

Синобада А
.....Круто
было♥

Alya
Sometimes Hides Her
Feelings in
Russian

2

Sunsunsun

Illustrated by
Momoco

УССКИ



.....Круто
было♥

Alya
Sometimes Hides Her
Feelings in
Russian



"Lady Yuki's wishes are my own."

Ayano Kimishima

Ayano is an expressionless maid of the Suou household. She's the sort of devoted servant who has boundless love for her master, and she's dedicated herself to serving Yuki. And that's exactly why she's bothered by Masachika's decision...

"Stay out of this. I am not interested in candidates whose grades are their only redeeming feature."

Sayaka Taniyama

Sayaka is a member of the public morals committee and used to be a member of the student council during middle school. She went head-to-head against Yuki (and Masachika) in the middle school election but was defeated. She didn't join the student council this year and presumably gave up her aspirations for becoming student council president, but...

"Who wouldn't feel pumped up after being embraced by the famous Princess Alya?"

Masachika Kuze

Masachika actually understands Russian. He's a normally carefree student who also happens to be the former middle school student-council vice president. Now he's running for the high school student-council vice president seat to make Alisa's dream of becoming president a reality.



“I don’t want
to compete
with Alya.”



“What
are you
staring
at me
for?”

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Не уходи.....♥

Alyya

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TOKIDOKI BOSOTTO ROSHIAGO DE DERERU TONARI NO ARYA SAN Vol.2

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First published in Japan in 2021 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo, through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

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Yen On
150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor
New York, NY 10001

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First Yen On Edition: February 2023

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Leilah Labossiere
Designed by Yen Press Design: Liz Parlett

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Sunsun, author. | Momoco, illustrator. | Rutsohn, Matthew, translator.
Title: Alya sometimes hides her feelings in Russian / Sunsun ; illustration by Momoco ;
translation by Matthew Rutsohn.

Other titles: Tokidoki bosotto roshiago de dereru tonari no Arya san. English

Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2022-

Identifiers: LCCN 2022029973 | ISBN 9781975347840 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN
9781975347864 (v. 2 ; trade paperback)

Subjects: CYAC: Language and languages—Fiction. | Friendship—Fiction. | Schools—
Fiction. | LCGFT: Humorous fiction. | School fiction. | Light novels.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.S8676 Ar 2022 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022029973>

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-4786-4 (paperback)

978-1-9753-4787-1 (ebook)

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PROLOGUE

You've got it wrong!

A relaxed atmosphere filled the apartment. A young girl threw herself on the bed, and her facial expression kept changing.

“Why...? But...”

The girl mumbling to herself while her complicated emotions played across her face was Alisa Mikhailovna Kujou. She had removed her school blazer and didn't seem to be concerned by the wrinkles creasing her shirt as she restlessly rolled around her bed. It wasn't like her to be this sloppy, but Alisa didn't have it in her to worry about that at the moment.

She was thinking back to what had happened around thirty minutes before, on her way home from school. She pondered about those eyes gazing directly into hers, the hand held out to her, and the words that slipped off her tongue.

“Love'? Me? What?”

She'd done it without realizing. The powerful feelings deep within her heart had swelled until they tumbled out of her mouth.

“I'm in love with Kuze? M-m-me?!”

She questioned herself once more before immediately diving into her pillow, burying her blushing cheeks.

“No! There's...no...way...I...!”

Her knee-jerk denial filled the pillow covering her mouth.

I love Kuze? Me? That's impossible! There's no way I would ever be in love with someone like him!

I could never love a slacker like him. I might have said some things in Russian that may have made it seem like I had feelings for him, but I was simply teasing him. I didn't mean what I said. I was just laughing at how dumb he looked with that seemingly permanent smug look on his face, never realizing I was complimenting him.

...Really, though?

A hint of doubt suddenly peeked out from the back of Alisa's mind,

and she clenched her fists tight.

“Really. I really don’t have any feelings for Kuze. I...I just got caught up in the moment. That’s all it was!”

After convincing herself, she sat up swiftly and then headed toward the closet.

Besides...even if I did have feelings for Kuze, and that’s a big if... there are more important things I need to worry about right now.

While she changed out of her uniform, Alisa reminded herself what was most important. She didn’t need time to think—it was becoming the student council president. She wouldn’t allow herself to lose sight of the goal solely because she was infatuated with a boy. She would be betraying Masachika, who said he was going to help make that dream come true as well.

Yeah... I need to live up to his expectations now that he has agreed to help me. I mean, how would he feel if I dropped out of the race and told him I had feelings for him? For example, of course.

She imagined how Masachika would respond.

“What? You like me? Oh, sorry. That’s not what I meant when I said I would be by your side and support your dream. Have you always felt this way about me? Come on... Ew. Forget I ever offered to help you.”

She imagined him being disgusted.

“Ack...!”

Alisa’s own imagined scenario hurt her, and she staggered. She stumbled back over to her bed before collapsing onto the covers. After lying in blank amazement for a few moments, her eyebrows furrowed, and she started to relentlessly beat the covers.

“Oh yeah?! Well, I don’t like you, either! How about that?!”

Breathing heavily, she pounded her fist on the bed with each word. *Besides, this is Kuze we’re talking about. He’s going to slack off during school tomorrow and annoy me like he always does anyway.*

Even after I did that.

“...!”

Just thinking about it irked Alisa, so she got out of bed and slammed the closet door closed...right as the front door to the apartment slammed shut. She placed her hands on her cheeks to check if they were still heated, then headed into the hallway.

“Hey, Masha.”

“Hey, Alya.”

“...?”

Usually, Maria would greet her sister with a radiant smile and a hug with a kiss on each cheek, but she seemed rather out of it today.

“Masha...did something happen?”

“Huh? Why do you ask?”

“Why do I ask...?”

Alisa wanted to tell her, but she didn't know how to explain and fell silent. Maria's gaze still seemed somewhat different from usual until she suddenly put on a big smile and plucked a stuffed animal out of the plastic bag in her hands.

“Oh yeah! I almost forgot! I met someone wonderful who I think you'd like.”

“Huh?”

Maria's sudden cheerful voice, along with the cat plushie she was holding out, bewildered Alisa.

“Ta-daa! It's Mewlisa!”

“M-Mewlisa...? What?”

“Check it out! Isn't she the spitting image of you?”

“...In what way?” Alisa's expression was unamused as she took a step back.

“Uh... Like...the eyes?”

“They're two black dots. It's nothing like me.”

“Come on! Take a closer look. See?”

“Yeah, yeah. Whatever you say... I just want you to call it something else. Okay?”

“But...”

“It'd feel like someone was calling my name every time you talked about it. I wouldn't be able to relax.”

“Hmm... Then how about Mewlya?”

“I guess that'd work...”

“Hooray! ♪ Now, let me introduce you to your new home, Mewlya.”

Maria began to head to her wonderland and clutched the stuffed animal to her breasts with a mirthful smile. Alisa rolled her eyes at the sight until Maria suddenly stopped in front of her room and looked back at Alisa over her shoulder.

“By the way, Alya, about Kuze...”

“What about him?” Alisa defensively replied after suddenly hearing the name of the boy she had just been thinking about.

“Oh, it’s nothing important. I only wanted to say that I think he’s a good guy. I can see why you like him,” Maria answered cheerfully, unaware or unconcerned that Alisa’s guard was up.

“For the last time, I don’t like him.”

“Really?”

“Enough!” yelled Alisa in frustration and discomfort, but she almost immediately withdrew when she saw the look in Maria’s eyes. Contrary to Maria’s jovial tone, her eyes were dead serious, almost frighteningly so. Nevertheless, that serious look was then hidden in a near instant behind her characteristic smile.

“Ohhh. I see.”

“Huh?”

“You’re so cute, even when you’re not being honest with yourself.”

“Wh-what?!”

“But you should hurry up and tell him that you like him before someone else steals him away from you.”

“Wh-what are you talking about?!”

“*Giggle*. Ah, to be young again. ♪”

Maria then retreated to her room like she knew something her sister didn’t, unconcerned by Alisa’s dismay.

“Hmph... What was that all about?”

Alisa resigned herself to stop trying to figure out her sister, then retired to her own room. She tried not to care or speculate, but...

“...”

...she couldn’t stop thinking about the serious look in Maria’s eyes for a while after that.

CHAPTER 1

Do you get it now?

“Ahhh! What is wrong with me?”

A high school student was mumbling to himself as he strolled down a road lit by streetlights. He wasn't anyone suspicious, though. It was Masachika Kuze on his way back after walking Alisa home.

“‘I will be by your side.’ ‘Just take my hand.’ Who do I think I am? Somebody kill me. Ugh. I'm going to be cringing in the shower for years now... And talking to myself like this only makes me look even more pathetic.”

He vented his frustration and self-loathing aloud into the night air. Masachika had just shown Alisa that he was a real man for a change, yet he couldn't help but dwell on his mortifying actions. The words he had said to Alisa played on an endless loop in his mind, and he was on the verge of dying of embarrassment and regret. Furthermore...

“Alisa said she was in love with me...didn't she?”

...the smile she had shown him as they walked down the boulevard was like a flower in full bloom. The vivid memory of the soft touch of her lips on his cheek when they said good night made Masachika jittery. Until now, he'd thought Alisa's Russian whispers of sweet nothings were merely a game to feel the thrill of being caught since she believed he didn't understand a word. However, her behavior in front of her apartment obviously went beyond what could be considered a game. It was almost as if that was how she really felt...

“Nah...”

Masachika hastily shot down the idea forming in the back of his mind.

She was just in a heightened state of emotion like me. I bet she's already returned to her senses and is cringing at the thought of it, too. Yeah... I'm sure that's what's happening.

But even after persuading himself of that, what Alisa had said and done still made his heart race...

“I thought I couldn’t fall in love anymore, but...”

Ever since that girl disappeared, Masachika had never felt romantically interested in anyone. He would still think some girls were cute or pretty, but that was pretty much it. He even felt lust from time to time, like anybody his age would, but he never felt love for anyone, and they’d never made his heart race like this, either.

Besides, I doubt any girl would fall in love with trash like me anyway.

Masachika despised himself most of all, so it was hard for him to imagine someone falling in love with him. Moreover, he didn’t trust the whole concept to begin with. He believed that most romantic feelings were temporary states of delusion that would fade away once certain conditions were met. He especially didn’t trust his own romantic feelings.

I can’t even remember that girl’s name or face...so there’s no way I could ever seriously fall in love with someone else, right?

Dating in high school was nothing more than a game to kill time. It was rare for high school sweethearts to ever go on and get married after graduation. The only time that ever happened was in fiction. Real high school couples were unstable, and the smallest thing could bring them together or break them apart. Even if Alisa really did have feelings for Masachika, she would most likely break up with him once she took a real hard look at him up close and spotted all his faults.

And the couples who do get married after dating in high school sometimes get divorced eventually as well.

He imagined his own parents, then smirked cynically before ultimately letting out a deep sigh.

“This is annoying...”

Those words fell unbidden off his tongue.

Getting worked up over something as uncertain as love was ridiculous. It was annoying. It wasn’t like he wanted a girlfriend, and it wasn’t like Alisa had asked him out, either. So why could he not stop thinking about it?

Mmm... I’m going to be single for the rest of my life with this mindset.

When he realized that he had become a heretic, he became even more depressed. But whenever he was feeling down, he would watch anime to feel better, so he picked up the pace and hurried home. Just when he was ready to escape from reality, he opened the door to his place...and noticed there was a pair of shoes there that weren’t his. Masachika froze.

“What happened to having ‘plans’?” he muttered. “Wait. I guess it’s

not that weird.”

If today’s events were all part of some plot to get him to join the student council, then of course Yuki would have been involved. In fact, she might have been behind the whole thing.

“Tsk... I fell right into her trap...or I guess I should say she dragged me out of hiding and pushed me into the trap.”

He sighed deeply while sliding open the door to the bathroom when...

“Huh...?”

“Uh...?”

...their eyes met. Yuki was drying her hair with a towel...completely nude. With her eyes opened wide and an expression overcome with surprise, she promptly used the towel to cover her front, but...

“Eeeeeek! My brother’s a Peeping Tom!”

“Yeah, yeah. You were waiting for me to open the door so I would see you like this.”

“Was it that obvious?”

“You rushed out of the bath the moment I closed the front door.”

Masachika glared at Yuki reproachfully as she grinned, revealing no signs of guilt.

“You went way too far this time.”

He rolled his eyes and turned to leave the bathroom when...

“Hey, not so fast. Aren’t you curious as to why I did all that?”

“Yeah, I’m curious, but put on some clothes first, okay?”

“Hold on, Masachika. I just realized something extremely troubling.”

“...Something extremely troubling?” repeated Masachika with a hand on the door he was facing, even though he knew it wasn’t going to be anything worth hearing.

“Hmph.” Yuki smugly smirked and covered the right side of her face with her right hand as if she were an overdramatic emo teen detective who had just solved a mystery. It didn’t help that her towel had come undone, baring all. One could only describe the sight as surreal, and yet Yuki showed absolutely no concern as she sternly opened her partially hidden eye wide and shouted:

“We’ve lived under the same roof for so long, but we still haven’t had the scene where you walk in on me changing!”

“You never cease to surprise me with the garbage that comes out of your mouth!”

“All brothers walk in on their sisters changing at one point! It’s

inevitable!"

"Yeah, in fiction! You nerd!"

"Takes one to know one!"

"Dammit! That actually hurts more today than it usually would!"

Masachika had been wondering only a few hours earlier if he was about to have an indirect kissing scene with his beautiful older schoolmate, like he was playing a visual novel. That's why being called a nerd right now was like having habanero sauce poured into a wound.

"Gnnng!"

He naturally clutched his chest and groaned, but in spite of his agony, Yuki was already striking a troubling pose and facing the complete opposite way of him.

"Anyway, I know deep down inside you want to see it, so here I go. Eek! Stop staring at me like that! ♡"

"Who are you talking to?"



“Huh? Oh, I’m talking to the camera that’s invisible to idiots.”

“More like a camera that only delusional nerds can see!”

“I guess that means you can see it, too, huh?”

“Yeah, I can see it. I can see it clearly. Cheese.”

Masachika made a peace sign while facing the same direction as Yuki. Perhaps they’d both been dropped on their heads as babies.

“Wow! Look at this picture! It’s surreal!” exclaimed Yuki with a straight face.

“Yeah, thanks to you!” Masachika immediately added.

Yuki then dropped the act and cheerfully smiled.

“Anyway, this is the least I can do to make it up to you.”

“Showing me your naked body isn’t making it up to me at all.”

“Excuse me? I saw ya checkin’ me out with your eyes.”

“Yuki, I’m going to be straight with you just this once.”

“Oh? What is it, bro? Lookin’ a little smug today, aren’t we?”

“Showing *everything*...is kind of a turnoff. It’s the brief glimpses from time to time that we men live for.”

“I see... I didn’t even consider that.”

They smugly conversed for some reason until they sensed an understanding mysteriously pass between them. After grinning with evident satisfaction, Masachika slowly turned around and tried to leave again when...

“Stop right there. Did ya really think you could just waltz outta here like that as if I didn’t notice? Ya looked, didn’t ya? Your eyes wandered from my head all the way to my feet, didn’t they?”

“I only looked at your chest.”

“So you admit it, you boob-loving pervert!”

“Shut up, you voyeuristic creep.”

“Hey?! I’d prefer it if you’d just call me a dirty slut!”

“That’s where you draw the line?! Anyway, just put on some clothes already!” Masachika shouted, slamming the door before heading to the living room. After cleaning himself up a bit, he swiftly returned to his room.

“Whew...”

As he sighed deeply, he tossed his school bag onto the floor and started to feel ridiculous for worrying so much. He then took off his blazer and collared shirt, leaving him in only a tank top and pants. But when he reached for his belt buckle—

“Gotcha!”

“What the...?!”

—the door flew open with a roar, revealing Yuki, still with wet hair, in only her panties and a T-shirt. She had once again kicked open the door. The unexpected event caused Masachika to instantly lose his balance, and with his pants wrapped around his ankles, he collapsed onto the bed. Yuki slowly traced him with her eyes, and a sleazy smile curled her lips.

“Heh-heh-heh... Nice body, bro.”

“You almost gave me a heart attack! What is wrong with you?!”

“I figured I’d use this opportunity to watch you change, too. Might as well get it out of the way. Know what I mean?”

“What’s so fun about seeing your own brother in his underwear?”

“Your underwear? I’m more interested in...,” Yuki started as she lowered her gaze toward Masachika’s nether regions, and her face was suddenly overcome with disgust.

“Oh my gosh... Seriously? You just saw your little sister naked, and you felt nothing? What is wrong with you?”

“The reason my body didn’t react is *because* there is nothing wrong with me. Who would even want a brother who gets turned on when he sees his sister naked?”

“Seeing you naked could turn me on!”

“Yeah, I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that.”

“Seeing you naked could turn me on! *Boi-oi-oing.*”

“Don’t repeat yourself! And what kind of sound effect was that?!”

“Just thinking about what that big, manly student council president would do with your body...”

“That’s what would turn you on?! Since when did you get into Boys Love manga?!”

Masachika hurriedly pulled his pants back up, and Yuki stared into the distance with a partially sorrowful gaze.

“I was completely against the concept at first, but I thought it wasn’t right to knock something before I tried it...and when I finally tried it, I kind of liked it.”

“Great. And now you’re obsessed. I don’t remember you having any BL books in your room, though?”

Yuki had her own room here at the Kuze residence as well. It was essentially nothing more than a hobby room filled with anime merchandise and a bed, though. Masachika often borrowed light novels and comics

from there, which was why he knew exactly what she had, and to his knowledge, she didn't have a single book from that genre. Yuki nodded at his dubious gaze as if she completely understood his doubt.

"That's because I keep them in Dad's study."

"What the...?! Seriously?!"

"I've already gotten Dad's permission, just to let you know. He said I could use the free space on his bookshelves in the study if I ran out of room."

"I'm sure he never expected you to keep smut like that on his bookshelves, though!"

"He said, 'Well, everyone has different tastes...', and left it at that."

"That's it?! Your daughter is being corrupted, old man!"

"Yeah, when I saw his exhausted smile and receding hairline, I thought, *Maybe I've been stressing him out?* And I felt a little guilty."

"Wow, daughter of the year here. Just don't tell him he's balding, okay? He's genuinely concerned about losing his hair," pleaded Masachika.

Yuki cackled on her way out of the room, only to return with a hair dryer and brush.

"By the way, my dear brother..." Yuki loudly began as she carefully dried her long hair, talking over the noise.

"Yeah?"

"...did you finally decide to join the student council after talking to the president and Masha?"

"About that..."

"Hmm?"

At Masachika's uncomfortable hedging, Yuki turned off the hair dryer and lifted her head to look at him. Masachika gazed right back into his sister's eyes and firmly continued:

"...I've decided to help Alya become the next president of the student council."

"..."

Yuki's eyes opened wide. She froze. She was, of course, taken aback. Helping Alisa become the next president meant that he was going to be Yuki's rival, since she was going to run for president as well. What he was doing could objectively be seen as betrayal.

"My..."

"Your...?"

Masachika was prepared to hear her express her disgust when Yuki all of a sudden dived onto his bed, shoved her face into his pillow, and screamed:

“My brother cuckolded me with Alyaaaaaa!”

“I’m not sure that means what you think it does.”

Yuki looked up in surprise, then grabbed her breasts with each hand.

“Dammit! You boob-loving monster! My C-cup breasts weren’t enough for ya, huh?! I can’t believe how easily you were brainwashed by Alya’s most likely E-cup tits!”

“Stop being so descriptive about everyone’s cup size!”

“Come to your senses, brother! Having C-cup breasts that you can play with are way better than E-cup ones that you can’t even touch!”

“Pretty sure I can’t touch anyone’s!”

“What?! You want me to throw in Ayano’s D-cup titties to sweeten the deal?! You want a harem?! I had no idea you were a closet pervert!”

“I’m seriously gonna squeeze yours if you don’t stop this!”

“Bring it oooooon! But please be gentle!”

“Seriously?!”

Yuki kneeled on Masachika’s bed, then suddenly wrapped her arms around herself and began to squirm.

“So? Are you going to be my first groper?”

“I’d prefer not to be a groper. More importantly, what’s up with the weird jokes today? You sound like a teenage boy.”

“I’m kidding. Besides, this wouldn’t be my first time anyway. Because you already touched my boobs in elementary school.♪”

“I definitely *do not* remember ever doing that!”

Yuki’s annoyingly smug smirk suddenly transformed into a bewildered gaze, causing Masachika to inwardly panic, worried that he actually had done that.

“Masachika... Did you forget? It was when I was in second grade...”

“Uh...?”

“We were playing hide-and-seek when you suddenly ran right into me. You dove into my crotch face-first and clutched on to my right boob!”

“That doesn’t even sound possible! Stop making up stories that make me sound like the protagonist of some pervy harem anime! Besides, your asthma in second grade was so bad that you hardly went outside!”

“And look at the healthy young girl I grew up to be! I haven’t caught a cold since middle school!”

Yuki, still kneeling, proudly puffed out her chest, but Masachika just rolled his eyes exhaustedly.

“If only you could have grown up to be a little better behaved.”

“I am well-behaved! At home, at school, almost everywhere!”

“...Sorry.”

“You don’t need to apologize! You need to treat me like a princess!” she shouted. She huffed while holding out her brush and hair dryer to Masachika. He approached her with a half smile, then took the hair dryer and brush out of her hands as if he knew exactly what she wanted.

“Heh. Thanks!”

Yuki happily positioned herself on the bed with her back to Masachika.

“Don’t expect me to be good at this, okay?” Masachika cautioned before he turned on the hair dryer and gently brushed her long, black hair. They didn’t say anything for a while after that until he finally pressed the cooling button on the hair dryer.

“So you’re going to run with Alya for student council...” Yuki brought it back up.

“Yeah... Sorry about that.”

“Hmm? It’s nothing to apologize for, though? If anything, it’s exciting. I love a classic sibling-rivalry story.”

“Ha-ha-ha...” Masachika laughed bitterly, since his sister was still thinking like a true anime nerd, even in this situation. “Just in case it isn’t obvious, I’m not doing this because I dislike you or anything.”

“I know. Because you love me sooo much, right?”

“...Yeah, I guess.”

“Hee-hee. You’re blushing.”

“Shut up.”

Yuki wiggled her body as if she was being tickled, then giggled. Then once she got the laughter out of her system, she shook her head and stood swiftly.

“Okay. That’s enough.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

After he handed her the hair dryer and brush, Yuki started to head toward the door.

“Well, it looks like we’re rivals now... Oh yeah.”

“Hmm?”

“I’m very lenient, so I can forgive a little cheating. So you’re free to come back to me whenever you get bored with Alya.”

“I’m not cheating on anyone, and I’m not going to ‘get bored with Alya.’”

“Yeah, yeah. You’ll come crawling back to me eventually.”

“You must have a really high opinion of yourself.”

“Ha-ha-ha! Farewell, my dear brother!” Yuki cackled as she waved good-bye and left the room. The moment she closed the door, she whispered in a voice so soft, her brother couldn’t hear.

“You finally found someone who motivates you...”

She looked back and faced the door between her and Masachika.

“I’m happy for you,” she softly whispered. Her eyes were filled with kindness and compassion, and her voice was swelling with boundless love. After gazing gently at the closed door for a few long moments, Yuki turned on her heel and headed for her own room.

“*Sigh...* I guess I wasn’t good enough, huh?” she muttered in a self-deprecating manner while opening the door to her room and stepping inside. After closing the door, she leaned against it with her head down for a few moments, then suddenly lifted her chin.

“But...”

There was no longer any compassion or self-deprecation in her eyes. Her expression was frighteningly serious.

“...I’m not going to lose.”

Her determined expression was breathtaking...and it was the exact same expression Masachika had made when he decided to finally get serious as well.



“Mmm...”

Masachika woke up the following morning to the sound of his alarm blaring. He flailed around the bed until he managed to turn it off.

“Mmm...”

After sluggishly sitting up, he opened the curtains to welcome in the brilliant morning sun. He squinted...and then realized that his sister had failed to harass him awake that day.

“...”

Recalling what had happened the night before, he began to think that

Yuki had been acting a little peculiar. Her recent favorite anime aired the previous evening, and usually, after watching it together, they would excitedly talk about the episode. However, Yuki didn't say much last night and almost immediately went to bed.

“*Sigh...*”

Perhaps she'd been in shock because of her brother's betrayal. She'd talked like she didn't care, but maybe she was actually hurting deep down inside. Masachika ran his hands through his hair, and his expression darkened as he considered the possibility. Even now, there was no sign of Yuki coming. In fact, he didn't hear any sounds from outside his room. Did she leave early because she was too uncomfortable to look at her brother anymore? Or...while highly unlikely, did she have trouble falling asleep last night and end up oversleeping?

“*Sigh...*”

He imagined his sister's eyes swollen from crying all night, and although he scoffed that it wasn't in her nature, he still felt a sharp pain in his heart. Masachika promptly hopped out of bed. He had to make things right.

And then...

“Eeeeeek?!”

...something suddenly grabbed his ankle, causing him to fall forward as if he was doing a somersault. He catapulted forward, flying across the room until his hands hit the wall. He then slowly turned around, his heart hammering against his chest. An arm was dangling out from underneath the bed...and it was attached to Yuki, who was broadly grinning.

“Mwa-ha-ha-ha! Did you seriously think the scene would end on a serious note?! You fool! I'm a woman of my word!”

“Tsk...! You little...!”

Yuki's boastful laugh jogged Masachika's memory of what she had said the other day: “*I'll hide under the bed next time so the moment you step out of bed, I can grab your ankles.*” That was when he realized what had really happened last night. While she'd made it look like she was going to sleep, she had actually been preparing this trap. His face turned red with rage and embarrassment. The fact that he'd been worried only a few seconds ago that he might have hurt her feelings made it worse. He should have trusted his gut! His sister wasn't the kind of person who would let something as insignificant as this depress her!

“Mwa-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-haaa! Ha...”

Yuki's triumphant cackling slowed, and the hand protruding out from underneath the bed suddenly drooped. She feebly moved her hand and smiled hopefully.

"Pull me out."

"Huh?"

"I'm stuck. Don't make me explain. It's embarrassing."

It appeared that while she'd managed to fit herself in between the boxes of clothes and old textbooks under his bed, it was so narrow that she couldn't pull herself out. She waved her right hand and continued to smile at the pickle she got herself into. Masachika, however, smirked evilly... then pulled the blanket off the bed and shoved it into her face.

"Pfft?! What are you doing?!"

"I'm burying you, you ungovernable little savage! You're gonna pay!"

"Eeeeeek! Boy cooties! The smell...! I'm gonna get pregnant!"

"Have you been sheltered your whole life?! You're not gonna get pregnant!"

"What if I have?! Is there a problem with that?!"

"If it's shelter you want, then feel free to enjoy the new shelter you have under my bed! Farewell!"

"Gwah?! Noooooo!!"

There was not even a trace of ill feelings or awkwardness during their battle, which continued until Yuki's ride arrived.

CHAPTER 2

Balls are the enemy, and that's final.

“Good morning!”

“Hey.”

“Did you catch that episode last night?”

“Yeah, it was insane.”

As her classmates' merry voices filled the air, Alisa opened her textbook and began preparing for class like she always did, but her eyes traced the same paragraph over and over, so she was clearly having trouble focusing. Although a hardworking model student, there was one thing preventing her from concentrating, and it was something obvious if you paid close enough attention.

Rattle!

“...!”

Every time the classroom door opened, she would look up in surprise, then glance at the desk next to hers without fail before returning her gaze to her textbook. It was exactly what it looked like.

What am I so worried about? He's just going to show up all sleepy like he always does. Worrying isn't going to change anything.

She twirled her hair around her finger and tried to persuade herself, and she had been repeating that thought ever since she'd arrived at school that day. She even realized this herself, so she exhaled slowly to shift emotional gears.

I just need to act how I normally do... Yes... Just act natural.

After finally deciding she wasn't going to care anymore, she turned her attention to her textbook once more...when she suddenly heard the classroom door opening again. But Alisa didn't look to see who it was this time because she was concentrating solely on her studies. Nothing could distract her whenever she decided to fully focus her mind on something.

“Oh, Masachika. Hi.”

“Hey.”

“...?!”

Or at least, that was what she believed until a voice grabbed her attention. She jumped in her seat, and not subtly, either. Still, she continued to turn the page of her textbook as if nothing had happened... even though the next page was completely unrelated to what they were going to study in class that day.

“Hey, Alya.”

“Oh. Good morning, Kuze.”

Masachika was the one who initiated the conversation. Alisa looked up like she hadn’t noticed him come in and put on a bold face as if to say, “Yesterday? Did something happen?” Masachika, on the other hand...

“Oh, preparing for class?”

“Y-yes...”

He was wearing a brilliant smile.

Huh? Wait. Hold on. Why is he smiling like that?

She was perplexed, having never seen him so open with his emotions.

“...Is something the matter?”

“Huh? No.”

“If you say so.”

Masachika didn’t pry but instead began to talk to Hikaru, who was in the seat in front of him. Alisa continued to glance at him out of the corner of her eye while pretending to prepare for class.

Kuze seems...down, for some reason.

That was the impression she got watching them chat.

They were talking about the same stuff as usual, and yet he seemed kind of sullen that day. She couldn’t help but wonder what was wrong... and why he looked so handsome today...

What am I thinking?!

Alisa suddenly had a flashback to what had happened the night before and frantically tried to clear her mind.

It’s nothing...! Yeah. He probably just didn’t get much sleep. That’s all.

He’s only a little down because he was sleep-deprived. That’s how Alisa pacified herself until class eventually began.

He’s not sleeping...

Not only that, but Masachika also didn’t yawn. He was actually paying attention in class for a change. He didn’t forget to bring anything today, and he wasn’t rushing to finish his homework in between periods,

either. Alisa, on the other hand, was caught off guard. She'd totally thought that Masachika was going to come in today and act like his characteristic unmotivated self, so seeing him taking school so seriously reminded her about what had happened the previous day.

"You won't be alone anymore. From now on, I will be by your side to support you."

Alisa could feel her cheeks burning as she thought back to the look on his face when he said those words to her.

Is he seriously trying to change himself...for me?

As the thought popped into her mind, Alisa promptly shook her head in embarrassment.

"Kujou? Is everything okay?"

"Huh? Oh, I'm sorry. I'm fine."

It was now fourth period—time for gym class.

One of her classmates was looking at her dubiously. They were in the middle of a volleyball match, so Alisa shook her head to clear her thoughts and viciously spiked the incoming ball into their opponent's court to avoid being stared at any longer. Volleyball was easy for someone as tall and athletic as Alisa. Although some of her opponents were on the volleyball team, she could easily hold her own against them. If anything, they were having a hard time keeping up with her. And yet despite demonstrating impressive skills on the court, her head wasn't in the game. Before she realized it, she was suddenly staring in Masachika's direction, where the boys were having their own match on the other side of the court.

I wonder if Kuze's okay...

Alisa was still worried about him because he had seemed off since that morning. There was a large net hanging from the ceiling that split the gym in half, separating the boys and girls. While she may have had 20/15 vision, it was impossible to tell who was who on the other side of the small-holed net from such a great distance...or at least, there usually would be no way. Alisa, however, somehow was able to easily pick out Masachika from the bunch. The reason was extremely simple, but Alisa didn't seem to realize it herself, at the very least.

"Ah...!"

All of a sudden, one of Masachika's teammates served the volleyball directly into the back of Masachika's head, who then staggered before ultimately collapsing. The boy who had hit the ball rushed over in concern.

"Alisa!"

“...!”

A voice called out to Alisa from behind, bringing her back to her senses right as her teammate’s toss was rising overhead. She unconsciously squatted in preparation to hit the ball into their opponent’s court when she noticed someone on the other team simultaneously leaping into the air to block, so she hastily changed plans. She gently bounced the descending ball back into the air, creating a slight arch that went over her jumping opponent’s hands before falling into their court. Her teammates erupted into cheers, and the teacher, who was the referee that day, blew his whistle.

“Game, set, match! Team B wins!”

After Alisa briefly thanked the teammates surrounding her, they cleared the court to let the next two groups play. But only after moving over to stand by the wall did Alisa realize that Masachika was gone. He had apparently left the gym.

“Is everybody ready? Great! Let the game begin!”

The teacher blew his whistle, and the next match started, drawing everyone’s attention.

“...”

Alisa debated the idea for a few moments...then snuck out of the gymnasium as well.



“‘The ball is your friend,’ my ass,” muttered Masachika, sitting on the stairs outside the gymnasium while rubbing the back of his head. Although he was surprisingly athletic, he had never been good with ball sports. Put simply, Masachika and balls didn’t get along. It always felt as if he had killed the balls’ parents, and they were trying to exact revenge on him. If it was baseball, he’d get hit by a pitch. Playing basketball meant unavoidable jammed fingers. And dodgeball? The balls would home in on his face in groups of five, once resulting in the first doctor stoppage in dodgeball history and making him a legend. He was essentially a ball magnet, which made him the perfect soccer goalkeeper, but he was never thrilled about feeling pain every time the other team tried to score.

“*Sigh...*”

He let out a deep sigh as he lazily hung his head low...when all of a sudden, his stomach began to roar as well.

“I’m starving...”

Yes, the reason Masachika seemed down all day was because he was hungry, more or less. Alisa was really worried that something had happened to him, but in reality, it wasn’t a big deal. His exchange with Yuki this morning had exhausted him both mentally and physically, and not having time to eat breakfast did his body no service, either. Incidentally, the reason he didn’t fall asleep during class today was because he’d gone to bed early, since he hadn’t shared his impressions of last night’s episode with anyone, and the reason he didn’t forget to bring anything to class today was because Yuki’s butler had given him everything he needed when he came to pick her up. For some reason, he knew Masachika’s class schedule... Therefore, most of it was ultimately nothing more than Alisa’s imagination. She had no idea that she was really just overthinking things.

“Are you okay, Kuze?”

“Huh?”

Masachika lifted up his head in surprise when he heard the sudden compassionate voice and found Alisa’s worried gaze looking down at him. Flustered, he immediately sat up straight.

“Alya? What are you doing out here?”

“I thought you got hurt, so...”

“Oh, you saw that? I didn’t get injured or anything. Maybe just a little bump...”

Masachika cringed after realizing how lame he must have looked, but Alisa took a seat by his side and fussed over him.

“Are you sure you’re okay? Want me to take you to the infirmary?”

“I’m fine. Seriously. The gymnasium’s really hot today, so I came out here to cool off for a few minutes.”

“...Oh. Hold on a sec.”

Alisa suddenly reached toward Masachika’s face, so he reflexively jerked his head away, but then she pushed back his hair and placed a cool hand on his forehead. Her hand felt good against his burning head, and his eyes closed in pleasure. Alisa placed her other hand on her own furrowed brow to compare their temperatures for a few seconds.

“I never really could feel much of a difference just using my hands like this.”

“R-really?”

Alisa shrugged, then wrapped her arms around her legs as she sat by

his side. She was being extremely thoughtful today, and yet Masachika...

E cups... Seriously?

His mind was deep in the gutter now. It didn't help that he was staring...at her chest being squished behind her long, milky-white legs, either. He was reminded of what Yuki had said the night before. While he had always thought they were big compared with those of his other classmates, being graphically told exactly how big they were was information far too stimulating for a boy in puberty.

Hold up... She did say "most likely"...which means they might be even bigger than an E cup?!

His raging hormone-addled mind broke free from his usual restraint. There was a theory that appetite and libido were connected, so perhaps his hunger was weakening his composure. Alisa, oblivious to his thoughts, slowly untied her ponytail, then held the hair tie with her mouth as she began fixing her ruffled bangs. Masachika caught a glimpse of her bare nape and then the pale skin of her armpit through the gaping sleeve of her gym shirt.

Wh-what is this?! It's like a nip slip but with her armpit! Is she doing this on purpose?! Does she want me to look?!

No. Not at all. Alisa probably didn't know that some guys got off on stuff like this, and Masachika knew that...which was exactly why it was so tantalizing. She was unknowingly being alluring. He couldn't help taking in a sharp breath as the motion of her tying her hair back into a ponytail revealed the unexplored frontier between her armpit and chest.

Yuki... This is what I was talking about!

This only further confirmed what Masachika believed: Almost being able to see was way more exciting than simply seeing a woman completely naked because the brief hints of skin added an element of mystery. After Alisa finished tying her hair, she lowered her arms and shook her head.

“...What?”

“Huh? Nothing...”

Alisa had finally realized he was staring at her, and she leaned slightly back. Masachika's eyes wandered as he searched for the right words to say, but Alisa gazed at him dubiously and said nothing. Instead, she shot up as something occurred to her.

“You should probably drink some water.”

“Huh? Oh. Right...”

It's not like I'm dehydrated or having a heatstroke, he thought, but he kept quiet and followed, racked with guilt, behind his uncharacteristically kind classmate. They walked around to the other side of the gymnasium, where the handwashing station stood between the gymnasium and schoolyard. There, he adjusted the faucet until it was facing upward, then turned the tap on. When Masachika lowered his head toward the arch of flowing water, the pleasantly cold sensation made him suddenly feel thirsty, and he began to guzzle it down. His body seemed to have lost far much more water than he'd initially thought.

It looks like Alya made the right call.

After turning off the tap, he wiped his mouth with his arm and casually glanced to the side.

Oh...

He was struck speechless by the vision of Alisa drinking water as well. However, unlike Masachika's guzzling, she delicately sipped from the narrow stream with pursed lips. Her long eyelashes framed her downcast blue eyes. The captivating way she held back her silky silver hair behind her ears with her fingers and the faint sweat glistening on her milky skin as she leaned forward, drawing attention to the swell of her breasts—all of it stimulated Masachika's pubescent impulses. He immediately felt lightheaded but not due to hunger or the heat.

"Phew..."

After quenching her thirst, turning off the tap, and lifting her head, Alisa heard water still running and glanced over...

"Wh-what the...?! Kuze?!"

...and found Kuze with his head under the faucet, the water running at full force. After a few seconds went by, he slowly pulled himself out from under the stream, combed his hair forward from the back, then flicked his head back to dry off.

"Wh-what are you doing?"

"Just trying to keep cool...," Masachika replied with an exhausted expression, water dripping from his chin and the tips of his hair.

"O-oh, okay..."

That was the only way Alisa could respond to such a bizarre situation.

"Oh my. Check out this tall glass of water. What happened, Kuze?"

Masachika's eyes immediately shot toward the sudden yet familiar voice, but he quickly redirected his gaze up into the sky.

"Hey, Masha. I was just cooling off. That's all."

Maria stood before him in the schoolyard, sporting her gym clothes as well. She wiped her face with the white towel around her neck and curiously tilted her head at the boy, who had immediately averted his gaze.

“What’s wrong? Is there something in the sky?”

“There are clouds.”

“That there are.”

“What are you doing?” Alisa barked in frustration, but Masachika still couldn’t lower his head...because the older, mature woman in front of him was...very much matured.

I never realized how much I loved gym clothes until now...

It became evident at that moment why the girls and the boys had separate gym classes. No healthy young man would be able to concentrate in class otherwise. Masachika considered this idly and gazed into the vast blue sky.

“You’re soaking wet... Do you have a towel?” asked Maria.

“No... I was planning on just letting the sun do its thing...,” the brain-dead teenage boy absentmindedly replied...and because he was so out of it, he was very slow to react.

“Okay, lower your head. ♪”

“Huh? Ah?!”

Before he realized it, Maria was so close that he could almost feel her breath. He reflexively looked down in surprise at the proximity of her voice, and she immediately threw a towel over his head, then vigorously rubbed his scalp.

Wh-what’s going on?! Nothing like this has ever happened before!

Masachika was utterly confused as he had his hair dried by an older, beautiful maiden. Never in his wildest dreams had he expected such a thing. Despite his bewilderment, his instincts were still working as normal. Every time the towel ever so faintly moved, his gaze would lock right onto Maiden Maria’s impressive...maidens.

“All done. ♪”

“Bfft. Th-thanks.”

Regardless of whether she noticed, she took the balled-up towel and patted his face dry. She then nodded as if she was content.

“So? Feel better?”

“Yeah, I guess...I know how dogs feel now.”

“Oh my. Are you an Akita?”

“I’m not sure what breed I am... Sorry. It looks like I’ve been a *bad*

boy.”

“...? I think naughty dogs are cute, too.”

“Ha-ha-ha...”

Maria’s innocent, oblivious response made Masachika feel even guiltier. He felt bad for wickedly ogling a holy maiden such as Maria and being a creep. Suddenly, someone grabbed his arm and jerked him away.

“Come on, Kuze. We have to get back. Masha, shouldn’t you be heading to class now, too?” suggested Alisa sharply.

“Whaaat? But I just got here.”

“...! Do whatever you want, but we’re returning to class.”

“Okay. ♪ See you after school! ♪”

“Oh, right. See you later. And thanks for the towel.”

Masachika bowed to Maria, who was cheerfully waving him good-bye, as Alisa dragged him to the gymnasium by the arm.

Sigh... Yep. Here it comes. She’s going to call me “gross” and “a creep.”

Masachika prepared to suffer Alisa’s disdain as he was tugged along. After all, he’d been looking at Maria’s chest like a pervert, so there was no use arguing. Just when they were about to arrive at the gymnasium, Alisa came to a sudden stop and turned around to face him as if to confirm his prediction.

“Are you feeling better?”

“Huh?”

“The back of your head where the ball hit you. Are you sure you don’t want to ice it?”

“...Ohhh!”

That was when he realized that Alisa thought he had run cold water over his head as an alternative to icing it.

What the...?! She has no idea what really happened!

While her gaze was somewhat sharp, she was worried about him, so he just felt even guiltier now. He couldn’t look her in the eye.

“Oh, uh... I’m fine now. The ball didn’t leave a bump or anything,” Masachika assured, his eyes wandering.

“...Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m positive! Really!” he replied, but when Alisa tried to touch the back of his head and check, he flinched away with every fiber of his being.

What’s going on? Why is she being so nice?! Is she going to be this nice from now on?!

Alisa's perplexingly kind gestures made him think back to her confession (?) to him the previous day and the kiss (?) on the cheek, but he frantically rid his mind of those images.

No, this is... But... Why don't I just ask her?

He decided to take a risky gamble as he leaned away from the slowly approaching silver-haired girl.

"Hey, Alya? Is it just me, or are you being unusually nice today?"

One of Alisa's eyebrows twitched, and she froze.

*Take that! Next, she's going to say, "I'm not. I was just a little worried. That's all," then she'll turn back to normal! And under no circumstances will she say, "That's because I'm in **** with you!" ... Maybe!*

She frowned sourly and looked away.

"I was just a little worried that something was wrong because you seem kind of down today. That's it," Alisa replied, twirling the ends of her hair around her finger.

"Huh? Oh... Ohhh..."

That was when it finally hit him, and he knew exactly what he had to do now.

"You noticed, huh?"

"Did something happen?"

"Yeah..."

Masachika met her worried gaze with a grave expression on his face, then spoke in a low tone as if he was about to make an extremely important confession.

"I'm really hungry...so I don't have any energy today."

"...What was that?"

"I'm really hungry...so I don't have any energy today...!"

Thanks to all the water he had gulped down, his stomach chose that exact moment to growl loudly. Alisa's dumbfounded expression instantly tensed as her brow narrowed. Everything that had happened between last night and now flashed through her mind, her face boiling from rage and embarrassment.

"I was wondering why you were paying attention and taking class seriously for a change... You were too hungry to sleep, huh?" Alisa replied in a deep voice, feeling ashamed about thinking even for a moment that he'd been doing it for her. Masachika, however, just tilted his head with an aggravatingly puzzled expression—a really punchable face.

“No, it’s just that I got plenty of sleep last night.”

“...Hmph. Oh, you did?”

Interesting. He got plenty of sleep last night, huh? And here I was thinking about what happened last night so much that I could hardly sleep. But look at this carefree guy. He was snoring like a bear without a care in the world. Interesting... Interesting, indeed...

Alisa turned purple from anger, her entire body trembling.

“Listen, Alya. You know what the Bible says?” Masachika said smugly.

“What does it say? And you better not say, ‘Love thy neighbor.’”

“No. It says, ‘If someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also,’” he replied with a brilliant smile before turning his left cheek to her, and Alisa wasted no time before raising a right hand. “That’s the spirit!”

“Thank you, Kuze!”

While thanking him, she mercilessly slapped him across the face, knocking him down.

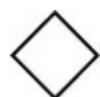
“Hmph! Just go back to class already!” Alisa huffed as she turned on her heel, leaving Masachika on the ground.

What a jerk! Unbelievable! There’s absolutely no way I’d ever fall in love with a buffoon like that!

Deciding that she had just been confused the day before, Alisa headed back to the gymnasium. Masachika watched her go and slowly stood back up.

Finally, she’s back to normal. That’s the Alya I know.

He inwardly breathed a sigh of relief.



“Alya? Shall we head to the student council room...together?” Masachika hesitantly asked after school. Alisa shot him a sharp glare but nodded—she still wasn’t over what he had said during fourth period—so she grabbed her bag without saying a word and briskly walked out the door. *Maybe I went a little too far,* he mused and followed close behind her like a loyal servant. The thought continued to plague him until they approached the open door to the student council room, and a few male students came out.

“““Thank you very much!!””” the students shouted with somewhat trembling voices as they bowed toward the room and then hastily walked

away. After taking a closer look, Alisa noticed it was the managers and leaders of the baseball and soccer clubs who had argued the day before. She immediately stopped, and Masachika stood by her side, but they soon realized that the male students seemed almost scared for some reason. The boys almost simultaneously noticed them as well, and after looking momentarily surprised, they rushed over to the pair. Masachika promptly stood in front of Alisa to protect her, but they never could have imagined what came next.

“““Please accept our apologies!!”””

They bowed to Alisa at a ninety-degree angle, bending at the waist. The powerful gesture of the sportsmen was admirable, but their overwhelmingly vigorous display was actually kind of frightening as well.

“Uh... What's going on?”

Masachika turned to his acquaintance, the captain of the baseball team, who then slowly lifted his head back up and replied:

“Just... Kujou, I apologize. We got too worked up yesterday and said some terrible things. We should have cooled off before trying to discuss anything. I'm sorry!”

“We should have given some thought to what you said before arguing with you like that. I'm really sorry,” the captain of the soccer team added before they all lowered their heads in unison once more. Although awkwardly recoiling in shock, Alisa timidly nodded.

“It's fine. Just please stop bowing.”

“““Thank you for your kindness!”””

After properly expressing their gratitude, they finally began to march away like a group of soldiers.

“What was that all about?” Masachika said in bewilderment as he watched them walk away.

“Hey, uh... Thank you for trying to protect me like that,” Alisa mumbled in a small voice, even though she was still in a bit of a mood.

“Huh? Oh... Don't worry about it.”

Although he shrugged it off like it was nothing, he was actually pretty relieved that she seemed to be in a better mood.

“<... You were really cool.>”

Masachika was taken by surprise! And it was supereffective! Because he had just let his guard down!

Uh... Yep. Sh-she's definitely back to normal.

He rushed ahead to the student council room so she couldn't see his

face. He imagined blood trickling out the side of his mouth after an attack like that.

“Hey, uh...? What was all that about?” Masachika called into the room as he opened the door, when all of a sudden...

“Huh?”

...he saw a stereotypical delinquent with an incredibly menacing aura, and he froze. She had short black hair and intimidating features that were somehow both masculine and delicate. She had the statuesque figure and gorgeous face of a model, and yet...she looked like she belonged in a biker gang. There was no other way to put it. Her glare locked onto Masachika like a starving beast's would when stalking its prey. Her powerful stance revealed no openings or weaknesses, and the air around her was dark and eerie. What stood out most of all, however, was the bamboo sword resting over her shoulder.

She's gonna kill me.

Masachika's instincts instantly chose his best course of action for survival. His tense cheeks reflexively perked up into a smile, showing that he meant no harm. He even spoke in a gentle voice as if to avoid provoking her in any way.

“My apologies. I must have the wrong room.”

And he gently closed the door.



.....Круто
было♥

CHAPTER 3

Could I have seconds?

“Oh... Sorry. I didn’t recognize your voice, so I thought the baseball-club and soccer-club guys had come back. My bad.” The speaker smiled sheepishly; she was everyone’s favorite school delinquent...better known as the vice president of the student council, Chisaki Sarashina. Her menacing aura had disappeared as she apologetically held up a hand in front of her and winked. Masachika, who was sitting across from her, relaxed a bit.

“*Sigh...* What was that all about anyway?”

“Hmm? You know more than I do.”

“What?”

As Masachika curiously tilted his head, Chisaki looked over at Alisa, who was sitting next to him.

“I heard our cute little friend here tried to settle their quarrel and find a compromise, but they continued to fight like savages and ignored what she had to say. In other words, they were pickin’ a fight with the entire student council, so I smacked the shi— Ahem! Uh... I smacked some sense into them! Yeah!”

Why do I get the feeling that’s not what she was going to say?

Masachika set aside that thought for now and shifted his eyes toward the bamboo sword leaning against Chisaki’s side.

“Makes sense... But, uh...don’t you think the sword was a bit much?”

“Huh? Oh, uh... Ha-ha-ha...”

Chisaki glanced to her side uncomfortably, then said in an extremely forced and cheerful tone:

“D-don’t worry about it! My fists might be deadly, but a bamboo sword has never killed anyone!”

“...Uh-huh.”

“A bamboo sword would break way before a person ever would!”

“Ha-ha...” Masachika let out a dry laugh.

“Ha-ha...! Yep!”

Chisaki’s eyes began wandering as she smiled tensely, realizing her joke had bombed. If it was Yuki, Masachika would have definitely played along, but this was Chisaki. It was nothing to laugh about. It wasn’t even a joke. Chisaki Sarashina, a second-year high school student, was one of the two so-called beauties in her grade. Some boys feared her, and some girls adored her for her handsome yet feminine looks. She was called Donna at school as a sign of admiration. People used to call her the Conquering Mother or the Chief, which had similar nuances, but they decided to go with Donna permanently after Maria transferred in and became the school’s Madonna. She used to handle student discipline in middle school, similar to a hall monitor, and was now the vice president of the student council—where she was in charge of organizing club meetings, which were mainly composed of club captains and vice captains.

I can see why everyone respects her... This is someone you should definitely respect. Masachika recalled how the baseball team and soccer team had acted after leaving the room, not to mention her menacing aura. Plus, there were countless stories about her around school: how she worked herself to the bone to solve the class’s bullying problem, how she handled a dozen actual delinquents who’d infiltrated the school all by herself, and how she used her bare hands to stop an agitated bull from charging at another student in Hokkaido on a field trip. However, her most famous heroic episode was when she saved a female Seiren Academy student who’d almost been kidnapped on her way home from school. Some of the other stories might have been made up, but this one really happened, and there was undeniable proof, too, because after the incident, she was awarded a letter of appreciation from the police. Plus, it was in the newspaper as well. Masachika had always figured she was probably the kind of person who would break your legs if she had to, like a loan shark, but after seeing how nervously she fidgeted just because they were awkwardly staring at her, he realized that was probably not the case.

“T-Touya...!”

She pathetically called for her boyfriend to help as though she couldn’t take the pressure any longer. Touya, who was sitting in the president’s chair by the window at the back of the room, smirked at his girlfriend’s plea and replied:

“Relax, Kuze. Chisaki didn’t resort to violence. She simply hinted at it to threaten them.”

“T-Touya!?”

Chisaki’s eyes opened wide in surprise.

“I’m kidding,” Touya said with a mischievous grin. Chisaki pouted, stood up, and ran around the desk where she began to slap Touya on the shoulder.

“You jerk! You big dummy!”

“Ha-ha! My bad.”

Masachika couldn’t help but laugh at their heartwarming quarrel.

“You’re such a meanie!”

“Ha-ha. Chisaki? My shoulder’s dislocating. Okay? My shoulder.”

Okay, maybe *heartwarming* wasn’t the right word. Uh... The sounds were worrying. The banging started to sound like cracking. She was really starting to dig in there, and after each hit, Touya’s well-built body wobbled. Nevertheless, he continued to smile as his girlfriend reprimanded him. He was a real man in Masachika’s eyes.

“Sorry I’m late. ♪”

Maria had suddenly thrown open the door, and she stood as still as a mouse while blinking at the sight before her, but then a soft grin curled her lips.

“Oh my. Chisaki? President? Let’s keep flirting in the student council room to a minimum.”

The fact that Maria could see something moderately violent and consider it flirting was impressive. She was a real “genius” in Masachika’s eyes. Regardless, it seemed to work on Chisaki.

“W-we weren’t flirting!”

Only after stepping away from Touya and seeing him rub his shoulder did she come back to her senses. Her expression became apologetic.

“S-sorry. Did I hurt you?”

“Hmm? Oh, I’m fine. My shoulders needed a massage anyway.”

Touya smiled and rotated his shoulder, though his smile seemed to be tinged with a painful grimace. His handling of the situation was so badass that Masachika almost fell in love.

“I’m really sorry... It looks like I need to work on controlling my strength...”

“What is she, some sort of new superhero?” Masachika whispered to Alisa.

“Don’t worry,” Touya reassured her. “This is why I work out. Come at me with everything you’ve got.”

“I guess, in a way, that means he works out for his girlfriend,” Masachika continued in a hush.

“Touya...” Chisaki murmured with a soft sigh.

“Huh? Why are there stars in their eyes? Did something romantic just happen?” Masachika asked.

In response to Masachika’s whispers, Alisa tugged on his sleeve, shook her head reproachfully, and tried not to smile. After snickering at her reprimanding gaze, he glanced over his shoulder at Chisaki and whispered:

“Hey, do you think Chisaki wraps her body in white cotton *sarashi* bandages like delinquents do in anime?”

“Why do you even care?” Alisa whispered back.

“Because then we could start calling her Sarashi Sarashina. G-get it?”

“Pfft!”

Alisa couldn’t stifle a snicker at the bad joke, then turned bright red in embarrassment and hit Masachika on the shoulder.

“Oh my. You two are so close,” Maria commented.

“...! Wh-what do you know?”

“Heh! That we are! Looks like we can’t hide it from your sister any longer ☆,” Masachika joked and winked like someone who had never winked before.

“Shut up,” Alisa replied hastily. Then there was a knock on the door, and Yuki stepped inside.

“Hey. Sorry for being late.”

“Hmm? Oh. Don’t worry about it,” said Touya as he stood and joined the others at the table. Touya was sitting in the seat in the very back—at the head of the table, in other words. Then to his right sat Maria, Alisa, and then Masachika. To his left sat Chisaki and then Yuki. Once everyone had settled in and relaxed, Touya asked:

“Is everyone ready?”

“““Ready.”””

“Then let us begin. First, let’s have Kuze tell us a bit about himself.”

“All right.”

Masachika stood up.

“I’m Masachika Kuze. I’ll be working as a general member of the student council from today on. My interests include anything nerdy, and I’m familiar with most popular anime and comics. In addition...”

He looked over at Alisa, who was sitting next to him.

“...I plan on running in next year’s election with Alisa Kujou here. Anyway, I’m happy to be part of the team now.”

“Welcome aboard.”

“We’re glad you’re here, too.”

“Happy to have you.”

Everyone showered him with warm applause and smiles. Yuki’s archaic smile as she clapped made it impossible to tell how she really felt, though Alisa quietly observed her.

“All right, then. How about we all say a bit about ourselves as well?” Touya suggested while exchanging glances with the other members to check if everyone was okay with the idea. He then turned to face Masachika once more.

“I am the president of the student council, Touya Kenzaki. I’ve been really into working out lately. Welcome to the team.”

“I’m the vice president, Chisaki Sarashina. My hobby...is kendo, I guess? Nice to have you on the team.”

“I’m Maria Kujou, the secretary. I like to collect cute things. Oh, and I read quite a bit of comics, at least ones written for young women.”

“I am Yuki Suou, the council’s publicist, and I am so happy you decided to join us, Masachika.”

“...Alisa Kujou. I like to read.”

Masachika nodded respectfully after everyone officially introduced themselves.

Man, it’s actually pretty impressive to see these people together in the same room.

He was awestruck. After all, the girls gathered here were unparalleled beauties, even throughout the long, rich history of Seiren Academy. Plus, they were each different in their own way. If you took a picture and sent it to some television network, they’d probably send someone over to interview the “most beautiful student council in the world.”

“All right, Kuze. Do you think you could help Big Kujou with her work today?”

“Sure.”

“Thanks. I’m sure you’ll get used to your tasks in no time, since you were the vice president in middle school, but I figured you could learn the ropes working side by side with one of us for now.”

“I’m guessing it’s also because we’re shorthanded, right?”

“Yeah. To tell the truth, we’re way understaffed, so nobody’s able to

focus solely on their assigned job.”

“Well, I’m happy to help. Besides, accounting and secretary work are usually done by multiple people, and general members like me are basically odd-jobbers anyway. I was a general member during my first year of middle school, so I’m used to stuff like this.”

“Oh? That’s really encouraging.” Touya mirthfully chuckled.

“I apologize for interrupting, President, but I need to get going. I have a meeting with the art club in regard to the upcoming exhibition,” Yuki announced suddenly.

“Hmm? Oh, sure. Thanks.”

“And we are going to be discussing the budget as well, so I would like for Alya to come with me.”

“Huh?” Alisa said, surprised.

She blinked, bewildered by her sudden inclusion in the conversation, but she almost immediately nodded as she deduced some unspoken message from Yuki’s expression.

“All right. I’ll be back shortly.”

They got out of their seats and began walking toward the door.

I feel like there’s more to this than meets the eye...

Masachika’s heart filled with worry as he watched them leave, but it was soon erased by Maria’s unconcerned, cheerful voice.

“Over here, Kuze. ♪ Let’s get started. ♪”

Her voice had a trancelike quality. Maria patted the seat, which Alisa had been sitting in, with the most calming smile, and Masachika scooted over with his own obedient smile.



Alisa followed closely behind Yuki as they walked down the hallway. She wasn’t so naive as to really believe Yuki simply wanted her help. Yuki had an ulterior motive, and Alisa had an idea of what it was. And yet it still didn’t seem like Yuki was ever going to start the conversation.

Yes... This is a conversation I need to initiate.

Alisa closed her eyes, mentally prepared herself, and said:

“Hey, Yuki? Do you think we could talk?”

Yuki turned around without a hint of surprise, like she’d been expecting this. She remained quiet as she smiled and nodded before looking toward an empty classroom.

“Sure. How about we go in here?”

“Okay.”

Yuki stepped inside the classroom, followed by Alisa, who closed the door behind them. The evening sun filtered through the window and illuminated the two girls as they faced each other.

“I decided to run for president next year with Kuze,” Alisa declared almost provocatively, initiating the conversation. Yuki, however, maintained her smile and nodded.

“Yes, I know. He told me yesterday.”

“...Oh.”

Although one of Alisa’s eyebrows briefly twitched when she heard that, she didn’t say another word, so Yuki eventually tilted her head in confusion.

“Um... Is that it?”

“...Yes. And I didn’t do anything I should feel ashamed of, so I’m not going to apologize. I just thought I should tell you.”

“Giggle. Well, thanks for telling me.”

Some might think that Alisa was intentionally provoking her, but Yuki cracked a smile as if she found it amusing.

“Yes, there is nothing you need to apologize for. After all, Masachika made the decision for himself, so I can’t complain. I do not plan on blaming you for anything, either,” Yuki stated clearly.

“It was a shame that he didn’t go with me, though,” she added playfully, and yet Alisa thought she seemed somehow withdrawn.

“Yuki... About Kuze... Do you...?”

“...?”

“...Never mind.”

Alisa stopped herself from going any further after realizing that she was overstepping boundaries. However...

“I love him. I love him more than anyone else in the entire world,” Yuki said confidently.

“...?!”

Alisa gazed at her in astonishment, taken off guard by Yuki’s serious expression and unflinching response.

“M-more than anyone else?”

“Yes. I love Masachika...more than my mother, more than my father, more than anyone in the entire world.”

She boldly proclaimed her love for Masachika without shame or

doubt, and Alisa unconsciously took a step back. Without missing a beat, Yuki took advantage of her shock and countered.

“What about you, Alya?”

“Huh?”

“How do you feel about Masachika?”

“I—I...”

She reflexively tried to say that he was just a friend, but Yuki’s unblinking stare made her panic and look away. She wondered if it was really okay to give such a noncommittal answer after Yuki had honestly told her how she really felt.

“Kuze...is my friend. A very d-dear friend...who means so much to me.”

Although Alisa was still looking away and now blushing, she eventually managed to squeeze out those words...then immediately, she felt her whole body flush, and she began to fidget. That wasn’t enough to please Yuki, though.

“Do you like him?”

“Hng?!”

The candid question made Alisa grunt and meet the other girl’s gaze. Yuki looked her straight in the eye and began to approach her, but Alisa instinctively retreated. Yuki, however, didn’t stop and kept marching forward until Alisa’s back was up against the wall. There was at least a twenty-centimeter height difference between Alisa, who was really tall, and Yuki, who was petite, so Yuki had to lean her head back and look up to face her. And yet it was Alisa who felt small.

“So? What is it? Do you like him?”

“Saying that I like him...would be... It’s more like...”

“I told you that I love him, so you have to tell me exactly how you feel, too!”

“M-mmm...”

Yuki’s relentless questioning was more than someone who wasn’t used to talking about boys and love could handle, forcing Alisa’s brain to overheat. She couldn’t think straight anymore, and the only things that ended up moving her lips were her stubbornness and feelings of rivalry toward Yuki.

“I don’t know...if I have feelings for him like that...but...! I-I’m not going to let you have him!”

Yuki slowly blinked, then stepped back.

“...I see. I suppose that should do for now.” Yuki giggled with her characteristic ladylike smile. “Shall we start heading over to the art club now? We shouldn’t keep them waiting too long.”

“O-oh, right...”

Although Alisa was slightly perplexed by how quickly Yuki’s behavior had changed, she followed her out of the room and began heading toward the art club’s room.

Wh-what did I say back there? I feel like I said something...really big. Wait... “Love”? Hold on. Love...?!

While she walked, Alisa struggled to recall what had transpired a few moments ago, and her eyes spun in circles as she helplessly tried to process it all. Yuki, who was observing her out of the corner of her eye, casually turned her head away, a sinister smile twisting her lips.

He means a lot to her, huh? And she’s never gonna let me have him? Heh... That’s my brother for ya. ♪

Contrary to Alisa, Yuki was thoroughly enjoying herself. Her steps were as light as a feather, as if she was going to break into a dance at any moment.



“Masha, about this part here...”

“Hmm? Ah, I must have made a mistake.”

“Oh, all right. I’ll fix it, then.”

“Thanks.”

Meanwhile, Masachika was helping Masha with her work and was inwardly shocked by what he’d learned...

Masha is an extremely competent secretary! What the hell?!

His surprise was pretty rude, but she really was exceeding all his expectations. She was serene as usual, but she got her work done, and she got it done incredibly quickly as well. He’d fully assumed she was invited to join the student council because they were relying on her popularity, so he was taken aback by how much of a talented hard worker she actually was.

This girl, on the other hand...

Masachika stealthily glanced at the girl sitting in front of him.

“Huh...? I was just looking at it a few seconds ago. Where did it go?”

“Chisaki, I think I saw you put it inside the blue folder over there,”

Maria mentioned.

“Huh? Ohhh. Right. Yeah.”

Chisaki went over to grab the blue folder off the shelf on the wall, but she didn’t seem to know which blue folder it was, so she just took a random one and curiously looked through it.

She’s terrible at her job! She can’t do anything on her own! I know it’s rude of me to say that, but still...!

It became clear that Chisaki and office work didn’t get along. In fact, she had absolutely no organizational skills at all from what Masachika could see.

“Hmm...? Mmm...”

And she couldn’t sit still, either. It had only been twenty minutes since they started doing paperwork when she began to fidget restlessly.

What is she? An elementary schoolboy full of pent-up energy?

She was looking around as if she was bored and waiting for everyone else to stop working, and while Masachika pretended not to notice, the fed up look in his eyes made how he felt more than obvious. A comforting, sweet girl who looked as sharp as a sponge at first glance, and a handsome young lady who looked like she could run an entire business all by herself... And yet the opposite ended up being true for both of them.

You seriously can’t judge a book by its cover...

Masachika was really feeling that when all of a sudden, Touya spoke up as if he couldn’t watch any longer.

“Oh. By the way, Chisaki...I heard they were replacing a lot of the books at the library with new ones.”

“What?! Do they need someone to help?!”

“Probably. The student librarians are mostly girls as well, and switching out heavy books can be exhausting. Do you think you could go check up on them for me?”

“I’m on it!”

Chisaki’s expression lit up like that of a kid on Christmas before she darted out the door in the blink of an eye. The paperwork must have been killing her. There was no way she was coming back any time soon.

“Sorry, Kuze. Chisaki’s always like this. With that being said, she’s extremely useful when we have committee and club meetings, so go easy on her, okay?” Touya bitterly smirked.

“Oh, uh... I mean, everyone has things they’re good at and things they’re not, right? Ha-ha,” Masachika replied with a strained laugh.

Chisaki was a really good person whom you could count on. That much he knew after seeing how she got angry because of how those jocks treated Alisa the previous day. And that was exactly why witnessing her childish side like this...made it even harder for Masachika, because he had no idea how to react to it.

“But that’s just one of the many things that makes her cute, right?”

“Derp. Isn’t it cute that my girlfriend can’t sit still for more than five minutes?” Stop bragging about your girlfriend.”

“Heh! Look at you, Kuze. A straight shooter like you is just what the student council needed.”

“This student council needed all the help it could get.”

“Ha-ha-ha! I knew inviting you to join was the right move!”

“What made you realize it?”

Maria watched their bit with a smile as if to say, “They look like they’re having fun,” while casually dragging Chisaki’s paperwork over to her side to finish it like that was the norm.

What kind of superhero is she?

Masachika changed his opinion of her from that moment on.



They continued working for another forty minutes or until they each found a good stopping point and decided to take a break. Incidentally, Chisaki never came back.

“Who would like some tea?” Maria offered.

“Oh, let me help you.” Masachika started to get up to assist.

“It’s fine. Please stay seated. I like making tea.”

Trying to help would only bother her. Plus, watching her heat up the pot and cups only further conveyed how serious she was when it came to tea. An amateur wouldn’t be able to do what she was doing.

“Do you like milk in your tea, Kuze? Or sugar? Oh, we even have some jam.”

“Jam... Oh, are you making Russian tea?”

“That’s what they call it here in Japan, at least. It isn’t lemon tea, though, unfortunately.”

“Sure, why not? I’ll have mine with jam.”

“Okay. ♪ Oh, and you wanted protein powder in yours, right, President?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Pfft!”

Masachika naturally burst out laughing at Maria’s sudden joke (?). It didn’t help that Touya had replied with a straight face, either.

Seriously? I had no idea Masha joked around like this. Wait... She wasn’t serious, right? Either way, that was hilarious. Pfft....!

Masachika helplessly tried to hold in his snickering.

“Calm down already, Kuze.”

“My bad...! It was just so— Pfft! Ha-ha!”

Touya rolled his eyes, and Masachika laughed until he cried and could laugh no more.

“Ah, that was good... Hmm? Now that I think about it, I thought people only drank tea in Russia during the winter,” he mentioned, as if to hide his embarrassment from laughing so hard. Maria swiftly poured hot water into the cups of tea while curiously tilting her head.

“Hmm? I think it depends on the person? At least, in our family, we would drink tea even during the summer. I guess it helped that our mother loved tea, though.”

“Oh, your mother’s Japanese, right? That makes sense...”

It was only natural that some Japanese culture meshed with theirs, even though they were born in Russia.

“Do you know a lot about Russia, Kuze?” Maria asked casually with her back still turned to him.

“Not really... I’ve just seen a few Russian movies. That’s all.”

“Oh, is that so?”

It wasn’t only “a few” to be honest, though. I had to have seen at least twenty with my paternal grandfather—since he was really into Russia—and it ended up helping me a lot with my Russian listening skills. Thanks to that, I could now understand what a certain affectionate classmate was whispering all the time, too! Hooray!

“Is everything okay, Kuze? You’ve been staring off into the distance for a while now.”

“Oh, I’m fine...”

Some gifts could be a curse, but perhaps they could also be a blessing in disguise, he wondered. Maria placed a saucer with a cup and some jam on it in front of Masachika.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

“Oh, wow. Thank you so much.”

“And here’s some for you, President.”

“Thanks.”

Touya seemed to have his with sugar, while Maria selected jam as well.

Now, how should I go about this?

Masachika decided to first taste his tea straight after briefly debating with himself.

“...! This is delicious...”

“Really? Thanks.”

Even the fragrance was nothing like the tea he usually drank. A bright aroma that spread from his mouth to his nostrils, a rich and...nostalgic flavor.

Now that I think about it...

Her mother liked tea as well. While faintly grimacing due to the slightly bitter tea, Masachika glanced over at Maria out of the corner of his eye and saw her spooning some jam into her mouth before taking a sip of her tea.

“...? What’s wrong?”

“Oh, uh... So you don’t put the jam in the tea, huh?”

“It depends on the person. *Ded*— Ahem. My grandfather used to mix the jam into his tea, but I prefer to eat mine like a snack.”

“Interesting...”

So it was like having sweet bean jelly with green tea, Masachika thought, and he decided to copy Maria and take a bite.

“It’s so sweet...”

His lips twisted, surprised by how sweet it actually was, and he hurriedly sipped at his tea. The sweetness of the jam was perfectly diluted, slightly changing the tea’s taste.

“Interesting...”

Adding the bittersweetness of the jam to the fragrance of the tea leaves gave it a complex flavor...

Hmm... It completely melts in your mouth with the tea, so it’s almost like drinking a completely new drink...

It was delicious in its own right, but the tea itself was already extremely good, so it might have been better to drink the tea straight. It wouldn’t be right to leave the jam after Maria spent all that time preparing it, though.

Maybe I’ll just go with a little sugar next time, too.

After secretly deciding that, Masachika began alternating between small spoonfuls of jam and sips of his tea.

More importantly, after actually thinking about it...

Maria was really beautiful, and she had an incredible body, to boot. Plus, she was nice, outgoing, and well-liked by most of her peers. She apparently had good grades and was always among the top thirty students in her grade on the bulletin-board score rankings. She must also be smart. Whether she was athletic or not was anyone's guess, but even if she was kind of clumsy, that would only contribute to her cute personality. She was a hard worker who knew how to put on a good cup of tea as well.

Hold on. Is she perfect?

I never thought of Maria that way due to her usually carefree nature and the fact that the perfect, famous superhuman Alisa was always by my side, but after giving it some thought, Maria was a perfect superhuman, too.

Masachika suddenly began to feel restless after realizing this. Maria was merely lifting her teacup slowly with a gentle smile, and yet she appeared more attractive to him than ever.

Now I get it... This is why they call her Madonna. She has the power to unconditionally turn any guy into a lovestruck little boy...

Right as his otaku brain was about to take off with this big-sister fetish, Maria noticed he was staring and smiled inquisitively, dragging him back into reality. It was nothing more than a sweet smile asking, "Is everything okay?" And yet he got butterflies in his stomach. It was a mystifying experience. He tried to calm himself down, but he couldn't. If he wasn't careful, he might let his guard down and reveal how he acted around family. He couldn't let his guard down. He couldn't...and yet when he saw Maria's angelic smile, his caution and self-control began to wane. He wanted to surrender himself to her comforting, loving nature and

"We're back."

"...Sorry we took so long."

"Oh! Yuki, Alya, welcome back. ♪"

All of a sudden, Yuki and Alisa returned from their meeting, and Maria broke into a smile. The overflowing motherly love and charm she was emitting immediately dispersed, and all that was left was an easygoing girl who loved her little sister.

How can one person change this much so quickly?!

The sudden change almost made Masachika fall out of his seat, but Maria expressed no concern as she smiled her way over to the shelf with the dishes and tea.

“Would you two like some tea?”

“Oh. Yes, please.”

“...Yeah.”

“Perfect. ♪”

She cheerily hummed as she prepared their tea. While Masachika regarded her curiously, Alisa took the seat next to him and scooted over to his side. But when he glanced at her and saw how close she was, she gave him a look that said, “Got a problem?”

“...What?” she asked brusquely.

“Oh, uh... Don’t you think you’re sitting a little close to me?” Masachika flat out replied.

“It’s bad luck in Russia for young ladies to sit at the corner of the table,” Alisa answered while glancing in the opposite direction.

“R-really?”

“Really.”

The chair rattled once more until her elbow was almost touching his, and she sent Yuki a piercing glare.

She still doesn’t need to be this close! And what’s with that look in her eyes?! I-is there going to be a fight? Are they already fighting?!

Alisa peered at Yuki warily, but again, Yuki’s archaic smile made it impossible to guess how she was really feeling. Masachika felt like he could see sparks flying between their intersecting gazes. Feeling uncomfortable, he decided to get up and leave, but Alisa instantly grabbed his sleeve under the table before he could move. She kept hold as though she was pleading with him not to go...and that was kind of cute...if viewed as an isolated event. But deep down inside, Masachika didn’t feel that way.

Noooooooo! Let me goooooo! I can’t take this awkward silence! This is so uncomfortable! Ahhhhhh!!

He felt like a guy who had just been caught cheating on his girlfriend, and he tried to escape with every fiber of his being.

Why me?! Why did this have to happen to me?! Masha, save me!

He looked back, unable to take it anymore, and asked Maria:

“Is there really a superstition in Russia about sitting at the corner of the table?”

“Of course. It’s technically not bad luck, but either you won’t be able to ever get married or you’ll get married later than you were supposed to if you sit at the corner.”

Maria then turned and cheerfully looked over at Alisa with sparkles in her eyes.

“I never expected Alya to care about something like that, though... Does this mean you found someone you wanted to marry?!”

“...No. I just felt like it.”

“Oh? Really?”

“Drop it already.”

“Awww.Alya, don’t be like that,” Maria said, pouting as she faced forward once more. After glancing at her sister, Alisa set her eyes on her hand that was holding Masachika’s sleeve, then said in the softest of whispers:

“<It’s still too soon to get married.>”

It was a very, very soft whisper, but Masachika could clearly hear her since he was sitting so close to her.

Yeah, you’re only fifteen years old. ♪ I’m a little concerned by how you phrased that, but everyone knows you’re way too young to get married. ♪ ...Is she seriously doing this in front of her sister?!

Masachika shuddered...because despite Alisa’s Russian-speaking sister being right behind them, she was asserting possessive dominance like she was going to mount (?) him. All of a sudden, Alisa heard Maria placing a teacup on a tray and let go of Masachika’s sleeve in surprise. After a few moments went by, Maria returned to the table with cups of tea for Alisa and Yuki.



“Here you go, Alya.”

She placed a small plate in front of Alisa...with what appeared to be almost an entire jar's worth of jam on it.

“...What?” she asked, realizing Masachika was observing her.

“Huh? Nothing...”

Masachika swiftly looked away, feigning ignorance as he dumped what little jam he had left into his tea, mixing it well with his spoon before finishing it off in one gulp.

Yep... This is a completely different drink now.

It seemed to be a lot more jam than tea, leaving a sweetness in his mouth that puckered his lips.

“Hey, uh... Where did Chisaki go?” Yuki suddenly asked.

“Huh? Oh... She still hasn't come back, now that you mention it...”

After looking up at the clock and tilting his head, Touya placed his teacup down and shrugged.

“Chisaki went to help out the student librarians... She'll be back when she gets hungry,” he replied.

“How old is she? Ten?” Masachika joked, and immediately, the door to the student council room flew open.

“Something smells good!”

“My bad. No older than eight. At most,” Masachika added as Chisaki rushed into the room with stars in her eyes.

CHAPTER 4

I could only taste the cream. I'm serious.

“All right, that should be enough for today. First-year students are free to leave.”

“Wait. Are you sure?”

“Yeah, we second-year students still have to meet with a few teachers, and it could take a while, so don’t worry about us and go. Good work today!”

“See you tomorrow...”

Yuki was going to wait until her ride came to pick her up, so it was only Masachika and Alisa who did as Touya said and retired from the student council room.

Now, then... How am I going to do this?

Masachika pondered how he was going to initiate the conversation as they strolled along on their way home from school. It wasn’t like he had anything especially important to discuss. He simply wanted to talk about their campaign plans for running for student council president and vice president next year. Nevertheless, Masachika still felt a little uncomfortable after what had happened that morning. It didn’t help that Alisa had been acting sort of strange ever since she got back from that meeting with Yuki, either. He was at a loss, anxious about how she might reply.

Yeah... Yuki did something to her.

Yuki seemed to have taken a liking to Alisa (in a bad way) the other weekend when the three of them had hung out. Teasing someone as serious and competitive as Alisa must have been like a dream come true to her. She probably saw Alisa as the perfect friend (toy?), so it was easy to imagine her employing her ladylike silver-tongue to mess with Alisa.

Sigh... There’s no use wondering “what if.”

He inwardly sighed as he walked alongside Alisa, who was completely silent and frowning a bit, but before long, he saw a familiar

restaurant and mustered up the courage to break the silence.

“Hey, Alya?”

“Yeah?”

“Want to grab something to eat?”

“Huh...?”

Alisa looked stunned as Masachika pointed at the restaurant.

“Oh, uh... I thought we could discuss our strategy for student council elections next year.”

“...Oh.”

She narrowed her eyes and half-heartedly nodded.

“Sure, that’s fine.”

“Great.”

Masachika swiftly began heading over to the restaurant, relieved that she didn’t turn him down, but the moment he placed a hand on the door...

“<So it isn’t a date...>”

...he was stabbed from behind by a Russian whisper.

Gwah! Only a coward would attack from behind!

Internally, he shouted like a samurai being attacked by an assassin, but he latched on to the door handle with wobbling knees and dragged himself inside the restaurant. After being shown to their table, they sat across from each other and ordered drinks.

“Uh... I’ll have the café au lait.”

“I’ll have the melon soda and the chocolate parfait.”

“...?!”

“...What?”

“Nothing...”

He couldn’t hide his astonishment. Ordering a sweet melon soda with an already supersweet chocolate parfait was blasphemy. Alisa’s expression twisted uncomfortably after realizing how weirded out he was, so she added:

“I’m just really tired, mentally. I won’t be able to think straight without something sweet. You know?”

“Uh-huh... Anyway, that’ll be all for us.”

The sweet part wasn’t the problem. The combination of foods was the problem. Masachika, however, dropped it and told the waitress they were done ordering.

“So, uh...did something happen between you and Yuki?” he hesitantly asked, wanting to clear up any doubts as they waited for their

drinks.

“...Nothing, really.”

Her reply was brief, but she swiftly averted her gaze, which made it obvious something did happen.

Yukiii!! What did you do to her?!

Masachika turned his head while he shouted at Yuki in his mind, and Alisa briefly glanced at him before looking away once more.

“...I just told her that I was going to run for student council president with you. That’s all,” she mumbled.

“Oh...”

Although he knew that was clearly not the whole story, he hesitated about whether or not he should pry.

“Hey.”

But after stealing a few more glances at him, it was Alisa who spoke up first with a look of grim determination.

“Hmm?”

“Are you and Yuki...dating?”

“No way,” Masachika answered without delay and a dead serious expression on his face. Of course they weren’t dating. While it may have seemed like a legitimate question to Alisa, who didn’t know they were siblings, the ridiculous question made him want to scream, “What do you think this is, a dating sim?!”

“...You’re not?”

“Absolutely not.”

Her eyes wavered, so he continued with a sigh.

“I don’t know what Yuki told you, but we’re...like family. We don’t have any romantic feelings for each other.”

“But Yuki said...”

“*Sigh...* Listen. Don’t take everything she says so seriously. She may look like some proper gentlewoman, but she’s not. She’s teasing you because she likes to see you get all worked up.”

“...”

Alisa stared at him as if she wasn’t satisfied with his explanation, but it was too late. The waitress returned with their order, so Masachika decided to get down to business.

“So...about next year’s election...”

He took a sip of his café au lait as Alisa drank her melon soda, and they looked into each other’s eyes.

“I’m going to be honest with you. We’re going to lose to Yuki at this rate.”

“...!”

One of Alisa’s eyebrows twitched at his blunt statement. She immediately placed her drink down and sent Masachika a piercing gaze.

“...You sound really sure of yourself.”

“Because I’m right. Yuki has pretty much already established her position as the next president.”

Masachika shrugged, unfazed by Alisa’s sharp glare.

“Don’t you think it’s strange that we don’t have enough first-year members in the student council? Usually, we’d have at least three pairs wishing to run together for president and vice president. During the first semester of middle school, there were six pairs including Yuki and me. In other words, there were twelve members.”

“Twelve?! That’s a lot...”

“Sure is, but most of them dropped out during the preelection debate, so only three pairs ended up actually running for president.”

“Debate?”

“Yeah, a student conference. Oh, right. It’s only been a year since you transferred, so I guess I should explain what a student conference is first.”

A student conference was essentially a debate held in the auditorium to solve problems when the persons concerned weren’t able to come to a conclusion themselves or when general students had topics they wanted the student council to discuss. Each representative would then express their opinion, and the audience would vote. Every student would be a witness to what the student conference decided on, which gave the student council the power to execute and enforce those decisions.

“For example, if we hadn’t managed to solve the problem between the soccer team and the baseball team yesterday, we probably would have ended up having a debate in the auditorium. Making such a big deal out of it would have probably created a few grudges, though, so we usually try to find a point of compromise between the parties involved instead. We only hold student conferences as a last resort.”

“Oh, wow... I knew they were doing something in the auditorium from time to time, but I had no idea they were having debates.”

“The student conferences are organized by the student council, but, well, the president and vice president do most of the work, and we peasants mainly handle the application forms and help out with little odds

and ends.”

“Interesting... But what do these debates have to do with the election?”

“Hmm? Oh... Student conferences are a little different when multiple presidential candidates are involved.”

In a lot of cases, they would hold a conference to address a clash of opinions about how the student council was run. It was essentially a debate. They would argue until there was a clear winner, so the debaters would be rated and judged by their performance.

“Once you’ve been judged for your magnetism, persuasiveness, and the like at a debate, it’s nearly impossible to change anyone’s mind. You’d be defeated before the election begins. I mean, think about how emotionally challenging it’d be to continue working with someone who just owned you in a debate, right? So most of the time, the losers end up leaving the student council on their own.”

“Now it makes sense...”

“So usually, you knock one another out of the race like this until there are only three or four pairs left. Not all people who run for president start as members of the student council, but even then, things are clearly unusual this year.”

Yuki and Alisa had been the only first-year students before Masachika joined. A few other members had joined temporarily, but each and every one of them eventually quit. In other words...

“Everyone has already given up because they know they won’t be able to beat Yuki in the race. That’s just how confident people are that she’ll become the next president.”

“...”

“I don’t need to explain the merits of becoming the student council president at this school, right? The value of the title alone is huge. There was apparently widespread ballot manipulation a few years ago during the election...”

With mixed feelings, Alisa watched Masachika speak in an uncharacteristically earnest tone about the election. She was so used to scolding him for loafing around all the time that seeing him take his work in the student council so seriously threw her for a loop. It made her feel... off. Plus, she didn’t like the fact that Masachika seemed indifferent about being in a restaurant alone together.

Tsk. Acting all smug like this is nothing to you...

Since Alisa never had many friends— Since Alisa always had her guard up, this was actually the first time she had ever gone to a restaurant alone with someone of the opposite sex. She was even willing to admit to herself that the Russian she'd whispered at the door came from the heart. She'd assumed that being invited to a restaurant after school meant a date, thanks to Maria filling her mind with romance-comic knowledge. She was restless. Should she sit across from him? Next to him? What would they do if someone from school saw them? Would someone just happen to walk by and see them if they sat by the window? Countless worrisome scenarios ran through her mind, and yet it was like she was the only one who cared.

What's his problem? Is he used to taking girls out to restaurants like this? I mean, I guess there are other girls he's close to besides Yuki.

Alisa recalled his promise when they shook hands on the way home the day before, rekindling her fury. She tried to drink her melon soda and not think about it, but the frustration still didn't go away. All of a sudden, she felt something sharp poke her tongue and opened her mouth in shock, only to discover that she had unknowingly chewed on the straw so much that it had completely flattened. *No wonder I was hardly getting any soda,* she thought, embarrassed by her childlike behavior.

“...But, well, thanks to that, our elections are supposedly clean now.”

Sitting across from Alisa, Masachika was still talking earnestly about the election, but everything went in one ear and out the other. Despite feeling obligated to listen, she couldn't concentrate. At all.

“Oh, really? Interesting.”

“Right? So instead, candidates battle things out through a debate where—”

Alisa gave a half-assed reply without any thought before taking a bite of her parfait. The sweetness of chocolate and vanilla ice cream spread through her mouth...when she suddenly bit down on something hard. It was her spoon, which she swiftly pulled out of her mouth in a panic.

“Alya? You listening?”

“...!”

She felt a warmth in her cheeks stemming from humiliation and embarrassment as the person *she* usually scolded for not paying attention stared at her skeptically.

“I'm listening. I was just preoccupied with my parfait for a second. That's all.”

“...Uh-huh. Well, it does look tasty.”

He half-heartedly nodded as if he understood, yet his dubious gaze was saying, “But is it really *that* tasty?” And her cheeks turned even redder.

What’s your problem?! The only reason I’m so distracted today is because of you, you know?!

Internally, she vented her extremely unreasonable anger and unjustified resentment, then looked away from his skeptical gaze. That was when she saw the parfait out of the corner of her eye and suddenly came up with a wonderful (?) idea.

Heh... Heh-heh-heh... Let’s see how focused he still is after I make him feel the same way I’m feeling!

Her own thoughts ignited her competitive side for some reason, and she grinned mischievously.

“Would you like a bite?” she said with a devilish grin.

“...?! Oh, no. I’m fine...”

“But you said it looked tasty, right? Don’t be shy,” she casually added while scooping up some whipped cream with chocolate syrup on top, then she shoved it right in his face, leaving him no room to escape. “Here, have some.”

The height at which she was holding the spoon made it obvious she wasn’t handing it to him, and while she didn’t say, “Here comes the airplane,” it was still obvious she was trying to feed him.

Huh? What’s going on? Am I locked in Alya’s route now? Wait. No. It’s not like we were flirting or anything...right? When did I trigger this route’s flag??

Masachika couldn’t contain his uneasiness, just as Alisa expected. His shock wasn’t as interesting as she had been hoping for, though.

“Oh, uh... Let me ask the waitress if she can bring us another spoon.”

“Don’t waste her time with something like that. Plus, you’ll just be giving them more silverware to wash.”

“But...”

What kind of humiliation fetish was this? Masachika unconsciously leaned back, but that only made Alisa further extend her arm.

“Hurry up and take a bite... This is normal in Russia.”

“Wait. Seriously?”

Most of what he knew about Russia came from movies and books instead of the motherland itself, so he thought that perhaps “indirect kissing” wasn’t a thing in Russia...

Okay, she's clearly lying.

He immediately came to that conclusion when he shifted his sight from the spoon to Alisa, whose face was all types of mischievous at a glance...but after a closer look, he noticed that the tips of her ears and even her fingers were red. Her fair skin made it all the more visible.

What has gotten into her? Why would you do something like this if it embarrasses you?

After collecting himself, Masachika became more worried about her rather than being self-conscious. His expression made that clear, too, so Alisa came to her senses as well.

What am I doing?

She was immediately overcome with embarrassment once reality set in. Her entire body felt like it was on fire, feeling as if everyone in the restaurant was staring at her, and she couldn't take it any longer. But she knew that backing down now would only embarrass her even further, so she kept the spoon in position while somehow managing to maintain her expression.

“Come on... The cream’s going to melt.”

“Oh, uh... All right...”

Masachika suspected she couldn’t back down now, either, so he gave up trying to convince her to stop.

I wasn’t expecting to have an indirect kiss here...but it won’t be a problem. I already prepared myself and toyed with the idea with Masha once before!

He may have jumped to conclusions previously, but the situation wasn’t that different. Feeling embarrassed meant losing, and he wanted to be a winner—which meant remaining calm and finishing this in style!

The only thing different this time is that the paper cup is now a spoon. That’s it... That’s—that’s a big deal! This is a spoon we’re talking about. Something that was just inside Alya’s mouth, touching her tongue. Putting that in my mouth wouldn’t be just any indirect kiss. It’d be...an indirect French kiss?!

Calmly assessing the situation ended with him unable to remain calm anymore. Right as his eyes drifted toward her lips, she said:

“Open wide. ♪”

There it was. As Alisa spoke, he caught a glimpse of her gorgeous white teeth and red tongue.

Ahhh!! Don’t show me your tongue! That’s way too graphic! My body

can't take any more! Ahhhhhh! Thank you for letting me know that beautiful girls have beautiful mouths, too!

On the inside, he writhed in agony. Perhaps it was his base instincts, but he obediently opened his mouth like a hungry baby chick would for its mother.

“A-ahhh...”

The spoon glided into his mouth, and he reflexively wrapped his lips around it. The plan to only use his front teeth to scrape the sweet dessert off the spoon completely left his mind.

Gwaaaaaaahhhh?! I just had an indirect French kiss! We indirectly French-kissed!! Is it just me, or are we moving too fast?! Way too fast?! ... Moving too fast for what?! What am I even talking about?!

Masachika imagined slamming his head against the concrete sidewalk outside and Yuki staring at him with a sleazy grin. “Heh. How did Alya taste?” she would say in the sleaziest of voices while patting him on the shoulder sleazily. Masachika would then stop hitting his head and get up just so he could backhand her in the face. She was a pain in the ass even in his imagination.

“...It’s sweet,” Masachika briefly commented, too flustered to say anything else.

“...Oh.”

But Alisa didn’t have it in her to criticize his reaction, so she simply pulled back her arm.

In fact, the entire mood is sweet! ...This is all your fault, stupid sweet atmosphere!

How did it come to this? We were having a serious conversation up until a few moments ago. Wait... Nobody saw us, right?

Masachika darted his eyes about...until he thought he saw someone he recognized outside the window.

Is that...Taniyama?

He began to wonder if it really was her until Alisa cleared her throat, dragging him back into reality. After he returned his gaze to Alisa, she stared right into his eyes with a dignified expression.

“So how do you think we could beat Yuki in light of all that?”

Her eyes were firm as she continued to move forward in spite of the difficult situation. That’s what astounded him—the blinding glow of her soul as it lit up in the face of adversity.

You’ve gotta be kidding me! “How do you think we can beat Yuki?”

Heh. Alya, you can't just switch into serious mode and pretend like none of that just happened!

He may have been joking in his mind, but he kept all those thoughts locked away and played along since he wanted to avoid any more awkwardness.

“Heh... We just need to take a different route.”

“A different route?”

“We don’t have a chance of winning if we try to fight her head-on... which is why we need to change our method of attack and appeal to the students in a different way than Yuki does.”

“...Could you be more specific?”

“Hmm...”

Masachika’s eyes wandered for a few moments.

“It’s just like when people vote for their favorite idol in a pop group. You need everyone cheering for you in order to beat the lead vocalist—to beat the best.”

“...What are you talking about? Everyone already votes for who they like the most, right?”

“Not necessarily. While the student council presidential election is a popularity contest for the most part, fans don’t need to go register for their right to vote, unlike when voting for pop groups. Everyone in the entire school *has* to vote...which means people who don’t really care who becomes the next president will vote for the ‘safest’ option. In other words, they’ll vote for the former president in middle school, who already has results and is someone they trust. To tell the truth, I did the same thing during the last election. I chose the former president...and I was honestly surprised when someone else won.”

“Yeah... Now that you mention it, Kenzaki wasn’t even a member of the student council in middle school.”

“Right? And if the same two people elected in middle school run together in high school, there’s apparently a seventy percent chance they’ll be elected again, which makes it all the more impressive that Touya won when you think about it. Anyway, he had a story that gained the support of his peers and made people *want* to vote for him,” Masachika commented as he took a stack of papers out of his bag. It was a school newspaper from last year, which had been published by the school newspaper club. He flipped to a certain page and pointed at an article inside. “See the small featured segment here?”

“...Huh? ‘Touya Kenzaki, Path to Victory: Episode Five’?”

“Yep. A member of the newspaper club at the time found it interesting that an underachiever like Touya was trying to become the next president, so he interviewed him. Touya apparently gave the guy the okay to use his real name in the feature story, too, in order to keep himself motivated as well.”

“Hmph... I suppose you can’t let your guard down if you feel like you’re constantly being watched.”

“Yeah, I’m sure the guy who interviewed him was half teasing him, but anyway, over time, his appearance clearly started to change, and his grades improved. It began to actually look like a real success story, which got all the readers on his side and eventually led to his win.”

“So that’s what you meant when you said he had a story that made people want to vote for him? In other words, he showed the other students his struggles and hard work?”

“You catch on quick. That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

Masachika smirked at his partner with evident satisfaction while lifting up his cup of café au lait to take another sip...but his mind had been focusing on something else the entire time.

So...what is she going to do with that spoon?

The spoon she had just shoved in his mouth, that is. It was currently lying on a napkin in front of Alisa, but she still had more than half of a parfait to go, and it was going to melt if she didn’t start getting to it soon. Did she not notice? Or was she pretending not to notice? Meanwhile, Alisa was diligently running her eyes over the copy of the newspaper that Masachika had brought...or at least, she was pretending to read while thinking about something else.

What am I going to do with this spoon?

...They were thinking the exact same thing. Now that she had calmed down, Alisa was dying from embarrassment. Not even she knew why she’d been acting so competitive earlier. *I should have started eating the parfait right after feeding him*, she thought. She could have casually gone back to using the spoon after teasing Masachika, and that would have been it. But after putting it down for whatever reason, it was getting harder by the second for her to pick it back up.

It’s Kuze’s fault for sticking the entire thing in his mouth like that... Have some tact, you creep!

Alisa glanced down at the spoon and was quick to blame Masachika

for what had happened...when she suddenly noticed some markings on the spoon made from leftover cream, and she swiftly looked away.

H-his lips left a mark... I—I can see where his lips touched! His liiips!

She got a little dizzy as she panicked. That was when Masachika hesitantly spoke up:

“Hey, uh... Sorry, but do you mind if I order something?”

“Huh?”

As Alisa blinked in confusion, Masachika looked around, then smiled somewhat bashfully and somewhat bitterly as well.

“The smell of food started to make me hungry again... I guess I shouldn’t be skipping breakfast, huh?”

“Oh... Knock yourself out.”

He opened the menu and flipped through a few pages until something caught his eye. A few moments went by after pressing the call button, then the waitress finally showed up.

“How may I help you?”

“Oh, I wanted to order something else. Is that okay?”

“Go ahead.”

“Uh... Could I get the sautéed spinach with bacon, the Szechuan mapo tofu, a side of rice...and two waters, please?”

“Sautéed spinach with bacon, Szechuan mapo tofu, a side of rice, and two waters. Correct? Anything else I can get for you?”

“Oh, I was just wondering if you could make this mapo tofu...extra hot?”

“Of course.”

“W-wait. Are you serious?” Alisa commented as she shrunk back. The waitress smiled cheerfully at her, then looked back to Masachika.

“You can get it double spicy, triple spicy, five times spicier, or even ten times spicier. What will it be?”

“Exactly how hot is ten times spicier?”

“Well, uh...”

After glancing to her left then right, the waitress lowered her voice and continued:

“...it’s honestly extremely spicy. I’ve tried it once, and I could only take one bite of it. It will destroy your stomach.”

“It will, huh? Nice.”

“What sounds nice about that?” Alisa interrupted with a straight face,

but Masachika ignored her.

“Let’s go with ten times the spice, then.”

“Sure. Will that be all?”

“Oh, uh... Do you think we could get another spoon, too?” Masachika asked, pointing at the spoon in front of Alisa with his eyes.

“Of course. I’ll be right back,” the waitress replied without prying. After making sure she was gone, Alisa looked at Masachika, who was placing the menu down on the table.

“That wasn’t necessary,” she complained.

“You talking about the spoon? I’m embarrassed. That’s all. It might be normal in Russia, but Japanese guys can’t handle stuff like that.”

“Uh-huh...”

She seemed hesitant at first, but then her lips twitched up provocatively.

“I just can’t believe something like this bothers you, Kuze. You must be a lot more inexperienced than I imagined. I thought you were used to doing stuff like that with girls.”

One of Masachika’s eyebrows twitched in frustration, since he’d only been looking out for her.

“If you ask me, I’m more surprised that you don’t care. Indirect kisses must be rampant in Russia,” he hissed with a tense smile, causing Alisa to frown with her brow knit in silence. After a few moments went by, she complained:

“<I wouldn’t do it with anyone else but you, you jerk.>”

Achievement unlocked: You just scored Alya’s first indirect kiss! Congratulations, Masachika!

Thanks... Am I going to die today?

Masachika gazed out the window as he listened to the sudden announcement in his mind, but he was brought back to reality when the waitress suddenly returned with a new spoon.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. May I take your old spoon?”

“Oh... Thanks.”

After Alisa accepted the new spoon, Masachika turned his distant stare toward her and urged:

“Come on. It’s going to melt if you don’t hurry up and eat it.”

“...You’re right.”

She righted her awkwardly tilting parfait and began to stir everything from the whipped cream on top to the cornflakes at the bottom before

taking a bite. She continued to eat like that for the next few minutes in silence, then clasped her hands together to express her thanks for the food before wiping her mouth with a napkin.

“By the way, I couldn’t help but notice how much you eat,” Alisa mentioned.

“Huh? ...Oh.”

Masachika realized she must have thought he was snacking in between meals, so he decided to clear up the misunderstanding.

“This is actually my dinner.”

“...I’ve been wondering this for a while now, but don’t you need to call home to tell them you’re eating out? They aren’t surprised when you go back already full?”

“My parents aren’t there right now.”

“Oh...”

Plus, Masachika was usually the one who ended up cooking most of the meals at the Kuze residence, where he and his father lived. He normally cooked for himself while his father was out for work, too.

“Yeah, it’s just me tonight, and I don’t feel like cooking.”

Technically, he did have a little sister who would stop by unannounced and demand food from time to time as well, but she wouldn’t visit his place two days in a row...so he decided not to even think about it.

“...Wait. You can cook?”

Alisa was genuinely surprised. Masachika shrugged.

“I can only make easy things, though. You know, ‘hassle-free cooking’ or meals you can prepare in a few minutes, so I can’t make anything complicated.”

“I’m still surprised. I didn’t think you had the patience to cook.”

“Well, I won’t deny that.”

It wasn’t like he actually enjoyed cooking. He simply felt it was his easiest option. When he first started middle school, he’d have some type of savory bread he bought the day before, he’d have lunch at the school cafeteria, and at night, he’d have some sort of premade dinner that was sold at the convenience store. It only took a month until he got sick of bread, and shopping every day got old fast as well, so one day, he randomly decided to make a small meal he saw on TV. That was when he realized that the time he spent going to the store every day took no longer than it did for him to cook and wash dishes. Plus, his dad would give him two thousand yen per day for food on days he wasn’t going to be home,

and whatever money was leftover would be money in his pocket to do whatever he'd wanted, so cooking for himself was a good way to save money. Put simply, he'd decided to cook for himself after weighing the pros and cons.



“What about you, Alya? Can you cook?” Masachika innocently asked, figuring someone as perfect as her would be able to cook at least the basics.

“...”

Alisa silently looked away.

“Eh. Most first-year high school students can’t cook anyway,” he added, taking the hint.

“It’s not that I can’t cook... It just takes too much time.”

“Oh... Are you the kind of person who has to cut vegetables and whatnot perfectly and all the same size?”

“I suppose you could say that. I like to make sure the food gets equally cooked, the seasoning is tasty, and it’s consistent...”

“And then you end up burning it, right?”

“...”

She took a sip of her melon soda, and he guessed that he’d hit the nail on the head. Masachika smirked but understood, since she was a perfectionist. Precise calculations were important when it came to cooking, but skill was even more important. To Masachika, not being exact while still not necessarily being careless was the trick to cooking, but a perfectionist like Alisa had to be exact with everything.

“...I can’t help that it bothers me. Just watching Masha cook based on ‘feeling’ makes my skin crawl...”

“Ha-ha. I can easily see her doing that.”

He imagined Maria throwing ingredients into the pan and sprinkling seasoning on top at random with her usual cheerful smile. *That would be her style*, he thought while smiling. He did feel that she was a little too nonchalant about it, though...

“But whatever she makes always turns out really good...”

“I guess she’s a natural, huh?”

Maria was apparently an excellent cook.

Seriously? Does she really have no faults?

One could hypothesize that she may be an even “better catch” than her little sister. Masachika placed a hand on his forehead, but Alisa waved her hand and changed the subject as if his gesture bothered her.

“Anyway, forget about that. What kind of story did you have in mind?”

“Oh, uh... Right. Where was I again?”

“You told me that we needed a story where everyone wanted to see us

succeed like Kenzaki had.”

“Ah, yeah.”

Masachika changed his expression and switched his gears back into thinking mode.

“It’s just like you said, Alya. First, we need to show everyone how hard you work...at the first semester’s closing ceremony, more specifically.”

“At the closing ceremony? You mean when the student council members give a speech?”

Masachika nodded, confirming her suspicions.

“Yep. The speech is just an excuse to introduce the student council’s members for next semester.”

“I vaguely remember hearing the student council doesn’t get any new members after that. Is that accurate?”

“Yeah, a lot of people join and drop out during the first semester, but after the speech, no new members can join. People can still quit, though. In addition, this speech also acts as a platform for us first-year students to announce our candidacy.”

“That was kind of how it seemed last year, now that you mention it...”

Alisa thought back to her third year of middle school.

“It’ll be your first policy speech in front of the entire school, and I’m sure I don’t have to tell you how important that is,” Masachika stated with a serious expression.

“Yeah...”

Lowering her gaze, she pondered with a serious expression as well until she suddenly glanced at Masachika with a worried look in her eyes.

“...What exactly should I talk about?” she asked in a soft voice.

“Whatever you want to. Just be honest and speak your mind. People will listen,” he promptly replied.

“Really? You don’t have any actual specific advice?”

She looked displeased. After all, she’d gone to him for help for a change, and he was giving her nothing in return. Masachika, however, only shrugged.

“You’re someone people want to cheer for, and I’ll be there to back you up if you ever have trouble communicating your ideas, so just be yourself and say what’s on your mind.”

The words he said so casually... Those words...

“Oh... Okay...”

Alisa blushed. Her pout instantly turned into something more bashful as her eyes wandered restlessly. She fidgeted, tapping her fingers and opening her mouth as if to say something before thinking for a moment and whispering in Russian:

“<...What makes people want to cheer for me?>”

Her darting eyes said, “Compliment me,” as she spoke.

You'd know if you could see yourself now. You're so cute, dammit.

He stared off into the distance with a sigh when suddenly, the waitress returned with the rest of his food.

“Will that be all for you?”

“Yep.”

“Enjoy.”

After watching the waitress walk away, he shifted his gaze back to Alisa, who sympathetically told him to go ahead and eat.

“Thanks... Sorry about this.”

After placing his hands together as if to say a prayer, he went straight for the sautéed spinach with bacon covering the white plate. It wasn't long before he cleared the dish like an appetizer, then moved on to the main dish: bubbling hot mapo tofu in a thin cast-iron pan. The perfectly crumbling snow-like tofu was covered in just the right amount of dark red magma-esque fermented bean paste. He dug his spoon into the meal and briefly cooled it off with a blow before taking a bite.

“Wow... This is pretty intense for a restaurant that's not even Chinese.” Masachika nodded with evident satisfaction as the spiciness prickled his gums.

“...Is that good?”

“Huh? It's all right. Want to try some?”

Ah, crap, he immediately thought. It was a mix between how uncomfortable he felt for being the only one eating and how he'd just offered to share some of his food even though it had only been a few minutes since the spoon incident. After giving it some more thought, he decided this was way too hot for her to eat, but he was hesitant to take back his offer, and rightfully so. Alisa was hesitant as well. Of course, she didn't want to eat the seemingly hazardous waste, but she was worried that Masachika would realize she really didn't like spicy food if she refused.

I have water. I have some melon soda left. I can survive a bite.

After making sure she had enough healing potions (drinks) left...

“All right, I’ll have a bite,” she declared with resolve.

“Oh... Uh. Okay.”

Despite knowing how she really felt, Masachika pretended like he didn’t notice and reached for a small plate. He then thrust his spoon into the mapo tofu to hopefully scoop up more tofu than spicy sauce, at the very least. But what he excavated was...a red stick of dynamite.

“Oh, wow. Check it out. An entire cayenne pepper.”

“...?!”

Masachika lifted the crimson weapon of mass destruction with his spoon and glanced in Alisa’s direction... She gave him puppy-dog eyes. “Don’t even think about giving me that,” she pleaded with her moist blue eyes. An angel and a devil instantly appeared on Masachika’s shoulders. The angel, who looked like a tiny Maria for some reason, gently spoke in a discouraging manner.

“You can’t. Only bad boys would do something like that to Alya.”

Meanwhile, the devil on his other shoulder, who looked like Yuki for some reason, sleazily tried to talk him into it.

“Heh. Do it, bro! You don’t need to hide it from me. I know ya’d get off on seeing Alya cry.”

The angel’s pleas and the devil’s temptation—the contradicting emotions clashed as he grinded his teeth.

Tsk! I...I...?!

His hands trembled as he struggled, wavering between deploying or putting aside that dangerous weapon. In his mind, he was like a man in a war zone clutching his gun, conflicted on whether or not he should shoot, but in reality, it was nothing more than a little cayenne pepper. Anyone watching would probably get secondhand embarrassment. That was the kind of situation this was.

“I don’t think it’s right to make girls suffer for your amusement, Kuze. I—”

“Get outta here!”

“Eep?! ”

The tiny Yuki slammed her imaginary body into the tiny Maria, sending her flying away to the stars. The battle had ended in under a second. There was just too much of a power difference between angels and demons.

Forgive me, Alya.

Masachika apologized to Alisa in his heart while selling his soul to his

inner demon.

“Here, you can have the most delicious part.”

“...Thank you.”

A monster. That's what I am.

Masachika criticized himself on the inside but smiled on the outside as he handed Alisa the modest plate. After that, she drew a pair of chopsticks out of the chopstick container sitting at the corner of the table, then scooped the entire piece of tofu into her mouth without another second of hesitation. Once the hard part was over, she laid her small plate back down on the table...and closed her eyes.

“You like it?”

“...Not bad,” Alisa replied without changing her expression. Masachika knew, though. He saw her hands clutched together and trembling on the table. He watched her right hand desperately holding on to her left, which looked as if it was going to grab the glass of water by its side any moment now.

I'm sorry, Alya.

Although cheerfully smiling, he muttered those words in his mind like a man who had actually very compelling reasons for betraying his friend.

“Alya... You forgot to eat the best part.”

“...”

For a very brief moment, the look in Alisa’s eyes wasn’t very ladylike, but Masachika pretended not to notice. Pressured by his smile, she plucked the cayenne pepper off the tiny plate and tossed it into her mouth as if to say, “Fire in the hole!” She then covered her mouth with her right hand and lowered her head as low as it could go.

“...Alya?”

“<You idiot.>”

Those pitiful Russian whispers.

“<Stupid idiot.>”

She repeatedly muttered <idiot> in a tearful voice, keeping her expression hidden. It wasn’t clear whether she was saying that to Masachika or herself for being stubborn, but...

“You should probably drink some water. Here.”

“<Stupid...>”

Even Masachika started to feel guilty for his stupid prank, but Alisa only continued to repeat those words. They didn’t discuss the election any more after that. Masachika finished his meal in silence as quickly as he

could and waited for Alisa to recover before they left the restaurant.

“...We talked a lot longer than I thought,” she commented outside under the night sky.

“Yeah...”

You were basically half dead the entire time, though, he thought while looking away guiltily. Nevertheless, he didn’t regret his actions because there was something touching about hearing Alisa’s tearful voice, since she always acted so tough.

If you want to call me a scumbag, then do it.

“What is Yuki going to do, by the way?”

“Huh?”

He suddenly lifted his head after hearing the unexpected name and noticed Alisa was glancing in his direction with a slightly uncomfortable expression.

“You know... Since we’re going to be running together, Yuki needs a new partne—a new running mate, right?”

“Ohhh.”

He pretended like he didn’t notice what she’d almost said. After shooting him a dirty look, Alisa continued with a somewhat dissatisfied tone.

“You mentioned earlier that new members couldn’t join the student council after the first semester’s closing ceremony, didn’t you? She doesn’t have that much time to find a vice president to run with her.”

“Well, she is really popular, so I feel like she could run with anyone and be okay... I mean, I ran with her and barely did anything, and she still won,” he added with a shrug.

Alisa shot him a wistful look, and he uncomfortably began to scratch his head.

“Like... She has a wide circle of friends, so she’ll have someone to run with her. I’m sure of it.”

Masachika imagined who the partner could be for a few moments.

“It’d probably be someone who used to be a member of the student council... But who?”

The brief glimpse of a person outside the window came to mind.

“Huh... We’d have a really tough road ahead of us if she got Taniyama on board.”

“Taniyama? Who’s that?”

“Sayaka Taniyama. She was Yuki’s last standing opponent in the

presidential race in middle school... Wait. You don't know her?"

"No."

As Alisa shook her head, Masachika curiously furrowed his brow and tilted his head. He had figured Sayaka was one of the girls who had joined the student council before almost immediately quitting this year.

Did she give up trying to become the president?

His heart swelled with bitter memories of the past as he recalled the young girl whom he had worked diligently with in the student council until she lost the election.

"Kuze?"

"Oh, it's nothing... At any rate, I guess we'll find out who she's running with before long. We can plan for how we'll deal with them after that."

"Yeah..." Alisa nodded a little skeptically. Masachika reminisced about the previous student council members, wondering whom Yuki would choose, but the answer was eventually revealed to him far quicker than he could ever have imagined. It happened the next day after school when Yuki brought a student with her...who wasn't a previous member of the student council.

"Ayano."

"Very well, Yuki."

A female student, who was standing diagonally behind Yuki, took a silent step forward in response to Yuki's summons. With both hands touching in front of her, she bowed gracefully, then made eye contact with each of the five seated members of the student council before introducing herself in a monotone voice.



“Nice to meet you, everyone. My name is Ayano Kimishima. I am a first-year student in Class C, and from today, I will be working as a general member in the student council with you all. It is a pleasure to meet you.”

Her expression didn’t change even once during her entire introduction. She gracefully bowed again. Each member of the council greeted her, puzzled in their own way by her robot-like demeanor.

“Kuze?”

“...”

Masachika grimaced. While he was completely taken by surprise by Yuki’s decision, this made it more than clear how serious she was. He knit his brow, staring so hard at Ayano that he didn’t have any energy left to respond to Alisa. All of a sudden, Ayano turned her head, and she began to stare Masachika straight in the eye, showing faint emotion as if for the first time.

“I look forward to working together, Masachika,” she quietly stated.

Ayano Kimishima. A maid of Yuki’s...who used to be Masachika’s maid as well.

CHAPTER 5

The bigger the better.

“Whew! It’s finally lunchtime! Masachika, Hikaru, what’s the plan? I bought lunch on my way to school today.”

“Huh. Well, that’s a first.”

“The school lunches get boring after a while, you know?”

“I brought lunch with me today, too,” Masachika announced.

“Oh, really? I suppose I’ll go pick something up at the co-op, then.”

“I need to grab a drink.”

After leaving the classroom, Masachika strolled over to the vending machine on the first floor while Hikaru headed toward the co-op in the opposite direction. However, once Masachika started descending the stairs, a voice suddenly called out to him from close behind.

“Masachika.”

He jumped, but he immediately recognized who it was and turned around with an air of nonchalance.

“Ayano... Need something?”

It was Ayano Kimishima, who had just joined the student council the previous day. She was not only Yuki’s maid, but also someone Masachika could truly call a childhood friend.

“I apologize for the bother, but could you spare me a few minutes?” Ayano gracefully bowed as she stared quietly at Masachika with a blank expression.

“...All right. Should we go somewhere we can be alone?”

“Thank you very much. This way, please.”

Ayano swiftly stepped in front of Masachika and began guiding him as though she already had a location in mind.

She never changes. She’s just like a ninja.

Masachika thought that as he stared at her firm, straight back. Despite being extremely good-looking by public standards, she surprisingly had almost no presence at all...to the point where you wouldn’t even realize

she was there until she was so close, you could clearly hear her soft voice.

...On second thought, saying she didn't have much of a presence was far too ambiguous. But she made almost no noise no matter what she did, and she would try to stay out of others' sight, so you wouldn't notice her coming unless you were really looking for her. She would disappear before you realized it, then, out of nowhere, be right next to you once again.

I mean, it's not like she's doing it maliciously, so I'm not trying to insult her or anything, but...

It wasn't as if she behaved like this because she was trying to scare people. This was just who she was: silent in every way whether it be her speaking, movement, or expression. She hardly ever initiated conversation as well, so of course, she wouldn't go out of her way to surprise others. It wasn't often she willingly struck up conversation with Masachika, either, despite knowing him for so long.

"This way, please," Ayano suggested while swiftly yet quietly opening a door (it was anyone's guess as to how she could do that with a sliding door) to an empty classroom. After Masachika stepped inside, Ayano closed the door, again without making a sound, and turned on the lights. She then stepped in front of him and bowed once more.

"I know your time is valuable, so first, allow me to thank you for—"

"Yeah, yeah. Just get to the point."

"My apologies."

She lifted her head and stared right at him, but her eyes were somewhat sharp in spite of her blank expression.

"Yuki told me that you would be running with Kujou in the election. Is that correct?"

"...Yep," Masachika admitted with a nod. After Ayano briefly lowered her gaze, she looked back up with a cold, distant light in her eyes.

"You have disgusted the head of the family with your decision."

"...!"

Masachika was astounded. The head of the family she spoke of was his and Yuki's maternal grandfather. In other words, the current head of the Suou household.

"He appeared to be extremely angry with your decision to get in Yuki's way, especially after abandoning the Suou household."

"..."

Masachika wasn't surprised. Of course, his grandfather, who valued the Suou household's reputation over everything, would not be happy with

his decision. There was no way he would ever allow Masachika to obstruct Yuki's path to success. She was going to take over for the Suou household one day, after all.

This was obviously going to happen, and yet why didn't it even cross my mind? That old sack of crap...

He griped about the grandfather in his memories. Incidentally, it was his grandfather who insisted that Yuki and Masachika claim they were only childhood friends when they were outside the house. Masachika thought it was ridiculous, but from his grandfather's point of view, having the future head of the household, Masachika, abandon them was apparently a scandal he wanted to avoid. Therefore, he made Masachika promise not to tell anyone he was related to them if he wanted to cut ties with the family. That was his one condition. Masachika wasn't obligated to keep his promise, but if he did anything to upset his grandfather, his little sister, who stayed in the Suou household, would be the one subjected to his wrath. It was Masachika's love for his sister that made him keep his promise and obey his grandfather.

"So? He told you to ask me if it was true?"

"...No. I needed to hear it for myself."

"...?"

He raised an eyebrow, his face overcome with surprise, since he fully assumed that his grandfather had sent her here.

"It is my duty as a retainer to clear the way for my master, and as Lady Yuki's retainer, I need to uncover the intentions of those who oppose her."

"What loyalty. What are you, a samurai?"

Though he may have been teasing her, there was no contempt in his voice. Masachika stood upright, for while he felt she was overblowing the whole thing, he knew that she meant every word of it.

Why did I even...?

Masachika reflected on his actions once more. He was going to run with Alisa in the election, which meant he was running against Yuki. Masachika Kuze would never decide to do something like this when you really thought about it. Upsetting his grandfather and running against his little sister, whom he loved? What was he hoping to gain from this? The honor of becoming vice president? He had no interest in that. He simply... couldn't abandon Alisa. In the end, that was all this was.

"I trusted you."

She turned an accusatory gaze at him in the midst of his reflecting.

“I trusted that you would never do anything to hurt Lady Yuki... Was I mistaken?”

“...”

Her anguished voice broke Masachika’s heart. She was playing the bad guy—a thankless role for the one she served, whom she loved and respected, and she was miserable. While she may appear to be emotionless at first glance, Masachika knew she was actually as loving, affectionate, and sweet as Yuki. She was not someone who had it in her to criticize or blame others, and attacking someone like this saddened her as well. She was a terribly kind girl. And she was in pain. She had to convey ill will when in reality, she was heartbroken. But what hurt Masachika most of all was the fact that he was to blame for this grief.

I should have done something sooner...

His expression changed as he reflected on his regrets, then he faced Ayano with sincerity. He gazed right into her eyes, conveying his genuine feelings from the heart.

“I didn’t decide to run so I could get in Yuki’s way. I decided to run in the election for Alya’s sake...and as a result, I became one of Yuki’s opponents. That’s all.”

“But...”

Ayano wavered as she looked into that sure gaze, but then her eyes almost immediately sharpened once again.

“Regardless of how you got to this point, you are still running against her. Is teaming up with Kujou that important to you? Is it worth betraying and hurting Lady Yuki?”

“...Yes.”

She was taken aback by his firm reply, especially after being so aggressive, and her eyes fell in sorrow and bewilderment.

“I don’t know why I’m doing this...but I’m still going to do it. I’m going to do whatever it takes to make Alya the next president of the student council. That’s what I promised her I’d do,” Masachika earnestly added.

“Is that because you have feelings for her? Do you li—?”

“No.”

He was able to clearly answer that. He wasn’t helping Alisa because he was in love with her. But then why was he helping her? He didn’t really understand the reason. He was determined even without knowing the

motive.

“I alone made this decision. Yuki has nothing to do with this, and I’m not even thinking about the Suou household.”

“...”

“So tell the old man he better not blame Yuki for this. If he has a problem, then he knows where to find me.”

Ayano’s eyes widened in shock, and she shuddered.

“...Very well.”

She bowed deeply. Then with her head still lowered, she asked:

“Please tell me one last thing before you go. Do you still feel the same about Lady Yuki now? How do you feel about her?”

“Yuki’s the most important person in the world to me. Nothing has changed,” Masachika promptly replied. “So please be there for her, okay? I know I’m in no position to be asking you that, but please.”

“...Very well. I am truly happy you feel that way, Masachika,” she replied as her long bangs hid her expression. She then turned around and walked over to the door behind her. “Thank you very much for your time today. See you around.”

She bowed once more in front of the door before retiring from the room...although normally, she’d have waited for Masachika to leave first.

“I wonder if I let her down...,” he muttered to himself, feeling as if the door left open was symbolic for how she felt inside.

I guess, without context, the whole conversation made me look like a scumbag who just cheated on his girlfriend. You know, the kind of guy who says stuff like, “Alya needs me. But you? You’ll be fine without me.” ...I mean, I am a scumbag, but still.

After some inner self-mockery, he ran his hands through his hair.

“I knew this would happen, but...it still hurts.”

The hostile eyes of his childhood friend tore at his heart even more than he imagined. The undeniable fact that his actions hurt the two closest people to him was gut-wrenching. Nevertheless, he oddly didn’t regret what he did. He still felt his decision to stand by Alisa’s side was the right thing to do. That didn’t mean it lessened the pain at all, though.

“*Sigh...*”

He hung his head low and sighed as he plodded wearily back to the classroom, completely forgetting the reason he had left the classroom in the first place.

“Oh, hey. About time you got back... Where’s your drink?”

“Huh? Oh...”

Only when Takeshi pointed it out did he finally remember why he left, but he wasn't in the mood to go get a drink anymore. In fact, he had lost his appetite altogether.

“I can just drink the water I have.”

“...? Oh.”

Takeshi felt like something wasn't right when Masachika shook the water bottle he had brought from home, but he didn't pry. Before another second went by, Hikaru came back with some savory bread and turned his desk around to put it together with Masachika's.

“...Alya's not here. Why not just take her seat?” Masachika commented to Takeshi, who had brought his chair all the way over from his desk.

“Honestly, I'd love to sit in Princess Alya's chair, but I'd rather not be killed today.” Takeshi bitterly laughed after glancing at the empty seat at the end of the row by the window.

“Oh, come on. Does she really scare you that much?”

“Not her. I'm talking about our classmates.”

“Makes sense.”

Even if the guys didn't kill him, they'd still probably rough him up a bit due to her status as an idol. It didn't help that the students' nameplates were on the right corners of their desks, so it was painfully obvious which desk belonged to who. The school believed that the students would naturally start taking better care of the school's equipment if they continued using the same desk throughout the entire year, but that also made it harder for students to borrow their peers' desks—without permission, at the very least.

Plus, seeing a girl's name on the desk out of the corner of your eye is unsettling as well.

Masachika opened his lunch box.

“What's that?”

“Today's special: yesterday's leftovers.”

“Yeah, I figured that much out myself.”

On the top layer of the two-layer lunch box was hamburger meat, which had been scattered about, and crammed into the bottom layer was white rice. Brown on the top and white on the bottom. At least there was a little broccoli to add a touch of color to the hamburger meat...if you could ignore its moderately wilted appearance.

“Well, at least it looks good.”

“Definitely looks like something a guy would throw together, though.”

“Because a guy *did* throw it together.” Masachika shrugged as his two best friends smiled crookedly. They knew that he lived alone with his father, so Masachika wasn’t especially bothered by their teasing. He placed his hands together.

“Anyway, let’s eat.”

“Let’s.”

“About time!”

They started their meal, but Masachika wasn’t really digging into his food like the others. He was still reflecting on what had happened a few minutes ago. He robotically carried his chopsticks from his lunch box to his mouth. That was when Takeshi suddenly reached into his plastic bag, which he’d brought his lunch in from the convenience store, and dragged out a comic magazine, perhaps having felt something gloomy about Masachika’s behavior.

“Hey, check out this week’s models, Blooming. They got them all together for a photo shoot.”

Takeshi pointed at the twenty-person idol group who had been exploding in popularity as of late. Even Hikaru, who usually showed zero interest in topics like this, jumped in, as he too had noticed something weird with Masachika.

“They have been on TV a lot lately, haven’t they? I thought they were going for a more innocent image, but it looks like they’re doing swimsuit modeling in magazines now, too.”

“This is apparently the first photo shoot with all of them together, too... Whoa. Seriously? I wasn’t expecting this girl to be so stacked.” Takeshi smirked as he stared at one of the models in a bikini.

“What about you, Masachika? Do you have a favorite?”

“I honestly don’t know a thing about idols or singers or whatever. I’ve heard of them before, but I don’t know any of their names.”

“Come on. Way to sound like an old man. There has to be an actress or singer you’re interested in.”

“No, seriously... I’ve never been a fan of any specific actress, either. There are some comedians who are cool, though.”

“Bro, for real? What about voice actresses? Any you like?”

“I’m not really interested in voice actors...”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me. What about you, Hikaru?”

“Do you really think I would be into those high-maintenance, flashy girls on TV?” Hikaru replied with a dark grin. Those words alone said all that needed to be known about how he felt about people on TV.

“What is wrong with you guys?! Are you men or not?! There has to be at least one actress you think is hot!” Takeshi shouted, annoyed that they couldn’t see eye to eye with him.

“How could you crush on someone you’d never be able to go out with?”

“Then what about 2D girls?”

“Yeah, but you can at least date them vicariously through the protagonist’s eyes.”

“What if the girl you like isn’t one of the main heroines, so the protagonist never goes out with her?”

“Takeshi... Are you familiar with fanfics? You’d be surprised what kind of things some people write...”

“You’re only sixteen years old, you know?”

“I never said I was talking about erotic fan fiction,” Masachika replied with a completely innocent look on his face.

“I agree. Girls in fiction would never betray you...,” Hikaru said with his dark grin.

“Hikaru, what’s wrong? Or am I talking to Shadow Hikaru?”

“Hikaru... I hate to break it to you, but cuckold comics do exist, too.”

“Masachika, stop!” Takeshi cried out.

“I knew it... All women are evil!” Hikaru grumbled.

“You make it sound like they killed your parents.”

“And whose fault is that?” Takeshi asked him critically.

He stared at Masachika with a reproachful gaze, making Masachika realize that he had gone too far, so he enthusiastically commented:

“Anyway, I guess I get it. It’s every man’s dream to secretly date a popular idol.”

“R-right?!”

“She’s everyone’s idol...is what everyone thinks, but she’s actually all mine.”

“I know exactly what you mean! It makes you feel superior to everyone else.”

They chattered on about fantasies none of them even had, but it seemed to put Takeshi in a good mood as he opened the comic magazine

one more time and handed it to Masachika.

“So? Who do you like? Don’t think about it. Just pick whoever you think looks cutest.”

“Hmm...”

Masachika flipped through the pages. Perhaps it was because he was a man. Or maybe it was his instincts as a boob-lover? Whatever the case, he couldn’t help but appreciate how well some of them filled out their bikinis. Takeshi grinned, seemingly aware of this.

“So you like the older women with the hourglass figures, huh? I’m a big fan of the younger girls—who are our age, too—but when you put them in bikinis... Know what I mean?”

“There isn’t a man in the world who could resist a body like hers.”

“Right? Boobs are filled with our hopes and dreams, after all!”

“They’re lumps of fat.”

“Could you please be quiet, Shadow Hikaru?”

Masachika grinned wryly at their exchange and turned the magazine in Takeshi’s direction.

“I guess if I had to choose someone, I’d go with this girl...”

He pointed to one of the models and looked up at his friends...who had expressions of surprise on their faces. Immediately, a chill ran down his spine as if a cold wind was blowing against his back. Masachika, instantly recognizing the situation, kept facing forward and started to desperately fight for his life using the only method he could think of: flattery.

“...if there wasn’t an extremely beautiful girl always sitting by my side! Because the girl in this magazine doesn’t hold a candle to her!”

“I’ll be confiscating that.”

“What the...?!”

A hand reached out from behind and grabbed the magazine. Masachika shrieked, his eyes following the magazine until they met Alisa’s glacial gaze looking down at him. Her eyes then fixed on the magazine, glowing with contempt.

“<Disgusting.>”

“Y-yeah, uh... I don’t understand Russian, but I can tell she’s revolted.”

“What a coincidence, Takeshi. Me too.”

“Ha-ha-ha...”

Takeshi and Masachika smiled awkwardly while Hikaru laughed as if

this had nothing to do with him, but when Alisa glared down at Takeshi and Hikaru intensely, they swiftly looked away and flinched back.

“Kuze... Did you seriously think it was okay for you, especially now that you are a member of the student council, to sneak smut like this into our school?”

“No, uh... Technically, Takeshi brought it with him.”

“Then you should have given him a warning.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Masachika recoiled, frightened by her eerily cold voice. After glowering in contempt at the three pathetic students for a good while, Alisa let out a deep sigh and placed the magazine down on their desk.

“Uh... Are you giving this back to us?”

“Don’t get the wrong idea. I simply don’t want to hold on to smut like that all day.”

“Wait a second. The cover may be a little lewd, and there are pictures of models on the first few pages, but overall, the magazine is filled with pure, wholesome material.”

“Says the little boy who was squealing over the perverse pictures with his friends.”

“Mmm... You got me there,” Masachika said with a groan, knowing she was completely right.

“You’re an idiot.” Alisa huffed one last time as she rolled her eyes and took a seat back at her desk.

“Hurry up and put that thing away before Alya changes her mind,” Masachika whispered angrily.

“All right... Wait. When did you join the student council?”

“Oh, right. The day before yesterday.”

“Why didn’t you tell me? What happened?”

“It’s a long story...”

The three male students moved over fearfully while whispering to one another. Alisa glanced at them in frustration, then rested her chin on her palm with her elbow on the desk and looked out the window. She thought back to what Masachika had been yelling a minute or so before. Despite knowing he was only trying to flatter her so she wouldn’t confiscate their magazine, she could feel her skin flush.

“<He really is an idiot.>”

She quietly whispered as if to distract herself from how hot she was feeling, but to Masachika, her harsh words really calmed the air, and he

inwardly sighed in relief. However...

“Hmm? Hikaru, what’s wrong?”

Masachika looked up, wondering what Takeshi was talking about when he noticed Hikaru staring hard at the cover of the magazine Takeshi was trying to tuck away. Both Masachika and Takeshi were baffled by his unusual behavior, since he had a strong dislike toward women. But before long, Hikaru pointed at one of the girls on the cover and noted:

“I was just wondering about the girl Masachika picked. What was her name again? Anyway, is it just me, or does she kind of look like Maria Kujou?”

Masachika immediately felt a piercing gaze boring a hole through his left cheek. The fleeting gentle atmosphere plummeted and was now as cold and sharp as an icicle.

Heyyy?! What is wrong with you, Hikaru?!

When he glanced to his side, he could tell Alisa was glaring at him through the reflection in the window, and a cold sweat began to slide down his back.

“Nah, I don’t know about that, man.”

He tried to play it off with a tense smirk, but...

“She does kind of look like Maria, now that you mention it.”

...Takeshi came in with a follow-up attack after taking a closer look at the cover.

How dense can one guy be?! Takeshi!!

Masachika was screaming at them in his mind, but the chilling blizzard from earlier was gone, so they seemed to be enjoying themselves without a care in the world. The blizzard, however, was not gone but had become a single sharp icicle that was stabbing Masachika right in the back.

“Right? Just look at her haircut and style. Her brown eyes and brown hair look just like hers as well.”

“Plus, she’s older than us. Masachika, the hell? I didn’t know you were into girls like Maria.”

The more excited they got, the more pain Masachika could feel pierce his cheek...metaphorically, of course.

O-oh, crap... One wrong word, and I’m dead.

As his survival instincts fiercely rang the alarm in his mind, he awkwardly choked out:

“I never said she was my type... Besides, Masha already has a boyfriend.”

“But you’d totally try to hit on her if she didn’t, huh?”

“Wait. ‘Masha’? Since when did you start calling her by her nickname? When did you two get so close?”

Why are they ganging up on me like this?! And why right now?!

The reason was because Masachika usually never expressed any interest in the opposite sex, especially when he treated Alisa and Yuki, perhaps the two most beautiful girls in school, like friends. His male friends even secretly worried that maybe he really was only interested in 2D girls. So even though this may not have been Masachika admitting he was in love, his two friends were relieved and somewhat excited to hear about his relationship with a 3D (real) girl. Masachika, on the other hand, felt like this was none of their business, which was emphasized by how aggravated he was.

“Guys, it’s a coincidence. I’ve never looked at Masha that—...”

But he couldn’t finish his sentence because he unfortunately could recall far too many times when he’d looked at Maria that way. His conscience naturally stopped him and said, “What kind of big fat liar are you?”

“I, uh... Yeah, I’ve never once considered dating her.”

Takeshi and Hikaru narrowed their eyes at him, clearly fed up at the fact that he was obviously trying to weasel his way out of this. Alisa’s scornful gaze jumped into the mix as well. Made sense, though. Who wouldn’t be disgusted to learn that someone was looking at their sister sexually?

“<Pig.>”

The insult whispered in Russian pierced Masachika’s heart. He couldn’t react, which meant he couldn’t argue, which made it all the worse.

“Then what about Yuki? Are you interested in dating her? Is what they say true about not being able to date your childhood friend?”

The moment Takeshi uttered Yuki’s name with a fed-up look on his face, there was something about Alisa that undoubtedly changed. Her gaze was piercing in a different way from a few moments ago as it skewered Masachika’s cheek. However, he thought not about Yuki but Ayano as he replied:

“You can’t date childhood friends. In fact, I have not and would not ever even think of considering such a thing. So just that we’re clear: Yuki and I will never be a couple, no matter what.”

“You’ve said that before, but why?”

Because they were siblings. They were blood-related siblings with the same parents. That was everything, but it was a secret he couldn’t reveal. All he could do was awkwardly smile at Takeshi, who shook his head as if it didn’t make a lick of sense to him.

“I don’t get you, man... She’s beautiful. She’s polite, she has a good personality, and she’s a perfect angel in class, too, which isn’t common these days.”

“Uh, right...”

Are we talking about the same Yuki? was Masachika’s knee-jerk response, but he caught himself and took a deep breath. It was only natural for everyone to view her as a proper young lady, since that was the only side of Yuki people saw at school. Little did they know that she was a total nerd in reality. Masachika couldn’t help but wipe the smile off his face, since he was aware of the real Yuki, but he couldn’t tell them the truth, even if they were his friends. So he ambiguously replied:

“But we’re lowly commoners compared with her. Know what I mean?”

“Oh... Right. I get it.”

“But wouldn’t that keep you from dating most girls at this school? I can’t count how many times I thought I kind of knew someone, then learned they were actually the daughter of some major corporation’s CEO or whatever.”

“Yeah, I guess. Anyway, I’d rather pick someone more on my level if I were going to date. And that’s a big if.”

“Dude, we’re talking about high school relationships here. Don’t you think you’re overthinking things?”

“So when you said you wanted someone more on your level, did you mean someone from a middle-class family?”

“Yeah, I guess. And, like, someone fun to be around? Someone you could date but still hang out with as friends...”

He naturally reminisced about *that girl* while not really thinking about the words that were coming out of his mouth.

“<S-someone like me?>”

A snowball’s chance in hell.

Her Russian slipped into his mind, infiltrating his memories, and he reflexively responded in his mind like Shadow Hikaru would. His face became dead serious, and he looked to his side to find Alisa still facing

away with her cheek resting on her palm...in an unusually stiff manner. After looking a little harder, he noticed she was faintly trembling and mumbling in Russian as if she was humming a song. But when Masachika strained his ears...his face went pale.

"I can't believe I said it. I can't believe I said it!"? Did she just squeal, too? Tsk. I can see you grinning in the reflection in the window, you know? Will you ever get tired of exposing yourself to me? Is this just a difference in culture? I heard that Russians were more straightforward than the Japanese. Is that it? You just say whatever comes to your mind if it's in Russian? ...Yeah, I know that's not it.

Still resting her chin on her right hand, Alisa poked her cheek, her lips twisting upward. Did she not realize Masachika was staring at her? Or perhaps she noticed, but her face got stuck like that? Whatever the case, it was a very unfortunate sight.

"Masachika? You okay?"

"Oh, uh... Also, like..."

Masachika began to reminisce once more after hearing Takeshi's voice, and the first thing that popped into his mind was *that girl's* smile. While his memories of what she looked like were fuzzy, he unconsciously grinned. She had a cute smile that'd make anyone smile as well.

"I like girls with a cute smile, too."

The instant he said that, the girl's smile in his mind was suddenly replaced by Alisa's smile from the other day.

What the hell? No.

After promptly shaking the thought out of his mind, he glanced at her out of the corner of his eye.

"..."

Her backside was stock-still, impressively so. You could almost hear her freezing over, and her expression reflected in the window was just as magnificent.

"Oh? A girl with a cute smile, huh?"

"Smiles are important, regardless of gender. I find it hard to get along with people whose eyes don't smile when they laugh and people who barely laugh at all." Hikaru weighed in.

"O-oh..."

Masachika understood exactly where Hikaru was coming from, but he noticed Alisa jump the moment he said that, making it hard to agree with him.

Please stop, Hikaru... Alya's getting hit by all the stray bullets.

Hikaru meant no harm by what he said, but for the most part, Alisa was objectively someone whose "eyes didn't smile" when she laughed, which she "barely" did as well. Masachika, however, knew that she laughed quite a bit when nobody else was around, and while her eyes didn't scrunch up, they were filled with joy... Alisa herself apparently had no idea, though.

"B-but, like, when people who don't usually smile do smile, it makes it all the more attractive. The almost-contradictory behavior is what makes it cute."

"You've got a point there,"" Takeshi and Hikaru both agreed with a nod. Alisa somewhat straightened her slightly hunched-over back.

"The intimacy is brief, though. You start to feel like strangers again right after they stop smiling."

"True that. The way people usually act is really important."

But Hikaru and Takeshi had chimed in once more, causing Alisa to hunch over again.

Quit it already! You're making all my effort go to waste! Alya's body can't take any more blows! She's going down!

Unable to stand it any longer, Masachika leaned in toward them, then gestured at Alisa with his eyes while whispering:

"Guys, cut it out. You're hurting Alya's feelings."

"Huh? Alisa?"

"Nah, man. Princess Alya doesn't care about stuff like this."

She did. She cared a lot. She was even on the verge of tears. Her reflection in the window made that much clear. Her lips were twisted, but in a different way from a few moments before, and it wasn't because she was trying to hold back a smile.

"<I don't care. I have friends. It doesn't matter.>"

She started putting on a bold front. Masachika did feel a little emotional seeing her like this. In fact, there might have also been a part of him that thought it was cute seeing her flustered for a change. But he felt sorry for her most of all. He felt guilty, and it tore at his heart.

"Just quit it, okay? And follow my lead...unless you want the afternoon classes to all feel like Antarctica? Because she's going to be ice-cold if we don't fix this."

"Er... Yeah, okay. You win."

"Y-yes, that is a good point..."

After getting them on board, Masachika resettled himself in his seat and opened his mouth, but before he could get out a word, Takeshi stopped him with his eyes.

Masachika, let me handle this.

Are you sure you can handle it?

Of course. No problem.

...All right. I'm counting on you.

They had an entire conversation with only their eyes before exchanging a slight nod. Takeshi thereupon boastfully snorted, then exclaimed in a loud voice:

“But I guess none of that matters when you’re as good-looking as Princess Alya!”

““You idiot!!””

Masachika and Hikaru simultaneously uttered the exact same words, taken aback by Takeshi’s paralyzing stupidity, but Takeshi himself simply blinked as if he had no idea why they were upset. If you looked up the word *aggravating* in the dictionary, it would just be a picture of his expression. But before Masachika could complain, a colder, more distant voice spoke up.

“Hmph. So that’s how you see me.”

“A-Alya...”

Masachika mechanically turned his stiff neck to look back and discovered the teary expression from a few moments ago had vanished; instead, it had transformed into a terrifyingly cold glare with absolutely no sign of warmth. Only after being subjected to Alisa’s chilling gaze did Takeshi finally realize what he’d done, and he froze.

“Well, excuse me for not being friendly and lacking charm. Sorry my face is my only redeeming feature.”

“Huh? No. I didn’t mean...”

“Maybe I should confiscate that magazine of yours after all.”

“What?! No, wait.”

“Hand it over.”

“...Yes, ma’am.”

Takeshi gave in to the pressure and submissively relinquished the comic magazine, which Alisa swiped out of his hands before storming back to her seat and sitting down. As a tense atmosphere filled the classroom, both Masachika and Hikaru shot Takeshi a reproachful glare.

“You make me sick.”

“No wonder you don’t have a girlfriend.”

“Hey?!”

The pathetic cries of the boy who’d shot himself in the foot drowned in the cold air hanging over the classroom.



Some minutes earlier, Ayano was walking down the hallway on the first floor after speaking with Masachika. She silently weaved her way among the students coming and going while staying out of sight as much as possible, like a leaf floating around rocks in the river. Before long, she arrived at an empty classroom without attracting anyone’s attention and knocked three times.

“Come in.”

“As you wish.”

Yuki stood waiting for Ayano in the darkness beyond the door.

“Have you finished talking with my brother?”

“Yes.”

“Good... Feel better now?”

As Ayano recalled their exchange, a warm light glowed in her eyes.

“Yes... Masachika is still the same man I hold close to my heart.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

Yuki was relieved to see the refreshing look in Ayano’s eyes, especially since she had made her distrust of and frustration with Masachika no secret as of late. While Ayano usually had a blank expression on her face, it was an acquired trait and not a lack of emotions. That was why Yuki was so relieved that Ayano’s misunderstanding about Masachika had been cleared, because she knew Ayano loved both her and her brother very much.

“It is rather dark in here. Allow me to turn on the lights.”

Ayano reached for the light switch by the door at her side, but Yuki immediately stopped her.

“Oh, don’t worry about that.”

“...Are you sure?”

“Yeah. I don’t want to draw any unnecessary attention. Plus...”

Yuki briefly paused, slightly lowered her gaze, and brushed her bangs back before posturing smugly.

“...the darkness makes this so much more badass.”

“...I apologize, but I still do not really understand the appeal,” Ayano replied with utmost sincerity to Yuki’s attempt at being edgy.

“Don’t worry about it. You’ve got plenty of time to learn.”

“Thank you.”

Yuki generously nodded back at her.

“Anyway, what did my brother say?”

“He said he still plans on running with Kujou.”

“Figured as much. What else?”

“He told me to tell the head of the family, ‘Don’t blame Yuki for this. If he has a problem, then he knows where to find me.’”

“Oh my. I see.”

Yuki instantly recognized that her brother was looking out for her. Her eyes widened in surprise for a brief moment before a grin curled her lips.

“Impressive... Looks like he’s serious about this.” Yuki looked as if she was happy from the bottom of her heart and could whistle a tune at any moment.

“Yes, his determination made my uterus tremble,” Ayano said, nodding.

“O-oh, uh... ‘Tremble,’ you say?”

“Yes,” Ayano confirmed, as if she’d said nothing to be ashamed of. Yuki grimaced.

“Hey, uh... Just to make sure, you’re not in love with my brother... right?”

“If you are referring to being romantically interested in him, then no. I admire him just as much as I admire and respect you. I have no romantic feelings for him, though.”

“Oh... Okay...”

“I would never even imagine doing something as insolent as dating him. Simply being used as an object is more than enough for me.”

“Yeah, that’s called BDSM.”

Yuki peered at Ayano with scorn for making that insane remark. Regardless, Masachika wasn’t off with his judgment of Ayano; she was a very sweet, incredibly affectionate person deep down inside. That much was true. But she was also someone whose excessive admiration for her two masters often mixed with her sexual preferences, making her unique desires quite apparent. There was always a part of her that felt a twinge of joy whenever Masachika or Yuki gave her orders. Ayano herself fully

believed her loyalty alone was what brought her this happiness. In fact, she was proud she felt joy. Even now, she had absolutely no idea why Yuki was glaring at her with disdain, so she curiously tilted her head.

“I apologize for my ignorance, but...what does ‘BDSM’ mean?”

“Huh? Oh, it stands for *Best Damn Suou Maid*.”

“Thank you very much. It is an honor. While you are already pegged to win the election, I shall maintain my discipline and always be submissive to you so that you may continue to dominate.”

“Wow, great choice of words,” Yuki replied in a monotonous voice.

“Really?” Ayano slowly blinked. “There is one last thing I forgot to tell you,” she added.

“Hmm? What is it?”

“Masachika told me that nothing has changed—that you are still the most important person in the world to him.”

“O-oh...”

With a serious expression, Yuki suddenly rushed over to the window facing the schoolyard, yanked the sliding window open with a *rattle*, then took in a deep breath...and held it in.

“Yuki? Is something the matter?”

“...”

But Yuki didn’t answer. She kept her hands clutched on to the windowsill in silence for a few moments before swiftly releasing the air in her lungs.

“Phew... That was a close one... I almost screamed my love for my brother to the entire school.”

After wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, she closed the window and shook her head with a deep exhale.

“*Sigh...* Why does he have to be so cute?” Yuki grinned and leaned against the wall as if to cool off. She crossed her arms, also pressing the crown of her head back as she gazed up at the ceiling and reflected.

“But... Huh. Not even Ayano’s pushing could make him change his mind...”

“He was worried about you, but he appeared to have made up his mind in regard to the election.”

“Yeah... He’s serious about this, huh? ...Heh! He really plans on running against me?”

Despite her own brother running against her, Yuki’s voice was filled with excitement.

“Now things are getting interesting. Honestly, Alya alone didn’t stand a chance against me.”

One might consider that an arrogant thing to say, but even Ayano agreed with her.

“I reached the same conclusion as well. Although I have not finished looking into it, it appears the majority of the first-year students are predicting that you will win. Kujou, on the other hand—to be honest, I found what she was doing to be reckless. Being a transfer student, she has no idea about your reign as the president in middle school.”

“Ha-ha-ha! That’s harsh. But yes, my supporters *are* as firm as rocks. Now, my dear brother...how do you plan on turning things around?”

Her eyes glowed as her lips curled upward into a smile that could only be described as ferocious.

“You seem happy.”

“I am. I get to fight that prodigy—the child prodigy of the Suou household, and he’s not going to be holding back. How could I not be looking forward to this?”

Yuki pushed off the wall and spread her arms out as if to dance.

“I’ve never beaten my brother in anything before, and now he’s got a powerful ally like Alya? And he’s serious about taking me on? My heart is singing. Now this is something worth doing. Come at me, Masachika! Because I’m going to hit you with everything I’ve got!” Yuki declared while clenching her fists. She turned her gaze back to Ayano. “And you’re going to help me, Ayano. Because we’re going to make him take this more seriously than anything he has ever done before.”

“Very well. I will do everything in my power to help.”

A strong light glowed in Ayano’s eyes, causing Yuki to smirk with evident satisfaction before turning around and exhaling while gazing out the window.

“By the way, Ayano...”

“Yes?”

Yuki looked over her shoulder at Ayano with a confident smirk and asked:

“...is it just me, or did I really sound like the last boss?”



CHAPTER 6

What all nerds want to do at least once in their life.

“Pair of jacks.”

“Heh-heh-heh. Full house.”

“...!”

The student council was throwing a welcome party for Masachika and Ayano after school. After having a rather early, light dinner in the school cafeteria—which was open at night as well, although with less on the menu—they took the party over to the student council room, where they enjoyed snacks and soft drinks while getting to know one another. They were split up into two groups: Masachika, Touya, and Chisaki were sitting at the office table, and the other four were playing cards on the guest sofa. It was mainly just Alisa and Yuki playing, though. Things had been awkward between them when the party first started (it was more like Alisa was purposely keeping her distance from Yuki), but thanks to Yuki actively trying to talk to her, Alisa gradually started to come out of her shell. Now they were having a friendly game of poker.

“Fold. I’m out,” Alisa said with a bit of a huff.

“Oh, you are? I only had a high card, but it looks like it pays to bluff sometimes.”

“Huh?!”

“Oh my. That’s too bad, Alya.”

Each one of them had been given a bag of snacks, which they were betting with, but Yuki was crushing her peers, perhaps due to being far more experienced. Around 80 percent of Alisa’s snacks now belonged to Yuki. Maria giggled at the sight and was immediately met with Alisa’s scornful glare. Meanwhile, Ayano was wearing her usual blank expression while indifferently dealing the cards as she stood between Alisa and Yuki. Surprisingly, she was a natural at dealing. It must have been her love for serving others.

“I might have said this last time we were playing board games together, but Yuki’s a cut above the rest when it comes to games,” Touya commented from where he sat by Chisaki while watching them play.

“Yeah, she is from a family of diplomats, after all. Games like that come naturally to her,” Masachika said, nodding.

“Hmm... I’m sure that’s part of it, but I think maybe it’s also because of how bad Alya is. She’s so easy to read.”

Masachika practically fell out of his chair, shocked by Chisaki’s blunt evaluation.

“Chisaki... There are some things better left unsaid...even if I was thinking the same thing!” Masachika chided her.

“...?! Oh... Sorry.”

“No, it’s fine... I mean, Alya really doesn’t have a good poker face. At all.”

“Wow, Kuze. Harsh.”

“I mean... Look at her. See?”

When Masachika rested his arm on the back of his chair and looked back, he saw Alisa’s eyebrows raise and her lips press together when she picked up the cards Ayano dealt her. After pondering for a few seconds, she bullishly bet a good portion of her snacks, but Yuki immediately went all in, raising the bet and causing Alisa to fold. Incidentally, both of them only had a high card, with Alisa holding the higher of the cards.

“See the expression she made? She makes it painfully obvious whenever she gets a bad hand.”

“I wasn’t expecting Little Kujou to be this easy to read. She always seemed much more emotionally restrained than her sister, but after seeing this...maybe Big Kujou is actually the harder one to read, after all,” Touya mused.

“Yeah... I think you might be right,” Masachika agreed while observing Maria, who was watching over the match with a gentle smile.

“I’ve known her for more than a year now, and honestly, I still never know what she’s thinking. She really does come off as this morally pure and good person for the most part, so I can see why everyone calls her Madonna, but she behaves so strangely sometimes,” Chisaki chimed in with a wry smirk.

“She does see things differently from most people, huh?”

“Or maybe she’s just an airhead?”

“Didn’t I just tell you some things were better left unsaid?!”

Masachika exclaimed and nearly slipped off his chair again, astonished by how blunt Chisaki could be.

“I could watch you fall out of your chair all day, Kuze,” Touya said, laughing.

“Ha-ha... By the way, why do you call Alya and Masha by those nicknames?”

“Hmm?”

“You know, ‘Big Kujou’ and ‘Little Kujou.’”

“Oh...”

Touya stroked his chin for a few moments, then grinned broadly at Masachika.

“I mean...it sounds kind of cool, doesn’t it?”

“...What? That’s it?”

Masachika reacted candidly as if the reason caught him off guard, but after noticing that Touya seemed kind of disappointed, he added in a fluster:

“Oh! I mean...! It definitely does sound cool! I know exactly what you mean! I was just not expecting you to say something like that with a straight face...”

“Oh... You get it, though, right?”

As Touya cleared his throat and collected himself, Chisaki put on some tea with a joyous smile.

“You don’t need to pretend. You’re just too embarrassed to call girls by their first names when you don’t have to, right?”

“W-well, uh... That may possibly be part of it, I suppose?”

Touya’s eyes flitted nervously, essentially confirming that his girlfriend was right.

“Wow. Just wow.”

Masachika didn’t know what else to say, but Touya suddenly looked smug and argued:

“I’m more surprised that you can call them by their nicknames.”

“You make it sound like I’m socially inept. It’s not a big deal.”

“Kuze, don’t forget I was pretty socially inept up until a year ago. I had almost no experience talking to girls.”

“Oh, right. I totally forgot about that.”

“Touya’s still new to this ‘being more outgoing’ thing. It took him forever to start calling me by my first name,” added Chisaki.

“That’s because you’re special.”

“T-Touya...! Y-you big dummy!”

“Ha-ha-ha! There’s nothing wrong with being embarrassed!”

Touya laughed dryly and clutched his side after Chisaki had elbowed him in the ribs.

“Would you like me to refill your drink, Ms. Sarashina?” asked Ayano, who suddenly emerged behind Chisaki without making a sound.

“Eep?!”

Chisaki overdramatically jumped and turned around to find Ayano standing there, and a twitchy grin twisted her lips.

“Ha-ha...ha-ha-ha... I’m impressed. Not many people can sneak up behind me without me noticing first.”

“What are you? Some kind of master swordsman?” Masachika inquired somewhat jokingly.

“Chisaki actually is a master swordsman, Kuze... One who mainly specializes in punching, though. I suppose that’d make her a master punchman...”

“Has a nice ring to it. Very modern,” Masachika replied in a monotone voice. After pouring Chisaki a cup of tea, Ayano curiously looked in Masachika’s direction as well. “Nah, I’m fine. I still have some of whatever this is left.”

“Very well. What about you, Mr. Kenzaki?”

“Hmm? Oh, thanks. I’ll take some.”

Touya threw back the rest of his drink before holding out his empty cup to Ayano, who promptly topped him off. Despite the drink being a carbonated beverage, it was impressive how she poured it with hardly any fizz.

“Thanks. By the way, I heard you work for the Suou household, and I was wondering... Is not making a sound a skill you needed to learn for the job?”

“Yes, I learned how to do so from my grandparents.”

“Oh?”

“Ayano’s grandfather was the secretary to Yuki’s grandfather, and her grandmother was their family’s housekeeper,” Masachika interjected, piquing Touya’s and Chisaki’s interest.

“Oh, really? Then does that mean your parents worked for them, too?”

“No, my parents are ordinary office workers,” Ayano responded simply.

“Wait. Really?”

“Yes, I really looked up to my grandparents, which was why I decided to become Lady Yuki’s retainer, not because it was our family business.”

“Huh. By the way, how long have you been serving Yuki?” Chisaki asked. Ayano’s eyes wandered up into space, but her expression didn’t change.

“Hmm... I am not exactly sure when I started, but I remember deciding to attend her when I was in second grade, I believe.”

“Second grade’?!”

“A testament to how much I admired my grandparents. Furthermore, I found that Masa—...Lady Yuki was someone worth serving.”

“Oh, cool.”

Although it sounded like she was going to say something else for a moment there, neither Touya nor Chisaki seemed to notice.

“Ayano, psst.”

Masachika waved Ayano over, and she obediently complied.

“I apologize. It was a slip of the tongue,” she said in a soft voice.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m just glad you caught yourself when you did. More importantly...”

“...?”

“Are you not mad anymore?” was what Masachika wanted to ask, but he swallowed those words as she gazed directly into his eyes...because her admiration was clearly written in hers. The cold glare she’d given him during lunch was nowhere to be found, and all that remained was love, respect, and loyalty.

The look in her eyes—just wow. But why? What did I do to get on her good-guy list? And when?

Masachika racked his brain over how he’d gotten her loyalty and affection to max level, since he couldn’t remember doing anything special, but he was distracted when Touya suddenly spoke up.

“So is it just good manners for maids to not make a sound? Is it so you don’t bother your boss?”

“Precisely. My grandparents always told me that to become one who serves, one must become air.”

“...What? I don’t think that means what you think it does.”

Masachika felt the same way as Chisaki. Ayano wasn’t wrong to blend into the background, but what her grandparents most likely meant was “Make sure to always have everything ready and neat so that your boss forgets you’re even there.” She’d been far too young to understand

nuance back then and had taken what they said literally, though. “*Become air? I can do that!*” she replied, and ever since then, she worked diligently to become air. Her grandparents found it adorable when she first started to behave politely and carefully while trying not to make a sound. “*Oh, are you trying to copy what we’re doing?*” “*Aww! What a cute little maid you are,*” they would say. But by the time Ayano stopped expressing emotion and they realized something was off, it was already too late. At any rate, her grandparents ended up deeply apologizing to her parents for mistakenly instilling a weird habit. However, Ayano herself seemed satisfied, and Yuki had already been turning into an edgy nerd during that time period and had responded by saying, “*An expressionless maid! How cute!*” So Ayano’s parents ended up giving up, allowing their daughter to continue her unorthodox path as a maid. Incidentally, she was planning on becoming Yuki’s secretary one day, but she’d been gradually becoming stealthier as of late, to the point that it made you wonder if she was actually training to become a ninja instead.

“Oh, Ayano. Do you think I could have a refill, too?”

“My apologies, Ms. Maria.”

Maria came walking over with an empty cup.

“Alya got mad at me and told me I was being annoying.”

She stuck her tongue out and took a seat by Masachika, then looked back at Alisa, who was glaring at her cards with a serious expression and furrowed brow. She only had three snacks left in her possession. It looked like this was the final round.

“Hey, is everything going to be okay? There isn’t going to be a fight, right?”

After Touya expressed concern in the midst of the tense atmosphere, both Masachika and Maria simultaneously shrugged.

“It’ll be fine. Alya may not look it, but she’s actually having a lot of fun,” said Masachika.

“Yes... She’s letting loose for a change and enjoying every minute of it,” Maria said as she observed her sister.

“You can say that again,” Masachika agreed.

“Oh my. You can tell?”

“Yeah, it’s obvious.”

As Masachika and Maria exchanged glances and shared a soft smile, Touya and Chisaki were completely baffled. *That’s her letting loose?* the two wondered as they tilted their heads in disbelief. But to Masachika,

Alisa was letting loose at a level he had never seen before. She was showing pure joy in everything she did while playing a game with perhaps her first female friend her age in years. For example, take the way she was looking at her depleted snack rations. Those weren't the eyes of someone panicking because they were about to lose. They were the eyes of someone disappointed that the game was almost over. Her eyes were saying, "I want to play more, but the game's going to end at this rate if I don't do something!"

What happened to being the "solitary princess"?

Masachika thought about her second nickname at school and rolled his eyes. Even though he'd always known she wasn't as unapproachable as everyone made her out to be, when he saw her enjoying playing cards like this, he was moved in a way that was hard to put into words.

"Oh my. It looks like we're all out."

Masachika turned around to the sound of Maria's voice and saw that the plastic bottle in Ayano's hand was empty. Ayano went to go grab another, but she soon realized the rest of the beverages were done as well, and she froze.

"How about I go downstairs and buy us some drinks from the vending machine?"

"Allow me to take care of—"

"Don't worry about it, Ayano. You're the heroine today. Allow me. ♪"

"...?"

Not only Ayano, but both Touya and Chisaki were also confused by what she meant, but Masachika seemed to get it.

"Uh... It means you're one of the guests of honor today and a girl, which makes you the heroine."

"Exactly. ♪ Now let's go, hero. I'm counting on you to protect me. ♪"

"Wait. Seriously?"

Her suggestion took Masachika by surprise, but after realizing that it would be hard for one girl to carry all those beverages by herself, he urged Ayano to relax and stood.

"Hey, I'm gonna go grab some drinks at the vending machine downstairs. Need anything?" Masachika asked while facing the sofa where Alisa and Yuki were sitting.

"Get me a soda, Kuze, will ya?"

"I'll have a cola... Wait. Ginger ale, please."

“Um... I’ll go with the lemon tea.”

“I would love a café au lait if possible. Oh, the brown one, not the white.”

“Sweet red-bean soup, please.”

“I’m fine with just water.”

“Who do you think I am, Prince Shotoku? Stop yelling all your orders at once. And, Masha, you don’t need to tell me what you want. We’re going to the vending machine together.”

“Oh, right. ♪” Maria smirked as if to say “oopsie,” and Masachika smirked back at her. Touya then began looking for something to write everyone’s orders on, but Masachika spoke up before he could find anything.

“Sigh... Soda, ginger ale, lemon tea, the brown café au lait, red-bean soup, and water. Got it.”

“““...?!”””

Both second-year students and Alisa stared in utter astonishment as Masachika and Maria left the student council room. Once in the hallway, the motion detectors sensed their movement, and the lights turned on. The red evening sun gilded the schoolyard outside the window as they walked down the hallway until Maria said with a relaxed tone:

“Thanks again, Kuze.”

“For what?”

“For helping Alya. For deciding to run with her in the election... I’m sure she’s thrilled.”

Her expression was brimming with compassion, fitting for someone also known as Madonna at school.

“That’s nothing you need to thank me for...”

“Oh? But it is. Before you came along, Alya didn’t have anyone she could count on.”

“Huh...”

Maria was wearing a gentle, more relaxed smile, unlike her usual bubbly one, when Masachika unconsciously stopped in his tracks and muttered:

“Wait... Are you...?”

“Hmm?”

“Oh, uh...”

After almost involuntarily saying what was on his mind, he stopped himself and wondered if it was really okay to ask. However, before he

realized it, he was already raising the question again as if Maria's gentle gaze was compelling him to.

"This might just be my imagination, but do you purposely try not to act serious around Alya?"

Maria slowly blinked as if she was caught off guard. She then shifted her gaze to the outside world on the other side of the window, her lips curling into a breathtakingly beautiful, mature smile.

"I don't want to compete with Alya."

Although what she said didn't sound like an answer at first, Masachika seemed to understand. *I knew it*, he thought.

"Alya is an extremely hard worker who always puts everything she has into anything she does...and that is one of the things I love about her."

Maria spoke as if she was imagining a world where only the two of them existed.

"Meaning you're playing the part of the 'laid-back older sister' so she won't see you as a rival?"

She giggled at his straightforward, blunt question.

"I'm not acting. Taking everything so seriously gets tiring. Does it not? You have to relax at least a little. Everything in moderation... Oh, but I don't deny I do behave more 'free and easy' around Alya."

"Ha-ha-ha... 'Free and easy,' huh?"

"Giggle... Can you blame me? She spoils me because of it."

"Oh, she does, does she?" Masachika said with a wry smile, thinking about how it was usually the other way around with sisters.

It's hard to tell when she's joking and when she's being serious.

Masachika scratched the back of his head while staring up at the ceiling, wondering if she was actually a serious person deep down inside or as laid-back as she usually appeared. That was when Maria's whispers tickled his ears.

"I don't want Alya to be alone."

When he lowered his gaze and saw her serious expression, his heart skipped a beat. He swallowed his breath as she gazed right into his eyes, smiling softly before continuing as if she was speaking to herself.

"Not only sisters, but relationships between siblings in general are also really difficult. They're the closest people to you, but because of that, you compare yourselves to each other."

"Yeah..."

Masachika was painfully aware of what she meant. Masachika, the

boy who'd abandoned the home he was born into, despised his mother, rebelled against his grandfather, and ran away from home...but once he had escaped, he realized he was empty. There was nothing he wanted to do. There was nothing he wanted to be. He had forced everything upon his sister and became a free man, and yet he was nothing.

I couldn't continue like that. I had to do something—something I couldn't do when I lived in that house—something I truly wanted to do. Because what would be the point of ever running away otherwise?!

...I was anxious, but nothing changed. There was nothing that got me excited. In the end, I was nothing more than a brat who impulsively ran away from home and was too proud to go crawling back.

Yuki took over as the eldest child of the family and grew up to become a magnificent young lady. And I? I wasted the talent I was blessed with and slowly faded away until I was nothing. I could make a difference if I put my mind to it, and yet I didn't even try to do anything. There was no importance to my existence.

It was impossible not to compare a worthless piece of garbage like him with his hardworking sister, who had unconditional love for her family. The only reason he wasn't overcome by inferiority and remained close with his sister was because of the effort she put into their relationship. She never changed. Even now, she made sure her brother knew that she loved him. To her, it didn't matter if he was Masachika Suou or Masachika Kuze. She loved him all the same. And she wasn't embarrassed to say so, which was why Masachika couldn't help but love her back.

If it wasn't for her, he most certainly would have kept his distance.

She really is the perfect sister.

That was when he suddenly realized something. Was Yuki acting like a bumbling nerd around him so that he wouldn't feel insecure? Was she purposely acting like an idiot at times for his sake?

No... That's really just who she is.

Although he realized he was overthinking it, he also realized that it may be somewhat true, and that was why he felt like he could kind of understand why Maria did what she did. It wasn't merely an act. It was a side of her that she wanted to keep secret because she loved her sister... and she wanted to be loved by her as well. Most people want to look cool in front of people they like. Maria simply strived for the opposite, but the why was no different.

“Masha... You’re a really good sister.”

“Heh. ♪ I am, aren’t I? Looks can be quite deceiving.”

She proudly puffed out her chest with a smug grin, but her smile almost immediately turned mischievous as she placed a finger in front of her lips while closing one eye.

“You can’t tell Alya any of this, okay?”

Masachika’s heart skipped a beat, having never seen Maria look so alluring before, so he dryly snorted to hide his nervousness.

“I won’t tell her. She wouldn’t believe me even if I did. ‘Hey, your sister is actually a very serious person.’ Like she’d buy that.”

“Oh my. I think you’re overestimating my seriousness. I’m still far more laid-back than Alya. Besides...”

Maria’s troubled smirk instantly faded, and she looked into Masachika’s eyes as if she were looking into his soul.

“...I’m not the only one hiding their more serious side. Isn’t that right, Kuze?”

“...”

Masachika was going to try to joke his way out of giving a real answer, but he immediately realized that would be pointless and shrugged.

“I don’t have some respectable reason why I do what I do like you.”

I wasn’t doing it for anyone else. The only reason I was goofing off and acting like an idiot was to protect myself.

“I do it for myself...because I’m selfish,” Masachika mumbled self-deprecatingly, figuring Maria wouldn’t understand his incoherent grumbles. Masachika recognized and accepted that he was garbage, but that didn’t change the fact that he was still afraid of people knowing that part of him. He joked around because he didn’t want people to realize that deep down inside, he was a scumbag. After all, being known as a slacker or an idiot was far better than people thinking he was a scumbag. He would never be completely open with anyone in order to keep that part of himself hidden from them. But all he was doing was protecting what little, insignificant pride he had in the end. He was the great pretender, living his life as a fraud, which was why people who lived true to themselves looked so bright to him. They were radiant, and it made him sick that he couldn’t live his life like them.

“I guess you could say I play the unreliable slacker because it’s fun. That’s all. Anyway, just don’t worry about me.”

And yet again, he played the fool so he could avoid actually opening

up to her and having her realize who he really was. Why did he start talking about himself like this in the first place? He hardly ever showed vulnerability, even to his family.

I keep lowering my guard when I talk to Masha for some reason...

Perhaps this was due to how accepting she was? Masachika goofily smirked while looking away, regretting revealing this side of himself to someone he hadn't known for very long. Maria quietly approached him and gently raised her hand.



“It’s okay.”

“...?!”

“It’s all going to be okay. You’re doing your best, and it’s all going to work out, Kuze,” Maria affectionately assured him as she rubbed his head.

“...?! I...! I’m not...!”

...doing my best. And what was going to be okay anyway? Masachika promptly wondered, but he was unable to turn those thoughts into words and simply lowered his gaze. His heart quaked. He couldn’t say anything. He felt strangely nostalgic. It was so soothing, and yet if he let his guard down even a little bit, the tears would overflow, so he clenched his teeth and desperately fought the urge.

“You are a boy, after all... You’re so strong.”

Maria looked at him with eyes of infinite kindness as if she was trying to soothe a hurt child or calm a fussy baby. After a few moments, Masachika uncomfortably moved his drooping head, and Maria immediately stopped touching him as if she understood why.

“...I’m really sorry,” Masachika muttered.

“You shouldn’t be. I’m older than you, so it’s my job to look out for you. *Giggle.* I finally feel like a second-year student in the student council. Alya and Yuki are so mature for their ages that I always feel like the younger member who needs guidance.”

“Ha-ha-ha. I can see that.”

Maria pouted while somehow also showing off her usual bubbly smile. Masachika was grateful to her for acting as she usually did.

“Anyway, I...I’ll make sure this doesn’t happen again.”

“Why? I don’t mind. If anything, I welcome it.”

“I can’t. I’m a man, and my pride won’t allow it. Plus, I’d feel guilty, since you have a boyfriend.”

“Oh... Right. ♪ But it’s fine. He’s not the kind of person who would let something like this bother him!”

“Oh...” Masachika gave an unsure nod as Maria proudly puffed out her chest. Was it really okay to take her word at face value, or was she joking again?

“At any rate, shall we get going? Everyone’s going to die of thirst if we keep them waiting any longer,” Maria commented.

“Good point. We wouldn’t want that,” Masachika agreed, putting his thoughts on hold for now. They set out for the vending machine on the first floor again, bought everyone their drink, and carried them back to the

student council room together.

“Oh, hey. About time you two got back.”

“Yeah, uh...”

“Sorry about that. ♪ Kuze and I just had so much fun talking. ♪”

“Really? Cool. Anyway, good timing. We actually just finished getting everything ready.”

For some reason, the moment they’d opened the door to the student council room, Touya had been waiting for them with an audacious smirk.

“Ready for what?” Masachika asked curiously, and Touya’s smirk grew even more pretentious.

“For the most mentally challenging game of all time. A little student council tradition of ours.”



“...So it’s mah-jongg.”

A slightly out-of-place mah-jongg table stood in the middle of the student council room. It was well worn, clearly showing its age as the beautiful women of the council sat around it, making the entire scenario seem even more surreal. Touya smiled stiffly as if he felt the same way and then he shuffled the tiles.

“By the way, I wasn’t lying when I said it was tradition to play mah-jongg at our welcome parties.”

“Okay... Well, I’m familiar with the game, but what about everyone else?”

Masachika turned his gaze to the others.

“I know how. My family and I play together sometimes,” Chisaki said confidently.

“I think I at least know how to arrange the tiles,” Yuki offered.

“Same here,” Ayano said simply.

“I’m sorry. I don’t really know...” Alisa admitted.

“I know for the most part,” Maria said, unperturbed.

There were surprisingly a good number of members who knew how to play. Masachika scornfully glared at his sister, who was a sixth *dan* in online mah-jongg, for saying she “thought she at least knew how to arrange the tiles.” He then began to think about the competition, but Touya promptly began to put them into teams.

“Now, as is tradition, we’ll be playing in pairs. Chisaki and me, Suou

and Kimishima, and Kuze and Little Kujou. Big Kujou, you'll be on your own. Is that okay?"

"That's fine with me. ♪ Need someone extra to liven up the party, yes?"

"Masha, are you really referring to yourself as 'someone extra'?"

"Because I am. ♪ I only know the basics of mah-jongg, after all." Maria smiled in a very bubbly way as she took a seat. Masachika then shifted his eyes in Alisa's direction.

"Hey, uh... How about you stand behind me and watch me play for now so I can explain how the game works?"

"Okay."

Masachika took a seat across from Touya while Chisaki sat to his right. It appeared Yuki was planning on watching for now.

"Anyway, everyone ready? We don't have much time until they lock up the school, so we're going to have to make this a half game. Oh, and as is tradition..."

Touya suddenly grinned sharply.

"...whichever team wins gets to 'order' the other three teams to do whatever they want. Within reason, of course."

"What?"

Masachika arched an eyebrow, since his partner was a complete beginner, putting him at a disadvantage, but the others surprisingly seemed to be all for it.

"Sounds good to me! A little danger makes it so much more exciting!" Chisaki said.

"Well, I suppose nobody here would request anything too wild, so I'm fine with it, too. ♪" Maria added merrily.

"I don't mind, either." Yuki agreed to the stakes.

"Lady Yuki's wishes are my own." Ayano complied unsurprisingly.

It's pretty easy to imagine how my competitive partner is going to react after all that.

"I'm fine with that, too."

"Did you forget the part where you were an absolute beginner?"

When Masachika looked back at Alisa, she seemed like she wasn't going to back down, no matter what.

How can she be so confident?

But he reluctantly agreed in spite of his complaints.

"Sigh... Fine, I'm in. By the way, the winning team gets to order the

other teams to do something, right? Not each individual in the winning team?”

“Exactly. After all, it wouldn’t be fair to Big Kujou if she somehow miraculously managed to win.”

“I’m going to need a miracle, huh?”

Maria smiled as if she didn’t care, but Touya clearly didn’t consider her a threat.

“Oh, by the way, President... What are the specific rules?” Masachika asked as he gathered his tiles.

“Hmm... Let’s start with thirty thousand points and allow red *dora*, *kuitan*, backdoor, *agariyame*, double *ron*, triple *ron*, double *yakuman*, triple *yakuman*... Well, you get the picture. Anything goes. Oh, except the game doesn’t end when someone goes bankrupt.”

“Ha-ha... All right.”

“Okay, then. Let’s start. Chisaki, you’re up!”

“Huh?”

Chisaki blinked in bewilderment as if she had been taken completely off guard and was only planning on watching the game, but Masachika was just as surprised.

“Wait. You’re not going to start us off, President?”

“Heh! The hero always arrives fashionably late.”

“Uh-huh.”

And just like that, their mah-jongg match began. However...

Still, though...what’s up with this student council?

...Masachika was surrounded by beautiful women: to his left, his right, and in front of him. And within the lovely flowers sat a single background character.

If only this was strip poker, I—

“Kuze?”

The instant the lewd thought popped into his mind, he felt a chill from behind and immediately began to hastily explain the rules.

“Huh? Oh, right. So after rolling the dice, Masha became the dealer. The dealer receives more points when winning and gets to be the dealer again next hand as well...”

Ignoring the cold glare coming from behind and the all-knowing, smug gaze from the individual diagonally to the right, Masachika continued:

“Basically, you want a winning hand of fourteen tiles. So four groups

of three matching tiles and a pair. That's the gist of it."

"My apologies. It looks like I win this round."

"Oh, see how Ayano just won the hand with a self-drawn tile? That's called *tsumo*. It's called *ron* when you win thanks to an opponent's discard."

Alisa, being a quick learner, already had the rules down for the most part by the time the fourth round started.

"What does it mean to go bankrupt and lose?"

"Going bankrupt means you have less than zero points, and there's a rule where the game automatically ends whenever that happens to one of the players, but we're not playing with those rules this time. So... congratulations! Now you can go into debt and still have to suffer for who knows how many rounds!"

"...Is that a good thing?"

"Well, it does give you the chance to turn things around if you're being optimistic...and it could also put you into debt for the rest of your life if this was an actual mah-jongg game with gambling."

"Have you ever gambled on mah-jongg before?"

"Oh, look. I can call a *pon*."

"Kuze?"

After the end of the fourth hand, Masachika switched places with Alisa. Both Ayano and Chisaki won twice that round, putting Ayano in the lead, followed by Chisaki, Masachika, and then Maria.

Ayano really plays it safe. She's good. Chisaki, on the other hand, plays really aggressively. And Masha? ...I'm not even sure she knows how to play.

They continued on while Masachika gave Alisa advice from time to time, but Chisaki and Ayano kept competitively picking up the wins and becoming the dealer. When the second half of the game started, Chisaki switched places with Touya and Ayano with Yuki. Almost immediately, Yuki won with a high-scoring hand, and when Touya eventually ended up becoming the dealer, he won three hands in a row.

Huh... Touya's cheating, Masachika thought as he watched from behind Alisa.

Now I get it... "Anything goes," huh? Which means cheating's fine, too.

From what Masachika could see, Touya was loading tiles into the wall and using a sleight of hand when drawing them to swap the unwanted tile

with something else from the wall—he was sure to draw whatever he needed to win.

“Oh, wow. I win again.”

“Wow, Touya! You’re amazing!”

“Ha-ha-ha! And that’s why I’m the president.”

Although Touya cheerfully accepted Chisaki’s compliment without a hint of modesty, if you looked hard enough, you could see a slight shadow over his eyes as if he was kind of ashamed of himself.

Looks like Chisaki doesn’t know he’s cheating, so he must be using some sort of trick that makes it near impossible to tell from behind.

That was when Touya finally realized he had been caught.

You noticed, huh, Kuze? Impressive. I wasn’t expecting Suou to notice as well, either... But no hard feelings, okay? Because this is also a student council tradition.

And he wasn’t lying. This was actually a Seiren Academy high school student-council tradition... At every welcome party for first-year students, the president and vice president would cheat and do everything it took to beat the first-year students’ asses in mah-jongg. It was their way of teaching the new members that they’d never survive the student council presidential election if they couldn’t even survive a game of mah-jongg... Or at least, that was what their excuse was every year when in reality, what they were doing was closer to mild abuse and manipulation than anything else.

Heh... They told me last year it was to “help me learn and grow” and made me do ten laps around the school every day for an entire month after every student council meeting.

A dark smirk curled Touya’s lips as he thought back to the order he had been given—which would send any PTA into a frenzy if they ever caught wind of it—when he lost at mah-jongg. On the bright side, it helped him lose weight and gain confidence, and he still routinely went on runs... but that was another story. Although they made him run to help him “learn and grow,” the president and vice president at the time ran with him, too, and after he finished the month, they’d praised him. He had even cried a little. But, well, that was also a story for another time.

Damn, I really was blessed to have them in my life! thought Touya.

President, Vice President, just you watch... I am going to show them how great the student council president is with this move you taught me when I took over!

Bizarrely pumped up, Touya was ready to get his fifth win in a row when all of a sudden...

“Ah! *R-ron!*!” Alisa awkwardly announced the moment Yuki discarded a tile.

“Wow. *Riichi dora...* That’s twenty-six hundred points, I believe,” Yuki commented after counting the points. Alisa smiled, although in a somewhat disappointed manner as if the score was lower than she’d anticipated.

“Heh! A little payback for what you did to me in poker.”

“Yes, you got me.” Yuki smiled empathetically as she handed Alisa her point sticks. Alisa immediately looked back at Masachika haughtily.

“Wow. Congratulations on your first win.”

“Thanks.”

Alisa flicked her hair back proudly, but...

Alya... Yuki gave you that tile on purpose.

...Masachika, who knew exactly what was going on, smiled softly as he gazed at Alisa’s profile. And he wasn’t the only one. Everyone besides Alisa and Maria knew what was going on. Yuki had predicted Alisa had a hand with a low score, and she had perfectly foreseen the tile she needed for a *ron* call. Why had she done this, though? Because she needed Alisa to get the win to prevent Touya from being the dealer again. Only the Kujou sisters didn’t understand what was going on, since they were beginners.

“Congratulations, Alya.”

“Thanks, Masha. You better get a win, too, okay?”

But nobody dared to say anything, since Alisa was all puffed up in front of her sister, who hadn’t won once yet. Touya and Chisaki forced pitiful smiles, Yuki did her usual archaic smile, and Ayano clapped with a blank look on her face. The student council room at Seiren Academy was a kind place.

“Ahem. Shall we start the next hand?”

Touya began shuffling the tiles. Although Yuki’s smooth move stopped him from becoming the dealer again, Maria’s future was hopeless since she still didn’t have any points, and Touya was already far ahead of the pack with Yuki in second place and Alisa in third.

Hmm... I suppose I’ve done enough. The others are going to start getting suspicious if I go overboard. I just need to make sure I don’t play into their hand.

Touya was sure he was going to win at this point.

...How naive he was.

“Alya, you think I can play some?”

“Huh? But...”

“I still haven’t won a hand, which kind of puts me in an awkward position since you already got a win and you’re a beginner. Know what I mean?”

“I guess. Fine. We can switch.”

“Thanks.”

After swapping out with Alisa, who was in the best of moods for getting revenge against Yuki, Masachika sat down and locked onto his sister.

...In two minutes, Touya was about to learn a hard lesson about what happened when you underestimated these siblings (nerds?).

“Oh. My apologies, President. I made a little mistake.”

“What?”

“Ron. Dealer *baiman*, twenty-four thousand points.”

It was only the second turn when Touya discarded an ordinary tile, which played right into Yuki’s hand. He still believed it was merely a coincidence at this point, but he immediately recognized something was wrong when Masachika won next.

“Oh. *Tsumo*.”

“What?”

Another two minutes went by, and he didn’t even get a turn this hand.

“*Chiihou*. Wow. I won as a nondealer on my first drawn tile. *Yakuman* —and I got the highest standard scoring hand.”

“Wow, Masachika! That was incredible!”

“Oh my. You won already?”

“What?! ‘*Chiihou*’?!”

“Congratulations, Mr. Masachika.”

“Uh...?”

In the midst of the female members’ excited and bewildered gazes, Touya looked across the table at Masachika.

Tsk! Impressive. I didn’t think you had it in you, Kuze.

Heh... You made your first mistake when you thought you could cheat to defeat me.

Masachika returned Touya’s twisted smirk with a fearless grin of his own...because he was cheating, too. Yuki may have shamelessly said,

“Wow, Masachika! That was incredible!” like she didn’t know what was going on, but she’d played a part in the cheating as well.

What kind of nerds would we be if we didn’t know how to cheat with a little dice control?!

There probably wasn’t another nerd in Japan who could relate to what Masachika was screaming in his mind, but these two siblings had mastered the art of cheating. They got exactly the number they wanted when they rolled the dice as if it were only natural. Incidentally, it was their paternal grandfather who had mentored them in the art of cheating.

Sorry, President. It’s over. It’s just too easy when you have two people loading tiles into the wall like this.

Tsk...!

They closed the huge gap in points in only a few minutes, making Touya narrow his eyes in frustration, which amused Masachika.

Don’t worry, President. I promise we won’t cheat during the last round.

What? Don’t tell me you...

Touya almost gasped aloud when Masachika made eye contact with him. After the two siblings won their hands, everyone was almost tied for first, with the exception of the holy mother Maria, who was deep in debt. Whoever won this next hand was probably going to win the entire game.

We wouldn’t want our partners to know we’re cheating, right? Let’s play fair and square and wrap this game up.

...Hmph. All right. I don’t need to cheat to win. You will feel the great weight and power I carry as the president!

They exchanged manly smiles in agreement.

Now...

...let’s have...

...a fair fight!

The curtains of fate were raised, and the final battle concluded.

“Oh my. I think I won this hand?”

““Huh?””

The two men turned their goofy expressions in the direction of the unexpected, unsure voice; looked at Maria’s hand; and immediately exchanged glances.

“President...”

“Yeah...”

“Anything goes, right? Which means this...”

“...Yeah.”

“Masha, th-that’s...”

“Chisaki? Huh? Guys, what’s wrong?”

Chisaki looked shocked. Even Ayano’s eyes were wide.

“Four concealed triplets, triplets of all three dragons, a hand of only dragons and winds...,” Yuki muttered with a twitching grin.

“Oh my. I have four *yaku*? Um...I guess that’d make this worth around eight thousand points?”

“That’s quadruple *yakuman*! That’s one hundred twenty-eight thousand points!” Masachika shouted in despair.

“What was all that for? Everything I did...,” Touya uttered bitterly as he finally recovered from his initial shock.

“Seriously?!”

Maria’s miracle put her in first place when the game ended, making everything the others did meaningless. Yuki and Ayano came in second, followed by Touya and Chisaki. Meanwhile, Masachika and Alisa dropped into last place since a nondealer won the round, which meant they had to pay even more with the points they had. Maria was then bestowed with the right to give an order to the six losers.

“Hmm... Now what should I ask you all to do?”

She placed an index finger on her lips and looked around the room until her eyes landed on the tiny, ribbon-adorned bags of baked sweets that had been passed out at the beginning of the welcome party. Her eyes widened as if she had an epiphany. Masachika had a really bad feeling about this...and his gut ended up being right.

—A few minutes later.

“Oh my gosh! You guys are so cute. ♡”

Maria gave a heartwarming smile to the slightly bashful girls and the trembling, emasculated boys standing before her.

“President...”

“Don’t say another word, Kuze.”

Everyone had to wear a ribbon for the rest of the day—that was Maria’s order. Maria herself put the ribbons on their heads, and wow—big deal for the girls, right? Real big deal. They looked like they got a little makeover, especially Chisaki, who wasn’t fashion-conscious and ended up looking so good that the other girls squealed in surprise when they saw her. The problems were Masachika, who had a generic NPC face, and the

giant Touya, who had the face of a middle-aged man.

“What did I do to deserve this...?”

“You? Look at me. This is a crime against humanity.”

“I don’t know. Generally, popular people can get away with doing things others consider kinda eccentric. People are more accepting; maybe they’ll go, ‘Oh, he’s into ribbons? Cool.’ But when your average student like me does this kind of thing, people usually cringe and call you names.”

The two boys exchanged glances, feeling sorry for themselves, when the other student council members approached them.

“C-come on... It’s not that bad. I—I actually think you two look good,” Chisaki managed to choke out.

“That’d be a lot more convincing if you didn’t look like you were about to burst out laughing. Instead, it just makes me feel worse.”

“She’s right, Masachika. You look really good. Trust me.”

“Your eyes are laughing, Yuki.”

“I am being serious. Wouldn’t you agree, Ayano?”

“Yes, you look very good.”

“I’m more worried that you can say that with a straight face.”

“Kuze...”

“Alya...”

Alisa’s expression was indecipherable when she said his name, but the moment Masachika looked in her direction, her eyebrows flew up, and she quickly covered her mouth and turned her head away.

“Don’t look away. Say something, dammit.”

“...! I—I think you look really good. You look...cute?”

“Just go ahead and laugh! Get it out of your system already!”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“Yuki! I wasn’t talking to you!”

Yuki somehow cackled while maintaining her gentlewoman facade, so Masachika shot her a piercing glare. However, Chisaki began to laugh as well as if Yuki’s laughs were contagious. Even Alisa’s shoulders started shaking as she stared at the floor, covering her mouth, so Masachika just gave up.

“President, Kuze, look this way. ♪”

“D-don’t tell me you’re going to take our picture?!?”

“Of course I am! Today’s a special day, after all. ♪”

Touya whispered to Masachika, whose expression had tensed in fright.

“Just give it up, Kuze. We cheated, and we still lost. We don’t have any right to refuse.”

“K-kill me!”

Those were the final words of the captured knight as his expression twisted in agony. Only the sounds of the girls’ laughter and the window shutters closing echoed throughout the student council room after that, coming to an end when a teacher stopped by to tell them they were locking up.

CHAPTER 7

It's a promise.

“Alisa Kujou.”

“...?”

Alisa turned around in response to someone calling her name during lunch the next day. Standing behind her was a girl with perfectly straight, almost shoulder-length black hair who gave off an intellectual vibe. Alisa didn't recognize the voice when she first heard it...and she didn't recognize the girl's face, either, but she could tell she was in the same grade due to the color of the ribbon she was wearing. And yet despite having never met before, the gaze behind the girl's glasses wasn't the least bit friendly.

“...What?” Alisa responded, her guard up.

“I'm Sayaka Taniyama from Class F. I know this is sudden, and I apologize for that, but do you have a moment to talk?” the girl asked in a sharp tone as she firmly resettled her glasses. She gestured with her eyes to the inner court outside the hallway. While her words were polite, there was still nothing friendly about the way she was speaking. Normally, Alisa would ask what exactly she wanted, but there was something about the girl's name that sounded familiar to her, and she furrowed her brow.

Sayaka Taniyama...? Isn't that the name of the girl who fought against Yuki in the election in middle school?

Alisa had heard all about her the other day from Masachika, especially about how she was a candidate Alisa had to watch out for other than Yuki. Sayaka Taniyama—she was the daughter of the CEO of Taniyama Heavy Industries, one of the leading shipbuilding companies in the country, so she came from an extremely wealthy family, making her one of the elites at Seiren Academy. Sayaka herself was incredibly talented as well. Her test scores were always within the top ten in her grade, and she worked as the class officer every year, so all the teachers knew her. What was most impressive, however, was how she'd defeated the candidates for president

and vice president from Class 3 at the debate in middle school. She crushed more rivals in the race than anyone else, including Yuki. That was why she was the candidate Masachika was most worried about other than his sister.

And that person, a future potential rival, was asking Alisa to meet her outside to talk. There was no way she could say no.

“...Sure.”

“Thank you very much,” Sayaka replied without a hint of gratitude in her voice before walking into the inner court from the edge of the hallway. Alisa followed after Sayaka, and they stopped underneath a large tree in the middle of the courtyard.

“First, I would like to confirm one thing: Do you really plan on running with Kuze in the election?”

“...Yes. Why?” Alisa said, although she wondered where Sayaka had heard that. A furrow appeared in Sayaka’s brow, and she continued with obvious malice in her voice:

“How sleazy of you. Are you not ashamed of yourself?”

“...Excuse me?”

Alisa was more dumbfounded than angry by the sudden insult hurled at her.

“You stole him away because you knew Yuki wanted to run with him. Were you trying to provoke her? What you did was low, even as a joke.”

“E-excuse me!?”

Alisa couldn’t take the verbal abuse any longer, though.

“How dare you accuse me of such a thing! Who do you think you are anyway? You don’t even know me!”

Alisa’s shouting gathered the eyes of the students in the surrounding buildings, so she fell silent. Sayaka, on the other hand, continued indifferently as though she didn’t care in the least:

“If anything, I should be angry with you for trying to tarnish our academy’s sacred election when you are not serious about this.”

“What? You make it sound like I used some cheap trick to get Kuze on my side.”

“Are you claiming you didn’t? I do not know what you did, but there is only one reason you would pick an imbecile like that to be your partner: to provoke Yuki.”

“No—”

“Alya? Sayaka?”

Alisa turned around to find Masachika rushing over from the hallway after hearing them arguing. He stood in between them, looking back and forth at them with a worried, alarmed gaze.

“What’s going on?” he asked Alisa.

“I don’t know. She suddenly told me she wanted to talk, then she started accusing me of stealing you from Yuki.”

“The hell? Where’d that come from?” Masachika asked as he curiously shifted his gaze to Sayaka. “Uh... Sayaka? I don’t know where you heard that, but running with Alya was my decision. She didn’t steal me from anyone.”

Sayaka frowned sternly, then slowly adjusted her glasses and replied:

“I find that hard to believe. What would make an imbecile like you want to run with a transfer student?”

“‘Imbecile’? ...Yeah, I guess I can’t deny that, but it was still my decision. There were no dirty tricks involved. I already told Yuki, and she’s fine with it, too. Whatever you thought happened didn’t. It’s all in your mind. So do you think you could apologize to Alya for the rude things you said?”

Masachika was trying to solve the situation as peacefully as possible until he suddenly felt a wave of rage coming from Sayaka, who looked at him darkly, and he gulped.

“I see... So *you* are the one who needs to be punished,” Sayaka grunted in a low voice before stomping over and glaring right up at him. Her eyes were terrifying, brimming with malice and resentment, and Masachika instinctively stepped back.



“Kuze, I challenge you to a debate.”

“What?”

A clamoring crowd gathered and watched from a distance after Sayaka made her declaration, and Masachika knew exactly how they felt.

“In regard to what we will debate... ‘Should we include teacher evaluations when accepting new members into the student council?’ How does that sound?”

“Hold on! Are you being serious?”

“Do you honestly believe I would joke about this? People like you do not belong in the race...or the student council, for that matter. Of course, you aren’t going to run away from a debate, right? You are a member of the student council for the time being, after all.”

Masachika was puzzled and could not process the sudden turn of events, but her eyes made it clear that she was serious about crushing him at the debate, and he knew if he wanted to do anything about it, he was going to have to beat her.

“All right. But first, I need details on—”

“Not so fast,” Alisa interrupted sharply. “The debate is for presidential candidates to argue their issues, so I would appreciate it if you didn’t make decisions without me.”

She shot Sayaka a piercing glare, but Sayaka herself didn’t even glance in Alisa’s direction as she dismissively replied:

“Stay out of this. I am not interested in candidates whose grades are their only redeeming feature.”

“Excuse me?! Look at me when you talk to me!”

Alisa forced herself in between Sayaka and Masachika, then got right in Sayaka’s face.

“We are a team. If you plan on defeating Kuze, then you are going to have to get through me first!” Alisa snapped. Sayaka stared back at her, clearly annoyed, and quietly sputtered:

“I was simply offering you a chance to run away so you could keep your dignity...”

She then lifted her chin with scorn and continued in a deep, cold tone:

“Very well. I will crush both of you at the debate. People like you two do not deserve to run.”

The surrounding students were buzzing with confusion and excitement as rumors of this year’s debate spread like wildfire throughout the school before the day was out.



“Sigh... I was sure there wasn’t even going to be a debate this semester.”

After school in the student council room, Touya was looking uneasily at an application from Sayaka in hand.

“I’m sorry. It’s right before exam week, too...,” Masachika said apologetically.

“It’s not your fault she challenged you... Sorry. I was just complaining to myself. I wasn’t trying to blame you.”

Touya waved his hand at Masachika while lowering his gaze once more at the application.

“Hmm... We really can’t refuse to debate with all the rumors going around, but this topic is...”

“Yeah, she obviously chose it because of me.”

“Right... I guess so...”

It was the topic Sayaka had brought up during lunch: *Should we include teacher evaluations when accepting new members into the student council?* In other words, *Should we make teacher recommendations mandatory for joining the student council?*

Touya drew his eyebrows together, since her real reason for choosing this topic was evident. Masachika, on the other hand, simply shrugged and casually remarked:

“I doubt many teachers know who I am, and if they do, they don’t have a good impression of me, so if this bill passes, I’m going to have to quit the student council.”

“Not necessarily. Even if everyone votes to adopt the bill, that doesn’t mean the school itself will use it... Are you really going to do this debate, though? Because I honestly don’t see how it would benefit you at all.”

“It *would* benefit us,” Alisa clearly stated. Touya turned to her with a look of deep interest, but the burning flames of battle in her eyes made him shrink back. “Defeating her would improve my chances of becoming the next student council president. In fact, if I run away now, then I will have no chance of defeating her during the race.”

“O-oh... You really think so?”

“Plus, she insulted both Kuze and me, so I am not going to be satisfied until she takes back what she said and apologizes to us.”

Masachika, who was quietly burning with rage, forced a smile and

added:

“Anyway, it’s not all bad. The debate gives us a little exposure before the closing ceremony and provides a chance to appeal to the students while declaring our candidacy.”

“Well, as long as you two are okay with this...”

Touya half-heartedly nodded at Masachika while checking the schedule.

“Hmm... It is too close to exam week... I know it’s a little sudden, but how about having the debate this Friday after school?”

“I’m fine with that.”

“Me too.”

“Perfect. All right, how about we make the announcement today?”

“President, allow me to make the flyer.”

“Suou, are you sure?”

“Yes, leave it to me.”

Yuki agreeably smiled and nodded from the office table, then shifted in her seat so she was facing Masachika and Alisa.

“Masachika, Alya, good luck.”

“...Thanks.”

“Thank you very much.”

“How does everyone feel about exempting them from their tasks until after the debate? They are going to be extremely busy preparing for it, after all,” Yuki suggested as she looked around the room at the other members. Everyone immediately agreed.

“Sure. ♪ Why not?”

“I’m fine with that, too.”

“As you wish, Lady Yuki.”

“Yeah, good idea. Kuze, Little Kujou, you two focus on the debate. We’ll take care of things here.”

“What? We can’t just leave you guys with all this work. You’re already busy enough.”

“And things will be a lot busier for me if this bill passes, which is why I need you two to prevent that. There’s nothing to feel guilty about,” Touya said humorously. Masachika and Alisa lowered their heads, grateful for his generosity.

“All right. Thanks a lot. Really.”

“Thank you very much. We won’t let you down.”

Masachika and Alisa retired from the student council room after

expressing their appreciation.

“All right, then. Want to head back to our classroom and discuss strategy?”

“Yes.”



“...Anyway, that’s probably how Sayaka’s going to argue, judging by her past performances.”

“All right...”

“So how would you counter her if this was her argument?”

Masachika and Alisa faced each other across the desk in an empty room after school and discussed strategy.

“...And I think that’s what I’d base my counterargument around.”

“Yeah, that sounds good to me. Very persuasive. We should still probably sort out and summarize the main points, though.”

They were using a copy of the application submitted to Touya to predict and prepare for Sayaka’s argument. The practice even helped Alisa gradually cool off, since she’d still been pretty irritated by what Sayaka had said earlier, and eventually, she was able to calmly analyze Sayaka’s behavior.

“Hey, Kuze.”

“Hmm?”

“Are you and Taniyama...on bad terms?”

“Not really. I mean, I don’t think we are... We worked reasonably well together and treated each other with respect when we were in the student council in middle school, at the very least.”

“Oh...”

“She usually doesn’t talk like that, just so you know. Like, honestly... I’ve never seen her be so rude before.”

He drooped and gave a slightly resigned shrug, causing Alisa’s heart to skip a beat. This was the first time she had seen Masachika, who usually goofed around all the time without a worry in the world, show weakness. Unlike Alisa, Masachika had been insulted by someone he knew. There was no way it wouldn’t hurt his feelings, regardless of how unreasonable Sayaka was being.

“Kuze...”

“Hmm?”

“Oh, uh...”

Alisa wanted to say something to her seemingly worn-out classmate, but she didn't know what. She had never tried to cheer someone up before, and she didn't know what Masachika and Sayaka's relationship was like, so she felt that whatever she said would sound shallow.

“...Why did Taniyama do that, I wonder?”

A completely different question ended up coming out of her mouth in the end, and she despised herself for not being able to think of a single thing to say to make her partner feel better. Oblivious to her struggles, however, Masachika placed a hand on his chin and looked up.

“Hmm... I was wondering about it for a while, but maybe she's under the impression that I'm only doing this because I get off on the idea of messing with the election or something...”

“Huh?”

“I mean, I'm only guessing, of course. But after you told me everything she said, she made it sound like she thought we weren't serious about the election.”

“Why would she think that in the first place, though?”

“Yeah... She even said your good grades were your only redeeming feature, too... But, well, I guess if you looked at this objectively, you're still kind of new here and don't have any major accomplishments in the student council. Plus, you don't have the connections that Sayaka has, either...”

Alisa watched Masachika mumbling quickly, and she confidently grunted.

“I can't deny that, but what about you, Mr. Goes Straight Home After School?”

“Yeah, and that's also why she probably thought we weren't serious about running for the student council presidency. Because she takes it very seriously.”

“You really think that's all?”

Because Sayaka's anger was not normal for someone who was only mad at people for not taking a student council election seriously. Alisa grimaced as she recalled the insults hurled at her, but Masachika immediately spoke up to calm her.

“I know. I get why you're annoyed, but relax.”

“I don't see how you can be so calm after what she said.”

“I guess...it's because I know how she normally is, so I know I must

have done something really bad for her to get that angry.”

His eyebrows drooped over his frail smile.

“Let’s pretend that you did do something. That still isn’t enough reason to insult someone like she did. You might be a slacker who doesn’t take school seriously enough, but you don’t deserve to be treated that way,” she protested in a low voice and furrowed her brow.

That was when Masachika finally realized she was getting mad on his behalf, and he started to blush slightly. Nevertheless, he didn’t want her to get any angrier than she already was, so he smiled and tried to smooth things out.

“Yeah... I used to be Yuki’s partner, so Sayaka probably can’t fathom why I would run with someone else, since Yuki is heavily favored to win. So I don’t blame her for thinking I’m just messing around.”

“But that’s still—”

Ridiculous was what Alisa was going to say before she suddenly realized that this had all happened because she decided to run with Masachika. She also realized that this was not going to be the only clapback to them running together, either.

It was obvious when she actually thought about it. His original partner was Yuki, and she and Ayano were his childhood friends. Even though Masachika hadn’t mentioned anything, something *must* have happened between them. Unlike Alisa, who was always alone, Masachika had probably made countless sacrifices so he could run with her.

“I...”

And once she realized this, Alisa became very frightened. Masachika had taken her hand as an equal, but the price he’d paid was far from equal. What could she give him? How could she repay him? What in the world could she do when she couldn’t even stand on her own two feet without his support?

“Alya? What’s wrong?” Masachika asked, worried as to why Alisa had suddenly fallen silent. Her breathing seemed shallow, and her face had turned pale. “Are you okay? If you’re feeling sick, then...”

“I’m fine. I’m not feeling sick, okay?”

“If you say so...”

Still, she didn’t look too good. Nevertheless, they had already come up with a basic strategy, so Masachika decided to call it a day...when Alisa suddenly spoke up with a somewhat troubled look on her face.

“Kuze... Is there anything you want me to do?”

“Huh? Where’d that come from?”

“...”

He tilted his head quizzically at her sudden proposal, but Alisa didn’t say another word. She only quietly gazed at him.

“Hmm... Something I want you to do, huh?”

Sensing that she didn’t want him to ask any more questions, Masachika scratched his head while racking his brain for a few moments.

“Oh, how about you make a funny face?”

“Be serious.”

“...Okay.”

But Masachika wasn’t the kind of person who could act serious when the mood was as heavy as this. It was also in his nature to say something absurd to lighten the mood when the person he was talking to had such a grave look on their face.

“Uh... Okay. How about you hold me gently, whisper words of love into my ear, and smother me with your overflowing womanly affections?” Masachika said with a flirty smirk. Alisa’s eyebrows jumped up, so he braced himself for the incoming slap because he was sure she’d be at her wit’s end.

“...Okay.”

“Huh?”

And that was why he was taken aback by how she actually responded. He sat in mute amazement while Alisa got out of her chair with a *rattle* and walked around the desk before stopping by his side.

“Wait, wait, wait. Mmmnnng.”

As she gazed down at him with those deep blue eyes, he grunted meaningless noises and scooted his chair away from her.

“Wait, wait, wait. I was kidding, okay?”

He raised both hands over his shoulders as if to surrender and tried to stop Alisa, who was actually holding her arms out wide. She then frowned slightly before lowering them. But Masachika’s relief was fleeting... because she briskly slipped behind him, throwing her arms around his shoulder before he could so much as blink.

“Eep?! ”

The feeling of skin as smooth as silk brushed against his neck. The sensation of something soft pressed against his back. Masachika immediately jumped and squealed, but Alisa didn’t seem to care in the least. She raised her left hand and awkwardly yet ever so gently caressed

his cheek.

“A-A-A-A-Alya?!”

He was so nervous that he screamed in falsetto, but he was worried about what would happen if he ran away, so there was nothing he could do. Nevertheless, that still didn’t mean he could simply surrender himself to Alisa’s embrace, and he began to nervously tremble in place. She gently rubbed her cheek against his while whispering into his ear:

“<I’m sorry. Thank you.>”

But he had no idea why he was being apologized to or what he was being thanked for. Along with those words, Alisa’s right arm, wrapped around his shoulder and chest, suddenly tightened. Masachika’s eyes were wide in disbelief.

“Alya...?”

“...”

She didn’t reply, but he felt almost as if she was relying on him—as if she was clinging on to him for support. Masachika let his body go limp in her arms. Alisa slid her left hand down his neck and wrapped her left arm around his shoulders before crossing her right arm over it.

“<Don’t leave me...!>”

There was a wistful note in her whisper, and Masachika felt like someone had just grabbed his heart. His chest painfully tightened as the burning emotions swelled inside. He was moved enough to wrap one hand around hers while his other gently stroked her head.

“Alya. We’re going to win. Not even Sayaka can get in our way. I will not let anyone interfere with the promise I made to you,” he clearly declared to Alisa while facing forward, as if he were engraving his determination into his own soul. Silence followed for a few moments until Alisa suddenly albeit faintly moved.

“...Kuze. You’re hurting me.”

“Oh. S-sorry.”

He let go of her in a panic, realizing that he had unconsciously tightened his arms. Alisa slowly moved away from him as well before speaking in a slightly teasing manner.

“If this was all it took to motivate you, then I should have done it sooner.”

He turned his head up at Alisa to find her smugly looking down at him, acting like her usual princess-like self. Masachika was relieved, and his lips curled into a devilish smirk.

“Who wouldn’t feel pumped up after being embraced by the famous Princess Alya?”

“Don’t call me ‘princess.’”

Masachika was met with a limp karate chop to the head, and his teasing smile grew. He stood and moved his desk back to its original position.

“Anyway, it’s late. How about we call it a day?”

“Okay.”

They began to casually walk down the hallway side by side after leaving the classroom as if nothing had happened.

You’re going down, Sayaka...even if that means hurting you again. I am going to keep my promise to Alya.

To this day, he could still bitterly remember seeing Sayaka cry after he and Yuki had defeated her in the middle school election, despite not being that serious about it. And yet, even if this meant he would be responsible for making her cry again, he wasn’t going to hesitate. He was going to go at her with everything he had. And he was going to prove how serious he was—how serious *they* were—with the hope that he could save her heart, a prisoner of her anger, even if only a little.

Anyway...I did something quite embarrassing again, huh?

He recalled his actions from a few moments ago and bitterly smirked. *This is one of those things you remember later in the shower and cringe*, he thought. But he had no choice. He’d reacted impulsively, just like when he had extended a hand to Alisa that day.

All of a sudden, a certain realization flashed in the back of Masachika’s mind.

Oh... So that’s why I chose Alya...

He suddenly thought back to Ayano’s question the other day and stopped at the top of the staircase. He’d said he didn’t know why he chose Alisa, and he honestly still wasn’t 100 percent sure now. But that sensation that drove him to want to do something—that was why he chose Alisa. That feeling, similar to a strong desire to protect, was surely...

Yeah... It’s not love. Just as I thought.

But if it wasn’t love...then...

“Kuze?”

Alisa, who seemed to be thinking about something herself, stopped halfway down the staircase and looked back up at Masachika. She creased her eyes as the setting sun peeked in through the window from behind him.

Masachika smiled wistfully but still affectionately at her, then softly whispered:

I won't leave

“Янеуйду.”

He would be there for her until the day he fulfilled his promise.

“Huh?” Alisa gave a skeptical grunt, holding her left hand over her eyes like a visor.

“Don't worry about it.”

Masachika walked down the stairs until he was by her side again, but by that time, his smile from a moment ago was already tucked away, only in his memories.



CHAPTER 8

Ideals and Reality

The day of the debate arrived. Masachika and Alisa were heading toward the back entrance, which led to the stage in the auditorium where they would be debating, when they suddenly ran into their opponent.

“Oh, hey.”

Sayaka coldly bowed before immediately heading inside the auditorium, but the student behind her replied in a friendly way:

“Yo, Kuze! Like, long time no see. Good luck out there... Wait. I guess I shouldn’t really be wishing ya good luck, huh?”

“How can you be so relaxed?”

“I mean, it’s not like I’m gonna have to say anything during the debate, so what’s there to worry about?”

The female student, whose wavy blond hair was tied in a high side ponytail, casually waved her hand. Her makeup was aggressive but just subtle enough to keep the teachers off her back. Her school uniform was worn in a somewhat casual fashion, and her flashy style, unique to Seiren Academy, was equivalent to whatever you would call the Japanese version of a Valley girl. She shifted her gaze to Alisa, who froze, having never conversed with someone like her before.

“I think this is, like, the first time we’ve actually ever talked? I’m Nono Miyamae, Saya’s partner.”

“Oh... I’m Alisa Kujou. Let’s have a good debate.”

“Ha-ha-ha. You’re sooo serious. You and Sacchi might actually really get along,” Nono said, laughing in a laid-back manner. “Anyway, I’m looking forward to it. Later,” she added before walking ahead into the auditorium.

“That was Taniyama’s partner? She was...”

“Yeah, they aren’t anything alike, appearance-wise at least. One’s a no-nonsense elite student, and the other looks like some laid-back fashionista...which she is, but she apparently uses that loud appearance of

hers to her advantage and works on the side as a model.”

“She’s a model? Isn’t that against school rules?”

“Well...it’s her parents’ company’s billboard, so that apparently makes it some sort of loophole in the rules?”

“By the way, I’ve been wondering this ever since I saw her, but her hair...”

“Oh, that? She’s a natural blond. Her grandmother was from America, I believe.”

“...Oh.”

Although she understood what he was saying, Alisa still seemed confused about something.

“Those two grew up together. While they may look and act differently, they’re actually really good friends,” added Masachika.

“Oh, so that’s why...”

“But don’t make any mistake. She didn’t get to be Sayaka’s partner just because they’re childhood friends. Nonoa was already at the top of the school caste without the help of the student council, and she has a broad network of contacts. She might even have the biggest network at this school.”

“...She definitely would be a threat during the race, then.”

“But you don’t have to worry about her today. Just focus on Sayaka.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I will.”

Masachika let out a sigh of relief after Alisa seemingly shook the thought of Nonoa out of her mind.

“Anyway, ready to go?” he asked.

“I’m ready.”

And just like that, they stepped into the auditorium, marching toward the final battle.



“Whoa. This place is packed. At least half the students who aren’t in a club are here.”

“This is the first debate of the school year. Plus, *the* Sayaka Taniyama challenged Alisa Kujou of all people. It’s no surprise this many people showed up.”

Despite being so close to exam week, Takeshi and Hikaru stopped by the auditorium ten minutes before the debate and were astounded by the

huge crowd. They looked around, only to discover that there were hardly any seats left. In fact, there were probably going to be a few students who had to stand to watch at this rate.

“Didn’t Taniyama run for student council president a while back? I think she was the noble princess’s last standing opponent if I can remember correctly.”

“Yeah, a lot of people thought she had a chance to become the next president, but she ended up losing to Yuki.”

“Taniyama has never lost a debate, though, right? Who knows what would have happened if they’d had a final debate before the election?”

“I know, right? But I thought it was really cool of her to try to settle things at the election instead of trying to rely on her debating skills alone to win.”

“You voted for Suou, you know?”

“Doesn’t mean I can’t admire the enemy.”

They were walking down the aisle searching for two empty seats when they overheard some other students talking. Teenagers from various backgrounds and all different grade levels were speculating who would win and discussing how they felt.

“What do you think about the topic?”

“Uh... It really has nothing to do with most of us, but, well, I’m sure she’s come prepared and ready to kill.”

“What do you think about the transfer student? I don’t really know much about her...”

“Same here. All I know is that she has good grades. Does she even know how to debate?”

“I feel like I know that Kuze guy from somewhere, though...”

“Wasn’t that the last name of the guy who was vice president when Yuki Suou was president? I don’t know much about him, either.”

“Oh, I think you’re right... Wait. Then why is he with that transfer student now?”

The majority of people were talking about Sayaka, but there were a few comments about Alisa here and there. Masachika, on the other hand, wasn’t worth mentioning for the most part.

“Feels like we’re at an away game.”

“Well, only one of them is well-known for debating, yes? ...Hey, look. There are two free seats over there.”

“Oh, great.”

Takeshi and Hikaru took their seats in two empty spots close to the center of the row before facing the front. To the right of the podium were Sayaka and Nonoa, with Alisa and Masachika sitting to the left. Although everyone in the audience was simply hanging around, they felt as though they were being mysteriously sucked into Sayaka's gaze. There was even something regal about her appearance as she sat straight with her eyes calmly closed as if she was meditating.

"She's really in her element. Like, I don't think we can beat her. In fact, I can only imagine our guys losing."

"Nevertheless, Masachika is extremely calm. I wonder how Kujou feels, though? She is going to be the one talking for the most part, after all."

"Yeah, usually the candidates for vice president only provide some backup. Can't have them stealing the presidential candidates' thunder and all. Even if the vice presidential candidate spoke up and won the debate for them, it'd just end up making the president look bad."

"I'm worried... Kujou doesn't seem like she is used to speaking in front of people...let alone this many."

"Right? At the very least, she's gonna have to be able to state her points without stumbling over her own words."

They watched Alisa with concerned gazes, but she kept facing forward, showing no sign that she realized she was being stared at. Her blue eyes were quietly fixed on the deserted podium, without a hint of hesitation or anxiousness...

There are...so many people... My throat feels so tight... Will I be able to talk?

...but in reality, she had never been this nervous in her life. Of course, the fact that their future depended on this debate was part of the reason, but this was also the first time she was ever going to express her opinion in front of this many people. While Alisa may have been opinionated, she never really asserted herself. She never expected anything from anyone, so she hardly ever found it necessary to argue her position. She never tried to influence anyone with her opinion, and in turn, she never let anyone's opinion influence her. That was her stance for the most part. Nevertheless, what was required of her right now was the power to move others. The power to convince people to choose to be on her side. It was a skill that she had regarded as unnecessary up until now.

Am I going to be able to do this? ...Or is my opinion going to be

ignored yet again?

Alisa recalled how, just the other day, the soccer team and baseball team had argued and shot down every idea she had. The tips of her fingers started to go white. She felt sick. Her legs had gone numb. Her feet on the hard stage floor felt like they were stepping on rubber.

“Alya.”

She turned to her side, almost as if she was desperate for his aid, and she felt extremely grateful for getting the chance to look away from the crowd.

“...What?”

Surprisingly, her bravado held, and her voice didn’t shake. Alisa herself wasn’t sure she could do it. Although she would sometimes turn to him from time to time, even his serious gaze was making her nervous today.

Kuze’s really relaxed. I have to pull myself together. I was the one who signed up for this, and I don’t want to disappoint him. Relax. Deep breaths... Just keep taking deep breaths...

Alisa tried to take a deep breath, but her throat—her lungs wouldn’t listen to her. She trembled nervously as blood slowly retreated from her hands and feet.

“Alya...”

“Kuze...”

She wasn’t able to put on a bold front any longer. Her desperate voice strained pathetically. She was on the verge of tears, and yet she had to hold back laughter for some reason. She felt like her head was going to explode when...

“Do you really have E cups?”

“...Huh?”

It was such a random, deranged question that Alisa couldn’t process what he had said. Only when Masachika glanced at her chest did she finally comprehend. She reflexively lifted up her arms to cover herself when she suddenly remembered where she was and stopped.

“Y-you creep! What is wrong with you?!”

She tried to keep her voice as low as possible when she criticized him, but Masachika immediately turned an extremely serious gaze at the audience.

“I was thinking, I can’t do anything weird in front of all these people... But that’s when I realized I couldn’t be slapped for anything,

either, and there was nowhere for you to run.”

He cracked a smile, then shifted his gaze back to Alisa with a strangely serene look.

“I was like, Wait... *I can be a creep, and there's nothing she can do about it?*”

“Go kill yourself.”

“Heh-heh-heh. Never in their wildest dreams could they imagine the filthy conversation we're having up here.”

“I really hope they aren't having any dreams even remotely similar.”

“Heh... So what color panties are you wearing today, young lady?”
Masachika asked with a cartoonish, repulsive voice yet serious expression.

“...! ...Oops.”

Alisa caught herself reflexively lifting a hand to slap him, then let out an exhausted sigh. She was starting to actually wonder if she'd made the right choice teaming up with someone like him.

“Could you please feel at least a little nervous?”

“Come on, Alya. I am nervous. Oh, hey. I found Takeshi and Hikaru in the audience. Yo.”

“Where? ...H-hey?!”

She promptly grabbed his wrist as he waved at his friends and forced it back into his lap, then sharply glared up at his carefree expression.

“Could you please quit it already? I'm being serious. You're embarrassing me.”

“Don't worry. I promise I'm way more embarrassed than you right now.”

“Then please start acting like it.”

“Y-your hands are so big and strong... Ahn. ♪ Please stop gazing into my eyes so passionately. Y-you're making me blush...”

“...”

“Ah, the ol' cold shoulder, huh?”

Alisa roughly let go of his wrist and looked away.

“Awww.Alya, come on,” he joked, as if he wasn't taking this seriously at all.

“...”

“I was just trying to lighten up the mood a little because you look so nervous.”

“...I'm not nervous,” she bluntly replied.

“Are you sure? Because you still look a bit stiff,” Masachika

skeptically added, examining her profile. Her complexion had improved considerably, but she still seemed like she was stressing herself out too much. After briefly exhaling, Masachika spoke up once more but with a serious, gentler tone.

“You don’t have to hide that you’re nervous. Who wouldn’t be during their first debate? I’d actually feel better if you admitted it. Like ‘I may be nervous, but I am going to do everything I can to win.’”

“...I’m not going to say that.”

“Yeah, I guess I should have figured as much.”

Alisa would never preemptively “make excuses” for herself like that. A perfectionist like her was probably planning to nail this speech no matter what.

“Alya, look at me.”

“...?”

Masachika met her skeptical expression and asked:

“Alya, who is your enemy?”

“...Taniyama, right?”

“No. Your enemy is the ideal version of yourself. Am I wrong?”

Her eyes briefly wavered, and she nodded. “...You’re right. What frightens me the most is not being able to do what my ideal self can.”

“Right? In other words, you yourself are the basis for evaluation, and only you are standing behind that podium and talking. The audience is nothing more than an audience. You won’t have to do a Q and A with them after you talk, so it doesn’t matter how many of them there are. Right?”

“Do you really think so?”

Her eyes anxiously wandered.

“I know so,” Masachika clearly declared, since he knew that being assertive made one sound more convincing to people feeling insecure.

“All you need to think about is acting like the coolest version of yourself. Don’t worry about a thing. If anything happens, I will take care of it.”

“...”

Alisa slowly blinked as if to absorb everything he was saying, then faced forward calmly. That was when Touya, who was serving as the chairman of the debate, suddenly emerged from the stage wing.

“Kuze. Kujou. It’s almost time. Are you ready?”

“I’m ready,” stated Masachika before glancing at Alisa to his side.

“I’m ready as well,” she quietly answered while looking Touya in the eye.

“Perfect.”

After giving them a firm nod, Touya headed over to the other side to speak with Sayaka and check if they were ready as well. Once he was finished, he took a stand behind the chairman podium on the left corner of the stage and said into the mic:

“We will now begin the student conference.”

Touya waited for the buzzing crowd to gradually fall quiet before moving on to introductions.

“I, Touya Kenzaki, president of the student council, will be your chairman today. Today’s proposer is first-year student Sayaka Taniyama from Class F, and she is accompanied by Nono Miyamae, a first-year student from Class D.”

When he turned to them, they stood out of their seats and bowed, which was followed by enthusiastic applause from countless supporters in the audience.

“Her opponent today is Alisa Kujou, student council accountant, and she will be accompanied by Masachika Kuze, who is a general member of the student council as well.”

Alisa then gracefully bowed, and Masachika somewhat theatrically bowed, too. While their introduction was followed by applause, it was sparse and far less passionate.

“Today’s topic is *Should we include teacher evaluations when accepting new members into the student council?* Sayaka Taniyama, please begin.”

“Okay,” she replied in a well-projected voice even without a mic. After leaving her seat, she walked over to the podium with no sign of nervousness, but she did stop briefly to bow to Touya before boldly taking a stand behind the podium. At the same time, her image was projected onto the large screen behind her.

“Thank you all for taking time out of your busy schedules to gather here today. We will be debating whether or not we should include teachers’ evaluations when accepting new members into the student council. In other words, should a teacher recommendation be required for joining the student council?”

After surveying the audience, Sayaka began to fluently explain her viewpoint.

“The president and vice president of the student council currently have the right to choose who they want to join, but it is not an exaggeration to say that they allow just anyone. In fact, after surveying previous middle school and high school members, both short and long term, of the student council...”

...You've gotta be kidding me. She prepared data for this?

Masachika was astonished by how she could provide numerical data like this in such a short span of time.

Wait. This wasn't Sayaka's doing. It was Nonoa's.

He shifted his half-admiring, half-bitter gaze to Nonoa, only to find her checking her nails as if this debate had nothing to do with her. She was apparently planning on being just a spectator during the debate.

“I believe you all can now see what this means: Anyone can become a member of the student council as long as they come forward as a candidate. But let us look at this from a different angle for a moment. Seiren Academy is a prestigious institution with proud traditions. Is it really okay for the student council, who represents the student body, to accept anyone who asks? Including those with poor conduct?”

After presenting the objective fact, Sayaka strengthened her tone and said to the audience:

“I believe that only the gifted should be allowed to join the student council. Surely, you all feel the same. You want someone qualified to represent you and someone who can act as a leader for those of you who are part of a school club. Imagine someone who has worse grades than you and poor conduct joining the student council and immediately becoming a person of higher rank than you. This person is going to be in a position where they can tell you what to do, and they will also be the one to decide whether you have permission to do something or not. Does that not sound awful?”

Masachika immediately recognized that the audience believed she had a point they had never thought of before.

Damn. She's good.

She even got those who weren't invested in this topic because they believed it had nothing to do with them to start seeing things her way. The students currently seemed to be leaning toward the idea that they didn't care that much, but they'd prefer someone who excelled if given the choice. It was exactly what Sayaka was going for.

“That is why we need to take teacher evaluations into consideration.

More specifically, students would need to get the signatures of their homeroom teacher, head teacher, guidance counselor, and principal in order to join. That way, only the best of the best will be in the student council.”

After sweeping her gaze over the audience one more time, Sayaka firmly finished her speech.

“We must create a better student council with dignity and grace! Because you matter! ...Thank you all very much for your time today.”

The audience erupted into applause as she bowed. After raising her hand and nodding at the crowd a few times, she shifted her gaze to Touya, who recognized the signal and grabbed the mic.

“We will now begin the question-and-answer period. Ms. Kujou, do you have any questions?”

The audiences’ eyes pursued Touya’s gaze as it shifted toward Alisa. Their eyes were brimming with expectations and intrigue, wondering how the rumored transfer student was going to react to such a powerful argument. Alisa quietly looked back at Touya...and shook her head.

“Uh... No questions?” asked Touya, like he was caught off guard, but Masachika waved his hand as if to tell him to move on. The audience rippled with disappointment. Everyone thought she had essentially given up, but this was actually something Masachika had talked to Alisa about and decided on from the start. Sayaka, who was a seasoned debater, would never show any weakness during the Q and A. Plus, asking the wrong question and being hit with the perfect response would make Sayaka look even better than she already did. Therefore, it would be better not to ask any questions altogether. Showing confidence and fluently conveying their opinion, especially after hearing what their opponent had to say, would be much more persuasive. That was the decision they had reached.

Everything’s all going according to plan so far.

They had accurately predicted what Sayaka was going to argue for the most part. There was no problem there. The rest was up to Alisa.

“Are you ready to go?”

“...Yes,” Alisa quietly replied.

“Then the podium is all yours,” Touya said, his voice projecting around the auditorium.

“Thank you.”

Her quiet voice strangely carried across the auditorium as she stood.

“Go get ‘em!”

As Masachika cheered her on from behind, she slowly headed toward the podium while the audience stared curiously...and extremely unkindly at her.

"I wonder how she's going to try to come back after that?" someone whispered.

"She couldn't come up with a single question during Q and A. It's over. Sayaka's got this in the bag."

"I told you. You'd have to get Yuki Suou if you ever wanted a chance of beating her."

"Come on. Let's at least hear what the so-called solitary princess has to say."

"Can she talk after that? She better not start crying. That's all I ask."

The audience muttered scornful comments and jeers. It wasn't long until the crowd was wondering how the solitary princess was going to lose, as if she had no chance of winning no matter what she said. Chisaki, standing at the wing, raised her eyebrows as if she couldn't stand back and watch any longer. But right as she tried to take a step forward, Maria grabbed her by the wrist and stopped her. Maria's eyes were grim but loving. They were the eyes of a woman who believed in her sister. Meanwhile, Alisa wasn't aware of the crowd because she was focusing everything she had on herself.

The ideal me... The coolest version of me...

She replayed Masachika's advice in her mind and imagined the ideal version of herself. Someone cool would be like Sayaka was a few moments ago when she gave her speech. But even more than her...

Yeah... What was he doing again that day?

Try to remember what he was like then. He was cooler than anyone else...

Oh, right. That was what he was like.

She knew her ideal self. All she had to do now was act the part. Alisa stood at the podium, slowly surveyed the audience, and then...she smiled.



Her smile caused a slight commotion within the crowd. Some were caught off guard, some were genuinely surprised, and one surprised observer even recognized the familiar smile of a certain young man in hers.

"Good afternoon. I am Alisa Kujou, student council accountant. I will

be representing the student council today with my counterargument.”

She bowed somewhat theatrically. She was confident. She was fearless, as if she was more worried about her opponent than herself. Everyone in the audience immediately realized the real reason she'd kept silent during the Q and A. It wasn't because she couldn't think of a rebuttal or a question to ask. It was because she didn't need to. The audience's opinion of her changed in the blink of an eye, for her provocative greeting was not what one would expect from a “solitary princess.”

“Now, I understand that Ms. Taniyama suggested that we require teacher recommendations in order to improve our student council, but I believe doing so would accomplish the complete opposite. Requiring teacher recommendations would undermine the student council altogether. Why? Because it would strip the student council president and vice president of their power of appointment, and they are the foundation of the council.”

The audience was captivated by Alisa's straightforward rebuttal, whether they liked it or not.

“The most coveted and respected positions in the student council are president and vice president, and they are elected in addition to being given numerous rights because they earned their positions through defeating the competition in a grueling election. You could say that the power of appointment is the most valuable right given to them. Surrendering that right to a teacher, albeit partially, is no different from admitting that you can't maintain dignity without the help of your teachers.”

Alisa's claims resonated throughout the auditorium. Some people in the audience gasped in admiration at the sight of her dignified, beautiful appearance onstage while others grunted in deep interest when they saw how confident she was. The mood in the entire venue had changed in mere minutes, but Alisa herself didn't notice as she eloquently continued to convey her ideas.

“The students at this academy highly value their autonomy, which is exactly why the student council is granted considerable discretionary power. The president and vice president are special exactly because they can freely decide who joins the student council. But what would happen if we required teacher recommendations when selecting new members? The president and vice president would most likely no longer be able to freely

select those they feel are best for the job. They would probably lose the right to refuse students whom teachers favor the most as well. In other words, the power of authority would more or less be surrendered to our teachers. Most work done in the student council would be done by students that they favor. That sounds like a far departure from what the student council should be, if you ask me.”

Masachika could sense people who were originally leaning toward Sayaka’s opinion start to doubt themselves.

Perfect. She’s relaxed and saying everything she wants to.

He inwardly sighed in relief when he saw how confident and articulate she was being. She was honestly doing better than he imagined. He was expecting her to be kind of awkward after seeing how nervous she’d been up until a few minutes ago, but she wasn’t going to have a problem anymore.

Sayaka is arguing that the student council would improve if only the elite were allowed in, while Alya is arguing that the president and vice president should keep their powers of appointment, since that would protect what the student council stands for. These people were elected by the students for a reason, after all. Regardless, they both have a point, and I’d say they’re probably evenly matched at the moment...

He was watching Alisa with evident satisfaction when he suddenly sensed a piercing gaze coming from his left and looked over. It was Sayaka. Her sharp eyes behind her glasses seemed to be saying, “You were behind all this, weren’t you?”

No, Sayaka. That’s all Alya. Those are her words.

Masachika didn’t give Alisa a single argument of his own. He didn’t put a single idea in her mind, either. All he did was predict what Sayaka was going to argue. While Alisa based her argument on his prediction, it was 100 percent all hers.

I’m not your opponent. Alya is.

As he glared back at Sayaka with his strong will, Alisa’s argument came to an end, which was immediately followed by the Q and A. Sayaka hastily raised a hand to strike back.

“You mentioned that the student council president and vice president wield the power of appointment, but my research proved that in recent years, everyone who has asked to become a member of the student council has been made into a member. How do you feel about that?”

“Is there a problem with that? There haven’t been any issues so far.

Even if a problem did arise, the president can take care of it or remove said student from the council. That's one of the president's responsibilities, after all."

Sayaka must have believed that Alisa would slip up if Masachika had prepared her entire argument for her, but Alisa didn't blink.

"There are those in the alumni association who believe the quality of the student council has been diminishing as of late, which is why I believe teacher recommendations should be a requirement. How do you feel about that?"

"I feel that the president and vice president should be the ones who decide that. Acknowledging their inadequacy and turning to a teacher for help is one option, but that is not something for us to decide."

If anything, Sayaka was gradually losing confidence. Her arguments were becoming less logical as time went on, perhaps because she was caught off guard by her opponent's skill.

You were defeated because you underestimated your opponent. Because you were chasing my shadow without even looking at Alya. She was your opponent, not me.

Masachika was never planning on fighting Sayaka. He listened to Alisa's argument before the debate, recognized she had a good chance of winning, and decided to let her handle it however she wanted to.

Masachika's opponent wasn't Sayaka. The person he needed to focus on was...

So what's she going to do?

He shifted his gaze to Nonoa, who was at Sayaka's side. Even Nonoa, who'd been acting like this had nothing to do with her up until now, was quietly staring right back at him. She then closed her eyes and nodded at him as if to apologize for something before shoving her hand into her skirt pocket.

"...?"

The change was gradual. It was a very faint rustling at first, which slowly began to spread throughout the auditorium. It wasn't long before you could hear the words *transfer student* and *outsider* if you strained your ears, while cheers and support for Sayaka simultaneously started to come from the audience as well.

Tsk! She really did it. Plants. And not the green kind. I'm talking about sleeper cells.

She was manipulating the audience. It was a strategy that only

someone with a network at school as big as Nonoa's could pull off. There were more than a few students at school who believed they were better than the rest, perhaps because they had been born into rich families. Therefore, their impression of Sayaka, the daughter to the CEO of a top corporation, was far different from how they viewed a transfer student who came from a middle-class family like Alisa. The backer Nonoa had planted in the audience were trying to stir those students' frustration, which had a high chance of pushing them to vote for Sayaka based on emotion rather than logic. But there was an even bigger problem than that right now...

“Ah...”

Alisa had suddenly taken notice of the audience in front of her. She'd only been able to keep a level head until now because she'd been focused solely on herself, and that was now wavering. It was painfully obvious even from behind that her body had suddenly become tense.

“...!”

The rustling in the audience grew louder after Alisa suddenly fell silent. The more she panicked and tried to say something, the harder it was for her to get the words out of her mouth.

I have to say something... Wait. What was I going to say again? ... What was the question? I have to hurry... But what should I...?!

Right as her anxiety was peaking and she was starting to panic, a gentle hand suddenly patted her on the back.

“Good job. I'll handle the rest.”

She swung her head around to find the person she could count on more than anyone else in this world. Masachika stood by her side behind the podium and grabbed the mic with a smile.

“I apologize for interrupting, but I'm going to be taking over from here. My partner has been speaking for so long that it looks like she hurt her throat. Sigh... You wouldn't have strained your voice if you weren't so quiet all the time,” he joked while glancing at Alisa. She immediately pouted, and the audience erupted into laughter. After lightening the mood, Masachika decided it was time to pull the ace out of his sleeve.

I wish we could have won based on the logic of our arguments, but if they're going to try to use emotion to sway the audience, then I'm going to as well.

He didn't want to do it, but he didn't have any other choice. He had made a promise to Alisa. He'd told her he would handle things if she ever

found herself in trouble, and that was why...he was going to destroy it all, smiling every second of the way.

“So anyway, I really want to start wrapping things up, since I don’t want my partner to have a sore throat tomorrow. I mean, is there really anything else we need to discuss?”

As his abrupt question caused the audience to rustle, he immediately followed up with another attack.

“I’m pretty sure this debate was already settled a month ago anyway.”

After surveying the audience’s baffled expressions, he swiftly raised his right hand into the air before lowering it in Touya’s direction.

“I believe everyone already made up their mind when they chose Touya Kenzaki to be their student council president.”

All eyes were on Touya, who was clearly startled by being named out of the blue.

“As you all know, he was a nobody and a poor-performing student up until a year ago. In fact, I’m just gonna come out and say it! He was an awkward, socially inept loser! His words, not mine. There was no way he was ever going to get a teacher’s recommendation!”

“Hey?!” Touya unconsciously shouted with a half smirk, causing the crowd to burst into laughter. Masachika promptly added:

“But he worked hard. He worked as hard as he could to be a part of the student council. His grades improved, he became a better man, and he even ended up sweeping the famous Donna off her feet! Surely, there isn’t a single person here who wasn’t inspired by his story. A poor-performing, socially inept student has turned himself into the charismatic president of the student council you all know today. How could you not root for a man like that?!”

Masachika feverishly spoke with his hands and body before taking a brief pause to view his audience, and once all eyes were on him, he calmly concluded:

“Touya Kenzaki was able to become the president of the student council because of the system we have in place. A system that allows anyone to become a member of the student council as long as they have passion. Therefore, I must ask you all one more time: Is there really anything more we need to discuss?”

Nobody answered him. Even Sayaka and Nonoa were completely silent.

“*Sigh...* Mmm... I was a little surprised to be suddenly dragged into

the debate like that, but anyway, I would like to move on to the closing arguments if there are no more questions. Is that okay, Ms. Taniyama?” Touya took control of the stage once again.

“...”

Masachika saw Sayaka silently stand from her chair, so he placed a hand on Alisa’s back and nudged her to walk back to her seat. But the moment they stepped off the podium, Nonoa screamed:

“Wh-what the...?! Saya!?”

When Masachika glanced in their direction, Sayaka was already hastily exiting through the wing. It had taken him completely by surprise, and the brief glimpse of her expression caused him to freeze. It was Alisa who ended up chasing after her, disappearing into the wing herself. A commotion erupted. Never had both debaters ever made an exit halfway through like this before. In the midst of the confusion and chaos, Nonoa scratched her head, then stood up before briskly walking toward the center of the stage.

“Sorry about all this,” she told Masachika before taking a stand at the podium. “We give up,” she declared while raising both hands into the air. The unprecedented surrender was followed by brief silence, then confused whispers began to spread throughout the auditorium. Before long, Touya managed to speak up and react, although in a somewhat puzzled state.

“Uh... Are you saying you wish to withdraw Ms. Taniyama’s proposal?”

“Oh, yeah. Sure. That’s, like, totally cool with me. I’m really sorry about my girl Saya.”

After Nonoa bowed apologetically, Touya cleared his throat and declared:

“Then it is official. The proposal has been rejected. Thank you all for coming today.”

The student conference came to its conclusion, enveloped in bewilderment.

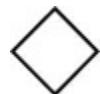


“Thank you, Masachika.”

“You can count on me, Yuki.”

I thought they were the ideal pair when I saw them that day. A woman

of personal magnetism and overwhelming charisma. And a man of merit who handled things behind the scenes to support her. They had complete confidence in each other and a committed relationship. Yes... They trusted each other more than anyone else in the world. Their bond was unbreakable. Of course they would win. That was why I felt admiration, wonderment...and only slightly envious when I allowed myself to give up... And that was why I felt betrayed when I saw those two. Why were you there? Was this bond of yours, which I strived for and considered sacred above all, nothing more than a lie? My admiration and respect transformed into hatred. I wanted to do whatever it took to tear them apart and ruin their relationship. And yet...when I saw them standing side by side, I was moved. Although in the past he had stood one step behind in the shadows, he was now standing by his partner's side...with an expression more radiant and animated than ever before. How could he look so happy? Who was this girl by his side now? They weren't even dating. And why...? Why does my heart ache so much?



“Wait!”

Alisa had finally caught up to Sayaka behind the gymnasium after running out of the auditorium. She grabbed Sayaka by the arm from behind and stopped her.

“Get back here. I won’t allow you to run away in the middle of the debate!”

Alisa’s eyebrows were arched in fury, but Sayaka didn’t reply, let alone turn around.

“Say something!”

But the moment she stepped in front of Sayaka and saw her face, she drew in a sharp breath.

“You’re...”

Alisa’s voice trembled in confusion as Sayaka glared fiercely back through her tears before violently knocking Alisa’s hand off her.

“Why?! Why you?!?” Sayaka screamed in explosive rage. Alisa froze. “Masachika and Yuki’s relationship was one of a kind! Because of them, I...! I...! I was able to give up! Tell me why...!”

Tears rolled down her furious, crimson cheeks, and with the way she strained her voice, her throat would be raw later. Her screams were

saturated with anger, sadness—far too many emotions to list, and that was when Alisa suddenly realized how Sayaka really felt, albeit only vaguely.

“You... You’re...”

But she couldn’t say another word after that. This entire time, she’d believed Sayaka had been doing all this out of spite, but it was the other way around. Alisa wasn’t able to say another word once she realized Sayaka’s intentions were actually good. Alisa always acted this way. She could never come up with anything thoughtful to say during times like this. She couldn’t inspire people. That was why she had no choice but to accept it all. Alisa decided to, at the very least, accept these intense emotions of Sayaka on Masachika’s behalf because she believed that was her role and the only thing she could do.

“If you have something you want to say to me...say it. All of it.”

“...!”

Sayaka responded to Alisa’s straightforward demand with a vicious scowl...then she suddenly lowered her head and deeply exhaled.

“I don’t have the right to blame anyone but myself,” she replied, her voice trembling. When she lifted her head back up, she smiled an empty smile through her tears.

“I am such an idiot... I believed in him, admired him, and felt like I was betrayed, so I took it out on you two, but...it was nothing more than my ego taking over. Nobody led me on but myself. Ha-ha... Mmm...!”

Alisa didn’t know how Sayaka felt, but she could tell that she was usually someone very rational. She must have been so shocked that she’d lost herself in her rage. Masachika choosing to partner with Alisa and not Yuki must have sickened her.

“Oh, there you are.”

It was Nonoa walking around the corner of the gymnasium.

“*Sigh...* You’re a mess... Sorry about this, Alisa. Let me take things from here, okay? Like, I’m sure Masachika’s waiting for you, so you can head back now.”

“Uh...”

“It’s fine. Okay? Please?”

Although concerned about Sayaka, Alisa began to walk back to the auditorium, but after a few steps, she turned to find Nonoa with her arm around Sayaka’s shoulder, and she said:

“Taniyama.”

Although Sayaka didn’t look back, Alisa continued:

“I don’t know why Kuze chose me...but I’m not going to let him down, so...”

She was having trouble putting her feelings into words, and she didn’t know whether this was something she should be saying to Sayaka, but even then, she put everything she had into it.

“So I’m going to continue working hard until I gain your respect as well... That’s all.”

Nonoa watched Alisa briskly walk away while quietly muttering:

“She’s a good person—that Alisa girl. Like, I thought she’d be a lot more distant and ruder...”

“...I am not surprised. He did choose her, after all,” Sayaka replied in a tearful voice. She then faintly looked up and asked:

“What happened to the debate?”

“Hmm? Oh, I told them we surrender. The audience didn’t seem too happy about it, but Masa and the president took care of it.”

“Ah... I’m sorry. It appears my actions inconvenienced you as well.”

“Don’t worry about it. You’re my bestie, and this is what besties do,” Nonoa replied with a faint smirk as she took off Sayaka’s glasses, faced her, and then tightly held her in her arms. “Plus, it’s not like this is the first time. I’m used to seeing you suddenly crying, screaming, and storming off already. Ha-ha.”

“I don’t—”

“You totally do. Do you want me to count off all the temper tantrums of yours I’ve endured?”

But contrary to her harsh words, Nonoa was gently rubbing Sayaka’s back.

“Let’s go apologize to Masa and Alisa once everything calms down. I’ll go with you, okay?” Nonoa added as though she was trying to persuade herself as well.

“...”

Sayaka silently nodded back as Nonoa continued to comfort her friend.

EPILOGUE

A Reason

Two shadowy figures watched the students form a line and exit the auditorium just as Touya and Masachika had instructed.

“Heh! My brother is still going far too easy on them.” Yuki leisurely smirked with a cup of tea in hand as she sat in the projection room built above the audience seats. She observed Masachika watching the students leave from the stage while leaning back in her chair, confidently crossing her legs.

“He could have ended this entire charade in mere minutes if he wanted to... Was he trying to give his partner an opportunity to grow? Or was he simply going easy on his opponent, since he felt bad for her?”

She swirled the tea in her cup and coldly looked down at him.

“I suppose it doesn’t matter. He isn’t going to stand a chance against me at this rate, though. He’s too soft, and it’s going to be the end of him before long... Wouldn’t you agree?” Yuki asked without looking back. Ayano, who was standing diagonally behind her, tilted her head as she pondered.

“I am not so sure. I believe both Masachika and Alisa did an incredible job.”

Yuki placed her teacup down, frowned, and looked back as if she was offended by Ayano’s skeptical tone.

“Ayano.”

“Yes?”

“You don’t get it. You don’t get it at all. You need to smugly and audaciously evaluate your opponent after each battle while a shadow conceals your eyes! This is one of the most important parts of acting like a villain!” barked Yuki as she banged her fist against her chair’s armrest.

“You have my deepest apologies. I still have so much to learn.” Ayano bowed sincerely.

“Tsk. Get it together, Ayano. Why the hell do you think I agreed to

handle sound and lighting during the debate? Do you think I like uncomfortably hot rooms?"

Yuki, clearly annoyed, fanned herself with her hand as the lighting equipment heated up the humid room. Ayano hastily pulled a fan out of her pocket and began fanning her master.

"May I say something...?" she eventually asked, clearly hesitant.

"What?"

"Don't villains usually lose in the end?"

"..."

"In addition, as I mentioned earlier, eating and drinking are prohibited in the projection room."

"..."

Yuki followed Ayano's gaze until she was looking down at a teacup placed on top of the control panel for the lights...so she uncrossed her legs and carefully picked up the teacup.

"...Ayano."

"Yes?"

"...Let's clean up."

"As you wish."



After thoroughly cleaning the now-deserted auditorium, Masachika and Alisa sat themselves in two side-by-side audience seats while they gazed at the empty stage. The other student council members had already left. All that remained was silence. After some time had gone by, Alisa eventually muttered:

"I think she really admired you."

"...?"

Although inwardly confused by what she meant, Masachika waited in silence for her to continue.

"Taniyama said that you and Yuki were a one-of-a-kind pair. She said she aspired to be like you. That's why she was able to give up," Alisa said, still facing forward.

"Yeah..."

It suddenly all made sense to Masachika, because he felt there'd been something strange about Sayaka's recent behavior. She was always very logical and rational, and yet she was acting as if she was possessed by rage

and hatred. But this was a problem familiar to his heart, too, and that was why he could understand very well where she was coming from.

Yeah... You felt betrayed.

He always wondered why Sayaka didn't join the student council. Usually, you'd want to become a member during your first year of high school if you were serious about becoming the student council president. She did actually join in middle school with that goal as well. On the other hand, it wouldn't be a surprise if she decided not to join the student council because she had given up on trying to exact her revenge on Yuki... and in the end, that was exactly what happened. Sayaka realized that she wouldn't be able to defeat Yuki, so she dropped out. She most likely recognized Masachika's achievements and skills as well. That was why she'd assumed that he would run with Yuki again this year. She never even doubted it. But Masachika decided to run with Alisa instead.

No wonder she was upset.

I wonder how she sees me. I wonder what made her feel like she lost. I wonder how it felt to have her decision trampled on like this.

Masachika was painfully aware of how it felt to believe and trust someone, only to feel like you were betrayed. And when he thought about how he was the reason she was in pain, he was overcome with incredible guilt.

“I’m not going to give up,” Alisa announced.

“...?”

He stopped grinding his teeth and lifted his head up.

“I’m going to prove that you didn’t make a mistake choosing to run with me...and I am going to gain Taniyama’s respect.”

He was extremely envious of how honest her words were and how optimistic her thinking was. Unlike Masachika, who had his head down as he drowned in his guilt, Alisa was looking straight ahead and trying to move forward. She was like a radiant star in a pitch-black sky, and it tore at his heart. But at the same time, he was glad that she was being positive, because he realized that staring at the ground wasn’t going to get him anywhere. He realized that if he had to choose, then why not keep his chin up and move forward?

“...I’m not going to give up, either. I’m going to prove to Sayaka that we aren’t messing around, and next year, she is going to want to vote for us.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

They nodded at each other, fortifying their resolve. They weren't in this fight alone anymore. Failure wasn't an option anymore—not after they'd hurt Sayaka and used her as a stepping stone for their own success.

It was her tears that moved me once again.

Masachika recalled seeing Sayaka crying two years ago and smiled bitterly.

“...Hey, can I ask you something?” Alisa said hesitantly after seeing the look on his face, interrupting his flow of thoughts.

“Hmm?”

He turned toward Alisa, but she was looking forward with a troubled expression as if she was having a hard time finishing what she wanted to say. However, after a few moments of silence, she eventually faced Masachika and asked:

“What made you choose me over Yuki?”

“...”

After slowly blinking for a few moments, he swiftly shifted his gaze up at the ceiling. It was now Alisa who was quietly waiting for him to speak.

“...I only joined the student council with her because I couldn’t say no to her.”

The muttered words that finally slipped off his tongue sounded more like a monologue than an answer, but Alisa listened quietly and attentively to what he had to say. Without so much as checking to see how she was reacting, he continued:

“I wanted to support her dream as well...but I guess I mainly helped her because I felt guilty.”

“‘Guilty’?” Alisa repeated unconsciously.

“...”

Masachika kept staring ahead and didn’t say another word. Alisa, however, could tell that he was confronting his inner self right now, so she swallowed her curiosity and faced forward once more.

“That’s probably why I always felt like I couldn’t breathe. I would see people around me working so hard for their dreams or goals and compare myself. I didn’t have the drive they did, and I would beat myself up over it.”

Becoming the president of the student council at Seiren Academy. That mission had been assigned to Masachika, but in the end, he had dumped that responsibility on his sister. That was why he couldn’t say no

to her. But because of that guilt, there was never any sense of achievement, no matter what he did. He dumped all his obligations on his sister. He forced her to be his reason. And while he did work somewhat hard to support her from the shadows, he felt like a coward.

“Saying I work and support the student council president from the shadows makes me sound cool, but all it really means is that I’m out of the limelight. It just means that I don’t have what it takes to stand proud before my peers and fulfill my role as the vice president.”

Hearing him speak so poorly of himself broke Alisa’s heart.

That’s not true. There’s no need for you to put yourself down like that. Alisa wanted to tell him that, but she thought anything she said would sound shallow, since she felt she didn’t really know him that well.

Yuki probably would have been able to cheer him up if she was here...

Maria probably would have been able to gently heal his wounded heart, too...

Touya, Chisaki, Ayano... She kept visualizing what others could do to fix the situation, making her feel powerless, and it struck her with grief.

Why am I like this? Why can’t I be more considerate of others’ feelings? I would do anything if I could to make him feel just a little better, and yet my body won’t move. I can’t speak. All I can do is listen in silence.

It wasn’t clear if he sensed her distress, but Masachika’s distant expression suddenly changed into something slightly more embarrassed.

“But this time is different...”

“...?”

“I decided to become the vice president of the student council on my own... I alone chose to run with you.”

That was the moment Alisa finally remembered what she asked him. Why did he choose her instead of Yuki? And that was when she also realized he was answering that question right now.

“That’s why...this has nothing to do with Yuki. I decided to run with you...because that’s what I wanted to do, and this is the first time I’ve ever made a decision for myself like this. I’m not comparing it to what happened with her. It’s just... You know? This is how it is.”

He averted his gaze and began aggressively scratching his head while stumbling over his words. Alisa couldn’t control her laughter, but she also realized she was part of what inspired him to stop looking down and face forward, which filled her heart with mirth and relief. A tingling sensation

went through her—something she had never felt before.

“I kind of wish you would be a little more straightforward with your answer,” Alisa teased, smiling. Masachika unsubtly looked away and snapped:

“Oh, shut up. I’m already a little embarrassed. Isn’t that enough? Besides, you get the idea.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t. Do you think you could be a little clearer?”

“I see you laughing! You’re not getting another word out of me. Anyway, what about you?”

“What *about* me?”

She mischievously smirked while leaning closer to him.

“Why did you agree to run with me? Do you think you could tell me and be as clear as possible?” he promptly asked, almost out of desperation.

“<Oh, that’s simple>,” she said as if it was the most obvious thing in the world, and she confidently grinned.



Поэтому что это Ты.

Her easily comprehensible, concise reply almost made Masachika's cheek twitch.

"...! Seriously?"

But he managed to hold back his surprise. Alisa must have thought he was replying to the fact that she'd answered in Russian, smugly smirking while flicking her hair over her shoulder.

"About ready to go?"

She stood.

"...Yeah, whatever."

Masachika stood as well, putting on his poker face while stretching his back to conceal his inner excitement.

Damn. That might be even more effective than Sayaka's tears.

Now he had to start getting serious, he thought, bitterly smirking at what a simple man he was.

But, well...this isn't that bad. Not bad at all...

At the very least, it was way better than being driven by guilt.

That thought alone put Masachika in a wonderful mood as he followed Alisa to the entrance.

"Oh, I almost forgot..."

"Hmm?"

She suddenly stopped ahead of him and looked back with a distant gaze.

"Kuze, care to explain?"

"Explain what...?" he wondered, tilting his head. A hint of crimson tinted Alisa's cheeks as her eyes narrowed grimly.

"You know what I'm talking about. You mentioned something about my chest, I believe?"

"...! O-oh, that? That was, uh..."

Masachika was suddenly reminded of what he'd said before the debate, and his eyes began to wander.

"Like, uh... A girl I know said something like that the other day, and... Don't worry about it. I won't tell anyone else. Plus, it was just a guess."

"..."

"Seriously! The topic came out of nowhere! We were just having an ordinary conversation! Like, there was this anime on TV where the girl had these E cups, and I was like, 'There's no way real E cups are this big,' and she was like, 'If you want to know what real E cups look like, check

out Alya...”

His voice gradually fizzled out as the excuse grew more pathetic. Alisa’s absolute-zero stare peered into his soul...until she suddenly let out a “hmpf” and turned away. He immediately sighed in relief, believing she was going to give him a pass this one time, when she suddenly whispered: “<Close enough.>”

He couldn’t process what she said at first, but the instant he realized she was answering his question from before the debate, he fell into a pit of utter confusion.

“Close enough”? Going which way?! Is she slightly bigger? Slightly smaller? Are they Fs close to the E side? Or are they Ds but on the bigger side?! Ahhh?! Which is it?!

The suddenly disclosed information caused this pubescent boy’s teenage brain to explode, but Alisa didn’t have time to worry about how he was reacting, as she rushed out of the auditorium in an attempt to hide her face, burning red ears and all. After the door was slammed shut, a deep silence reigned over the spacious theater.

Until eventually...

“Which is it?!?!”

...the screams of a teenage boy filled the empty auditorium.

послесловие

Afterword

Sunsunsun here. It has been half a year already, but I'm back and was able to publish a second volume thanks to all your support. I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

To tell you the truth, if the first volume didn't sell, I was planning on leaving with these fond memories in my heart and returning to posting stories online again on Shousetsuka ni Narou—my first love. I would return to creating short stories while remembering the good times I had with Alya once in a while. But the reactions I got went far beyond anything I ever expected. I honestly have to give credit to Momoco for these god-tier illustrations and my associate editor for going the extra mile. I felt like a level-1 hero who was given level-99 party members to aid his quest by an overprotective king and— Ahem. What am I even talking about?

(After thinking for another five minutes and seventeen seconds...)

I'm not really sure what I wanted to say anymore, but whatever. It's not like people actually read afterwords. Am I right? Plus, the people who do actually enjoy reading them surely get what I'm trying to say anyway. "What did the author mean in the second passage when he said, blah blah blah?" It's like those reading tests you had to take back in grade school. I always wondered if the people making those questions even knew what the author was trying to say. It's not like they asked them. If you're still in high school, ask your teacher if they checked with the author first the next time one of these questions pops up. I'm sure they'll be "thrilled." Seriously, what am I even rambling about? What's the point of me writing all this? I don't know. Please, teachers of the country, tell me what I'm trying to say.

Aaaaaand done! Perfect! I think I filled up enough space now and finished the afterword without even bringing up the second volume. Heh.

Why do I get the feeling that the editor, who I haven't even met since everything's still remote, is clutching his head and frustrated right now?

Must be my imagination.

Anyway, it's time to give thanks where thanks are due.

Natsuki Miyakawa, my editor, who has worked hard to produce and advertise this series with his incredible ability to plan and edit.

Momoco, as always, for her wonderful, godlike illustrations.

Tapioca for illustrating the manga again, which is even more incredible than last time.

Sumire Uesaka for doing the voice of Alya.

Kouhei Amasaki for doing the voice of Masachika.

And everyone else who came together to help create this novel, including all the readers who picked up a copy.

I wish to give each and every one of you my extra-large thanks.
THANKS!

I am looking forward to seeing you all again next volume. Until then!



I'm looking forward
to more volumes,
Feelings in Russian!

Thomie D

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