knew that if he did, his eyes would be drawn into the deep, mysterious valley.

Hah, I won't fall for Slit's trap!

Having already lost control of his composure, Masachika awkwardly moved his feet around. Alisa relentlessly closed in on him, her smile taking on a sadistic edge.

Fufu, where did your confidence from earlier go?

Sensing that he was thinking about another woman during the dance, she pushed her body against him, partly to chide him. But his state of panic was more intense than she anticipated. Watching Masachika's eyes dart back and forth, she enjoyed the sense of playing with him.

That's right, just focus on the fact that I'm wearing this bold dress and dancing with you!

Drawing him in with both hands to ensure he couldn't escape, she herself pressed closer. In response, Masachika swiftly adjusted his position with an astonishing reaction time.

“Fufu.”

Feeling his legs desperately avoiding her steps and his right hand gently touching her back, Alisa sensed his considerate nature and laughed.

No matter how reckless Alisa's actions were, Masachika would always catch and support her. Overwhelmed with happiness, she continued to toy with him.

Ah, this is fun... Look at me more, only at me. Be my partner alone.

For that reason, their clasped hands grew warm. The body temperature of Masachika, felt up close, making her heartbeat endlessly race. As if being drawn into Masachika's eyes right in front of her, Alisa unconsciously leaned into his face.

“Uwah!”

“Eh? Kya!”

And so, at that moment, Masachika's balance finally gave way. He stumbled, landing on the floor on his rear end as his back hit the wall. Following suit, Alisa also fell forward, only to be caught in Masachika's embrace with his arms tightly around her.

“Ouch~ ...Alya, are you okay?”

Clearly, it was Alisa's fault that Masachika had stumbled, and yet, Masachika immediately showed concern for Alisa without blaming her at all. Warmth and joy filled her heart at his kindness and the worried look he gave her.

Ah, I really should apologize.

She knew that, but an irrepressible smile spread across her face. It was fun, it was delightful... She didn't want to see the boy in front of her clouded with concern, so Alisa turned her smile into something a little more mischievous.

“What's the matter? Why are you so...?”

Looking up at Masachika with a slight upward glance, she slipped her right index finger between her chest and tugged on the edge of her

dress. Then, as if to teasingly show off her cleavage, she whispered in a feverish, seductive tone.

“Did this pique your interest?”

“Wait, wh-what—?!”

Masachika’s composure and gentlemanly demeanor were both utterly shattered in an instant, and he became visibly flustered. Feeling his gaze firmly fixed on her chest, Alisa’s entire body heated up.

“*Fufufu*, what a pervert. Pervert~”

Despite feeling her body burning with embarrassment to the point where she almost wanted to scream, Alisa continued to playfully tease Masachika. Then, to avoid his gaze, she leaned against his chest again. Pressing her ear against his solid chest, she felt his own heart racing just as vigorously as hers.

Woah, his heart is pounding so hard... Fufu, he really is quite naughty.

Still, it wasn’t a bad feeling. Being touched or looked at by him wasn’t bad, was what Alya thought.

What kind of emotion was this? Even though it was still embarrassingly intense to the point where she almost wanted to scream, her heart was filled with happiness. This emotion... she had felt it somewhere before—

“O-Oi, Alya? Oi~”

Masachika’s voice was full of bewilderment. Amused by his tone, Alisa’s shoulders shook as she laughed.

“No, what’s so amusing? If you’re not hurt, could you please let go of me?”

“Oh my? Are you dissatisfied with being embraced by me?”

“I-I mean, clinging to me like this—”

Seeing Masachika in a state of utter distress while stumbling over his words, Alisa closed her eyes with a content smile while shuckling softly.

I'm just teasing Masachika-kun. That's all...

Muttering this to herself, Alisa leaned against Masachika. Seeing her smile, which clearly reflected her complete trust, Masachika also relaxed, as if surrendering to the situation.

And so, the two of them continued to snuggle quietly together until the sound of the music from the schoolyard faded away.

Chapter 1 - Reunion

Seirei Academy's Autumn Festival came to an end, and after a short break, the students returned to their regular classes. However, many of them seemed unable to concentrate on their studies at all. They appeared restless, as if eager to chat with friends and classmates. Some couldn't resist and were even secretly chatting on their smartphones during classes.

What occupied the majority of their thoughts was an incident that took place during the school-wide morning assembly in the gymnasium. Or perhaps, it was better described as a public apology.

“I sincerely apologize.”

Uttering those words while exemplarily prostrating himself on stage in front of the entire student body was Yusho Kiryuin, a charismatic guy at the academy who could easily be counted among the top three popular guys.

He was the heir of a major corporation, known for his exceptional piano skills and his handsome face, earning him nicknames like the “Piano Prince.” Furthermore, his pride oftenly matched his reputation. His actions, however, shocked the entire student body and elicited screams from many female students. No, perhaps the most shocking part was... the fact that Yusho's head, while prostrating himself, was shining brightly.

His enchantingly silky smooth hair, which was always perfectly styled and caused many female students to swoon in admiration, had completely vanished from his head. Moreover, the person who shaved his head seemed to have done a poor job, as bandages were placed all over, giving a painful or rather comical appearance... Well, to be clear, it was quite amusing. Especially considering his face still maintained its usual enchanting charm.

And to be honest, the explanation Touya had provided at the assembly didn't quite resonate among the student body.

Even so, as a sense of understanding gradually spread throughout the crowd, voices of anger started to emerge, mainly from students who had suffered some kind of damage due to the incident Yusho had instigated. Just as things were about to escalate, Yusho and Sumire, who were both on the stage, suddenly had another uproar. Sumire, for reasons of “shared responsibility,” took out scissors and tried to cut off her cherished vertical roll hairstyle. Chaos erupted once again. Several female kendo club members stormed the stage to stop her, and a battle reminiscent of the recent swordplay performance ensued. It all culminated with everyone sitting down after Chisaki’s fierce command—an absolute scene straight out of a comedy sketch.

And so, in this puzzling state where the entire student body was unsure whether to laugh or be angry, the principal announced Yusho’s punishment: a one-month suspension. And thus, the school-wide morning assembly came to an end. And now, the entire student body was immersed in conversations about that incident. Among them, Masachika, who was believed to be the mastermind behind thwarting Yusho’s plot, naturally attracted attention.

“Hey, Kuze! That thing this morning, was it really caused by the piano showdown during the festival?”

“You actually won against the Piano Prince in a piano duel?”

“How did you find out Kiryuin-kun was the culprit behind that whole commotion?”

As soon as first period class ended, classmates crowded around Masachika, and he couldn’t help but grimace in response. Nevertheless, he didn’t want odd rumors and speculations to spread at this point. So, Masachika did his best to answer their questions to the best of his ability.

“How did I figure out Kiryuin was the culprit? Well, assuming that incident was an attempt to bring down the current Student Council, the culprit might be someone eyeing the next council election. There was even the possibility of someone else holding a grudge against the current President and Vice-President... Either way, given the scale of the incident, I thought they’d try to establish contact with the Raikokai for an explanation. So, I was keeping an eye out to see if anyone would approach the room where they were seated in... That’s the gist of it.”

“Heeh~! So, how did you get him to agree to a piano duel?”

“Well, that’s a secret.”

“Aww~! Come on, tell us, we’re really curious!”

“Exactly! That’s exactly what we want to know!”

They pressed Masachika with eager questions, but there were things he couldn’t say, or rather, didn’t want to. So, Masachika sighed with a wry smile and delivered a punchline.

“Cut me some slack. There are some things I can’t talk about regarding the Raikokai.”

Hearing those words, his classmates leaned back with a collective expression of understanding.

“Oh, I see...”

“Yeah, when you put it that way...”

There was a reason they all had somewhat puzzled expressions on their faces. The thing is, about that commotion during the Autumn Festival, there was a gag order issued on the same day. By members of the Raikokai no less.

Even so, they couldn’t shut everyone’s mouths, and a few individuals, mainly outside visitors, posted videos and images of the incident on social media... But those posts were deleted within a minute. Entire accounts were wiped clean. And in the media, there was a short and simple news story: “Suspicious individual intrudes Seirei Academy’s Autumn Festival, apprehended by security guards.”

Despite the scale of the incident, the news article made it seem as if the intruder was caught immediately. It didn’t particularly capture any attention and was largely ignored. It was as if the intrusion had been dealt with swiftly... For students at Seirei Academy, who knew about the Raikokai, their reactions were only a serious “Eh? That’s scary.”

By the way, there wasn’t much involvement from the police and other authorities either... The intruders taken to the student disciplinary committee room had somehow disappeared. Where they went, or what happened to them, was probably better left unknown.

“The idea of a secret organization manipulating a nation from behind the scenes is a conspiracy theory that can be found throughout history and across cultures, but... I’m starting to think that maybe the Raikokai is behind all that.”

“Well, it’s not exactly a secret organization... But their appearance really felt like a gathering of every influential figure out there.”

“Actually, considering everything, a one-month suspension was pretty lenient for Kiryuin.”

“Well, considering the fact his actions were for his motives in the election campaign... An act of mercy, perhaps?”

Masachika’s classmates discussed with subtle hints of fear across their faces. Responding to them with a silent wry smile, Masachika glanced toward the back of the classroom... where another discussion was taking place.

“That live performance was seriously amazing! Hey, do you have any recordings? People from other classes want them too.”

“Oh, recordings? Ah~, I haven’t really thought about that.”

“We have some recordings for practice, but... we didn’t record the studio sessions, I think.”

“Ehhhh~?!”

Exposed to discontented voices, Takeshi and Hikaru exchanged slightly troubled yet proud expressions.

“Kujou-san, I know I’m late but I wanted to thank you for reaching out to me during that firecracker incident. I was starting to panic a little, but your presence was really reassuring.”

“Is that so? Well then... I’m glad.”

“I’d love to see your elf cosplay again, Kujou-san...”

“Ah, that was...a one time thing, you know...”

“Aw~, that’s a shame.”

“And your band outfit was super cool too! I was observing from a distance... Where did you get it?”

“They were actually designed by Nonoa-san, so I’m not quite sure...”

Amidst the admiring and familiar glances, Alisa offered a slightly awkward smile.

While watching this scene unfold, the second period teacher entered the classroom, and the present students reluctantly returned to their seats. Alisa also returned to her seat at the same time.

“Good job out there.”

Offering a slightly fatigued but warm smile towards Alisa, Masachika noticed she looked a bit unsettled as she nodded with wandering eyes.

“...You too.”

She only uttered those words softly, and faced forward and as she took her seat. Masachika offered a wry smile in return.

Oh... looks like she’s still carrying the aftermath of the evening festival. Well, we were quite... enthusiastic during that time.

Thinking that, Masachika started to recall the events from before, but quickly shook his head to snap out of it. In an attempt to focus on the class, he was met with unrelenting attention from his surroundings, once again feeling a sense of unease.

Ugh~, it’s great that our popularity increased because of the school festival, but... this is more mentally exhausting than I expected...

If he were only considering the election campaign, the current situation was quite fortunate. Originally, he encouraged Alisa to form a band primarily to change her image and improve her social skills. Indeed, after the school festival, the way people looked at Alisa had changed. Alisa, who used to be a solitary figure only observed from a distance, was now surrounded by those who wanted to get close to her. And Alisa, despite some confusion at times, had shown a willingness to embrace this change.

From a results perspective, it's a great success... But the unexpected part is that I'm also attracting attention.

Actually, Masachika seemed to be the one stealing the spotlight now. Not in a negative sense, and in the context of the election campaign, it was still a positive outcome. But still, it was unsettling.

Well, the buzz about this morning's assembly will likely die down soon. Once my explanation from earlier spreads throughout the school, things should start to settle down...

But~, such a casual thought turned out to be a mistake.

“Hey, did you seriously kick away a firecracker thrown at Kujou-san?”

“I didn't know Kuze-kun was so skilled at the piano. Where did you learn?”

“What happened to those troublemakers who crashed the school festival?”

“I want to hear about the quiz showdown!”

During breaks between classes, there was a constant influx of people coming in, one after another. Envy and admiration only came his way. Because of this, Masachika couldn't find any time to relax during the breaks. By the time lunch break finally arrived—

“Aaahhh~”

Masachika was alone in the student council room, feeling utterly defeated.

“Uuuuuhhh~”

He was lying face down on the sofa, writhing and moaning incoherently. It was embarrassing as no matter where he went, he was viewed as a model of dignity and maturity.

Taking advantage of being the only person in the room, Masachika reveled in his own misery. Suddenly, he stopped moving and muttered to himself.

“...I got carried away.”

The words that escaped his lips were filled with regret and embarrassment.

He reflected upon his actions during the Autumn Festival, which everyone around him narrated as a heroic tale. To Masachika, all of it was practically a half-buried dark history. His feelings were more along the lines of, “Don’t look at me. Don’t talk about it. Please just leave me alone.”

Defending others against firecrackers on stage with a kick, punching a delinquent in the face. And on top of that...

Vividly recalling his interactions with Yusho, how he’d responded to Yusho’s theatrical attitude and provoked him, with a show of cocky bravado—

“Obgh! Wouuuu!”

A surge of embarrassment exploded inside of him, and Masachika bounced off the sofa, wriggling and squirming in agony.

Ugh, guh, oooohhh... I’m gonna die. Seriously, I’m going to dieeeee.

His small stroke of luck was that; apart from the events on the schoolyard and in the auditorium, there weren’t many witnesses to the other incidents.

The embarrassing “super-strong character” move he had done on Yusho was only known between them. It was unlikely that Yusho would talk to anyone about it, so regarding that exchange, which Masachika considered the epitome of his dark history, it was unlikely that anyone else would find out about it.

With the exception of the confrontation with the delinquent that he knocked out with a punch, the subsequent pursuit by Nonoa’s friends had a much bigger impact, which is why it didn’t become a subject of gossip. His actions were not widely discussed, but the problem in question was the fact that people were mainly talking about the firecracker kick and the piano showdown. As for those two incidents, Masachika didn’t really feel any shame... However, whenever these stories came up, it inevitably reminded him about his overly cocky behavior before and after those events.

I get it, okay? No one actually finds it cringeworthy, and honestly, it's not like everyone knows about it to begin with. I understand, but... it's just so... unghhhh...

Masachika was the type who, when faced with a mix of good and bad things, ended up with the negative impressions outweighing the positive ones. He had done the same before, like focusing only on the painful goodbye with Maa-chan as the whole of memory with her, while treating everything else as a bad experience. This time around, he was faced with the same predicament.

Ugh... Now that I think about it, all the things I did regarding the situation with Shiratori and the surprises I pulled off for Alya feel painfully embarrassing now.

Once he started thinking that way, the negative thoughts started flooding in. The image of Nao's tear-stained face came to his mind, and Alisa's devilish smile and her alluring valley—

“Fubaah!!”

A highly unpleasant memory resurfaced, and once again Masachika bounced off the sofa. Despite his intentions, the memories of such events had been imprinted on his brain, and continued to play out automatically in a chain reaction.

The soft feeling of Alisa's body in his arms. The seductive smile that nearly captivated his heart, accompanied by her swaying—

“Nnnngh!!”

Masachika slammed his forehead against the sofa, forcibly trying to white out his mind. Yet even doing so, the memories from back then that his senses absorbed refused to fade out so easily.

Nyaah! Alya was incredibly beautiful and smelled so good, and she... she pressed her b-boobs against me! But I looked all serious, and there I was with that super eager-to-please grin, shamelessly revealing my ulterior motives. I couldn't bear it! But those boobs were so amazing and she leaned in so close, and Alya didn't seem to notice, but when she tugged her dress, I caught a glimpse of it!

After a while of writhing mentally in a different way this time, he murmured within his mind.

Haah... I wish someone would praise me for keeping my composure in that situation...

"Should I give you some praise?"

Go home, you foolish demon.

Without missing a beat, he promptly smacked down the mischievous little demon Yuki, who had appeared in his mind. The demon dissipated into smoke and disappeared, but it quickly reformed as the smoke gathered.

"Demons never die~♪"

So annoying~

With an irritated huff at the grinning demon departing in fits of laughter, Masachika let out a deep sigh and slumped back.

Though he managed to escape the negative thoughts brought on by such shocking memories, the situation remained unchanged. If he were to step out now, he'd likely attract curious gazes from passing students again. Thinking about this, his mood sank once more.

Ah... I get it now. I'm just not good at being in the spotlight to begin with.

He was faintly aware of it before, but the fundamental reason why he became the shadowy Vice-President, who only worked behind the scenes, during middle school likely stemmed from that very issue. Feeling like a lousy person himself, whenever he was in the spotlight, he was afraid his true nature would be seen, which he thought would make him unbearable. That's why he tried to stay behind the scenes, rather than standing in the spotlight...

But I swore to support Alya while standing beside her, so I have to get used to things like this...

In the current election campaign, Masachika had resolved to step into the spotlight himself. Unlike Yuki, who was fully qualified for the

position of Student Council President, he believed Alya needed someone by her side...

—Is that really the case?

A voice of doubt cut into his thoughts. What came to mind were the remarkable displays of growth Alya had shown recently.

Her prideful determination to stand on her own during the quiz showdown. Her acceptance as the leader of the band consisting her peers. The leadership she demonstrated on stage to subdue the firecracker incident. And... the way she awkwardly handled the people who came to see her earlier with a smile.

Recalling these moments, a certain feeling swelled within Masachika. It was a feeling he'd had during the school festival, an intuition...

The day when Alya doesn't need me might be closer than I thought...

At the very least, it seemed he wouldn't need to constantly be at her side as he used to be. Alya's rate of growth exceeded his expectations. Perhaps, due to being overly protective, maybe he was the one who has been limiting Alya's circle of friends—

“Oi, you scum. Stop making excuses and neglecting your responsibilities, you coward.”

Saying this aloud to remind himself, Masachika propelled himself up with newfound determination. Sitting up straight on the sofa, he glanced at the room's clock, realizing that the lunch break was already halfway over.

“Ah~”

Since he didn't bring a lunchbox today, he'd have to either go to the cafeteria or buy something from the school store if he wanted to eat. However, considering the possibility of being surrounded by people again, a sense of heaviness took over his chest.

...I'm not that hungry anyway. Maybe I can skip lunch... Besides, it's almost time to go even if I leave now.

While absentmindedly pondering, the door to the Student Council room suddenly swung open. Without much surprise, Masachika looked towards the entrance with an indifferent expression...and his eyes met Maria, who just entered.

In an instant, a radiant smile swept across Maria's face.

Oh, what a nice smile.

As he inadvertently squinted his eyes, Maria approached with a series of quick footsteps. She placed the documents she was holding on the desk, and looked at Masachika with affectionate eyes as she sat down on the sofa.

"Is there a troubled Saa-kun here?"

"Is this the real Mother Mary?"

Masachika deadpanned the moment Maria started talking like a nun. Maria then took a seat beside Masachika, spreading her arms wide without a word. In an instant, a vivid memory of maternal violence flashed through Masachika's mind.

"...No, I won't let you do that pose, and I won't let you make me come over."

He raised both hands in front of his chest, openly expressing his wariness. Yet, Maria frowned slightly in response.

"...Kuze-kun, do you not like being kissed on the cheek?"

"Huh? A-ah, a kiss on the cheek huh? ...A kiss on the cheek."

Feeling guilty due to Maria's sad expression and embarrassed by his own misunderstanding, along with the growing sense of awkwardness, Masachika awkwardly lowered his hands. Stifled by a sense of guilt and embarrassment, Masachika averted his gaze, and as he did so...

"Eh?"

Arms wrapped around his neck and head, and just as he thought they were tightening around him, he was pulled forward gently.

And then, Masachika's entire view was filled with Maria's uniform ribbon.

“?!?!?”

“There, there, what happened?”

A gentle inquiry from above, but he had no capacity to answer.

You mentioned a cheek kiss! You said cheek kiss! Liar!!

Masachika protested in his mind, yet he couldn't voice it. Because everything below his nose was buried in something soft. Not only could he not speak, he also couldn't even breathe. Well, not that he couldn't physically breathe. It was more of in a psychological sense.

Because if he breathed through his nose in such a situation, it would be like if he was deliberately smelling something, like some kind of pervert. If he exhaled, it would be even worse, as he'd be blowing rough breath onto a woman at close range, a complete pervert move. So, if he breathed through his mouth...? Well, that would look like he was trying to inhale something, and that was still kind of perverted... In other words—

In this situation, how am I supposed to breathe...? Through skin respiration? Is skin respiration even possible?

That was the issue.

As Masachika tried to communicate the predicament by tapping Maria's shoulder, her grip did not loosen at all. And during that time, the oxygen in his brain started to deplete—

No matter how many times I tap her shoulder... Oh, I get it now. Of course, Masha-san's bosom was also... that plump and full... I can see how being close to death could feel like happiness...

His consciousness gradually drifted away, and—

“Alright, next is this spring roll. Say ‘aah’.”

“Ah~...n.”

“Is it delicious?”

“...I-It’s delicious.”

Before he knew it, Masachika was being fed by Maria. Moreover, with the “aah” technique.

“Why?”

“Eh?”

“Wait? Huh? How did it turn out like this?”

“Why... Well, Kuze-kun, you seemed hungry, so I decided to share my bento with you. And there was only this pair of chopsticks, so I thought I’d feed you.”

“Did I... agree to this?”

“You nodded your head.”

“Seriously...”

It was hard to believe. But then again, moments ago, Maria was feeding him without any trouble. Moreover, looking at it, Maria’s bento box was already about half empty.

What is... going on? Did I lose my memory...? Could it be that due to Masha-san’s overflowing motherly charm, I temporarily regressed to being an infant? The aggression of motherhood sure is terrifying.

And while he was shivering in fear—

“Here, ah~”

Chopsticks were held out in front of him, and his mouth opened on its own. Chewing, swallowing.

“Is it delicious?”

“It’s delicious.”

It was as if he was perfectly trained.

“Wait a minute!”

“Kyaa! What’s wrong?”

“I don’t even know what happened myself...”

Masachika hung his head down in disappointment, and Maria blinked several times before nodding with a look as if she understood.

“Philosophy, huh?”

“I’m utterly astonished.”



“It’s true that our school is co-ed, but...”

“That’s not it.”

“...Japanese is quite difficult, isn’t it?”

“It’s not really a language problem, though...”

“Yeah, *ahh~n*”

“Feeling too lazy to think?”

With a slightly exasperated look, he retorted, but she paid no mind and jabbed her chopsticks in without hesitation.

Masachika continued to chew and swallow.

“Is it tasty?”

“It’s delicious... but, um, I’ve had enough.”

“Eh~, why? You’re a boy, so you should eat more.”

“No, if I eat any more, there won’t be enough for Masha-san.”

“Hmm~? Oh~ well. I’m already full and happy just like this.”

True to her words, Maria smiled innocently with a grin, making Masachika instinctively turn his face away.

H-How can she say something so embarrassing...

With a sensation of itching all over his body, Masachika shrunk his shoulders and scratched his arm.

And then, the chopsticks were presented again.

“Here, *ahh~*”

“No, really, I’ve had enough... in more ways than one.”

“Eh~? Are you sure~? Aren’t you holding back for some reason?”

“No, not at all. Thank you for the meal. I’ll leave the rest of it to Masha-san.”

He raised his hand in refusal in front of the offered chopsticks as Maria withdrew the chopsticks with a slightly dissatisfied expression.

Then at that moment, as if she had thought of something, she blinked her eyes and smiled, offering her bento box to Masachika.

“Well then, in return, how about you feed me this time, Kuze-kun?”

“Huh?”

“As a thank you for the food, can Kuze-kun feed me with an ‘ahh’ this time?”

Saying so, Maria placed the bento box and chopsticks on Masachika’s lap. She bent her upper body towards him, closed her eyes, and opened her small mouth.

“Here, ah~”

“Uh, eh? S-Seriously?”

“Ah~”

Without paying attention to Masachika’s confusion, Maria maintained her waiting posture.

No, having this mutual “ahh” exchange is kinda like we’re a ba-couple^[1]... or rather, aren’t we practically having an indirect kiss at this point??

Thinking that, Masachika looked closely at Maria’s face, who had already closed her eyes, and gulped nervously.

Long eyelashes casted down. Soft, plump cheeks. A gentle beauty that combined both innocence and maturity.

“Hm?”

“!”

As Maria opened her eyes as if to peek, Masachika slightly recoiled.

From a distance, Maria’s eyes appeared light brown, but up close, they harbored a complex radiance with shades of green and blue. When their gazes met, Masachika’s heart felt strangely restless.

“Ah...”

Sensing that she was looking in his direction, Masachika swiftly picked up a cherry tomato with his chopsticks and held out his left hand, offering it to Maria.

“Here, *ah~*”

“*Ah~*”

Just as Maria awkwardly tried to accept the cherry tomato he offered with her mouth—

“Ah!”

The cherry tomato slipped through the gap between the chopsticks and Maria’s lips, falling onto Masachika’s upturned left hand.

Reacting quickly, Masachika cupped his hand to prevent the cherry tomato from rolling off onto the sofa. Then suddenly, Maria lifted his hand from below and pressed her own lips against it.

“Wha—!?”

Maria took the fallen cherry tomato into her mouth from Masachika’s hand, her lips brushing against his palm in the process.

It lasted just a moment. If you were to say it was a figment of his imagination, he might dismiss the sensation, but a shiver ran down Masachika’s spine. Unsure if Maria noticed his reaction or not, she chewed on the cherry tomato while blushing.

“Nhufufu, I guess I was a little impolite, wasn’t I?”

After swallowing the cherry tomato in her mouth, Maria looked somewhat bashful. Without saying a word, Masachika pushed the chopsticks and bento box towards her.

“Um, you can eat the rest by yourself.”

“Eh~? Why?”

“Please, just spare me.”

Saying that and shaking his head, Masachika turned his gaze towards Maria, who seemed to have sensed something. She accepted the chopsticks and bento box without saying anything else, then turned

back to sit properly. Maria's gaze moved away from him, and in secret, Masachika heaved a sigh of relief—

“...Um.”

“What~?”

“...Aren't we sitting a bit close?”

He phrased it as a question, but there was no doubt that she was sitting too close to him as their arms and legs were touching.

“Since Kuze-kun seemed a little down, I thought I'd comfort him with some physical contact.”

“Well, it might actually make me more unsettled.”

If anything, he was even more agitated. Though in a way, that prevented him from dwelling on his downcast mood.

“...Is your heart racing?”

“Uh, no, well...”

Masachika internally thought, “Why is she so sharp at times like this?” as he averted his gaze. Then, Maria, who had been observing him closely, broke into a mischievous smile.

“I see, I'm relieved. I was really nervous too.”

“E-eh~? Really?”

At Masachika inadvertently sounding skeptical, Maria pouted childishly.

“It's true... Want me to prove it?”

“Eh?”

Prove... what? To prove whether her heart was racing or not...?

“H-How do I do that?”

Before he knew it, those words slipped out of his mouth. Immediately afterward, a mix of anticipation and regret surged within

him. He wanted to bury his head in his hands. Yet, once spoken, words cannot be taken back.

With an unsettled feeling, Masachika averted his gaze as Maria turned away from him, her back facing him.

“?”

“Please?”

“?”

“Listen to the thumps of my heartbeat.”

“...Ah.”

After a few seconds of hesitation, Masachika finally understood.

I see. So, when it's around Masha-san's size, it's easier to listen from behind... Ahahaha.

Amused laughter echoed in his mind as Masachika collapsed to his side. Using the armrest of the sofa as a pillow, he hugged his knees and curled up on the couch.

I want to die...

What exactly had he been expecting? His lack of self-control was driving him to despair.

“Kuze-kun? Hey, what’s wrong? If you sleep right after eating, you’ll... um, turn into livestock? You’ll become livestock, you know?”

“Livestock?”

“Ehehehe, I wonder what they usually are? Pigs or cows?”

“...Generally, they’re cows.”

“Is that so? Then a cow! You’ll turn into a cow and I’ll raise you.”

“Why the sudden shift to being a sadistic queen? Well, if we’re going with that, wouldn’t you want to turn me into a pig...?”

“Really? A queen would probably have a cat, shouldn’t she?”

“You’re probably confusing it with something else, right?”

Saying so, Masachika realized he wouldn't know how to explain why a queen would turn someone into a pig. So, he gave up pursuing that line of thought and sat up. As he rested deeply on the sofa, lost in thought, Maria, who had finished eating, suddenly asked him.

"And so? What was Kuze-kun so sad about?"

"!"

At the sudden question getting to the core of the matter, Masachika's body tensed for a moment... then he relaxed, answering somewhat resignedly.

"It's nothing really... I just thought, you know, like I was the antagonist."

Saying this somewhat nonchalantly, he thought it was a bit too dismissive and decided to elaborate.

"Overflowing with talent... I'm like the antagonist who mocks the efforts of the protagonist. Without much effort, and without any particular passion, I'm the disliked character who still manages to produce results."

"...You're talking about the piano showdown, aren't you?"

"Well, that too... I guess."

"But... Kuze-kun, you've put in a lot of effort too, haven't you? You used to tell me that a lot in the past. I remember it well."

"!"

Touched by memories of Maa-chan, a serious expression momentarily took over Masachika's face... but he quickly replaced it with a sarcastic smile.

"Well, I did make an effort to be liked by my parents, I suppose."

"....."

"For me, whether it was piano, karate, or studying, they were all means to that end. It's not like I did them because I liked them, and I've never really put my heart and soul into anything in the first place."

He just went through the motions, practicing diligently as he was taught by his teachers.

“Without any struggles or anguish, achieving results solely through talent... and being praised by ignorant people who didn’t know anything, how could I feel any joy?”

Spitting out these bitter words, Masachika immediately regretted it. He understood. There was no malice in the people around him. The problem lied in himself, unable to accept their sincerity, and his outburst was nothing more than a release of pent-up frustration.

“Is struggling and suffering... considered effort to you?”

Amidst Masachika’s self-reproach, Maria’s quiet question reached his ears. Frowning slightly at that, Masachika answered carefully.

“...Well, I mean, isn’t that what genuine effort is all about? Struggling with one’s own weaknesses and shortcomings, yet still gritting your teeth and moving forward. Isn’t that determination beautiful?”

“I see... That’s what Kuze-kun thinks.”

Nodding slowly, Maria spoke cheerfully.

“In that case, Kuze-kun is working hard, isn’t he?”

“...Huh?”

Caught off guard by her unexpected words, Masachika thought, “Is she being naive again?” in a genuinely rude manner. However, Maria directly met his skeptical gaze and continued.

“After all, you’re struggling right now, aren’t you?”

“!”

“You’re agonizing, suffering... and yet, you’re still moving forward, right? To support Alya-chan. Isn’t that what you’d call “genuine effort” as you mentioned?”

He was about to deny it on impulse, but no words came out. As Masachika slightly opened his mouth and froze, Maria wrapped her arms around Masachika’s body, which stiffened upon contact.

“It’s okay. You’re doing your best. Kuze-kun... you’ve been working really hard.”

These were words Maria had told him before.

“It’s okay. Someday, Kuze-kun will come to love himself.”

Just like always, those words, filled with infinite gentleness and care, slipped right into Masachika’s heart. His heart felt light as if it were a lie, and he even found himself entertaining an unusually optimistic thought, “Maybe it really is true.”

“...Is that so?”

Whispering those words, Maria gently moved away and smiled at Masachika. Moved by her smile, Masachika also gave a faint smile. Although his smile was much more tinged with bitterness compared to Maria’s.

“I’m sorry, it’s just... I keep relying on you.”

“It’s fine, you know? I’ve said it before, but I enjoy spoiling Kuze-kun.”

Maria laughed softly, as if it were nothing. Her smile was so innocent, so pure, and just like that of an oblivious girl who hadn’t experienced hardship. But in Masachika’s eyes, that smile appeared stronger and more dependable than anyone else’s.

“So, don’t hide your vulnerability from me. You can rely on me as much as you want, okay?”

Her words were heavy and laden with truth. Her smile represented that of a young girl, yet carried a slightly mature atmosphere.

“If Alya-chan takes your hand, then I’ll be the one pushing you forward. That’s what I want to do.”

For some reason, that smile of Maria’s... unexpectedly overlapped with the smile of that girl, who Masachika hadn’t been able to connect with imagery until now.

In an instant, Masachika felt like his chest was tightly gripped. Immediately after, his heart started rapidly pounding, as if threatening to jump out of his chest, and he couldn't look away from Maria's eyes.

Wh-what? What's this? No way... Huh? Wait, seriously?

Though he tried to deny it in his mind, his heart and body were revealing the truth. This feeling was the same as what he felt for Alisa a few months ago...and the feeling he had for that girl years ago.

No, no, seriously? This is way too inconsistent, right? No, because Masha-san is Maa-chan, can I say that they're a single mind...?

Thinking that far, he was surprised that he had naturally accepted the equation of "Masha-san = Maa-chan". He didn't know the reason. But now, at this moment, Masachika felt as if he was reuniting with that girl for the first time.

The Maria in front of him looked completely different in appearance and atmosphere from the girl in his memories. However... to Masachika at this moment, the two couldn't seem to be completely different individuals anymore.

Uh... Huh? ...Seriously?

In the depths of his chest, something large swelled. Faced with this unfamiliar sensation, Masachika instinctively felt fear.

His feelings for that girl... for Maa-chan had just been resolved not long ago. Therefore, she was already a thing of the past, and he thought the emotions he once had for her would never rekindle... but that wasn't the case right now.

Partings allow for reunions. Therefore, those who confront and settle things properly are able to remember.

The feelings he had thought he had lost forever, when they resurfaced, were so vivid that he couldn't understand why he hadn't realized them before...

Yeah, sorry. I underestimated my first love.

In front of Masachika, who was tossed about by his own emotions, Maria's smile took on a mischievous shade.

"Still, you know~? If Kuze-kun is worried... how about I let you give me a kiss on the cheek as a token of gratitude?"

"Huh?"

"You know, Kuze-kun, you've never given me a kiss on the cheek before, have you~? So, how about it?"

As soon as she said that, Maria gently opened her arms, assuming a "waiting" posture. Faced with Maria's childlike excitement and anticipation, Masachika couldn't help but blush.

Wh-why now of all times? If I give her a kiss on the cheek right now... I have a feeling like my emotions will overflow!

This situation was not at all favorable. If he surrendered to this situation, before sorting out his emotions...before he could organize his thoughts, his state of mind might get swept away by something hot, something that made him want to cry or shout, and do something outrageous.

But running away here... Is... is there some clever way to avoid this somehow?

Amidst the wild waves of emotions surging from within, Masachika desperately thought and recalled the events that had just taken place.

That's it!

Simultaneously, he came up with a clever plan to navigate the situation, and Masachika put on a serious expression as he spoke.

"I understand... A kiss on the cheek, right?"

"Yeah."

"Then..."

Nodding earnestly, Masachika rose from the sofa... He then wrapped both arms around Maria's head and hugged her tightly against his chest.

Oh, this is bad. This is... indeed something else...

In an instant, the words “Maa-chan, I missed you!” nearly burst out from his throat, and Masachika panicked. But somehow, he managed to restrain that urge, and after holding her for about five seconds, he let go of his arms.

“You thought I was going for a kiss on the cheek, didn’t you? Haha~, this is payback for earlier...”

And with a smile that seemed to say he had the upper hand, Masachika looked down at Maria... But when he noticed that her face had turned bright red all the way to her ears, he froze in place.

Her smile full of anticipation just a moment ago had vanished. In its place, an expression void of any emotion remained on her face. The large brown eyes were wide open and round, blinking repeatedly while looking downwards. Furthermore, steam seemed almost ready to rise from her red-tinted face.

“Um...”

“!”

In response to the unexpected reaction, Masachika let out a voice while freezing his smile, and Maria’s body jolted in response.

“Ah, um, well...”

And while mumbling unclearly, she quickly tidied up the lunchbox and placed it in her tote bag before standing up.

“Th-then, I’ll be going back, okay?”

“Ah, yes.”

“Yeah, in that case.”

While looking in the wrong direction and repeating the same thing twice, Maria headed towards the door that led to the hallway. And for some reason, without turning the doorknob, she tried to push the door open, only to be naturally bounced back with a clunking sound.

“Ah!”

Amidst the sound of the door lightly hitting her, Maria's faint scream rose. But as if nothing had happened, Maria once again opened the door and hurriedly left the Student Council room.

After seeing her off and hearing the door slam shut, Masachika buried his face in the armrest of the sofa and screamed at the top of his lungs.

“What kind of reaction was that!?”



Wh-whoa... That surprised me...

In an empty corridor, Maria walked with light and somewhat fluttery steps. Her mind was filled with the sensation of being tightly embraced by Masachika just moments ago.

The sensation of a hard, broad chest against her nose and cheek. The feeling of strong arms pulling her in a little roughly. Presented with that strength, Maria understood that if she were held down, she knew she wouldn't be able to resist such a distinctly different touch of a person of the opposite sex.

A-Amazing... That was a man.

As she voiced those thoughts in her head, Maria felt her cheeks grow hotter.

It was an odd thought, but until now, Maria hadn't really felt any sense of “manliness” from Masachika. For Maria, Masachika was an extension of Saa-kun. That's why her feelings of affection for him were still the same one-sided and pure emotions she had harbored from her younger days.

Holding him tight, even giving him kisses on the cheek—these were things Maria enjoyed, and were therefore, quite natural to her. They were expressions of mere affection, albeit slightly embarrassing ones... with no room for fear. That was what she believed, until now.

“.....”

After being boldly embraced by Masachika, Maria couldn't help but anticipate what might happen next. Faced with an overpowering force she couldn't resist, Maria's heart raced, and she trembled with fear. She was intensely aware of Masachika's "masculine traits" as never before... and simultaneously realized her own "femininity."

I-I don't like this, it's so embarrassing...

At this point, she was filled with a sense of shame over her past actions that she had never thought twice about until this moment.

Whether it was being embraced by Masachika or accidentally seen in her underwear, Maria's perspective hadn't seen anything of a sexual nature in those situations. After all, Masachika was Saa-kun. In fact, Masachika had also blushed and felt embarrassed, just like the times when they had been close in their childhood. Nothing had really changed...

But... maybe it was different after all? P-Perhaps there was some... excitement? Could he have been... aroused?

She had known that her body might be of interest to the opposite sex, however... she had never anticipated being viewed with such desires.

B-but, that's how it is, right? Saa-ku... Kuze-kun is just a teenage boy. Wanting to touch a girl's body isn't just curiosity; it's a kind of natural intention...

Yet, until now, she had never given such thoughts a second thought and had clung to him like a small child, oblivious to these potential implications...

"~~~~!!"

Suddenly feeling ashamed of those actions, Maria squatted down in a corner of the stairs.

Within her heart, a mixture of excitement at Masachika's newfound male qualities and a sadness about how Saa-kun had changed.

At that moment, Masachika and Maria simultaneously realized two opposing truths.

“Masha-san... You really were still Maa-chan...”

“Kuze-kun is... Saa-kun, but he wasn’t just Saa-kun, huh...?”

After several years had passed, the two, now standing at the starting line once again, murmured in unison across the distance of a dozen meters.

““The next time we meet, how should we act...””

As the two fretted over their concerns, somewhere else even further away...

“Huh! Somehow, I feel like onii-chan is feeling down again!”

The bro-con, catching wind of this news from her mischievous intuition, discreetly began to make a record of this event.

[1]: “Ba-couple” (バカッペル) is a slang made from joining the words “baka” (idiot) and “couple,” literally meaning “stupid couple,” which is used to describe couples that openly flirt in public, embarrassing those around them.

Chapter 2 - We Didn't Need This Kind of Foreshadowing

“Well then, it’s a bit late, but... let’s raise a toast to the success of our live performance!”

“““““Cheers!“““““

Following Alisa’s lead, the six members, divided between male and female, raised their glasses simultaneously at tables on both sides. After school, the members of Fortitude, including Masachika, gathered for a karaoke party. At the back of the room, the males included Masachika, Takeshi, and Hikaru, while the females present were Alisa, Sayaka, and Nonoa.

Things were still a little bit awkward between Masachika and Alisa, and Alisa even averted her gaze slightly so as not to meet his as they clinked their glasses. However, the other four didn’t seem to mind and started talking without much concern.

“Man, there were a lot of ups and downs, but we managed to pull it off in the end!”

“Seriously... There was a moment when I thought we might not make it.”

“Hikaru, is your stomach okay now?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Thanks, Alya-san.”

While rubbing his stomach, which had been hit by a delinquent who had infiltrated the school, Hikaru smiled wryly.

“I really went through a tough time... I used to think getting hit by delinquents only happened in the world of manga.”

“Well, there are people in the world who can’t be reasoned with. Although I was also surprised that there were such barbaric individuals in this day and age who would suddenly attack students from other schools just for money.”

“Yeah... I thought Japan was more peaceful. Well, maybe it depends on the location~?”

No, do you even have the right to say that? Didn't you literally try to gouge that delinquent's eyes out?

While internally retorting to Nonoa's words, Masachika looked away. After all, Masachika himself had broken the delinquent's front teeth with a punch to the face when he helped Nonoa, so he couldn't really criticize others. Moreover, he hadn't told Alisa about it, and he didn't want it to be widely known, so Masachika skipped that topic and changed the subject.

“Anyway... Did you guys make up with Shiratori and the others in the end?”

In response to Masachika's question, Takeshi and Hikaru exchanged glances with conflicted expressions and then smiled slightly.

“Yeah... Well, somehow.”

“Of course, it's not like we're completely back to normal...but we did make a promise to hang out together again sometime.”

“I see, that's good.”

Having them nod and explain, Masachika didn't feel the need to inquire any further. He had no intention of getting more involved in their relationship, nor did he plan to reveal that he had played a role in their reconciliation. Although he had apologized directly to Nao for what he had said after the school festival, he hadn't asked about what happened to Luminaz¹¹.

It's probably best not to meddle any further... Well, if Takeshi and Hikaru are feeling better, that's all that matters.

As he pondered such thoughts while munching on a mountain of french fries, surprisingly, Nonoa picked up on that topic.

“So~, what about Luminaz? Are they going to make a comeback?”

“Well, I guess... we'll have to find a new vocalist since the previous one transferred schools...”

“I see~”

As Nonoa replied with a nonchalant expression, Takeshi briefly glanced at Alisa before hesitantly speaking.

“By the way, um... Alya-san, would you... consider continuing as the vocalist?”

“Eh? W-Well...”

Alisa’s gaze wavered in response to the offer, which was delivered with great caution. At the same time, her feelings were clearly understood by Masachika.

From the beginning, Fortitude was always meant to be a temporary band until the Autumn Festival ended, and Alisa, in a sense, was not a regular member but a pinch hitter. It would be troublesome to suddenly ask her to continue as their regular vocalist. Especially considering the delicate situation with the other original members being in the midst of repairing their relationships.

“...This year’s Student Council is busy due to our small number of members. The only one who is in a club at the same time as the Student Council is Sarashina-senpai, but that’s because of her stamina... It might be a bit difficult, don’t you think?”

Sensing Alisa’s dilemma, Masachika offered some help, and Takeshi immediately made an apologetic expression with a wry smile.

“Yeah, you’re right. Sorry, Alya-san. It’s just your vocals were amazing, so...”

“Ah, um. Then... sorry?”

Alisa also looked a little apologetic, and the atmosphere became a bit heavy. Then, a nonchalant voice spoke out of place.

“So~, does that mean I can join? I wanna try being the vocalist.”

““Eh?””

The one casually raising her hand was Nonoa. Her unexpected volunteering left not only Takeshi but also Hikaru wide-eyed.

“Nonoa-san... Is that okay?”

“Hmm~? I mean, I’m not in any committees like Sayacchi or Alisa, and I’m in the going-home club... So there shouldn’t be a problem, right?”

“Well, yeah, that’s true, but... Well, as Takeshi said, wouldn’t joining later as the only new member be kinda awkward?”

“Eh? Not at all~? I don’t mind that kind of thing.”

Nonoa responded calmly, prompting Hikaru and Takeshi to exchange glances. Then, as if representing both of them, Takeshi hesitatingly spoke.

“If Nonoa-san is okay with it... then, of course, we’d love to have you. Well, though we should also ask the other two...”

“Sure~. Let me know when it’s decided. Oh, by the way, since we’re already here, should I show off my singing skills?”

At her own pace, Nonoa took the remote control and selected a song. It was one of the songs on the list that Luminaz had played as a cover.

“Oh, ah~”

Nonoa stood up while adjusting the microphone volume, and at the same time, Sayaka, who was sitting on the sofa, picked up a tambourine.

Huh? A tambourine?

Just as Masachika was about to turn his serious gaze in that direction, an impressive performance began. Nonoa’s usual languid demeanor disappeared, replaced by a powerful rock song that was sung with a powerful voice. There was also a surprisingly serious tambourine performance, delivered at a rapid pace. The gazes of the other four went back and forth between Nonoa and Sayaka.

After the song ended, applause naturally filled the room.

“Oh, wow, Nonoa-san, you’re amazing!”

“Yeah... It felt totally different from Alya-san, but you’re a great singer.”

“Thank you, thank you.”

As Takeshi and Hikaru praised her genuinely, Masachika added a half-smile and some teasing comments.

“...But seriously, that was amazing. What’s up with that singing ability? And that tambourine performance? Are you guys going to acquire some ultimate equipment after defeating the final boss or something?”

In response to Masachika’s somewhat joking remark, Sayaka, pushing up her glasses, answered calmly.

“Well, even if you say that... I’ve learned this technique to avoid disturbing the atmosphere without singing, as I have a limited selection of songs I can sing.”

“I see, my bad.”

The perceptive Masachika accurately understood that it wasn’t that she had a limited selection of songs she could sing, but rather that her singing genre was skewed toward the otaku side.

“It wasn’t necessary for me to mention it in the first place.”

“You’re that kind of person, after all.”

Masachika accurately understood the underlying sentiment behind those words.

“Well~, for now, is it a pass?”

Nonoa lowered the microphone and asked. Takeshi and Hikaru immediately nodded.

“Yep, it’s a perfect pass!”

“Yeah, no room for complaints over here.”

“Yay~”

Nonoa gave a half-hearted cheer as she lazily raised her fist. At first glance, it seemed doubtful whether she was genuinely happy, but Masachika somehow sensed that Nonoa was indeed delighted.

“...But it’s still surprising. Nonoa getting so into the band.”

“Hmm~? Is it?”

When Masachika honestly shared his thoughts, Sayaka also agreed.

“Yeah, I was surprised too. Nonoa seemed pretty into it. I even heard she was promoting the performance while working at our class’ maid cafe.”

“Oh, really?”

“But I wasn’t really promoting or anything like that? I mean, we were aiming for a special award during our class performance, so I wouldn’t mix personal and class matters like that.”

Nonoa waved her hands in denial after Sayaka’s remark, then she casually cast her gaze up.

“I just... was asked, ‘When are you available?’ So, I just said, ‘I won’t be available during this time because I’ll be doing a live performance in the stage at the courtyard.’”

“I see.”

“Haha, well, if you put it that way... it’s not really an outright attempt at promoting, is it?”

“No, but isn’t that kind of like stealth marketing?”

“I think it’s a bit different...”

Nonoa started so casually, and the other four, apart from Sayaka, couldn’t help but smile wryly. As for Sayaka, she let out a light sigh with a resigned expression.

“Speaking of mixing personal and class matters, didn’t you want to perform with Sayaka from the start? I heard you pushed for it.”

“I didn’t push for anything. I just casually said, ‘I’d like to perform with Sayacchi~,’ and everyone else just took it from there.”

“I see just how much Class D revolves around you.”

However, if we’re talking about mixing public and private matters, even a certain maid from somewhere else smoothly helped with

her master's class performance, so Masachika couldn't say anything more about it.

Although she blended in so naturally, I let it slide at that time, but when I think about it calmly, Ayano is in Class C...

Yesterday, he suddenly realized this and confirmed it with Yuki. Apparently, she was treated as a substitute while her master was away on business. What a mixed and natural situation.

"Did Takeshi-kun and Hikaru-kun go to Sayaka-san's maid cafe?"

"Well, uh... We went to check it out after the performance, I guess?"

"But Nonoa-san wasn't there at that time."

"Oh, so you went... Did you happen to draw the lottery tickets?"

Remembering the lottery that had ensnared many boys, Masachika grinned and asked. Takeshi averted his gaze at this uncomfortable reaction, leaving Masachika blinking.

"Wait, seriously?"

"I drew it three times."

"Seriously!?"

To Sayaka's revelation, Masachika widened his eyes in shock. In response, Takeshi stammered, "Uh, well, you see..." but before he could explain further, Sayaka continued with a sigh.

"So, on the third try, when he finally won, he chose me, so I was quite surprised."

"N-No, it was just for the sake of commemorating it, you know? I thought Sayaka-san dressed up so unusually, didn't you?"

At Sayaka's words, Takeshi tried to play it off casually, but... Masachika couldn't help but feel that something was off about his demeanor.

Hmm? That seems a bit... different from just trying to hide embarrassment.

While inwardly tilting his head, Masachika saw Alisa nodding without any particular reaction.

“That’s right, her outfit was definitely refreshing. ...But it seems like you preferred Nonoa-san, Masachika-kun?”

“Well, that’s because Sayaka basically forced me, you know?”

“Huh? Wait, Masachika, did you take a photograph with Nonoa-san?”

“Well, um, yeah, sort of? So, Sayaka, did you tamper with the lottery when I drew it back then?”

As Masachika hastily changed the subject, Sayaka replied with an innocent expression.

“Who knows? I’ve forgotten.”

“Oi.”

“Hm? What’s the matter?”

“No... It’s just that I hit the jackpot at such a perfect moment, so it was a bit surprising.”

“Huh? Was the probability of winning the lottery really that low? Takeshi won on his third try, you know?”

“As far as I could see, there were about four people who missed seven or more times in a row.”

“That’s...”

The gazes of the three boys focused on Sayaka. However, Sayaka just shrugged her shoulders lightly.

“We haven’t received any specific instructions from the festival committee. That’s all.”

“Your way of saying that is just like someone who’s actually done something suspicious.”

As Masachika gave her a suspicious look, Alisa suddenly remembered something.

“Speaking of which, did anyone get hurt during that commotion? I heard a group of delinquents invaded Class D’s classroom...”

“Not really, nothing major. One of the girls in our class felt uncomfortable, but the Vice-President of the Disciplinary Committee supported her.”

“Vice-President...? Oh, Kiryuin? ...Violet-senpai, I mean.”

Alisa mentioned Sumire’s name with an unfamiliar tone, and as such, Masachika proceeded to explain with a stern face.

“No, Alya, it’s not *Violet*, it’s Violet-senpai^[2]. If you mispronounce it, it’ll come across as disrespectful. Call her Violet-senpai with respect and affection.”

“Or maybe rather a little teasing than respect, in Masachika’s case.”

“You’re quite fearless, aren’t you?”

Masachika, who said something silly with a serious face, received exasperated glares from his two best friends.

In reality, Sumire was highly respected and admired by everyone at Seirei Academy. She possessed a noble family background, beauty, popularity, and if it weren’t for her declaring, “It’s disrespectful to compare me to my older sister!” there would have been talk of the two second-year beauties becoming three.

To openly tease a senior who received so much admiration and envy, as Masachika did, was not an easy feat. But he remained unfazed.

“That’s also part of Violet-senpai’s charm.”

“That’s one way to put it...”

After sighing deeply in exasperation, Hikaru suddenly remembered something and asked Sayaka.

“By the way, did Kiryuin-senpai end up taking over as the President of the Disciplinary Committee? I heard Kaji-senpai resigned to take responsibility for the security breach during the school festival.”

Hikaru’s words made Masachika raise an eyebrow.

Taiki Kaji, the former Student Council President at Seirei Academy's junior high school, and one of Masachika's close friends. During the school festival, he had been persuaded by Yusho to assist outsiders in infiltrating the school... but the matter hadn't been made public, and Kaji had officially resigned, citing his responsibility for the security breach.

One reason there was no conclusive evidence that Kaji had facilitated the intrusion was by Yuki's decision and influence. Kaji himself wanted to confess and make amends, but Yuki had put a stop to it. Yuki had revealed the situation to him personally over the phone after the festival.

"Well, to be honest, Kaji-senpai... If you fall from grace, there's nothing in it for me. If you're willing to repay your debt, you should stay quiet about the security breach and help with my election campaign," so she said.

Even though it wasn't a discussion that should be held openly with her rival in the election campaign, the truth was that Kaji could have been used as a witness regarding Yusho's involvement if Masachika had chosen to do so, especially using the bet from the piano showdown as leverage. But in the end, he decided to respect Yuki's wishes and keep the matter to himself. Of course, he had his own reasons for doing so, aside from Yuki's request.

Considering that he lost the election, I wasn't sure how to approach him, and in the end, I distanced myself. He was already in shock after being separated from his beloved fiancé, and now he's keeping his distance from the people around him... It's no wonder he's struggling.

In the midst of all this, the underclassman who remained by his side, Yusho, whispered endlessly, "I'm on your side, senpai," and "That election was weird, right?" If he were to suggest, "There's a way to turn everything around," it might have been enough to push him over the line.

Yusho has a seriously devilish talent for manipulating and abusing the negative opinions of others...

Thinking about his classmate, who couldn't be described as just a black-hearted prince, Masachika grimaced bitterly. While Masachika was lost in thought, Sayaka, ignoring him, lightly shrugged her shoulders and answered Hikaru's question.

"If things go as expected, Kiryuin-senpai should take over. But considering the recent scandal regarding someone related to her, she doesn't seem too enthusiastic about it. And there aren't any other strong candidates, so it's on hold for now."

"I see... Well, there aren't many people who can stand above Kiryuin-senpai anyway. In Kaji-senpai's case, he already had established a legacy as the President and a regular member of the junior high student council, so it wasn't out of the question when he assumed the position of head of the Disciplinary Committee."

Hikaru nodded in agreement, but then Nonoa casually spoke up.

"Then~, why don't you become the committee President, Sayacchi?"

"I won't."

"Eh~? Why?"

"With so many people who admire Kiryuin-senpai, if I were to run for President of the committee, it would only earn me their resentment."

Sayaka spoke calmly, but Alisa chimed in in disagreement.

"But Sayaka-san, you defeated Kiryuin-senpai in a debate when you were in junior high, right? In terms of standing above Kiryuin-senpai, you're more than capable, aren't you?"

"That was..."

Upon hearing Alisa's unexpected opinion, Sayaka averted her gaze. Unusually, she seemed somewhat uncomfortable. Masachika, however, understood the reason.

In reality, during that debate, the main clashes were not between Sayaka and Sumire-senpai, but between Nonoa and Kiryuin. From my perspective, knowing what happened behind the scenes, it was a truly eerie battle between a villain and straight up pure evil...

Both Masachika and Yuki realized Nonoa's true nature during that debate. Until then, they had thought, "She's probably not as apathetic as she appears," but after the debate, they began to think, "This girl is dangerous." At the same time, they also had a gut feeling that Sayaka and Nonoa would be their main opponents in the election...

Who would have thought that we'd become so close that we call each other by our first names now... Life's sure full of surprises.

While Masachika pondered some rather old-fashioned thoughts, Sayaka, who seemed to have reorganized her thoughts, cleared her throat lightly.

"...Well, that was three years ago. I can't expect to be recognized as a first-year Disciplinary Committee President just like that."

"Is that so?"

"Yes... and besides—"

At that moment, Sayaka smiled mischievously.

"—apparently, the most important thing for a Disciplinary Committee member is... combat ability, they say?"

"Is that so?"

"Don't take it seriously, Alya. That's not true at all. The current Disciplinary Committee is undoubtedly the way it is because of Violet-senpai and Sarashina-senpai."

"Eh? Violet-senpai, maybe, but why Sarashina-senpai?"

"Well, Sarashina-senpai was a member of the Disciplinary Committee for three years in junior high, and she was even one last year."

"Oh, right... I remember hearing about that..."

"In other words, Sarashina-senpai is the one responsible for everything that happened to the disciplinary committee."

"But, what was Sarashina-senpai thinking in the first place to change the Disciplinary Committee into such a martial group in the first place...?"

“What was she thinking, huh...?”

As Alisa expressed her doubts, Masachika’s words became vague. The honest answer to her question would be, “Because bullies and troublemakers who were disciplined by Chisaki were forced to join the Disciplinary Committee and were trained physically and mentally like a reformatory facility.” But could he say that...? Masachika hesitated, and it seemed Nonoa sensed his inner turmoil as she interjected.

“Right, speaking of Sarashina-senpai, I heard she was an absolute beast when dealing with the intruders. I’ve only heard rumors, though.”

“What do you mean by ‘an absolute beast’?”

Masachika gave a wry smile and asked such a question to Takeshi. However, there was a slight realization in Masachika, and he wiped off a bead of sweat.

In reality, Masachika had no idea how wild Chisaki’s behavior had been. He had become slightly concerned about the intruders after the piano showdown and went to the Disciplinary Committee room to check. However, when he reached, all he encountered was a male Disciplinary Committee member who had left the room, pale-faced and muttering, “A person... a person’s body... in such a state...” He promptly made a U-turn at the sight.

“But wouldn’t Sayaka know more about that since she’s also on the Disciplinary Committee?” Masachika asked while turning his attention to Sayaka.

Sayaka, avoiding eye contact, shrugged her shoulders subtly.

“Well... it’s not a pleasant topic. Anyway, Hikaru-san, shouldn’t you show that to Masachika-san?”

“Eh, oh, right.”

In response to Sayaka’s words, Hikaru took out his smartphone and made some adjustments before handing it to Masachika.

“Sure, I plan to share it with everyone later, but...”

“Hm? What?”

As Masachika tilted his head in confusion at the commotion coming from the smartphone's speaker, he accepted the device. When he looked at the screen, his eyes widened.

The screen displayed Alisa in her live performance costume, seen from a distance above the heads of the audience. The enthusiastic crowd's noise was pierced by a powerful introduction, and Alisa's singing voice resounded through.

"I asked a friend to record this for me. It's quite distant, and the view is occasionally obstructed by people's arms and heads..."

Indeed, it couldn't be considered a high-quality live video. However, precisely because it was a raw recording taken amidst the crowd, the fervor of the moment was conveyed vividly.

The audience swayed and jumped in time with the music. As the performance continued, Alisa, who had initially seemed a bit stiff, gradually got into the rhythm.

Ah, that's amazing... so cool.

As Alisa walked around the stage, basking in the cheers of the audience, Masachika squinted his eyes. He couldn't imagine calling her the "Lone Princess" from the way she and her bandmates locked eyes and enthralled the crowd, synchronizing their breaths.

She's dazzling... really.

Watching Alisa on the screen, he felt a hint of loneliness along with joy and pride.

Truly... it's a far cry from how I filled the entire auditorium with silence.

Alisa, enveloped in cheers with her friends on the dazzling stage, and himself, alone in the dimly lit auditorium.

Thinking about the contrasting performances, Masachika couldn't help but smile wryly. As the video ended, he handed his smartphone back to Hikaru.

"Woah, that's amazing. There was such a huge uproar. No wonder you guys were surrounded by so many in the classroom earlier."

Hiding the dim emotions in his heart, Masachika teased. In response, Hikaru exchanged glances with Alisa and Takeshi as they laughed with troubled expressions.

“Well, being surrounded like that... it’s not all it’s cracked up to be.”

“Honestly, it can be a bit exhausting at times... you know?”

“Yeah.”

Masachika tilted his head at Takeshi, who agreed with Hikaru and Alisa.

“Huh? I thought Takeshi would be like, ‘Is this the start of my popular phase?!’”

“Huh?! I wouldn’t say something like that!”

Upon Masachika’s remark, Takeshi widened his eyes in surprise, then for some reason looked at Sayaka before shaking his head vigorously from side to side.

Both Masachika and Hikaru exchanged puzzled looks at Takeshi’s strange overreaction.

“...Now that you mention it, Takeshi was surprisingly mature. Even though he was also surrounded by so many girls.”

“Well, I’m not really... I don’t want to be excessively popular or anything like that. If the person I like is fine with me, that’s enough...”

“??”

Masachika and Hikaru exchanged perplexed glances at Takeshi’s oddly innocent statement. Unable to bear the gaze of the two, Takeshi turned away and said after taking a sip of juice.

“But anyway, after the school festival, we have midterms right away, and then there’s the sports festival...”

Changing the topic so blatantly, Masachika raised an eyebrow but played along.

“Yeah, you’re right. There are too many events packed into this short time period.”

“Isn’t it tough for the Student Council? You’ll have responsibilities during the sports festival, won’t you?”

“Well, not really... The sports festival is mainly organized by the Sports Festival Planning Committee, and the Student Council helps out. The Student Council is more involved in deciding the events to be held on the day...”

He answered while looking around vaguely, but just then, Nonoa chimed in.

“Well, there’s the horseback competition during the sports festival, right?”

“Ah, well... that’s true, but it’s just like a little practice beforehand...”

“Horseback competition?”

Seeing the questioning look on Alisa’s face, Masachika thought, “Ah, I forgot to mention that,” and added an explanation.

“It’s a side event during the lunch break at the sports festival. In other words, it’s a race between the candidates for the next Student Council President and Vice-President. The reason why it’s called a “Horseback Competition” is because in its literal sense, it’s a horseback competition between the opposing campaign teams in the election. By the way, it’s just a side event, so losing in this race doesn’t mean you’re out of the election, okay?”

“Well~, winning is better, though~”

Nonoa, who spoke as if it had nothing to do with her, made Masachika smile faintly, who then continued with a serious expression.

“True. Winning is definitely better. And honestly, right now, things are going in our favor. The Student Council officers’ greeting at the end of the semester, the quiz showdown at the recent school festival, and calming down the commotion caused by Yusho. In all of these, we’ve left a stronger presence than Yuki and Ayano. Ideally, we want to keep this momentum going.”

“Yes, I believe that the election campaign’s momentum is shifting in your favor more than I had anticipated.”

Unexpectedly, those words made Masachika and Alisa stare at Sayaka’s face. Under their gaze, Sayaka furrowed her brows slightly.

“...What’s wrong?”

“Well, I just didn’t expect to hear such an analysis from you...”

“I simply stated the facts.”

Understanding what was being implied and realizing that asking would only lead to a complicated situation, Sayaka let out a sigh.

It’s like there’s a yuri scene occurring in front of me...

Watching the scene with indescribable feelings, Masachika turned his attention back to Alisa.

“Well, Sayaka’s right. We’re currently turning the tide after initially being at a clear disadvantage. To maintain this momentum, we have to win the campaign race this time, even if it’s just a side event.”

In response to Masachika’s words, Alisa nodded with a serious expression. However, at that moment, Takeshi, without much regard for the atmosphere, chimed in.

“But, you know... if you do it normally, you guys can win, right? Considering the height difference.”

“Yeah, well, if we do it normally...”

Masachika chuckled awkwardly at Takeshi’s comment, which was an understatement that had disrupted the serious atmosphere. After all, when it came to height, there was nearly a sixteen-inch difference between the combined heights of the Alisa-Masachika pair and the Yuki-Ayano pair. In a horseback competition (in which horses weren’t used, but rather with one teammate riding on top of the others), it was self-evident that the rider being at a higher position was advantageous. Furthermore, there was a significant difference in the reach of the riders’ arms. In terms of physical specs alone, Alisa had a distinct advantage in the horseback competition.



“However, since it’s a horseback competition, it means there won’t be only two participants per team, right?”

“Hmm? Ah, because there’s one rider for each of the three members in one team, there are two supporters.”

“In that case, wouldn’t it all depend on the capabilities of those cooperating partners?”

“Hmm... I’m not sure. You see, the rider is typically the candidate for President, and it’s a given that the Vice-Presidential candidate leads the horse... Well, to be precise, there are cases where that’s reversed. If the Presidential candidate is a boy, and the Vice-Presidential candidate is a girl, it seems like the Vice-Presidential candidate becomes the rider, at least from what I’ve heard.”

“Both the previous and current President-san and their running mate were like that, though~”

“Yeah, and it seemed pretty.”

“Yeah, I’ve seen a video of it. It was brutal. It looked like a herd of dump trucks versus tricycles.”

“Or like Lü Bu riding the Red Hare versus his foot soldiers riding mere ponies^[3]. ”

“They were unbeatable...”

Seeing Alisa’s expression, which couldn’t be easily described but seemed to indicate her level of understanding, Masachika chuckled and added some context.

“Thanks to that, it turned out to be a memorable debut match for the President, who hadn’t had a fixed partner until then. But, to get back on track, the fact remains that in the horse race, the abilities of the Presidential and Vice-Presidential candidates are more critical than those of their cooperating partners.”

“That’s right...”

“Moreover, because of these considerations, the cooperating partners... or rather, their popularity is more important than their physical abilities.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

In response to Alisa’s question, Masachika thought for a moment before replying.

“Well~, it’s like this. As cooperating partners, which candidate would the audience prefer to support: the candidate who brought two athletically inclined students, or the candidate who brought the current serving Student Council President and Vice-President? Of course, the Presidential and Vice-Presidential candidates aren’t directly involved, but it’s a bit like declaring, ‘I support this pair!’ even in the case of an entertaining horse race. So, it’s better to have people with greater name recognition and influence. But, of course, this is separate from the outcome of the horse race.”

“When it comes to that...”

After receiving Masachika’s explanation, Alisa turned towards Sayaka and Nonoa. Then, she glanced at Masachika as if trying to catch a glimpse.

Well, it’s reasonable... the selection itself.

Understanding her thoughts, Masachika nodded lightly with agreement. Then, Alisa gazed directly at Sayaka, who was looking back with a cold expression, and spoke.

“Sayaka-san, Nonoa-san, would you be willing to run in the horseback competition with me?”

A straightforward request with no frills. However, Masachika secretly felt moved by the fact that Alisa had sincerely asked for cooperation from others. But...

“And what benefits do I get from cooperating with you?”

Sayaka’s response was rather curt.

“I’ve said it before, but I’m not supporting Alisa-san in the election. I helped with the band activities out of personal interest, but this is a different matter.”

With cold eyes, Sayaka spoke matter-of-factly. Then, she looked directly into Alisa’s eyes and said pointedly.

“If you think of me as your partner in the election battle, that’s a big mistake.”

Sayaka’s declaration, which firmly pushed Alisa away, filled the room with tension. Takeshi and Hikaru, too, watched the confrontation with bated breaths. Even Masachika, who had anticipated this development, stared at the two with a stern expression. As for Nonoa? She was still sticking close to Sayaka as ever.

“...So? If you want someone like me, who is not your partner, to cooperate in the election battle, what benefit will you offer me, Alisa-san?”

Or perhaps it was a challenge from the girl who had once been considered the most likely rival candidate for the presidency to Alisa.

But what does it mean to move people? The negotiating power to move someone, who couldn’t be swayed by emotions, with material gain. Perhaps that was what Sayaka was asking Alisa. Watching from the side, Masachika thought so.

I managed to convince her with otaku merch before, but...she probably won't budge this time.

After all, what Alisa was asking for was different from performing together in the school festival. Participating in an event, associated with the election, as a collaborator was an act that practically declared support for that candidate to all the other students. Moreover, becoming Alisa’s pawn would likely be humiliating for Sayaka. Depending on how you look at it, it could be seen as surrendering after losing in the debate. Sayaka, who had never bent her knees to anyone in school before, didn’t seem likely to accept it so easily.

Even I find this persuasion quite difficult... So, Alya, what will you do?

As a precaution, while considering what to do if Alisa’s persuasion failed, Masachika trusted his partner, who had shown remarkable growth recently, and awaited Alisa’s response.

Amid the attention of everyone present, Alisa... as if succumbing to the pressure of Sayaka’s gaze, averted her eyes. In response to this reaction, Sayaka narrowed her eyes as if disappointed.

With increasing tension... Alisa, while fiddling with her hair, said somewhat shyly.

"Indeed, we're not partners, but... well, we're friends. There's no one else I can ask for something like this... so I'd be happy if you could join us..."

With a light blush, Alisa said that and glanced at Sayaka. She radiated an unintended charm and cuteness that would undoubtedly captivate men, but...

Alya... Well, that's probably an honest statement, but isn't 'presenting the benefits' essentially appealing to emotions? Sayaka's the type of person to not budge with emotions...

Masachika furrowed his brows slightly at Alisa's words, which were even questionable as negotiations. In apparent agreement with Masachika's thoughts, Sayaka exhaled lightly, then turned her face away from Alisa with a gesture of indifference, pushing up the bridge of her glasses with her finger.

"Well, if that's the case... I suppose I can't help it, can I? We are friends, after all."

She was moved with emotions!?

Masachika widened his eyes in surprise at Sayaka's response, which had taken on a more excited tone as she fidgeted with her glasses.

Is that okay, you, the queen of debates!!?

In response to this rather unsuitable reaction, Masachika stared at Sayaka in bewilderment. However, Sayaka, who had dispelled the cold atmosphere she had maintained until a moment ago, maintained a slightly smug aura while keeping a tsundere expression.

"Sayaka-san, is that alright?"

"...Well, if it's a friend's request. I don't think it's right to turn you down."

"Thank you, Sayaka-san. And what about Nonoa-san?"

"If Sayacchi's goin'~, I'm goin' too~"

While still clinging to Sayaka, Nonoa readily agreed. Then, she stared at her childhood friend's face with a grin from a very close distance, and Sayaka furrowed her brow as she pushed Nonoa away, who had wrapped her arm around her.

"You, move away."

With those words, she pushed away her childhood friend, who had been clinging to her arm, and Sayaka stood up with a cup in hand.

"Then, I'll go get something to drink."

With that, she announced her departure and left the room quickly. Watching her leave, Nonoa grinned with only her mouth.

"Sayacchi's a bit shy, isn't she~?"

"...Rather than shy... I saw an unexpected side of her."

"Hmm~? Well, Sayacchi doesn't have many friends after all~ Maybe she's happy?"

"Is that so..."

Masachika was slightly dumbfounded by how easily Alisa had broken through what he had thought would be a difficult negotiation.

I'm somewhat shocked... or rather, to make the cold-hearted queen swoon with a straightforward appeal, Alya is seriously the protagonist, huh...?

Feeling like he had become an unexpectedly tainted person for thinking about negotiating with calculations, Masachika felt a little down. Just then, Nonoa, while reaching for her honey toast with a fork, casually asked in a nonchalant tone.

"So, Takeshi fell for Sayacchi, right?"

"~~~~~!?"

Without any context, the other four were equally startled by the question. Then, the three of them simultaneously turned towards Takeshi, their faces gradually reddening in astonishment.

"Eh, w-wait a minute. Seriously?"

In response to Takeshi's response, delivered in rapid succession while displaying a ridiculous amount of agitation, Masachika stammered while Takeshi looked around and muttered incoherently. That reaction alone was more than enough.

"Eeeh... No, eeeh?"

"I can't believe it, really?"

"Well, I didn't expect that..."

"...I agree with Masachika on this. I thought Takeshi's type would be someone... well, someone overflowing with kindness."

"No, she's kind."

Takeshi asserted, a bit embarrassed, while Masachika and Hikaru stared at him intently. They remained in silence for a while.

And there, in the room, was Takeshi, unsure of what to say after having his feelings exposed so suddenly, Masachika and Hikaru, unable to calm down after learning about their best friend's unexpected crush, Alisa, frozen in the unfamiliar experience of discussing a male friend's love life, and Nonoa, the culprit, munching on honey toast.

And then, the silence that didn't quite suit a karaoke box was shattered by the sound of the door opening.

"What's wrong?"

Sayaka, entering with a glass of ginger ale in hand, furrowed her brows as she looked around the room. But Masachika ignored her and quickly finished the remaining cola in his cup.

"All right, I think I'll get another drink too."

"Yeah, me too."

Saying this, Masachika and Hikaru, seemingly in agreement, each put an arm around Takeshi's shoulders from either side.

"You're coming with us, Takeshi, right?"

"Huh?"

“Yeah, let’s try different juice combinations at the drink bar together.”

Without waiting for Takeshi’s response, they stood up and, half-dragging him along, the three of them left the room. Takeshi’s glass was left behind, but that was a minor issue.

“So... do you really like Sayaka?”

As they reached the corridor in front of the drink bar, Masachika asked Takeshi once again. Seeing Takeshi’s reaction, not denying it but averting his gaze, Masachika sighed lightly.

“...Seriously~”

It was clear that Takeshi was serious. However, in many ways, supporting him would be difficult.

First of all, their social status didn’t match. Sayaka was the daughter of the president of one of Japan’s top corporations, while Takeshi, although technically a president’s son, belonged to a small-town factory. The number of employees and annual revenue differed by about three orders of magnitude.

Moreover, Sayaka herself was a challenging character. It was hard to believe she had any interest in romantic relationships... In fact, she seemed like the type who would enter into a political marriage without hesitation if it benefited her family.

And on top of that, she’s a closet otaku... Takeshi definitely doesn’t know about that... Besides, there’s Nonoa...

Taking various factors into consideration, Masachika wore a troubled expression, and Takeshi seemed a little dissatisfied.

“What’s the big deal?”

“Well, it’s not really a big deal... But didn’t you say you liked someone before summer vacation? Back when we were studying at my place, you said something like ‘I’ll become more aggressive and go for it.’”

“Come to think of it, you did say that. What happened with that?”

“Well, about that...”

“...Don’t tell me you’ve already been rejected?”

“Not exactly... You see, the person I liked back then was, well, I won’t reveal her name, but she was the manager of the soccer club...”

“Hmm?”

“Manager of the soccer club? Why again?”

“Well, actually, for a while, the manager of the soccer club helped out with the baseball club’s practice. During that time, she was really kind to me in various ways, and, well, I started to like her.”

“Hmm?”

In response to Takeshi’s explanation, Masachika froze in place. Somehow, this story sounded very familiar, like he had heard it somewhere before. The manager of the soccer club helped the baseball club...? Oh right, who was it that made that suggestion?

“So, I made an effort to approach her... but it turns out she was dating our team captain...”

Oh, whoa? The club president’s girlfriend, right? There she is~ the secret girlfriend. I wonder who irresponsibly encouraged Takeshi, even though they didn’t know, hmm~?

“Well, that’s why I had a heartbreak... And then, we formed a band together this time, and she helped out Kanau during the school festival, and, well, I started to like Sayaka. That’s how it went.”

I see, thought Masachika. All the culprits who had materialized such a situation were within himself. None of it was intentional, but the guilt weighed heavily on him.

In this situation, there was nothing left for Masachika to say but—

“...I’ll support you.” He said it as if squeezing the words out.

[\[1\]](#): That's the original name of Takeshi and Hikaru's band (the one with Nao, Riho, and Ryuichi). We kinda missed it in V5 and V6 so I'll go back and edit it in after we finish V7 (maybe). Oops.

[\[2\]](#): So the difference here is that Alya pronounces it “ヴァイオレット” (va-i-o-re-tto) while Masachika pronounces it as “バイオレット” (bai-o-re-tto). The difference is that the former is a transcription of the English word “violet” using katakana, while the latter is a pronunciation more often used in figurative speech, or in a poetic sense. Also just a note, we kinda messed up the meaning behind her actual name in the previous volumes. As you may recall in previous volumes, we said Sumire's actual name was Violet, but it isn't. Her name's actually Sumire (堇), (hiragana: すみれ), but Masachika calls her “Violet” since “Sumire” means Violet, to tease her. Oopsies on my end, I'll update the TNs in the previous volumes after we're done with V7.

[\[3\]](#): Lü Bu was a Chinese military general, warlord, and politician, who owned and rode a famous horse called the Red Hare.

Chapter 3 - Wait a Minute, Did My Cowlick^[1] Just Stand Up?

“It was somehow more lively than I thought.”

“Yes, it was fun.”

Masachika was escorting Alisa to her home on their way back from karaoke.

In the end, the karaoke session with the other band members had disbanded after about two hours. It was a modest gathering considering it was both a celebration of the successful live performance and a farewell for their band. However, since they had school the next day, it couldn’t be helped.

Originally, they had planned to do it on a weekend, but the make-up holiday for the school festival didn’t align with everyone’s schedules. On the other hand, the next holiday was right before their exams, so they ended up with this arrangement. Nonetheless, they agreed to meet up again after the exams for another get-together, so it wasn’t like it was the last time the six of them would gather.

“Singing your favorite songs with friends is more enjoyable than I thought.”

“You’ve never done that before? Such experiences, I mean.”

“I’ve sung with my family before, but...”

“Ah. Family karaoke, huh?”

“Not exactly, it’s more like... at a dacha...^[2] you know, a Russian countryside house, where we all sing along with my grandpa playing the guitar.”

“That sounds more blissful than I expected...”

The two of them conversed casually as usual, but there was still a subtle sense of awkwardness between them.

Yeah, somehow... the sense of awkwardness is still dragging along with us, regarding the evening festival.

Recalling Alisa's full-blown mischievous mode during the evening festival, likely caused by the festival's sense of excitement in the first place, Masachika immediately brushed that thought away.

Well, it'll naturally settle down at some point. Yeah.

With such thoughts in mind, Masachika deliberately behaved as usual. However, at a point in their conversation when it fell silent, Alisa suddenly stopped in her tracks.

“Huh? Alya?”

Turning around with a puzzled look on his face, Alisa, who had been looking down at an angle for a moment, raised her gaze with a determined expression.

“Masachika-kun... Is something wrong?”

“Eh?”

“You seem... a bit awkward or something.”

“.....”

Masachika initially thought, “No, isn’t it you?” in response to Alisa’s words. But after a few seconds of contemplation, he changed his mind.

Maybe... Is she right?

Perhaps, without realizing it, he had been displaying awkward behavior. He hadn’t been aware of acting awkwardly, but he did have an inkling of the cause.

It’s probably...because of Masha-san.

The conversation he had with Maria during lunch break. The feeling he had, and that sudden flutter of excitement for Maria. Somehow, it had become a burden on his conscience regarding Alisa.

I wonder what this feeling is. It almost feels like I cheated. But we’re not even dating...

Feeling conflicted, Masachika remained silent, and Alisa furrowed her brows even more, looking increasingly worried.

“Is there something bothering you after all?”

Alisa’s genuine concern only intensified Masachika’s feelings of guilt. However, now that he had been found out, he felt that keeping quiet and trying to hide it would only make things more awkward. So, after some thought, he opened his mouth slowly.

“Yeah... Well, it’s just a little something that’s been on my mind.”

“Something...?”

“No, it’s not a big deal, really...”

Masachika lightly cleared his throat, adjusted his expression, and began speaking while looking up at the night sky.

“...There was this anime I watched a while ago, and the ending of the final episode was just too sad, it traumatized me.”

“...?”

“So, recently, they made a second season of that anime...a continuation after several years. I hadn’t intended to watch it because the first season traumatized me, but a friend told me, ‘The second season is great!’ And when I said, ‘I’m more into the mainstream stuff right now,’ they backed off and said, ‘Well, it’s good, you know? So maybe give it a try after you finish the more popular shows?’ Well, it was fine up to that point, but...”

Sensing Alisa’s questioning gaze, Masachika continued.

“So, because a friend recommended it to me, I became interested. I revisited the first season, and I realized that it was actually a good show overall, despite the strong impression left by the final episode. So, even though I didn’t plan to watch the second season initially, I ended up getting somewhat hooked...”

As he lowered his gaze, Masachika shook his head from side to side with a needlessly troubled expression.

“But since I initially said, “I won’t watch it because I’m into the mainstream stuff,” it’s kind of hard to say, “I got hooked on the second

season☆,” to that friend. On the other hand, staying silent about the mainstream stuff also feels awkward... So, I guess I’m anxious about something like that?”

“Is that what’s bothering you?”

“Yeah. What do you think?”

“To be honest, isn’t this a simple matter?”

“Hmm~... Well, maybe.”

Masachika chuckled in response to Alisa’s subtly exasperated look.

Well, it’s fine if it’s about anime. But when it comes to people... yeah. Well, it’s my fault for making such a weird excuse.

As Masachika chuckled to himself and self-deprecated, Alisa spoke with a puzzled expression.

“It’s not a big deal, really. You like it, right? Because what you like is a matter of personal feelings, and I don’t think that can be stopped... Besides, wouldn’t it be unkind to that friend to be awkward about it because you’re worried about what they might think?”

Her words were carefully chosen, reflecting her thoughts. Unexpectedly, they resonated with Masachika.

Widening his eyes in surprise, he met Alisa’s gaze who blinked, appearing somewhat flustered.

“...Yeah, maybe you’re right.”

“That’s right... isn’t it? At least, that’s how I feel.”

“Yeah... I guess so.”

He slowly nodded several times, and a relieved smile spread across Masachika’s face.

“Thanks, I feel a bit better now.”

“Really? Well, I’m glad to hear that...”

With a somewhat dissatisfied expression, Alisa tilted her head, and Masachika smiled gently in response. Then, as they resumed walking, he playfully raised his voice.

“I never expected the day would come when I’d consult with Alya about my worries.”

“Consult? It wasn’t that big of a deal, was it?”

“No, everyone has their own worries. And the depth of those worries varies from person to person.”

“Yeah... well if it’s okay with you, feel free to come and talk to me again about your worries. I mean, we’re... partners after all.”

With a pout and a sulking expression, Alisa was clearly embarrassed. Understanding this was a way to hide her embarrassment, Masachika smiled even more gently.

“Yeah, I’ll count on you.”

“!”

As soon as he said that, Alisa, who was walking beside him, flinched as her shoulders twitched.

“Huh?”

“It’s nothing.”

Brushing off Masachika’s questioning gaze, Alisa hurried ahead. Contrary to her actions, she seemed to be in a good mood.

Somehow... it seems like things have returned to normal?

Masachika breathed a sigh of relief in his heart and quickened his pace to walk alongside Alisa. Then, as they approached Alisa’s apartment, she suddenly spoke.

“By the way, it’s already test season, but...”

“Y-Yeah.”

“What do you think? If you want, we can study together again.”

With Alisa cheerfully making this proposal, Masachika contemplated for a moment and then shook his head.

“No, this time, I’ll study alone. It’s a bit pathetic~, you know? About me always needing someone else to study with.”

“...I see.”

Alisa’s agreement sounded like it had a tinge of disappointment, but that might have been Masachika’s overthinking. Meanwhile, they arrived at the entrance to Alisa’s apartment.

“Well then, see you tomorrow.”

“Yeah, thanks for walking me home.”

With those words, Alisa placed her foot on the stairs leading to the entrance of the apartment building. She then swiftly turned around, slipped into Masachika’s chest, pressed her cheek against his, and—

【I’ll be relying on you too.】

Whispering softly in his ear, she swiftly turned around and entered the apartment building.

Masachika stood there in a daze, watching her retreating figure until she disappeared completely.

That was... unexpected...

Feeling the warmth spreading from where Alisa’s cheek had touched him, Masachika shivered and couldn’t resist but break into a run.

As he sprinted through the city on this still-warm night, Masachika’s breathing grew heavier, and not only his face but his entire body became flushed. However, within his heart, an unprecedented determination welled up.

“...Let’s do our best.”

He reaffirmed his commitment and felt a surge of motivation. Tonight, he was convinced he could study with great focus.

Alright... First, no more using my computer starting today. I'll also limit TV and smartphone usage to a minimum!

As he walked briskly through the city on a still-warm night, Masachika felt his energy rising. When he arrived home, he was out of breath and his face was flushed. However, inside his chest existed a sense of determination that burned stronger than ever before.

“...I’ll give it my all.”

With renewed determination, Masachika pushed open the door to his house, and—

“Ah, welcome back!”

His younger sister greeted him with her ponytail bouncing as she spoke.

“Will you choose me? Or Ayano? Or maybe...a th-ree-some?”

“Are you talking about a three player computer game?”

“I’m not talking about playing a versus game here.”

Ignoring Yuki’s vulgar greeting, Masachika headed to the bathroom saying “I’m home.” After finishing washing his hands and face, he went to the living room, where Yuki was energetically fiddling with her ponytail.

“So, now that the school festival is over, let’s binge-watch the anime we missed before the exams start!”

With a cheerful smile, Yuki tried to disrupt her older brother’s determination without any malice.

“Well, I just came back from hanging out, and...it’s already near the test period, so I can’t afford not to study.”

“Don’t worry! We’ll start studying seriously tomorrow!”

“Not very convincing...”

As Yuki confidently twirled the end of her ponytail and made her declaration, Masachika pursed his lips. “I’ll start taking it seriously from tomorrow” is a cliché phrase often used by people who ultimately don’t

follow through. However, in Yuki's case, it seemed different. She was likely planning to thoroughly enjoy herself today so that she could truly give it her all starting from tomorrow.

Well, she's clearly very excited about it, so I might as well join in... Wait, didn't I just make a decision?

He quickly corrected himself.

What am I thinking? I literally just made up my mind just now.

With that inner resolve, Masachika shook his head and looked at Yuki.

“Sorry, Yuki. I've decided to study seriously starting today. Let's save the binge-watching for after the exams.”

“Aww~, do I really have to wait until the end of next week? Avoiding spoilers is such a pain...”

While her ponytail drooped sadly, Yuki expressed her dissatisfaction.

“I know, but I'm aiming to be in the top 30 for this exam. So, please understand that I need to focus on my studies.”

However, despite feeling sorry, when politely but firmly stated, Yuki reluctantly nodded, her ponytail bobbing slightly.

“...I understand. After the exams then.”

“I'm sorry. You came all the way here as well...”

“It's okay~. I'll make sure not to disturb your studying, so I'll just dive into my pile of books in my room.”

“Thanks. By the way, I wasn't planning to bring this up, but...”

Unable to ignore it any longer, Masachika peeked behind Yuki, who was still playing with her ponytail. He saw Ayano manipulating Yuki's ponytail with her hands, trying to make it stand up in the air.

“...What are you doing?”

“Heh, I'm glad you asked.”

“I didn’t really want to have to ask in the first place.”

At that moment, Ayano placed her right hand’s fingers against her forehead as if to hide her face. Yuki’s ponytail, which waved seductively thanks to Ayano’s touch, seemed exceptionally troublesome to Masachika, who squinted his eyes even more.

However, neither Masachika’s lukewarm gaze, typical of his laid-back attitude, nor the somewhat sorrowful look in Yuki’s eyes seemed to bother Ayano. She gazed off into empty space as she continued.

“Where should I start... Right, it was me who—”

“30-second skip.”

“—Her trade mar—”

“Once more.”

“—rather, it should be like this.”

“Rewind ten seconds.”

“When a character’s emotions droop sadly and her spirits are down, her ponytail would just hang there limply, but when her heart is all lively and cheerful, her ponytail would bounce around happily. Seeing that, I was shocked... I realized that all ponytail characters should be like that.”

“You’re quite dexterous at this, aren’t you, Ayano? I feel sorry for you though.”

As Yuki delivered her lines, her ponytail moved in sync with each motion, literally being tossed around by Ayano. She had to be careful not to accidentally pull Yuki’s hair. Surprisingly, Yuki spread her arms wide in that moment and spun in place. Ayano darted around Yuki, crouching down.

“Hey, cut it out!”

“Oh, right! A ponytail isn’t just a hairstyle to express liveliness! It should reflect emotions through the movement of the hair.”

“In other words?”

“If we’re talking about the ponytail, shouldn’t emotions be expressed through the hair’s movement?”

“That’s an unnecessarily elaborate and overly grandiose way to explain something so dumb.”

“And you’re mercilessly skipping through people’s speeches. Can’t stand to listen to an intro, huh, Generation Z-san?”

“Isn’t it strange for one member of Generation Z to criticize another?”

“I’d rather not be arbitrarily placed in categories created by adults.”

“You’re the one who brought it up.”

“I think trying to fit everything and everyone into categories can lead to societal divisions.”

“I see. So, your speech about ‘all ponytail characters should be like this’ from earlier doesn’t seem to match.”

As soon as Masachika made a sarcastic remark, Yuki raised her hands toward the sky like a stage actor.

“That’s right! Ponytails! I discovered the potential of ponytails and worked hard to become a true ponytail character... And thus, I tried to move the ponytail in sync with my emotions!”

“Wouldn’t it have been more constructive to practice a special move or something?”

“But then...”

“Yeah?”

“My cowlick stood up.”

“You’ve got some mysterious skill growing there.”

“Heh, the world still doesn’t know... This offbeat skill has the potential to become the strongest.”

“As in, your cowlick?”

“You don’t understand... Making the cowlick stand means controlling the hydrogen bonds of keratin. In other words! If I master it, I can manipulate the molecular bonds of all biomolecules at will.”

“You’re taking it too far.”

“Isn’t expanding on an offbeat skill the whole point?”

“Even so, if you go too far, it’ll just be treated as a joke.”

“Well we’re talking about cowlicks in the first place, so it’s already in the joke category, right?”

“I never thought you’d hit me with logic.”

As they continued their banter seamlessly, Masachika turned his attention back to Ayano.

“So... because you couldn’t move your ponytail on your own, you asked Ayano to do it for you?”

“Exactly! It was a brilliant idea to make perfect use of Ayano’s stealth skills—”

“Ayano, if you ever decide to file a harassment complaint, you’ll probably win a hundred times over, so feel free to speak up anytime.”

“Thank you, but I’m okay.”

“The embodiment of loyalty, huh~?”

“It’s just plain masochistic, really.”

“The embodiment of idiocy should stay quiet.”

“The embodiment of idiocy, or should I say ‘Aho-ge^[3]’... Hmm, it’s a fitting title for someone who can control their cowlick.”

“.....”

“.....”

“.....”

“What is it?”

“Stop with the reverse tsukkomi^[4]. Don’t push your failed jokes onto others.”

“It’s your fault for not handling the tsukkomi, anii-ki.”

“Are you going to get angry in return? No matter how much I can handle, I won’t mess with a visible bomb, you know?”

“How awful! I thought onii-chan would go down with me!”

“Don’t drag others into it. If you’re gonna die, do it alone.”

“Woah, this guy’s a scumbag! The type that kicks away his panicking companions in a panic!”

“And you’re like a mob character who shows the ugliness of humanity to the readers and dies.”

“And usually, in the next panel or the one after that, they usually get attacked from behind or from above.”

“But on the flip side, when they didn’t abandon their comrades, the main characters always come to their rescue.”

“Right. So, from now on, make sure to pick up the bombs properly.”

“So you believe someone will come to save you~? You’ll run away as soon as you’re put in that situation”

“Tch, you caught on, huh?”

“But despite being scum, you’re surprisingly the hateable character who somehow survives...”

“Hehe, in my final moments, I’ll mutter, “onii-chan...” and make my exit in the most frustrating way.”

“But that onii-chan of yours died in an explosion because of you, didn’t he?”

“Come on, just go study already, onii-chan!”

“And who was it that told me to pick up the bomb, my little sister?”

“Hey, Ayano, you’re being called.”

“!?”

“I told you not to involve others... Geez.”

With a tired sigh, Masachika rubbed Yuki’s head while she pouted. Then, he removed his hand from Yuki’s slightly startled expression and lightly patted Ayano’s head in an appreciative manner.

“Oh, woah?”

And, when he did that, Yuki leaned forward a little and pressed her head against his hand, as if to express her desire for more petting.

“Hmm... Just so you know, if you think that girls will be pleased when you pat their heads, that’s a great misunderstanding of us otakus, dear brother.”

“It’s not like I had that intention or anything.”

“Well, I appreciate it. Come on, pet me. Pet me more!”

Saying that, Yuki leaned forward a bit and pressed her head against him, prompting him to pet her more.

“What’s this about...”

Despite his somewhat bewildered expression, Masachika continued to pat her head just like he did with his grandparents’ dog, Rir, at their home.

“Uwa~”

With a slightly robotic yet enthusiastic voice, Yuki lifted her shirt, exposing her stomach like a dog. Then, she smiled as if to say, “Go ahead, pet me,” but... Masachika completely ignored her and went into his room.

“Ugh, even when this enchanting belly is right in front of you, you’re totally ignoring it...? You boob-lover!”

Pretending not to hear the resentful words from behind the door, Masachika changed into loungewear and went straight to his study desk. Then, he began studying with an unusual level of concentration.

During his study session, he received a cup of coffee from Ayano and continued to study with an intensity that was rare for him. After finishing the coffee, he took a short break and checked the time on the clock, which was about to reach 9:30 PM.

“.....”

He absentmindedly glanced outside his room, but there didn't seem to be any unusual sounds. It appeared that Yuki had indeed locked herself in her room as she had declared. While this was what Masachika had wanted, it still felt somewhat anticlimactic, almost as if he had done something wrong or left something unfinished...

Wait, what am I thinking? I need to stop being such a sis-con.

I'm well aware that despite my little sister's usual goofing around, she's actually a serious and caring person. If my sister sees that I'm really trying to focus on my studies, she's the kind of sweet girl who would respect that.

But... that's exactly why...

It wouldn't hurt if she was a bit more selfish.

Masachika couldn't help but think that way. He wanted to spoil his sister, who has become too accustomed to suppressing her own desires, at least to his heart's content. Despite feeling that way, he knew that...Yuki would never insist on having her way at the expense of Masachika's own feelings. Such an unusually mature understanding weighed on Masachika's heart with loneliness and sadness.

Once the exams are over, I'll accompany her in anything she wants.

With that determination in mind, Masachika stood up from his chair and stretched.

Hmm... I should take a bath first...

A few minutes ago, he remembered hearing the notification that the bath was ready. Since Yuki and Ayano weren't using it, he thought he'd go in first... With that in mind, Masachika left his room and knocked on Yuki's door.

“Hello~?”

“Can I take the bath first?”

“Sure, go ahead~”

Receiving permission from behind the door, Masachika quickly brought his change of clothes from his room. He hurriedly removed his clothes and peeled off the wet compress from his neck before entering the bath. As he washed his head and body and sank into the hot water, he felt the fatigue accumulated from hours of studying dissolve into the bath, giving him a soothing sensation.

“Ah...”

He let out a satisfied sigh and completely relaxed in the bath. Just for now, he wanted to forget about studying and relax. However, from beyond the bathroom door, he heard the sound of the sliding door in the washroom opening.

Hmm? Is someone coming in to wash their hands or something?

The moment he thought of that in the back of his mind—

“Here I come!”

“!/? Wha...!?”

Yuki kicked open the bathroom door and entered completely naked.

“Hey, hold on! What are you thinking?!?”

As Masachika sat up abruptly and yelled, Yuki proudly responded—

“I decided I could intrude when you’re taking a bath as long as I don’t disturb your studies!”

“Hey, come on! You’re completely naked!”

“Well, being naked in the bath is normal, you know. Don’t worry, the light and steam are doing a good job at censoring.”

“They’re not doing any job!”

“It’ll~ be fine, you know. I’ll fix it later. I’ll stick on some seaweed.”

“Can you stick it on yourself now then!?”

Masachika, still facing away and protesting with a bewildered voice, heard the sound of Yuki closing the door and sitting on a bath chair.

“Hey, wait a moment. Are you seriously planning to get in together?”

“Eh? Yeah. It’s the only way to chat with onii-chan without disturbing his studies.”

“No~, no, no. Even so, taking a bath together is just crazy.”

Being high school students, it was unusual for siblings to bathe together. Moreover, girls of her age typically wouldn’t want to use the bath after their father or brother, nor would they want to wash laundry together.

Well, Yuki’s not going through a rebellious phase, so maybe it’s not that extreme... But even in adolescence, shouldn’t she be a little embarrassed?

In fact, Masachika himself felt embarrassed at the thought of his sister seeing him naked. If she were a girl, it would be even more... Masachika’s ears caught something as these thoughts came to mind.

“Is there something weird with me, after all?”

Yuki muttered quietly. Sensing a hint of seriousness in her voice, Masachika briefly glanced towards Yuki. Yuki, while washing her hair, was staring down at her lower abdomen.

“.....”

Noticing a sense of urgency in her demeanor, Masachika turned his face away again, contemplating what could be the matter. In general, one could say that Yuki’s actions were strange. But if one were to consider Yuki’s personal circumstances without generalizing...

“It’s not like I find you weird or anything.”

That was the only response he could give.

Masachika knew it as well. The fact that Yuki showed no signs of entering her rebellious phase was because...before she could even enter such a phase, she had no choice but to become an adult.

Surrounded by her unreliable older brother and self-centered adults, the intelligent Yuki, though still a child, understood that she couldn't remain a child forever. As such...she had relinquished her right to seek comfort from her parents and her right to rebel against them, advancing several steps toward adulthood early on. All for the sake of protecting her family.

Actually, Yuki is much more of an adult than I am.

He sincerely believed that. But...

There are definitely still parts of her that are very childlike...

A rebellious phase and adolescence were undoubtedly important stages for children to grow into adults. But what happens to a heart that forcefully skips over those stages? No matter how much she may appear to be an adult, would her growth not become distorted in reality?

"Sorry, Nii-sama. I will... be staying in this house."

Yuki's demeanor, mature beyond her years.

"I wouldn't be embarrassed if onii-chan sees me naked, you know?"

On the contrary, she maintained a childlike appearance that never seems to change over time.

Maybe, this childlike part of Yuki...

In that unadorned room, much like a hospital room. Could it be that, that Yuki, who was left behind on that bed, was still a part of her?

Back then, Yuki had said she wanted to play tag in the garden to her heart's content. She had said she wanted to play games and laugh as much as she liked. But over time, she stopped voicing such modest wishes... With many unfulfilled wishes kept inside, Yuki became the successor of the Suou family.

It was undoubtedly Masachika who had left her behind...

Is that Yuki here... the Yuki from back then?

At the time, Yuki couldn't even take a bath without being mindful of it. She often just wiped her body on the bed because she would get asthma from things like steam and temperature changes. Long baths were strictly forbidden. Naturally, she had never had experiences like frolicking in the bath. If she now wanted to do things she couldn't do back then...

“Well, do as you like.”

With a hint of resignation, he said that and submerged himself deeply in the bath. Then, Yuki, who had her hair tied up, looked at Masachika intently and then flashed a mischievous smile.

“...I see.”

With the seriousness gone from her voice, Masachika secretly felt relieved...

“Well then, excuse me.”

“What!? Oi!”

“Splash!”

With a cheerful voice, Yuki moved her body as if leaning against Masachika's back. Just as her sound effects implied, the rippling water surface struck his face, causing Masachika to shake his head in response, trembling.

“Come on, seriously...”

When Masachika expressed his exasperation and half-blame, Yuki, who had jumped in energetically, placed her hands on the edge of the bath and floated up.

“Woah, it's pretty hot.”

“If you think so, then get out.”

“I can’t stay in such a hot bath! I’m heading back to my room!
...Did you think I’d say that? Too bad. I won’t raise such an obvious
death flag.”

“Where’s the death flag in that? Rather, being in here is more
dangerous, isn’t it?”

“Onii-chan...? Don’t tell me.”

“Not that kind of danger!”

“I heard that bathrooms are easy to make look like suicide scenes,
but I never thought...”

“Yeah, it’s a different kind of danger than what you’re thinking.”

“You can tell a lot about a person in situations like this.”

“Stop spreading rumors about the hot gossip. What you really
learned is how much you talk dirty all the time.”

“Well, I can’t beat Elena-senpai in that department.”

“That person is out of the question.”

“Yeah, I’m used to it already.”

As she said that, Yuki sank her floating body, letting the water rise
up to her shoulders and leaned her back against Masachika’s body.

“Wai—”

“Hahaha, it’s like we’re a newly cohabitating couple.”

“No, seriously, you...”

“Hehe, with this, you can’t respond to the cliche “We’ve taken a
bath together!” childhood story technique with “That was when we were
kids!” anymore, anii-ja.”

“...Haaah.”

Masachika contemplated on expressing his disapproval but
quickly lost the motivation and sighed.

Well, if I think of it as being in the bath with a grade-schooler sister...

With that thought in mind, he cast his gaze into empty space, but then—

“Here we go, *splash!*”

“*Pwah!?*”

He was splashed in the face with water. Looking at Yuki, he saw her clasping her hands on the water’s surface, creating an impromptu water gun.

“One more time!”

“*Bbpft!*”

As Yuki tightly clenched her hands, hot water burst out from between her fingers, attacking Masachika’s face, as his cheeks twitched in the process.

“You know... seriously, you’re acting like an elementary school student.”

“*Fufu*, it’s our innocence that allows us to have so much fun in the bath.”

“Stop shooting while talking.”

With a chop to his sister’s head, who continued to shoot water at Masachika from behind, he wiped his face with his hand.

As he did so, Yuki’s naked body naturally came into view, and Masachika, feeling it was wrong, couldn’t help but gaze at her body.

“.....”

It was indeed a well-proportioned, beautiful body. However, what caught Masachika’s attention was... the thinness of her body.

There were feminine curves, but overall, it was thin and slender. In terms of body thickness, she seemed to be only about half as wide as someone like Touya.

Is she really eating properly...?

Masachika was genuinely worried, but as he returned his gaze to Yuki's face, she grinned.

"Oh, what's the matter? Have you finally come to appreciate the charm of my belly?"

"No, that door is still closed."

"If you can't appreciate the sexiness of these slightly raised abdominal muscles, you've still got a long way to go..."

"And which muscles might you be talking about??"

"Look, right here. You'll know when you touch it."

"No, I'll pass."

As much as she was his little sister, and as much as it was her stomach, he hesitated to touch it and quickly refused. However, Yuki gently narrowed her eyes and, for some reason, softly stroked her own stomach.

"Please, could you stroke my stomach... I'll be happy..."

"Am I meant to be some kind of zookeeper or something?"

With a strangely loving expression, Yuki took Masachika's hand, as if urging him gently. Seeing her look like she wouldn't be satisfied unless he touched her, Masachika let out a sigh and gently stroked his sister's slender stomach—

"Ahahaha!"

...Suddenly, a loud, piercing laughter erupted, and he quickly withdrew his hand. But at that moment, Yuki had turned expressionless again and closed her mouth. As if prompted by that, he reached out his hand again, hesitantly.

"Ahahaha!"

He withdrew his hand. She turned expressionless again. He stroked it.

"Ahahaha!"

"How scary!!"

Every time he stroked her, Yuki opened her eyes and mouth wide, and burst into loud laughter, causing Masachika to scream in a mixture of fear and surprise.

“Aren’t you supposed to be more embarrassed about this?! I thought you were a cursed doll or something!”

“Well, I guess I got a little embarrassed.”

“If this is the result of being embarrassed, I’m worried about your mental state.”

“Half of me is made of kindness, you know?”

“And the other half?”

“Sexiness.”

“It’s not like I care about that, you know?”

“Sexy and kind... Huh? Could it be that I’m perfect as a romcom heroine?”

“Do romantic comedy heroines really need to be sexy? I actually think that emotionally innocent girls are more in demand.”

The moment Masachika said that, Yuki looked up at her brother menacingly, one eye wide open.

“That’s because you’re just a virgin lover, isn’t iiiit!?”

“I like bitches too, thouuuugh!”

“The ‘bitch’ you like is just a naughty older lady who enjoys taking the virginities of younger men, you knowww!?”

“You, you bastard! Why do you know so much about your brother’s fetishes!?”

“Well, um, it’s not like...”

Instantly embarrassed, Yuki let her gaze wander, then looked down at the water’s surface while mumbling.

“I mean... I like that type too, you know...?”

“Don’t reveal your fetish with confession-level enthusiasm. And, isn’t it strange that you like naughty older women?”

“Well, lately, I’ve been into manga where naughty older women make tsundere girls fall for them, who think they’re immune to it...”

“...I see.”

Should Masachika be relieved that it was a more sensible reason than he thought, or should he worry about his sister starting to get into yuri after getting into BL^[5]?

Well, as long as it’s just a 2D thing, it shouldn’t be a problem. It’s not like she’s confusing it with reality...

Masachika gave a little thought and came to that conclusion, but Yuki clenched her fist and continued.

“So, personally, I’m really interested in Nonoa-san and Sayaka-san.”

“Aren’t you mixing fiction and reality right now!?”

“They’re both suspicious, you know? Sayaka-san doesn’t have any standout rumors, and I can sense something extraordinary in Nonoa-san’s obsession with Sayaka-san.”

“Well, maybe...”

“Personally, I wouldn’t be surprised if Nonoa-san secretly eliminates any guy who tries to approach Sayaka-san.”

“.....”

Yuki’s joking assumption was something even Masachika couldn’t deny. It was one of the reasons why he couldn’t wholeheartedly support Takeshi’s feelings for Sayaka when he heard that he liked her.

At some point, I’ll really need to confirm his feelings...

Looking up at the ceiling, he made up his mind, and Yuki sank down slightly from the water’s surface and looked up at Masachika.

“By the way, my sweetest onii-chan...”

“What is it?”

Lowering his gaze, Yuki smiled and reached out, stroking Masachika's neck—

“Who gave you this hickey?”

In response to the question, Masachika flinched involuntarily.

Ah, crap.

He had forgotten about it when he removed the bandage before getting into the bath. It was the mark where Alisa had bitten him at the school festival.

“.....”

Since she had seen it, there was no way around it. Concluding such, Masachika stared aimlessly into the void and explained seriously.

“I got bitten by a zombie.”

“Seriously? That’s bad. But if you’re not turning into a zombie, does that mean you’re one of those people that have been previously injected with antibodies?”

“Exactly. So, my consciousness is still human, but my strength exceeds that of one.”

“So, you’re going to say that you injected bodily fluids under the pretext of passing antibodies to save the girl who bit you, right?”

“Yeah, yeah, at first I thought I’d try to resolve it with a deep kiss, but even that won’t make it in time, so in the end—it turns into some 18+ erotic grotesque panic!”

“So, what if an old man who has been bitten rolls in? What would you do...?”

“I’ll just listen to his last words and make it easy for him.”

“At least show a little hesitation.”

“Alright, I’ve warmed up enough. It’s time to get out.”

“No, you’re not going anywhere.”

“*Hmph*, do you think you can stop me?”

“What did you say? You little—”

As he tried to get out of the bathtub, Yuki extended her arms and legs, pressing down on him with her whole body. However, Masachika was not so weak to the point where he could be easily restrained by this. Despite being trapped between the bathtub and Yuki’s back, he managed to slip out little by little. Then, Yuki, with a hint of impatience but a triumphant smile, said—

“I have no choice... I didn’t want to use this move...”

Muttering that, she released her grip on his arms and legs, allowing Masachika to stand up. As he tried to get out of the bathtub before anything else could happen—

“Angel Mode, activate☆”

Right after that declaration, Yuki firmly grabbed his left hand. Along with a terrible feeling of dread, he reluctantly looked down, meeting Yuki’s innocent, sparkling eyes.

“Nii-sama? You have to count to one hundred before you can get out, okay?”

“Mm, okay.”

As his heart was pierced by those eyes, Masachika stumbled unintentionally. But then...

No, I can’t give in! If I give in now, it’ll be just what Yuki wants!

Thinking that, Masachika stopped himself. However, he noticed that Yuki was staring fixedly at one point just slightly above his line of sight. He immediately squatted down.

“You...”

Closing his legs and glaring at Yuki with resentment, Yuki, wearing a puzzled expression, glanced back and forth between her and Masachika’s position. Then, she tilted her head and said,

“Nii-sama, you really have to—”

“Alright! Let’s count to one hundred together!”

“Yeah!”

Resigned, Masachika raised his voice as if he had given up, and Yuki smiled and nodded. Then, with a sudden idea, she spoke in an innocent tone.

“Nii-sama! I want to float a duck! A yellow duck!”

“No, there’s no duck here.”

“Then, can you be the duck, nii-sama?”

“A duck? Is this the pure cruelty of a child?”

“No, just being a duck is enough.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Hey, nii-sama, do you know? Ducks are a breed of domesticated birds that humans have raised. In other words, they’re livestock, right?”

“What are you trying to say!?”

“Nii-sama, can you be my duck?”

“You’re quite the little angel, aren’t you?”

“Caught me.”

“Well then, I’m getting out of here!”

With that declaration, Masachika got out of the bathtub and started to shower himself. Yuki watched him with a sly grin. Behind that smile, she secretly sighed in relief.

Well~, looks like he’s doing just fine.

Her older brother, who had performed at the school festival during the piano showdown and who seemed down today, was back to his usual self. She knew that if she left him alone, he could suddenly become endlessly depressed. That’s why she had come to check on him, to see what was going on.

I wonder... Did someone from the Student Council or the band, or someone else altogether, cheer him up in my stead?

Pride and happiness swelled up within Yuki at the thought of so many people supporting her brother, but there was also a hint of loneliness.

That bite mark... In the end, whose was it? Most likely Alya-san's, I think.

It bothered her, but she was sure her brother wouldn't answer even if she asked further.

“.....”

A dark, unpleasant feeling welled up in her chest. Trying to shake it off, Yuki stood up forcefully. However, at that moment, her vision went black.

“Uh...?”

She could feel the blood drain from her body in an instant. Her sense of balance vanished along with a dizziness that felt several times worse than she had imagined, and Yuki grasped the edge of the bathtub as if she was about to collapse. However, due to the sudden forward motion, her legs slipped, and she slammed her knees below the step of the bathtub. The pain was strangely dull, resonating deep within her body.

“Yuki!?”

In response to the urgent call, she raised her head slightly, locking eyes with her brother, who looked as if it were the end of the world. His grave expression left her torn between a feeling of bewilderment and guilt, and Yuki couldn't help but smile wryly.

“No, I'm fine. Just a bit dizzy...”

So, there was no need to worry. She waved her hand lightly while remaining crouched in the bathtub. However, right after that, Yuki was forcibly lifted up with great strength.

“Huh, wha...?”

She was carried away like a princess in an instant and gently placed on the bath towels spread out on the floor.

Oh, onii-chan, you're so strong~

Having slightly off-target thoughts about her first-ever princess carry experience, Yuki was gently lowered onto the bath towel spread out on the floor.

“Ayano! Come over here for a moment!”

“No, it’s not that serious—”

“You called? —Yuki-sama!? What on earth is happening!?”

“No, I told you, I just got a little dizzy—”

“Ayano! Call an ambulance!”

“Y-Yes!”

“Just calm down!”

After desperately explaining that she had only suffered from heat stroke due to the hot bath, she managed to avoid them calling an ambulance. However...

“...Onii-chan, you don’t have to take care of me so excessively. Ayano is here too.”

“The sick should stay quiet.”

“I’m telling you, I’m not sick...”

Lying down on her own bed, Yuki was being treated as if she were a full-blown heat stroke patient.

A cooling sheet was attached to her forehead, and Ayano fanned her face while she sipped on a sports drink handed to her by Masachika with a straw.

“Actually, I think I’m already better... I’m sorry for making such a fuss, but it’s starting to get embarrassing now...”

“Then consider it a punishment for causing us worry.”

“Oh, come on, seriously?”

As if to prevent any further arguments, the straw was thrust into her mouth.

Sip, sip. The sports drink tasted good, but she was already tired of it.

“At least let me properly dry my hair... and don’t you have to study for your test?”

“It doesn’t matter, really.”

“No, it does matter.”

“.....”

“I said I’ve had enough of this sports drink!”

In between their conversation, the straw was offered whenever there was a chance, and Yuki refused it by shaking her head firmly. As the straw was withdrawn, she heaved a sigh of relief.

“Did you only hit your right leg here?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah.”

“In that case, let’s have it checked at the hospital later.”

“I told you, it’s not that serious!”

“Ayano, can you arrange for a car?”

“At your service.”

“I don’t need that!”

“.....”

“I said I’ve had enough of this sports drink!”

She was treated so overprotectively that it felt like harassment, and Yuki couldn’t take it anymore. She jumped up suddenly, and her right leg, which had hit the bathtub, throbbed with pain, causing her to stumble slightly.

Ah...

When Yuki realized it, it was already too late.

“Ayano! We need to call an ambulance after all!”

“At your service!”

“Please, stop it!”

Her brother and her maid were seriously trying to have her urgently transported, but Yuki did her best to stop them.

During this time, the dark and unpleasant feelings that had arisen in the bathroom had disappeared completely.

[1]: Often in anime or manga, the cowlick is a clump of hair strands which moves in response to its owner's emotions. For example if they're excited, it may stand up straight.

[2]: A dacha is a Russian cottage often used as a second/holiday home in the summer.

[3]: It's a pun lost in translation here. Cowlick in Japanese is “Ahoge” (アホゲ), and idiot in Japanese pronounced “Aho” (あほ).

[4]: As mentioned before in previous volumes, tsukkomi is part of the “boke and tsukkomi” routine, (funny guy and straight guy routine), in which the boke plays the role of being silly and having weird or outlandish jokes or observations, with the tsukkomi correcting them with logical retorts.

[5]: Yuri is a genre in anime, manga, or light novels, of romance between two females, and BL (boy's love, or yaoi) is a genre of romance between two males.

Chapter 4 - The Century's Greatest Sense of Confusion

The exam period took place for two weeks, which could be described as a bitter experience for all junior high and high school students. Today was Saturday, the day after the midterms of the second semester.

Masachika and the others had been given a ride to an amusement park in the suburbs in a fancy, 4WD foreign car (with a dedicated driver) owned by the Taniyama family. The group consisted of the six band members and one other person...

"Hikaru-san, are you okay with roller coasters and thrilling rides?"

"Well, I think I'll be fine with the usual roller coasters and such... as long as it's not something like being suspended in mid-air or going completely upside down..."

"I see! I'm quite scared of those kinds of rides, so I admire people who can handle them."

"Is that so? Hahaha..."

Upon arriving at their destination, Nonoa's little sister, Rea Miyamae, forcibly clinged on to Hikaru,

It seemed that ever since Hikaru had helped her at the cultural festival, Rea had only been eager to get closer to Hikaru. As such, Nonoa brought her along to join the group today.

However, the main purpose of this occasion was simply to celebrate the end of the midterms and the band's success in the cultural festival (part 2). Naturally, there were expectations behind inviting Rea, an outsider, to participate. Specifically, a hidden purpose... To support Takeshi's love life, the others agreed on inviting Rea.

This was because Sayaka had been informed to subtly cooperate and help Rea in her romantic pursuit for Hikaru. Being her sister, Nono would of course be supporting Rea, and as a result, Hikaru, Nono, and Rea would naturally form a group, and with Masachika and Alisa acting as a pair... it was expected that Takeshi and Sayaka are likely to become a pair. Well, at least that was the plan, however...

As soon as they entered the park, Masachika and the others had their plans greatly disrupted.

“Alisa-san, do you often visit amusement parks?”

“No, actually, this is only my second time...”

“Is that so?”

“What about Sayaka-san?”

“I quite like places like this, so I go four or five times a year.”

“Really? That’s a bit surprising.”

“I get that a lot.”

Seeing Sayaka and Alisa naturally becoming a pair, Masachika silently cried out in his mind.

Crap, Sayaka won’t leave Alya’s side!!

Naturally, it should be fine for them to split into groups of three and four. However... it was a complete miscalculation, or rather an unexpected outcome, that Sayaka actively started talking to Alisa.

As a result, the trio with dangerously high facial attractiveness went first, followed by two stylishly beautiful girls. And trailing at the rear were two unimpressive guys... What a sad formation this was.

“(Hey Takeshi, at this rate, we’ll be stuck riding attractions in this group formation.)”

Glancing at Takeshi beside him, Masachika expressed his concern in a low voice. In response, Takeshi also whispered without turning his head.

“(Well, Sayaka seems to be having fun, and interfering would...)”

“(You’re acting like you’ve already been rejected!)”

Skillfully whispering, Masachika pointed at Hikaru at the front. Hikaru was engaged in a conversation with Rea, with a subtly twitching smile.

“(See, look, Hikaru is doing his best for your sake, you know? Are you going to waste Hikaru’s dedication?)”

“(So getting sandwiched between a beautiful sister duo is dedication...?)”

“(I understand what you’re saying, but suck it up. For Hikaru, being approached by girls is a trial.)”

“(…Then why don’t you go talk to Alya-san?)”

“(You’re really...)”

Takeshi, who was clearly showing his shy side, left Masachika exasperated.

Of course, executing this request wouldn’t be difficult. Since Alisa was also in on the hidden agenda of deepening Takeshi and Sayaka’s friendship, she would surely cooperate actively if Masachika approached her. However... even with that, it didn’t seem likely that Takeshi would smoothly talk to Sayaka.

Well, maybe I should help out to get things moving.

Thinking so, just as Masachika was about to approach Alisa...

“Hey, everyone! Would you like to ride that?”

Rea, who was at the front, raised her voice, throwing off Masachika’s timing. And when he looked in the direction Rea was pointing, what met his gaze was a spinning teacup ride accompanied by lively music.

“This teacup ride here is famous for spinning really fast! Want to give it a try?”

“Really~?”

“A teacup attraction, huh...? Now that you mention it, I haven’t been on one since I was a kid.”

Without any objections, they all decided to ride the teacup attraction since Rea suggested it.

Each teacup had a maximum capacity of four people, so naturally, the group was divided into the Miyamae sisters and Hikaru, with the other teacup seating the four others.

Alisa and Sayaka rode side by side, with Masachika sitting next to Alisa, and Takeshi in between Masachika and Sayaka. It was a tight fit for four people, and their legs were almost touching. Takeshi also felt his legs were about to bump into Sayaka’s, so he quickly pulled them back.

No, he looks like he’s following the model etiquette when riding on a train!

Masachika let out a wry smile as Takeshi sat with his legs perfectly aligned and his back straightened. Just then, they heard a ringing sound which signaled the start of the ride, and the tea cups slowly began to spin.

“Alright, do we turn this middle handle?”

They tried turning the handle lightly, increasing the tea cup’s rotation speed slightly.

“Oh, it got faster. What do you think? You guys wanna make it even faster?”

“I don’t mind.”

“Sure.”

“Okay, then—”

As they put more force into turning the handle,

“*Kyaa~!*”

Masachika suddenly heard Rea’s high-pitched voice from nearby and instinctively turned his eyes in that direction, shuddering at the sight.

“Ahhh! Onee, it’s too fast!”

The teacup was spinning rapidly in circles. Rea clung tightly to Hikaru, as if she was fighting against the centripetal force.

...Well, there might be some significant lateral G-forces involved in the ride, but judging by how the other two were tilting their bodies, it was clear that Rea was exaggerating quite a bit. Perhaps she had asked Nonoa to make it spin faster like that, even though she was the one who had requested it. Seeing her exaggerated acting, Masachika shuddered.

What a calculating move... This girl is a real little devil!

And then he realized. If he turned the handle here with all his might, the same thing would happen on their side too.

Huh? Is it really okay to turn it like this?

Was it gentlemanly to deliberately go along with an event that was clearly a minor, lucky pervert occurrence? But then again, it would be strange not to turn it quickly after the other three had given the okay. And let's not forget. Right now, Masachika was on a mission to bring Takeshi and Sayaka closer.

Well, a little mishap or two is okay, right? It's an amusement park after all.

After about two seconds of pondering, Masachika decisively turned the handle. As he continued to turn the handle in quick succession, the rotation speed of the coffee cup increased rapidly, and with the ever so increasing G-forces, they experienced centrifugal forces that swung them around. Those who weren't holding onto the handle directly felt the full brunt of the lateral G-forces.

“*Kya!*”

With a light scream, Alisa placed her hand on Masachika's thigh, and feeling her touch, Masachika jerked his body.

Whoa, what!? This—

Feeling a sensation he wasn't very familiar with, having a girl touch his thigh, Masachika felt a strange sensation run through his spine.

“Ah, s-sorry—!”

With an apology, Alisa quickly retracted her arm. But now, without the support of her arm, Alisa was forced to lean her whole body against his shoulder.

As their upper arms touched each other, a soft, sweet scent tickled his nostrils, and Masachika raised his head with a start. Then, he noticed that Sayaka, who was sitting in front of him, was also leaning on Alisa’s shoulder.

Alisa leaning on Masachika’s shoulder, Sayaka leaning on Alisa’s shoulder, and Takeshi sitting in a uniformly straight pose.

Oi!

Masachika mentally quipped as Takeshi grabbed the edge of the tea cup to resist leaning toward Sayaka with all his might.

No, that’s right! I think being a gentleman is fine! But right now, this situation doesn’t look good for me!

It was as if... Masachika was the only one who wanted this situation to happen. As he thought this, the rotational speed of their tea cup gradually slowed down, and Alisa and Sayaka returned to their original positions.

[...Pervert]

No, that’s not it...

And as Alisa muttered something in Russian as they separated, Masachika let out a sigh of despair.



After visiting several attractions, lunchtime had arrived. Masachika and Hikaru headed to the restroom under the pretext of washing their hands and cornered Takeshi against the wall.

“Hey, do you have the motivation for this?”

“...I do.”

“Speak up.”

Takeshi, who was usually a cheerful and lively person, had a downcast expression right now. At that sight, Masachika sighed.

Takeshi hadn't been able to hold a conversation with Sayaka all morning. And it wasn't like he didn't have any opportunities; quite the contrary, actually. The others even went through the trouble of setting it up so that Takeshi and Sayaka would be a pairing thanks to the arrangements of those around them.

In the haunted house, he was more scared than anyone else, worrying Sayaka in the process. On the roller coaster, he screamed like crazy and was shaken so badly that Sayaka had to pull him out after the ride was over. In general, their only source of concern rested within him.

“I hate to say this, but... you should be more proactive like Rea-chan.”

“Well, it's different for guys and girls, isn't it?”

“Well, yeah.”

In Rea's case, she aggressively pursued Hikaru to the point where it was admirable. In the haunted house and on the roller coasters, she would say, “I'm scared, so please hold my hand...” and look up with watery eyes, combining a delicate girl act with subtle touches. However, this approach probably worked because it was a girl doing it, not a guy. Whether it worked on Hikaru or not, was another question in its own sense.

In general, for guys, pursuing a girl would usually mean showing their dependable side or closing the gap between the both of them by having fun together. However, so far, Takeshi hadn't been able to do either.

“Actually, it's a bit late to bring this up, but... aren't you not suited for amusement parks?”

“!”

Masachika calmly pointed his observation out, seeing that Takeshi didn't seem to be enjoying the attractions at all. In response, Takeshi averted his gaze but muttered softly.

"No, because... everyone seemed so excited, so I thought I could enjoy it if I was with everyone."

"...So, in other words, you're generally bad with thrill rides, especially roller coasters?"

"I think Takeshi being like that is a nice trait though..."

When looking at the somewhat careless and thick-skinned side of Takeshi, who was always a very considerate friend to the both of them, both Masachika and Hikaru were left somewhat speechless

I hope that he could at least endure it for a little longer... I feel like when it comes to these things, if he can endure it skillfully until the very end and then only give up then, it can only make others like him more, like, "Huh!? Were you actually not good with thrill rides!?" but...

If he couldn't endure it at all and kept on worrying, there would be no chance of increasing his likeability. Moreover, Takeshi himself seemed to be disheartened by his own ineptitude. In this state, he couldn't even show his good side.

"...Alright! There's no point in trying to overcome what you're not good at! Instead, let's do something that you're good at!"

Masachika reconsidered and came up with a new plan. After lunch, they headed to the section where they could play a football minigame.

"We just ate, so if we go on more roller coasters now, we might get sick. So, how about a little competition here? Let's pair up and see which pair can knock down all those targets with the fewest balls."

Hikaru and Takeshi, who had been briefed in advance, nodded upon Masachika's proposal, with Sayaka and Rea also agreeing. Then, as arranged in advance, Takeshi and Sayaka became pairs, with Hikaru and Rea forming another. However...

"Oh, since we're here, how about making the pair that does the worst go on that free fall ride?"

Rea's suggestion added an unexpected penalty.

Well, a little pressure might make Takeshi work harder.

Thinking of it as someone else's problem entirely, Masachika, who was chosen as the person to go first, tried to sneak away, leaving behind the Alisa-Nonoa pair. However, just before he could step outside the fence, he was called out by Alisa from behind with a puzzled voice.

"Huh? Masachika-kun, where are you going?"

"Eh? I'm passing on this one because ball games hate me."

"Why would you say that?"

Masachika, who had never considered himself participating from the beginning, naturally replied like that. However, Rea raised her voice in protest.

"Ehhh~? Kuze-senpai, it's not fair for you to run away just because there's a penalty!"

"Well, I didn't mean it like that..."

"Yeah, that's right~. Then, Kuzecchi, you're on our team."

"Eh~?"

Dragged back by Nonoa, Masachika reluctantly stayed with the group. While reluctantly watching, Alisa stood in front of the targets numbered from one to nine and kicked the ball with a run-up.

"Oh!"

Masachika widened his eyes at the sight of that beautiful shot. The ball soared through the air with momentum, drawing an arc and heading straight for the target in the middle, number five—only to be deflected by the frame, bouncing off the sealing and hitting him squarely in the face.

"Gah!"

A flash of light exploded in the depths of his nose, and Masachika couldn't help but crouch down on the spot.

"Oh dear."

“Ah! I-I’m sorry! Are you okay, Masachika-kun!?”

Alisa worriedly called out to him, and Masachika, suppressing the pain and tears, stood up with a nonchalant expression.

“*Pfft—!*”

A trickle of nosebleed began to flow from his nose, and at the same time, Alisa and Nonoa both turned their faces away in unison.

★ · ☆ · ★

“Really, I’m so sorry...”

“No, well, I’ve always had a bad relationship with ball games, so there’s no need to apologize...”

After being forced to leave the game due to an injury in the first round, Masachika sat on the bench a little away from where the game was taking place with Alisa, holding his nose high while looking upwards.

“Well, it’s not just that... I, um, I couldn’t help but laugh...”

“...Well, don’t worry about it. If I saw someone who’s both nostrils started bleeding at the same time, I’d laugh too.”

In fact, Alisa had tried hard not to burst into laughter. But as the one who caused the incident, she couldn’t let it go so easily. After a brief silence, she tapped Masachika’s arm.

“Hmm?”

As Masachika continued to look upwards, Alisa said while patting her own thigh.

“...Wanna come here? To cool it down.”

“Eh?”

“The drinks I bought earlier are still cold, so we can cool down your nose with this.”

She took a bottle of barley tea from her bag and patted her thigh again, hinting at her intentions. Understanding what she meant, Masachika froze.

“Um, you mean... what they would call a lap pillow?”

“...Don’t say it out loud like that.”

“Well, it’ll be a bit embarrassing for me too in a public space like this.”

“It’ll just be a medical procedure, you know?”

“What a convenient term, ‘medical procedure.’”

“G-Geeez. Come on, it’ll be fine.”

“O-Oh?”

Being forcefully pulled closer, Masachika was caught off guard and fell onto Alisa’s lap. Immediately, he felt the soft sensation of her thigh and warmth, and his thoughts briefly stopped. Soon after, he felt an impending nosebleed again.

Crap, if I bleed now, it’ll create some strange implications, and Alya’s clothes will get dirty.

Motivated by a sense to avoid a crisis in various ways, Masachika quickly twisted his body to lie on his back on Alisa’s lap. His left ear bumped against her lower abdomen, blocking half of his vision, specifically the view from his left eye.

...Woah.

Witnessing a rather shocking sight, Masachika produced a voice devoid of intelligence in his mind. From beyond that mountain range, Alisa’s voice, filled with confusion and embarrassment, descended.

“Um, could you move a little more to where my knees are?”

“Sure.”

As he obediently shifted away from the mountain’s shadow, a towel-wrapped bottle was pressed against his face.

The cool sensation was surprisingly pleasant, and Masachika narrowed his eyes. He hadn't realized it himself, but it seemed that the spot where the football had hit him was throbbing with heat.

"...How is it?"

"Ah, it feels good."

Unconsciously giving that response, Masachika suddenly realized that saying "it feels good" in this situation might create another meaning.

Oh, well, a lap pillow does feel good, but that's not what I meant...

He concocted excuses in his mind, but if he said them out loud, they would only sound like excuses, so he remained silent. He focused on swallowing the blood that was flowing back into his throat, trying not to be aware of the sensation of Alisa's thighs touching the back of his head. Suddenly, Alisa started to fidget with her legs.

"...If you're embarrassed—"

"No, it's fine..."

While Masachika, with his view blocked by the plastic bottle, might not be able to see the surrounding gazes clearly, it must have been quite embarrassing for Alisa. Thinking so, he tried to speak up, but she immediately denied it. Moreover, when Masachika tried to sit up, she pressed his shoulder to stop him. Resigning himself to the situation, he allowed Alisa to take control.

"...By the way, are you feeling better now?"

After a moment of silence, Masachika inwardly tilted his head in response to her question.

"What are you talking about?"

"You know... before the midterms, you seemed a bit unwell."

"Ah..."

He answered impulsively and regretted it immediately after. With such a response, he had practically confessed that he was indeed feeling unwell without intending to.

“So, you were unwell after all.”

“Well, yeah, just a bit.”

Realizing that hiding it any longer was pointless, Masachika admitted to Alisa’s suspicions. In truth, he had felt a bit under the weather before the midterms.

However, the cause of that... well, was somewhat of an inexplicable story. Masachika got so caught up in taking care of Yuki, who got overheated in the bath, that he ended up feeling under the weather himself. It wasn’t like he had a fever; he just had a slight headache. So, Masachika just went to school as usual and pretended to be calm.

“It was just a little headache... You noticed it quite well.”

“I did.”

As if it were natural, she responded in that tone, and then Alisa muttered softly.

【I’ve been watching you all along.】

Gufufpt.

It had been a long time since he heard Russian spoken so intimately, and Masachika almost burst into a nosebleed. He hurriedly swallowed his nosebleed and clotted the blood and then spoke seriously.

“Well, I was a bit careless... but I’m completely fine now, so you don’t need to worry.”

“Is that so?”

“Just, um... I’m sorry. I know it sounds like an excuse, but it might be a bit tough to make it into the top thirty this time...”

“It’s okay.”

In response to Masachika's apology, Alisa replied indifferently and lightly patted his head.

"Masachika-kun... you're always doing your best as my partner. Exam results aren't that important."

"Is that so...?"

Perhaps because they weren't face to face, Masachika felt a bit bewildered by Alisa's words, which were more straightforward and gentle than usual, but he also felt a sense of relief in his heart.

"Thanks, Alya."

"....."

Masachika also expressed his gratitude sincerely. They then remained in peaceful silence for a while...



“Um, Masachika—”

Just as Alisa raised her voice as if she had made up her mind, Nonoa's voice reached them.

“Oh my? What are the two of you doing”

““!””

The both of them flinched at the sound of her voice, and Masachika quickly moved the plastic bottle on his face out of the way and sat up abruptly. Then, looking at Nonoa, who was gazing at them with half-closed eyes, and the passersby who were glancing over in their direction, he hastily explained in a loud voice.

“Nothing! I was just getting the spot on my face where the football hit me cooled down! Right?”

Turning toward Alisa as if to seek her agreement, Alisa once again flinched and stammered.

“Y-Yes... I, um, I'll go buy a new bottle, okay? This one's already lukewarm...”

“Eh? Oh, um, there's no need to cool it anymore, though~?”

Ignoring Masachika's call, Alisa hurriedly stood up and disappeared off into the distance. Watching her back with an indescribable expression, Nonoa turned to Masachika and said.

“Did I interrupt something?”

“No, it's not like that... Is the football minigame over?”

Changing the subject casually, Nonoa replied and lazily waved a peace sign while maintaining her languid expression.

“I cleared it with fourteen balls, including Alisa's targets.”

“Huh, a hit rate of about seventy percent? That's amazing.”

“Well~, I'm pretty good at ball games~”

Saying that in a matter-of-fact tone, Nonoa sat down where Alisa had been.

“Is it okay not to watch from over there?”

“Oh~, it’s Hikaru and Rea’s turn now. If I’m there, Sayacchi might start talking to me, right? And that might disturb Takeshi’s progress.”

As Nonoa nonchalantly stated that as if it was common sense, Masachika furrowed his brow with a surprised expression. And at some point as time passed, Masachika asked her something he was curious about.

“Are you really okay with that?”

“With what~?”

“Even if it was hypothetical, would you be okay if Takeshi and Sayaka got along... and became a couple?”

Nonoa didn’t change her expression in response to Masachika’s words. Nevertheless, Masachika continued to gaze at Nonoa and carefully chose his words.

“To be honest... I thought you might not be happy if Sayaka got a boyfriend.”

“Can you be more specific~? You mean you thought I might have interfered instead, right?”

“...Yeah.”

Without denying it, Masachika continued to watch Nonoa intently. In response, Nonoa, still expressionless, shrugged lightly.

“It’s not like I want to interfere. It’s okay with me, you know? If it makes Sayacchi happy.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah, if Sayacchi is happy, then I’m probably happy too.”

To those words, which could be considered selfless, Masachika was left speechless. Gazing at Masachika, who stared at her with a serious expression, Nonoa chuckled softly out of the corner of her eye.

“Woah~, did you have to react so blatantly~?”

“...No, sorry. I didn’t expect to hear such a devoted and honest comment from you.”

“Ahaha, you’re pretty honest too, Kuzecchi~”

“Did I offend you? If so, I apologize.”

“I know you didn’t mean anything like that~”

With a deliberately dissatisfied tone in her trailing words, Nonoa turned her gaze to the sky. And then, while staring into space, she suddenly said something unrelated.

“Glass harp, was it? You know, the thing where you put water in glasses and play them as instruments?”

“? Ah.”

“So, like, if you put the same amount of water in glasses of the same shape, they’ll resonate with each other~”

“...What’s your point?”

The conversation had jumped to something so random that it was hard to understand her intention, and Masachika tilted his head. Without even looking at Masachika, Nonoa continued in a detached manner.

“Perhaps my glass is, like, ridiculously thick and super uneven in shape.”

“!”

At that moment, when Nonoa finally made her point, Masachika’s eyes widened.

“Even if the other glasses around shake, my glass wouldn’t budge. I tried various things, but it didn’t work... No matter how much I applied shock to the other glasses in front of me, my water surface never rippled. Until Sayacchi slapped me, that is.”

She seemed to be reminiscing about that time, and Nonoa chuckled faintly. Then, she spoke in a surprisingly gentle voice.

“Sayacchi is the one who can shake my water surface. Even my uneven glass can resonate a little with Sayacchi’s glass. So... if Sayacchi can be happy, then I can be happy too, I’m sure of it.”

It sounded like a confession of sorts. Masachika couldn’t help but be moved by the almost sacred feeling in Nonoa’s words.

However... even with that, Masachika went one step further as a friend supporting his friend’s romantic journey, potentially taking Sayaka away from her.

“If that’s the case, would you be okay if someone more important than you comes into Sayaka’s life, even if it means you’ll spend less time with her?”

“Hmm~? Well...”

In response to Masachika’s somewhat impudent question, Nonoa turned her gaze around and appeared to be deep in thought. After a moment of silence, Nonoa smiled faintly.

“Well... if and when I cross that bridge, I might be able to understand what loneliness feels like.”

Her expression seemed almost cheerful. Masachika wondered if it was just an illusion, a projection of his wish for this girl to have some human qualities like everyone else. But...

“.....”

He shifted his gaze to the ground at his feet and scratched his head. After hesitating for a moment, Masachika spoke without looking at Nonoa.

“...Well, I’ll listen to your story, okay?”

Despite his somewhat gruff tone, there was no immediate response. Masachika waited for a few seconds, but still, no reply came. When he finally glanced to the side, he was surprised to find Nonoa wide-eyed and staring at him. Their eyes met, and Masachika quickly averted his gaze.

“I can’t just leave you alone like that... because I’d be troubled if something happened that left you traumatized because of Takeshi.”

Even though he felt awkward when saying it, Masachika continued while looking in the opposite direction.

While he looked in the opposite direction as he thought he was doing a poor job of hiding his embarrassment... suddenly, he felt a presence right beside him. Immediately, an arm wrapped around his right arm, startling him and causing him to turn around immediately. There, at a distance that felt almost suffocating, was Nonoa's face with a joyful expression, and Masachika was startled once again. He instinctively tried to pull away, but it didn't mean much because his arm was firmly held in her grasp.

In front of him was the face of a remarkably beautiful girl, the kind you rarely see even in the entertainment industry. His right arm was firmly ensnared by this beauty, and he could distinctly feel the sensation of her chest around his forearm. However, what caused Masachika's heart to race was not the healthy impulse of a teenager but a pure biological sense of danger.

Wh-wh-what!? Am I gonna be eaten or something?

Despite being embraced by an exceptionally beautiful girl, he felt like a normal human being pounced on by a wild beast. Instead of his body heating up, it was growing oddly cold. However, his back was sweating profusely.

“It’s... yeah, that’s fine.”

In front of the trembling Masachika, Nonoa’s eyes sparkled brightly, and she playfully traced her lips with her tongue. It seemed like the action of a carnivorous beast licking its lips, further heightening Masachika’s sense of danger. However, at that moment, Nonoa brought her face even closer and whispered to Masachika in a somewhat sultry voice.

“Hey, Kuzecchi, would you mind trying to slap me just once? Who knows, maybe the water in my glass might resonate.”

“Why on earth would I do that!?”

In response to the sudden abnormal request, Masachika let out a half-scream-like voice and shuddered as he understood the intent behind it.

“Hey, wait a minute. Spare me. I don’t have the confidence to handle your obsession.”

“Is that so? If you won’t slap me, then I’ll just kiss you like this.”

“Wait, hold on, seriously, stop it!”

He instinctively guarded his mouth with his left hand, but Nonoa’s bewitching smile persisted, and a strong sense of danger pierced through Masachika’s heart—

“What are you two doing?”

Upon hearing Alisa’s voice reach his ears, Masachika’s shriveled heart leaped. When he turned around, there was Alisa, holding a bottle of juice in her hand, looking at him with a bewildered expression. In a situation where there was no way to explain, even Masachika was at a loss for words. However, Nonoa, without seeming concerned, replied to Alisa.

“Hmm? Maybe, are you trying to flirt with Kuzecchi right now?”

“Wh-what...!?”

“Then, it’s not a big deal, isn’t it? Kuzecchi is single, after all.”

“...u...”

As Alisa tried to rebut her argument, she decisively swallowed her words. While watching Alisa, who had a strained expression as she struggled to find her voice, Masachika finally regained some composure.

No... I froze instinctively, but if I decisively reject her now, it should be over, right?

In his mind, scenes from countless romcoms he had watched and read flashed back to him. In such scenes, the protagonist is usually just left bewildered, causing the heroine to become displeased.

Yes... in situations like this, it becomes a mess because the guy doesn’t take a firm stance. If I clearly say no, it should end.

With this in mind, Masachika took a deep breath and turned to Nonoa.

“Nonoa.”

“Yeah?”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t see you as a romantic interest. I’ll say it clearly: I don’t feel any romantic attraction towards you.”

“I see, but that doesn’t mean I can’t pursue Kuzecchi, right?”

“I see, it doesn’t make a difference, huh?”

It didn’t end there. The awkward situation continued.

This girl is seriously strong... What’s with her? She’s invincible.

Thinking seriously about what to do, Masachika spoke the words that came to mind.

“Nonoa, let’s calm down for a moment. Our goal this time around is to get Takeshi and Sayaka, as well as Hikaru and Rea, to get along, right? If we act strange, it’ll ruin everything, especially for Sayaka and Rea’s sake.”

Masachika hoped that mentioning Sayaka’s name might make her stop, but in reality, it was just a desperate attempt to persuade her. Surprisingly, Nonoa stopped moving. She blinked slowly and then looked around at the empty air.

“Right... You’re right... I promised.”

Then, as if muttering to herself, she released Masachika’s arm. Standing up immediately, Masachika approached Alisa.

“Thanks for going out of your way to buy that, but my nosebleed has already stopped...”

“Oh, um...”

“But I appreciate the thought. How much did it cost?”

“Well, I don’t really care about that...”

“No, things like this are important.”

“That was because you were hit by the ball I kicked earlier...”

“You already repaid that with the lap pillow.”

Spontaneously saying that, Alisa furrowed her brows slightly. Realizing his mistake, Masachika struggled with his words.

“Geez, you’re such an idiot.”

Snorting lightly, Alisa pushed the bottle towards Masachika and turned on her heel.

“...Come on, let’s go to where everyone else is.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

“Roger~”

Prompted by Alisa, Masachika and the others, in an awkward atmosphere, headed towards the corner where the others were gathered.

There, they found Takeshi apologizing to Sayaka, who had her shoulders slumped, and Rea clinging to Hikaru. Seeing this scene, Masachika screamed inwardly.

He lost!!

And thus, the losers, Takeshi and Sayaka, were sent to free fall—Takeshi died.

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“Seriously... If you knew it would be like this, you should have just refused, even if it was just a penalty game,” Sayaka said with a touch of exasperation as Takeshi hung his head dejectedly as they sat on a bench.

While waiting for Takeshi, who had been completely drained of his spirit during the free fall ride, the others rode on a nearby Ferris wheel. So, Sayaka, who had stayed behind with Takeshi, decided to voice something that had been on her mind for a while.

“First of all... if you’re not good with thrill rides, you should have just said so. There are plenty of places to have fun other than an amusement park.”

“Well... everyone seemed so excited, and I thought since I’m already a high school student, I could handle it, you know?”

Takeshi lifted his face ever so slightly and weakly smiled, as Sayaka sighed in response.

“Really, always prioritizing the people around you... It’s a disadvantageous personality, you know?”

“...Well, isn’t that the same for you, Sayaka-san?”

“?”

Taken completely by surprise at his response, Sayaka furrowed her brow. Then, Takeshi, who had slowly raised his body, looked directly at Sayaka and explained.

“You always prioritize gathering people around you instead of asserting yourself. Isn’t that right, Sayaka-san?”

Sayaka was taken aback by these unexpected words.

Then, turning her gaze away from Takeshi, she pushed up her glasses and said while facing forward,

“...It’s because it’s convenient for leading people. People don’t trust someone who tries to manipulate their surroundings for personal reasons. That’s why I prioritize rationality and utility. Emotions, which contradict rationality, are unnecessary. I consider them, but I don’t emphasize them. No matter how cold they say I am, I don’t intend to change my style.”

Well, as a result, I lost to Alisa-san, who moved people with emotions... Quite an expected turn of the tables, wasn’t it?

Sayaka thought to herself with a touch of self-deprecation and a sarcastic smile. But to her surprise, all she heard were unexpected words in her ears.

“That’s amazing...”

Impressed by the voice that seemed genuinely fascinated, Sayaka furrowed her brow and turned to look at Takeshi. At her reaction, he looked flustered as he tried to explain.

“N-No...! I mean, to completely suppress yourself like that and prioritize harmony with the people around you... I don’t think most people can do that. So, I find it amazing. Sayaka-san, is a kind person, I think...”

“.....”

With a shy blush on his cheeks, Takeshi told Sayaka these words, and she widened her eyes in reaction. As she stared at Takeshi intently like that, Takeshi, unable to bear the embarrassment, turned his gaze forward. Prompted by his actions, Sayaka also turned to face forward, pondered Takeshi’s words, and then muttered quietly.

“...I’ve never been told something like that before.”

Upon reflection, evaluations regarding her personality from people around her were always things like “cold” or “lacking in charm.” While she had received praise for her abilities, she had hardly ever been complimented on her personality.

That’s why Takeshi’s words were so refreshing for Sayaka; they hit her like a wake-up call. And then, Takeshi continued hesitantly.

“Even at the school festival, doing things like the maid café, which might seem uncomfortable for someone like you, Sayaka-san, you did it without complaining and put in your best effort... I think that’s amazing.”

“.....”

Sayaka pushed up her glasses in silence in response to Takeshi’s words. Because deep down, she actually had enjoyed herself. She had a really good time as the head maid. Having a displeased expression while feeling uncomfortable? She never made a single one. After all, she was an otaku.

Without noticing Sayaka’s true feelings, Takeshi swallowed his saliva once and continued.

“But, we’re all friends, right? So, when we’re in this kind of group, isn’t it okay to let loose a bit more or show some ego? I mean, don’t you think it’s okay for you to express yourself more actively, and assert what

you want to do? After all, there's just me here right now, right? But I'll support what you want to do. Or something like that..."

With a slightly playful tone, Takeshi spoke rapidly, and Sayaka laughed softly in response. Then, with an unusually gentle smile on her face, she stood up from the bench and said to Takeshi.

"Then, would you hang around with me? Since we're already here."

"Yeah, sure! Leave it to me~"

After hesitating for a few seconds at Sayaka's smile, Takeshi stood up. They then began to walk side by side, with a much more relaxed atmosphere than usual.



"Hey? Aren't those two walking around together down there... Takeshi and Sayaka?"

Masachika pointed his observation out while peering down from the gondola's window. At his words, Alisa, who was sitting across from him, turned her gaze in that direction, and indeed, there were figures that seemed to be Takeshi and Sayaka walking around together.

"Well, I was worried, but... somehow, it seems to be going well."

"....."

Alisa watched Masachika say that with a slight sense of surprise and relief. And at that moment, what came to her mind were the images of Rea making advances on Hikaru, and Nonoa, who had clung to Masachika's arm a while ago.

Is love really such a wonderful thing?

Without making fun of it nor being amazed by it, she genuinely thought that.

But even before this, it was not like there were no people around her that were in love. Touya and Chisaki, as one such example. Right before and after the cultural festival, the whole school had delved into a romantic mood, and it was so vivid that even Alisa could see this. Not to mention even her sister, who had been thinking about the boy she was in love with when she was younger, was close by the whole time too.

Even so, Alisa had never been interested in romance. But seeing her friends in love like this... she somehow felt like she was the only one left behind.

*What am I thinking...? I am me, and the others are others, right?
Love is not something to rush into.*

In the first place, Alisa had never thought about actually trying to be in a romantic relationship.

She couldn't imagine herself being captivated by someone, and she didn't think she needed a boyfriend or anything like that.

But...

She had always thought it was okay to be alone, but now, after being surrounded by friends like this, she realized that she honestly enjoyed the presence of others. So... maybe romance, too, might be more wonderful than Alisa thought.

Can I... come to understand it too? This thing called love?

If possible, she wanted to experience it, considering that it was often described as a wonderful thing.

She probably started thinking like this after she saw Masachika being approached by Nonoa, as it oddly gave her a sense of hopelessness.

Takeshi and Sayaka, Hikaru and Rea, Masachika and Nonoa. If all of them worked out, Alisa would be left alone. That's why she was currently feeling so impatient.

But Masachika-kun clearly rejected Nonoa-san...

But that's... because Masachika also has a special someone he strongly adores.

Alisa realized that at the Autumn Festival, when she listened to the emotions he evoked when he played the piano.

Ah—

Suddenly, the expression Masachika had at that time overlapped with Masachika's current profile as he looked after his friend.

Kind... but sad... Alisa couldn't help but lean forward unconsciously at that expression that seemed to tighten her chest.

“Oh, ah!?”

“!”

The gondola swayed, bringing Alisa back to her senses. Then, she returned her body, which had been leaning forward, to the seat.

“Oi, oi, don't do that all of a sudden... That scared me, you know?”

Looking at Masachika, who said that with a troubled half-smile, Alisa smiled mischievously as usual after a few beats.

“Oh dear, surprised by something like this? *Ei!*”

“*Uwa!*”

Utilizing her weight to shake the gondola, Masachika stretched out both arms and legs to balance. Alisa, who found his reaction amusing, shook the gondola again.

“Wait—Stop, it's dangerous!”

“*Fufu*, ahahaha!”

And so, until the gondola returned to the ground, like a child... with a somewhat buoyant spirit, Alisa's mischief continued.

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“Well, I wonder where those two went...”

“Yeah, I haven't received any messages on my phone.”

“Same here~”

“Which means they probably haven’t gone too far...”

The five of them, having disembarked from the Ferris wheel, walked through the park in search of Takeshi and Sayaka, who had gone off somewhere. In case, by any chance, things had gotten cozy between them, they deliberately refrained from making phone calls and instead opted to search for them on foot. As a result, they walked in the direction witnessed by Masachika when they left the Ferris wheel, and after a few minutes...

“Oh, there they are.”

The two they were looking for were at the toy vending machine corner lined up at the edge of the food court.

“Next is pink...? No, this is green... Hmm~, two more times, or maybe three more times...”

Sayaka, who was glued to the side of the Gachapon machine, mumbled something while peering inside. At her feet was a basket filled with a large number of capsules. For some reason, Sayaka was in full-on otaku mode, leaving Alisa and Hikaru flabbergasted. Even Masachika’s consciousness momentarily drifted away.

...*Wha—!*

However, he quickly regained his composure and hurried over to Takeshi.

“Hey, Takeshi, what’s this...”

To his best friend, who had inadvertently uncovered an unseen side of his crush, Masachika peered into his face with uncertainty—

“Ah, check this out, Masachika... Sayaka-san looks like she’s having a blast.”

“...You’re amazing. Seriously.”

Masachika placed his hand on Takeshi’s shoulder, filled with genuine respect, as he gazed at Sayaka with a somewhat transparent smile.

Chapter 5 - If You're Gonna Create a Character, Let's Cast Aside the Shame

“Well then, let’s decide the events for the school festival’s sports day using the school-wide survey... But before that, I have a brief announcement.”

At the first Student Council meeting after the midterms, Touya said this while glancing briefly in Chisaki’s direction.

“At the recent Disciplinary Committee meeting, it was decided that Chisaki will assume the position of Disciplinary Committee President, which had been vacant since the cultural festival. We plan to make the formal announcement at the next morning assembly.”

In response to Touya’s announcement, the four of them, excluding Maria, who had probably heard about it beforehand, all opened their eyes wide. Among them, Yuki raised her right hand and asked.

“So, does that mean Sarashina-senpai will be taking on the roles of both the Student Council Vice-President and the Disciplinary Committee President?”

“That’s right. It’s quite unusual, but since there are no other suitable candidates, we have no choice.”

Touya shrugged his shoulders with a genuine “no choice” attitude, or rather, he seemed disheartened. Although Masachika was surprised at first, when he thought about it calmly, it made sense.

The Disciplinary Committee, which had actively suppressed the incident during the school festival, were now seen as somewhat of heroes among the students. At the forefront of it all was Sumire, who, thanks to her initial popularity, was now considered a savior. If she became the Disciplinary Committee President, it was almost certain that the school’s order and peace would be maintained, or at least that’s what most students believed.

However, the mastermind behind that incident was none other than Sumire's relative, Yusho. While very few students actually saw that as a problem, Sumire herself declined the position of Disciplinary Committee President because of that very reason. On the other hand, appointing someone else as Disciplinary Committee President, and therefore placing them in a higher position or status than Sumire, wouldn't have been accepted by anyone. Except for one candidate.

I see... I had excluded her as a candidate just because she's the Student Council Vice-President, but with Sarashina-senpai, I guess everyone will accept it.

Chisaki had played a significant role in that incident, and it was also her who had transformed the Disciplinary Committee into its current form, a group of warriors. Originally, she was supposed to become the Disciplinary Committee President in her second year, just like when she was in junior highschool, but Chisaki joined the Student Council at Touya's invitation, and her will was inherited by Sumire. In a way, Chisaki becoming the Disciplinary Committee President was a return to what the original Disciplinary Committee would have been.

“In that case... um, congratulations? Is it okay to applaud?”

Uncertain if it was appropriate to applaud, Masachika glanced back and forth between Chisaki and Touya. In response, Chisaki, appearing somewhat troubled by the reaction, tilted her head with a vague smile.

“Well~, I wonder? I mean, I'll probably be more like an honorary advisor? And I'll leave the actual work to Sumire... But still, that means that I might come to the Student Council a little less often?”

“Ah, so that's why the President looks troubled...”

“Haha, yeah, I suppose so. It's totally cute, though.”

With a smirk, Chisaki gently pushed her fist against Touya, who seemed somewhat disheartened. Touya's uniform let out a creaking sound.

“Mmm, so that's how it is... Well then, shall we start deciding on the events?”

While adjusting his uniform, which had been rumpled, Touya made this announcement, and the Student Council members turned their attention to the documents in front of them. The documents listed the names and descriptions of the sports day events gathered through the school-wide survey.

“Events like the 100-meter dash and the 400-meter relay, which are held every year, are as listed on that whiteboard over there. It would be nice if we had some slightly unconventional events that don’t overlap with those...”

“...There are quite a few events that are more than just slightly unconventional.”

In response to Masachika’s comment, everyone chuckled. Then, they began to pick out the clearly joke events one by one.

“What’s this? Takigyo^[1]? Where are we even supposed to get a waterfall from!?”

“‘Sword Dancing’? This is definitely influenced by the school festival, right?”

“‘Shaved Ice Speed Eating Competition’? What even is that...?”

“‘20-Meter Backwards Run’? ...Would anyone even reach the finish line for that?”

“Um, there are also events like ‘Sumo,’ which seem somewhat acceptable...”

“Yeah, well, those are still okay for now...”

Amidst the lively atmosphere, Touya spoke with an indescribable expression on his face.

“As I thought... suggestions like ‘sparring’ or ‘melee combat’ sound more like training exercises than competitive sports events...”

Seeing the numerous events that seemed like they belonged more in the military than in a school setting, besides those mentioned by Touya, the others also wore ambiguous expressions. The reasons for these events being included were somewhat understandable.

In fact, since the Autumn Festival, interest in martial arts among the students has been on the rise. Especially the Kendo club, which has been particularly active, was said to be inundated with out-of-season membership applications. It just goes to show just how significant the impact of the incident was in many ways.

A violent incident that occurred during the enjoyable school festival. In the midst of an incident that could traumatize even delicate students, the figure of the Disciplinary Committee members who bravely subdued the intruders, despite being fellow students, left a vivid impression on many. The shock was even greater for those students who realized their own helplessness, and as a result, Seirei Academy was currently experiencing an unprecedented growth of self-defense as a trend.

“This might also be a result of that influence... Well, it’s better than having problems in school life due to psychological shock...”

While saying that, Touya tilted his head slightly, and Chisaki added, shrugging her shoulders.

“Well, exercise is something recommended by the health and counseling teachers. In fact, it actually seems like there are no students complaining of physical or mental issues anymore?”

“I see, well, that’s good... They say a healthy mind resides in a healthy body, after all.”

“That’s right.”

Chisaki nodded contentedly. Glancing sideways at that, Masachika muttered under his breath.

“But I’ve also heard the boys lament that delicate, frail girls, who used to complain about their anxiety, would join the Women’s Kendo Club and become mental combatants...”

“...But discovering their new side must be a good thing, right?”

“The trade off is that they would completely lose their original side, though.”

Masachika turned his gaze away from Chisaki, who seemed uncomfortable. As someone who had heard the voice of sorrow

firsthand, words and comments that said she used to be a gentle girl who loved flowers, he was curious about how she had changed.

“Well, I’m not the club President... It’s Sumire’s job to guide the club members, right? Even if you ask me...”

“But it was Sarashina-senpai who turned Sumire-senpai into that kind of person in the first place, right? I know about it, you know? When she first entered the school, Sumire-senpai was the typical sheltered ojou-san who had nothing to do with violence.”

“Oh, haha... Well, yeah.”

Aware of it herself, Chisaki averted her gaze awkwardly and then smoothly changed the subject while looking at the documents.

“Oh, there’s ‘Steel Sewing Line’ listed here too. That sure brings back memories.”

“Huh? What’s that?”

“Ah, it’s a training method from a famous manga called ‘Legend of the Conqueror of the End’.”

“A manga? Oh, I see.”

In response to Masachika’s explanation, Maria absentmindedly raised her head and, as soon as their eyes met, she quickly looked back down at the documents. Seeing such a reaction, Masachika couldn’t help but feel unsettled.

Damn it, I was trying not to be conscious of her...

Feeling his heart flutter, Masachika also returned his gaze to the documents in front of him. Without showing any signs of noticing the two’s behavior, Chisaki, sitting across from them, said with nostalgia.

“Oh, it really brings back memories. I tried to do it too~”

“Eh? Really?”

As Masachika eagerly took the bait, Chisaki nodded with a smile.

“Really, really. I actually tried it out on a frying pan with a sewing set~”

Saying that, Chisaki glanced at Maria, who had floating question marks above her head, and added an explanation.

“Ah, this ‘Steel Sewing Line’ is the training method performed by the protagonist of that manga. It’s a practice that allows one to see the flow of energy... ‘In this world, everything has a flow of energy. If you can discern it and apply force in the right place in the right direction, then even strength becomes unnecessary. Even sewing frying pans with a needle becomes easy.’ Or that’s how it goes.”

“It was really popular at one time, wasn’t it~? I wasn’t following it in real-time though. I remember thinking it was really cool when I read about the master’s armor that had tiger embroidery.”

“I thought so too. Look, when I was reading that series, I was in the middle of trying to change myself... So, I was heavily influenced by it.”

“Ah, I see... Did you read it when you were in the middle of starting your training period or something?”

“That’s right, oddly enough, it was a technique that helped the protagonist, who was small and lacked strength, to become stronger, right? I thought it was perfect for me back then, being weak and all... Since then, I spent days staring at frying pans to learn how to see the flow of energy.”

“So you’ve been doing it for a pretty long time.”

“I think I did it until junior high school.”

“You did it for longer than I thought!”

“Yeah, and when I entered junior high school, I learned a shocking fact... There’s no such thing as the flow of energy in inanimate objects, and it’s impossible for human eyes to see such a thing.”

“Rather, you didn’t know that and still got into Seirei Academy?”

“I was shocked when I learned that fact... I wondered, ‘Then what is this I can see with my own eyes?’”

“You can see it?!”

“I never thought Sarashina-senpai was a practitioner of the energy flow-based martial arts...”

“Oh? Yuki-chan knows about it?”

“A-Ah. No. The boys in my elementary school often talked about practicing it.”

Seeing Yuki on the verge of accidentally exposing her otaku self due to the shock, Masachika smoothly changed the subject.

“Well, aside from Sarashina-senpai, I don’t think anyone else can do something like that, so let’s skip this suggestion.”

“I mean, even I can’t sew frying pans with a needle, you know?”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah. I can pass the needle through, but afterwards, the thread always gets tangled at the needle hole. I wonder what to do about that?”

“Maybe you need to integrate the thread into the needle’s tip?”

“Oh, I see. I get it now.”

“Anyway, moving on, how about ‘Interclass Domino Toppling’? It sounds a bit interesting, doesn’t it?”

“It does sound interesting, but... isn’t it difficult to set up dominos outside? They’ll fall over because of the wind.”

“And if the ground is gravel, the dominos won’t even stand up in the first place, right?”

“Hmm, that’s true.”

Starting with Touya’s comment, the other Student Council members began a serious discussion as if it was planned, without any objections.

“What about the ‘Foot Acupressure Race^[2]’?”

“Why don’t we adopt it as one of the obstacles for the obstacle course?”

“Yes, but if we do that, participants will need to take off their shoes during the race... What should we do about that?”

“I think we can leave the details to the Sports Festival Committee. I’m more interested in the ‘Foot Acupressure Race,’ but it would be difficult to prepare dozens of meters of acupressure mats, so I agree with making it just a section of the obstacle race.”

“I see~. That makes sense~”

“‘Sandbag Stacking’ was quite popular last year as well, so we can include that as an event, right?”

“Yeah, it can be done in parallel with other events.”

“That’s true.”

“What about the ‘Waiter’s Race’?”

“Waiter’s Ra— Ah, I know that one. Running while carrying trays full of glasses... That’s basically your specialty, right?”

“Haha, yeah, it is. But isn’t it a bit interesting? The preparation is simple too.”

“Yeah, and it’s a racing event. If we need more race-type events, we can consider it, right?”

After roughly deciding on the events, they took a break... and suddenly, Yuki spoke up.

“By the way, about this year’s horseback competition...”

Masachika and Alisa instinctively raised their guards as Yuki casually dropped those words. At the same time, they raised their eyebrows slightly and smiled archaically, as Yuki consulted with Touya.

“There are only two participants, myself and Alya-san, right?”

“Hmm? Oh yeah, that’s right.”

“In that case... what do you think?”

After finishing her prelude, Yuki smiled and clasped her hands together.

“If it’s just Alya-san and I, the event might end quickly, so how about making this year’s horseback competition a team competition with three participating teams for each?”

It was a proposal that seemed as if she was purely concerned with the excitement of the sports festival. In fact, the proposal to make it a team competition with three participating teams each because “a one-on-one competition would lack excitement” was a perfectly reasonable one. However... for Masachika and Alisa, this proposal had nothing but drawbacks.

This girl...! Does she really expect us to gather ten supporters on our side?!

With one rider and three supports per team, and three teams for each group, they would need to gather a total of twelve participants. Excluding Sayaka and Nonoa, who have already given their consent, and Masachika and Alisa themselves, they would still need to gather eight more supporters. Gathering that many influential participants would be easy for Yuki, the former junior high school Student Council President, but challenging for Alisa, the transfer student.

I mean, I could gather them through my own connections... but that wouldn't be meaningful. Damn it, don't play dirty!

Though he felt bitter inside, Masachika quickly responded with a composed expression.

“Indeed, a one-on-one match would end too quickly, so why not make it a best out of three? With two wins out of three, the winner would be clear, and it should be quite exciting.”

“But won’t a three-round match be physically demanding? And if a rider falls, ending a round, it might be difficult for them to continue for another round. Besides...”

Counteracting Masachika’s suggestion immediately, Yuki placed a hand on her cheek and frowned.

“...Compared to Alya-san and Masachika-kun, Ayano and I have such a significant difference in physique that it wouldn’t be a fair competition. One-sided matches lack excitement, don’t you think? On

the other hand, if it was a team match, tactics can come into play, creating a more favorable and fair atmosphere.”

Th-this girl! As if she has the right to say that!

Faced with Yuki openly using their disadvantage in height as a shield, Masachika inwardly gritted his teeth. Once those words were spoken, no matter how Masachika and Alisa tried to counter, it would appear as if they were inclined towards bullying weaker individuals. Moreover, when told, “It wouldn’t make for a fair competition” the sportsmanship in this setting wouldn’t allow them to stay silent.

“Indeed, what Yuki-chan says makes sense. This height difference is hardly fair.”

As Masachika and Yuki had anticipated, Chisaki nodded while voicing her agreement. In the Student Council elections, there was an unwritten rule that the President and Vice-President should not interfere in the underclassmen’s elections. Touya followed such a custom, maintaining his silence. However, Chisaki seemed to be speaking purely based on sportsmanship. She simply didn’t seem to care about the unwritten rule, or perhaps she was completely oblivious to the possibility that her statement could be seen as interference in the upcoming elections.

In any case, the Vice-President’s support for Yuki’s proposal was significant.

This is bad. She knows that making that proposal breaks that unwritten rule, yet it seems like we’re being portrayed as the villains here.

Masachika felt a sense of urgency and panic, but at that moment, Alisa, who had been silent until now, spoke up.

“What does Masha think?”

Those words caught Masachika off guard.

Right, we should try to win Masha-san to our side. If Masha-san supports us...

With newfound hope in his heart, Masachika turned toward Maria, who calmly placed a finger on her lips.

“A horseback competition, right? Where the presidential candidates compete... Who’s Alya-chan planning to partner with?”

“...I was planning to partner with Sayaka-san and Nonoa-san.”

Slightly worried about Yuki and Ayano, Alisa answered her question, prompting Maria to puff up her cheeks.

“Ehh~! Why didn’t you ask me? I want to participate in the horseback competition too!”

“Wha—!?”

Masachika and Alisa were taken aback by this statement that directly thwarted their plans. Yuki, not missing the opportunity, immediately tried to rope in Maria.

“Well, if Masha-senpai suggests it, then perhaps a team match is better. That way, Masha-senpai can also participate.”

“Oh, I think that sounds good~. Is that fine with both of you?”

Yuki raised the corner of her mouth as she asked, while Chisaki nodded seriously. Furthermore, Maria wore an innocent smile. Faced with these three, Masachika and Alisa realized their impending defeat.

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“Damn, we’re in a tough spot...”

“It can’t be helped... Honestly, there was some merit to her proposal of including more teams.”

After the Student Council meeting, Masachika and Alisa returned to the classroom and sat facing each other at their desks, holding an emergency meeting about the horseback competition.

“But what should we do now? If we include Takeshi and Hikaru, we still need five more volunteers besides Maria. Any ideas?”

“Y-Yeah...”

“Does anyone come to mind...?”

“.....”

Despite asking as a last resort, Alisa remained silent and averted her gaze. Masachika also understood the situation, so he didn't press her further.

“...What if we just go all out and form a powerhouse team?”

“A powerhouse team?”

“To make sure we don't lose no matter who they bring, we could recruit tall male students from the sports clubs. We might have to disregard their popularity, but there are some possibilities in the basketball club—”

“Absolutely not.”

Alisa's strong rejection cut off the conversation, causing Masachika to widen his eyes in surprise.

“...Why not?”

“Why? Well...”

In response to Masachika's genuine question, Alisa stammered and avoided eye contact. Then, with an air of dissatisfaction, she muttered while looking downwards.

【Why do I have to be touched by anyone other than you?】

“Ghg!?”

In response to Alisa's unexpected response in Russian, Masachika nearly choked in surprise. While desperately holding back his reaction, Masachika tightened his facial muscles with all his might as Alisa averted her gaze.

You... youuuuuu—! Wh-what the, what the heck are you sayingggg?!

While screaming internally with barely any vocabulary, Masachika gritted his teeth as hard as he could. Then, while somehow managing to put on a perplexed expression, he asked Alisa—

“What did you say?”

“...I said I don’t want to partner with any guys I don’t know.”

“...Well, even if you say that, we already have three male members which is a significant advantage for us...”

“I just looked it up, you know? In a horseback competition with four members per team, the rider on top sits on the arms or shoulders of the team members at the bottom, right? So that means... the team members at the bottom will be touching my... my butt...”

At that point, Alisa shuddered with a sudden fear and hugged herself tightly. Then, she shot a sharp glance and yelled as if biting out her words.

“No! Absolutely not!”

“(She’s a germaphobe, huh~?)”

Masachika whispered softly as if making a sarcastic comment that would likely make other male students at the school feel dejected. But in reality, that seemed to be a valid concern.

Indeed, partnering with unknown boys might lead to them becoming useless and infatuated with Alya... Anyway, if Alya refuses this idea strongly, I can’t force it upon you.

Masachika shrugged lightly and reconsidered.

“So, shall we consider Maria-san as part of our team...? She probably intends to participate anyway. As for the remaining five...”

After discussing for a while, the two of them eventually came up with four potential candidates for now.

“Yeah. For now, including Takeshi and Hikaru, let’s approach those six tomorrow regarding the other two teams we need... But what about the other girl who will join the team that we’re in?”

At this point, Masachika listed several female students in the school who had popularity and influence.

“...Well, these are the famous ones around here, but... do you know any of them?”

“I’ve met some of them through Student Council activities... but we’re not on personal terms.”

“Well, I guess that’s typical for seniors.”

Since he hadn’t expected much in the first place, Masachika readily nodded. Then, leaning back in his chair and looking up at the ceiling, he tilted his head in thought.

“Hmm~, what should we do~...”

“...What about that person?”

“Hm?”

When he lowered back his gaze, Alisa continued with some hesitation.

“The... the one from the handicrafts club.”

“Ah, Slit-Paisen?”

“Yeah... or rather, I don’t even know her real name, thanks to you?”

“If you really want to know by the way, that’s her eighteenth alias.”

“Huh?”

“Never mind. Well, Slit-Paisen is Slit-Paisen, so it’s fine.”

“It’s not fine.”

Ignoring Alisa’s annoyed glare, Masachika crossed his arms.

“Well, yeah... If I ask, she might agree, but Slit-Paisen’s not that well-known among the seniors. She’s pretty well-known among the underclassmen... but if we consider popularity and height, we should be asking another second-year girl or even other third-year girls...”

“...I don’t really know many seniors, and even fewer would support me...”

“Well, I could try using my connections...”

“That’s—”

“Besides, it’s not a bad thing if there’s at least one supporter of mine, right? The others, including Masha-san, are *your* supporters, after all.”

As he spoke, Alisa reluctantly nodded after about ten seconds of contemplation.

“True, having at least one...”

“Yeah. However, having someone you have absolutely no acquaintance with is also a bit... Hmm. It would be better if you know them and if they seem like someone who would support you... and preferably if they happen to be a somewhat well-known girl...”

After thinking for a while, Masachika groaned at the strictness of these conditions.

“It’s difficult... After all, my supporters are basically Yuki’s supporters... So if there are people who support me and not Yuki...”

“Yeah, I see what you mean...”

“Yes... Ah, do you know the Vice-President of the Flower Arrangement Club, Kitagawa-senpai?”

“Huh? ...No, maybe I’ve seen her before, but...”

“I see... How about Kanazawa-senpai from the Volleyball Club, the tall one?”

“I know who she is, but I haven’t really talked to her.”

“Then... what about Minamihama-senpai from the Literature Club, the short one with red glasses and a short haircut?”

“...I don’t know her.”

“Hmm~, I see...”

At that moment, Masachika noticed that the temperature of Alisa’s gaze had dropped significantly.

“...Alya? What’s wrong?”

“What?”

“No... it’s just your gaze looks kinda scary right now.”

“It’s nothing? I was just thinking about how reliable of a partner you are.”

As Alisa explained, she slowly crossed her arms and legs, and then, with a completely emotionless smile in her eyes, prompted him to continue.

“Please go on. Are there any other female students you have in mind?”

“...Well, for now, it’s just those three.”

That was a lie. There was one more person in his mind. However, Masachika had an instinctual feeling that it would be dangerous to mention her any further.

“*Hmmmm?*”

Alisa stared at Masachika with a suspicious look, then shrugged her shoulders after a few seconds.

“Well, whatever.”

With those words, Masachika heaved a sigh of relief—

“So, how did you become friends with those three you mentioned?”

“Eh?”

“The three you mentioned just now, what brought you together and how did you become friends?”

“...Is that really important?”

“Yes, as a reference for increasing supporters, I’d like to know.”

It was a diligent and reasonable request, more like a police officer interrogating a suspect.

“Well, Kitagawa-senpai... Well, it was like... from a trial, like an opportunity to do flower arrangement, and she liked how I arranged the flowers, so... we started talking a bit from there.”

“I see.”

“As for Kanazawa-senpai... When I went to the gym for Student Council work, her spike just happened to hit me in the head...”

“Hmmmmm...?”

“So, I ended up with a slight concussion... But she was very responsible and considerate... And that’s how we became friends, I guess?”

“Uh-huh.”

“As for Minamihama-senpai, well, we both share an interest in light novels, so that’s how we became friends.”

“...I see~”

After listening to Masachika’s brief explanations, Alisa, for some reason, flashed a triumphant smile.

【So, how we met was the most dramatic.】

What??

With a puzzled expression and question marks floating above his head, Masachika continued without paying much attention.

“So, what should we do? Should we approach these three for now?”

In response to Masachika’s question, Alisa stopped dead in her tracks and put on a contemplative expression. After about ten seconds of thinking, she asked with a bit of effort, as if squeezing the words out from between clenched teeth.

“By the way, do you have any male candidates in mind?”

“Eh? Well, there are a few, but... You said earlier that you don’t want any guys...”

“Just in case! Just in case!”

“Ehhh~, well if we’re talking about guys, there’s that senior from the basketball club...”

Asked to provide some candidates, Masachika mentioned a few names, but none of them seemed to be familiar to Alisa. She fell into silence with a face that resembled someone who had just eaten a bitter bug.

“So... what should we do?”

Seeing Alisa in what seemed like a deep internal struggle, Masachika asked tentatively. And just as Alisa began to slowly open her mouth—

“Oh, there you are. Oi, Kuze-kun!♪”

Following the sound of the sliding door being opened with a clatter, a female student with long black hair styled into twin tails approached while waving her hands cheerfully. In addition to her well-proportioned figure and a slightly short skirt that generously revealed her long legs, the blue ribbon on her school uniform indicated that she was a third-year student. Her appearance was filled with brightness and cuteness, giving off an idol-like charm, and she seemed like an outgoing and friendly girl at first glance. However, Masachika’s reaction to this was a slightly tired, wry smile.

“Ehh~? What’s with that reaction? Elena-senpai’s feelings are hurt now, you know?”

“Well, you see... Senpai’s high-spirited aura just depleted all my HP in an instant...”

“Haha, what are you talking about! Kuze-kun, you don’t need to worry about that at all!”

“Hahaha, well, I guess I should at least be a little wary of the high-spirited types like you as an otaku, you know...”

As he was patted on the shoulder energetically, Masachika replied somewhat mechanically. At that moment, the girl turned her gaze toward Alisa and flashed a friendly smile.

“Oops, sorry for interrupting, Alisa-chan. Can I borrow Kuze-kun for a moment?”

“Oh, yes. Narahashi-senpai...”

“Just call me Elena.”

“Um, okay...”

“Senpai, Alya is someone who genuinely gets intimidated by high-spirited people, so please go easy on her.”

“Really? Sorry, sorry. Was I too casual earlier?”

“No, it’s okay... Elena-senpai.”

“Ah, that’s better, Alisa-chan. Alright, let’s just drop the honorifics altogether.”

“Mind your distance.”

“Oh, that’s good~, your tsukkomis are as sharp as always.”

In response to Masachika’s sharp retort accompanied by a cold stare, the female student laughed heartily and gave a thumbs up.

Her name was Narahashi Elena. She was a third-year student at Seirei Academy, the President of the Wind Ensemble Club, and... not to hide anything, the former Vice-president of the Student Council. Thanks to that, she still occasionally visited the Student Council room, teasing her juniors, helping with tasks, or just having tea before leaving. During the recent Autumn Festival, she had played an active role as the Vice-President of the Executive Festival Committee.

She has a good personality and takes care of others, so she seems to be quite popular among the Wind Ensemble Club juniors... After all, she used to be the Vice-President. She does have some respect among the students, after all...

“Well, there aren’t many students in this school who can deliver sharp retorts to Elena-senpai. It’s rare, so feel free to come more! Don’t worry about the senpai thing, just keep giving those sharp comebacks!”

“Decency.”

“Oh, no, I’m in trouble. I feel like I’m awakening to something with the cold gaze of my kouhai.”

“Your own foolishness, perhaps?”



“But won’t that be enlightenment...? My eyes are wide open now... so there’s no way I’ve achieved enlightenment! What’s left of me if you take away my sexual desires!?”

“Hunger and the desire for sleep.”

“I’m like the embodiment of the three great desires, huh...?”

“Just kidding. The Elena-senpai, who’s rich, popular, and beautiful will still be left behind.”

“Kuh, no way...! ...Huh? That doesn’t sound bad?”

“It’s actually quite good.”

“I see, so... I won’t become enlightened then?”

“I’m not saying you have to become enlightened, but maybe you could calm down a bit?”

“No~, I still want to have fun with girls.”

“Being a womanizer, huh?”

“Oh~, nice tsukkomi! Good job~”

Masachika observed her with a lukewarm gaze as Elena, who even surprises Yuki when in her mischievous little sister mode, exhibited harassment of the highest order.

“Do you really want to be tsukkomi’d that badly?”

When Masachika reacted in a cold voice, Elena smiled playfully and wriggled her body exaggeratedly.

“Eeeh~? Y-You’re acting like... like Elena-senpai’s always sexually frustrated...”

“Not in that way.”

“Haha... Well, you know?”

Blushing and scratching her head awkwardly, Elena replied cheerfully with a smile that seemed to be plastered on her face.

“This school is full of gentlemen and ladies who graciously overlook silliness, so I usually end up being the one who has to play the tsukkomi role. Finding someone where I can comfortably be the boke is quite rare.”

“Why not just let loose and play the boke frequently then? ...You actually have an earnest nature, huh...?”

“Hey, don’t say that! I’m not... I mean, Elena-senpai is a free-spirited and naughty onee-san~”

“Yet I never hear any juicy stories when you come to mind.”

“Well, you see, Elena-senpai isn’t the kind of woman who gets tied down to a specific person, you know?”

“Yeah, yeah, that’s the type of character you’re playing, right? Elena-senpai.”

“Don’t call me a character!”

Elena grew even more irritated as she glared at Masachika, but he shifted his focus to the main topic.

“So? What can I do for you?”

“Oops, right, I almost forgot.”

Finally recalling the main topic at hand with a change in expression, Elena cleared her throat and then extended her hand to Masachika with a smile that seemed like it would come with a “*kyapi☆*” sound effect.

“Kuze-kun, make a contract with me and become a Harem King☆!”

“Go home.”

“Why!?”

Receiving an immediate recommendation to leave, Elena slammed both hands on Masachika’s desk.

“A Harem King, you know? That’s right, a Harem King! Any high school boy would gladly agree to my proposal!”

“Your ‘Harem’ is actually just the Wind Ensemble Club, isn’t it!? So, you mean the club President, right? I have no reason to assume such a position!”

“What? Kuze-kun, so you do get it.”

As he tried to fend off the elbow poking him, Elena became a bit more serious.

“Ah, sorry. Should I explain from the beginning?”

“...*Haaah.*”

“The ‘Harem King’ thing was a joke. What I want from you, Kuze-kun, is to take charge of the piano in the Wind Ensemble Club.”

““!””

Upon hearing those words, not only Masachika but also Alisa’s expressions became somewhat stern. Without seeming to be concerned about their reactions, Elena raised both hands in a troubled manner.

“Originally, we had a third-year student as our pianist, but they’re now busy with external university entrance exams and quit recently. So, currently, we have no pianist in the Wind Ensemble Club. Well, it’s not like we need a pianist for all the songs, and everyone joined the club because they wanted to play wind instruments... So, no one wants to take over.”

“Well, that’s because those who want to play the piano usually go to the piano club...”

“Exactly. So, just as I was thinking about what to do...”

While nodding in agreement with something, Elena put her arm around Masachika’s shoulder with a gentle smile.

“Well, I was super impressed, you know? I never expected to find such a talent so close by.”

“*Haaah.*”

“So, how about making a contract with me and becoming a Harem King?”

“I can’t do it.”

“Why!?”

“Because I only have a bad impression of someone who pushes for a contract like this. Also, it sounds a bit more like I’d be involving myself in a slave contract rather than becoming a Harem King.”

“That’s a pretty negative way to think... Hehe, I was just suggesting we do club activities together☆”

“—But you never said it like that, not even once??”

“Ugh, you’re tough... I never thought you’d reject this so thoroughly...”

“If anything, why did you think I wouldn’t reject this kind of invitation?”

With a completely exasperated look from Masachika, Elena changed her expression slightly as she explained with a different tone.

“Because, there are cute girls, lots of them.”

“So, why this type of invitation?”

“I can give you the real deal instead then.”

“You’re talking about a performance, right!?”

Seeing Masachika raise an eyebrow at what was being said in front of Alisa, Elena wore a puzzled expression.

“Kuze-kun, don’t tell me you’re not interested in a harem...?”

“That’s not the point here.”

“Then why? Even though I’m showing so much sincerity.”

“In good faith?”

In response to the deadpan question from Masachika, Elena hugged herself with a frustrated expression.

“That look in your eyes... You want me to show sincerity more clearly!? Ugh! Fine... if it has come to this, then I, as the club President, must do what I have to do...”

“That’s seriously not necessary.”

“But you’re telling me to pay with my body, right!? Well, go ahead and do whatever you want. You can satisfy your youthful desires with my perfectly ripe body! It’s time to eat!”

“It’s time to eat...?”

“Just like when you play the piano, you can make Elena-senpai sing instead! You can perform ‘Neko Funjatta^[3]’ with Elena senpai’s body!”

““.....””

“Ah, um... Is it too much to ask for you guys to not to give me that ‘what is she saying?’ look in silence? Hehe, can you cut me some slack?”

Under the cold crossfire of his icy gaze, Elena chuckled like a delinquent and scratched her head. Seeing her face, Masachika sighed and spoke.

“If that’s what you think, then please ask normally in the first place...”

Masachika wore a tired expression towards his senpai who never made a straightforward request. In response, Elena twitched her eyebrows and abandoned her playful attitude, staring down at Masachika with a deadly serious expression.

“So, does that mean... you want me to bow my head?”

“No, that’s not what I meant. Please just ask normally—”

“Hah! How disrespectful! Even though I used to be the Vice-President of the Student Council, you’re telling me to bow my head like some ordinary first-year student?”

With a sarcastic curl at the corner of her mouth, Elena scoffed and then, with fluid grace, dropped to her knees and prostrated herself before him.

“Please, I beg you. Join the Wind Ensemble Club.”

“Wh-what a lack of pride...”

“*Heeeeey~* I’m begging you. I want Kuze-kun’s to play the piano in my final performance in high school~! I’ll do anything I can for you!”

Even the usually composed Masachika felt a pang of guilt as Elena clung to his arm, still on her knees.

“But no matter what you say... as a former Vice-President, it’s not right for you to influence a current election—”

Just as he was about to explain that she couldn’t help them, Masachika suddenly realized something.

Huh? But... isn’t the horseback competition just for show?

Regardless of how the parties involved perceived it or how the spectators felt about it, the horseback competition was essentially a sideshow, and strictly speaking, participation was not mandatory. So, if that’s the case...

Even though she’s a former Vice-President, having her participate in this... is a gray area. Well, unwritten rules are unwritten rules. It’s not like it’s explicitly stated anyway...

In other words, it was just a matter of which team could persuade the students the best.

Besides...

Since hearing about the piano, a sarcastic smile had lingered in Masachika’s mind when it came to the phantom image of his mother.

I’ve settled things with Maa-chan and our past already... I need to let go of this too.

With that thought in mind, Masachika and Alisa exchanged glances. Then, through eye contact, they communicated their basic intentions, and Masachika slowly addressed Elena.

“You said you’d do anything, right?”

“Eh?”

Looking up with a bewildered expression, Elena was gazed down upon by a faint smile.

“You mentioned paying with your body... didn’t you?”

“E-Eh... ehh?”

To the junior who seemed to exude an unsettling atmosphere, Elena suddenly stood up, her expression tense as she alternated her gaze between Masachika and Alisa. Her cheeks turned red, her eyes moistened, and...

“Today...”

“?”

“My underwear today isn’t cuteeee!”

“Don’t run away while shouting things that can lead to misunderstandings!”

With her arms protecting her body, Elena fled like a frightened rabbit, and Masachika’s angry voice chased after her.

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“...Will it be okay?”

After catching up to Elena, who had run away, and finishing up the discussion they reopened, Alisa, who had returned to her seat in the classroom, asked Masachika with hesitation.

“Hm? Well, she even went as far as to prostrate herself... Besides, it’ll just be until the concert in December after the sports festival. If it means that Elena-senpai will be our volunteer and help us, it’s a small price to pay.”

In response to Alisa’s question, Masachika shrugged with a wry smile.

In the end, Elena agreed to participate in the horseback competition but under certain conditions. However, even those

conditions were concessions proposed by Masachika, so in a way, Elena had wholeheartedly accepted his terms. And as compensation for that, Masachika agreed to help the Wind Ensemble Club as their pianist as Elena had requested.

“However, waiting until after the sports festival for her request... She’s really down-to-earth or maybe just sensible in general... She probably didn’t come to me after the cultural festival because she was waiting for the exam period to end, I’m sure.”

Despite her outwardly wild character, Masachika let out a subtle chuckle at his considerate and detail-oriented senpai. However, Alisa asked again.

“But is it really okay?”

“?”

“That is... becoming their pianist.”

The idea of Masachika playing the piano was a concern for Alisa. Despite feeling a bit less confident due to Masachika’s skeptical expression, Alisa decided to voice her speculation.

“Masachika-kun... I thought that... maybe you don’t really like playing the piano.”

She had a gut feeling, which she developed after hearing Masachika’s piano performance at the Autumn Festival.

At first, Alisa had felt a sense of resentment, wondering why Masachika had hidden his ability to play the piano. She questioned why, with such skill, he hadn’t joined their band. And why, despite all this, he had decided to showcase his talent then.

But as she listened to Masachika’s performance, her initial reaction gradually subsided, and she arrived at an answer to her own “why.” That is, that Masachika might not like the piano, or he might even hate it.

In response to Alisa’s speculation, which was more of an intuition, Masachika opened his eyes wide, seemingly surprised.

As I thought, I knew it.

His reaction convinced her, and Alisa spoke up.

“If it means forcing yourself to do something you don’t really want to... should we stop now? We can always find someone else to help volunteer.”

Masachika averted his gaze, deep in thought, after Alisa’s words. Then, after a few moments of silence, he slowly opened his mouth.

“...No, it’s not like I dislike the piano or anything, and I’m not forcing myself.”

Alisa felt that this answer, given after contemplation, came from Masachika’s true feelings. However, at the same time, she realized that it could also be a way to divert the conversation.

Ah, he did it again...

Again, at a critical moment, Masachika evaded and dodged her words, as if he were refusing to let Alisa delve deeper into the issue.

When it happened like this, Alisa found herself unable to say anything.

Why don’t I just ask, “Then what is it that you don’t like?” or, “Why didn’t you want to join the band?” I should ask this. Now.

Even though she thought this in her mind, her voice refused to come out. She had a feeling that if she asked, Masachika would drift further away. Before the speechless Alisa, Masachika smirked with a touch of sarcasm.

“Well, on the flip side, it’s not like I have a particular passion for it either... So, I guess there’s a bit of concern there.”

“Concern?”

“You know, they say that in things like choir and ensemble, it’s important for everyone to be in sync, right? No matter how skilled you are, if your hearts are all over the place, it won’t go well~. Something like that...”

Masachika explained in his usual playful tone.

“So, you know, I think it might be a letdown if someone like me, who doesn’t really have an interest in Wind Ensemble or ensemble performances in general, were to join. I didn’t raise this to Elena-senpai’s attention earlier, though.”

As Masachika said this with a feigned guilty smile, Alisa realized something.

So, you...

His lack of passion for music. That was the reason why Masachika didn’t have the desire to join their band as a performing member himself. He believed that not having the same passion would hinder those around him. Realizing this, Alisa remembered a similar feeling she had experienced recently.

Just like I don’t understand love...

Not sharing the same fervor as those around her. Feeling like she was the only one who couldn’t get excited, a sense of loneliness and alienation...

Do you... feel that way too?

The moment she thought this, Alisa’s lips moved.

“I don’t think that’s true.”

Spoken with a strong tone, Masachika looked at Alisa as if taken aback. Meeting his gaze head-on, Alisa continued.

“Maybe you don’t have a passion for music. But...”

Alisa didn’t know what had happened in Masachika’s past; however, having observed Masachika up close, she could say this with confidence.

“I believe you’re someone who can ignite their own passion to support those who are passionate. Just like you did your best to support everyone in Fortitude, and like how you decided to run for the Student Council... because of me.”

Leaning forward in her chair, Alisa held Masachika’s hand. She stared into his eyes, trying to convey her feelings.

“So... I’m sure it’ll be okay. You can definitely fulfill Narahashi-senpai’s wish. So... don’t suffer like that.”

As her last words came out, Alisa wasn’t sure why she had said such a thing in the first place. But when she gazed at Masachika, she couldn’t help but say them from the bottom of her heart.

And when she saw Masachika’s eyes tremble upon hearing those words, Alisa realized that her words indeed had truth behind them. Masachika was suffering. Beneath his joking and carefree demeanor. Probably, for a very long time now...

“Ah!”

The moment she realized this, Alisa couldn’t hold back any longer. Her chest tightened as if in agony... and before she knew it, she was embracing Masachika tightly from the front with all her might.

In that position, right next to Masachika’s ear, she squeezed out a voice from the depths of her throat.

“Someday...”

The words seemed as if they might falter. There was a sense of fear nesting deep within her... A fear that told her not to push any further. It tightened her throat and compelled her to close her mouth.

Even so, Alisa desperately resisted that fear and whispered to Masachika in a hoarse voice.

“Someday... will you tell me... about your suffering?”

In response to Alisa’s question, which she had mustered all her courage to ask, Masachika couldn’t reply immediately. Instead, a long, heart-wrenching silence hung in the air. Then, after this prolonged pause, Masachika quietly nodded.

Alisa felt a sense of relief and joy flood her heart at his silent agreement. She tightened her embrace around Masachika, feeling content, and briefly thought about saying something more in the heat of the moment.

Should I say it now?

She had been struggling with how to convey something for a while now, and in this moment, she almost blurted it out. But right before she could, she reconsidered her actions.

No, maybe it's better to wait until after the election, right?

That's right, winning the election and then confidently sharing her feelings would be better. To achieve that, she renewed her determination.

I absolutely have to win the election.

With her resolve solidified, Alisa turned her gaze toward the classroom door and locked eyes with Elena, who was watching her from there.

““!””

Their eyes met, and both of them jumped as if startled. After a moment of frozen stillness, it was Elena who started speaking first, her words stumbling over each other.

“Oh, about that, um, about the specifics, we haven't talked about that, so, that's why—”

As her gaze darted frantically, Elena blushed as she let out her words...

“I-I didn't see anything, and I won't tell anyoneeeee—”

She let out a scream as if she had witnessed a crime scene first hand, and dashed away like a bolt of lightning.

“Don't run away while shouting things that can lead to misunderstandings!”

In response to this spectacle, Alisa's voice, now back to its normal livelihood, shouted after her.

[1]: Takigyo is a Shinto and Buddhist Japanese tradition, commonly described as waterfall meditation. It involves meditating under a waterfall, and is said to raise one's metabolism.

[2]: Foot Acupressure Race (足つぼ競走) is a race in which contestants race across mats with pointy rock like structures, and can be a potentially painful experience.

[3]: “Neko Funjatta” (猫ふんじやつた) is a Japanese nickname for the very common and simple piano piece, “Flohwalzer”. Apparently, it’s called as such in Japan since “猫ふんじやつた” translates to “I stepped on a cat” which is for some reason associated with Flohwalzer’s playful melody?

Chapter 6 - The Senpai Who's Bad for the Heart and the Senpai Who's Kind for the Heart

“I see, Suou-san was up to something like that.”

“Yes, that’s right. So, we’d like Sayaka-san to join the horseback competition in a team with Takeshi-kun and Hikaru-kun. Sorry for the short notice...”

The next day, after getting approval from Takeshi and Hikaru to participate in the race, Alisa and Masachika visited Sayaka from Class F during their break.

After hearing the situation from Alisa, Sayaka slowly pushed up her glasses and said, “Well, I don’t mind, but... it was quite careless of you. You were completely outplayed by Suou-san’s plan...”

Lowering her gaze and dropping her shoulders, Alisa couldn’t help but feel down. Sayaka started sideways at her and continued.

“It’s alright to feel down, but shouldn’t we think about countermeasures for similar situations in the future?”

“...You’re right.”

To the Sayaka’s mercilessly sarcastic words, Alisa couldn’t offer any counterarguments and simply nodded and agreed. Seeing this, Masachika, who couldn’t stand by and do nothing, offered some assistance.

“Well, Yuki was really good this time. It was hard to argue when faced with such a straightforward and logical point.”

Masachika tried to smooth things over, but Sayaka snorted disdainfully.

“Even so, you didn’t have to obediently follow their proposal. If they used the idea of difference in height as a shield to their plans, you could have pledged to restrict your cooperation to female participants

only. After all, originally, our group only included me and Nonoa, so there was no risk involved.”

“...I didn’t think of that.”

“And even if her proposal, to have the competition with multiple teams, had been accepted, you could have asked for the disclosure of each other’s participants in exchange... There were countless things you could have done.”

““.....””

In response to Sayaka’s calm words, Masachika and Alisa were left speechless.

Indeed, Sayaka was right.

At that time, due to Yuki’s proposal gaining support from both Chisaki and Maria, they were completely swept away by such momentum, and their brains refused to function properly.

Masachika had already switched his focus to who to bring into their group, but looking back now, there was no need to unconditionally accept Yuki’s proposal.

“...You’re absolutely right. We’ll reflect on it.”

“Yes...”

Sayaka snorted again and turned her head away from Masachika and Alisa, appearing even more cold and distant than usual. Masachika tilted his head in response.

Meanwhile, Alisa nodded sincerely and, gazing at Sayaka, spoke up.

“That was very informative. Thank you for cooperating with us. You’re very dependable.”

“...I see.”

While responding to Alisa’s words with indifference, Sayaka kept adjusting her glasses anxiously. Seeing her like that, a certain speculation arose, causing Masachika’s cheek to twitch.

No, but could it be...?

He quickly denied that speculation himself, but at that point, he couldn't think of anything else.

Could it be... that because someone else took her seat as a member of Alya's team, she was sulking!?

While concealing her expression with a gesture of adjusting her glasses, Sayaka seemed to now be in a good mood, and Masachika felt that the image he had of her from their middle school days was crumbling, and was secretly perplexed.

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“Sorry, did you wait long?”

“Nah, it’s no big deal~”

It was currently lunch break. Masachika, who had been summoned by Maria, visited the Student Council room alone.

As he opened the door and stepped inside, he found Maria sitting alone on the silent Student Council room’s sofa.

“.....”

In this situation that reminded him of his recent exchange with Maria, Masachika felt a slight sense of unease as he walked towards the sofa.

“So, what can I help you with?”

“Well... how about taking a seat?”

Maria pointed to the spot next to her. Masachika swallowed hard as thoughts of what had happened just before the exam period were now rushing back to him.

But... she probably called me here to talk about that incident, right?

Since that incident, Maria had become somewhat awkward around Masachika. On the other hand, Masachika, too, couldn't help but feel awkward around Maria because the distant feelings from his first love had rekindled.

However, he still couldn't figure out why Maria was feeling awkward around him.

If we're going to talk about this... I can't just run away here. I need to sort out my feelings myself.

With that determination in mind, Masachika sat down next to Maria. He patiently waited as Maria, who still seemed unsure of her words, stared at her own knees.

Then, after what felt like a complete rotation of the second hand on the clock, Maria finally spoke.

“Um, Kuze-kun... do you...?”

“Yes?”

Seeing Masachika sitting upright with a sincere attitude, Maria gathered her courage and made up her mind to ask what had been on her mind.

“Do you... look at me with... lewd thoughts?”

“...Come again?”

Masachika was taken aback by the unexpected question, and his mind went blank. Seeing Masachika frozen with his head tilted to the side, Maria panicked and waved her hands in panic.

“Ah, no! That's not it! I'm not blaming you or anything... It's just that, I know that teenage boys are naturally like that! So, I know it's not your fault...”

While lowering her voice hesitantly, Maria awkwardly bowed towards Masachika.

“I'm sorry! Until now, I never really thought about it and, um, I've been so, like, close with you, physically...”

She slowly lifted her head and, while avoiding eye contact, Maria continued with embarrassment.

“Kuze-kun, when something like that happens...you must feel troubled, right? You had to endure it... so I’m sorry for being so insensitive and always sticking to you without realizing this!”

And as he looked at the top of Maria’s head as she bowed once again, Masachika thought,

...Wh-what should I say!?

Simply put, it was hell. For an adolescent boy, this was nothing but hell.

The feeling was akin to a male high school student who had been caught with the possession of erotic magazines by his mother. Of course, Masachika had never experienced anything like that... but in terms of having one’s hidden desires and lust pointed out by someone of the opposite sex, not to mention someone who was close to you, this situation felt somewhat similar.

Um, should I just accept her apology? But if I do, it means admitting that I look at Masha with ulterior thoughts... No, I do have those thoughts about Masha. Honestly, I do look at her that way! But as Masha said, it’s just because I’m an adolescent boy, so it can’t be helped...

And, unexpectedly, Masachika denied himself from giving an excuse.

Adolescent boys and such, that’s just an excuse... But the truth is, I have no such impure thoughts towards someone like Nonoa or Elena-senpai...

But, he had lewd thoughts about Maria.

He hadn’t been aware of it until now.

That, in itself, was the most significant evidence that Masachika recognized Maria as a romantic interest. However...

Well, yeah, that’s true, but... I don’t know. Now that I see Masha-san as Maa-chan, I feel incredibly guilty...

It felt as if he was defiling that girl from his beautiful memories with vulgar desires... Masachika felt a tremendous disgust for his own perverted thoughts, and he wanted to die lightly.

“No, not at all, there’s no need for you to apologize... Please raise your head.”

Out of the guilt that made his chest ache, Masachika tried to cut off the conversation. Then, Maria suddenly raised her face with a loud noise, and Masachika drew back a bit.

“By the way, Kuze-kun!”

“Y-Yeah?”

Maria spread her arms towards the slightly startled Masachika. Then, with a flushed, serious expression, she said,

“As an apology... feel free to touch me as much as you want!”

“...Wha—?”

“For making you endure it until now... without holding back, feel free to touch as much as you want?”

“How did this conversation go in that direction!?”

Normally, wouldn’t this be where you say, “From now on, I’ll be careful and avoid physical contact”? Why did she take such an active approach? Why, of all things, did she do something that completely affirmed his perverted desires?

“I-It’s okay! If it’s Kuze-kun, I’ll be fine! It’s embarrassing, but I’ll do my best!”

“No, it’s not okay, and you don’t have to do your best!”

Maria, who had her face all red while looking around in a daze, shouted in a mix of panic.

This is bad. She’s overthinking and driving herself crazy!

Maria, who had completely gone off the rails in a strange direction, was making Masachika’s head spin too...

“I get it, I understand! I understand your feelings, Masha-san!”

Without any idea of how to organize his thoughts, Masachika blurted out his feelings, extending both hands forward to stop Maria anyway.

“But, please, have mercy! It’s true that I see Masha-san in that, well... in that way, but I also feel an intense sense of self-loathing because of it! If I were to touch Masha-san here, I’d probably self-destruct from self-loathing!!”

Without even understanding what he was saying himself, he closed his eyes and screamed as loudly as he could... and then, the Student Council room was filled with a painful silence. The only sound he could hear was the ticking of the clock, but eventually, a faint laugh reached Masachika’s ears.

Slowly opening his eyes to the sound, he saw Masha laughing with a somewhat relieved expression.

“...Masha-san?”

“Ah, no, I’m sorry? Kuze-kun, you’re still Saa-kun, after all.”

“?”

While raising an eyebrow in question, Masachika decided that the outburst had somehow subsided and relaxed his hands. Then, with a rational expression, Masha bowed to Masachika again.

“I’m sorry. When I realized that Kuze-kun was a man, I got a little scared.”

“Uhh... Well, that...”

So she figured out my impure, ulterior thoughts, right? And then she got scared because she realized those thoughts were directed towards her, didn’t she?

Thinking that, Masachika once again wanted to die. But before he had the opportunity to slump down with both elbows on his knees while feeling depressed...Masha smiled and explained.

“But it’s okay now. Kuze-kun won’t do anything to hurt me. I’ve realized that you’re still the kind Saa-kun.”

“Eh, well...”

Reflecting on Masha's words, Masachika, with a still-confused mind, came to a conclusion.

"Could it be...that you were testing me?"

"Well... I'm sorry? It might have ended up feeling that way, in hindsight."

"Ended up... feeling that way?"

In response to Masachika's question, Masha lowered her brows slightly with an apologetic look.

"I really did feel bad about not noticing Kuze-kun's... maleness. And I did think it would be okay if it was Kuze-kun who touched me. But... when I saw Kuze-kun panicking more than me, I somehow felt relieved."

Chuckling softly, Maria narrowed her eyes affectionately.

"Kuze-kun, you really haven't changed at all... I got scared that you did and started acting strangely."

"Huh... I mean, that's..."

Maria averted her gaze from Kuze, and while scratching his head, he mumbled.

"As I said earlier, it's true that I'm in a bit of a predicament...so from now on, please refrain from teasing me too much."

"*Fufu*, okay. I'll do my best~"

"But are you sure you won't?"

"Well, you see, I just can't help but stick to the person I like~"

While explaining with her usual fluffy smile, Maria changed her tone and continued.

"But... Yeah, from now on, I'll try as much as possible to tell you before I do something like that, okay?"

"So you won't stop sticking to me like that, huh...?"

"Yeah. So, um..."

Then, Maria opened her arms slightly. Seeing a scene that felt oddly familiar, Kuze's cheeks twitched.

“Let’s make up with a hug, okay?”

“.....”

Yes, that’s right... Just like I’m Saa-kun, Masha-san is also Maa-chan.

Surely, there was no profound meaning to this embrace. It’s like an act when kids make up after a fight. Just as in those days when there was nothing more to it, you should do it with pure and light feelings.

“Yes, yes, it’s just a hug to make up, isn’t it?”

With that thought in mind, Masachika felt relieved, leaned forward slightly, and lightly embraced Maria. Maria, in turn, hugged Masachika tightly, just like in those days when there were no ulterior motives between the both of them. Then, near Masachika’s ear, Maria let out a satisfied laugh.

【I’m not scared after all.】

As if reassured, Maria whispered softly—

Smooch

“Hey, wait—!”

Feeling the sensation on his cheek, Masachika quickly pulled away. In response, Maria... with a mischievous smile that she had never shown back then when they were just children, stood up, pointed her index finger in front of her lips, and said,

“I did say ‘I’ll try as much as possible’~”

With a wink, Maria left the student council room with a skipping gait.

Watching her back, Masachika flopped onto the sofa and buried his face in his arms and shouted,

“I’m going to die!!”



After school that day, Masachika and Alisa, having finished their Student Council duties, changed into their gym clothes and went to the back of the school building.

Shortly after the two arrived, Maria appeared, and a few minutes later, Elena showed up.

“Hey there~. *Phew*, it’s a bit chilly today,”

Masachika furrowed his brow slightly at the sight of Elena lightly rubbing her short sleeved arms.

“Are you okay? We’re just doing a light practice today. You could wear your tracksuit...”

“Nah, I’ll warm up as we practice.”

“Is that so? Well, Alya, Masha-san, if you guys feel cold, you can change into your tracksuits too.”

“I’m fine.”

“I can handle this much.”

Masachika felt a bit concerned about whether he was being considerate enough towards the girls. Standing next to him, Elena looked at Alisa and Maria and spoke,

“But seriously... Those gym clothes look good.”

Hearing that comment in a deeply contemplative tone, Masachika glanced at her in silence. Elena, with a sly grin on her face and her eyes drooping as if to say, “*gwehehe*,” continued.

“They’re quite alluring... kinda makes me feel all tingly—”

“Elena-senpai, can I ask a physics-related question?”

“Huh? Going straight for the physics-based tsukkomi... That’s so on-the-nose—”

Masachika's hand suddenly passed in front of Elena, who was deliberately acting flustered.

“.....”

“Excuse me, I was just swinging my arm.”

Elena, with a straight face, looked at Masachika, who had raised his hand as if to strike her. Then, she placed her hand on her mouth and looked up at him with a playful gaze.

“It’s my first time, so... please be gentle?”

And at that moment, Masachika retorted, chopping his hand on her head.

“Ugh... You’re terrible, Kuze-kun. Raising your hand to a girl... What if you awaken Elena-senpai’s inner M^[1] because of this?”

“Then, I’ll take full responsibility and turn you into a proper M.”

“Oh my god, this kouhai is a monster! What are you planning to do with Elena-senpai if you turn her into an M!?”

“Ignore her.”

“No way... you’re just going to toss me away like that!?”

With that casual comment, Masachika once again delivered a hand chop to Elena’s head. He made the motion appear more significant with a snap of his wrist, but in reality, it was just a light tap with his fingertips. However, true to her nature as a comedian, Elena clutched her head dramatically in pain.

“Ugh... Elena-senpai’s lewd brain cells...”

“Forget about that, let’s start already.”

Ignoring the senior who seemed lost in outlandish desires, Masachika turned his attention to Alisa and Maria. However, as he did, he noticed that the two of them were looking at Masachika and Elena with indescribable expressions.

“...What is it?”

Seeing Masachika hesitate a little, Maria tilted her head and put her index finger to her lips.

“You two... seem quite close, don’t you guys~?”

“Huh? Well, it’s not exactly that we’re close...”

“I’ve never seen Kuze-kun talk so casually with a girl before...”

“No, it’s not like that...”

Even with Yuki, he was usually like this.

He thought about it for a moment and quickly realized that he had been talking with Elena like he usually did with Yuki in little sister mode. But then again, it might be true that there was no other girl at the school who interacted with him in such a casual, or rather, rough manner.

“Ugh, well, whatever. More importantly, Masha-san, um, your stomach is showing.”

“Eh? Ah...”

He could glimpse her navel peeking out from under her gym uniform, and Masachika pointed it out while averting his gaze. After Maria adjusted her clothes, Masachika turned his back towards her.

“Well then, let’s start off with trying a simple piggyback ride. Masha-san and Elena-senpai, hold my hand and use the other hand to grab onto my shoulder... yes, like that.”

Facing forward, he joined hands behind his back with Maria and Elena. It was at that moment that he realized something.

Huh? Isn’t this essentially a lover’s grasp...?

Just as he was thinking that, the same observation came from behind him.

“Eh? Um, no way... isn’t this like how lovers hold hands~? It’s embarrassing~”

“Oh, it really is~”

On his left hand, Elena shyly intertwined their fingers together, and his other hand, that was connected to Maria's, was tightly squeezed, suggesting something deeper. And on his cheek, Alisa's cold gaze pierced him.

“...Alright, Alya. Get on.”

“.....”

Pretending not to notice it, Masachika, along with Maria and Elena, squatted down in a position ready to receive Alisa as the rider. Then, Alisa swung her leg over Maria and Elena's arms, gradually putting her weight on them.

“Offu, I can feel Alisa-chan’s butt against my arm...!?”

“Are you on? In that case, give me your feet...”

“Wait a minute!? What kind of technique is this!?”

As Elena and Masachika’s fingers intertwined even more tightly, she let out a yelp. When Masachika released his grip with a small sigh, Elena breathed a sigh of relief.

“It hurts... I was almost sent over the edge by Kuze-kun’s finger technique!”

“You really never learn, do you?”

“Ehehe... Elena-san’s the type to joke around whenever she can, you know...?”

“...Is that so?”

“Ah, yes.”

“Yeah, it’s true.”

Accompanied by an exasperated, cold voice, Masachika lightly poked her legs with his foot. Then, Masachika and Elena spread their joined hands, allowing Alisa, who had taken off her shoes and socks, to gently place her bare feet on them.

U-Um... touching Alya’s bare feet like this is...

“Woah, so this is how Alisa-chan’s pretty feet feel!?”

Elena's silly voice dispelled any impure thoughts, and Masachika adjusted his hand positions with a composed feeling. It's often said that someone else nearby being flustered can act as a calming mechanism, but it also seemed that Masachika was able to remain calm when someone nearby expressed their lecherous thoughts.

"All right, let's stand up now. Ready, set, go~!"

The three of them synchronized their breaths and stood up simultaneously.

Then, Maria and Elena placed their hands on Masachika's shoulders, adding more weight on him.

Hmm. This is quite...

"Ah, give me a sec..."

"Ugh, it's kinda heavy... I mean, it's rude to say but it's kinda heavy!"

Despite feeling a bit unsteady, Masachika managed to maintain his balance.

"Well, for now, let's try moving like this."

And while in that position, they tried walking forward, backward, and sideways.

At first, synchronizing their steps was a struggle, but with Masachika leading and giving commands, they gradually got the hang of it.

"All right, next. Alya, try standing up for a bit."

"Eh? ...Are you sure?"

"Yeah. You might have to stand up if there's a headband grabbing game as part of the competition."

"I understand... All right, here I go."

With that, Alisa raised her hips and stood on the hands of the three—at that moment, Elena let out a scream.

“W-Wait a minute! This is seriously painful! My hands...my hands are slipping!”

Startled by her voice, Alisa hurriedly lowered herself, and the three of them released her.

“*Phew*, that hurt~ ...The load on my arms when she stood up is no joke.”

“Well, Alya’s entire weight was on our hands...”

“Yeah...and I think about half of it was Kuze-kun’s fault.”

“...I think Elena-senpai making sexually harassing jokes is the problem here.

Turning away from Elena, who was resentfully fiddling with her hand, Masachika noticed Maria’s stomach was showing again and quickly averted his gaze.

“...Masha-san, your stomach is showing again.”

“Ah, *mouu*.”

As Maria adjusted her clothes with enthusiasm, Elena nodded knowingly.

“Maria-chan has big boobs, you know? So her shirt naturally gets pulled up, so it can’t be helped.”

“*Gfguu*.”

Masachika, taken aback by the blunt comment, couldn’t find a way to respond. With no one to stop her, Elena turned her attention to Alisa.

“Speaking of which, Alisa-chan is pretty big too... I thought I was quite well-endowed myself, but now I’m not so sure...”

“Um! Can you seriously please refrain from discussing such things in front of a guy!?”

Turning her face away in exasperation, Alisa raised her voice in protest. Elena, not stopping herself, grinned and leaned in to peer at Masachika’s face.

“Hmm~? Is that so~? The Wind Ensemble Club is always like this, you know?”

“...What a lovely workplace where the club President’s sexual harassment runs rampant.”

“It’s a wonderful harem full of endless smiles!”

With a dissatisfied pout, Elena stared at Masachika, who was dripping with resentment. Then, as a form of retaliation, he said in a drippingly sarcastic tone,

“A harem, huh...”

“Yeah, it’s a harem. So what?”

“...I’ve heard rumors that during the Wind Ensemble Club’s training camp, you said things like ‘Let’s take a bath together tonight~’ to the other female members, but when it was time for the bath, you were the first to finish and left everyone else behind.”

“Oi, stop it.”

“And there were rumors that you said ‘I won’t let you sleep tonight,’ but you were the first to fall asleep before midnight.”

“Cut it out! You’re obstructing my business!!”

Waving her hands in frustration, Elena started making excuses like, “N-No, that was just me being considerate so I wouldn’t be tired the next day.”

Ignoring her, Maria quietly asked Masachika.

“(Eh? Is Elena-senpai actually like that?)”

“(Despite her appearance, she’s actually shy and sensitive. Besides, despite her words, she doesn’t really engage in physical contact that much, or so I’ve heard? You see, deep down, she’s actually a fundamentally sensible person.)”

“Hey! I can hear you!”

“I know and that’s the point.”

“You’re making it sound like I’m some kind of...”

“That’s not what I was trying to do.”

“A~ny~way! Don’t spread such baseless rumors like that!”

“You don’t need to worry. Most people around you already realize that deep down, you’re a sensible person at heart.”

As Masachika swallowed the words “That’s probably why you won the election,” he directed a warm gaze along with Alisa and Maria. Elena blushed, and her face started trembling. Then, she suddenly covered her eyes with her right arm and swiftly turned around.

“Uwaaah! I’ll sue you for defamation!”

“You’d need a voice recorder for that to work~”

Without even turning around in response to Masachika’s calm tsukkomi, Elena disappeared around the corner of the school building.

“...Eh? We’re still in the middle of practice...”

After seeing her off with an indescribable expression on her face, Alisa looked at Masachika with a perplexed expression. In response, Masachika shrugged his shoulders with a nonchalant expression.

“Don’t worry. She’s not the type to quit halfway through a job.”

He explained so, and a few seconds later...

“Ah, she’s back...”

“See? Because she’s fundamentally sensible.”

★ · ☆ · ★

“Congratulations, brave hero, for making it this far.”

“Can’t you welcome me back a bit more normally?”

Having finished his secret after-school practice with the others, Masachika gave a sharp glare to Yuki as he returned home, who was

sitting nonchalantly in the living room chair. Then, he looked around to confirm that a certain maid wasn't blending into the background.

“...You’re alone today?”

“Oh? Are you saying I’m not enough for you?”

“No, I’m already full from today.”

“Do you want me to bring out Ayano-pudding as dessert then!?”

“Don’t call Ayano a pudding.”

In response to Masachika’s sharp tsukkomi, Yuki laughed heartily and said casually—

“Anyway, when you said you were ‘already full,’ did you mean you’ve been dealing with someone exhausting? Like... Elena-senpai, for instance?”

“!”

Caught off guard by the casually dropped name, Masachika’s cheeks twitched for a moment, and he realized his blunder. Despite practicing secretly behind the school building to ensure that the members of their horseback competition team were not revealed in advance, Yuki seemed to have seen through everything and smiled triumphantly.

“How did the practice go, anii-ja?”

“...If you’re trying to bluff me, then you’ve improved, my dear sister.”

“Bluff you? No, no. Rather, I’m sure of it. If you’re coming home late at this time, that’s the only explanation.”

Masachika, who had been skillfully played by Yuki with a smug smile and those words, chuckled sarcastically.

“So, did you come to inspect the enemy today?”

“Hmm? Is that what you think? I don’t plan on losing to anyone, no matter who the opponent is. You already know that in advance.”

“Hmm, I see. So, you’re even confident that you’ll be able to handle an opponent you have never fought against before.”

“Don’t underestimate me. I can gauge my opponent’s abilities to some extent just by looking at them. In fact, I can tell how much a manga leans towards eroticism just by reading the first chapter!”

“I can do that too, you know? I can even figure it out within the first few color pages.”

“The skin-to-page ratio in the opening color pages. That’s how you find out the threshold for the level of exposure in a manga...!”

Teasingly saying this while her voice quivered, Yuki seemed to be talking like a pro, and Masachika gave her a lukewarm look.

“So? What did you come here for?

“Huh? What did I come for, you ask? It’s obviously...”

Yuki slowly stood up and slapped the table. Then, with widened eyes, she looked up at her brother and said,

“It’s to binge-watch the anime we promised before the midterms, of course!”

“...Ah.”

“You forgot, didn’t you!? You forgot about me!”

“No, I just had a small lapse in memory.”

“Maybe you don’t have enough memory? You should upgrade to a larger capacity. Get an external hard drive to increase storage while you’re at it.”

“It’s USB 1.0, so it would take a long time to load regardless.”

“Then buy a new one.”

“Does that mean I’ll have to be reincarnated?”

“If that happens, I’ll tag along and reincarnate with you.”

“That sounds burdensome.”

“In your next life, the heroine will be your little sister from the previous life.”

“That actually sounds plausible.”

“And your little sister in your next life will be the heroine from the previous life.”

“This is getting confusing all of a sudden.”

“By the way, it’s not isekai reincarnation; it’s reverse reincarnation.”

“...Hmm?”

“And now, the sister from this world is trying to seize the body from the heroine while saying, ‘Give me my body back!’”

“Stop with the sudden horror! That’s creepy!!”

“And the title will be: ‘My Little Sister Might Not Be My Little Sister’.”

“But that would drive readers who expected a step-sis romcom into uproar.”

“I like works where the true meaning of the title becomes clear later.”

“I like them too, but this wasn’t what I was looking for.”

“Anyway, binge-watching anime is just one of the reasons I’m here.”

“Is there another reason?”

“Of course, it’s to apologize for getting you sick right before the midterms!”

Masachika was at a loss for words as she explained with such a straight expression. Then, while looking at his sister’s earnest face, he let out a small, wry smile.

Well, if Alya noticed, there’s no way you wouldn’t...

As he mocked himself inwardly, Yuki, who had approached quietly, looked up at him from a very close distance.

“Are you okay now?”

“Yeah. Your right leg doesn’t hurt anymore either?”

“Yeah.”

“I see, that’s good.”

“Yeah. Now, we can fight fair and square without any handicaps in the horseback competition, right?”

“That’s a relief.”

They exchanged daring smiles, and Yuki, with a mischievous grin, extended both arms.

“So, here’s my apology. Today, you’re free to adore me to your heart’s content.”

“...What’s different from usual about that?”

“It’s about the mood. Oh, by the way, since we’re at it, let’s do that one more time—that princess carry.”

“And now you’re giving orders too... I mean, I only did that because of a sudden surge of adrenaline when faced with a crisis...”

“Oh? Can’t do it? You were just lifting Alya a moment ago, but you can’t lift me?”

“Ah~, alright, alright. Here we go!”

With determination, Masachika wrapped his arms around Yuki’s shoulders and the back of her knees, lifting her up in one go.

“Uwaaa~! Oh, it’s amazing, it’s amazing! You’re lifting me up so high~!”

“Wai~, stop flailing your legs!”

“All right, we’re staying like this until we finish binge-watching anime!”

“My arms will die!”

“Then it’ll be a part of your workout routine for the horseback competition. It’ll help you with the election campaign...”

“Where did the fair and square part go!?”

As always, the two of them.

Having casual back-and-forth exchanges in their daily lives.

In the midst of it all, they put each other’s worries to rest... and as siblings, they confirmed their intention to fight fair and square.

And so, the day of their competition arrived.



[\[1\]](#): M standing for masochist.

Chapter 7 - A Big Rolling Ball Would Probably Cause an Accident

It was currently late October. With temperatures that made one question if it was really autumn, yet ideal for physical activities, Seirei Academy's sports festival was in full swing.

"...It's quite an interesting sight," Masachika mumbled as he looked out at the field from the Student Council's tent.

"The red team is fast! But here comes Higashiyama from the green team, making a move from the outside! What an acceleration, incredible! Higashiyama is catching up... Higashiyama is catching up! And they've overtaken the red team! First place goes to Higashiyama of the green team!"

"It's like the commentator's covering a horse race."

"Horse race...? Masachika-kun, don't tell me..."

"It seems like you've misunderstood. It's not that. I've just been playing a horse racing video game recently, I'm not actually betting on races."

As Masachika gave a sharp tsukkomi in response to the Broadcasting Club member in question, who was clearly having too much fun, he suddenly noticed a suspicious look from Alisa sitting next to him, prompting him to hurriedly explain himself.

"Actually, I'm pretty sure that Broadcasting Club member is also influenced by the same game I'm talking about... Well, the audience seems to be amused, though."

He glanced with a hint of annoyance at the commentary booth where teachers and Broadcasting Club members were crowded, which he had been observing earlier. At the same time, there was movement in the competition area he had been watching.

“And there~! Look! The Judo Club’s third-year player, Sasaki, has dropped his sandbag! Sasaki is out, clocking in at 8 minutes and 27 seconds!”

Turning his attention to that area of interest, he saw a large male student returning to the audience with a look of regret. Simultaneously, there were also more sturdy male students who stood still, unmoving even after he had left. Additionally, behind the row of strong males, female students were dashing at full speed.

“Hmm~, how surreal.”

Because the duration of the sandbag lifting event was not set, or rather, unknown, as it had no time limit, it was conducted concurrently with other competitions. As a result, there was a lineup of muscular male students along the outer perimeter of the track, and behind them, there were girls sweating gracefully, creating a somewhat unbalanced spectacle.

“And now, ten minutes have passed, and there are thirteen participants remaining! Who will be the last one standing?”

“...The President is really giving it his all.”

Among the athletes from sports clubs like Judo and Rugby, who had absolute confidence in their strength and stamina, stood a persisting Touya. However, his grip strength seemed to be reaching its limit, as the sandbag was slowly slipping from his hands.

“Uwa, it looks tough... It’s like he’s only barely holding it with his fingertips now...”

“He’d ideally want to readjust his grip, but... if he lets go for even the tiniest bit, he might drop it.”

“Yeah...”

Just when they thought he might be about to drop out, Chisaki, who was helping with the Sports Festival Committee, passed in front of Touya. As she passed by, she looked at him and said something. Then—

“O-Oh?”

It seemed that Touya, encouraged by his girlfriend, released his right hand with momentum, only to quickly slip it under the sandbag. Similarly, he slid his left hand under the sandbag and braced both arms to support it with his palms.

“Oh! President Kenzaki has readjusted his grip here! It looks quite unbalanced, will it be okay?”

In response to the commentator’s words, Alisa also looked concerned.

“Indeed, with that technique, he doesn’t need to grip it that tightly...”

“But you know, the sand inside the sandbag can shift, and if its balance tilts forward or backward, it’s game over.”

“That’s true...”

Masachika and Alisa worried that it might not have been a wise bet from Touya. However, contrary to the pessimistic predictions of his juniors, Touya continued to hold the sandbag in that state.

“Oh! Kamizumi has dropped out here! The winner is President Kenzaki! The Student Council President has really shown us his determination here!”



“““““Ohhhh~～!!”””””

Amidst the loud cheers and applause from the audience, Touya, who had just dropped the sandbag in its place, let out a victorious roar, as Chisaki rushed over to him to exchange a high-five.

“And here’s a congratulatory high-five from Vice-President Sarashina! President Kenzaki secures the win!”

Laughter erupted in response to the commentator’s words, and Chisaki directed a playful glare towards the commentator’s booth. However, perhaps having restrained herself appropriately, Chisaki quickly returned to assisting the Sports Festival Committee, and Touya followed suit, returning to the Student Council tent.

“Congratulations, President. You were so cool.”

“Congratulations.”

“Oh, thank you.”

Touya responded with a smile on his fatigued face to the applause from both Masachika and Alisa.

“I thought it looked impossible from the way you readjusted your grip... but you endured it well.”

“Yeah, it really came down to willpower in the end. Well, it also helped that Kagami and Saijou-senpai weren’t participating.”

With a somewhat puzzled expression, Touya mentioned the two individuals who held top-tier recognition in the school’s sports clubs. During the planning stages, Kagami and Saijou were considered top contenders for the sandbag lifting competition. Kagami was a handsome rugby player, considered the absolute ace of the team. Saijou, on the other hand, was a nationally ranked Judoist, known for his gentlemanly demeanor. Both of them were quite popular among the female students, and their popularity among male students wasn’t that far behind as well. In fact, if we’re being honest, they were probably even more popular among the male students than Touya himself.

“...Well, honestly, I was surprised that those two didn’t participate. Maybe they just weren’t interested in a straightforward test

of strength? In any case, it's amazing that you won while competing alongside regulars of the sports clubs.”

“Thank you. Well, with this, I hope I've left a result that I won't be ashamed of as Chisaki's boyfriend.”

With a satisfied smile, Touya said this, and behind him—

Masachika could see Chisaki stacking the sandbags into piles of seven, but he decided to ignore it.

“Yeah, you're right. Even Sarashina-senpai high-fived you. I'm sure she was reassured with your performance, President!”

“Is that so? Well, if that's the case, then it was worth the effort. Hahaha!”

Yeah he didn't see that. When the executive committee member offered her a trolley, he totally didn't see Chisaki declining with a smile and waving one hand! The commentator didn't mention it either!

“(Um, Masachika-kun...)”

“(I didn't see anything.)”

“(...Right.)”

Alisa also followed Masachika's lead in pretending not to see. Touya still had a long way to go to become the kind of man who his girlfriend could rely on in a muscular sense.

“Now, next up is the teacher's relay! Each year and class's homeroom teacher from the respective teams will race and pass the batons! For the red team, the first runner is Sendagawa-sensei from Class A of the first year! Will the effects of his no-smoking challenge from summer vacation pay off? For the blue team, the first runner is Tabata-sensei from Class C of the first year! I heard she recently got a new younger boyfriend! For the green team, the first runner is Kohinata-sensei from Class E of the first year! It's said he only drinks cold water, even in winter! And for the yellow team, the first runner is—”

The audience erupted in excitement as the Broadcasting Club member casually exposed various tidbits of the participating teachers.

While Masachika laughed along with them, Alisa, after checking the program, stood up abruptly.

“The next event is the cosplay race, so I’m heading there now.”

“Ah, I see. See you later.”

“Yeah, hang in there.”

As he bid farewell to Alisa, a member of the Sports Festival Committee approached and called out.

“Excuse me~, can you help us prepare for the ball toss event?”

“Sure, I can do that.”

“No, no, President, please rest. I’ll go and help.”

Masachika had Touya sit back down and headed over to assist the organizing committee.

“...Hm? Ball toss?”

...Without giving much thought to the name of the event.



“What a terrible experience...”

After preparing for the ball toss, Masachika ended up helping with the competition on a whim... And as expected, it was a disaster.

Masachika’s assigned task was to support the pole holding the basket for the ball toss game and count the number of balls after the event. Supporting the pole meant he had to naturally stand directly under the basket. And as the game was being played out, the balls started raining down with no sense of remorse. If he kept his face down, the balls would hit the back of his head, so he decided to keep his gaze raised. Strangely, a ball hit him squarely on the cheek from the side, which he thought someone might have accidentally kicked, but after that, several more balls followed suit and came flying from the side. He wanted to believe it wasn’t intentional, though...

“Yeah, well, at least the basket didn’t break, and the balls didn’t fall down all at once!”

As Masachika tried to console himself with a sadder tone than necessary, the announcer announced the start of the next competition.

“Next up is the cosplay race!”

As soon as that announcement was made, the audience became especially excited.

The cosplay race. One boy and one girl from each class would participate, but in all honesty, it was really just a cosplay competition. And due to the nature of this kind of competition, most classes had naturally nominated their good-looking classmates to represent them... In the waiting area near the starting line, Masachika saw familiar faces. In fact, half of the first-year girls were in some way or another connected to the upcoming Student Council election.

Well, it’s not like there’s any real competition in this event, but... since Yuki is participating, Alya will probably go all out. Please, just don’t fall and get injured, okay~?

While helping as a committee member at the finish line, Masachika wished that as he watched from afar. While doing so, the first-year girls quickly stood at the starting line and started running as soon as the starting pistol fired.

“Oh~, that’s Alya for you. She’s pretty quick.”

Alisa was in the lead, followed by Yuki. The others were not much different, and the group reached a place where several large vinyl bags were placed.

“Now! We have arrived at the location where the costumes are placed! The choice here will determine their fate!”

Naturally, the time it takes to change and the ease of running vary depending on the costume. The outcome is often decided here, but for now, Masachika could only hope that Alisa would draw a costume that was easy to run in.

While Masachika watched, Alisa and the others each picked up a vinyl bag and entered a large dark curtain set up along the course.

“Everyone has entered the changing rooms! Now, who will be the first to come out!?”

Inside the curtain, several members of the handicraft club were waiting with costumes prepared, so even if the costume was difficult to put on alone, there was no need to worry... or so they said. Masachika wanted to say that they shouldn't prepare such costumes in the first place, but apparently, they were trying to make sure there wasn't too much difference in changing time.

And a few minutes later, a figure emerged from the dark curtain.

“Oh! The first one to come out is...”

Bathed in sunlight, silver hair fluttering.

“It's contestant Kujou!”

“Oh!”

The audience cheered, and Masachika also raised his fist. But then, he looked at Alisa's costume again and furrowed his brow.

“Hmm?”

A white sailor uniform that exuded the scent of youth. A blue school bag slung over the shoulder. And... a piece of bread in her mouth.

“Oh, what's this!? A sailor uniform, no! It's a cosplay of a protagonist of an old-fashioned shoujo manga!”

The Broadcasting Club member's announcement was met with laughter from the audience. On the other hand, Alisa, who clearly didn't understand what was going on, dutifully kept the piece of bread in her mouth and continued to run.

Silver hair blowing in the wind, a bouncing skirt, and a swaying piece of bread held by her lips. To top it off, with her short sailor uniform, she occasionally revealed her white belly as she approached a corner, causing some of the audience to show an inexplicable excitement.

“It's a corner! It's a corner!”

“—Is she gonna collide with someone...!?”

Amidst the strange glances full of expectations, no accident happened, and Alisa continued to run on the track. Then, finally, the second runner emerged from the dark curtain.

“Oh, what’s this? Who has appeared here—huh?”

The announcer’s voice, which had momentarily risen in excitement, quickly turned to a puzzled one. It was no wonder, as what appeared was... not really a costume but a mascot.

Made of paper and vinyl, it looked like a somewhat charming... no, lovable dinosaur with an expressionless face, and it had a figure reminiscent of Ayano peeking out from its neck.

“Um, that’s Contestant Kimishima... right? Is this meant to be a Tyrannosaurus? What is this? It seems like she’s got a pretty lousy costume!”

The announcer, unsure of how to judge the situation, tried to liven things up again. In the midst of that—

“!”

Ayano-saurus was running with all her might on her short legs. She vigorously shook the head of the cardboard cutout and wagged her tail. However, she wasn’t really going fast at all, yet her cute and slightly comical running drew laughter from the audience and high-pitched screams from the girls.

“Ayano-chan is so cute!”

“I want to take her home!”

“Look over here!”

She was being treated as a mascot.

Then, following her, a pink figure jumped out from behind the dark curtain.

“Uwa, that’s awful.”

Seeing the figure of the follower who had just appeared, Masachika let out a half-appalled, half-sympathetic voice. The reason was that the pink figure was... entirely and completely pink. They

donned a pink bodysuit that covered their whole body, and a helmet with something horn-like protruding from it.

“Oh!? What is that... Some kind of power ranger? Maybe the pink one? I don’t know! Actually, I don’t even know which contestant that is!”

Along with the announcer, the audience also laughed in surprise at the half-amused, half-shocked spectacle. However, when the pink hero (heroine?) started chasing Ayano-saurus comically, the audience burst into laughter.

“The hero is so fast!”

“Run! Dinosaur-san, run away fast!”

Amidst the cheers and encouragement, Masachika also muttered with a wry smile.

“No, seriously, who is that? It doesn’t seem like it’s Yuki... but, could it be Nono—”

But that concern was quickly dismissed.

“Oh, next to appear is... Ohh!?”

The announcer’s excitement rose as a normal cosplay appeared after the comical performances.

“This is... a Mini Skirt Police!?”

Appearing on the scene, a blonde beauty who looked like she could be chewing bubblegum and resembled a delinquent police officer, made the audience go wild.

“Me! Arrest me!”

“No, officer, arrest me instead~!”

The perverted gentlemen in the audience raised their deep voices as Nono, holding handcuffs, ran with her legs covered in fishnet stockings.

A dinosaur chased by some kind of hero, chased by a Mini Skirt Police... It was a truly surreal scene. And in the midst of all this...

“Oh! Here comes contestant Kujou to the finish line! In addition to the luck of drawing an easy-to-change, easy-to-run costume, she ran wonderfully!”

As Alisa crossed the finishing line, Masachika went over to meet her.

“Good job Alya. Congratulations on first place.”

“Thank you.”



“The changing area is in the other school building... Oh wait, I haven’t gotten back my gym uniform yet.”

Looking toward the changing area, they saw Yuki emerging from behind the dark curtain.

“Oh, that’s...”

“Woah, it suits her really well...”

Seeing Yuki’s attire, the two of them couldn’t help but admire it. A red and white outfit that exuded purity. A delicate crown adorned her head, where her long black hair was tied back, and she held a kagura suzu^[1] in her hand.

“Oh! Contestant Suou, what a shrine maiden outfit! Wait actually... it’s also a kagura dance cosplay!”

The costume, which undeniably exuded a sense of sanctity and elegance to Japanese people, suited Yuki, who was naturally a prim and proper girl if she kept quiet. However...

“It looks really hard to walk in that.”

Due to Yuki’s petite stature, the hakama was quite long, and she was wearing tabi and zori^[2] as well. It seemed like attire that would be challenging to run in. But contrary to Masachika’s expectations—

“Woah, she can run pretty well in that.”

“But... she might still finish last at that pace. Ayano-san seems like she might not even finish, though.

“Actually, the second-year girls have already started... At this pace, Ayano might even be overtaken by them.”

Even though she had finished changing second, Ayano was steadily being overtaken by those behind her, and she was still running in the middle of the course. Seeing this, Alisa and Masachika wore complex expressions. The audience, who had initially watched with excitement, now worriedly cheered for Ayano, who looked like she could collapse at any moment. Finally, Yuki caught up with Ayano around the remaining quarter of the course and said something to her. Then, she

took Ayano's costume-clad hand, and they started walking together in sync.

“I see, she’s thought it through...”

The audience warmly applauded and cheered for the pair that was running for Student Council, who were holding hands and aiming for the finish line. Although they were already certain to finish last, their dignified stride, while smiling at the audience, somehow resembled a victory lap.

Hmm~, so this is what they call winning the game but losing the competition... Yuki was a step ahead.

Masachika didn’t say this out loud to Alisa, but it seemed she had a similar thought, as she looked at Yuki with a somewhat regretful expression.

“Alya, your face.”

“Ah—”

Realizing that she had been looking at Yuki with a stern expression after Masachika’s words, Alisa made a slightly embarrassed expression. So, to change the mood, Masachika decided to change the topic of conversation.

“By the way, I have a simple question; how did Ayano even get into that costume?”

“That’s... Well, the costume itself was originally inside the dark curtain, and inside the vinyl bag, there was a piece of paper that said ‘dinosaur,’ and some cushioning material to increase its size.”

“Ah~, I see.”

“By the way, I was curious too... What did they mean by cosplaying a protagonist of some old shoujo manga? The audience seemed quite excited about it...”

“Ah... Well, I don’t know the exact source, but there’s a famous scene of a girl running with a piece of bread in her mouth, shouting ‘I’m late, I’m late~’ while heading to school. Then, at a corner, she collides with a boy, and that boy turns out to be her destined one...”

“Hmm? So that’s why the bread...”

Alisa looked at the bread with teeth marks on it, wearing a puzzled expression, and Masachika smiled wryly.

“If you want, you could have that for lunch or something...”

At that moment, Yuki and Ayano reached the finish line together as they held hands, prompting a loud round of applause. Masachika, as part of the organizing committee, headed towards them.

“Good work~... No, you were really great, Ayano.”

“Thank... you... very much...”

Masachika offered heartfelt praise to Ayano, who looked quite fatigued, though expressionless.

“What do you want to do? The changing room is over there... If it’s too much trouble, I can help you. I can even push you in a cart if you’d like.”

“No... I’m okay. I realized that trying to run too fast wasn’t stable, so I decided to walk slowly.”

“I see. But if it gets too tough, don’t push yourself...”

Just then, a wave of cheers erupted as the fourth second-year girl emerged from behind the curtain. It was Maria, dressed as a nurse, holding toy syringes and a binder.

“Woah!? Contestant Kujou! A nurse! What a classic cosplay! And it suits her perfectly!”

The excitement of the commentary was matched by the enthusiasm of the audience. Despite not revealing much skin, the atmosphere was unusually heated.

“Ah, my stomach hurts! Nurse-san!”

“My chest feels tight... Is this the effects of love sickness...!?”

...It seemed like even members of the audience were faking sickness. The excitement around Maria was so great that Masachika felt a bit of sympathy for the three contestants ahead of her.

“(Woah, she’s really curvy...!)”

Masachika was about to give Yuki an instinctive slap on the back for her straightforward comment, but then he remembered that Yuki was in cosplay. He stopped himself just in time. As he hesitated, more runners finished changing one by one, and lastly, someone extraordinary appeared.

“Whoa!? Contestant Kiryuin! Wearing a dress! What an amazing dress!”

Wearing a medieval-style dress with a voluminous skirt, a wide-brimmed hat, an extravagant fan in hand, accompanied with her vertical roll hairstyle. It was none other than Sumire-senpai’s grand entrance.

““It’s almost too perfect.””

The siblings unintentionally made the same comment. However, it was hard to argue against how well it suited her. And to add on to it... she was incredibly fast.

“Whoa!? Contestant Kiryuin is fast! Incredibly fast! How can she run that fast in that dress!?”

Holding her skirt with one hand and covering her mouth with a fan, Sumire raced at an astonishing speed. She overtook the other runners one by one and quickly closed in on the leading group.

“How can she run so fast while in that skirt...?”

“Umm, I’d like to believe I’m seeing things, but... Was Kiryuin-senpai wearing heels?”

As the siblings watched in astonishment, Sumire, who had taken the lead just before the finish line, cut through the tape. She then proudly arched her chest and burst into laughter.

“Ohohoho, victory is mine~!”

“...She certainly knows how to celebrate.”

Respecting his senior who didn’t forget to provide fan service, Masachika headed towards the second-year girls who had finished at the finish line.

“The changing room is on the first floor of that school building! Please go there after receiving your gym clothes!”

While calling out to them, Maria also crossed the finish line in fourth place.

“Oh, good job, Masha-san.”

“Thanks~, Kuze-kun. Ah, it’s a shame. I was so close to third place.”

“That’s too bad. It must have been tough with both hands occupied with the syringe and binder.”

As he approached her and said that, Masachika couldn’t help but think.

No, it’s not “curvy”... It’s more like “tight-fitting.” Geez.

Seeing her up close, it was clear that the pink nurse outfit, which was snug in some places, was quite tight, and he didn’t know where to look.

Then, suddenly—

“Ugh!?”

Something hit him from behind, and Masachika stumbled slightly. He quickly turned around, only to find Alisa, who had inexplicably started eating the piece of bread again, glaring at him with a shoulder tackle.

“What’s wrong, Alisa? Or rather, why haven’t you gone to change yet?”

“.....”

Even to Masachika’s question, Alisa remained silent. He felt like he was being scolded by her gaze for his inappropriate thoughts about Maria, and he wiped his forehead nervously.

“Haah... Let’s go, Masha.”

“Eh? But I haven’t received my gym clothes yet... Oh, right, Kuze-kun! Do you have your phone?”

“Yes? I have it but—”

“In that case, can we take a picture? You too, Alya-chan, join us.”

“Eh?”

As soon as Masachika took out his smartphone from his pocket, Maria pulled his arm tightly. Alisa was also pulled in the same way, and the three of them lined up with Maria in the middle.

“Alright, Kuze-kun, could you take our picture?”

“Um, is it okay?”

“Why not? Oh, is it because of the backlight?”

“No, it’s not that.”

Maria smoothly interjected with her airhead personality, and Masachika, with a serious expression, thought, “Well, if she’s okay with it,” and held up his smartphone.

“Come on, Alya-chan, get closer over here too.”

“Uh, okay...”



“Come on, smile! Then, *cheese!*”

“Ah, then I’ll take the picture~”

As instructed, Masachika switched his smartphone to the selfie camera and took several shots. He also took a few pictures of Alisa and Maria alone.

“Thanks~, Kuze-kun. Can you send the photos later?”

“Ah, sure.”

Masachika nodded, feeling a mix of happiness and guilt as he unintentionally acquired photos of the two cosplaying. Just then—

“Masachika-kun, since we’re here, could you take some photos of us too?”

“Oh, then me too~”

“May I have my photo taken as well?”

Yuki, Nonoa, and Sumire all raised their hands one after another, and an impromptu cosplay photo session (with one photographer) began. After taking photos of all the volunteers, a voice from the side called out.

“Alright, here are the second-year students’ gym clothes! Please take the ones with your names on them!”

Looking over, Masachika raised an eyebrow at one of the Handicraft Club members who had brought black plastic bags.

“Oh, it’s Slit-paisen.”

“Yes, Kuze-san, great job~. What are you up to? Taking photos?”

“Oh, I was asked to...”

“Hmm~, I see, I see.”

With a smile, Slit-paisen nodded and approached Masachika. Then, her expression suddenly became serious.

“Give me the photos.”

“I won’t.”

“Why not!”

“Because of portrait rights!”

“But my children also have portrait rights!”

“Are you talking about the costumes?”

“Yes!”

“Slit... Listen carefully.”

“Yeah, it’s not Slit, but what is it?”

“It’s about the clothes... They don’t have portrait rights.”

“Legally speaking, right?”

“What kind of response is that?”

“Kuze-san... In our club, humans are considered accessories to the costumes.”

“...Uh, what? What’s with that scary comment all a sudden? Our conversation isn’t making sense anymore.”

“In other words, even when taking photos, the main subject is the costume, and the person wearing it is just an incidental presence.”

“Sorry, but I feel like my morals are getting distorted, so I’ll get back to work.”

However, Masachika’s job was to guide the finishers and provide assistance if necessary, so he didn’t have much to do during the race. As he hurriedly wrapped up his conversation and returned to the finish line, Slit-paisen inexplicably followed him.

“Hey, you should get back to work too.”

“Now, now.”

“What’s with you?”

When he replied with that question, the third-year girls began to emerge from behind the curtains one after another.

“Oh! Contestant Narahashi! Wearing a Chinese dress!”

Coming out in second place, Elena waved to the surroundings as she ran around the track. Her dress had a deep... deep slit, and she unabashedly exposed her long legs.

And then, Slit-paisen put her hand on Masachika's shoulder and turned to look at him with a smirk. Then, she pointed to her own face with her thumb smugly.

“.....”

“Well, even without you saying it, I can tell you made it. Stop with the infuriating silent appeal.”

With a half-hearted sigh, Masachika couldn't help but retort as he shifted his gaze back to Elena.

“But... that slit is way too deep, isn't it? If it were Elena-senpai, it would go all the way to her butt if someone less skilled wore it.”

“Well, you can adjust it with the strings.”

“Yeah... But Elena-senpai is surprisingly bold... Oh, but she looks a bit embarrassed.”

“Narahashi-senpai can be quite innocent at times~”

With a slight blush and a twitch in her cheek, Elena elegantly cut through the finish tape and took first place.

“Yay!”

“Congratulations, Elena-senpai... The changing room is over there.”

“Huh? Why are you trying to send me off so quickly? I heard there was a photo shoot at the finish line.”

“There isn't one.”

“But you were taking pictures earlier, weren't you~? Take mine too, since we're here.”

“Alright...”

“Hooray! Here we go!”

As Masachika raised his smartphone, Elena mischievously grabbed the backside fabric of her Chinese dress and let it flutter.

“*Fuwa~ohh~*”

“Alright, alright, how sexy.”

“Hey, you could react a bit more! Don’t you have anything else to say?”

“Your face is turning red, don’t push it.”

“Huh!? It’s because I was running!!”

“They say herbal medicine helps with palpitations and shortness of breath, you know?”

“Don’t treat me like some old lady! I’m still fresh at eighteen!”

“Real eighteen-year-olds don’t say they’re fresh, you know?”

“Hey, Kuze-kun, aren’t you being a bit too harsh on Elena-senpai?”

“Is that so? I’m usually like this with girls who don’t hold back. Right?”

“Yeah, that’s true.”

Slit-paisen nodded in agreement, and Elena, looking somewhat shocked, covered her mouth and pretended to hold back tears.

“Horrible! So I’m not the only special one!”

“Yeah, well, in the sense that not needing to be reserved to this extent is unusual, you might be in your own special category.”

“Whaaat~? Whaaaaaat~? So I am really special to you after all! Geez, Kuze-kun, you’re so wicked!”

“Wicked...? Seriously, you keep using words that make me doubt your actual age.”

“Who are you calling an old hag!?”

“I didn’t say anything like that. Alright, alright, I’ll take the photo now~”

Saying that, he glanced at the screen of his smartphone.

“Oh, but why is the creator in the shot?”

Seeing Slit-paisen naturally standing next to Elena, Masachika glared at her and retorted sarcastically.

[1]: A set of twelve bells used in a type of Shinto ritual ceremonial dance, kagura.

[2]: Hakama are a traditional type of Japanese clothing used and worn by shrine maidens in Japan. Tabi are socks often worn with zori, Japanese sandals made of rice straw, cloth, leather, or lacquered wood. Tabi are often called split-toe socks as they have an inlet in the middle to allow for space for the toe post of zori.

Chapter 8 - You've Really Grown Up, Haven't You?

“Students participating in the scavenger hunt, please come this way! Can I have the first group to please stand in front! The second group, please line up behind them!”

Following the guidance of the Sports Festival Committee member who was waving their hands and shouting, Masachika joined the line.

‘Now, the next event is the scavenger hunt. The commentary for this event will be taken over by me, Yuki Suou, the Student Council’s Public Relations Officer, in place of the Broadcasting Club.’

A cute and clear voice that came from the commentary booth prompted cheers from the audience. Looking closely, Yuki, who had taken a seat in the commentary booth, was waving with a friendly smile.

That girl... Even in a place like this, she's building her popularity. Being the Public Relations Officer gives her a pretty unfair advantage, huh? Even though I was the one who came up with the role in the first place.

In fact, it seemed to be effective, as the other students lining up were visibly excited.

“Eh, Yuki-sama is doing the commentary? Seriously? Maybe she'll mention my name?”

“If I intentionally run slowly, will she say, ‘Do your best?’”

“Excuse me! Please listen to the instructions!”

The committee member raised their voice in response to the guys who were blatantly voicing their desires.

“First, when you run to the table with those topics written on papers, please choose one paper and draw it! Go look for something that matches the topic written inside, and once you find it, come back to the table! From where the person in charge is standing over there, run around the track to the person holding that flag over there, and that's

the finish line! The person in charge will check if the item brought matches the topic, but if it's wrong there, you'll have to redo it, so be careful! Also, if you don't run around the track properly, you'll have to redo it as well!"

The Sports Festival Committee member was doing their best to fulfill their duties. However,

"Hey? Isn't that Kujou-san holding that flag?"

"Oh yeah, you're right. She really stands out, huh?"

"Listen up!!"

Now, the guys' attention was directed towards Alisa, who was standing at the finish line. Masachika cast a sympathetic glance at the committee member raising their voice.

Well, it's kind of a half-playful competition... and I don't think anyone's seriously trying to win. Well, as long as I don't come in last...

Just as he thought that, he felt a chilling gaze and turned around to find Alisa staring straight at him.

...Ah, you're telling me to go for the win, right? Got it.

Prompted by the eloquent plea in the eyes of his competitive partner, Masachika tightened his resolve.

Well, the points are relatively low, but I'll do my best to at least get in the top three...

Seirei Academy's sports festival was a competition for total points divided into four groups by class. Winning didn't really lead to anything, and Yuki from Class A and Masachika and Alisa from Class B were all in the Red Team, so there was no real rivalry there... but that didn't seem to matter to Alisa.

She always throws everything she's got, and when some form of competition is involved, she always aims for the win. That's my partner for you, after all~

As if resigned to the situation, Masachika rotated his shoulders and... took a sharp breath. His expression changed. Despite initially considering going for a safe third-place finish, Masachika was now

completely focused. Amidst others playing around, he was unapologetically aiming for victory.

“Now, it’s the turn of the next group, please step forward!”

When his turn came, Masachika positioned himself at the starting line.

“Go!”

Prompted by the small explosion fired by the starting pistol, Masachika dashed forward vigorously. Most of the students participating were not confident in their running abilities, and it seemed that students who just wanted to enjoy the festival had gathered. This allowed Masachika to arrive at the front of the long table in the lead.

Please... give me something easy to find, something easy to carry!

Then, he grabbed a piece of paper from the middle and quickly opened it. What was written there was—

Someone else's girlfriend

“.....”

Masachika closed his eyes and looked up towards the sky. After letting a second pass, he glanced down at the paper in his hand once more.

In addition, there was a small additional note in the corner that said, “Women in relationships (married one’s excluded).”

You've gotta be kidding meeeee!! How am I supposed to borrow that?!

After a double take, Masachika finally accepted reality and inwardly shouted.

“Excuse me! Can someone lend me their girlfriend?” What a stupid thing to say! Borrowing from a stranger is impossible, and if it’s someone I know, it would be incredibly awkward!

Furthermore, they had kindly added the note, “excluding married ones.” This meant he couldn’t even choose someone like a friend’s mother sitting in the audience.

If only someone had a sister or younger sister here to watch them today... But who comes to their sibling’s sports festival anyway? So, I guess I have no choice but to pick from among the students...

Masachika agonized while gritting his teeth. Just then, Yuki’s commentary reached his ears.

‘What’s going on here? Kuze-kun from the Red Team, who arrived at the topic table first, has come to a halt! Did he draw a difficult topic? Meanwhile, other participants are going one after another to find borrowed items!’

As she spoke, the students who arrived later went off without showing any signs of hesitation. Before he knew it, Masachika was the only one left in front of the long table.

If I stay here too long, I’ll be in the way for the next group... Damn it, what should I do!? Borrowing from someone I know who has a girlfriend is... No, wait a minute!

In that moment, memories from several dozen minutes ago flashed through Masachika’s mind.

‘For the blue team, the first runner is Tabata-sensei from Class C of the first year! I heard she recently got a new younger boyfriend!’

That’s it!

As soon as he thought of that, Masachika dashed towards the tent where the teachers were gathered. He called out loudly to the teachers who were looking at him.

“Excuse me! Is Tabata-sensei from Class 1-C here?”

While waiting for a response and searching for her himself, a teacher seated at the front replied.

“Tabata-sensei has already been borrowed.”

“How is that even possible!?”

In response to his unintentional shout, the teachers burst into laughter. Feeling a bit embarrassed, Masachika turned around and indeed saw Tabata-sensei holding hands with another student at the finishing line.

Darn it, what do I do? Do I wait? No, waiting for confirmation that it matches the topic and then going back to the course and trying to reach the goal again will take too long! Is there someone else...?

At that moment, Masachika had an idea. What came to his mind was someone who was believed among the students to have a boyfriend, and more importantly, someone Masachika could borrow without any problem.

After thinking of it for a moment and hesitating for about three seconds, Masachika rushed back to the tent where he had originally been. With determination, he extended his hand to the person he was looking for, who was sitting on a folding chair.

“Masha-san! Please!”

“Eh? Ah, sure. Alright.”

For a moment, Maria blinked in confusion and then took Masachika’s hand and stood up. He tightly held her hand, and Masachika sprinted towards the field.

Ah, this feels... nostalgic.

Memories of playing with Masha at their childhood park flashed in the back of Masachika’s mind, and he couldn’t help but smile a bit as he was running. While running at a slightly slower pace to match Masha, Masachika glanced around at the track.

*How about the other competitors...? Just one person ahead.
Alright, this should work!*

A student with an umbrella was leading the way, but the other students had not yet returned. Maybe, in terms of quickly finding a solution, Masachika’s topic was in the winning category. He thought about it and immediately dismissed the idea.

No, it’s definitely not the winning category. Yeah... but depending on the item, it might be hard to find the person who has it,

and I might have to go to the school building to get it... Compared to that, I guess I drew a pretty high-ranking topic.

While thinking, he reached the long table with the topic and ran towards the goal again.

'Ah, Kuze-kun from the Red Team? Please make sure to 'carry' the borrowed item properly!'

Upon hearing the live announcement, Masachika abruptly stopped. He turned his head towards the commentator's booth, and even from a distance, he could see Yuki, who had an incredibly happy expression, speaking again.

'Specifically, make sure to lift the borrowed item off the ground and go around the track!'

Following Yuki's commentary, cheers and encouragement from the audience erupted.

"You can do it!"

"Give us a princess carry!"

"Show us your manliness, Kuze!"

Taunted by the irresponsible comments from the surroundings, Masachika's cheeks twitched.

Princess carry... no, no way. That's impossible. Doing a princess carry for this distance is just not feasible. If it were Yuki, maybe, but with Masha, my arms would definitely give out. Besides, borrowing someone else's girlfriend and then doing a princess carry? That would be way too sleazy!

Of course, the students provoking him had no idea what the topic was. Most likely, they were thinking of something like "the school's most beautiful girl" or "an admired senior" as a topic, something slightly embarrassing. As evidence...

"Princess carry? Uh, no way~"

Masha, covering her cheeks with both hands and wearing an embarrassed smile, shook her body while giggling. However, her relaxed

expression made it seem like she wasn't really that troubled. Moreover, she occasionally casted sidelong glances at him.

Are you actually secretly looking forward to it, Masha-san? No, it's probably not just my imagination.

It seemed like he could hear her inner voice saying something like, "It's embarrassing, but if Kuze-kun wants to do it?" Masachika was left a bit flustered by that gaze.

【Carrying me like a princess and crossing the finish line, it's like...
Kyaa♡】

Masachika retracted his previous statement, she was clearly thinking of something more extreme. She seemed to be fantasizing about cutting the tape at the finish line of life. Even Masachika blushed involuntarily at that thought. Just then...

'While Kuze-kun is standing still, other participants have returned! We don't know what's going to happen!'

Yuki's commentary entered his ears, and Masachika quickly looked up. When he turned around, he saw a student with a single-lens reflex camera running towards him. And behind that student, for some reason, another student was holding a small wooden bear figurine.

"Where did you borrow that from!?"

Masachika retorted to the student holding the wooden bear figurine for the time being, then gritted his teeth.

This is bad... At this rate, even third place is in jeopardy. Ugh! Well, it can't be helped!

In an instant, he made up his mind. Masachika stuffed the topic paper into his pocket and turned his back to Masha, squatting down. Closing his eyes to block out the surrounding taunts and the hopeful look in Masha's eyes, he called out behind him.

"I'll give you a piggyback ride. Please get on, Masha-san."

"E-Eh? But, I'm a little sweaty..."

"Don't worry about it! Hurry!"

While urging her forcefully, Masachika reminded himself in his mind.

Alright! What I'm carrying on my back right now is the little Maa-chan. I'm carrying the cheerful and angelic little Maa-chan! So, there's nothing embarrassing about it! There's no ulterior motive here!!

Creating an image of the little Maa-chan being carried by big brother Saa-kun in his mind, he composed himself. But right after that—

Maa-chan, you've really grown up, haven't youuuuu~?

Masachika's back was immediately enveloped by a soft and warm sensation.

In an instant, the image of Maa-chan he had in his mind was completely transformed with overwhelming softness and realism. The image correction was ruthlessly shattered by an unforgiving physical force, causing Masachika to freeze in place.

“Are you... alright? I’m not too heavy, is it?”

“It’s fine. Hold on tight...”

Though it wasn’t fine in a different sense, Masachika summoned all of his composure to affirm her without showing any signs of his agitation. In response, Maria’s arms wrapped around his neck, completely trusting her body to him. Drawn by gravity, Maria’s body overlapped with Masachika’s back in a closeness that transcended even zero distance.

Whoa, it’s crushing me! I won’t explicatively say what it is, but something big is crushing me around the area of my shoulder blades!

Experiencing a sensation for the first time in his life, a feeling that couldn’t be described as either a scream of despair or a cheer, Masachika stood up. And in a normal and totally not weird way at all. He was bent over because of the piggyback ride, and there was no other meaning to it. Absolutely none.

Oh, damn it! Cut it out already, you shameless fool! Maa-chan is the one riding on your back! Don’t you dare harbor any filthy desires towards Maa-chan! Are you trying to die?!

Once again, he reprimanded himself desperately, trying not to be too conscious of the sensation on his back, Masachika reached around Maria's legs—

Munyi~

“.....”

Compared to feeling her through the gym clothes, the vivid sensation of flesh was overwhelming in an instant. Moreover, Maria, whose legs he held, squirmed shyly.

“Um, heh, this is a bit embarrassing... My legs are thick...”

“No, that’s...”

Even though he reflexively denied it, Masachika's awareness was now locked onto the area from Maria's knees to her thighs, captured in his own hands. The smooth skin he felt against his hands and the softness of her flesh. The door to a thigh fetish, initially opened by Alisa, swung wide open as if its hinges were about to burst.

I see... so thighs are called thighs because they're thick, huh?

Moreover, it felt like he was on the verge of realizing something strange. However, at that moment, he was overtaken by the student with the camera, and Masachika snapped back to his senses.

“Alright, here we go!”

“Y-Yeah.”

At least he had to secure third place. Masachika began to run with Maria on his back.

'Woah! Kuze-kun is so fast! I'm having a hard time believing that he's actually carrying someone on his back!'

Perhaps influenced by Yuki's comment or not, the teasing voices from the audience seats that had been heard before had now turned into sounds of surprise and cheers. However, to run at such a speed, there must be a corresponding price to pay.

“Ah!”

Every time Masachika's feet touched the ground, a heavy shock ran through his legs and arms. In addition to that, Maria's body was pressed against his, and he could feel her softness rubbing against his back.

Ugghhhh!! It's Maa-chan that's the one riding on my back! The angelic Maa-chan~!!

As the sensation of reality mercilessly punched at him, Masachika clenched his teeth tightly while running. He ran quickly as if trying to shake off everything he was feeling right now.

And then, beyond the students running ahead of him, the figure of Alisa standing at the finish line came into view.

Ah, shit.

Masachika immediately thought of those words as his gaze fixed on her figure. And as if to prove that intuition right, Alisa's eyes, which held a pale blue flame, focused towards Masachika, who was currently carrying Maria on his back. They then turned to Maria's arms clinging to Masachika, to Masachika's hand grabbing Maria's leg, and finally, they returned to Masachika's face with an intense stare. *Jiiii~*. She didn't relent on staring at him.

How scary.

As a chill ran down his spine, a mysterious sense of guilt washed over him once more. Oddly enough, he felt like he was cheating on her.

"Fuuu~"

"Uhi!?"

Suddenly, a breath was blown straight into his right ear, and Masachika involuntarily let out a strange sound. Then, a chuckle immediately arose from behind him.

"Fufu, what a cute reaction."

Following the voice with a somewhat mischievous tone, Masachika's nape tingled.

"Masha-san? W-What are you doing in public like this...?"

“It’s okay, I made sure no one would notice.”

Whispered into his ear, the arm wrapped around his neck tightened.

“(I don’t wanna hand you over...)"

A small, almost inaudible murmur.

Masachika couldn’t see Maria’s expression, and before he could inquire about its meaning, he reached the finish line.

‘Kuze-kun, has finished in third place!’

“You made it to the finish line, Kuze-kun. Now, put Masha down.”

“Oh, right.”

“The topic confirmation is over there.”

With a stern voice, Alisa said so indifferently and turned her face away. However, the moment Maria, who had gotten off Masachika’s back, held his hand, Alisa turned back with a puzzled expression.

“? Alya-chan?”

Returning her gaze with a puzzled expression of her own, Maria tilted her head, and Alisa, with her eyes slightly narrowed, asked,

“Masha... There’s no need to hold hands, is there?”

“Eh? But I’m being borrowed by Kuze-kun...”

“B-But, still...”

“All right, please come over here so I can check the topic!”

As they were called out by a member of the Sports Festival Committee, Masachika, though somewhat concerned about Alisa, headed in towards that direction with a slight sense of relief. Meanwhile, Alisa’s gaze continued to pierce into his back, stimulating Masachika’s sense of guilt.

No, I didn’t even do anything wrong...

Yet, he still couldn't help but feel guilty. Was it just a part of a man's nature or because he had something to hide deep down?

Or rather, Masha-san...?

Prompted by the sense that something was off about Maria's demeanor when she had gone out of her way to join their hands in front of Alisa earlier, Masachika turned towards her profile.

“?”

But there was nothing particularly suspicious in Maria's expression as she tilted her head with a smile. However...

“I don't wanna hand you over,” she said...

“Alright, let's check the topic on the paper.”

“Ah, yes.”

Masachika handed the paper he took out from his pocket to the Sports Festival Committee member.

“Fufu, I wonder what the theme is~?”

Maria said this with an unusually cheerful demeanor, however—



“Mu...”

A minute later, in the tent where the Student Council members gathered, was the unusual sight of Maria with a pout on her face.

“Masha-san? Um, are you upset about something?”

“I am upset.”

In response to Masachika's timid question, Maria answered immediately, causing him to shrink back. Since everyone else was out and there were only the two of them in the tent, Masachika had to face Maria's anger directly.

“You know, Kuze-kun...”

“Y-Yes?”

Called by Maria, who was sitting next to him, Masachika’s shoulder twitched. Then, without even turning to look at him, Maria explained,

“I’ve never dated anyone other than you, Saa-kun.”

“Ah... Yeah.”

Feeling a bit embarrassed by her sudden words, Masachika turned to face Maria, who leaned forward.

“I’ve always liked you, Saa-kun.”

“Th-thank you very much?”

“Do you have any idea how I felt when I, who have always been so faithful to you, had to admit in front of the entire school that I’m someone else’s girlfriend?”

“Ah—”

Seeing the expression of anger and sadness on her face, Masachika felt an intense sense of remorse.

“...I’m sorry, I didn’t consider your feelings.”

“No can do. I won’t forgive you.”

Despite bowing his head as if compelled by an immense sense of guilt, Maria instantly and firmly rejected his apology.

“If you don’t go on a date with me, I won’t forgive you.”

“Eh? A date?”

Completely taken aback by her unexpected words, Masachika lifted his head without thinking.

“Yes, a date. You have to take me on a very romantic date for a whole day next time, or I won’t forgive you.”

“A very romantic date, you say...”

“Yeah. A date that would make my heart flutter.”

That was quite a high hurdle, especially for Masachika, who had very little experience with dating. Moreover, he couldn't help but wonder if it was appropriate to go on a date with Maria while knowing about Alisa's feelings.

“Understand?”

“A-Ah, yes.”

Though Masachika hesitated, he found himself nodding under the pressure exerted by Masha, who had leaned in close towards him.

“Hmm, that's good then.”

Then, Maria turned back to her usual cheerful self.

Unexpectedly, Masachika's heart was now filled with excitement at the prospect of going on a date with Maria. However, he was more bewildered than ever. As he stared at Maria's profile with a hint of suspicion, Maria tilted her head.

“What's wrong?”

“Ah, well...”

Masachika wasn't sure if it was okay to ask. For a few seconds, he hesitated and pondered... Then, hesitantly, he opened his mouth.

“Masha-san, um... You want me to properly address and face Alya's feelings, don't you?”

That was the wish she had conveyed to him two months ago in that park. Masachika believed it was Maria's true feelings, her true intentions. That was why he felt uneasy about Maria's actions earlier, holding hands in front of Alisa and the sudden invitation for a date.

“Yeah, that's right.”

However, in response to Masachika's arising suspicions, Maria nodded casually. In such a nonchalant manner that Masachika felt taken aback.

“I want Kuze-kun to properly address Alya-chan’s feelings. That part’s true, okay?”

But as Maria said this with a sincere attitude, one of the Sports Festival Committee members called out to her from outside the tent.

“Sorry, Masha! Can you give me a hand for a moment?”

“Ah, sure~”

In response to the call, Maria got up from her seat and took a few steps forward.

“But...”

Turning back, Maria blushed slightly as she spoke.

【Please choose me in the end, okay?】



Chapter 9 - Encounter

“...Alya? Shouldn’t we gather the members for the horseback competition soon?”

“I think there’s still some time.”

“No, but because of the number of people...”

What Masachika said was true. Despite understanding that and actually agreeing with him in her head, Alisa tightly pursed her lips and remained silent. Just then, one of the members of the Sports Festival Committee called out to them.

“Um, excuse me, can you help with some cleanup?”

“I’ll go.”

“Eh? Oi, Alya...”

Masachika tried to stop Alisa when she accepted the request, but she interrupted him with a stern voice.

“I’ll be back soon.”

“...I understand. I’ll gather the other members in the meantime.”

“...Please.”

Feeling a slight sense of guilt at the sight of Masachika’s silent retreat, Alisa quickly made her way over to help.

Haaaah... What am I doing?

Alisa inwardly mocked her irrational actions, and yet despite this, she couldn’t fathom the idea of seeing Maria’s face right now.

The scene from earlier in the scavenger hunt kept replaying in her mind. The two of them running together, hands linked, as they got closer to where she stood at the finishing line. Just thinking about that filled Alisa’s heart with swirling emotions of anger and disgust.

What the hell? Mouu.

She knew. It was just a coincidence that was the topic Masachika had drawn, and he had no choice but to carry Maria towards the finishing line. Neither Masachika nor Maria had done anything wrong in that regard. She understood that, but such feelings of uneasiness loomed around her chest and refused to go away.

Seeing Maria being led by Masachika while running, Alisa couldn't help but feel like shouting, "Don't touch her!" It was as if her memories of dancing with Masachika at last year's school festival, running through the shrine grounds with him on the night of the summer festival, among other memories, were being tainted by Maria. A sense of irrational and pitch-black anger welled up in her chest, unlike anything she had ever felt before. And now, all she could feel was a sense of self-loathing for harboring such feelings towards her own sister, even if they were only temporary.

I know, it's just baseless paranoia. Masha hasn't done anything wrong.

Maria hadn't done anything wrong. She hadn't done... anything wrong?

No, she hasn't done anything wrong, but! What's with that expression on her face? And she was being so clingy... It's indecent!

Thinking of such imagery depicting Maria, who had been cuddling with Masachika with a smile, suddenly set off loud warning bells in Alisa's chastity conscience.

Shouldn't girls... refrain from letting boys touch their bodies so easily!? You should only allow that with someone you truly trust... To do something like that when she already has someone else she loves... It's Yuki-san's fault too, it's Yuki-san's fault too!

As her anger grew with each passing thought, Yuki was also caught between the crossfire, who had prompted Masachika to carry Maria on his back.

Despite knowing that Masha has a boyfriend, she still gave him those instructions... Saying it's because of the rules, but seriously, Yuki-san, you're always so clingy with Masachika-kun too! ...Masachika-kun, you should learn to say no a little more!

Her anger continued to spread out of control, and Alisa pushed the large rope into the gym storage room as if venting her anger.

“Thank you~, Kujou-san. You really saved me there.”

“...No, it’s my duty as a member of the Student Council to help”

“I see... Good luck in the horseback competition! I’ll be rooting for you!”

“Th-thank you very much...”

Receiving unexpected words of encouragement from a senior member of the Sports Festival Committee, Alisa responded with a smile, although she felt a little bewildered. Then, as she was about to return from the gym storage room to the schoolyard... she still felt that her steps were heavy. While her outburst had relieved some of her anger, a sense of self-loathing was gradually growing in its place.

Haaah... Maybe I should go wash my hands.

She looked down at her hands, which had gotten a bit dirty from the cleanup, and used it as an excuse to head to the nearby restroom.

After finishing her business and leaving the restroom, while reluctantly returning to the schoolyard... she spotted an elderly woman wandering alone in a distant area from where the parents were seated.

Hmm? Why is she in a place like this...

Tilting her head slightly and confirming that there were no other people around, Alisa gathered her courage and walked toward the elderly woman.

“Um, are you looking for something?”

When Alisa timidly spoke up, the elderly woman turned to her with a slightly widened gaze. She appeared to be in her sixties. She wore a bright blouse and a loose, floral long jacket, which was a somewhat flashy but fashionable outfit. Her calm and gentle demeanor gave off the impression of an elegant lady.

Is she the wife of a President of some company...?

Considering the nature of the school, Alisa made that assumption, and the elderly woman let out a slightly surprised sigh.

“Ara, you’re...”

“?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I was looking for a vending machine...”

“If that’s what you’re looking for, it’s over there... I can show you.”

“Oh, that’s kind of you. Thank you.”

Still not wanting to return to Masachika, Alisa aimed for the nearby vending machine, feeling a slight sense of guilt for making it look like she was acting out of pure kindness.

“The sun seems to be more intense and hotter than usual today, don’t you think? I started craving a cold drink.”

“Yes, it certainly doesn’t feel much like autumn.”

“It might be due to global warming.”

Perhaps she was a talkative person, but the elderly woman didn’t seem to mind Alisa’s unremarkable replies and continued with a gentle smile.

“My grandchildren are the same. They keep going back and forth between their new and old summer clothes.”

“Ah... In my class too, there are many students who change their clothes depending on the day, especially since we have two sets of uniforms now.”

“Is that so... But you guys will start wearing winter uniforms from November, right? I hope it cools down a bit more.”

“Yes, you’re right.”

For some reason, in this peaceful atmosphere, Alisa didn’t feel any difficulty in continuing the conversation. They eventually reached the vending machine.

“Thank you. As a token of my gratitude, let me buy something for you.”

“No, really, that’s not necessary.”

“Don’t be shy. Come on, pick something you like.”

“No, it’s really fine.”

After a few rounds of back-and-forth, Alisa gave in and pointed to the cheapest bottle of mineral water.

“Alright, then...”

“Oh, is that it? There are other options like juice, you know.”

“Well, I have an event coming up.

“Oh, that’s true. But in that case, wouldn’t a sports drink be better?”

“I don’t really like them since they leave a sweet aftertaste in my throat...”

“I see, well, it’s not good to push something onto someone. Understood.”

Saying so, the elderly woman inserted money and began pressing the buttons.

“Then, for my husband, a cola...”

“Is this the one?”

“Yes, thank you.”

While slightly tilting her head at the elderly woman’s husband’s choice, Alisa pressed the button on the top row for her. Then, she received the bottle of mineral water and toyed with it in her hands.

Hmm, should I drink it here...?

As she pondered this for a moment, she somehow lost track of an opportunity to part ways, and started walking back along the path with the elderly woman.

“Thank you very much for being so kind.”

“It’s nothing... It’s part of the organizing committee’s duties to assist both parents and students.”

“You’re a kind young lady... and so beautiful. I’d want you to be my grandson’s wife one day.”

“Ahaha...”

“*Ara*, I’m sorry. I was just joking.”

“No, it’s...”

“Besides, at your age, you must be quite popular, right? Do you have someone you like?”

“I haven’t really thought about things like that yet...”

“I see... Well, there’s no rush.”

The elderly woman’s casual words made Alisa feel somewhat relieved. It was as if a pure, cool breeze had blown into her feelings of loneliness and isolation that she had felt at the amusement park, a sense of restlessness as if she were being left behind.

Perhaps this person... can provide the answers to my worries.

With that intuition, Alisa found herself confiding in this nameless elderly woman.

“I... I don’t know. About things like love... the difference between just liking someone, feelings of goodwill, or something more.”

Hearing this, the elderly woman looked at Alisa’s face. Then, as if she had sensed something, she turned to face forward and spoke cheerfully.

“It’s quite complicated, isn’t it? Even at my age, I still don’t have a definite answer.”

“Eh? Is that... the case?”

Even though she’s married with grandchildren? With that question in her eyes, Alisa looked at the elderly woman, who continued to smile while facing forward.

“Of course, I know what love is. But I don’t know the exact definition of it. I think it’s something that really varies from person to person.”

“.....”

In the end, she seemed to settle for such an ambiguous answer. Just as Alisa was starting to feel a slight disappointment, the elderly woman casually spoke.

“Actually, I don’t think ‘love’ is a word that refers to just one emotion.”

“? Love... is love, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but there are a whole bunch of different emotions in love, aren’t there”

“...?”

With a puzzled look on her face, Alisa listened as the elderly woman spoke slowly.

“Admiration, respect, friendship, of course, the kind of goodwill you mentioned earlier, and for some people, obsession, or even hatred. It might be a bit indelicate to say, but sexual desire can also be part of it.”

“Se-sexual desire?”

“But even that is still a part of love, don’t you think? I believe that love encompasses all these different emotions... at least, that’s how I see it.”

“.....”

To be honest, Alisa couldn’t easily agree with the explanation spoken in front of her. In her view, feelings like friendship and respect were completely different from love, and the idea that even obsession or hatred could be part of love made her tilt her head in confusion.

Isn’t love supposed to be more, you know, pure and... sparkling, something beautiful?

Naturally, a vague counterargument formed in Alisa's mind. However, for Alisa, who was still searching for the true meaning of the emotion called love, the elderly woman's interpretation was quite fresh.

Alisa also knew about emotions like friendship and respect. If these emotions gathered and intensified, leading to the birth of love... someday, Alisa might be able to understand it.

"...This has been very enlightening."

"*Fufu*, is that so? Well, that's good to hear. Anyway, that's just my personal perspective, so don't take it too seriously, okay?"

The elderly woman laughed at her own words, and Alisa returned a faint smile. While they were talking, without realizing it, they had walked to the area near the parents' seats.

"Um, it's about time for me to—"

As she was about to bid farewell to the elderly woman, a voice she vaguely recognized called her from behind.

"Oh, Asae-san! Wait—why are you with Kujou-san!?"

Alisa turned around, startled by the voice, and when she saw a frail-looking old man standing on a picnic sheet and looking in their direction, her cheeks twitched noticeably.

"Eh, ah? I-If I remember correctly, you're Masa— Kuze-kun's..."

"Oh, you remembered me, huh? Sorry I didn't introduce myself properly last time. I'm Tomohisa Kuze, Masachika's granddad."

"Ah, I'm Alisa Kujou... Wait..."

Which means...

She turned to the elderly woman, who had put her hand to her mouth while smiling

"Oh dear, how careless of me. Allow me to introduce myself again. I'm Asae Kuze."

"Wha..."

Only belatedly recognizing the situation, Alisa's inner turmoil intensified.

Masachika-kun's... Gra-grandmother!? Wait a minute, did I just seek romantic advice from Masachika-kun's grandmother!?

Half-panicked, her brain seemed to be trying to escape from reality, and then she realized something unnecessary.

Or rather! Matching outfits! At this age! Matching outfits!!

Looking at Tomohisa Kuze dressed in a bright shirt and flashy floral jacket, Alisa screamed inside her head.

Well, it was fine. She thought they looked fashionable and harmonious, which was nice. But... if her own grandparents were dressed like this, Alisa would probably hesitate to walk with them.

Then, she suddenly noticed something when she looked at Asae's face.

That's right, at that time... when I called out to her!

The wide-eyed reaction when she said, "Ara, you're..." at that time. Back then, Alisa had thought it was just because she found silver hair and blue eyes unusual...

No way, did she realize who I was at that moment!?

Sensing it, Alisa stared at Asae, who smiled apologetically. With that reaction, she understood everything, and a burst of anger, mixed with intense embarrassment, exploded inside her.

"~~~~...!!"

She let out an inaudible cry and shuddered, then noticed the woman sitting next to Tomohisa.

Is she... Masachika's mother?

Alisa's intuition made her flinch, but immediately, she felt something was off.

But wait? Aren't Masachika's parents...?

She remembered the apartment where she had been multiple times, a place where there was no one besides Masachika. She also recalled the story Masachika had told her when he fell ill. She furrowed her brows and made eye contact with the woman.

“Hmm?”

She suddenly felt a sense of déjà vu when she looked at the woman’s face, causing her to furrow her brows even deeper.

“Oh, this is—”

Sensing Alisa’s gaze, Tomohisa was about to say something to the woman next to him, but she rose to her feet, as if to cut him off.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Yumi Suou, Yuki’s mother.”

“Ah, Yuki-san’s... Nice to meet you. I’m Alisa Mikhailovna Kujou, a member of the Student Council, just like Yuki-san.”

“Yes, I’ve heard about you from my daughter...”

As Yumi responded timidly, avoiding eye contact, Alisa recognized the true identity of her déjà vu.

Ah, I see... She does look quite a bit like Yuki.

Although her expression lacked the confidence and vibrancy that Yuki had, their facial features were strikingly similar. With that realization in mind, a question arose.

Why are Masachika’s grandparents with Yuki-san’s mother...?

To this obvious question, Tomohisa responded with a chuckle.

“Well, when I saw that Yumi-san was here alone, I invited her to join us.”

“Ah... is that so?”

While she accepted his explanation, Alisa couldn’t help but feel uneasy.

Even if they’re childhood friends... are their grandparents and parents really this close?

She couldn't shake off her sense of doubt, but remained silent. Meanwhile, as she pondered this situation, a familiar voice called out to her.

"Oiii~, Alya, it's about time..."

Raising her head, Alisa saw Masachika approaching them, waving his hand shyly. He must have come looking for her, guided by her silver hair. As he looked at the two people next to her, Masachika frowned.

"W-Why are Grandpa and Grandma with Alya..."

Then, Masachika's gaze shifted to the woman seated next to them, and the atmosphere froze in an instant.

"Ma-Masachika-kun?"

Stunned and with a cracked expression, Masachika seemed lost for words as he stared at the woman. Alisa couldn't help but feel bewildered.

Eh? What... What's going on?

Alisa, without understanding anything, shifted her gaze between the two of them, but the standoff between the two ended when Masachika broke his gaze. The bizarre atmosphere seemed to drag on for longer than it actually did, which was probably just about five seconds.

"...The other's have already gathered over there, so let's go."

"Eh? ...Ah, yeah... Well then, uh... Goodbye."

"Yeah, goodbye."

"Oh yeah! Masachika-kun! Let's have lunch together later!"

"I'll be having lunch with my friends."

Without even looking back at them, Masachika responded coldly to Tomohisa's invitation, and walked away. Alisa quickly followed him, puzzled by his uncharacteristic demeanor.

"Masachika-kun, what—"

But when she walked up to Masachika and looked at his face, she gasped.

Anger, hatred, and sadness mixed together, swirling fiercely just beneath the surface of his expression. It was a tumultuous display of emotions, a stark contrast to Masachika's usual carefree demeanor. At such a sight, Alisa was rendered speechless.

“.....”

Masachika couldn't even muster the energy to feign a composed attitude as Alisa's gaze met his face. He didn't say anything and remained silent, and that was unusual for him. Alisa struggled to find words.

What's going on? What should I... I don't even know...

Her thoughts spun in circles in her head and throat. She had to say something. But what? Nothing came to mind, so...

“Guh!”

Without uttering a word, Alisa pressed the cold bottle she was holding against Masachika's cheek.

“It's cold!”

Startled by the sudden chill of the recently bought bottle, Masachika stopped in his tracks and instinctively moved away. Then, he furrowed his brow and looked at Alisa.

“I don't think it's right... to say those words to your grandfather... like that.”

She stumbled through her words, feeling embarrassed. Her words were faltering, but she had to say something. But nothing came to mind, so...

“You're right. Well, maybe I'll have lunch with them sometime.”

He said it with a hint of humor, as if it were a joke, and his expression relaxed. Although Alisa felt relieved, a sense of awkward shame lingered in her heart.

There were things she really wanted to ask. Why had he reacted like that when he saw Yuki's mother? What had happened between them? She wanted to know. She wanted to ask. But for now, she decided to wait.

Someday... He promised he'll tell me someday...

Alisa decided to wait. She would wait for the day when Masachika would tell her everything. Until then, she would become a more dependable partner for him. Someone he could trust and confide in, someone who would support him through his struggles.

To achieve that... I can't afford to lose.

And... there was something else she wanted to tell Masachika. After winning the horseback competition today, she had a message for him, and for...

“Ah, Alisa’s here~”

“You’re a bit late, aren’t you?”

“Good job, Alya-san.”

“Good job.”

She found herself alongside her supporters, those who fought alongside her—Sayaka, Nonoa, Takeshi, and Hikaru.

“Ah, sorry~. Did I make you all wait?”

“Huh, late? I think we’re still fine, right?”

Then she noticed the presence of Maria and Elena. And...

“Oh my, it seems we are the last to arrive.”

She arrived with elegance and confidence, her distinctive vertical rolls swaying.

With a smile, Alisa welcomed her, and in response, she returned with a graceful and radiant one.

“Good job, Violet-senpai.”

“It’s Sumire, desuwa!”

Masachika's greeting was met with a sharp tsukkomi.



Two weeks ago, when they stayed back in their classroom after school to discuss who they could ask to support them,

“...Could we ask Kiryuin-senpai for help?”

Masachika nodded slowly in agreement with Alisa's suggestion.

“That's... fine. Violet-senpai seemed to like Alya too...”

“Really? When?”

“You know, when Kiryuin came to apologize after the cultural festival...”

Just as the Autumn Festival was drawing to a close, Sumire, accompanied by Yusho, visited the Student Council and the Festival Executive Committee quarters to explain the situation. She bowed her head to the Student Council President, Vice President, and other members. Then, she personally apologized to Alya, too...

“There's no need to apologize. Kiryuin-senpai had nothing to do with that incident, and you managed to quell the incident and make the live performance a success despite the interference. So for that, thank you very much. You helped resolve the situation.”

That's what Alya had said, bowing her head in return.

“...Certainly, she offered to help with any further issues that might arise, but I don't think that's the same as her liking me.”

“Nah, I think she's really taken a liking to you. I mean, Violet-senpai doesn't take her words lightly, so I don't think she'd say something like 'I'll help' just like that.”

“Yeah, I guess you're right.”

Alisa tilted her head with a mixture of happiness and doubt. With a small wry smile, Masachika rested his chin on his hand.

“Yeah, if we can get full cooperation from Violet-senpai, we might be able to mobilize the Four Season Sisters...”

“Four Season Sisters?”

“Yeah, the disciplinary committee... or rather, the famous sister group from the Girls’ Kendo Club, even though they’re not actually sisters... Anyway, there are four of them. The vanguard, second, middle, and Vice-Captain of the girls’ kendo club, excluding Sarashina, their Captain.”

“Huh?”

“Violet-senpai is the Vice-Captain and the eldest of the quartet. So, if we can get her cooperation, maybe the four of them could join us? With those four, we’d have a well known and powerful team. Oh, by the way, you were there too, right? During that firecracker incident, when they helped apprehend the culprit—”



And so, Alisa and her supporters, the best of the best, were gathered here. Following Sumire, three female students appeared, standing side by side in a row, each slightly angled.

They all turned slightly to the side, and Sumire snapped her fingers. As if prompted by that, the lively twin-tailed girl to her right proudly declared her name.

“Shinbashi Ayame!”

Then, the tomboyish girl to her right covered one eye with her hand as she spoke.

“Oumori Kikiyou.”

Finally, the remaining girl the opposite end pushed up her glasses and introduced herself

“Kurasawa Hiragi.”

Finally, Sumire, with her vertical rolls swaying, confidently introduced herself.

“Kiryuin Sumire.”

In unison, the four of them declared together.

“We are the Four Season Sisters, and we are here to assist!”

Their entrance was magnificent, as if they could trigger an explosion behind them at any moment. Seeing this, Sayaka clapped her hands appreciatively, and Takeshi followed suit, tilting his head in confusion.

“Hey, Nonoa-chan, your ass is as nice as ever~. Can I touch it?”

“50,000 yen.”

“That’s steep! For how long?”

“Two seconds.”

“Two seconds!? Uh, by the way, is it okay if I pay with card?”

“You’re actually gonna pay?”

Ignoring that, Elena continued to sexually harass Nonoa, prompting Hikaru to retort immediately.

“Uh, Masha-san, your stomach is showing again...”

“Ah, *mouu~*”

Maria fixed her clothing with a slightly embarrassed expression after being pointed out by Masachika.

Looking at her gathered supporters once more, Alisa muttered—

【Did I make the right choices?】

Chapter 10 - The Horseback Competition

“Alright then, everyone, please take care of me.”

Alisa’s call gathered everyone in the place, and they all nodded. During the pre-practice gathering for the mock battle, tactics against the expected opponents and the corresponding strategies had been shared and discussed with everyone. What they were doing now was just a simple confirmation.

However, seeing Alisa take charge of such a large group herself was deeply moving for Masachika.

She really has grown a lot...

He watched Alisa with a mixture of joy and loneliness, almost as if he was her guardian. But before he could dwell on it further...

“By the way, um...”

Takeshi hesitated and glanced in Elena’s direction.

“Narahashi-senpai, are you really going to participate in that outfit?”

In response to Takeshi’s curiosity, all eyes turned to Elena. She placed her hand beside her face and smiled confidently.

“Narahashi-senpai, you say...? No, that’s not me. Right now, I’m the mysterious guest supporter, Sexy Mask!”

Elena’s eyes sparkled as she said this, wearing a Venetian mask with lace that could be used at a masquerade ball. Yes, she was concealing her identity with a mask. This was the compromise that Masachika proposed in order to have Elena, a previous Vice-President of the Student Council, to participate as a supporter. By the way, the choice of the mask and pseudonym itself was Elena’s sense of style.

“It’s perfect, Elena-senpai, no, I mean, Sexy, *pfft* Mask.”

“Did you just laugh?”

“No, not at all.”

Shaking his head from side to side with a nonchalant expression, Masachika nodded seriously.

“Well, anyway, if that’s the case, the other students won’t recognize you at first... And even if, by some chance, they do figure it out, it should be clear that Elena-senpai did not openly declare support for Alya and I.”

“*Fufu*, is that so?”

Elena, who was quite pleased, swished her hair, now in a ponytail. Then, Hikaru, with a hesitant and skeptical voice, chimed in.

“No, I think it’ll be pretty obvious... actually.”

“What are you talking about, Hikaru? Haven’t you heard of the unwritten rule that as long as you hide your eyes, you won’t be recognized? This time, I’ve even put extra effort into changing my hairstyle. There’s no way they’ll figure it out.”

“No, that’s just a cliché from manga and drama shows... Besides, your change in hairstyle is just altering the position of your ponytail, which is within the margin of error...”

Saying this, Hikaru looked around as if seeking agreement, but...

“Elena-senpai, you look wonderful! So cool!”

All there was, was Maria in a daze.

“It looks quite good though, doesn’t it?”

Sayaka, whose otaku heart was tingling.

“I’ve never seen a mask like that outside of a photoshoot.”

And Nonoa, who seemed nonchalant about it.

“It’s more stylish than I imagined. Maybe we should try wearing it next time.”

Furthermore, the Four Season Sisters, led by Sumire, seemed to be excited about it. But what type of squad are they aiming to become?

With such reactions, Alisa and Takeshi were the only ones who shared Hikaru's skeptical response. Facing the reality of being in the overwhelming minority...

"Well... if Narahashi-senpai thinks it's a good idea..."

Hikaru conceded to the majority. Just then, the announcer's voice echoed.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I know we've just entered lunch break... but we're starting the special event, the horseback competition!"

The declaration caused the audience to erupt with excitement.

"Now, let's start the athlete's entrance! First up, from the entrance gate, the Kujou-Kuze Pair!"

Amidst cheers and expectant gazes, Masachika and his team made their way onto the field.

"Introducing their leading horse! Rider, Alisa Mikhailovna Kujou! Her horses are Kuze Masachika, Maria Mikhailovna Kujou, and... um..."

The announcer stumbled a bit on the last one, looking slightly embarrassed.

"The, um, mysterious guest supporter, Sexy Mask!"

In response to this peculiar introduction, Elena, now known as Sexy Mask, flashed a peace sign and shouted, "Yeah!"

From the audience, perplexed voices arose.

"Wh-who is that?..."

"Who the heck is that?"

"Go for it, whoever you are, senpai!"

Hearing these comments, Masachika slowly nodded.

"As expected of Sexy Mask. They have no clue."

"Is that so!? I heard some pretty suspicious voices though!?"

“President! Do your best!”

“Oh, y-yes♡! ...Wait! I’m not your president!”

Elena demonstrated a perfect follow-up with a swift wave to a female member of the Wind Ensemble Club. Then, perhaps getting a little anxious, she asked Masachika in a low voice.

“Umm, hey, is this really okay?”

“It’s fine. Like I said earlier, everyone should understand the reason for the disguise.”

“You think so...?”

“Yes.”

Masachika reassured Elena with a confident demeanor.

Well, some people might see this as a joke by Elena-senpai, but just her participating in disguise alone will have a significant impact for us.

He chose not to voice his somewhat devious thoughts.

While all this was happening, excited voices from the students in the audience filled the air as the announcers introduced their names.

“Ohhhh!? Is that Kiryuin-senpai!? Moreover, aren’t they all members of the Disciplinary Committee!?”

“It’s the Four Seasons Sisters from the Girls’ Kendo Club! Are those four really participating!?”

“Kujou-senpai and, um, Narahashi-senpai, and the members of that band that performed in the cultural festival are there too, huh? Well, apart from Narahashi-senpai, it seems pretty straight forward.

“No way, this lineup is amazing! Not only did they include their former rival candidate, Taniyama-san, Kiryuin-senpai is there too! Seriously, it’s like they assembled a dream team for the Student Council...”

“Oh, indeed. If what they said during the opening ceremony is true... could it be that Kiryuin-senpai plans to join their Student Council if they’re elected too? If so, then I’m voting for Kujou-san!”

Friendly gazes from the surrounding students showered down on them, and everyone’s eyes sparkled as they imagined the potential new Student Council that would be formed with the members Alisa had gathered.

Gathering supporters has actually gone quite well... As expected, forming a team with Student Council-related members in line with Alya’s belief of “welcoming even rival candidates” was the right choice.

Masachika was also satisfied with the reactions of the students amongst the audience around him.

“...Huh? But if it goes on like this, Kuze will be in quite a harem-like situation, won’t he?”

...Although some students realized something unnecessary and completely pointless, Masachika chose to ignore it in the end.

‘Now, from the exit gate, it’s the Suou-Kimishima pair!’

As the introduction of Masachika’s team had finished, it was time for Yuki and Ayano to make their entrance. Seeing their members, Masachika was taken aback.

“Hey, hey, hey... what the heck? Seriously?”

“Uwaaa, they all look so mature...”

“Well, this is... they’ve brought an impressive group of people.”

Elena was dismayed, while Sumire expressed both admiration and caution in her voice. In the midst of their conversation, Sayaka calmly spoke while pushing up her glasses.

“Except for Kaji-senpai and Asama-senpai, who will most likely serve as riders, they have eight ace-level athletes from various sports clubs... It’s like they’ve assembled the ‘Strongest Team One Could Imagine.’”

“It must be because she has the connections to make it happen... This is the best way to showcase the extent of her networking skills...”

“And, aside from their leading horse, they have four girls and four boys... It’s an appeal that they’re supported regardless of gender, right?”

As Hikaru and Nonoa pointed out, many voices of admiration for Yuki’s connections came from the audience.

Ignoring these comments as well, Masachika stared at the two behind Yuki and Ayano with a cautious demeanor. Those two were the ones mentioned by Touya after the sack race.

“Kagami-senpai and Saijou-senpai... I didn’t think they were participating because they weren’t in the sandbag competition. I see, they must have been conserving their energy and strength for this. This... is going to be tough.”

“Those two... certainly are causing quite a commotion among the girls.”

“Well, they seem to be popular... especially Kagami-senpai. As guys with both fame and physical ability, those two are seriously top-notch, aren’t they? They didn’t seem very interested in being involved with the election campaign, and I didn’t expect it either... but she really managed to win them over.”

“Well, you know.”

As Masachika and Alisa were talking, Nonoa casually interjected.

“It’s because those two like Yuki, isn’t it?”

“...Huh?”

To those unexpected words, Masachika turned around with a serious expression. Taking in that gaze with half-opened eyes, Nonoa continued indifferently.

“Is it that surprising? Yuki is popular, so it’s not really unexpected.”

“.....”

He turned his gaze back to the front without saying anything. He could see Yuki and the two seniors exchanging words with smiles. At the same time, the concern that Alisa had told him before flashed in his mind.

"I just looked it up, you know? In a horseback competition with four members per team, the rider on top sits on the arms or shoulders of the team members at the bottom, right? So that means... the team members at the bottom will be touching my... my butt... No! Absolutely not!"

When Masachika initially heard these words, he was actually exasperated on the inside. He thought what she said was too fastidious, but now...

Sorry Alya. I was wrong.

At the thought of those hands touching Yuki's body, the hands of those two guys who had ulterior motives for Yuki.

I'm going to kill them.

He felt a simple urge to kill.

"Oh, you really look like you're ready to kill~"

"Masachika-kun...?"

In response to Alisa's puzzled voice, Masachika snapped out of his trance. And then, putting his murderous intent aside for now, he decided to talk to the seniors later and shifted his focus.

"No, I'm fine. Well, they are indeed tough opponents, but as long as Ayano is in front, I don't think we'll lose in terms of height and mobility. Ultimately, when it comes to a fight, the one in front will bear the burden if the rider leans forward."

"That's right."

"More importantly... Will Sayaka and Sumire-senpai be okay?"

"It's Sumi—! ...You mean dealing with those two? Don't worry about it."

"...Did you just reflexively blurt that out?"

"What are you talking about..."

As Masachika gave a sharp look at Sumire, who turned her face away, Sayaka pushed up her glasses and spoke.

“I’m fine too. If it comes to a match like this, I have no intentions of showing any mercy.”

“I see.”

Even though he found reassurance in their words, Masachika’s heart was filled with bitter thoughts.

I had expected it, but... those two are the riders after all.

For Sayaka and Sumire, Kaji Taiki and Asama Kirika were individuals they had looked up to as Student Council President and Vice President during their junior school days. Even though they said it would be no problem, facing them, or rather viewing them, as opponents might be challenging for them.

It was not clear how much they aimed for, but it could have been expected that Sayaka would participate in the competition when asked. Sumire might have been unexpected, though. And for Elena, those two were her juniors from her Student Council days. So, on her side too, she would undoubtedly find difficulty to face them as opponents. It was then that Masachika suddenly realized something.

Huh? But it’s the same for them, right?

Taiki and Kirika would hesitate to go for the win against their beloved juniors too. So what’s with the intention behind making the both of them riders, despite the possibility of the both of them holding back? As Masachika pondered this, the player introductions came to an end.

“The conditions for disqualification are having your headbands taken or falling off the horse! The outcome is decided once the lead horse is disqualified! Violent acts such as grabbing hair, punching, or kicking are prohibited! However, tackling is allowed! That’s all for the rules!”

After a moment, the announcer’s voice filled the air.

“Now, both teams, form your horseback teams!”

Upon hearing the announcer’s instructions, Masachika briefly exchanged glances with Alisa and nodded.

“Anyway, everything should go according to plan.”

“Yes.”

With a brief exchange of words, Masachika’s group each formed their horseback teams. Their riders mounted the three horses, crouching in a ready position. During this time, Alisa addressed everyone.

“As discussed earlier, we expect the opponents to launch close range battles. To ensure we can fight one-on-one as much as possible, let’s have Kiryuin-senpai go in first.”

“Is it alright to have the male and female riders fight against each other?”

“Yes, it is. Please take on the male team. Sayaka-san, you’ll go against the female group.”

“Understood.”

“Roger.”

“Then... let’s win this.”

In response to Alisa’s final words, everyone in the vicinity nodded vigorously.

“Now, both teams, please stand up!”

Following the announcer’s instructions, all six horseback teams stood up simultaneously, prompting the audience’s excitement to reach its peak as the two teams faced each other.

“And now, the special event ‘Horseback Competition’ begins!”

The battle began as a firecracker was ignited.

However, an unexpected situation occurred for Masachika and his group.

“Hm!?”

Two of the three riders from the opposing team, excluding their lead horse, began to approach in their direction. In a complete deviation from their expectations, Masachika was about to give a signal to retreat but then swallowed his words.

No, Alya is the leader. I shouldn't be giving instructions here.

Alisa's unease could be sensed through the hands resting on Masachika's shoulders. Maria and Elena, who were both holding Alisa's hands, would likely have felt it too. Nevertheless, Masachika and his team silently placed their trust in their leader.

“.....”

After a few tense seconds passed, Alisa spoke up.

“Kiryuin-senpai, Sayaka-san, move forward. Try to intercept those two riders and keep them at a distance from us as much as possible.”

“Understood.”

“Got it. We’re going.”

“We’ll step back for now. Let’s not get involved in the fighting... and assess the situation.”

“Understood, we’ll step back ten paces.”

Addressing Maria and Elena beneath her, they synchronized their breaths as they retreated. Then, they observed the situation on the battlefield once again and Masachika tilted his head internally.

The two enemy riders who had approached them started to slow down and enter a defensive stance as Sumire and Sayaka went to intercept them. And when the distance between the two sides closed somewhat, they suddenly came to a halt.

“What’s going on? They’re glaring at each other but they’ve stopped...”

“It seems like it, right...?”

Elena and Maria also raised bewildered voices to this unexpected situation.

When thinking of an aggressive assault, this cautious approach was completely unexpected. The males in the opposing team were sturdy guys, and with their height difference, it seemed they were in full capability of holding their ground against Sumire. Regarding the female

side, Kirika, who was only a member of the table tennis club, shouldn't cause much trouble for Sayaka and her team.

If analyzed calmly, there was no reason for the opposing team to adopt a passive approach at this point. If there was a reason, it might be psychological, such as the senior-junior bond within the student council Masachika had thought about earlier.

But haven't they already come to terms with that?

He thought they had come to terms with it, but once they actually confronted each other, did it become difficult? While not impossible, it was hard to imagine both of them having the same reaction at the same time.

If that's not the case, could this stalemate be Yuki's intention...?

He couldn't be sure. However, regardless of the reason, this situation where only two teams from each side were glaring at each other wasn't ideal.

At this rate, the audience won't get excited...

No matter the thoughts of the parties involved, this horseback competition was intended as entertainment. In other words, apart from victory or defeat, a certain level of "showmanship" was expected.

Retreating to the back and letting only their teammates fight was not a clever strategy, publicity wise. Nobody among the audience was hoping for that. Winning through such tactics might even reduce their popularity. It would be counterproductive. And yet, Yuki, who had gone all-out with showmanship over results in the previous cosplay race, should naturally understand this.

The audience was eagerly waiting for an exciting spectacle, but the current standoff would not deliver that.

That's why I thought they'd go all in by now...

The thought of having a leader ordering their subordinates to take down the enemy leader without lifting a finger has a bad ring to it. On the other hand, a team leader who chooses to act as bait in effort to help their subordinates take down the enemy's leader would be regarded as impressive and well-involved.

When Yuki proposed a three-on-three team battle, Masachika had a hunch that was what she was aiming for. That was why Masachika's team came up with the plan to have Sayaka and Sumire restrain the opposing team's two other horses, while leaving Yuki's own horse alone for the time being.

Following those instructions, Sayaka and Sumire began to circle around their opponent's male and female horse teams.

"They're remaining in their positions on the flanks... maybe they're aiming to commit a pincer attack. But if we dodge and evade that, we can end up isolating them separately."

Just as Masachika voiced this prediction, the two opponents moved. They began to move in opposite directions to avoid being circled on the outside. As a result, a path opened up directly connecting Yuki's two supporting horse teams in a straight line

"Umm, is this... going as planned, right?"

"Well, kinda? It's different from what I expected... but we might be able to have one-on-one battles now, right?"

Maria and Elena raised their voices in confusion, with Alisa and Masachika sharing the same sense of confusion.

Yes, it was currently going as planned. If the opposing team were aiming for a chaotic battle, then they would try to provoke one-on-one battles in return.

The opposing team must have preferred a chaotic team battle because it seemed that they didn't have the confidence to go for one-on-one fights. So, for them, being forced into one-on-one battles would be the worst-case scenario...

Or that's how it's supposed to be... But what's this?

It's like the opponents were taunting them to "come over here." It was the perfect situation that Masachika and the others could only wish for, which is why it's so eerie.

"A trap... maybe? What if the moment we step into the space between those two horses, we get ambushed from both sides and forced into a chaotic battle...?"

He voiced his suspicion deliberately, sharing his thoughts with team members.

“Or is it an empty fort strategy? Acting as if there’s a trap when there’s nothing, waiting for our stamina to run out...?”

Besides, they had horses composed of females carrying their riders, compared to the heavier males on the opposing side. In a prolonged battle, in which endurance was of more importance, it was obvious that Masachika and Alisa’s side were at a clear disadvantage.

Damn, I have a bad feeling about this.

Since the beginning of the match, or rather, since the proposal for a group battle, Masachika had this nagging feeling that the other side had been dictating the pace. The situation shouldn’t be bad as it was, but for some reason, it felt like they were being slowly cornered... Moreover, one thing is clear to Masachika,

This situation is exactly as Yuki planned.

That’s how it is. So, in order to change the situation that has formed right in front of them, in order to take control of the situation, what should they do now?

“Let’s go.”

But before Masachika could further sink his consciousness into a sea of his own thoughts, Alisa’s voice pulled it out.

“Let’s believe in our teammates and move forward. We’ll defeat Yuki-san.”

A voice filled with trust and strength. Despite having her own doubts herself, she spoke without a hint of hesitation, dispelling any uncertainty among her teammates. It was undoubtedly the voice of a leader, a voice that could guide and command.

Ah, how impressive... Alya, you’ve... really become such a strong leader without me realizing...

A sense of admiration welled up inside him, along with a strong sense of determination as he was guided by Alisa’s voice.

“Understood, Captain.”

Masachika replied with a confident smile, prompting Alisa to playfully pat his head. It completely relaxed his tension, and Masachika laughed heartily.

“Let’s go, Masha-san, Elena-senpai.”

“Yeah.”

“Shall I give it another go?”

“Oi, there’s someone acting like a rookie here.”

“How rude! What makes you think I’m a rookie?”

“Your first-person pronoun and speech style.”^[1]

With a playful back-and-forth between him and Elena, everyone shared a small laugh, and Alisa issued her command once more.

“Full speed ahead! Let’s target their lead horse at once! If the Yuki retreats, we’ll surround and take down their female horse team first, followed by the male team!”

“““Roger!””””

In unison, they replied to Alisa’s command, and Masachika and his teammates dashed forward. They synchronized their breaths and moved at the fastest speed they had practiced.

In response, Yuki’s team also began to advance.

“Guh!”

As the impending decisive battle approached, Alisa’s grip on Masachika’s shoulder tightened.

Then, when the distance between them and the enemy had halved... the opponent made their move.

Just like jaws closing in to crush a prey that had foolishly leapt into its grasp, Yuki’s two other support horse teams, who had been positioned on the sides reversed, closed in.

It was a pincer attack that was sure to be followed by chaos. The scenario they had feared unfolded just as they had expected. But

Masachika, Masha, and Elena showed no signs of hesitation, and neither did anyone else.

Because Alisa had said so. Because she said to believe in their teammates. With those words that resonated in their hearts, the three of them advanced, focused only on what laid ahead.

"Oh! This is a pincer attack— wait, Kiryuin-senpai is too fast! How about that? Oh, oh! She took it! Kiryuin-senpai has snatched the opponent's headband... Wait, what!? What an amazing tackle on the other side! Contestant Miyamae, right into the opponent who reversed—Oh! No, it's a draw! Both fell off! It's a mutual takedown!"

The broadcaster relayed the news of their teammate's valiant efforts. For a moment, concern for their friends who had apparently forcibly stopped the enemy raced through Masachika's mind. But then,

"Advance!"

Once again, Alisa's strong voice pushed those thoughts aside. Empowered by her voice, Masachika stared straight ahead.

Coordinating with Sumire-senpai for a pincer attack... Such a clever way of fighting is not needed now. Let's go directly, time to decide this!

To be honest, Masachika had advised against a direct confrontation, as they still haven't figured out Yuki's intentions. The feeling of them holding the upper hand over there remains unchanged.

But... who cares about that?

Their leader had chosen a head-on breakthrough, that was enough a reason to attack directly. Moreover, it feels more thrilling that way.

No tricks, just a direct confrontation, the perfect path for a protagonist.

Wearing a fierce, exhilarating smile, Masachika dashed forward. The distance between them narrowed drastically. Ten meters, five meters, three meters... and just as they got really close, the opponent suddenly stopped. Yuki, who had been standing, now seated herself on the shoulders of her two male teammates below her.

Are they trying to flank us—?

Which way will they move? Masachika intently observed Yuki, who had taken a seat on her horse, even placing her hands on the shoulders of the two boys beneath her. Her posture seems as if...

A three-person cactus gymnastics formation...? [2]

The moment he realized that, a shock ran through Masachika's body.

“H-Huh?”

Looking down at the impact coming from the front, he realized that Ayano was clinging onto him tightly. Because Masachika, who was the frontmost and in the center, had stopped, the alignment of the three people that made up Alisa's horse was disrupted.

Hold on, then what about Yuki—

In a hurry, Masachika readjusted his posture and looked ahead, where Yuki was now in the hands of the two guys, her feet resting on their hands. Her body leaned forward...

““Ready, go!””

They synchronized their breaths, and the two strong guys raised their arms in unison—Yuki's body soared through the air.

Seriously!?

Masachika tried to dodge on instinct, but due to Ayano clinging to him, his movement was severely restricted.

“Hang in there!”

All he could do was grip Maria and Elena's hands tightly. Overhead, Alisa watched as Yuki leaped toward them and went into complete shock.

W-Wha-!?

Then, on the spur of the moment, she assumed a position to catch Yuki. Forgetting about their competition for a moment, she braced

herself and extended her arms to await her. And just like that, she desperately held onto her friend, who had thrown herself into the air.

She closed her eyes, gritted her teeth to endure the impact, and then...

“Thanks, and sorry?”

Right after hearing a somewhat mischievous whisper in her ear, Alisa felt her headband being pulled off.

“I got it!”

With those words, Yuki thrust Alisa’s headband upward, and a mixture of bewilderment and cheers erupted from the audience

“Oh!? Contestant Suou has taken the headband! But, this is... No! It’s valid! Contestant Suou san has not hit the ground yet, and even though she’s the rider, a tackle from her is within the realm of the rules, so this is valid!”

And after a momentary pause, the broadcaster declared,

“The victory goes to the Suou-Kimishima pair!”

In response to the announcement, the audience erupted in loud cheers and applause, as Alisa listened to it all with a somewhat dazed expression.

[1]: Elena uses “icho” (いっちょ) here, which is a more colloquial way to refer to oneself. It’s pretty uncommon when compared to the likes of watashi, ore, or boku.

[2]: Specifically, the term “三人サボテン” was used in the JP raws. It’s a term used in Japanese to describe a specific gymnastic move, which I don’t think exists in English—I have no knowledge of gymnastics so maybe there is a specific term out there—in which the person on top sits on the shoulders of two others below, before placing their feet on their thighs and standing up. I have no knowledge of gymnastics, so my explanation might not be the best, but if you search up “三人サボテン” on youtube, there’s a video showcasing it.

Epilogue - *This Is*

After the horseback competition, Alisa found herself in the empty classroom of her class. She had parted ways with the rest and made some excuse to leave Maria, who had invited her to have lunch with their parents. She had sought refuge here. Lunch was the last thing on her mind right now.

She took a seat at her desk, gazing absentmindedly at the classroom while the noise from the school grounds served as a backdrop.

“I’m sorry.”

Alisa had apologized while bowing her head, yet none of her gathered friends blamed her. Despite this, she thought that such kindness was too heavy to handle.

“.....”

She hadn’t experienced how painful it would be to carry the expectations of her friends, to only let them down, before. Until now, she had always been alone, so even if she failed to achieve the results she wanted, it was her burden to deal with alone, both the cause and the consequence. But now...

“Gh!”

The friends who believed in Alisa and cooperated with her, seniors who had joined as new companions, her sister who supported her with a smile, and...

“~Ugh!”

His face had crossed her mind, and Alisa buried her face in her desk. Clenching her teeth, she raised her fist precariously, to only weakly thump it on the tabletop.

She had been elated. She had been arrogant. She had become complacent with the idea that she had many companions, that they had

recognized her as their leader, and got carried away by the fact that she could behave that way. She had become intoxicated with that sense of omnipotence, believing she could do anything, and... ended up making a judgment error.

In retrospect, it was something she should have realized. Especially when it came to conjuring up tactics or negotiating, she understood that she wasn't on a level where she could compete with Yuki. In that situation, she should have simply relied on Masachika. If she had done that, she wouldn't have fallen into Yuki's trap so easily.

But she had been too eager to win, overconfident in her own abilities, and ended up challenging the game with a shallow strategy. And what was even more disgraceful was that the reason she had hurried to win was just a personal desire.

“I’m the worst...”

The self-mockery that escaped her lips was tinged with a bit of moisture. She was certain that everyone was disappointed. Some might even be perhaps angry. The reason Alisa had tried to win the race with her own abilities so badly was simply that... she wanted to invite her friends to a birthday party.

November 7th. Alisa’s birthday was just two weeks away.

It was foolish. She should have conveyed that unrelated to the race. It was because she was consumed by such frivolous thoughts that she suffered such a miserable defeat.

It was absolutely right. That was nothing but the truth. But... even so...!

【I wanted to win today... and invite everyone...!】

It was a battle in which Alisa wanted to achieve victory through her own efforts. She wanted to show her friends and her parents in the audience a splendid version of herself. And then, with dignity, she wanted to invite her friends to a birthday party.

Every year, her birthday was celebrated with only just her family. Though they did not put it into words, she was sure her parents had

been worried. With her head held high, she wanted to introduce the friends she had made in high school to them.

To show them that she wasn't alone anymore. That she had made such wonderful friends. If she could convey that, her parents would surely be delighted and smile.

【I wanted to have a birthday party with everyone...!】

If only she could have celebrated her birthday with her smiling parents and her smiling friends. How wonderful a day it would have been, filled with unimaginable happiness, joy, and... but now, it's all...

I, I...

Miserable, undignified, a failure who had let everyone down. Who could even mention celebrating a birthday?

"Uuu, gh..."

It was all just her personal desire. That was why this result and its causes were the result of her actions alone. Nobody was to blame. She had brought her personal feelings into the race, foolishly dreaming of a ridiculously happy future and then lost. It was all her fault.

She wished her birthday wouldn't come at all. A family-only birthday party now would probably be insincere and only make her misery worse. Instead of having those thoughts, she'd rather—

"Yo, good work."

A voice reached her ears, making Alisa jump in her seat. Why was he here? She had come here after parting ways with him, thinking he would be with Maria.

Ignoring Alisa's confusion, he pulled a chair over to his own desk and sat down. Then, in his usual manner, he casually started to discuss the competition, paying no attention to Alisa's current state.

"Well, I got quite the surprise this time. I didn't expect their rider to be literally launched off... They must have practiced that a lot, huh?"

He spoke with a light tone, as if he hadn't noticed Alisa's mood. He continued discussing the match they had just finished.

“Well, the rules will probably be revised from next year. If it’s allowed for the rider to separate from the horse, in extreme cases, it would allow one person to carry the rider, allowing the remaining two to do whatever they want... The rules were a bit flawed this time around, and it seemed like no one cared about it. Oh well, if someone pulls off such a flashy stunt, it’s only natural that people would shift their focus to that~”

That normal and typical attitude of his... annoyed her to no end right now.

“...Hey.”

“Hm?”

“For god’s sake, can you just leave me alone?”

Her voice trembled with uncontrollable anger as she uttered words of rejection. But...

“Eh, don’t wanna.”

It was casually brushed off with those words. This further fueled her anger, but Alisa kept her face buried and said in a forcibly suppressed voice.

“I don’t know if you can tell, but I’m not feeling it right now... So, just leave me alone.”

“You being down isn’t like you at all. Didn’t Sayaka mention something similar before? Anyone can feel down, but accept the loss as just one loss, and you’ll be able to surpass Yuki again in the afternoon.”

“B-But!”

Unable to contain her anger any longer, Alisa slammed her fist on the desk and lifted her head slightly, shouting as if she were spitting out blood.

“It’s my fault that we lost, you know!? Everyone worked so hard, but my error in judgment ruined it all!”

While glaring at the tabletop, Alisa desperately held back her tears. Then, she was hit with cold words from the side.

“Don’t be so conceited, Alya.”

Alisa turned towards the uncharacteristic comment. Caught off guard by Masachika’s piercing gaze, she involuntarily held her breath. Masachika looked straight into Alisa’s wide-open eyes and spoke in a calm, matter-of-fact tone.

“I... we didn’t cooperate with you because we thought you would win. We cooperated to help you win.”

His words pierced Alisa’s chest like a dagger.

“That defeat was your defeat and ours. Everyone understands that, so nobody blames you. But don’t arrogantly shoulder the defeat on your own. It’s an insult to us.”

The words spoken so endlessly calmly and slowly echoed painfully in Alisa’s chest. Unbeknownst to her, the tears she had been desperately holding back began to trickle down her cheeks.

Beyond her blurred vision, Masachika stood up. He wrapped his arms around her head, blocking her view.

“It’s frustrating, I know.”

“Yeah...”

“For me too... For everyone. Together.”

“Yeah...”

Tears seeped into Masachika’s gym uniform, and with them, it felt like the pain in Alisa’s chest flowed out. In the embrace of Masachika’s arms, she cried.

Ah, he’s... he’s right.

While quietly shedding tears without uttering a single word, Alisa realized.

Certainly, it was painful to let down the expectations of her friends.

But that pain could be shared with her friends if they were together.

Because they were friends. The causes and consequences were something to be shared among friends.

It was Alisa's fault that she brought her personal feelings into the race. So she thought she would bear the punishment on her own. And that was fine.

“...I'm fine now.”

With that declaration, Masachika silently released her. Alisa felt a sudden wave of embarrassment as she saw tear stains on his gym uniform.

“Uh, um...”

While looking down, Alisa reached for something to wipe her eyes once more, as a bottled drink wrapped in a handkerchief was offered to her.

“Here, in return from when we visited the amusement park. Don't worry, it's a clean handkerchief.”

Alisa understood his intention behind those casually delivered words. She smiled slightly, accepted the bottled drink, and pressed it against her eyes.

The cold bottle absorbed the heat from her eyes. As she did this, she felt Masachika sit down again.

“By the way, changing the subject.”

“?”

His voice sounded a bit dissatisfied, and Alisa instinctively tensed up. With an expression that emitted question marks, she continued to hide her eyes as Masachika spoke in a nonchalant tone.

“When are you going to invite me to your birthday party?”

“...Eh?”

“What do you mean “eh?” Didn't you say in Russia, the person celebrating their birthday is the one who hosts the party? Takeshi and Hikaru basically have no busy schedules, so inviting them a little later

might be fine, but I think it's better to invite Sayaka, Nonoa, and Yuki a little early, don't you think?"

In response to the words that were delivered in an utterly casual tone, Alisa raised her gaze slightly, met eyes with Masachika, and then quickly averted her face.

"But, I—"

"I'll let you know, in Russia, not telling someone your birthday is a way of saying 'I don't wanna be friends with you this year.' I mentioned it to Yuki and Takeshi like some piece of trivia as well, so if you don't invite them, it might cause a rift in your friendship with them, you know?"

It was a few months ago that Alisa had said these words to Masachika in desperation. Alisa herself had completely forgotten she did so until now.

Such words... So you remembered them—

Before she knew it, Alisa was laughing. Whether it was out of joy or amusement, she didn't know. But somehow, without her realizing, the sadness and self-loathing that had filled her heart had vanished.

Oh, what magic this magician possesses, effortlessly erasing the pain and punishment Alisa had tried to bear on her own.

"...So? Do you plan to invite them? If you want, I can help with that."

"...No, I'll invite them myself."

"I see."

With that brief response, she heard the sound of Masachika standing up. Then, speaking in his usual brusque manner to Alisa, who still had her face down,

"In that case, you should go back and have some lunch, okay? We'll have to work hard in the afternoon... Besides, it was you who told me to eat with my grandparents, right? Make sure you eat with your family, too~"

After leaving those words behind, it looked like Masachika was about to leave. Realizing this, Alisa quickly placed the bottled drink back on the table, and embraced Masachika's back before he could. Burying her face in his shoulder, she asked—

“About my birthday party... will you come?”

“...Yeah.”

“Will you celebrate my birthday with me?”

“Of course, right?”

His response was so genuinely casual, and it filled Alisa's heart with joy. Her eyes started to get warm again, so she closed them tightly.

“...Thank you.”

She barely managed to convey just that and released herself from the hug. She bit her lower lip and desperately held back her tears.

And without looking back at Alisa...

“Mm.”

Masachika responded briefly and waved his hand over his shoulder as he left the classroom. It was so characteristic of him and yet filled with such considerateness that Alisa couldn't help but laugh through her tears.

“You really are...”

Wearing a carefree expression, yet always staying one step ahead.

It was truly infuriating and detestable, yet like magic, Masachika manages to always melt away Alisa's sorrow and pain.

Was Masachika really that dependable?

Wha...t?

Her heart was pounding strongly, and not just around her eyes but her entire body was enveloped in a tingling warmth.

Dependable, indeed. Masachika was someone she could rely on more than anyone else, and someone she respected... and yet, there were also parts of him that could annoy her.

These things about Masachika...

I am...

Her heart was aching. Her body was burning. The words of Maria and Asae that she had heard earlier echoed in her mind.

"I want to scream out in embarrassment, but I don't hate it. It's like a feeling of happiness, and somehow, because of that..."

"Admiration, respect, friendship, of course, the kind of goodwill you mentioned earlier, and for some people, obsession, or even hatred. But even that is still a part of love, don't you think? I believe that love encompasses all these different emotions."

The feelings she had built up, the teachings she had received, all came together to form one answer...

No.

Her mind instinctively denied the emerging answer, but her heart instantly contradicted it.

Deny, deny, deny, deny—it's not like that, it's all a misunderstanding, a lie...

But, ahh, this is...



TN: Translates to “love.”

Side Story - From When She Was Just a Childhood Friend

“Yuki-sama, may I have a moment?”

“*What is it?*”

“Is Ayano here with you?”

“*Yes, she is.*”

“I see. My apologies for intruding.”

With a slight bow, Natsu Kimishima, a servant to the Suou household, opened the door and entered. She observed the woman sitting next to Yuki on the bed and addressed her formally.

“I must apologize for my intrusion. It appears Yumi-sama is here as well.”

“Ah... is it time for dance practice?”

“Yes, the instructor will be arriving soon...”

Once she received this message, Ayano, who had been playing cards with Yumi and Yuki, stood up from the chair beside the bed.

“Well then, I’ll see you later, Yuki-chan.”

“Yeah, do your best in your dance practice, Ayano-chan.”

She waved her hand back at Yuki, who was on the bed, and turned to Yumi.

“Well then, excuse me, Yumi-sama.”

“Yes... Good luck.”

“Umm, ‘I appreciate it’? I appreciate it very much.”^[1]

After an awkward farewell, Ayano approached in small steps, prompting Natsu to soften her composure.

To this imitation of politeness by her granddaughter, Natsu couldn't help but smile.

Lately, this granddaughter of hers seemed to be imitating the behavior of Natsu and her husband. She was learning to be polite and respectful towards Yumi, Yuki, Kyotarou, and Gensei. For Natsu, it was endearing. However, on the other hand...

"I have arrived, Grandmother."

In the same way, perhaps imitating Masachika and Yuki, Ayano began to use polite and formal language even towards Natsu and her husband. And it was making her feel a bit lonely...

Normal children at this age tend to be influenced by their surroundings, and it can't be helped, I suppose...

Although she had said several times, "You can call me Grandma, like you used to," it seemed that Ayano had become somewhat stubborn once she began using polite language. She had been using polite honorifics consistently ever since, and it seemed it was hard to change, so Natsu had stopped insisting.

Still, it's quite impressive for a child this age to use polite honorifics so properly! She might become a fine servant in the future! Ara, I wonder if kids these days dislike becoming servants?

With a sense of pride that bordered on grandma-bias, Natsu nonchalantly raised a flag. Little did she know that the day when the flag would be raised was not far off.



"Okay, with good posture! Let's start from the beginning once more!"

In the Suou family's ballroom, the dance instructor gave clear and concise directions. Following these instructions, Ayano and Masachika took each other's hands.

Originally, this dance lesson was meant for Masachika, the heir of the Suou family, however; Ayano also participated as his partner and received instruction alongside him.

As they matched their breaths and danced together, Natsu sighed in amazement. She wished to applaud and show her support without getting in the way.

Oh... how splendid. The term “prodigy” must have been created for children like Masachika-sama...

Even though they had only just begun their lessons, Masachika already displayed a sense of grace and poise. Even the dance instructor, known for their strict teaching, nodded in approval while watching Masachika.

“Masachika-san, you’re doing an excellent job! However, please be mindful when turning; sometimes your lower body leads a bit. Let’s work on that!”

In response to the instructor’s feedback, Masachika promptly adjusted his performance. Masachika’s ability to grasp new concepts so quickly was befitting of someone called a genius. However, being his partner was quite challenging.

“Ayano-san, don’t look down! Your posture suffers when you do. Even if you make a mistake, keep your gaze up! We don’t want your missteps to affect your posture!”

Unintentionally, she glanced downward after accidentally stepping on Masachika’s foot, drawing the instructor’s attention. However, when she rushed to correct her gaze, it disrupted her steps even further, leading to more mistakes. A vicious cycle of mishaps began, and she ended up stepping on Masachika’s foot multiple times.

“Alright, that’s enough! Let’s take a short break!”

In the end, Ayano had stepped on Masachika’s foot a total of six times. Feeling downcast, she slumped in her chair.

“I’m sorry, Chika-kun^[2]... I was clumsy and... I stepped on your foot a lot.”

“It’s okay. I also stepped on your foot once... Wasn’t it painful?”

“That was because I made a mistake... I’m so sorry.”

Before Natsu could speak up to comfort her, Ayano muttered something.

“Yuki-chan would be able to do it better... I’m really no good...”

This unexpected expression of inferiority was due to the complex feelings Ayano had toward her childhood friends, the Suou siblings. Natsu felt surprised by the depth of her words, and she struggled to respond. However, Masachika, looking puzzled, said—

“Ayano isn’t no good, you know? Because you’re really kind.”

“Kind...?”

“Yeah. Ayano is helping me with practice, and you’re even playing with Yuki, who can’t leave her bed. I’m always grateful to Ayano.”

Masachika smiled and continued even more,

“I like dancing with you, Ayano. Our compatibility is perfect, and it gradually makes me feel better and better at it... It’s enjoyable. So...”

He stood up from his chair and held out his hand towards Ayano.

“Will you continue to be my partner?”

Taken aback, Ayano blinked several times before breaking into a smile. She got up from her chair and took Masachika’s offered hand, saying, “Yes!”

“Thank you.”

Watching the two of them holding hands and smiling, Natsu wiped her eyes with a handkerchief.

Masachika-sama... What a noble character! Without becoming conceited about his talents, he remains considerate of others... The Suou family’s future is in good hands.

While being deeply moved by this, she also couldn’t help but think,

Masachika-sama, that’s pretty much a proposal!

Even though she knew that Masachika had no such intention, she couldn't resist the urge to tease him in her thoughts.

Of course, if it's Masachika-sama, he would make a great partner for Ayano... However, there is still the issue of social status. But even so, that would be splendid! Yumi-sama and Kyotarou-sama probably wouldn't mind, and my husband would also...

Engaging in whimsical daydreaming about her granddaughter's future, Natsu, despite her age, seemed to be reveling in romantic fantasies. She was so engrossed in her thoughts that she didn't realize,

Chika-kun is truly amazing! I need to work even harder too!

Perhaps you should call it being a child after all. Ayano didn't pay much attention to Masachika's proposal-like words, and her feelings were purely those of admiration. However, in reality, as a young girl, she hadn't completely avoided the stirrings of such certain emotions.

When Chika-kun held my hand earlier, I felt something strange...

The content of that feeling was entirely different from what her grandmother was imagining. It'll still be awhile before this young girl decides on her own path to life and her own feelings.

[1]: Ayano uses the phrase “きょうしゅく” (恐縮 / kyoshuku) which is a more formal phrase used to express modesty and gratefulness. The reason as to why she says it twice is because I'm assuming she's just only learnt how to properly use this greeting/phrase.

[2]: Yes, this is what she calls him.

Afterword

Hello, it's SanSanSun here. After finishing volumes 4 and 5, I found myself in a writer's block while working on the afterword and, without thinking ahead, added 16 pages just a week before the deadline. I'm now in a state of shock. Why doesn't it work out so that there are more pages left in a better way? If there were about 3 to 8 extra pages, there would be more options. Well, it's entirely my fault for not managing the pages myself, though.

I just don't have anything more to write. You can see it in the cover sleeve comments, right? That aimlessness. I don't even know what I'm writing myself. People from the science field might say, "Oh, that's interesting" in regard to those numbers, but I think folks in the humanities will just be blank. Even if you're not in the humanities, you might still be blank.

Moreover, even though I use this pen name and play around with it so much, to be honest, I don't really like the number 3. My favorite number is 24. After that, it's 12.

24 is great, isn't it? It has an indescribable coolness. First of all, it sounds good, looks good, and it's beautiful that it can be divided by all single-digit integers except 5, 7, and 9. 12 is also nice. Twelve apostles, twelve heavenly gods, the Chinese zodiac, twelve ranks of court nobles... Well, that's beside the point. This number appears in various places, and I think it has a unique beauty. 13 is also good; it has a chuunibyou-like coolness. For the same reason, 14 is surprisingly hard to let go of. I don't feel any romance in 15; it's just like a plain old strawberry.

Oh, speaking of edgy charm, of course, you definitely can't forget about zero. Whether you treat zero as a number or not is a delicate matter, but that's part of what makes it cool. Those who don't understand this charm aren't edgy. Because of its edginess, you should start over from scratch. Even if you start over from one, you won't reach zero! Hahaha!

...Well, I did mention something about science-minded people in the cover sleeve comments, and then I ended up talking about something even they might not follow. Huh? What's that? You want me to keep talking?

Well, I guess there's no helping it! In that case, let me talk about three-digit numbers, but as an edgy person, (the rest is omitted).

Now, let's move on to the next topic after discussing numbers up to six digits. It seems like I might have accidentally revealed my smartphone's passcode towards the end, but it's probably just my imagination. Anyway, what's next... Oh, right, I should probably address *that*.

Regarding the previous afterword, I mentioned that including a short story instead of an afterword is probably almost certainly a first in the history of light novels... but a writer friend of mine told me, "Huh? There are others who do that, you know?"

...I feel embarrassed. The downside of not reading many light novels has come back to bite me here. Yes, it's true. I'm a light novel author, but I don't read many light novels. I mentioned it briefly in the afterword of Volume 5, but starting something new takes a lot of effort for me... be it in light novels, manga, or anime, I find it very daunting to dive into new works. And the more well-known a series is, the more I hesitate. Given my personality and the fact that it takes me a lot of effort to start something new, the number of light novels I bought and read before my debut was... about ten? And when it comes to romantic comedies... maybe two? And that was only up until high school. Once I entered college, I got more into web novels and light novels on platforms like "Narou," which were easy to read and explore new releases. As a result, I distanced myself even more from traditional light novels... but anyway, that's not really important.

I thought I was doing something revolutionary, but it seems there was a pioneer before me after all, using short stories in place of an afterword. However, well, maybe the concept of sandwiching an afterword with a short story is likely a first in the light novel industry, so it's not entirely wrong, right?

I've been enjoying that approach in this volume as well, stuffing in a short story to boost the word count. Once you experience the ease of it,

you can't go back to filling everything with just an afterword. After all, even with the same number of pages, the amount of text is different. With a short story, you can use up a line with just a short line of dialogue, and you can break lines between sentences. However, I got a bit carried away last time and ended up running out of pages, forcing me to condense and delete some content. Writing Slit-Paisen's short story was just too much fun...

Oh, speaking of Slit-Paisen, while in the original work, her face has yet to be revealed (and there are no plans to do so at the moment), she's already made an appearance in the manga adaptation. Just when I was working on the manuscript for Volume 6, the manga adaptation was covering the backstory from the first volume (the chapter about the junior high school festival). There, a member of the Handicrafts Club appeared in the manuscript. I thought, "This is perfect," and I suggested to Saho Tenamachi-sensei, the manga adaptation artist, "Why don't we make this character Slit-Paisen?" Saho Tenamachi-sensei was very enthusiastic and agreed to the idea, and that's how it happened.

What's interesting is that when the chapter with Slit-Paisen's appearance was updated to Magapoke, the 6th volume of the original work hadn't been released yet. In other words, Slit-Paisen appeared in the manga adaptation before the original work... and this created a trap, where some readers who diligently follow the manga adaptation updates ended up overlooking Slit-Paisen. Well, the volume that contained that chapter, manga adaptation Volume 2, was released after the original 6th volume, and Saho Tenamachi-sensei even mentioned this whole Slit-Paisen situation in their afterword for manga adaptation Volume 2. So, readers who keep up with the updates are most likely also buying the tankobon (collected volumes), and they should have noticed it over there, right? Right?!

Ahem, so, in other words, what I want to say is, everyone! Please buy the tankobon (collected volumes) of the manga adaptation! If you do, you can read my ridiculously detailed afterwards. I was told, "We'd like the author's afterword to fit on one page," and I replied, "I see, it just has to fit on one page?" That's me, the author who responded like that. But even though they asked for it to fit on one page, the actual task of making it fit was left to someone else... It's not the fault of the number of pages; it's the fault of not specifying an upper limit in terms of word count. If it's not explicitly prohibited, it means it's okay to do it. Saying

something like, “You should understand it with common sense,” after the fact is meaningless. In the world, there are many people who do things that can’t be understood with common sense, like me.

When I say these things, you might wonder, “Why is he acting so self-important when he’s aware he’s doing something unconventional?” It’s actually the opposite. It’s precisely because I’m aware of doing unconventional things that I act self-important. People who have something to hide or feel guilty about tend to act overly self-important to intimidate those around them and avoid being questioned about their questionable actions. So, when you encounter such people, look at them with a sense of pity and think, “Ah, this is a pitiful creature that can’t survive without putting up a front.” Of course, there are also people in the world who are so unaware of their own lack of common sense that they mysteriously act self-important. When you come across such individuals, look at them with a sense of pity and think, “Ah, this is a sad monster born from an unfortunate environment.” Look at them with pity and deliver a German suplex. Just kidding, don’t actually do a German suplex. If you’re going to do it, just do it in your head. Huh? What’s with that look? Oh, right. By the way, you can also read my original short story. If you buy the tankobon of the manga adaptation. So, let’s buy the tankobon. Alright, the requested advertisement is over!

Alright, so we’ve finished the promotion for the manga adaptation. Now... shall we talk about the anime adaptation?

...No, I don’t think there’s anything in particular to talk about. I’m not sure how much I can discuss. Oh, and the plans are steadily progressing, you know? The reason the release intervals have become five months for this volume is because the work on the manga adaptation and the preparations for the anime adaptation have been added to the mix. This is the limit of being a part-time writer. That being said, I often find myself rushing to finish the manuscript in a panic as the deadline approaches, like a high school student working on their summer break homework, and I can’t definitively say that pushing myself wouldn’t have allowed me to maintain a four-month pace. Which is it? I’m not even sure myself.

Now, if we can’t discuss the anime, then maybe we should talk about creative theory to appeal to the humanities folks... but I won’t. There’s something about discussing creative theory that I don’t like. It

feels a bit self-indulgent. I don't mind it when I see other people doing it, but when it comes to me, it's like, "Hey, I just got one work published, and now I'm acting all high and mighty," and the little devil in my head starts chuckling. Moreover, who would even consider a guy who writes by simultaneously working on the first, third, sixth, and eighth chapters, a downright bizarre way of writing? Yes, I have a confession: when I write Roshidere, I don't write in chronological order from the prologue. I typically work on multiple chapters all at once. There are times when I write almost all chapters in parallel.

And as you can see, just like how everyone has their own way of writing novels, creative theories are incredibly individual. You shouldn't take everything to heart. I think you should listen to them with a grain of salt, or even just a third of the advice. I often find myself questioning the creative theories that professional writers share, and it's rare that I think, "That's exactly right." So, instead of studying how to write a novel, I believe it's better to deeply analyze the works you love, the ones you find impressive, and practice "learning through reading" rather than "learning through watching." But, of course, I'm not advocating plagiarism.

While it's great to consider the opinions of others, if you want to take advice from other writers, I think it's a good idea to join a community of writers, preferably one with a diverse range of writer types. There, you'll naturally encounter a wide variety of opinions, but when it comes to aspects that truly need improvement, you should receive similar advice from multiple people. By addressing those areas, I believe you can eventually write above average. Well, this also falls into the broad category of creative theory, so there's no need to take it too seriously. Listening to a third of what's said is enough. You can disregard about two-thirds of what someone like me, who writes haphazardly, says. Saying it's enough when it's really just a ninth. How audacious! Oh, it seems I've triggered someone from the science field again...

Well, it feels like we've been talking about numbers all this time, but it seems like we're about to run out of space, so let's move on to the acknowledgments.

Once again, I want to express my gratitude to Miyagawa-san, who has had to deal with my slow progress. Every time, it's not just close to

the deadline... it's even beyond it, and I deeply apologize for that. I am reflecting on it. I am. Well, I might just be saying it. In addition to forgiving someone like me, I'm truly grateful for Miyagawa-san's valuable feedback from his objective perspective. Thank you very much, as always.

Next, I'd like to express my gratitude to Momoko-sensei, who once again provided us with a splendid array of illustrations. Despite your busy schedule, you consistently create illustrations of divine quality, and I'm extremely grateful for that. Especially this time, you not only handled the character designs for the new characters but also provided numerous illustrations featuring multiple characters... Thank you so much.

And in the manga adaptation, I want to thank Tenamachi-sensei for drawing Alya, Masha, and now the adorable Yuki in ojou-chan mode so wonderfully. Thank you for providing fantastic manga adaptations every time. I've also finished the promotion for the manga adaptation on Twitter, as you requested. I'm guessing you were mostly joking, but hahaha, you picked the wrong person to mess with. Well, opinions might differ on whether that counted as a promotion!

And last but not least, I want to express my gratitude to Suzuki-san, who has taken on the role of the new editor for the manga adaptation, as well as everyone involved in the production of Roshidere, and all the readers who have read it. I send my heartfelt thanks, which can't be expressed in numbers. Thank you! Before we meet in the next volume... let's meet in the author's afterword in the manga's volume 3 adaptation. Alright!



#ロシデレ
よろしくおねがい
します。:)

Monica

Fan Translator's Note

Yo. Thank you for reading our fan-translation of Roshidere Volume 7! We hope you enjoyed it as much as we did. If you did enjoy it, please take the time to rate the series and maybe even write a review on [Novel Updates!](#)

I'd like to express my deep gratitude to the editor, Darrk, and our ~~German slave~~ Proofreader, Shinzou. Fan-translating this volume would be impossible without their contributions, and they were really big help.

Anyways fellow Mashabros, it seems like it really is over for us :(

We'll hopefully catch you all again in Volume 8!

Feel free to join our [discord server](#) for any updates or to just chill with us! We also translate other series which we upload to our [website](#) as well!

As always, please support the author by buying the official translation when they've catched up! Please do not reupload our fan-translations, nor resell them. Fan-translating is just a hobby for us, and we do not plan on making it as a means to monetary gain.

- NaCl

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