

燐々SUN イラストももこ
Story by sun sun sun illustration by momoco

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ИНО

角川スニーカー文庫





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14
隣のアーリヤさん

Иллюстрация на тему концепции языка и культуры

時々ボソッとい
ロシア語でデレる

「HEY, DON'T LOOK AT ME!」

「U-UHM, IT'S TOO EMBARRASSING FOR
ME IF YOU KEEP LOOKING LIKE THAT...」

**「DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT...
IT'S JUST A LITTLE BIT OF MY
INNOCENCE COMING OUT」**





「... Ah, I am aware of the bad look in my eyes.」

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Prologue

Encounter

Italicized text = Inner monologue

"()" = Whispering

【】= Speaking in russian

"Although this time I was already very confident..."

"Although I practiced a lot, but...why?"

"Again that guy came in first...even though he didn't practice much."

"Otou-san said that if I couldn't get first place, it would have all been for nothing... I've had enough. I just want to quit...."

He had heard phrases like that for a long time. Masachika began to clearly realize this fact after he was sent to live with his grandparents from the Kuze family.

"Is the winner that boy again? I think sensei is favoring him a lot."

"I heard that he comes from a very old and prestigious family. I'm sure sensei is just feeling pressured."

"Why wasn't my son selected? Is there a problem with his score?!"

"Look at the kid. Shouldn't that kid be nominated into the Hall of Fame or something? I mean, so we can give the other students a chance..."

The pain of people who were unappreciated swirled around him. Self-directed hostility and exile. Masachika, who up to that point was preoccupied with his family issues, ironically was able to become more aware of this problem after leaving the Suou family.

"Haaah, being a genius isn't fair, is it?"

Those were the words once said to him by one of the contestants when Masachika won a piano competition.

That it's not fair... It's true. Every time he did something he had been taught, within a certain small period of time, Masachika could always achieve progressively better results than before. There was never sadness nor frustration. He never experienced obstacles or hardships when doing something. Masachika is able to do things that no one else can do despite his great efforts. Since he was young, he has had more tutoring than most people, but in all of them, Masachika always got good results.

During Swimming lessons, he could swim faster than anyone else, and in Karate he was able to obtain his black belt faster than other kids who went

to the dojo every day. He always won first place in all piano recitals, and in his Calligraphy class, his work was always displayed in the most conspicuous place. Masachika did all that not because he liked it. From the beginning, he had no desire to do it all.

He just wanted to live up to his grandfather's expectations.

He just wanted to be praised by his mother.

He wanted to reassure his sister.

After all, that was all he wanted. Nothing more than that...

Huh? Then why am I still studying?

His mother was no longer praising him. His grandfather was disappointed in him. Besides, how could he convince his sister now after committing such a thing at school? What was the point of further trampling on other people's efforts with his talent? After thinking about it so much, Masachika finally came to his senses.

"If all that is pointless... It would be better if I were to just give up on everything."

There must be many people crying...behind Masachika's glorious achievements. Those who have worked so hard and put in so much more time with true passion. Even without realizing his precious efforts, he had already committed many sins without realizing it.

"...It was all in vain."

Their actions so far, and Masachika himself, who has no passion for anything. He felt that it was all for nothing....

"Masachika-chan, isn't it time for swimming lessons already?"

Even the words of his grandmother who had come calling him to his room as usual, was no longer moving for Masachika's heart.

"...I won't go."

"Hah? Ohh... So today you want to take a day off——"

"I don't want to go anymore. I give up everything. I want to give it all up."

"...Um, I see. If Masachika-chan wants to quit, that's fine as well.."

His grandmother nodded, as if she had already deduced something from the careless words. There was no skepticism or anger, only sympathetic acceptance. Masachika stepped off the porch and began to walk aimlessly because his grandmother's kindness made him uncomfortable. Masachika began to hear noises as he approached the shopping district and turned around to look at the game center.

Games, huh...

Masachika remembered his classmates discussing games at school. Elementary school children appear to be very enthusiastic about video games. Masachika, on the other hand, had never played video games before, due to sensei's warnings that it would interfere with his studies.

"....."

Along with a sudden urge to rebel against his grandfather from the Suou family, Masachika slowly entered the game center building. Then, he started playing a zombie shooting game that caught his attention. At first, he was immediately killed because he didn't know how to play it, but after playing it four times, Masachika understood and managed to defeat the final boss on the seventh try. Then, the score was displayed on the screen and with a B rating.

"...Ohh, the less damage I take and the more conservative I am with my bullets, the higher score I get, huh..."

When Masachika thought he could finish it easily, it seemed like the game had just started. The only thing on his mind now is how to solve all the challenges. How many more mistakes could he reduce and how much higher of a score can he achieve from now on? From here on out, the real battle begins.

"Well, I guess I'll go for a perfect score."

After that, Masachika took advantage of the fact that there was no one behind him and kept playing until he was satisfied. Then, when he finally achieved a perfect score...all the leaderboard rankings were filled with his name.

"...Well, I guess that's it."

As soon as his interest waned, Masachika continued with the crane game. However, after he managed to master it after trying several times, the rest was just a process of reaping rewards. Not wanting any gifts, Masachika took all the gifts he could get and gave them to the onlookers watching around him. After doing that for several days, Masachika was finally banned from entering any nearby game centers in the neighborhood.

"Well, it seems that rumors have spread, so it can't be helped..."

He tried to convince himself of this, but the uneasy feeling in his chest wouldn't go away. Even in a place like this, people who were too good at it would be shunned. Masachika couldn't stop the feeling of helplessness from growing in his heart.

"Sigh, what should I do about this?"

Masachika sighed as he looked at the giant teddy bear he was holding with both hands. This was a prize from a crane game that Masachika won when a game center employee gently chased him away. It was too complicated to return it, so he brought it home...but no matter how you look

at it, it was for girls. Because Yuki had severe asthma, she couldn't have a stuffed animal, so if he had to give it to someone, Ayano....would be the only option. But Masachika had no intention of visiting the Suou family again, so he doesn't know when he will be able to see them again. After all, what kind of expression should he show by giving it to her?

"...Maybe I can give it to Grandma."

While struggling with this problem, Masachika found himself standing in front of a park with lots of playground equipment. When he casually looked in a certain direction, Masachika saw that there was a group of five girls who looked to be the same age as him. At the same time, his gaze naturally gravitated towards one of them.

Eh, an angel...?

A moment filled with awe. At the same time, such an impression naturally appeared in his mind. She was a very beautiful girl who looked out of this world. Her white skin looked dazzling and refracted the light. Her long blonde hair looked soft when the wind blew. Her bright blue eyes were like sapphires. Her whole appearance was so lovely and adorable. Now, however, her beautiful face was clouded with confusion and sadness, she seemed to be begging for something.

"Nai, suu, re...su, ka?"

"Wait, I can't understand what you are saying, you know~?"

"Speak in proper Japanese, please~Maria-chan~."

The girls around her laughed mischievously as she attempted to speak Japanese fluently. In response, the girl panicked even more as she stammered out her words, but despite the fact that the four probably already knew what she was talking about, they continued to tease her by saying things like "I don't know what you're saying" or "Your Japanese is so bad." After seeing that sight, Masachika's face contracted with a sense of déjà vu.

The four girls' hideous expressions as they laughed at the girl. A face full of malice and the desire to harm someone superior and different from them. They have the same expression as the boys who messed with Masachika and were violently pushed aside by Masachika.

【I can't anymore.... My words were not understood at all...】

In the end, the girl moaned in Russian and the other four girls took the opportunity to raise their voices.

"Eh~, eh~, wait a minute~! I really don't know what you're saying, you know~?"

"Don't you know the proverb "The ground you step on holds the sky"~? I guess foreigners don't know that, eh~."

[T/L note: This is a Japanese idiom/proverb, but its meaning is unfortunately lost in translation]

"Ahh~, even though I took the trouble to invite you. That's enough, let's leave Maria-chan alone and play by ourselves~?"

"Yes, let's do that~"

The four girls left after having allowed mischievous words to be heard, leaving the girl alone. For a brief moment, the girl stood there, her hands clutching her skirt as she attempted to follow them.

"....."

The sight was so upsetting that Masachika considered kicking the four girls in the back as they fled. Masachika quickly suppressed that violent impulse and returned his attention to the girl who had been left alone.

Her pale pink lips were tightly closed, as if she was trying hard not to cry. When Masachika saw that scene, his heart swelled. Then he found himself approaching the girl and speaking to her in Russian, which Masachika was unfamiliar with.

【Are you all right?】

The girl raised her head in response to the question. Then she opened her droopy, wet eyes wide and looked at Masachika, puzzled.

【Ehh, just now...?】

【I can speak Russian....Well, just a little though?】

The most basic levels are found in the Russian language, which is simply a series of words. However, the girl's face immediately brightened. She showed her delight and admiration with her entire body.

【.....Uh, you can speak Russian?!!!! Wow, so cool!】

"...!"

To be honest, Masachika didn't fully comprehend what she said. Masachika, on the other hand, realized he was being praised based on the words he managed to catch. Above all, the girl's gaze shone with pure awe...and had a powerful impact on Masachika's heart.

【My name is Masha!】

"Uh, ah...?"

【Masha!】

While Masachika was perplexed by the unexpected feelings that shook his heart, the girl smiled and spoke. Masachika initially mistook it for a Russian word he didn't recognize, but after another question, he realized what it meant.

【What's your name?】

"Mmm? Ah yes, name you said! Umm.... Maa?"

【Masha!】

"Maa?"

【Masha!】

"Ohh, you mean Masha?"

Masha happily nodded several times after confirming that. She then pointed her palm at Masachika and said again:

【What's your name?】

"Ahh, my name is... Masachika. Suou Masachika."

【Shuou Mashachika?】

"Masachika. Ma-sa-chi-ka."

【....! Masaa Chika!】

"Eh, ehhh? Well... Okay."

Masachika nodded awkwardly, bowing his head at the Russian-sounding name. Masha then smiled and looked down slightly as she spoke.

【What's wrong with this child?】

"Huh?"

【What's this child's name?】

"Mmm? Oh!"

Masachika blushed as he realized she was asking the name of the stuffed animal he was holding after a brief pause. He was embarrassed because this angel-like girl mistook him for a "boy who likes to carry stuffed animals everywhere."

"No... Umm... I got it at the game center...?"

After seeing Masha's reaction, Masachika decided that she didn't understand him and once again pushed the Russian words out of his head.

【Game rewards, gifts. I don't want it. I'll give it to you】

【....? Eh, for me?】

【Yes, for you.】

After Masachika said that and handed her the stuffed animal, Masha looked confused for a moment, but then she smiled radiantly.

【Uwaah, really, thank you, so cuteeeee ♡!】

When he saw Masha happily hugging the stuffed toy, Masachika felt that he was being hugged too. Masha asked Masachika again, who turned his head away because he was embarrassed and indescribably happy.

【And what is this child's name?】

【Not having. He has no name】

【Is that so? Hmm~. Then from now on his name will be Samuel III!】

"..."

Although he couldn't hear it well, for some reason Masachika felt that the stuffed animal had been given a unique name and could only smile slightly. After grabbing Masachika's hand that had that expression, Masha pointed to a dome-shaped game.

【Masaa chika, shall we go play?】

"Huh?"

【Let's run!】

"W-what? Ah..."

Masachika started to run while his hand was pulled. The girl who was mistaken for an angel at first was actually not an angel at all, she was just an innocent girl. However, her smile was so innocent... It really surprised Masachika, who always suffered from isolation and malice.

When he and Masha exchanged words and played together, Masachika began to feel that his dry and cracked heart was slowly healing. Masachika wanted to talk to her often. Masachika wants to show more of his cool side to Masha.

From then on, Masachika began to frequently watch his grandfather's Russian films, which had never interested him before. He started taking more

lessons, although he tried to quit once. Or maybe he was just treating Masha as a substitute for his mother. Maybe Masachika just longed for her approval and admiration that his mother never gave him again.

Still... The feeling he felt at that moment was indeed the feeling of love.

【What's wrong? Masaachika】

【Hmm～～ ...Regarding that nickname, can you stop calling me "Masaa Chika" since it sounds like it's a Russian name?】

【Really? Hmm～～. What should I call you then?】

【At least, I think it sounds more Japanese if you add "kun" at the end...】

【Is that so... In that case, I'll just call you "Saa-kun", okay?】

【No, do you still want to use that address "Saa."】

If so, it still leaves an impression similar to a Russian name. Masha smiled and brought her face close to Masachika, who was smiling wryly and thinking like this.

【So, what about me?】

"Huh?"

【What will you call me?】

No matter what changes, the name "Masha" became her nickname. Masachika had no intention of changing her nickname...but when he saw Masha's expectant look, he couldn't bear to say that.

"Umm~~..."

The first thing that came to Masachika's mind was to add the suffix "chan" to her name. But that form of address was quite embarrassing even for a child.

【Nee～Nee～, what are you going to call me.】

"Umm....."

However, if he was pressured to do so, such a choice would immediately disappear from his mind. Masachika hesitantly opened his mouth while turning his head.

【In that case...】

Chapter 1

Reunion And Farewell

"Maa-chan?"

The name that re-emerged from the depths of his memory spontaneously came out of Masachika's mouth. Then Maria slowly nodded with a sad smile.

"Yes... It's me Saa-kun."

After hearing these words, the shadow of "that girl" who had been hiding behind a mist in his memories, and Maria's appearance in front of him overlapped...

No, clearly they don't overlap anymore?!

That girl... No, although Masachika could finally clearly remember Maa-chan's figure, her appearance was very different from the senpai in front of him. Not only were her height and body shape completely different, but even her hair color and eye color had also changed. The atmosphere she emitted also changed drastically because the color of her blonde hair and blue eyes had transformed into brownish hair and brown eyes. The image of the

girl who used to look like an angel, and her senpai who is calm and loving in front of Masachika, was not exactly the same.

Well, it's only natural that I didn't notice it...still, there must be something wrong with me because I didn't notice it for more than two months!

As he continued to ponder it, Masachika asked with a half-hearted feeling to Maria.

"Well... Maa-chan, right? The girl who always played with me in this park about six years ago..."

"Um, that's right."

"Ah, uh, um..."

In addition to a truly unexpected meeting, the fact that the person he once loved was someone who now made Masachika not know how to approach the situation.

Maria smiled a little and gently grabbed Masachika's hand whose eyes wandered all over the place as she mumbled unclearly.

"For now, let's go somewhere shady first, shall we?"

"Ah, yes."

"Ah, mou~... Your formal language sounds strange, stop it with that already."

"Eh~..."

It's true that in the past the way she spoke was quite awkward. While remembering this, Masachika walked towards the bench under the shade of a tree while being led by her hand. After sitting side by side on the bench, Masachika finally had time to settle his mind and ask questions.

"Umm... Since when did you realize?"

The question coming out of his mouth was a form of speech between formal and informal mode. However, Maria was not too unsettled by it and answered him lightly while looking forward.

"Hmm~? Right after we met in the Student Council room."

"Wasn't that when we first met?"

"Yes. I had doubted it because your last name had changed, so I thought "What?" and I tried to confirm my suspicions by speaking Russian, but you didn't respond at all, so I thought: "Maybe I had mistook you for someone else~"."

After saying that with a slightly amused tone, Maria looked at Masachika. Then she said while narrowing her eyes with a loving look.

"But Saa-kun was still Saa-kun, so I thought.....it must still be you. Besides, this too..."

"Eh, what...?"

Besides the confused Masachika, Maria touched Masachika's right shoulder and gently stroked it... No, what Maria stroked was not the shoulder, but an old scar that's there.

"The marks Saa-kun protected me with.... How could I still think you were someone else with something like that, right?"

"Ahh, I see, that's right."

"Fufufu, I told you, stop talking politely."

"Ah, no, yes..."

Even so, to Masachika, the girl in front of him was Masha-san, not Maa-chan. How could he easily change his perspective, and hasn't it been too long that he couldn't relax with her like before?

"Umm, even so, this is still a big coincidence, isn't it? It feels too much of a coincidence that we meet here again of all places..."

"It's not a coincidence."

"Ehh——?"

Maria said so seriously as her face showed such seriousness in front of Masachika who tried to change the topic because he didn't know what to say.

"I had thought of giving up if I couldn't see you during this vacation. That's why...this is fate."

"F-fate... No, in my opinion, this sounds like a drama, but it's not too excessive..."

Although Masachika tried to argue with a wry smile, Maria's attitude did not change at all. Masachika's voice naturally faded when he saw her serious eyes. Then, he secretly asked again with a serious face.

"What do you mean by...fate?"

It would have been a tactless and far-fetched question. But Maria immediately answered without hesitation.

"...I said it during the training camp, didn't I? I'm talking about fate, that's what I mean, you know?"

[T/L note: In the Raw, Maria says "Unmei no Aite," or if translated literally, "the couple that is destined."]

There is no doubt that it is a confession of love. Masachika's heart beat abysmally, and words of denial reflexively left his lips.

"No, no, no, no, no, this is very strange."

"Why?"

"Actually, why ask why... No, you have no reason to like me. I'm not Suou Masachika, I'm not Saa-Kun anymore, and I don't remember doing anything to make Masha-san fall in love with me. On the contrary, I keep showing my pathetic side..."

Maria laughed a little only before telling Masachika, who compiled the words of denial from himself one by one.

"Yes...that's right. Kuze-kun is different from Saa-Kun in many ways."

"Well, right? Besides, after I think about it now, he also used to be quite naughty... I didn't remain a boy who always showboated, did I?"

"Fufu, well, that's right~. Although I don't think you're annoying, there are still actually a lot of stories that boast."

"Ugh, right..."

Although he knew it, he still felt unable to listen to it if it was confirmed like that. Facing Masachika, who curled up to the point where he wanted to disappear, Maria turned her gaze to the distance as if she was reminiscing about the past.

"You are proud and laughing like 'Look at that! How cool, no!'..."

"Ugh..."

"When I praised you, you always laughed and looked so happy...Fufufu, at that time you were so cute."

"Cu-cute..."

Masachika's shoulder slumped, deferring as he realized that he was really treated like a child. Under such circumstances, Maria suddenly showed a different smile.

"Even if you're suffering, you always thought "I don't deserve to suffer," and would always force a smile..."

"...Huh?"

The flow of conversation suddenly changed and Masachika blinked his eyes. While looking straight at Masachika, Maria said in a soft voice.

"...I think Kuze-kun's (Saa-kun) smile is more adorable than anything else."

"...!"

"Actually, you're a person who is more kind and caring than anyone else, but you never admit it to yourself and instead hide your pain behind your smile...seeing you like that makes me want to hug you with all my might. I want to hug you tightly, caress your head, kiss your cheek and tell you... "You've done your best" or "You don't have to hate yourself anymore", I just want to tell you this over and over again."

Maria's opinion was full of affection and passion when she said that. Seeing her expression like that, Masachika thought while wanting to escape from reality.

Hey, in other words, do you like bad boys?

But Masachika immediately got rid of such silly thoughts.

Hmm, what is this...? She thinks the bad guy who works hard is cute... Something similar to that?

After successfully describing Maria's words in an incomprehensible interpretation, Masachika closed the tip of his mouth to avoid Maria's passionate gaze.

"Someone that sounds like a hero in the shadows, carrying a heavy burden like that on his back.... I'm not that type of cool person."

He doesn't have a tragic past at all. He just threw toddler tantrums and ran away from home, then couldn't come home. And the problem has only stretched so far. The problem he experienced was not important at all if it was expressed through words.

In front of Masachika, who sneered like this...Maria stretched her body a little as if she was holding something back.

"If you keep showing a cute face like that..."

"Ehhh?"

Then, as if she was whispering something, Maria suddenly opened her hand and hugged Masachika.

"Gyuuuu~!"

"Wahh, what, why!!!"

"Kuze-kun, you shouldn't have done that! You keep seducing me with a cute face like that!"

"What!"

Masachika's expression immediately became dazed as he was suddenly embraced with his cheeks pressed against Maria's cheeks with all her strength. The extraordinary physical language of an Onee-san blowing out all thoughts with a single blow. Super important waves of information, such as the supple feeling of Maria's womanhood, limbs and her fragrant scent stimulating his nasal cavity, filled Masachika's brain and made him overheat in an instant.

V-very soft~she also smells very good~.

Along with the brain overheating, Masachika felt that he was an elementary school boy again. A faint tremor caressed his earlobe.

"(This is really...Saa-kun...)"

At that moment, Masachika quickly regained his normal thinking as he felt a tight feeling in his chest.

Well, come to think of it....

According to Maria, it's not a coincidence that they met here again today. In other words...Maria often visits this place from time to time, hoping to meet her old friend again. Even though she has no proof of being able to meet again.

What the hell, that...? Why did she come...

Masachika suddenly felt like he was about to cry due to a small vibration that spread throughout his body. Warm feelings swelled up in his chest, and he impulsively wanted to hug the girl in front of him.

"Masha-sa——"

Masachika raised his hand along with the emotions attached to his chest...however, at that moment.

"Ahh～! Maria onee-chan is on a date～!"

Masachika unconsciously turned around when he heard the sound of a high-pitched scream typical of small children. Then, there are seven elementary school children who seem to be around ten years old. It seems that Maria has also become aware of their existence, and she kept her body away from Masachika while scratching her cheeks because she feels embarrassed. As a result, Masachika's arms wandered in the air and immediately returned to his knees.

"Ahhh~... It seems we have shown something embarrassing~."

"...Do you know them?"

"Ahahaha yes, they are friends who sometimes play with me..."

While talking about that, three girls among them rushed to Masachika and Maria with bright eyes. Four children with suspicious expressions followed behind them.

"Nee~ could this be the person Maria onee-chan mentioned a lot?"

The leading girl asked Maria with a curious face. Maria then nodded clearly, even with a little shyness.

"Yes... He's the person I like."

「「Kyaaaaaaaaaaaaaa————!!」」

Maria's confession made the three girls shout without hesitation. And at the same time...

Hey, what was that? I felt like I had just heard the sound of a broken heart from a child's first love that was cruelly destroyed... What's worse, four people at once!

It was clear from the faces of the four boys standing behind the girls that this was Masachika's fault. After all, they all froze as if they forgot to blink.

"Nee~, nee~ What do you like about him?"

"Hey, we'd better not bother them."

"That's right~right~. Umm, please enjoy your date you two~?"

"Ahaha, what's that~?"

The three girls left in a buzz, raising a ruckus in a very adult manner. They also didn't forget to drag the stunned boys along. That was an extraordinary cleanup.

"...Girls these days are very sophisticated."

"Fufu, it seems~."

The words came out of Masachika's mouth because he was shocked by the 3 girls who were like a storm. Masachika regained consciousness when Maria responded to his words in agreement. Then he remembered Maria's words and immediately felt uncomfortable.

"Umm, regarding the previous words..."

"Yes?"

"I mean... The person you like...?"

When he asked shyly, Maria nodded with a calm smile on her face. Masachika's heart beats fast in reaction to her smile that looks like an adult.

"Yes... I like you, you know? I've always liked you. You are the only person I will always love."

It was an honest and sincere confession of love. After receiving that...what Masachika thought was just sadness.

"Then why..."

"Huh?"

"Why did you leave me.... On that day?"

"E-eh?"

When Maria blinked several times in confusion, Masachika spoke about their day of separation that came back from the depths of his memory, as if he wanted to vent his bitter feelings.

"You said it that day. You told me goodbye. That you weren't the person I was meant to be with and that you would never see me again!"

"E-Ehh, wait, wait a minute, ehh...!"

When she heard Masachika's accusation, Maria's eyes widened and she gasped a little, and then she shook her head.

"I didn't say that! I never said that at all!"

"But, you clearly said that..."

"It's true that I said goodbye! But what happens after that is different! "If you're not my soulmate, I'll never see you again. But if you're really my soulmate, we'll definitely meet again." Isn't that what I said?!"

"...E-Ehh?"

In Maria's defense, Masachika traced his memory back while sounding skeptical. While trying to remember again, he felt that Maria said something after the statement "I won't see you again." It's just that... Maria's first words were so surprising that Masachika missed what happened next.

That's right, Masachika missed it. When he realized it again, Maria was gone...after that, he visited the park many times to see if there was some kind of mistake, but still he never saw her again.

Masachika closed his eyes from reality. Without thinking deeply, he fled to the conclusion carelessly and was caught in the tragedy that "that girl is just like my mother, she has also betrayed me." Then he labeled it as "an unpleasant memory" along with his mother's memories and sealed it away. If only he thought more carefully than running away, Masachika might have caught up with the truth.

"Ha-hahaha..."

Masachika let out a dry laugh after being run over by a sense of disappointment. He inevitably felt foolish when he thought he was so hurt by

a small misunderstanding. After seeing Masachika's situation like this, Maria lowered her eyebrows with a sincere apology.

"Umm... I'm sorry? I wanted to say goodbye properly in Japanese....but since I used unfamiliar Japanese, I must have confused you..."

"Ahh... No, it's all my fault because I was too quick to jump to conclusions, so Masha-san doesn't need to worry about that..."

Perhaps exactly as Maria said, her Japanese language skills that were not so proficient at the time might have caused the misunderstanding. But not least, there is a possibility that past memories have changed in Masachika's mind. Especially childhood memories, which can be changed according to his own wishes, either in a good or bad way.

However, which one is right? There is no way to know for sure now, so there is no point in thinking about it.

"I'm so sorry..."

But Maria apologized once again in a sad voice and gently hugged Masachika. Masachika almost gave up a very relaxing feeling...but the confession of Maria's love replayed in his mind and he quickly felt uncomfortable.

"Umm, I..."

Maria nodded to Masachika, who seemed hesitant to speak, as if she understood everything.

"It's okay... Don't worry, I'm not looking for an answer to my confession earlier."

"Ehh...."

"Because, Kuze-kun, you weren't thinking of me as such, were you?"

"Ugh..."

It seems that she really knows everything, and Masachika felt uncomfortable in a different way than before. Seeing Masachika frozen with an awkward expression, Maria released his body while laughing and continued in a calm voice.

"Besides...you must have realized it, right? Alya-chan's feelings."

"...!"

Masachika gasped, he never thought Maria would mention that. Maria smiled a little happily at Masachika, who wasn't sure how to react.

"Fufu, well, even though Alya-chan hasn't realized her own feelings...but I'm curious why we like the same person. It's probably because we're both sisters."

"...."

Maria spoke without too much concern about how sisters could fall in love with the same person, something that would only cause chaos from a strangers' perspective. Masachika felt a strong discomfort at this view.

"Why..."

Why do you look so calm? Maria, who caught the unspoken words of the message, continued calmly as usual.

"Because it makes me happy. Alya-chan fell in love with someone. And that person she fell in love with is a nice guy like Kuze-kun."

"....."

"I'm really very happy. Both Alya-chan and Kuze-kun, both of whom I love... So that's why..."

While suddenly looking up at the sky, Maria muttered in a musing voice.

"After all, I don't want to compete with Alya-chan."

That's the idea that Maria once spoke about the other day in the school hallway, a place where the faint rays and sunset shone. The same words echoed with different meanings now.

"That means..."

Does it mean you're stepping aside for your sister...?

Maria smiled softly in response to Masachika's surprised look.

"Therefore, I want Kuze-kun to think about and face Alya-chan's feelings properly...and if you still choose me..."

In the middle of the sentence, Maria cut off her words and smiled so beautifully that it made Masachika fascinated by her.

"If that happens, am I willing to...accept Kuze-kun's feelings?"

Masachika's chest tightened due to the endless tenderness and attention in her words.

"So, Masha-san... Doesn't that bother you?"

After truly understanding Masachika and Alisa's feelings, she was still willing to step back and prioritize the feelings of the two. Masachika considered the proposal of sacrificing herself too much, but Maria lowered her eyebrows and looked a bit worried.

"Please don't put on an expression like that. This is all my own selfishness, I just don't want to hurt Alya-chan or Kuze-kun."

And then a bit of regret appeared in the expression on her face.

"...I'm sorry? I know that if I express my feelings now, I will only upset Kuze-kun. Although I already know that, I still can't control my feelings...but in the end, I really don't want to hurt both of your feelings. I want you two to make a decision that you won't regret..."

After saying that with a little sentiment, Maria raised her index finger in front of her lips.

"So... What happened here, and about our past, please keep a secret from Alya-chan, okay? If she knows that Kuze-kun is Saa-kun... I'm afraid Alya-chan will feel uncomfortable with me and suppress her own feelings."

Instantly, a feeling of loneliness that was not described struck Masachika's heart. Though confused by the emotions that he couldn't even understand, Masachika nodded his head.

"...Okay, I understand."

"Good."

Maria nodded slightly in response to Masachika's answer and turned forward. The silence continued for a while. But strangely, Masachika felt comfortable with this silence. It's just that, there was an unknown sense of loneliness residing in his heart. Maria was also looking at the garden with a sad expression on her face.

"....Now then..."

How long has it been? In the end, Maria stood up to say that out loud and looked at Masachika with a small smile on her face.

"Since our conversation is finished... How about we head home now?"

"Ah... Yes, that's right. Umm, would you like me to accompany you home?"

"Thank you very much, but there's no need. I'm sure Kuze-kun wants to think about a lot of things too... So I'm fine here."

"Ah yes, that's fine."

Masachika stood up while feeling a little disappointed that Maria parted so easily and then Maria slightly extended her hand to Masachika.

"Mmm? What's wrong?"

Masachika was a little nervous, wondering if he would be hugged again. Then Maria said while smiling bitterly.

"Finally, can I kiss your cheek like before?"

"Huh? ...Ah."

Come to think of it, I usually received kisses on my cheeks every day when we were saying goodbye. While remembering that, Masachika was overcome by feelings of nostalgia and nodded without thinking.

"Yeah, okay."

"Mmm."

As soon as Masachika turned to her, Maria easily approached him and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. Next, she placed their right cheek cheeks together, followed by their left cheek cheeks.

[T/N note: The "kiss" here isn't a direct kiss on the cheek. It's common in European countries and Russia as a greeting where you place your cheeks together and make a kissing sound. It's also known as a cheek kiss and isn't really an actual kiss as the lips don't make any contact with skin.]

Ah, it feels so nostalgic...

Masachika unconsciously squinted his eyes at the greetings she had given him many times before. And Maria's cheeks attached to his left cheek twitches to the side....

"Ehhh?"

Masachika's body stiffened as he felt a soft sensation on his cheek. Maria smiled mischievously at Masachika, who was dazed with wide eyes.

[T/N note: This is an actual kiss]

"I'm sure Alya-chan will forgive me if it's only limited to this, right?"

"Ah, yes...?"

"Fufu, see you later, Kuze-kun. Next time if we meet again, let's act as usual, yeah!"

With a slightly shy smile, Maria waved her hand and walked towards the garden entrance.

"Ah, yes..."

More than stunned, Masachika waved back. And after Maria disappeared outside the park...Masachika finally realized the reason for the feeling of loneliness residing in his heart.

So, apparently...

This is a feeling of loneliness at the end of a story. The love story between Saa-kun and Maa-chan, which remained in Masachika's mind due to their half-hearted separation that day, was completely resolved today.

There is no longer the strong Saa-kun with scars, and the innocent and pure Maa-chan from those days. Even if Masachika and Maria were to fall in love again in the future...the story cannot be a continuation of their past.

Their story has been completed as a past memory in Masachika and Maria's heart.

"...."

Masachika looked back at the park area silently. And in doing so, he could see the scene as it was before. Two people talking non-stop in the playground. They held hands and ran past each other with smiles on their faces. And then... The two parted due to a misunderstanding. A tenuous story of first love that ended in sadness....

"Goodbye."

After saying goodbye to the shadows of the two children, Masachika left the park alone.

Chapter 2

Just Because It's A Dream Doesn't Mean It's Real...

On the way home from the park, Masachika walked with an indescribable sense of loss.

At first, he visited the park to resolve his past love, but once it was resolved...unexpectedly, he was overwhelmed by a sense of loneliness which Masachika himself couldn't resolve. Although he decided he wanted to get rid of the past, he instead found himself thinking only about the past. But there were still many things to think about Alisa and Maria.

"Haah...."

The path he was walking now was also the path that Suou Masachika used to walk. After Maa-chan kissed him goodbye on the cheek, he would run home as if driven by his happiness and embarrassment. Then he would

sneak back to his room from the terrace so that his grandparents would not see his happy face.

While remembering those times, Masachika opened the door and walked to the terrace. Then, there was the figure of Yuki in a plastic paddling pool with her school swimsuit.

"...What are you doing?"

Masachika asked helplessly at the sight that made him apathetic no matter what he did.

After all, why would she be here? I wasn't told that Yuki would be coming to this house today.

Or maybe this was also an illusion created by the brain...when Masachika placed his hand on his forehead and closed his eyes, his face was then splashed with cold water.

"Ughur!"

When Masachika opened his eyes after reflexively wiping his face with his hands, he saw Yuki lying face up in a plastic pool pointing a water gun at him.

"...Hey, seriously, what are you doing?"

Masachika's cheeks contracted as he asked his sister again, who was secretly smiling at him. Then, Yuki smiled and looked up at the summer sky, playing with her water gun and acting calm.

"Don't worry about it... It's just a bit of my innocence coming out."

"Innocence, huh."

"Yeah, my adrenaline."

[T/N note: There's a bit of a pun here, first Yuki says あどけなさ (adokenasa) which means "innocent or naïve," then she says アドケナリン (adokenarin) which sounds a bit like adrenaline.]

"Don't say it like it's adrenaline."

While throwing a tsukkomi and looking at her, Masachika approached Yuki and stroked her head.

"Yes, serotonin."

"Wuaaaahh, happy hormones are being released~... Wait, what the hell am I doing?"

"Don't suddenly put on a serious face like that. I'm the one who wants to ask what you're doing here."

"What am I doing, ugh, my head...!"

"Have you been brainwashed? Let's quickly remember again."

"Gununu... Haa! ...At this point, I started to remember...that this world was the world of the otome game I played before my death."

"Didn't anyone tell you to remember your previous life?"

"Suou, Yuki...? Ugh!!! Impossible! I was reincarnated as an evil noble girl?!"

[T/L note: Again, Yuki uses a pun here.]

"I'm worried that you really are possessed by an evil demon."

"I just remembered...that my brother and I are evil characters who always play pranks on the heroine."

"Don't tell me the main heroine is Ayano."

"That's right, Kimishima Ayano is the heroine of this world. She's the main character in the world of 'The Drowning Crazy Love of the Dark Lady ~Obsessed with the Beautiful Yandere Boys~!'"

"Yes, can you tell me the names of the boy targets right now? I'll kill them all."

"Kiyomiya Hikaru."

"Hmm~~, I was so surprised that I had difficulty answering~."

"Kiryuuin Yuusho."

"That guy is just an evil bastard at heart."

"Hachiouji Ouji."

"Shouldn't that person be the student council president of the neighboring city? What's his first name, anyway?"

"And then...the hidden character, Sarashina Sakuya."

"I don't know who he is, but that person is probably the final boss. Just like in the previous patterns, after you've finished conquering all the objectives, you'll be able to conquer the final boss too, right?"

"Therefore, first of all, Onii-chan must eliminate this hidden character."

"Sorry, impossible. Such a character is best kept hidden for the rest of your life."

"Ehh... But if someone doesn't defeat that hidden character, the world will be destroyed, you know..."

"So he instantly becomes the final boss."

"Ah, but if it were the same as the original story, Onii-chan would have bled to death today due to the lucky pervert incident, so it shouldn't be a problem at all..."

"Don't go around making up the cause of my death. And what's more, is it going to be today?"

"Yes. Well, quickly wipe your face. How long are you going to keep your face wet?"

"Whose fault is it? Who's the cause for this, huh?"

After lightly hitting his sister on the head, Masachika took off his shoes and walked out onto the terrace. Then his shoulders slumped as he walked around the Japanese-style room.

Haa... Somehow I lost all my strength.

While holding back the water dripping from his hair with a handkerchief, Masachika hurriedly walked to the bathroom. As he walked through the Japanese-style room facing the terrace and out into the hallway, it was silent with no sign of anyone else. Not only was Grandpa absent as he was walking the dog, but there was no sign of Grandma either.

Baa-chan is also out...?

While bowing his head, Masachika opened the bathroom door. And then, he looked at Ayano, who was completely naked.

"Sorry"

Then, he quickly closed the door. All that happened in 1.7 seconds. While showing his incredible reaction speed, Masachika let out a silent scream in his heart.

She was so quiet I didn't even know she was in there,

haaaaaaaa————!!!

From a cursory glance, she was wiping her body with a bath towel, but why didn't she even make a sound when she rubbed her body? Masachika

gritted his teeth as he realized that he was blaming the maid who remained silent even in such a place.

So this is what she meant by a lucky perverted incident?!

She knew that Ayano was in the bathroom and deliberately instigated Masachika to go to the bathroom immediately. Clearly there was no other intention other than mischief and ignorance. The stories of nosebleeds, which seem to be nothing more than a joke, may be a harbinger of this.

If so, raising his voice here was the reaction Yuki wanted. He should go to the bathroom quietly as if nothing had happened here...when Masachika was thinking that, suddenly the bathroom door opened noiselessly.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, Masachika-sama. Come in, please don't mind me."

"How could I just ignore you like that!"

Ayano tried to invite Masachika normally while hiding her body with a bath towel. This behavior, that was too unexpected, made even Masachika shout.



"On the contrary, you're the one who should be worrying about it!"

"...! You're right. I apologize."

After saying that, Ayano started wiping Masachika's chin and wet hair with the bath towel covering her body. Naturally, Ayano's soft body was immediately seen by Masachika.

"This isn't right! What the hell are you worried about!"

Jumping up, Masachika turned his head and shouted again.

"How foolish are you, aren't you ashamed!"

"Masachika-sama, I'm desperately trying to overcome my embarrassment."

"Then you might as well lose that fight!"

With a cry that could not be described as a tsukkomi or a plea, Masachika returned to the Japanese-style room like a rampaging rabbit. Then he threw himself on the tatami mat and groaned, holding his wet, damp head. When he heard laughter, Masachika raised his head slightly and laid face down on the tatami mat.

"Oyaoya, looks like you managed to avoid the death flag. Turns out Onii-chan is cool too, eh~."

"....."

Yuki sat cross-legged on the plastic pool and looked at him with a smile. Masachika silently walked away from the figure who was ready to tease him no matter how he reacted.

"Hey, hey, what's the matter, Onii-chan-sama, are you burning Ayano's appearance into your brain?"

"..."

"Hello~hello~is someone there~, please don't ignore me~."

"....."

"Ahhh, arara, my swimsuit suddenly slipped a little~."

"....."

Rather, why do you think I should turn around, what do you think of your brother? Although tempted to launch such tsukkomi, Masachika restrained himself and decided to lie down in a state of indifference.

"...Tch, I guess you wouldn't react if my swimsuit fell down a little, huh. Now that you saw Alya-san's bra-less white breasts at the training camp, you're not interested in my half-naked school swimsuit like this, is that what you mean, huh!"

"....."

"Damn it, Alya-san. Alya-san is the cutest and most precious. If it wasn't for Alya-san's E-cups, Onii-chan wouldn't have..."

"...?!"

"Oya? Your shoulders seem to be shaking a bit, you know?"

The moment Masachika thought "Oh, shit" in his heart while Yuki smiled mischievously at him through the open sliding door, Ayano, who was dressed plainly while holding a towel in her arms, appeared and went out to the terrace.

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting, Yuki-sama. This way please."

"Mmm? ...okay~."

After Ayano asked, Yuki came out of the pool in slippers while letting out a slightly regretful voice. Ayano then gently wiped Yuki's body and the

soles of her feet before wrapping them in a towel and leading her towards the bathroom. But, before entering the hallway, Yuki turned around and asked Ayano in a casual tone.

"By the way, Ayano, how much did Onii-chan see of you?"

"Hurry up and go take a shower, you idiot. Ayano, you don't need to answer that."

Masachika immediately closed the sliding door (forcibly). He then waited for his sister's laughter and footsteps to leave before turning to Ayano again.

"I'm sorry. I accidentally looked at you..."

"Ah, no, I should be the one who has to apologize for showing something unpleasant..."

"It wasn't an unpleasant sight, you know?"

On the contrary, the sight of her thick, lustrous black hair, attached to her beautiful, slender but feminine limbs, was a dazzling and pleasurable sight. However, it would be sexual harassment if he answered honestly like

that, but on the other hand, if Masachika didn't say anything, Ayano would definitely "think badly of herself and find herself unpleasant."

"...Ayano is cute and she's also very sweet... So don't put yourself down like that."

"T-thank you very much... Masachika-sama is also very interesting and wonderful."

"...If that's the case, thank you."

After slightly ignoring Ayano's assessment, Masachika laid down again to escape the strange atmosphere. When Masachika started to turn his back to her, Ayano seemed to read the situation and shut her mouth tightly. The servant girl who always blended in with the air was really calm. She was very different from her master who liked to play around and make things worse.

Haa... Seriously, what an exhausting day... Let's hope I don't get karma tomorrow, right?

Masachika thought he had received a confession of love from the opposite sex for the first time in his life in a park, and right after that, he experienced a lucky perverted incident. From an objective point of view, if

that kind of luck continued, he was worried that bad luck would happen to him in return.

No...I don't think it's the first time in my life, huh?

After managing to remember that girl...Maa-chan also confessed her feelings for Masachika. Masachika at the same time, albeit timidly, expressed his feelings, and the two ended up loving each other...He could still remember that incident, and even though he now thought it was just two young children who were in love, he still thought about it.

But... Masha-san has always been serious about it this whole time...

It was easy to dismiss it as a childish joke, but at least Maria kept that feeling in check the whole time. If you think like that, Masachika can't bear to put a cheap label like that.

Haha, it feels like a promise in a romantic comedy when two characters promised to get married when they were kids, but I've never heard of anyone actually dating from that.

Masachika realized something inside his head while laughing hollowly like that.

Hmm, wait a minute...? Eh, could it be that the boyfriend Masha-san mentioned at that time was...?

At the training camp, Maria told him that her boyfriend in question was her referring to a stuffed toy... But could it be that...?

Was she referring to me...?

As soon as that speculation arose in his mind, a slight sensation welled up from inside his chest...but the feeling soon subsided.

No, to be more precise, it's not me...but Suou Masachika——the person in question is Saa-kun, huh?

At the same time, a sense of loss once again grew in his heart and Masachika suddenly felt a drop in his mood.

Ah, damn it... My feelings are getting more and more negative.

Masachika also realized that it was a bad habit of his. Still, he couldn't stop his mind from falling into a negative spiral.

Oi, both Masha-san and Alya, how on earth could you both fall in love with this kind of guy?

He could feel the feelings from the two sisters that were so charming.

Normally, his heart would be filled with joy...but, unfortunately, only apologies filled Masachika's heart. He could only apologize for being like this. He could only apologize for disturbing their hearts.

That's absolutely impossible for me...that doesn't suit me.

Maybe it's better to just run away. He could cut all ties and lock himself in his own home. Just like when he ran away from the Suou family home. That way, he wouldn't have to worry about other people's feelings anymore——While Masachika was thinking that, the sliding door of the room opened wide.

"Ah～so refreshing! Haaa!"

Immediately after that, Masachika felt something flying and rolled on the tatami mat to avoid it——.

"Still naïve～!"

"Ughk!"

...Masachika choked from the pressure of Yuki's body on his stomach even though he had anticipated her arrival. Looking at her brother's coughing face, Yuki wiggled her eyebrows slightly and smiled.

"Are you suffering from summer fatigue, are you tired?"

With her chin resting on Masachika's chest, his younger sister was still smacking his forehead.

"Stop it and don't hit me."

When Masachika carelessly pushed her hand away, Yuki raised her head and straddled Masachika.

"Fumu, not even a tsukkomi...it seems this situation is quite serious."

After saying that with a serious expression, Yuki raised both hands with her middle and index fingers in front of his chest——.

"For Onii-chan like this, I will present you a bundle of joy——!!!
Zupipipipipipipipipi——!!!"

While shouting these words quickly, Yuki jabbed her finger into Masachika's stomach and chest.

"Awawawaww, stop doing that, what kind of elementary school kid are you! Besides, where's that lightning you're imitating!"

"My sentiment is lightning!"

"What kind of lightning is that!"

When she heard Masachika's exclamation, Yuki's hand moved slightly and looked straight at Masachika's face.

"Do you want to know?"

"...I'd love to know from you."

"Huh? Well, then let me tell you."

Yuki nodded her head proudly and looked at Masachika with a serious face while combing her bangs with her right hand. Then, in a cold voice, she told him seriously.

"This is Onii-chan chuki-chuki lightning."

[T/L note: A reference to "Onii-chan suki suki."]

"Ohh, Onii-chan chuki-chuki lightning, huh?"

"U-umu..."

"....."

"....."

"...Try to explain in detail."

"Bastard, you must be trying to make me die of embarrassment on purpose, aren't you!"

"Just say it normally, that you're embarrassed to the point of wanting to die."

"It's a word created for dying of embarrassment, you idiot."

After saying that, Yuki buried her face in Masachika's shoulder to hide her expression. And then...

"...The smell of another girl."

"Uwahh, scary."

"Hoho~? Aniue-dono really can't be underestimated, huh. I thought you looked a bit sad~, but unexpectedly your troubles are related to a woman, huh?"

"..."

"Wow, because you're calm, that mean my guess was right huh, hmm
~?"

"....."

Masachika closed his eyes silently at his younger sister who was riding his stomach like a horse again. Yuki puffed out her cheeks with a "Muu" to her older brother, who decided to remain calm in an easy-to-understand manner.

"In that case, I'll give a chuu to Onii-chan who is upset!"

While saying "Chuu!", Yuki opened her mouth wide and brought her face close to Masachika's.

"Stop it already."

Masachika, who immediately opened his eyes, grabbed his forehead and stopped her. When viewed from the side, the scene looked like an older brother being attacked by a zombie-turned-sister. Then Masachika asked Yuki in an irritated voice when his sister was still trying to bite his neck even after he grabbed her forehead.

"Also, why are you so insistent on trying to bite me lately?"

"Hey, do you really want to ask that?"

Masachika's casual question was met with an unexpectedly serious response. The expression on her face was sinister and impassive, in contrast to the ridiculous demeanor she had just displayed. Masachika shuddered slightly as he looked at her unblinkingly.

"...What do you mean?"

Perhaps it has a special meaning? If so, what is it about? Facing Masachika, who was contemplating a bit seriously, Yuki opened her mouth silently with a blank expression on her face.

"I'm waiting for 'If you dare to bite, you must grit your teeth.'"

"Huh..."

"Although～～I'm always waiting for that, you know～～～?"

While looking deeply at Masachika who was holding his breath, Yuki opened her brother's old wound with a cynical tone. Then, as soon as Masachika looked at her with annoyed eyes, she imitated Masachika's tone with an excessively evil tone and a sly smile on her face.

"If you dare to bite, you have to grit your teeth, okay?"

"Damn brat...!"

"Kyaaaaaaaahahaha——! Iyyyyaaaaa——! Onii-chan was really cool
hahahaha——!!!"

Yuki fell from above Masachika and rolled around laughing, stomping her feet on the tatami. Then suddenly, she raised her upper body with a serious face and raised her index finger.

"Ah, by the way, the line "If you dare to bite, you must grit your teeth" has two meanings: the first meaning is "After showing your fangs, you must finish completely", and the second meaning "Defend yourself, so get ready" both have cool meanings——"

"Stop, stop, don't explain it either!!!"

When he replied with a trembling look, Masachika sighed and laid down as well. Then, after that, Yuki immediately showed her face.

"Ohhh, your mood doesn't seem so bad, Nii-chan. Now you're in "This broad ☆" mode and you want to roll with me, right?"

"I can't imagine high school kids still doing that."

"High school kids are still considered kids too, you know~?"

Yuki shook Masachika's hip as if she was moaning. Feeling a little irritated by her behavior...Masachika suddenly had a thought.

Could it be... She really just wants to pamper me?

At the same time as Masachika came to that conclusion, he remembered the affection he felt for Yuki in the garden, and the words Maria had said to him during the training camp.

Skinship is just as important, huh...

While mulling over Maria's words in his mind, Masachika turned to her and silently pulled Yuki, who was sitting next to him.

"O-ohh?"

Yuki collapsed on top of him with a slightly nervous expression. While holding Yuki's small back with his left hand, Masachika began to stroke Yuki's head with his right hand.

"Oh? Huh, ah?"

Yuki's expression was a little stunned when her brother suddenly hugged her gently and stroked her head. However, maybe she felt something

from her older brother who was still stroking her head silently, Yuki smiled and lowered her head.

"What are you doing～～? You're so embarrassed～...Uriurii～."

Yuki sounded shy as she pressed her forehead against her brother's chest. Yuki rubbed her head towards him like a small animal wanting to be pampered. Because being able to feel some affection and longing there...Masachika felt warmth deep within his heart. The self-contempt and desires to escape that had been lodged in his chest were slowly fading away.

Ah... This is better than I thought.)

Now he began to understand what Maria meant. The importance of physical contact and securing affection.

Yes, I hope so...

Feeling firsthand the affection Yuki was directing at him, Masachika suddenly wondered why he had turned a blind eye to Maria's confession. There was nothing but tenderness in Maria's arms. Her words were filled with genuine concern.

"...Onii-chan is..."

"Hmm?"

Then, Yuki suddenly began to speak, and Masachika looked down at Yuki, who was lying against his chest. However, Yuki didn't look up and continued with her face still buried in Masachika's chest.

"You don't have to feel sorry for me forever, you know? Until now, I still feel happy...and I've never held a grudge against Onii-chan."

"...!"

"Even if I put it this way, Onii-chan will definitely be thinking and worrying about a lot of things... But to me, Onii-chan is still the Onii-chan I've always cared about... You don't have to worry about the Suou family, Onii-chan can be happy in a dignified way, okay?"

Masachika knew that those words came from the bottom of Yuki's heart. Just like that day, his younger sister's words, which were very mature and full of affection, immediately touched Masachika's heart.

That's true... At least Yuki and Masha-san told me that they like my current self...

As Masachika slowly went over his sister's words, Yuki looked up from his chest and smiled.

"The me before was already very similar to the main heroine, right?"

"Haha...so noisy."

After scratching his sister's head while laughing and giggling, Yuki buried her face into Masachika's chest while exclaiming "Uwaaa~."

Thank you, Yuki.

In his heart, Masachika was grateful to his younger sister who was always kind and loving.

Oh, what a pitiful brother who needs a little encouragement from his younger sister.

Masachika continued to mock himself, but there was no more dark self-deprecation in him.

He was determined never to look back at the torment of self-hatred again. He still can't like himself, and he still thought he was worthless....yet there were still people who loved him, even though he was worthless. Self-contempt is just an excuse for comfort. Instead, it was better to think

about the person who had always been taking care of him until now. Because doing so would also help him deal with Alisa's feelings of love.

Along with Masachika's quiet determination, a peaceful atmosphere flowed through the Kuze family's Japanese-style room. The comfortable silence continued for a while...but just as the wind chimes on the terrace emitted a tinkling sound, Yuki suddenly frowned and looked up.

"...Hmm~? The main heroine? ...Hahhh!"

The next moment, she jumped up with a dumbfounded expression on her face. Yuki looked at Masachika, who had a doubtful expression on his face, and raised a voice full of horror.

"Could it be, this is a forced event to enter the younger sister's route?"

"Haa?"

"Oi oi, come on, brother...Are you trying to follow the sibling route, which is even quite controversial in the otaku world!"

"There's no such thing as a route like that."

"Hmph, well... If Ani-ja is prepared to do that, I'll do my best to respond as well!"

"Yuki-san?"

"Damn, but then, what should we do about the Suou family's successor...!"

"Hey, Yuki-san?"

"What, you want Ayano to give birth to your child? W-What a devilish idea...!!!"

"Ayano has human rights."

"Yuki-sama...that's a very good suggestion!"

「「Ups, Ayano-san?」」

The surprising statement from Ayano, who had been mingling with the air, made the two of them turn around with serious faces. Then, Ayano sat with her back straight on the tatami mat expressionlessly, but her eyes lit up as she clenched her fists tightly.

"In other words, that means... I can use everything I have for the sake of you two, right!"

"Okay, calm down, Ayano, do you realize you said something crazy?"

In response to Yuki's question, Ayano placed her hand on her chest and spoke as if she was a devout believer.

"One of my joys is that you two can always be together...If I can help with that, I won't regret it!"

"She didn't even realize what she had said."

After saying that in a resigned tone, Yuki turned to Masachika and gave him a thumbs up with a half smile.

"You did it, Onii-chan. The forced blood sister route has become the forced harem route!"

"That's not going to happen! It's a double dose of abnormality!"

"What is it that makes you feel unsatisfied? A harem - isn't that every man's dream?"

"If it's the 2D world, yes. A real harem is still too much for me."

"That's why you're a fucking virgin who has no guts at all."

"Did the self-proclaimed virgin bitch say something?"

Yuki, who skillfully ignored Masachika's counterattack while shaking her head and saying "Oh, my god~ Yare Yare," suddenly put her hand to her chin with a surprised expression.

"Wait a minute... Wouldn't it be a perfect solution if the two of us, as brother and sister, enter Ayano's harem route, where we compete with each other for Ayano?"

"In that case, if I make one false step, I will become "The man caught between the Yuri couple." I can already feel goosebumps rising on the back of my neck."

As soon as he said the words "The man caught between the Yuri couple," Masachika rubbed the back of his neck, feeling a strong urge of vicious murderous intent coming from somewhere. Then, he turned to Ayano and quickly changed the subject.

"Ayano, you should also calm down a bit. Even if it's just a joke, don't say anything that will waste your life."

".....A joke?"

"Haha, what an innocent look."

Masachika himself already knew that. He knew that Ayano wasn't the type to joke around. Although he already knew that, when he saw Ayano's

eyes that were so straight when she tilted her head innocently, Masachika looked away from her. In response, Ayano placed her hand on her own chest, looking surprised at being suspected of joking.

"I am your servant. It has been my greatest pleasure to serve you both."

"Didn't you say it wrong, 'It has been my greatest pleasure to be used by you two'? You M girl."

Hearing Yuki's corrective reply, Ayano blinked a couple of times and then turned to Yuki.

"By the way, Yuki-sama. A while ago I already knew the meaning of the 'M' word according to the general public..."

"Oh, you finally figured it out? That's right, the 'M' word. I didn't mean 'M for Meido', you know?"

"As I thought, you're joking...Regarding that, there's one thing I'd like to fix."

"...What?"

Ayano looked directly at Yuki, who raised her eyebrows suspiciously and stated firmly.

"I'm not a masochist."

"...Oh."

"Hee."

Ayano's statement made not only Yuki, but also Masachika look at her with a cold gaze. However, Ayano continued in a completely sincere manner, despite the doubtful looks of her two masters, who did not believe her in the slightest.

"I will not become sexually aroused by being mentally or physically tortured."

"...Despite that, didn't you want me to step on your head before summer vacation?"

"That's because of my instincts as a maid."

"I see, since it's instinct, it can't be helped, huh..."

After seeing her brother unable to ask correctly, this time it was Yuki's turn to ask Ayano.

"Since it's instinct, does that mean there's no self-interest in it?"

"Of course."

"Hohou, then let's hear your explanation. The reason why a servant should present her head to her master."

In response to Yuki's request, Ayano straightened her posture and spoke eloquently as if she were a certain cultivator teaching a noble doctrine.

"We servants are always trying to improve ourselves for the sake of our master."

"....Fumu, go on."

"But you two have always been very good...I don't mean to complain, but sometimes I almost forget that I'm just a servant."

"...Yes."

"Pride is the great enemy of growth, and laziness is the beginning of depravity. That's why I always have to discipline myself."

"..."

"That's why...I want you two to always guide me so that I don't forget that I'm still inexperienced."

Ayano's words made Yuki and Masachika involuntarily think a little.

While some people are happy with bosses who don't punish them for mistakes and praise them for even the "smallest things," there are also people who are dissatisfied with bosses who "are unresponsive and lack motivation." For the two of them, Ayano was more like a cute little sister than a servant. Therefore, they always thanked her for her dedication and never blamed her for her mistakes. But...but isn't that the same as not recognizing Ayano as a servant? By not acting like a master and instead pampering her, they might unintentionally make Ayano nervous?

I see, Ayano... She really wants us to give her clear discipline, huh.

Unknowingly, I must have hurt Ayano's pride as a servant, huh...I should reflect on this.

Ayano said confidently while the two of them were convinced and at the same time looked a bit melancholy. As the servant of the two, Ayano proudly declared,

"Compared to the two of you, I am nothing but a meaningless existence. I want you both to truly understand and teach me that this body is nothing but a tool that can't even be a service dog! Through some harsh words and punitive measures!"

「「Isn't that the same as being super masochistic!」」

In conclusion, Ayano really is a super M girl.

Chapter 3

What Was He Going To Do On The Side?

"Finally, my math homework has also been completed..."

After closing the textbooks that were distributed for the summer vacation homework, Masachika stretched his stiff body. He was currently in the living room of the Kuze family apartment. The person in front of him was Alisa, who was silently moving a red pen over her textbook.

As usual, the two were working together on summer assignments, and there, Alisa also closed her textbook and put it aside.

"Are you done?"

"Yes, with this I've finished all my homework."

"Oh, really? Good job."

Apparently, Alya finished all her homework early. Presumably, she continued to do her household chores diligently. On the other hand, Masachika, who could not complete his homework when he was home alone, still had some homework like English and Physics. But even so, the process now was much faster than in previous years.

"Mmm..."

"..."

Casually and coincidentally looking at the clock in the living room at the same time, they both realized that it was past 3:30 p.m. Alisa usually gets home around 6:00 p.m. so it looks like she still has a lot of time to spare.

Um, what should I do...?

For now, Masachika thought as he added barley tea to their respective cups to save time. If you think about it normally, since the goal of their meeting was to do their summer vacation homework, their goal would have been achieved if they had finished their homework. But that didn't mean he could casually say "Good job! Then let's disperse!", without being able to read the mood at all.

That's right, the mood...the mood that Alya keeps looking at me as if she's implying something!

Alisa's movements of playing with her hair seemed to imply, "Ah~I still have a lot of time, here~What should I do, eh~?" and she looked at Masachika as if waiting for something, or urging him to do something. The time coincided (sadly) with Masachika who had also finished his homework, so he couldn't pretend he hadn't noticed. All he could do was sip the tea from his cup and pause.

Well, it's over...

All that because Masachika didn't have the guts to say "All right, then let's go on a date!" Maybe if it was before the training camp, he could have said it jokingly. However, now that Masachika had realized Alisa's love for him and his own incompetence, he couldn't even say it even if it was just a joke.

But...

He had decided to face her properly. Besides, running away from this situation would be tantamount to betraying Maria's sincere will.

...Alright!

After placing the teacup on the table, Masachika looked up with determination. When he looked straight into Alisa's face who was looking at him, Alisa also seemed to have guessed something and turned to Masachika.

Two people looking at each other head on. It shouldn't be something strange, but now that Masachika realized Alisa's feelings of love, he felt that Alisa's normal gaze seemed to harbor some kind of emotion. Masachika gasped as he felt the immense passion residing in those sapphire eyes.

"Well, since we still have a lot of free time..."

Masachika hesitated with his words, desperately suppressing his heartbeat. Inside his head, Maria in her chibi angel form and Yuki in her chibi demon form waved their pom-poms together. Encouraged by that support, Masachika then said with determination.

"Shall we talk about the election campaign?"

"....."

Silence fell over the living room. Alisa's gaze seemed to have lost its sparkle. Maria and Yuki's chibi forms on their heads lowered their pom-poms with cold eyes.

"Kuze-kun is a fool"

"Damn scum"

Stop it, don't look at me like that.

Maria in her chibi angel form looked at him with disappointed eyes, while Yuki in her chibi demon form kicked him mercilessly, and Masachika's chibi form shrinks even more in his shadow. Seeing Masachika stunned with self-deprecation, Alisa lowered her gaze slightly and sighed lightly.

"Phew... Well, election campaign preparations are just as important, right?"

"R-right?"

"Why are you speaking in Kansai dialect?"

"It's nothing, hahaha..."

After laughing dryly, Masachika cleared his throat once and changed his expression. He knew he had done something cowardly as a man, but when he wanted to, he had no choice but to change his mind completely.

"First of all... Speaking of events in the second semester, there's the usual school festival that takes place in early October."

"Ah, if I'm not mistaken, all student council officials must participate in the school festival preparation committee, right?"

"That's right, two representatives from each class. In addition to the student council officers of this batch, there's the disciplinary committee, the beautification committee, the health committee, and the former student council president and vice president of the previous batch... That's probably it."

Seirei Academy School Festival, also known as Shuureisai (Autumn Festival). It was tradition for the former student council president and student council vice president to serve as the chairman and vice chairman of the festival preparation committee. Then, the current student council members would hold important positions on the preparatory committee under them, and lead the other committee members selected from each graduating class.

"In other words, the other committee members will be able to determine whether they are reliable or not when they work together. You have to be careful, okay? The elected committee members in each class are usually the most influential people in the class, except for the bad student type. If

they thought “This person is absolutely useless～,” it would have quite an effect, you know?”

"That's true..."

"Well, since Alya is the Treasurer, as long as you do your job correctly and accurately, I don't think that's going to happen... However, what's often questioned is the likes of a PR person like Yuki."

A student council officer will basically do a job that matches his or her position. For example, the secretary manages the time, the treasurer manages the budget, and PR people prepare guidelines and brochures. Managing the budget is a behind-the-scenes job, but public relations makes it easy to understand the results, making it easy to emphasize results, but at the cost of making it hard to hide mistakes. If they produced flyers with flashy designs or hard-to-read pamphlets, Yuki's credibility as a candidate for student council president would suffer.

But that's not something Alisa should worry about as a potential opponent. Masachika shrugged as he reconsidered.

"...Well, if she were, she should be able to do it easily. The treasury business is basically the same as the battlefield business, both before and

after the festival ends, and I'll help you with that too, so you won't have to worry too much."

"Yeah..."

"Okay, okay, you don't have to worry too much about it now. If you do it like you always did in the student council, there shouldn't be too much trouble."

Masachika deliberately told Alisa, who was a little worried, in an optimistic tone. However, Alisa looked thoughtful with a difficult expression on her face.

Well, working together in a team is Alya's weakness... Especially when it comes to managing other members as a team leader...

Alisa is a perfectionist. He is also aware that her standard of "perfection" was too high in the eyes of those around her. In addition, she was unable to provide moral support and leadership to those around her. As a result, she ends up doing everything herself without relying on others.

Having a perfectionist doing the treasurer's job is not so bad...but the problem is that she is not good at teamwork. Since she will be heading the

student council in the future as student council president, this problem should be solved immediately...

However, this was not a problem that can be fixed overnight. If she could overcome her weakness by saying this and that through words, Masachika would have no problem.

Perhaps on the contrary, this could be a good experience for her. I have no choice but to gradually accustom her to it on this occasion.

After concluding that, Masachika cleared his throat slightly towards Alisa, who was looking at him with a difficult expression.

"T-that's right... Maybe now is a good time to do it. Let's build our own method of communication."

"....? What are you talking about?"

Masachika silently looked at Alisa, who was looking at him doubtfully.

"W-what?"

Alisa's gaze wavered in confusion, but Masachika continued to stare at Alisa silently.

"Hey, is there something on my face? Hey, say something, please."

Alisa said uncomfortably as she looked at her own body and put her hand on her face. In response, Masachika told her briefly.

"Can you read what I mean?"

"Huh?"

After hearing that question, Alisa frowned as she looked at Masachika. After looking at each other for about 10 seconds, Alisa's cheeks blushed and her gaze was all over the place.

【Huh? I'm not ready for that yet...】

"Wait a minute, what did you just read?"

Masachika accidentally made a tsukkomi to the Russian mumble that he didn't understand. And then, with a slight sigh, he gave her an answer.

"Just now I was going to say 'Get me a cloth.'"

"Hah? ...No, how would I know that?"

"Is that true? Ah, no, you really don't need to understand. I didn't mean that... I've been pointing at the napkin through my eyes for a moment now, while saying "take it" with small mouth movements, you know?"

"That's..."

"Hmm~. Then, let's try again, let's try one more time."

Masachika said this to Alisa, who was not satisfied and started looking at him again. Then, Alisa looked into his eyes as if to answer... After a few seconds, she looked away again.

【Armpit? That sort of thing...】

"So, what, how did you read it?"

Are you a Mutsuri, you really are a Mutsuri, huh?

[T/L note: Mutsuri is a nickname for a hidden pervert or a revealed pervert because of their quiet appearance where they never talk about erotic or lewd things.]

Masachika kept looking at Alisa, who was shy for some mysterious reason. Then he scratched his head and leaned his body against the back of the sofa.

Even though he already knew vaguely, the two really couldn't communicate through eye contact as well as expected. If it were Yuki, he could convey most of his intentions with eye contact and detailed movements.

This way of communicating required communication skills, experience, and a lengthy relationship... Maybe it's still too difficult for Alya.

Takeshi and Hikaru, whom he had been friends with for a long time, were able to communicate with Masachika without speaking to some extent. Within the student council, besides Yuki, only Touya could communicate with him that way. It was possible because of Touya's compatibility, observation skills and great concern. Chisaki was not the type to do this kind of agile communication, while Maria and Ayano were not on the same frequency as him because they always went at their own pace. And Alisa had absolutely no interpersonal experience.

"Mmm～..."

This lack of trust is a small drawback in the fight during a joint election campaign. In an emergency, there is a big difference between being able to communicate quickly and not being able to do so. In fact, as someone who

had overcome various difficulties with Yuki in the past, Masachika was quite worried that his thoughts could not be transmitted that far.

"If you make a worried face like that, how about trying to read what I have to say?"

"Hmm?"

When Masachika heard Alisa's dissatisfied voice, he found that Alisa was looking at him. In response, Masachika also turned to her and straightened his posture. Then Alisa—————

【This is about the other day's training camp.】

"W-wait a minute."

"What, if you say you can communicate with a few gestures, you should be able to pick up nuances even in Russian, right?"

"Don't ask anything ridiculous!"

【At breakfast time on the last day————】

"No, no, let's go on as usual————"

【You used my cup halfway, you know.】

Hueeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee——?!

【But it seemed you didn't notice it though...】

I didn't noticeeeee——!!!

Masachika almost shouted out loud at the unexpected confession. He immediately recalled the events of that moment, but Masachika still didn't know what she was talking about. It was true that everyone used the same type of glass, so there was a possibility that someone might have gotten the wrong glass. Other than that...

【I drank it before telling you, so I also wasted the time to say it...】

Judging from Alisa's slightly shy appearance, it didn't look like she was lying.

The incident where the indirect kiss happened without me noticing.

Alisa looked embarrassed but smiled mischievously at Masachika who looked a little away without showing his expression.

【This is...something called "exchanging sake cups" that happens at traditional Japanese weddings, right?】

No, not really.

【You have to...take responsibility, okay?】

How scary, how scary.

Masachika raised both hands as if surrendering to Alisa, who thought her words were misunderstood and said what she wanted.

"Wait a moment. Seriously, I really don't understand...Besides, what's the point of talking openly when we're trying to communicate in secret?"

"Uh, I see."

Shrugging her shoulders in a show of disdain, Alisa fanned her face with her hands while putting on a calm expression.

Don't do it if you're embarrassed...

Alisa didn't seem to notice Masachika's disdainful look, and pretended to be thinking for a while.

"Then... Let's do what you just did."

After saying that, Alisa quickly turned her gaze towards the window, moved her mouth in small movements and slowly folded her arms. Then, she slightly bowed her crossed arms.

As if she was begging for something.

After seeing her gesture, Masachika who read Alisa's intention interpreted it as....

"I want to go out and go on a date".

Hmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm~~~~~!!!!

Masachika gritted his teeth and groaned in amusement at the response he got. He pinched his thigh hard under the table and managed to keep his expression under control.

~~~~~Hmm, I don't know how to respond to this!

If Masachika said the right answer, he would definitely get a weird vibe, and if he gave the wrong answer, he would become a completely self-conscious misunderstood child. Anyway, Masachika was stuck in a situation where he couldn't do anything.

"Hey, how was it, can you understand what I'm trying to say?"

"Mmm..."

Alisa folded her arms and smiled provocatively, as if to say, "Besides, you definitely won't understand". She was so sure of her own superiority that she came to the conclusion that Masachika could not understand. At first glance, Masachika wanted to destroy that arrogant expression of hers with surprise, astonishment and embarrassment...but calmly he thought the risk was too great. Reluctantly, Masachika gave a soft answer even though he knew it was the wrong answer.

"Hmm, you meany... 'Isn't the weather nice today?'"

"Fufu～."

This girl is so annoying ☆

Alisa shamelessly showed a mocking expression and smiled at him. Even Masachika's cheeks contracted slightly when he heard that, but Alisa didn't seem to mind and said with a sense of superiority.

"Completely wrong. You know, you don't even know yourself."

"...By the way, what's the correct answer?"

"I wanted to say:"Summer vacation is almost over"."

"Mmm～..."

Masachika looked at Alisa's sly face as she replied indifferently. Then he continued at a leisurely pace.

"Maybe it's just my imagination that I felt like you were asking me out on a date?"

"H-huh! H-How could that be, right? It's just your imagination..."

At that instant, Alisa quickly turned her head away while shaking her shoulder in a reaction that was as noticeable as if she had an ice cube slide down her back. Masachika continued indifferently as he gently watched that easy-to-understand reaction.

"Ah, right. Well, you really would never say something like that, even if it's just a joke."

"...Of course not."

"Yes, that's right～."

After looking over Masachika's prickly comment, Alisa's lips pouted slightly.

【What the heck...is so weird about me asking you out?】

Ugh...

Feeling a little guilty about Alisa's grumpy mutterings, Masachika quickly continued.

"Yeah, hasn't that kind of event ever happened before? Yeah, I knew that girls asking you out only existed in manga."

Masachika said so quickly as if to imply that what felt strange was not being invited "by Alisa", but being invited "by girls." Then Alisa seemed to regain her confidence and smiled with a sense of superiority.

"Oh, that's a shame, isn't it? Well, what about me? I've been asked out on more dates than I can count."

"I see... By the way, how many times have you received that invitation?"

Hearing Masachika's question, Alisa's fingers that were playing with her hair suddenly stopped. Then, she quickly averted her gaze to the side and replied slightly curtly.

"...Well, how many times have you been on a date?"

"Hmmm~"

"....."

While looking at Masachika, who snorted with a disinterested look, Alisa twisted the ends of her hair and muttered to herself.

【I'm talking about it being with you.】

...*Ugh*

In other words, it meant that she had never gone on a date with anyone other than Masachika. Even though he had expected it, the impact was still unavoidable when it was expressed in words. Masachika gritted his teeth and Alisa suddenly turned around with a surprised look on her face.

"J-just so you know, I'm not tempted by any seductive guys or anything!"

"Uh, ahhh... But I don't doubt that."

In the first place, even in school, there were plenty of boys with good looks, smart brains and decent family backgrounds. Masachika thought that Alisa would never fall in love with a stupid boy like that...but Alisa still insists.

"Because I would choose my partner correctly!"

"O-ohh."

Masachika took 20 points of impact damage.

"I-I just...um, choose...someone I can trust? Because I would only do it with someone like that."

"Y-yes."

Masachika took 40 points of impact damage.

"L-listen to me, okay? I understand... Then, it's enough to stop there..."

Masachika desperately begged her to stop, but Alisa didn't stop!!!!

"I would never date someone I don't even like!"

"..."

90 points of impact damage to Masachika. However, he managed to block it with 1 HP remaining.

"Ah, but that doesn't mean it's about you. I just don't hate you..."

Alisa was embarrassed. Masachika collapsed.



【Ehehe, we got scolded.】

【After all, it was impossible to sneak into another school's music room...】

【Muu～...I mean, I wanted to listen to Saa-kun's piano too.】

【Um～...then, how about if I invite you to the next recital?】

【Eh, really?】

【Yes...after all, I promised...】

【Thank you, I'm really looking forward to it!】



"——Chika-kun."

"Haa!"

As soon as he regained his senses, Masachika looked up and saw Alisa leaning forward slightly while looking at him with a doubtful expression.

"...Oh, sorry. I was a bit lost."

"...Hmm I see."

Alisa immediately narrowed her eyes and cold air started emitting around her.

"...?"

Masachika arched his eyebrows...curious as to what made her angry. Then, suddenly, there was a shock that hit his knee.

"Ouch!"

The sudden and unexpected shock sent a flash of light shooting through Masachika's brain. Apparently, Alisa, who was sitting on a chair, kicked Masachika in the knees at the same time.

"Huh? Are you fully awake already?"

"I-It's not like I'm drowsy and unconscious...!"

Masachika tried to apologize while curling up and enduring the pain, but Alisa's gaze still seemed cold. If the person you're talking to falls asleep in the middle of a conversation, it's perfectly normal to feel angry, but....

No, isn't it all your fault?!

Or so Masachika thought, but protesting would only make the situation worse. Reluctantly, Masachika cleared his throat slightly and returned to the main topic of conversation.

"Umm, so how are we supposed to communicate in case of an emergency...?"

Then, along with Alisa's expression still grumbling, he and Alisa made eye contact several times. Fortunately or unfortunately, the face-to-face practice went smoothly and without any hint of romantic comedy.

"———Hmm, maybe this is how it used to be? Ah, I changed the pattern of my communication compared to when I used to do it with Yuki, but if we do it too many times, there's a chance that she might eventually understand us...maybe it's better not to do it in front of Yuki."

"I see."

"Besides...well, maybe too. It would be better if we decided on bluffing gestures even in the usual routine."

"Bluffing gesture?"

"You see...when you negotiate, there are times when you just bluff, right? For example, when negotiating with a club, you might say "I have permission from your club advisor." Another example perhaps... when you want to run away from a troublesome conversation? By saying "I have been summoned by Sensei after this." In such a situation, if one of us were to not understand each other's intention to bluff by saying "Eh, did that really happen?", that would ruin the situation, wouldn't it? So we'd better make sure we both know right away that what we're saying is just a lie."

"Haa..."

Ignoring Alisa's expression that looked unsure, Masachika thought for a moment and slightly raised his left hand.

"Hmm, how about touching your hair with your left hand? You have a habit of playing with your hair with your fingers, don't you? Just do it with your left hand..."

"How about you?"

"As for me... Maybe scratching my head? Anyway, let's decide that, what you said while touching your hair with your left hand was a bluff, in other words, it was a lie."

"Okay, I get it... I might forget though."

"...Well, you can keep it in the corner of your head."

After saying that while shrugging his shoulders, Masachika adjusted his posture slightly. The next thing he said was something quite tense, even for Masachika.

"So... In a state where we can't exchange eye contact. In other words, there's a way to communicate when we're side by side... A way to communicate called moving our hand."

"...What's that?"

"Well, true to its literal name, you have to write letters on another person's palm with quick motion input. Either under the table, behind the back or something else... Ummmm in other words, secretly holding the other party's hand, okay?"

"Eh...?"

When Masachika hesitantly said that, Alisa frowned shamelessly.

"You mean holding my hand...are you going to caress my palm with your fingers?"

"Instead of being called caressing, it's more like writing an entry. Just like on a smartphone screen typing...or maybe more precisely, the side of the wrist. For example, on this side is the letter "A", then in the middle of the wrist side is the letter "Ka", the rest are left in sequence with the letters: Sa, Ta, Na, Ha, Ma, Ya, Ra..."

Masachika pointed to the palm of his left hand successively from the wrist side to the fingertip side, then joined his left hand with his right hand.

"The difference with smartphone input is that the path from the letters "A" to the letters "Ra" can be done with a quick flick, while for the letters "Wa", the symbols dakuten, handakuten, conversion to lowercase and deletion are done with the index, middle, ring and little finger. Tap your index finger once for the letter "Wa", tap twice for the letter "Wo" and tap three times for the letter "N". As for the middle finger, tap once for the sign dakuten and tap twice for the sign handakuten. The ring finger and little finger have one tap each to switch to lowercase and delete a letter."

[T/L note: Dakuten (濁点) or sometimes called ten-ten is punctuation or diacritical signs in the form of a colon or quotation marks used for Japanese letters or kana, while handakuten (半濁点) is punctuation or diacritical signs in the form of a small circle which is called maru (丸) used

for Japanese characters or kana. Its function is to change the consonants of kana. For example, letters: は (ha) → ば (ba) → ぱ pa]

While tapping the back of his left hand with the fingers of his right hand, Masachika began to explain. After listening to everything with a difficult expression on her face, Alisa opened her mouth without even trying to hide her skepticism.

"Well, I understand the theory, but...isn't it hard to implement? Leaving aside the person who wrote it, I think even the person reading it will have a hard time keeping up."

"It's just a matter of getting used to it. If you get used to it, you'll be able to talk with your fingers simultaneously when conversing with other people, you know?"

Then, Alisa said something with an even more reluctant expression on her face as Masachika casually said something unbelievable.

"Also...I really don't like the way your hands caress my palms."

"...If you say that, there's nothing I can do, you know?"

Masachika felt slightly hurt when Alisa said so clearly with displeasure coming out of the corners of her mouth. "Does she? This person likes me, right?" For a moment, the question popped into his mind, but he quickly reconsidered, "No, I don't think that's the case."

"Um, Alya?"

"What?"

"Could it be... You have germophobia?"

When he thought about it, she had shown signs of that before. Masachika remembered that she really didn't like other people touching her body...especially her skin, even in gym class. But the response that came back was a stronger rebuttal than expected.

"N-No! I don't have germophobia or anything!"

"Eh~... But when the beautification chairman asked you to shake her hand, didn't you shake her hand briefly~ and then immediately let go?"

"That's because...she's someone I don't know."

"Well, isn't that germophobia?"

"I told you no! I, umm...yes! No one wants another person to touch something they value, right?"

"Huh?"

In response to the sudden question, Masachika pondered for a moment as his gaze hovered in the air.

"...Ah, for guys, for example watches and cars... For girls, handbags and accessories. Well, there's really a type of person who doesn't want other people's fingerprints or anything dirty on their favorite things."

"Yes! That's right!"

Alisa nodded vigorously at Masachika's weak agreement, then Alisa turned her body and put her hand on her chest.

"Because my body is the most important thing to me! That's why I don't want anyone else to touch me carelessly!"

"...So that's what it looks like?"

For some reason, Masachika felt ambiguous about her intentions. Even more...

"So what's the difference between that and germophobia?"

"It's completely different! I didn't wash my hands after shaking hands!"

"No, you don't need to deny it so vehemently..."

"Of course I will! If you say I'm a germaphobe, it's like I'm a very nervous girl!"

"It's quite different, huh?" Masachika swallowed those words and considered Alisa's argument for a moment.

Hmmm～... Well, if it's not something pathological, but for her high pride... Maybe it's different from germophobia?

Masachika was a bit convinced as he imagined a Noble Princess appearing in Isekai genre works saying something like "The only man allowed to touch my skin is someone who promises to marry me in the future!"

The idea of the chastity of a true princess, huh...

Masachika half nodded with an impression that could not be described as admiration or disappointment.

"Hmm～. Well, it can't be helped if you say you don't like it..."

Masachika obediently tried to back away, thinking that it wasn't something he could force on someone who didn't want to do it. However....

"No way! I'm not saying I won't..."

After raising her voice because she sounded terrified for a moment, Alisa lowered her voice. And then, while playing with the ends of her hair, she hesitantly asked while stealing glances at Masachika.

"You.... You want to touch me that badly?"

"Hah?"

"I mean, my hand..."

"Uh, ah~..."

Somehow there seems to have been a little misunderstanding. But if he's asked whether he wants to touch or not....

"Well, that's it."

"...No matter what?"

"...No matter what."

"Hmph. Is that so...?"

As soon as she heard Masachika's statement, Alisa stopped playing with her hair and pointed her hand at Masachika while looking away.

"Um, then, okay?"

Pretty easy, huh. What's with all those excuses from before? Give me my time back.

Masachika's brain angrily reprimanded Alisa, who stretched out her right hand with a sullen face. And then, contrary to his thoughts, he calmly performed a tsukkomi.

"Not with your right hand, but with your left."

"Uh...hmpf, here!"

After being surprised for a moment, the expression on her face changed with embarrassment, she turned around with a frown and extended her left hand. While smiling wryly at Alisa's reaction, Masachika tried to touch the left hand that was extended towards him...but suddenly, he hesitated for a moment.

Alisa's white hands looked slender and soft. After another glance, it was such a beautiful hand that fit the expression "hands as soft as silk and as

white as milk." Even though it wasn't the first time they held hands, somehow Masachika found it harder to touch her than usual because of the strange movement.

"...What, why did you stop all of a sudden?"

"Ah, no... Then, excuse me."

Seeing her with a suspicious look, Masachika carefully took Alisa's hand. Her hands were slightly cold and soft. Although he was slightly shocked by the feeling, Masachika gently touched Alisa's palm with his thumb.

"Um, like this——"

Then, he carefully moved his thumb while thinking to himself "I should have cut my nails a little better..." Then....

"Ahnn..."

Hearing a faint sigh in front of him, Masachika quickly raised his head. Then Alisa looked at the intertwined hands with a slightly sullen expression and a frown on her face.

"...What."

"Nothing..."

Thinking it was just his imagination, Masachika turned his attention back to her hands and twiddled his thumbs alternately.

"This is the letter 'E', if you touch without sliding like this, it will be the letter 'Na', then if you touch the middle finger like this, it will be the letter 'Bo.'"

After showing a series of examples, Masachika looked up to see Alisa's face who still looked a little angry. The only thing that bothered him a little was that Alisa was biting her lower lip hard as if she was trying to hold something back.

"...Did you understand?"

"...Yeah, sort of."

"Ah, good. Then let's try simple sentences."

Saying that, Masachika moved his finger very slowly.

Well, in a simple sentence...yo-yo——

"Hmmm~..."

Te, n, ki——

"Ahnn...n."

De, su——

[T/L note: The words Masachika wished to say was "tenki desu", meaning "clear weather."]

"Ah..."

Hahhhh～～!!! Don't let out such weird moans—————!!!

Masachika could no longer pretend not to notice. A strangely sexy sigh was heard coming from the direction in front of him. Every time he moved his finger, Alisa's hand moved restlessly. Although they didn't do anything strange, Masachika felt that he was doing something wrong.

"Hand sex! We're having sex with our hands!"

[T/L note: From the romaji raw "手ツクス" version of "teksu", which is a combination of the two words "hand and sex."]

Shut up!

For now, Masachika pretended to be calm and looked up while silencing the little demon Yuki who was making noise in his head.

"You know what sentence I just wrote earlier——"

Masachika immediately became silent and couldn't say anything. It was natural for his reaction to be like that. That's because Alisa's white cheeks looked red and her eyes were full of tears, staring at him.



【Pervert...】

Why?!

Once again, Masachika didn't do anything wrong. But what's with that reaction, could it be that she read something strange?...But that idea was quickly dismissed.

"...Does it say"good weather"?"

"O-Oh, right. Even though this is your first experience, you're excellent at guessing correctly."

"...."

Even after hearing Masachika's praise, Alisa looked away sadly.

"Ahhh～... Could that have tickled you?"

"...A little."

"I-I see. In that case, maybe we shouldn't use this method. If it can be seen on your face, there's no point in communicating secretly..."

While looking at Masachika who said that in an attempt to calm her down, Alisa muttered something.

【Instead of tickling, it felt like——】.

"Well, it can't be helped! Even Yuki at the beginning——"

Somehow, Masachika had a feeling that the Russian words coming out shouldn't be heard, so he raised his voice to interrupt Alisa's words. Then, Alisa's hand shook when the name "Yuki" was suddenly called out, and Masachika immediately thought "shit."

"I'll do it."

"Eh, but...you don't have to force yourself, you know?"

"Even Yuki-san got used to doing it many times, right? In that case, I'll do it too."

Alisa's expression changed in an instant and her blue eyes lit up with a burning sense of rivalry. Seeing the look in her eyes, Masachika realized there was no point in saying anything.

"Well, then... Shall we continue?"

Over the next hour, Alisa managed to increase her reading speed to that of a normal conversation.

"That's amazing... To think you could learn it so fast..."

"O-Of course..."

Alisa's expression beamed as she said that with a proud smile on her face. Her forehead was covered with sweat and her bangs stuck to her forehead. In addition, she also looked a bit breathless.

So erotic.

Her appearance was so sexy that such an impression had occurred to Masachika by accident. After an hour of this kind of face and breathing, Masachika felt that his self-control was being tested.

Well, now it's over... Yes, I endured it. I did a good job of putting up with it, God, I endured it!

While praising himself inwardly, Masachika let go of Alisa's hand.

"Yes, it's like this——"

Then, his hand that was about to let go was immediately grasped tightly. When he turned to her face, Masachika could see Alisa's face filled with a dangerous smile and flaming eyes that implied revenge.

"Next is the one who writes, right?"

"Umm..."

"Isn't it?"

"...I-I think so~."

After that, another hour passed. Masachika allowed Alisa to practice stroking his palms until she was satisfied...or rather, he was forced to let her practice with his palms.

Chapter 4

Who Needs A Man's Blush?

One day, with only a week left of summer vacation, Masachika received a short message in the morning saying, "Please call me."

It was in the morning, with only a week left of the summer vacation. The message was unusual, and Masachika immediately called.....Although they were not in dire need of help, they seemed to have difficulty explaining themselves over the phone. The first thing Masachika needed to do was to make sure that he had a good understanding of what he needed to do and how he needed to do it.

".....Oh."

The first thing that came to mind was the fact that the music room he went to was not only a place to relax, but also a place where people could enjoy the atmosphere. The reason being that Hikaru was inside the room; he sat in the corner...with dilated pupils, all while carrying a dark aura around him. He had expected this to some extent on the phone, but it was obvious that the situation had descended badly. It also appeared to be quite deep.

I wanna go home, but that's not so easy now, is it?

Masachika let out a single sigh and opened the door with all his might.

"Oh, Masachika~..... I've been waiting for you....."

Then Hikaru had spoken out to him, but soon, Masachika came up to him with a pitiful look on his face.

He said, "Oh..... What's going on? What's the situation here?"

In the first place, why were there only two people here? Today, Takeshi and Hikaru were supposed to be practicing with the other three band members for the school festival concert. It was the student council that managed the reservations for the rehearsal space, so there was no doubt about it.

"Listen, that's the thing. Actually....."

Then Takeshi began to tell what had happened.



"I'm sorry."

The first person to open their mouth and bow their head was a strong-looking girl with suspended eyes who wore her shoulder-length black hair tied on both sides. It was Nao Shiratori, the vocalist of the band, of

which she was the leader. She was always engaging and proud, and rarely bowed her head.

The other band members were perplexed by her behavior. In the midst of all this, Nao kept her eyes downcast and spoke with a tone that sounded as if she was suppressing her emotions. She said that she had to transfer to a new school for family reasons and could no longer attend the school festival with them. Once the other members asked her for more details, she told them that it was because her father's company was about to go bankrupt. Nao did not elaborate further, but it seemed that there were many things going on in her family over the matter.

"I think this will be the last time I will come here to this school. So.....I'm sorry. I'm sorry to place this burden on you guys, but I'm going to have to leave the band."

The other four were at a loss for words at the sudden parting words of their band member.

"It's not like that.... Why didn't you tell us earlier?"

The one who raised such a sorrowful voice was a petite girl with a bob cut hairstyle, that bounced around at the ends, which gave off a somewhat small animal-like atmosphere. It was Riho Minase, Nao's childhood friend and the band's keyboardist. Nao looked away from her childhood friend, whose eyes were shaking with shock, and answered without hesitation:

"There's nothing I can do about it. What's the point of telling you?"

"Maybe so....but I wanted you to tell me..."

Riho replied that even though the situation with her father's company was something out of her control, she still wanted her to at least share her concerns with her.

"Riho-chan, there are some things that are difficult to talk about because you guys are best friends, right?"

Riho, with tears in her eyes, was about to approach Nao, but Hikaru, sensing this was not a good idea, gently stopped her. Then, Riho seemed to calm down and apologized to Nao.

"I'm sorry, Nao. I didn't mean to blame you..."

"Oh, yeah..."

An awkward, indescribable silence passed between the two of them. The most important thing to remember was that the best way to get the most out of your money is to be honest with yourself.

"Well, well, well! It doesn't mean that you can't participate in the school festival live, right? There's no rule that says people from outside the school can't participate in the school festival.....right?"

"Let me assure you..... no, but..... It's a gray area."

They were unsure about what had been said. One cannot just go to any school and jump in to participate in their live festival.

"Yeah... I agree! Nao, don't give up, let's still participate together!"

"Outside participation? But surely, that would be....."

Nao must have been disappointed by not being able to participate in the live concert she had been aiming for all along. Her eyes, which always had a bullish light in them, shook unreliably as she looked at the faces of her friends in turn. Then, a chubby boy, who had been silent until then, put his hand on Nao's shoulder and said,

"I'm sorry, but Nao is going to participate in the live concert."

"What.....?"

The one who called out with a faint voice was Ryuichi Kasugano, the band's bassist and Nao's boyfriend. Not only that, the other three looked at Ryuichi as if they were wondering what was going on. In response, Ryuichi lifted the corner of his mouth and pointed at himself with his thumb.

"The thing is, my grandfather is the president of Eimei Bank."

"No way!"

Takeshi exclaimed, his eyes peeling back at the name of a mega-bank known to all Japanese people. Hikaru and Riho also widened their eyes in surprise.

"I'm going to go...talk to my grandfather and see if I can get a hold of him. I'll then ask him to do something about your father's company."

"Ryuichi....."

Nao's eyes shook at her lover's encouraging offer, and.....in a hard voice, without looking at Ryuichi, said "It's...okay. It's too late for that. Besides...you and your grandfather don't get along very well, do you?"

He said, "Well, yeah.... I guess that's true. But it's all right. If it's a lifetime request from his grandson, even that stubborn old man wouldn't say no!"

"No, you're relying on your relatives after all the cool things you said."

"I don't have a choice, do I? Do you really think a fat little guy who has nothing to offer but his brains, good looks, good personality, and his base of operations can manage a company?"

Ryuichi was quick to jump on the bandwagon and slap himself on the stomach.

"No, I just have high self-esteem!"

When Ryuichi again made a tsukkomi, the four of them, except for Nao, burst into laughter. The dark and serious atmosphere that once clouded the room swept away and the usual cheerful and light atmosphere returned.

Ryuichi lowered his head as if relieved by this, and gently spoke to his girlfriend, who remained the same.

"So, you know. I know it won't be a quick fix for everything, but don't tell anyone you're leaving the...band or anything else, and I'll ask Grandpa somehow."

Ryuichi's words were met with nods from all three of them as they looked at Nao. The four band members looked at him with great affection, but Nao said, "It's okay."

"No, you don't have to do that..... Mind your own business."

The two of them now shared the same mood, together.

"Don't be shy," he said. "I'm not afraid to bow down to my relatives for your sake. I'm used to bowing to teachers."

"So what? I told you it's none of your business. I don't want you to do that to me!"

"I don't intend...to do that, I just want to...do everything I can as a boyfriend..."

"I'm not going to agree to it. Long-distance relationships don't last long anyway, let's break up!"

"Hey! Nao!"

"Hey, hey, hey!"

"Nao-chan!"

Nao's decisive words startled all three except Ryuichi. On the other hand, Ryuichi, who was confronted with the parting of the ways, looked up in shock and...slowly fell on his face, and muttered a few words.

"I see, ——Nao didn't like me that much after all."

"Huh? I don't know what you're talking about—"

The first thing that came to their minds was the fact that it was not desirable to address the current situation. Despite this, the four of them didn't miss her eyes which were blatantly darting about. Ryuichi, perhaps convinced of his own guess, continued with a sneering smile.

"No, I knew it. When you said 'I don't know what you're talking about'"

Ryuichi's words made even Hikaru, who was perplexed, unsure of what to say. In the midst of all this, it was Riho who raised her voice.

The first thing that came to her mind was,

"I'm sure Nao.....is lying, right? Because, Nao, when you joined the band, you said there was someone you liked in the band....."

"!"

Nao took a few steps closer and stared up at Riho, who revealed her agitation more than ever. Her gaze moved as if seeking for help and caught the light at the end of it. Then, Nao said as if she was going to throw it all out.

"Yes, I used to like Hikaru! But Hikaru said he was distrustful of women, so I just went out with Ryuichi in a casual manner, so let's just leave it at that!"

After saying these words, Nao grabbed her belongings and ran out of the music room. The shocking turn of events left everyone speechless and silence fell. In the midst of it all, a voice leaked out and it sounded strangely loud.

"Oh, no...even I..."

The voice belonged to Riho. It was probably unintentional on her part.

"Uh, well, I'm....."

Riho's huffing and puffing expression revealed her agitation at the gazes gathering on her, and she left the music room as if to escape. What was left were three boys whose hearts were stirred to pieces.

"Ryu-Ryuichi...erm..."

Upset himself, Takeshi tried to say something to his heartbroken best friend. But Ryuichi, with a forceful weepy smile on his face, slowly shook his head from side to side, "I'm sorry."

"Sorry...give me some space."

And Ryuichi also left the music room with his shoulders slumped. Neither he nor Hikaru could follow his retreat.



"Hell no....."

Hearing the whole story from Takeshi's mouth, Masachika involuntarily groaned.

So that's what happened...

Masachika sympathized with Hikaru, who was completely open about the situation. Hikaru was, first of all, traumatized by girls who had romantic feelings for him. The worst pattern of all was that the person he had allowed himself to be attracted to as a friend actually liked him. As a result, he had lost not only female friends but also male friends in the past.

And this time was extremely close to that case. It would be difficult for Ryuichi, who was told that his girlfriend's true love was actually Hikaru, to respond to Hikaru in the same way as before. So he believed it was only natural that Hikaru would fall this way. Probably...

"(I was convinced it was just the women who are thinking with their lower body, but if you're just a little bit nice to them, they'll fall for you and then they'll go wild with you without thinking about the world around them. I wish all of them would die, too.)"

"Stop it, Hikaru, let's leave it at that."

Hikaru, in a tone of voice so foul that it would destroy his own character, cursed the girls, and Masachika, in a moment of desperation, called out a halt to the conversation. Then, Hikaru gently raised his head and looked up at Masachika with vacant eyes.

"...Masachika? Why are you here?"

"Takeshi called me up....Well, that sure was a big deal."

Saying this, Masachika crouched down next to Hikaru and put his arm around Hikaru's shoulder. Takeshi also crouched down on the other side and put his arm around Hikaru's shoulder in the same way.

"Really, Hikaru's a man with many female struggles....Well, don't worry. As long as we're around, it's not a man problem. I don't know if there is such a thing as man trouble."

"I'm sure you're right, Hikaru has a woman's problem~.....Well, don't worry. As long as we're around, it's not a man problem. I don't know if there is such a thing as a man problem!"

"What?"

"What?"

They looked at each other with straight faces over Hikaru's head. The silence fell. It was broken by a small sound of Hikaru's chuckle.

"Pfft, thank you.....really, you two."

"Oh.....Glad to see you've managed to recover."

"What? I can be a pretty good guy, right? Right?"

"Takeshi, read the room."

"What?"

Masachika and Hikaru both looked at Takeshi with a stern stare, and the air relaxed a little again as usual. Then a knock was heard, and the door to the music room rattled open.

"Excuse me, I remember this is now our piano club's practice time...Can you give us some space?"

The one who entered the room with such a comment was a beautiful boy with a very sexy look. He had a slender, well-styled body with a somewhat melancholy and elegant appearance. He was tall and slender. He was a beautiful boy with a slight air of theatricality, and his behavior was like that of a nobleman, which made him very picturesque. His name was Yusho

Kiryuin. He is said to be one of the three most beautiful boys in the school and is the son of the chairman of the Kiryuin Group, a major group company, and was also known as the "Piano Prince" because of his brilliant achievements in piano competitions both in Japan and abroad. Looking at his bewitchingly beautiful face, Takeshi let out a small "ugh" sound.

"Oh, Kiryuin.....Sorry, we'll clean up right away."

Masachika pretended not to notice the groan, and as he said this, he urged Takeshi and Hikaru by looking at each of them. The two then hurriedly began to clean up the mess. Masachika wanted to help, but decided that it would be a distraction for an outsider who did not know what he was doing to get in the way, and decided to buy time for the visitor.

"Sorry, we're having a little trouble."

"It's fine. I sometimes also lose track of time because I'm so excited when playing."



".....I appreciate you saying so."

Yes, it helped. But the female members of the piano club behind them don't seem to think so at all.

Masachika was also concerned about it. He could feel it in the way he looked at him, like he was trying to get him to pay attention to him.

"But still.....Kuze, how unusual it is for you to be in the music room. Have you joined the light music club?"

"Hmm? No? I was just called by Takeshi this time. I've got my hands full with the student council."

"Is that so? Is Kuze not good at playing instruments?"

It was a casual question. However, Yusho's gaze seemed to be probing something, and Masachika answered, tilting his head slightly inwardly.

"I didn't mean anything like that," Masachika replied. "When I was little, I played the violin and a little bit of piano."

"You're not going to play the piano in front of Yusho."

A small voice containing a sneer rose from among the female students behind Yusho, and immediately afterward the sneer spread like a ripple. Masachika naturally noticed it too, but since there seemed to be nothing good in reacting to it, he let it pass without turning his head. However, Yusho, of all people, reacted to it.

"Hey, hey, hey, don't say that, okay?"

".....Yes~"

"But, if you think you can play the piano in front of the professional-looking Yusho-sama, you can't help but laugh."

"I'm not a pro at all.....For me, piano is a hobby, not a profession. I have no intention of competing with him."

".....Yes."

"I'm still amazed at the level of.....you've achieved as a musician!"

When one of the girls voiced this, the other girls in the club nodded in agreement and gave him a heated look.

"Alright~, you're free to use the room now."

Takeshi, with a somewhat sullen demeanor interrupted, looking as if he might click his tongue.

"Really? Well then, let's get started."

「「「「 Yes! 」」」」

Yusho entered the music room with the other female members of the club, who seem to have lost all interest in Masachika. As they walked into the music room, Takshi and Hikaru looked at him as if to say, "What the heck?"

Masachika." With a wry smile on his face, Masachika led them out into the hallway, and after walking some distance, he called out to the guys.

"You.....hate Kiryuin too much, don't you?"

"I mean, I don't necessarily dislike him....., do I?"

He was reluctant to answer Masachika's direct question. In fact, he probably doesn't really dislike anyone. Rather, Takeshi was not the kind of person who could seriously dislike anyone. To prove this, he awkwardly swept his gaze over the question, and his lips twitched in a childish manner.

"I don't really care about anything. Just now you said, "I play the piano" so...you were totally boasting."

"No, I didn't say it like that!"

Takeshi was not concerned, however, and he turned up the heat.

"In the first place! What's with that harem situation? All the others in the club were girls, it's not a piano club, it's a harem club..."

"Yeah, well..."

"And! I asked him once before! I asked him once if he was dating someone! And do you know what he said?"

".....'I'm not seeing anyone'?"

"Yeah!"

"Oh, really?"

When Masachika half-smiled and made a ‘tsked’ sound at the unexpected correct answer, Takeshi wagged his finger in frustration.

"I know, but it's not like that! The way he said it, it was so meaningful, so suggestive!"

"Oh..... What do you mean? You mean there's a reason why he's not in a relationship?

"Exactly!"

"I've been working on this for a while, but I'm not sure I'm going to be able to stand this anymore."

Takeshi then stuck his index finger in the air and said with a straight face,

"He's definitely eating all the girls in the piano club."

"I see, so Takeshi was on your side too?"

"You're just jealous! I mean, it's just jealousy, isn't it!"

"I'm jealous? What's that about? Oh, Hikaru! No, I'm not! That was a joke....."

Hikaru immediately began to envelop himself in darkness, and Takeshi rushed to follow him.



"So what are we going to do with that..... After all, the band?"

Twenty minutes after entering the family restaurant. After a little while, when Hikaru had calmed down, he blurted out, "I'm not sure if we're going to be able to recover from this."

"You....."

Masachika, with a sense of crisis, looked at Hikaru and wondered if he had brought up the subject again before his tongue had dried up. However, there was no response, so he dropped a sigh of relief and got on the subject.

"What are we going to do, nothing but.....bring in new members? At least as far as vocals are concerned."

"I wonder if we'll be able to make it in time for the school festival."

"What, are you still planning to give up?"

"The school festival is in early October. There is only a little more than a month left. If we started looking for a new vocalist now and asked Ryuichi and Riho to come back.....and practice from there, it is very doubtful that we will be able to adjust in time. To begin with, I'd have to ask them to do the vocals at our place! The show is a month away! It's hard to imagine anyone saying "yes" when asked to do a vocal performance. The vocalist is the face of the band, after all."

"I think it's a tough call to make....."

"I promised.....that I'd show him the coolest thing he'll ever see at the school festival. I promised Kano that I would show him the coolest part at the school festival live performance."

"Oh, your brother. He's in the fourth grade, right?"

"Yes! He's so cute! He is very affectionate towards me.~"

Once it came to his brother, Takeshi deliriously loosened the corners of his eyes and mouth. However, his expression quickly turned somber and he held his head in his gaping mouth.

"That's why I can't break my promise to him.~~~"

At these words, Masachika shook his shoulders a little. Then, after thinking for a moment, he cautiously opened his mouth.

"Not that I don't have an idea who could do vocals, but....."

"Oh, really?"

".....Someone you know?"

"Yeah, I'd have to ask her....."

"Yeah, well..."



"Oh, Alya, over here, this way."

When Masachika sat up a little and waved his hand, Alisa's face lit up for a moment as she entered the family restaurant. But then she quickly cleared her face and approached, drawing the attention of the people around her.

"Sorry to call you on such short notice."

"Really? Well, I just happened to have some free time....."

Saying this, Alisa walked over to the table and.....

"Oh, thank you."

"Well, hello?"

As soon as she saw the two guys sitting opposite of Masachika, she became expressionless.



".....So you want me to take on the vocals?"

"Oh, yeah, what do you think?"

After about ten minutes of explaining the situation, he looked at Alisa's face, but she just sipped her melon soda float with a pouty look on her face.

Masachika and Hikaru, who were sitting in front of her, pulled their cheeks at her blatantly sullen demeanor.....

"Hey, hey, isn't Kujou-san in a bad mood?"

"I guess so....."

With Alisa, who did not readily send a reply, at their side, Masachika and Hikaru talked to each other with eye contact. Takeshi? Alisa was dressed in plain clothes, and he was looking down his nose at Masachika.

【I was wondering what was going on when you suddenly called me up....】

Then, unexpectedly, Russian mumbled in a frustrated, mumbling tone. Hearing this, Masachika guessed what was putting Alisa in a bad mood.

Eh, oh I guess I made the wrong call to.....

It was difficult to explain the situation over the phone, so Masachika just said, "If you have time, I'd like you to come to a family restaurant."

.....Apparently, Alisa misunderstood it as an invitation for fun or something. The first thing she saw when she arrived at the restaurant, she found Hikaru and Takeshi there, so he guessed it was a bit of a slap in the face.

【You wouldn't ask me out if you didn't have something to do?】

"Well, Alya? How does it sound?"

When Alisa finally started gulping down the straw, Masachika asked her again. Alisa glanced at Masachika and then quickly looked away.

"Why me? I've never been a singer of a band before and.....there are plenty of other people who would be better suited for the job."

"Why.... Because you're the best singer I know, of course?"

Alisa, who had been looking unenthusiastic at Masachika's assurances, raised her eyebrows.

".....Well? My family often compliments my singing voice, but that's it? Is that all?"

"That's just it..... Singing well is a tremendous talent, you know? Think about it. The only time an ordinary person can move someone to tears is once in a lifetime, when they write a letter to their parents at their wedding. A good singer can move thousands and thousands of people to tears with their voice alone. Isn't that amazing?"

"Isn't that a bit of an exaggeration?"

"I'm not exaggerating. To be frank, I think the gift of singing is one of the rarest and most outstanding talents that heaven has given to mankind."

"Hmm-hmm?"

Where was the slightly unfaithful attitude she had displayed just a few moments before? Alisa's mouth loosened as she fiddled with the tips of her

hair with her, as if she was not satisfied with the situation. Takeshi and Hikaru exchanged glances next to each other with a look of surprise on their faces.

"What? Is Alya-hime a bit more easy going than I thought?"

"I guess she's actually pretty easy to get on board with."

[T/L note: Their conversation was not said out loud, they communicated through exchanging glances.]

Aside from the two sharing their surprise through eye contact, Masachika continued.

"And of course, Alya will benefit, too. I assure you, if you show off your voice on stage at the school festival, you will definitely have a huge following. Besides, it would be a good experience for you to practice teamwork."

Alisa raised her eyebrows a little at Masachika's calculating remark and looked at Hikaru with concern. She then poked Masachika's left hand under the table and started writing on the palm of his hand.

"Can you say that?"

Somewhat smitten by the fact that Alisa was immediately using the palm stroke technique they had practiced the other day, and by the fact that she was trying her best to type the letters, Masachika dared to answer aloud.

"I'm telling you, don't be shy with Takeshi and Hikaru. They know that, too. This is not a free cooperation to your classmates, but a mutually beneficial deal."

At Masachika's words, Alisa looked away for a moment and pondered. Then, after a dozen seconds of silent contemplation, she turned to Takeshi and Hikaru.

"I understand. If it's okay with me, I'll help you guys."

"Oh, oh, are you serious? No, if Kujou-san will take care of it, I'll be very happy! Thank you!"

"Hey, hey, hey, Takeshi, we haven't even heard Alya's singing yet, you shouldn't welcome her so enthusiastically."

"Oh, no, but..... I thought Kujou-san would be good at almost anything, right? Ha ha ha....."

Masachika and Hikaru gave a warm, raw look to Takeshi, who scratched his head, seemingly unable to look directly into Alisa's face.

"Well, I wouldn't have a problem with Kujou-san either, but she needs to show us what she's capable of. This also goes for both of us."

"I guess we'll have one session and then we'll make a formal decision.. Is that okay with you, Alisa?"

"Yes."

"What are we going to do then? Do we go somewhere and sing karaoke?"

"No, we're in uniform, and karaoke is no way to show off your skills."

"It's a school music club, after all. If you're going to have a session, why not go to school?"

"I see. I see. Umm~..... Worst-case scenario, we could rent a studio somewhere..... But when's the next practice day?"

Masachika was now talking with Takeshi and Hikaru to discuss the future. He was holding his left hand, which was still connected to Alisa's. Alisa began to trace her fingers across the palm of his hand again.

Hmm? What's that.....?

It was no small feat for Masachika to read a palm stroke, even if he was conversing with someone else. He focused half of his attention on the conversation and the other half on his left hand, and.....

No, no, no, no... "Look at me" ?

Masachika turned his head toward Alisa as he had read. But what he got back was a dubious look.

".....What?"

"Yeah, nothing....."

Masachika was puzzled for a moment as to what was going on, thinking inwardly: "You called me." He wondered if he had made a reading mistake by any chance and tried to remember, but.....

"Hey, hey, hey, what's the matter? Did you suddenly fall in love with Kujou-san's face?"

He turned around to face the front when he heard a chilling voice from the other side of the table. Alisa's voice with a smile reaches his ears.

"Oh, really?"

With a provocative smile on her face, Alisa brushed her hair away in this manner. Masachika's cheeks pulled back as he saw the smirk behind her eyes.

This girl.....

Swearing inwardly that he had been set up, Masachika responded in a nonchalant manner.

"I thought I heard you say something, so I just turned around."

"Oh, my."

Alisa withdrew with mischievous ease, but the mischievous light in the depths of her eyes remained unchanged. As if to prove it, Alisa's fingers once again began tracing Masachika's left hand.

"You're so flustered, it's adorable."

Masachika was puzzled for a moment, wondering what was going on. He wondered if he had made a reading mistake and went back to his memory, but he could not find.....

"I mean, I know it's a little late for this, but do you think we should ask Kujou-san to join the Light Music Club?"

"Hmm? Yeah, what about it.....? Well, that's probably the least complicated circumstance right now....."

"Right?"

"Now I'm serious, so turn around and look at me again."

[T/L note: palm flick here]

"Well, yeah..... I'll make a few calls there."

"What's wrong? Are you sulking?"

[T/L note: palm flick here]

"Wait a minute. Isn't that only after it's been decided that Kujou-san will officially join?"

"That would be better. The next practice is two days before the first day of school, right? We'll make it official then, and if you want to join the club, you'll have to start in the second semester..."

"You're so cute, like a little kid."

[T/L note: palm flick here]

You're so quick to abuse the palm flick technique I taught you!

Masachika exclaimed inwardly while conversing with Takeshi and Hikaru. While trying his best not to react, he was also conscious of Alisa's fingers, thinking that maybe she really had something she wanted to tell him confidentially...but it was just a complete and utter prank. She was only teasing Masachika, who was strongly unresponsive. In this case, he decided to stop reading the conversation. Deciding that, Masachika concentrated on the conversation. But, there he was!

Uh..... Something, this is.....something...

As a result of having stopped following the movements of her fingers, he became more conscious of the feel of her fingers. Alisa's smooth fingertips tickling his palm. Each time she knocked on his fingers, they lightly clasped together, hand on hand.

Oh, no..... I feel soooo mushy because of the development just recently!!!

Masachika felt a sense of urgency at the sensation of a thrill crawling slowly up his spine. But to shake off his hand at this point would be impolite, and he felt defeated. But he couldn't think of any excuse to suddenly get up from his seat in the middle of a conversation.

No, but it's kind of seriously bad. I mean, I'm starting to feel like I'm doing something naughty, fidgeting under the table.....!

Aware of the heat slowly rising in the depths of his body, Masachika decided to end the conversation quickly anyway. But it was not going to be easy. It was difficult to find a break, mainly due to Takeshi's random thoughts that led him to jump from one topic to the next. Still, he managed to mobilize all his rational mental thoughts and maintain a calm demeanor.

"Well, I'd better give you the soundtrack and lyrics to the songs we'll actually sing live ahead of time."

"Yeah, right.....By the way."

"Hmm?"

"Masachika, aren't you looking a bit red?"

"What?"

Masachika stiffened at Hikaru's observation.

"You're right, he's a little red. Are you okay?"

Then, a casual concern was directed at him from Takeshi. The pure eyes of his two friends made..... Masachika wanted to fiercely disappear. In addition, he felt humiliation, shame, and self-loathing for having succumbed to Alisa's prank and blushed at the mere touch of her hand.

Aaahhh~~! I want to disappear, I want to die, I'd rather be killed! Kill me now!

Masachika's shoulders contracted, leaving no time for excuses. Alisa's voice reaches his ears.

"Hey, what's wrong? Do you have a fever?"

Masachika glared at Alisa with a sideways glance at her words, which were so unconvincing that they were almost too unconvincing. However, Alisa's eyes were completely unmoved. Rather, she looked satisfied and loosened her mouth, then danced her fingers in Masachika's palm.

"I'll leave it at that for today."

Finally, Alisa took his hand away and picked up the melon soda float. Then, with a hearty and joyful laugh, she drank in her victory.

Chapter 5

Russian Dere, or Exposed Love For Short

"Well, I guess it didn't work out after all....."

"Oh..... I know, well it's not like it's unreasonable."

The day after Alisa took over as vocalist, Masachika was in his room talking with Takeshi on his phone. The topic was about Ryuichi, the bass player of the band, and Riho, the keyboardist.

"They both want to take a break from the band for a while..... I don't know for how long, but probably not in time for the school festival."

His voice, which was not like his usual energetic and domineering voice, suggested that Takeshi was quite worn out from the discussion with those two.

"I see."

".....Well, if we play in a band with all these emotional lumps in our throats, I don't think we'll be able to breathe together properly."

"That's right..... But I never thought that even Riho liked Hikaru....."

".....?"

The words leaked by Masachika caused Takeshi to raise a puzzled tone.

".....Was that ever mentioned?"

"What? Because before she left, Riho said, "Even I....." That means Riho also liked Hikaru, right? That's why Hikaru was in such a state."

".....Hmmm~?"

Indeed, that was what it sounded like from the back and forth. But still, Masachika still suspected something was off. The three had been friends for a long time.

The first thing he needed to do was grasp an understanding about the situation. From Masachika's point of view, he felt nothing but discomfort in what he had just deduced. Takeshi and Hikaru were too shocked to notice. No, this was beyond discomfort...

"Ha..... But then what do we do now about the bassist and keyboardist..... Even though we've managed to get Alya-hime to help us out....."

In a completely dejected tone of voice, Takeshi blurted out under his breath, "I'm not going to let this situation do this to me." With these words, Masachika interrupted his own thoughts. At the same time, he realized that "quitting" was not an option for Takeshi, but still, he reaffirmed his decision.

"Now that more than half of your members are out....are you still going to play at the school festival?"

"Hmm? Well, yes, I promised.....that I would.....fulfill it, and....."

"And?"

"If the event is canceled here," he said, "it's going to drag on for a long time, isn't it? If we cancel the event here, it's likely that Hikaru might also drag himself out.....this time around, right?"

Genuinely, Takeshi spoke in concern for his best friend. Then, immediately, he raised his voice in a deceptive manner.

"And that's it! We can't miss this opportunity to collaborate with Alya-hime!"

".....Haha, yeah."

Although he said so with his mouth, it was clear that this was not his main goal. What was it then? It was putting friendships between men before ulterior motives toward girls. That is the kind of man Takeshi Maruyama is.

"All right, in that case, I'll take care of the bass and keyboard."

"Eh, you still have someone in mind? I don't think there are many people outside of the light music club who can play bass, let alone the keyboard....."

"I've never played the bass, but I can play the violin. If they are both string instruments, what's the difference?"

"I think it's going to be very different. And I've never heard you play the violin."

"I didn't know that. Well, it's not something I go out of my way to brag about..... At best, I can play "Czardasz" at twice the speed."

[T/L note: "Czardasz," also often referred to as "Csárdás," is an incredibly famous piece played in virtually all Romani orchestras, composed by the Italian composer Vittorio Monti.]

"You're a monster!"

After that, they chatted for a while over the phone and hung up the call around the time when the energy in Takeshi had returned to normal. Masachika then launched his messaging app and sent a message to the person he had told Takeshi he had in mind.

"I understand.....the situation."

The next day, Masachika was at a café facing the person he had summoned: Sayaka Taniyama, a fellow student council member when they

were both in junior high school. While waiting for the food they had ordered to arrive, Sayaka was quietly listening to Masachika's story, and after Masachika explained the situation to her, she quietly opened her mouth.



"So? And then what? What do you need me to do after hearing that?"

Her voice and gaze were cool-headed with no intention of making any approach. Sayaka treated everyone with a cool demeanor except for a few people, but she seemed to be particularly severe with Masachika, with whom she once had an epic election battle with. It was as if she was a strict female boss who often questioned her subordinates. In her eyes, there was no tolerance for mischief of any kind.



The light of her aura was so bright that it would not tolerate even a little deception. That was why Masachika answered honestly, without any deceptions or tricks.

"I'm going to be straight to the point," he answered. "I want to ask you to join Takeshi's band as the new bass player."

"Why? Why me as the bass player....."

"You can play, right?"

Masachika stared into Sayaka's eyes, not letting her speak. Sayaka also stared back at Masachika as if she could see Masachika's true intention. Then, when Masachika's gaze turned to Sayaka's hands on the table, Sayaka huffed and sat deeply in her chair.

"Even if that's true, what's in it for me?" Sayaka said nonchalantly, her glasses glinting with a faint smile on her face. "I don't believe that I would unconditionally cooperate with Kujou-san's attempts to gain popularity——"

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting. Here are Naksha's Healing Sandwich and MP Potion."

"Wow!"

"There's some more coming."

Masachika's serious air instantly fizzled out in front of the food brought by the waitress, and Masachika gave a jittery look to Sayaka. Yes, in fact, this restaurant was a café, but a collaboration café. The interior of the cafe was designed in the image of a tavern where adventurers would gather, and the menu was very elaborate, with dishes from the anime and drinks inspired by each character.

"And this is Gerger's Dragon Hamburger and Dwarf's Sake."

"Thank you."

Following Sayaka, a dish was placed in front of Masachika. Of course, the "dragon hamburger steak" was actually a combination of ground beef and pork, and the "Dwarf's Sake" did not contain alcohol. It was simply a recreation of the appearance of the dish as it appeared in the original.

But it's well made..... Yuki would have enjoyed it if she could have come too.

In fact, Masachika had originally made a reservation with the collaboration café so that he could come with Yuki. However, Yuki happened to have other plans and was unable to come, so he invited Sayaka to join him in the slot that was just available. Masachika held up his phone to at least send a picture to Yuki. In front of him, Sayaka was also taking a picture with her phone. They continued to take pictures in silence for a while. Switching seats, he also took a picture of his partner's food. After taking all the pictures

and looking at the coaster that came with her drink, Sayaka suddenly changed her expression.

"So? Do you really think I'm going to unconditionally cooperate with Kujou-san?"

"No, no, no. Do you really think you're capable of seriousness right now?"

After a few nonchalant tugs, he picked up a fork.

"Look, we've got a time limit, let's just eat anyway."

When he noted that, Sayaka also reached for her sandwich, raising her eyebrows a little. And so, after about 20 minutes of eating. Masachika returned to the main topic.

"So, about the band..... I think it's a fascinating story for you too, don't you think? It's just like Keifuyu, a band that runs out of members and wants to go to the school festival."

Sayaka's eyebrows twitched at Masachika's words. Keifuyu (official name: "Winter Will Never Come for the Light Music Club") was an anime about a light music club that had been threatened with closure due to a lack of members, due to members transferring to other schools, and in order to avoid this, the club aimed for a successful live performance at the school festival.

The title "Winter Will Not Come" has two meanings. One is a sense of crisis that they will not be able to welcome winter if they do nothing, and the other is a statement of determination that they will not accept the winter season. Three years ago, the song was all the rage, and anecdotally, it drove many otaku down the path of light music. And from what Masachika could see, Sayaka was probably one of them. Her overreaction to Yuki's T-shirt at the amusement park and the faint octopus mark on her finger were evidence of this.

".....Well, it's not hard to see why. Kanamin, the bass player, was also a member who joined later."

Slowly nodding, Sayaka pushed up the bridge of her glasses and hid her eyes behind them.

"I don't know about that, though. The vocalist Luna also has silver hair, and her motive of wanting her younger sibling to see her in action is similar to Takeshi's love for his brother, and to begin with, Hikaru's name is very similar to Seimiya's, and...."

[T/N note: Most likely a parody of K-On where the Light Music Club they inherited was on the brink of desolation. Characters kinda match up too, I guess.]

Masachika gave a lukewarm look to Sayaka as she spoke quickly, clinking her glasses. For three minutes, Sayaka's passionate talk continued.

Then, Sayaka came to herself and coughed lightly before putting on a cool expression.

"Well, that's why I can't cooperate with Kujou-san just because.....I'm sure it's a lot different. Also I never heard that you can play the violin."

Masachika reached under his chair with a feeling of both dismay and admiration, wondering how he had managed to keep his mouth shut until now.

"Well, you wouldn't do it for free, would you?"

Then, seeing what Masachika put out on the table... Sayaka's eyes changed color.

"Hey, that's.....!"

"Well, I think you know what this is?" he said. "This illustration of the last episode is a special edition, completely new and completely original. There are only five of these in the world, and they have never been resold."

Sayaka's mouth dropped open at Masachika's promotion. Smiling at her reaction, Masachika placed it on the table between two acrylic plates.

"I'll give this to you if you take me up on it."

Sayaka's eyes narrowed at the blatant bribe.

"You've got a lot of nerve trying to poach me with something like this."

"Take your hands off it first."

But her hand was firmly gripping the illustration card on the table. When Masachika lifted the illustration card, Sayaka's hand caught it. Her involvement was safely secured.



The next day, Masachika went to meet with the keyboardist in mind.

She asked, "So? You want me to play the keyboard?"

The one who asked this question straight up was Nono Miyamae, who had dazzling blonde hair in a ponytail. Masachika laughed quietly at the question.

"What do you want to do?"

"What?"

At Masachika's counter-question, Nono opened her mouth a little with half-open eyes. Masachika's smile deepened at her reaction, and he made a suggestion with a nonchalant face.

"If Miyamae wants to do it, you're welcome to play the keyboard for the band."

Yes, a proposal. It was not a request. If he asked for something, he'd have to pay for it. It's already hard enough to come up with a price that would

satisfy Nonoa, and it would be too scary to owe her anything. That was why Masachika did not ask for a favor. He simply made a proposal based on the fact that he had brought Sayaka into the picture. If Nonoa wanted to participate with her, he would let her do it.

".....I'm not going to ask you to do it. That's why I went through the trouble of asking you and Sayaka on different days."

With her natural intelligence, Nonoa immediately understood Masachika's intentions and leaned against the back of her chair.

"What if I refuse?"

"I'll do it then. I'm not as good visually as you, though."

"Really?"

He looked at Nonoa with an unconcerned face and gave her a meaningful look. But she quickly lost interest and waved her hand in a flutter.

"Well, that's okay~. I'll come along for the ride. I'm a little confused, though~"

"I see. Thank goodness."

And so, the five members of the band were finally together.



"So, the five members are all here."

"Hold on."

"Woman.....woman....."

"Well, can't wait any longer, huh?"

When Masachika reported to Takeshi and Hikaru about the members he recruited on the group call, that was the response he got back.

"I don't care how many connections you have with the student body, I can..... I'm fine with those two....."

"It's expected when you have an idea of what I'm talking about. She's famous for her piano skills."

At the middle school of Seirei Gakuen, a choral competition was held every year. It was customary that the best piano player in the year would accompany the chorus each time. At this school, where many children of wealthy families attend, many of the students have been learning piano since childhood, and the student who was chosen as the accompanist would have considerable skill on the piano. Nonoa has been an accompanist for three consecutive years, and is said to be the second best pianist in the school after Yusho, the piano prince. And that's something that even Takeshi and Hikaru knew all too well.

"No, she said it was too tiring and didn't think she'd ever go there....."

While Nonoa was known as an excellent pianist, she was also known for not showing any interest in music-related club activities, or rather, in club activities as a whole. The fact that he was able to recruit her so easily must have been enough to make even Takeshi want to hold his head in his hands.

"I mean, a piano and a keyboard are not really the same thing..... Are you sure she's okay with that?"

"I'm not sure how much of a difference it makes..... Well, if she says she can play it, it's okay, isn't it?"

"Isn't that pretty ambiguous? And Taniyama-san? I'm not sure if she can play the bass guitar..... But to be honest, I don't have a clear image of her at all."

"I honestly don't have much of an impression of her either."

"Then how did you know she can play the bass guitar?"

"..... Well, for a variety of reasons."

After slurring his words, Masachika immediately switched the subject.

"So, do you have any complaints about this group?"

"I don't have any complaints..... I'm more worried that they're so great that I'm going to shrink away from them, or that they're going to eat me up completely....."

"Don't worry, they're not that vicious."

"I don't mean that! I'd rather be eaten if that's what you mean!"

"Don't worry, you'll never get that chance."

"Why not? I don't care if it's Taniyama-san, if it's Miyamae-san, maybe she'll enjoy the food."

"Even if that should ever happen, just don't take it out on us, seriously."

After advising him in a gruff tone, Masachika called out to Hikaru.

"So, don't worry, Hikaru. No one is going to fall in love here."

".....Really?"

"I'll take care of it as the manager. If any romantic problems should arise, I'll be there to handle them."

"Manager?"

Takeshi responded to Masachika's casual remark in a nonchalant voice. Masachika responded in a surprised voice.

"I've been trying to do that since..... Since I'm the one who recruited the new members, I should be the one to take care of them, right?"

"Well..... I guess?"

"Besides, you guys and the three of them don't seem to fit in very well without me in between."

"Yeah, that's.....true.

Once he had convinced Takeshi, Masachika returned to persuade Hikaru.

"Well, that's why I'm here..... Why don't you trust me here and try to work with me?"

"....."

There was a long pause, at the end of which came the sound of Hikaru's small exhale.

"I understand. I'm not going to be selfish here. In the first place, I was the cause of the breakup of the previous members....."

"No, you don't have to worry about that."

"The most important thing to remember is that you are not responsible for what the others did. You don't need to feel responsible."

".....Thank you"

Two days later, the five members met for the first time in the music room. But.....

「「「「.....」」」」

The air was heavy. No, maybe it was only the boys who were feeling the heaviness..... Nonoa came early and had been playing with her phone for a long time. Sayaka was silently adjusting her bass guitar. Takeshi was showing his purity in front of the glittering ladies. Hikaru was already wearing a slightly dim aura. Alisa was there in silence. None of them spoke up on their own. Two minutes had already passed since everyone arrived, but there was no sign of conversation even though it was their first meeting.

Oh~ this is more grim.....than I thought. I guess I'll have to take charge here?

At that moment, Masachika was about to let them introduce themselves for the time being. Sayaka, who had been silently tinkering with the bass guitar, suddenly said,

"Well. It looks like everyone is here, so let's get started right away. It seems we don't have much time."

"Okay~"

"Yeah, I'm....."

At Sayaka's words, Nonoa began to set up the keyboard, and Takeshi and Hikaru hurriedly began to prepare as well. Masachika quickly called out to Sayaka, who was about to start the session without having a good introductory conversation with each other.

"Wait a minute, Taniyama. Shouldn't we at least lightly introduce ourselves?"

"It's not like we don't know each other at all, and we've shared information. It's a little late for that, isn't it? Besides——"

After saying that calmly, Sayaka gently crawled her fingers along the neck of the bass guitar and laughed.

"You can learn a lot more about someone by playing a single note together than by exchanging a hundred words."

"You suddenly say cool things, don't you? What, are you usually like that?"

Masachika was unintentionally making fun of her with a straight face, but Sayaka seemed to be self absorbed in the situation.

I mean, that bass was.....

It was a bass that looked kind of familiar. Specifically, it looked like something he had seen in an anime about three years ago.....

—— *is she just a geek?*

Turning away from Sayaka, who caressed her bass with somewhat enraptured eyes, Masachika turned to Nonoa.

"Miyamae, so you have a keyboard."

When he casually said this to Nonoa, who was setting up her own keyboard, she looked up and answered.

"I bought it."

"Oh, yeah..... I'm very thankful for that, but I'm sorry that I didn't tell you sooner..... In case you're wondering, there's one in the light music club room that you can rent."

"I'd like to do it with my own stuff anyway. It's not as expensive as a piano, so it's not a big deal."

"Oh, yeah....."

When Masachika nodded half-heartedly to Nonoa who slumped her shoulders, Takeshi, who had a guitar around his neck, came up to him and quietly whispered in Masachika's ear,

"(You're talking it lightly, though. That keyboard alone costs close to 100,000 yen, you know? If you include the other equipment around it, it's probably 130,000 or so.)"

"(Seriously?)"

It wasn't a big deal for her though. I guess that's what high school girl models are for, huh? Masachika shivered quietly, and suddenly heard Alisa humming enter his ear. He casually turned his ear that way and wondered if she was speaking out loud.

【Hold me, hold me, hold me, hold me, hold me...】

"Ugh!"

"What's wrong?"

"No..... It's nothing."

Masachika shuddered in a different way as he quickly fumbled.

Is this the Kamacho song I heard.....some time ago?

[T/L note: Kamacho is slang short for "Kamatte choudai" (構ってちょうだい), which translates to something along the lines of "Someone, hang out with me, please", and is a phrase used to tell people you're free and looking for someone to be with, or hang out with. So a Kamacho song is one related to that, hence why she says "hold me".]

The official title of the song was "Unreachable Thoughts" (lyrics and music by Alisa Kujou). Masachika looked at Alisa, who was speaking Russian with a blank expression on her face as if to say "What kind of expression should I put on?" He then let out a small exhale before heading to her.

"How are you doing, unreachable thoughts-san?"

"Who's unreachable?"

"If you can make such a sharp statement, I guess you'll be alright."

"I've been listening to the sound files I received so I can sing without needing to read the lyrics..... But this is the first time I'm going to combine it with a live band performance, so I can't say for sure until I try it out."

"You've never sung with a live band before. Well, that's just the way it is."

"You're a good manager, aren't you? Do you have any advice for me?"

"I don't. I've never been in a band or anything."

"I can't count on you....."

Masachika cowered as Alisa raised her eyebrows and spoke hatefully to him.

"Well, if there's one thing I can say, it's that you shouldn't be.....too reserved or on the flip side, try too much to fit in, but you should speak up."

"What, are you sure that's a good idea?"

"I don't think many people can do that."

"Hey, are you ready to go~?"

Masachika was approached there and took Alisa by the hand.

"Go on, then."

"Yeah."

Everyone was in place and Alisa stood at the head of the group. And so began the session, the first of five.

"Oh.....!"

The performance was a little awkward at first. But the moment Alisa started singing, the atmosphere changed. Her beautiful voice was spontaneous and clear, but also strong and powerful. As if pulled by her voice, the four members' performance gradually came together. As they approached the chorus, Alisa's voice grew stronger and her performance became more passionate. When they entered the chorus, the tension exploded at once. They kept up the momentum until the very end of the song, and the performance ended with a lingering guitar note.

"Oh, my God~!"

After a moment of silence, Masachika gave a hearty round of applause. Although there were still various parts of the performance that were not quite up to par, the performance still gave a good sense of the potential with this group of musicians. Masachika was not the only one who was impressed with the performance, as Takeshi excitedly exclaimed,

"No, that was amazing! Kujou-san sang so well! Taniyama and Miyamae were great!"

"I really didn't think we'd be this comfortable playing for the first time."

While the boys were completely excited, the girls were calm.

"At the start we were a bit slow, but Kujou-san helped us get the momentum rolling."

".....Well, isn't that how it's supposed to be the very first time?"

Takeshi and Hikaru also chuckled a little at this calm reaction. Well, from Masachika's point of view, as for Alisa, there was probably some embarrassment involved.

"Then let's repeat it a few more times. Then we'll go through it once in full."

"Oh, yes."

With Sayaka's words, the practice began again. After about 40 minutes of practicing the song in its entirety, Sayaka said,

"I'm going to play the third measure of the chorus again. We had a little trouble there. Let's work on that a few more times."

[T/L note: A "measure" is basically just a "bar" in music. It's translated to "measure" here but it's practically the same as a "bar", with the term "bar" used more in British English and the term "measure" used more in American English. Also there are usually 8, 12 or 16 bars/measures in a chorus, which are usually only in multiples of 4, since 4 bars/measures usually makes one line.]

"Oh, that's right."

"Yes."

"Okay~"

"Yeah."

Masachika noticed that the practice was naturally led by Sayaka.

That's Taniyama, after all..... She has a broad vision and often examines people very carefully.

From Masachika's point of view, Sayaka is a genuine commander type. He felt that not many people had as much talent as she does when it comes to running a group.

Alisa was the type of person who thinks things work better when she does them on her own, but Sayaka was the exact opposite. She was convinced that it would be most efficient and successful if she took the lead in moving others.

And it actually works. The results of her efforts became her achievements, and the people around her came to believe that they would be alright as long as they followed Taniyama's lead, and would disapprovingly look at anyone who disturbed that harmony. She did not appeal to emotion, nor rely on her charisma, but rather on the practicality of solid results to

motivate the people around her. This was the natural talent of Sayaka, who was born to be on the dominant side.

As they approached the chorus, Alisa's voice grew stronger and her performance became more passionate. When they entered the chorus, the tension exploded at once. They kept up the momentum until the very end of the song, ending the performance with a lingering guitar note.

Good grief, while this would make a reliable ally, it would also be a nasty one.....you know what I mean? Alya. Even if you become student council president at this rate, Taniyama might take away the center of your attention and business.

The advice to "raise your voice" earlier included that meaning.....,but Alisa didn't seem to have noticed it.

Alisa still has to make sure she would be able to control and be at the center of the situation. It's just the beginning.

The five of them, who had gotten into the swing of things, continued to practice without Masachika's thoughts.



"Alright then, it's time to clean up and start the post practice discussion."

The music room was reserved for the remaining 15 minutes, Masachika clapped his hands and called out.

"Oh! I don't have any objections at all! We're a great group!"

"Yeah, it was nice working with you all, all three of you."

"Yes, thank you very much."

"All right~"

"Thank you."

So it was officially decided that the five of them would form the band, and the next practice would be in the new semester. By then, it was decided that each of them would come up with a band name. Then, they decided to break up for the day.....

"Alya, can I talk to you for a minute? I have something to tell you about the opening ceremony the day after tomorrow....."

Scratching his head with his left hand, he said this to Alisa, and Masachika turned his attention to the other four students.

"Okay. I'll see you guys later."

"See you, you two."

"See you in the new semester."

"Oh, see you."

"Yeah, see you."

After seeing them leave the music room, Alisa gave Masachika a suspicious look.

"So, what's this I hear about the opening ceremony? I thought the student council was supposed to be getting ready for it tomorrow."

"No, of course not. I mean, didn't you notice the.....signal?"

"What?"

"Look, I touched my hair with my left hand....."

"Oh....."

Then Alisa apparently remembered the agreement she had made with Masachika the other day that what he said while touching his hair with his left hand was a bluff. Shrugging her shoulders a little awkwardly, Alisa quickly looked away.

".....I'm sorry. I forgot."

"Yeah, well, that's okay..... Let's just go to the courtyard for now."

Masachika was not about to be pestered again by the next group using the music room, so they moved to the courtyard. Normally, the courtyard was

always crowded with people in the adjoining corridor, but today it was not so popular, especially during the summer vacation.

"So, how was the practice.....?"

Sitting side by side on a bench in the shade of a tree, Masachika quickly began.

"Well..... Honestly, it was more fun than I thought it would be. I didn't realize how much fun it would be to perform music with other people."

"Well, that's good to hear."

Masachika sincerely replied to Alisa's honest impression. If Alisa found it enjoyable to work with someone, he thought that it was progress.

【It would have been more fun if you had been with me.】

There goes her sudden flirting in Russian while mumbling.

Masachika was a bit sentimental when he was hit with her mumbling Russian, which made him squeamish. Coughing, he then cleared his throat and got down to business.

"So," he said, "We.....We're going to decide on a name for the band at the next practice."

"Yeah. Yeah, right.

"Normally, I think the process would also go straight to choosing a leader for the band."

"What?"

Alisa tilted her head slightly after letting out a sound of being struck by the emptiness of the situation, as if she had not expected that.

".....Isn't the leader of the group Maruyama-kun?"

[T/L note: Since it's rarely mentioned, Maruyama is Takeshi's last name.]

"Originally," Masachika replied, "but more than half of the band members have changed. We're probably going to have to start all over again, aren't we?"

After saying this, Masachika consciously put his stern demeanor on display and turned straight to Alisa, who was sitting next to him.

"So who do you think would be the.....leader in that case?"

At Masaichika's question, Alisa's eyes widened for a moment and she.....hesitantly spun her words.

"It's.....Taniyama-san, I think."

"I agree. Today's practice, it was Taniyama who clearly showed leadership."

At his merciless assertion, Alisa bit her lip as if she had finally understood what Masachika was trying to say. But Masachika went even further.

"In other words, for today's practice, you admitted to yourself that you were completely defeated by Taniyama in terms of leadership qualities. I'm sure Takeshi and Hikaru feel the same way. At this rate, the band leader will probably be Taniyama."

".....Yeah, right."

Alisa, unable to refute a single thing, agreed with Masachika with a frustrated look on her face. However, Masachika cowered his shoulders and then turned around to speak in a carefree voice.

"Well, what the heck?"

"?"

"Well, after all that, we won't be able to choose a leader for the next practice."

"What do you mean?"

Masachika responded in a casual tone to Alisa, who looked back at him dubiously.

"I asked the other four beforehand. I asked them to decide on a band leader on the day of the show....or, more precisely, at the last rehearsal."

"What?"

Alisa raised her eyebrows, wondering what he meant, as if she was saying "What's this about?"

"Alya, you have to convince the four of them that you are the right person to be the leader by the time the show starts in a month. If you can't do that, being student body president is just a dream."

"Yes!"

"Taniyama is without a doubt one of the best leadership characters in the school. Learn what you can from her, but be yourself and surpass her."

After a few seconds, Alisa looked up at the sky. Then, after a short pause, she answered in a short, determined voice.

"All right."

".....Oh."

Masachika looked up at the sky and talked to the person next to him in his usual tone of voice, feeling both admiration and satisfaction at the unaffected profile.

"Well, I'm here for you, as always."

"Yeah, I'm counting on you....."

With their pledge to each other for the summer firmly in each of their hearts.....the new semester began.

Chapter 6

I Really Think I'm Not Guilty of This

"Woah!"

It was September 1st, the first day of the second semester after the summer break. After the opening ceremony and homeroom, Masachika looked down at the schoolyard from the window of his class and shouted as if he was talking to someone else.

What he saw was a long line of students stretching from the entrance to the gymnasium to the outside. And many students were dashing across the schoolyard to join the line. It was so crowded that one might have thought that some celebrity had come to the event, but that was not the case with Touya Kenzaki. What was going on over there right now was the sale of school uniforms.

The new summer uniforms were released thanks to the efforts of the student council president, Touya Kenzaki. However, just because new summer uniforms had been made available, it didn't mean that they were being replaced all at once. The new summer uniforms were to be sold at the purchase counter, and it was up to each student to decide whether or not to buy them. For at least the next three years, students were allowed to wear either the old or the new summer uniforms.

However, it was decided at the staff meeting that only today, when crowds were expected, a temporary sales stand would be set up in the gymnasium to handle the situation.

If it had been only purchasing, the corridors would have been chaotic with students lining up to buy and students trying to go home.

"Everyone is kind of sick of these long-sleeved blazers....."

Students were all looking a little confused as their classmates were now darting out into the hallway, and Alisa muttered to herself, "I'm not sure what's going on. The new uniforms were not only for the new year but for the new semester. When it came time to start the new semester, the lingering heat was too much to bear."

The new school semester started, and the heat was lukewarm, or maybe people were just too tired to change. Or perhaps they felt a sense of crisis because more people were switching than they had expected. The reason was

not clear. In any case, the renewal of the school uniforms that Touya initiated seemed to be accepted by many of the students.

"But I'm thankful that tomorrow I'll finally be free of this blazer, instead of being required by school rules to wear it in school."

Takeshi said so and fanned his face with his hand, to which Hikaru nodded and said with deep emotion.

"I'm sorry to break it to you, but I hear the new shirts are actually a little hot?"

"What? Why?"

They both looked at him as if to say, "Are you insane?" Masachika cowered when Hikaru continued to look at him as if to say, "Are you out of your mind?"

"The material is not transparent in the slightest. Apparently, they don't want the students of Seirei Gakuen to be seen in a public place in a disgraceful manner."

"Wait a minute, are you saying..."

Saying this with a shocked expression, Takeshi glanced at Alisa and then asked Masachika in a whisper so that Alisa could not hear him.

"(You mean the event where the girls' underwear becomes visible doesn't occur?.....?)"

Masachika nodded gravely at Takeshi, who asked with a ridiculously serious expression on his face.

"(.....That's what I'm talking about)"

"(Idiot.....)"

He staggered over and leaned against the window. Then he turned his eyes out the window and gave a wistful smile.

"Oh my God..... Are there no dreams or hope in this world?....."

"What the hell are you talking about in peaceful Japan?"

"Even today, a beautiful transfer student who claims to be my bride didn't show up even though it's a new semester....."

"How can such an event happen in real life? Also, these days, the trend when it comes to transfer students is ex-special forces personnel and ex-servicemembers yearning for an ordinary life."

"I wanna be the main character. I don't want to be a supporting character!"

".....Oh."

"What the hell was that?"

"Oh, nothing....."

Masachika quickly looked away at Takeshi's pursuit. Hikaru and Alisa were also silent, with somewhat subtle expressions on their faces. After a few seconds of strange silence, Hikaru returned to the conversation in a slightly brighter voice, as if to change the air.

"But it's amazing, isn't it? I thought it would be impossible to break with tradition like this without the Raikokai's approval."

Raikokai was the official name of the body composed of past student body presidents and vice presidents of Seirei Gakuen High School. Although this school was a prestigious private school, tuition fees were actually not that high. In fact, it was quite inexpensive when taking the quality of the facilities and various systems into account.

The reason for this was that the alumni donate a large amount of money to the school. The amount of donation from the Raikokai to the school was especially large, and of course, its influence on the school was strong in proportion to the amount of donations.

Of course, the donation for the process for the renewal of the school uniforms was also a significant amount of money, so it would have been impossible to implement the plan without the approval of the Raikokai.

"Well, it seems that it was the younger members who actually voiced their opposition," Masachika said, cowering behind him.

When Masachika cowered his shoulders, he raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"Oh, really? I thought it would be the hard-headed old men who would oppose this kind of thing."

"The "Koukai's" are really all heavyweights in the political and business world....., so they probably don't care about such a small group anymore, do they?"

".....Well, I can't imagine Niikura-san complaining about his alma mater's uniforms, but..."

"Right?"

"Right. Huh? Niikura-san?"

Alisa was asked as if she knew what was going on, and Masachika replied, "You didn't know?"

"He is Prime Minister Niikura. You know, the prime minister."

"What?"

"How troublesome..."

"Didn't you know Kujou-san?"

Alisa looked genuinely surprised, and Takeshi asked in a tone that was somewhere between a polite and a tame one. Although they were in a band together, they were still somewhat strangers here.

"Well, the Raikokai is not an organization that is very publicly active. You can't tell without knowing the relationship between them."

Still, it was rather well-known among the students at Seirei Gakuen Academy. It's not a great rumor, so it's not surprising that Alisa, with her narrow circle of friends, didn't know about it..... So, Masachika softly followed up with Alisa.

Incidentally, the reason why it was not a rumor was that it was not an uncommon occurrence. After all, there are four living members of the Raikokai who have served as prime minister, including Prime Minister Niikura. If we include those who have already passed away, the number was several times as many. A normal school would probably announce, "One of our graduates is former Prime Minister Niikura!" But in the case of Seirei Gakuen, the school would not be able to say, "What? Prime Minister? I'd have to look it up, but they're probably from our school."

[T/L note: This PM Niikura here doesn't exist in real life. Just a fictional made up character.]

"It's just like 'Isn't that right?' No one cares about it at all because it is at the level of 'is that so?'."

"The famous ones include the Minister of Finance, Ohnuma, and Governor Nanase of Tokyo. And the list is endless. Taniyama's father, the president of Taniyama Heavy Industries, the president of Zircus, the president of Eimei Bank, and the chairman of Clarique."

[T/N note: Again, the first 2 are made up political figures.]

Masachika counted his fingers and stopped in the middle of the count. Then, Hikaru added in a casual tone.

"And, you know, Suou-san's grandfather was the former ambassador to the United States, wasn't he?"

".....Oh, that's right."

Masachika found himself lowering his tone of voice and thought to himself, "Oh shit." He noticed that Alisa and Hikaru were looking at him a little suspiciously, and Masachika inwardly clicked his tongue at his own carelessness.

"Hello~"

Just then, however, someone appeared, and Masachika turned around with a nonchalant look on his face.

"Oh, welcome....."

Entering the classroom was Nonoa, her hair in a ponytail. However, Masachika and the others all froze when they saw what she was wearing.

This was because what Nonoa was wearing was the new summer uniform that was on sale in the gymnasium right now. A presale maybe? No such thing was happening. Masachika, an officer of the student council, was sure of it.

".....Why are you already in your new summer uniform?"

When Masachika, on behalf of all of them, asked that question, Nonoa tilted her head with half-open eyes.

"Hmm~~..... Well, what's the problem with it?"

".....All kinds of things, huh?"

Once that was said, Masachika could not pursue the matter any further. In all likelihood, she was just too lazy to explain, but Masachika didn't think it would do him much good to delve into the details. If Nonoa says so, then it must be true.

"Ahhhh..... You're not playing with your phone today, are you Miyamae?"

To divert the conversation, he said this to Nonoa, who was sprawled out on a nearby seat of her own accord, and she let out an "ah~" before cowering her shoulders.

"My mom gets mad at me for playing on my phone too much. I'm trying to be a little more careful."

"Oh, yeah....."

Masachika was honestly taken aback by the unexpected statement from Nonoa and that she had been warned by her parents. Masachika was not the only one who felt a sense of surprise, and he opened his mouth a little reservedly.

"Miyamae-san... You really listen to your parents, don't you?"

"What? I usually do. Well, I don't listen to my teachers."

With a languid expression that did not seem funny at all, Nonoa said something that made it difficult to decide whether she was serious or joking. Takeshi and Hikaru also seemed at a loss for a response and smiled amiably.

Hmmm, I can't wait to see where this goes...

Takeshi was the type of person who was shy around girls, while Hikaru was simply not good with girls. Alisa was not very good at making friends. On the other hand, Nonoa was very fast-paced, and Sayaka doesn't care much about other people's feelings. To be honest, he couldn't imagine a future where these members were playing in a harmonious band, even though he gathered them together himself.

That's why I have to stand between them well.

"Well. Let's start by deciding on a band name, shall we? Anyone with an idea?"

In a classroom empty except for the six students, Sayaka stood at the podium like a teacher and looked around at the five students. After a short pause, Hikaru raised his hand and she replied, "Yes, Kiyomiya."

"Well, how about..... 'Colorful' ? As you can see, we're pretty much all different colors..... I think it's simple enough."

[T/L note: He's most likely referring to their hair colors here.]

"I see. Not bad."

Sayaka wrote "Colorful" on the blackboard. Then she asked, "Anything else?" followed by Takeshi, who raised his hand vigorously.

"Yes, Maruyama-san."

Takeshi smiled wryly at Sayaka's nomination. Then, with a hint of confidence wafting around his mouth, he said slowly.

"Sunrise of paddy... What do you think?"

He seemed rather confident, but the other five members of the group were not so sure. With a slight furrow of her brow, Sayaka pushed up the bridge of her glasses.

"It literally translates to..... "sunrise in the rice paddies"? What does that mean?"

He raised his index finger in response to Sayaka's reasonable question.

"I started with the initials of all the members of the band.....HI, ASAHI NO, and so on. And when I rearranged them, I got "Sunrise of paddy" ! What do you think?"

[T/L note: Initials in Japanese, not English romanized letters.]

"Oh, man."

Nonoa didn't hesitate to make a disapproving statement. The gal's relentless feedback was killing him! The "Mere Old Man" has been killed!

".....I think I'll leave that one out of the list."

And the public discipline officer was unrelenting. Sayaka coughed lightly and turned her attention to Nonoa, who had cut off and thrown away her kill.

"Do you have any ideas, Nonoa?"

"What~?"

Looking at Nonoa, who was playing with her hair and looking at him, Masachika thought to himself, "She's probably going to say a sparkling name anyway, so I don't think it's necessary."

"Maji," "Paris," or "Age"? It would definitely be a long and useless name.

Masachika's anticipation of such a situation was met with an "ah" from the other end of his gaze.

"Then, Tsukune Daimyojin."



"What the hell is that?"

"What~? Isn't it good?"

"That sounds like the name of a tavern, doesn't it?"

When Masachika clicked his tongue with a straight face, Sayaka also asked Nodoka with a difficult look on her face.

"By the way, how did you get that name?"

"What? Nori?

[T/L note: Nori means seaweed in Japanese.]

"....."

In response to Nonoa's immediate answer, Sayaka silently put her hand on her forehead. Still, at least for the moment, Sayaka wrote "Tsukune Daimyojin" on the blackboard, and then Nonoa asked her,

"Hey, what's Sayacchi's idea?"

"My idea? Well then..."

After turning around slightly and raising her eyebrows, Sayaka ran her chalk across the blackboard.

"Twilight——"

"Yeah, hold on a second, Taniyama."

"What is it?"

"Yeah, just wait. Let's go there for a little bit."

As soon as the first letter was written on the blackboard, Masachika invited Sayaka into the hallway. Naturally, however, Sayaka raised her eyebrows in puzzlement.

"Can't I just write.....this first?"

"Hmmm... Sayacchi~? I think we should do as Kuzecchi says."

"No....."

At her childhood friend's words, Sayaka reluctantly put down the chalk and went out into the hallway with Masachika. As soon as they closed the door, Masachika gave Sayaka a wallop.

"What were you trying to write earlier?"

"What did you mean...hmm?"

When she let out a sigh as if to say, "You want to ask me such a question?" Sayaka pushed up her glasses and answered in a matter-of-fact way,

"I was about to write 'The Coma Night Party'"

"Whoa, it's as bad as I thought it would be. It's almost getting to me."

"What are you saying?"

"What are you talking about? By the way, how do you read that?"

"Oh, you're very perceptive, aren't you?It reads 'Twilight Evening Society.'"

"Are you crazy? You're a little late to the party, aren't you? Is this a late case of chunibyo?"

Masachika's point was correct. In fact, Sayaka had not been an otaku for very long. Sayaka became an otaku in June of her eighth grade year. That's right, it was after she lost the election for the middle school student council president to Yuki and Masachika. Until then, Sayaka had been a child who had no qualms about achieving results and living up to her parents' expectations. She lived an exemplary life according to her parents' expectations and attended a prestigious school to said demands.

For Sayaka, the defeat in the election campaign was her first incident of disobeying her parents' expectations. She returned home, fearful of what kind of reprimand she would receive.....and instead was greeted by her parents with kind words of encouragement and kindness. She was relieved to receive these words and at the same time realized that it was she herself, who had forced herself to become the person her parents expected her to be.

And so, she began to think, "Couldn't I live my life a little more the way I want?" As a result.....Sayaka became a healthy otaku, and it had been a little over two years since then.

"I'm not going to say anything bad, but you really shouldn't write that. It'll give you away."

"! That's troubling....."

Apparently, this worked for Sayaka, who was a closet otaku. Thinking for a moment, she returned to the classroom, erased the words on the blackboard as if nothing had happened, and turned her attention to Alisa.

"So, Kujou-san, what do you have for us? Do you have any ideas?"

"What, me now.....?"

Alisa was perplexed by the fact that it had suddenly come around to her. On the other hand, Takeshi and Hikaru did not say anything in particular. Apparently, they have guessed something thinly.

I don't know how they didn't geek out over this until now.....

"Well, what do you think about 'Fortitude'?"

"Fortitude? Fortissimo? I don't remember such a musical symbol."

Sayaka quietly replied to Hikaru, who was trying to make a big joke out of it, while hiding her eyes behind her glasses.

"Something like perseverance."

"Oh, really?"

"Well, patience as well, but I think perseverance is closer to fortitude."

"....."

Alisa told Hikaru, who let the words roll around in her mouth.

"Just as the Japanese people consider humility to be a virtue..... In Russia, there is an aspect of fortitude that is considered a virtue. The spirit of perseverance in the face of adversity may be a value unique to Russia, where the predicament is harsh."

"The predicament..."

So Hikaru apparently realized what Alisa was trying to say. Then Hikaru laughed softly and nodded toward Alisa.

"I like it."

"Me too! It's got a cool sound to it."

The two agreed with each other, and at once the atmosphere became one of adopting Alisa's idea. Sayaka and Nonoa also looked at each other and communicated with their gazes.

"Any other opinions?"

Everyone agreed with Sayaka's words in silence. One of them raised his voice a little hesitantly.

"Well, it's not that I'm against it, but... By the way, how do you say "Fortitude" in Russian?"

"Eh? Фортитьюд."

"Nesgibayemye.....? Uh, yeah... Fortitude then it is."

[T/L note: The "Nesgibayemye" here was Masachika trying to repeat what she said in Russian.]

As a result, the band name "Fortitude" was decided.



"The performance time for each group was 15 minutes. If we included self-introductions, three songs would be appropriate. The sheet music you gave us last time had three songs and one original."

Sayaka asked this, and Hikaru and Takeshi looked at each other. Then, Takeshi said with a little bit of a stutter.

"Oh, I don't mean to interrupt you, but that original song was written together with the old members, so I don't think it's right for us to play it."

"I see..... Well then, let's go with the three songs in that order."

"Yeah. I guess I'll have to think about practice time and all that."

Even as he said this, Hikaru's mouth oozed a slightly unconvinced air. Masachika was convinced that he really wanted to play their original song.

"I mean, if you want to do an original song, why don't you make a new one? We still have a month to go."

"A month is usually a good amount of time for me and Takeshi to write lyrics, but not so much.....to compose music."

Even when Masachika offered to help, Hikaru did not say, "Let's do it." Takeshi, too, looked as if he wanted to say something, but kept his mouth shut. Perhaps, too, Hikaru, as the one who got involved in the band activities, had some reservations about the women on the guest side, so to speak. But then an unexpected person spoke up.

"If you want to do original music, I think you should do it. I can help too. I want to make sure that everyone here is satisfied with what we are going to perform."

Hikaru's eyes widened when Alisa raised her voice. Masachika was also a bit surprised by his partner's unexpected aggressiveness.

Not me, but all of us, huh?.....

It is not about pursuing one's own ideals. Masachika was a little moved by the words.

"No, I'm glad you feel that way, Kujou-san, but as I said before....., the music is..."

"Then why don't you use Sayacchi's original song?"

Nonoa's unreserved dismissal of Hikaru's reservations drew the attention of Sayaka this time.

"Sayacchi, you wrote some original songs, didn't you?"

"Well, yes, but we only have the sheet music for.....guitar."

"Oh, Taniyama.....you can play guitar too?"

"As well as anyone else."

Sayaka said it without hesitation. In response, Nonoa looked at Hikaru with her usual unwilling half-lidded eyes.

"So, we've got some songs. I mean, the song selection itself was from the previous band, right? To be honest, some of the songs didn't suit Alisa's voice, so we should just start over."

"Wouldn't that be better?"

"Oh.....yeah."

"Yeah, that's true."

"If that's the case, why don't we just start all over again? Then the covers we play and the original we'll compose won't be that much different in terms of time and effort."

With aggressiveness shown by the girl's in the band, Takeshi and Hikaru also looked at each other before nodding their heads.

"Yeah, okay....., okay! Let's do it!"

"Oh! Taniyama-san. Do you have any sound files? I'd like to hear some of your original songs."

"For practice, I have.....some videos I took with my phone....."

"Oh, really? I want to listen to it!"

Hikaru said as he was motivated all at once and approached Sayaka with the same intensity. And then they all listened to a few songs——

"I'm not sure if it's my imagination or if it's just that.....everything sounds like anime songs."

"I mean, the titles of some of them are....."

"Don't go that far."

The boys communicated through eye contact with unnatural expressions on their faces.

"How do you like it? I'm proud to say that I'm pretty good."

On the other hand, Sayaka was strangely confident.

"That was amazing, oh my God~!"

Nonoa muttered vague adjectives, befitting of her gal image.

"I think it's a great song that clearly shows Taniyama's unique view of the world."

Alisa replied purely. As such, Sayaka's liking for Alisa went up dramatically.

"I thought the second song was particularly good."

"Me too... It's very good."

"Yeah, I thought that one was the best, too!"

"Yeah, yeah, it's rather calm."

"It was amazing~!"

Everyone was on board with Alisa's choice of song. Thus, the music for the performance was safely decided. Masachika then spoke up,

"Well then, for the original song, let's choose "Yumegen" written by Taniyama-san."

"Oh, it's called 'Dreamscape.'"

"It's..... Oh, I see."

About one person, Masachika had a feeling he wasn't safe in a sanctimonious way, but... He was not aware of it, so that's good.



Shit.....

The next day, Masachika was walking down the hallway with a fierce sense of urgency.

Quick..... I must hurry.....

His steps were a little unsteady and his vision was blurry and hazy. Still, he struggled to keep his feet moving forward. If he stopped even once, he would be finished. At that moment, he was sure that.....

If I don't, I'll seriously fall asleep standing up!!! I should be able to take a nap there without anyone noticing.

After lunch, Maria was heading to the student council office with a paper bag containing her new summer uniform in hand. Yesterday, there were so many people waiting in line that she decided, "Well, I'll just buy it tomorrow," and wore her old summer uniform to school today. Around her were students in short sleeves.

On the other hand, she was wearing a shirt, a jumper skirt, and a blazer, which made her want to say to herself, "Don't give a damn about global

warming." Even Alya had reached her limit in the morning alone. So she decided to buy a new uniform at the store during the morning break and change during the lunch break. But then the problem was finding a place to change. The changing rooms would be too personal, and the restrooms would be out of place for both the Student Council officers and Maria's aesthetic sense, so the first place on her list was the Student Council Room, where few other students came in and out and where the door was locked.

"Sorry to bother you."

Thinking that no one would be there, Maria called out to make sure and went inside. Then she saw a pair of shoes lying on the floor and a foot sticking out from the edge of the sofa.

"Woah, what a surprise....."

She let out an involuntary gasp, but the person lying on the couch did not move.

"....."

A little while later, Maria cautiously approached it. Then she sneaked a peek across the sofa and.....took a look.

"Yaaaahhh~, so cute!"

Skipping her guardedness, Maria gingerly crouched down in front of Masachika. Then, peering into his defenseless sleeping face, she placed both hands on her cheeks and let out a silent cry of "kyaaa."

"Hmmm ♡ Saa-kun, you sleepyhead..."

She looked like a mother watching over her toddler, and she let out a happy smile. Maria was born with a much stronger sense of motherhood and affection than others. She always had the desire to take care of, spoil, and adore the people she loved. Until now, this desire had mainly been directed at her younger sister, Alisa..... But Alisa was a more solid person than her older sister, and she was not the type of person who overflowed with emotions of spoiling her sister. Then now, her favorite person appeared, looking exhausted.

The sight of him completely waiting to be taken care of (from Maria's point of view) made Maria feel rather out of control. If it had been a bed or the floor instead of a sofa, she would have definitely slept with him or on his lap.

"Fufufufu~n, cute~!"

She had no intention of interfering between Masachika and Alisa, and she meant what she said when she told Masachika to put Alisa first. However, it was what it was. If someone you love was in front of you waiting to be taken care of, it was only natural that you should take care of them. It was bad enough that Alisa was not here.

Oh my God, Alya-chan, you never get the chance to support Kuze-kun when he's weak.....

After thinking about this, she realized that this is because Masachika wanted it that way. Masachika was resting here because he did not want Alisa to see him weak..... When Maria realized this, her love and desire to protect swelled up inside her.

Oh, Kuze-kun, you really are a boy..... Then I'll spoil Kuze-kun for Alya, too!

Maria, who had the great honor of taking Alisa's place, took a moment to peck Masachika on the cheek.

[T/L note: This isn't a kiss. She just pinched him.]

"Fufufu~♪ tsun tsun tsun, choo choo choo..."

She tickled Masachika's cheek with her fingertips, saw his eyebrows wiggle, and shook her head side to side. Heart marks were already flying all over her head.

Ha! I must capture this cute sleeping face on camera!

With that thought in mind, Maria started shooting a video in the corner of the room so as not to wake Masachika with the sound of the camera. Then, just like a cameraman who was trying to surprise Masachika when he wakes

up from his sleep, she quickly brought Masachika's face up close to the camera.

"I love you so much!"

With a whisper of agony, Maria pinched Masachika's cheek again. She enjoyed the smooth and soft feeling of Masachika's cheek as much as she could.

Ummm, what should I do from here?

Then she thought about how to take care of him. The sofa was a bottleneck. Since she couldn't sleep with him, she couldn't just stroke his head and sing lullabies.....

Oh, no, I'm already doing both, am I?...

Maria's eyes fluttered as she realized that she had unconsciously and gently stroked Masachika's head while humming a small lullaby. However, when she saw that he had become calm and relaxed, she smiled. Basically, Maria was quick to change her mind and does not care about details. The reason why Maria's eyes became calm was because someone else's cheeks were no longer pinched, but she doesn't care about the details!

"Alright, alright, have a good night~?"

Maria whispered softly as the lullaby came to an end. Then, suddenly changing the type of smile, she spoke to Masachika in a calm voice.

She then asked Masachika in a calm voice, "Kuze-kun, do you think.....I'm good-natured and self-sacrificing?"

Naturally, no answer came back. But Maria didn't seem bothered.

"Because I am....."

【Unyielding.】

Then, closing her mouth, Maria quietly said, "I don't think so."

Then, with a slightly sad, compassionate look in her eyes, Maria patted Masachika's head.

【I think it's going to be okay.】

【You see, you won't be able to stand being around Alya-chan now.】

When she told him this in a really small voice, Maria's lips pouted a little and she tickled Masachika's ear.

"That's why..... I'm not nice at all. You already know that, don't you?"

After saying this childishly for a change, Maria patted Masachika's head again with a gentle expression. Then, as if on a sudden impulse, she brushed Masachika's bangs and broke into a pout.

"Oh my god, your forehead is so cute~♡"

.....Maria was quick to switch her mood. She looked at Masachika's forehead with her loosened face again. As she did so, Maria felt like kissing him.

I want to kiss this cute forehead..... Oh, maybe on the cheek?

And then, unexpectedly, Alisa's face popped into her mind.

In her head, she made excuses to her sister, but as she watched Masachika's sleeping face, those excuses lost their shape. Then, Maria took a small breath, put her phone on the floor, and slowly moved her face closer to Masachika's sleeping face.

It isn't what it looks like, you know? Alya. It's more like kissing a child goodnight, or a kiss of affection, not a kiss of love.....

"(Alya-chan, it's your fault for not being here.....)"

And the moment their faces were close enough to feel each other's breath. Kon-kon-kon.

"!?"

A knocking sound echoed in the student council room.

".....? What are you doing?"

Visiting the student council room with a paper bag in her hand, Alisa knocked formally and opened the door. She then tilted her head at the sight of Maria, who seemed to be getting up with a great deal of energy.

"Ah, Alya-chan? No, Kuze-kun was sleeping, so I just watched him for a minute."

"...."

Alya frowned at her sister, who seemed to be in an unusually flustered state as she held the door open.

"Alya-chan, are you changing your clothes too?"

"I'm not sure. Yes, but....."

The first thing that came to her mind was that Maria was alone in a room with Masachika just now.

"I'm going to go change my uniform....." she said, her eyes flashing a half-smile.

"I'm going to change here too....."

"No, you can't do that if Masachika is there."

Alisa jitterily retorted at her sister, who had clearly said something outrageous with the intention of deceiving her about something, as if to say,

"I won't be fooled." However, Maria's reaction to this was beyond imagination.

"What? Why?"

"What?"

It was a genuine question, not a deception or a retraction. At least, that's how Alisa saw it.

"Kuze is sleeping so well, why don't you just lock the door and get dressed in a jiffy?"

"No, no, no, no, no!"

"Alya, shh."

"Uh."

She yelled out unintentionally, and Alisa hurriedly covered her mouth. She then looked at Masachika, but Masachika continued to sleep without moving.

".....Right? At this rate, I don't think he's going to wake up yet."

"No, but..."

"So is there anywhere else you could change?"

At Maria's question, Alisa was at a loss for words. Both Maria and Alisa had originally chosen the Student Council Room after much consideration. No other strong candidates would come to mind.

"It's all right.~ Just get dressed quickly and sneak out, that's it."

In the meantime, Maria locked the door from the inside, closed the window curtains just in case, put the paper bag on the table, and really started to change her clothes.

"Hey, hey..."

"Alya, hurry up or your lunch break will be over."

At Maria's words, Alya checked her watch and frowned when she realized that she only had a little more than ten minutes left of her lunch break. It was true that if she went to another place now to change her clothes, she wouldn't make it in time for her next class.

But.....

What if Masachika woke up while she was changing? Just thinking about it made Alisa's whole body hot like lamenting fire.

After all, let's give up getting dressed.....

Alisa decided to do so, but then it occurred to her. After changing here, she'll wake up Masachika. Then, when Masachika noticed that her clothes had changed, she could tell him, "I was just changing here." While imagining

the look on Masachika's face if she were to do that.... A sense of mischief began to well up in Alisa's chest.

It would be very amusing for Alisa to see Masachika, who was usually joking or aloof, get upset by her words and actions. Sometimes Masachika's surprisingly dependable demeanor would make her want to play tricks on him, but when he would see him blush like a child, it was so cute and endearing that she just had to play along. She wanted to tease him to no end, even if she had to use her femininity to the fullest.

I wonder how Masachika would react if I said, "I just changed my clothes here" ? Would he be shocked? Or would he make a face like "Heh, heh~" as best he could?

If he pretended to be okay, she would show him the uniform she had taken off. She might even let him touch it and say, "See, it's still warm, isn't it?" Just the thought of it made Alisa hot with shame, but more than that, she couldn't stop smiling. A tingle ran down her spine when she imagined Masachika being played with by her.

Oh, he was so cute then, too.....

A few days ago at the family restaurant, Alisa tickled Masachika's hand in that teasing manner. She had to leave it at a moderate pace because of the location, but today, she was more aggressive and...

"Oh, Alya!"

She then took off her blazer and was met with a slightly creepy look from Maria, who pulled her blazer off, and Alisa's expression tightened up. Then, she glared at Maria with a retort and quickly began to change her clothes before she could say anything more. Carefully, so as not to make a sound, she quickly took off her uniform. Then she took off her ribbon and shirt, and picked up her new uniform. A moment later.

「Let's go! Fly hiiiighhhhhh」

[T/L note: It's Masachika alarm clock, which is an anime song.]

Alisa's shoulders jumped at the sudden, intense shout voice, and she took down the uniform in her hands.

"!"



Masachika instantly jumped up at the familiar alarm anime song and reached for the source of the sound as a spinal reflex.

"Oh, ouch!"

He then slid off the couch with such force that he let out a small moan. And then, Masachika turned around at the sudden sound of a scream. And what he saw was bliss. There were two beautiful sisters wearing only socks and underwear. Alisa's large, rounded, taut buttocks, and her thin, narrow

waist, which seemed even more unreliable than her hips, were all exposed to him.

On the other hand, Maria's body was full of femininity, which was disproportionately vicious to her childish face. Alisa boasted a style so perfect it was hard to believe she was 15 years old, and Maria boasted a body line so voluptuous it is hard to believe she was 16. Both of their bodies were almost completely hidden from view. Even the underwear that covered their bodies with apologies seemed to be nothing more than an ornament to adorn their overly beautiful naked bodies.

".....?"

Masachika, still in a half-awake state, could not distinguish whether the scene was a dream or reality, and stared at them with his mouth hanging open.

"Hey, don't look at me!"

"Oh, um, it's a bit.....charming to be seen that much....."

However, Masachika's brain finally started moving again at their words with flushed cheeks. But the processing still couldn't keep up, and Masachika, unsure of himself, gave a half-smile and a thumbs-up.

"Don't worry! It's not much different from a bikini!"

Alisa, her eyes raised, grabbed the shirt hanging on the chair and threw it at him as hard as she could. Before he had time to avoid it, a light shock hit Masachika's face, blocking his vision. This is how it happened.

Alisa's body heat, transmitted gradually through the shirt covering her face. The smell of the girl's sweat and skin irritating his nostrils. The combination of various things has made Masachika's brain a little buggy, and here he expressed his honest impression.

"Oh, it smells good."

Immediately after, a mysterious force hit his face from behind his shirt, forcing Masachika's consciousness to shut down.

Chapter 7

I'm sorry, I'm guilty

"All right then, let's get started!"

After school, the chairman of the school festival committee announced the start of the first meeting. The members present were the student council officers, the former president and vice president, two representatives from each class, and the head of each activity. In addition, the chairs of the Public Morals Committee, the Beautification Committee, and the Health Committee were present as well.

The Discipline Committee was responsible for patrolling the campus on the day of the festival and during preparations, the Beautification Committee for decorating the entire campus, and the Health Committee for dealing with injuries and emergencies on the day of the festival.

In order to ensure all participants could cooperate together, the chairpersons of the respective committees attended the meetings. Or rather, since each class had its own program, the core members who work as the

school festival committee on the day of the festival are these three committees and the student council.

One committee member from each class was to manage the class presentations, while the other would help the committee. Of course, on the day of the festival, all committee members had to take breaks, so there was not much room to spare.

"This year, too, the festival will be held across two days. On the first day, the festival will be open to the public, and on the second day, it will be open to the general public to invite more outside participants. Usually, people get a little crazy on the second day, so please be careful."

The former student council president was a master of his craft, and the people gathered at the meeting listened to him with complete trust and confidence.

"On the second day of the event prizes would be more luxurious, but in the past, there was a coffee shop project that suddenly increased the exposure of the girls by 20% on the second day.....so we will take care of that."

"Wait a minute."

"Chairman, is it possible for men to be more revealing!?"

"Well, yes, as long as it's not too much to look at."

"Is it possible?"

"Oh, if only they are as buff as Touya."

"Me?"

"Mm-hmm. Look at this..... Good, isn't he very muscular?"

The former president teased the current president with his juniors, and they all burst into laughter. Except for one person.....

"Please wait! I can't agree to make a spectacle of the muscles I've nurtured in Touya!"

"Oh, oh, calm down, Sarashina."

"If you insist on doing it, you'll have to defeat me first!"

"Muri muri muri."

"They love~you."

"Don't make fun of me, Vice-Chairman..."

Like that, the meeting proceeded peacefully from beginning to end, with light self-introductions by the committee representatives and the determination for their respective committees. The roles of the Student Council officers were automatically determined by their positions, so for Masachika and the others, it was no different from the contact information.

"This year, as in previous years, we are going to give out two tickets, one for parents and one for guests. Any opinions?"

"It's nothing new, but paper tickets in this day and age?"

"We can't afford anything more than that!"

"Well, you're right..... But it would be easy to copy such a thing if you wanted to....."

"No student wants to go to that trouble just to invite a bunch of friends. It seems that those who don't have enough invitation tickets get them from those who have some left over."

"That's true."

As Masachika was listening to the chairperson of the executive committee, a sample admission ticket was passed from Maria to him.

"(Here, Saa-kun.)"

"(Thank you.)"

Masachika looked at Maria's face as he thanked her in a whisper, but her expression was the same as usual and she didn't seem to be concerned about anything, especially about what happened at the lunch break. And.....about what happened during the summer break.

Seriously, nothing's going to change.

Since their reunion at the park during the summer vacation, Maria had maintained the same attitude as before, as she had declared. That was what

Masachika would have wanted, but if nothing had changed so far..... He was a little worried about whether that confession was real or not.

"What's wrong?"

"(Oh, no no no, it's nothing.....)"

"(Oh, maybe it's.....)"

With a look of surprise on her face, Maria put her hand to the side of her mouth and put her face close to Masachika's ear.

"Did I just remind you of lunchtime?"

"!?"

"(You're so naughty.)"

A giggle of embarrassment blew into his ear, sending a shiver down Masachika's spine.

Huh? Masha-san is a little devil? Is she a little devil?

Masachika was confused as the chibi angel Masha-san became the chibi devil Masha-san in his head.

"From now on, when you are tired, you can count on me, okay? I will take care of you."

Huh? Are you an angel? No, you are a demon inviting human beings to their downfall? Ha! Are you the devil in the skin of an angel?

With his brain sweetly paralyzed by Maria's whisper in his ear, Masachika's mind was whirling with idiotic thoughts. Then, a poke on his opposite side brought Masachika back to himself.

He looked over and saw Alisa staring at him with a sideways glance. Maria, smiling a little at this, quickly pulled her body away from Masachika.

Ahhh, it's been a while since I've felt the stinging sensation of icicles...

Masachika's eyes became a little distant as he was pierced by a cold stare from right beside him.

Was Alisa's gaze cold because of his close proximity to Maria, or is she still reeling from the lunch break? Probably both. Incidentally, Masachika woke up in the infirmary at the end of fifth period after that. It was difficult to determine whether the reason he was passed out in bed was due to Alisa's mysterious blow or simply due to lack of sleep.

Admission tickets, you know~..... I don't have anyone to give it to, let alone a surplus...I think I'll give them to Takeshi again this year...

Thinking about this in an escapist way, he turned the sample over to Alisa, trying not to look at her. Then, an epiphany struck Masachika's brain.

Wait a minute. If I use this, I can call up that guy from.....can't I?

Masachika found a solution to a problem that has been nagging at him for the past few days, and he immersed himself in his own thoughts.

"?"

Alisa tilted her head at her partner, who suddenly began to ponder something with a difficult expression on his face. But Masachika was not at all concerned and made no sign of noticing her reaction. In the meantime, the meeting was coming to an end.

"Ah yes. As usual, the members from the Raikokai will be here on the afternoon of the second day, so..... Touya and Sarashina, do your best to deal with them."

"Yes."

"Ah, yes."

"So that's it then? Does anyone have any last words? Then submit your proposals and come up with a theme for the festival before the next meeting! That's all! Thank you for your hard work!"

The rest returned their greetings to the declaration, and the first meeting concluded.

We were more harmonious than I thought we would be.

To be honest, Alisa had expected a more tense meeting, but she relaxed her shoulders as she watched the representatives of each class and heads of each department as they filed out of the room.

"Hi, Kuze-kun, Suou-san. Long time no see."

"Oh, Ka.....Kaji-senpai. It's been a while, hasn't it?"

"Well, we've seen each other from time to time, but it's probably been a while since we've talked like this."

"Right."

Right next to her, Masachika and Yuki were having a friendly conversation with a soft-spoken, bespectacled male student. As former middle school student body president and vice president respectively, they seem to have many connections leading to situations like this.

"Let me introduce you to someone. I'd like you to meet my new partner, Kimishima."

"Oh, well, I'm.....Kujo's new partner."

"Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you....."

"I am Kaji, the chairman of the Public Discipline Committee. It's nice to meet you too..... I actually knew who you were, but it feels a little strange to be actually introduced in this way. Oh no, I don't mean that in a bad way."

"Haha, well, you're right~"

The Public Discipline Committee Chairman's gaze turned to Alisa for a moment. Immediately, his interest returned to Masachika and Yuki, and the three of them began conversing again. Alisa, who did not have the social ability to interrupt and join the conversation, had no choice but to silently observe.

"All I could do was just observe the conversation."

It had been like this since before the meeting started. Alisa could only watch Masachika as he talked comfortably with people she did not know. As she did so, a dark, feverish feeling slowly began to swirl within Alisa.

Oh, no.....this feeling.

Alisa frowned a little at the fuzzy feeling swirling in her chest. Alisa was aware of what this unfamiliar feeling was. This was possessiveness. She didn't want him to be friends with other people like that. She wanted him to care about her more than anybody else. She wanted him to put her first because she puts him first. It was such a selfish and self-indulgent feeling. She knew it was a selfish and self-indulgent feeling. The fact is that Masachika and her were nothing more than friends. Alisa was just heavy

weight, and she was sure that Masachika just harbored normal feelings towards her as a friend.....

But! You could have at least treated me a little more differently! And we went on a date. I...I...I even kissed you! And you even looked at me in my underwear! I'm practically married to you!

Even so, she was confronted with the reality that she was only one of many friends to Masachika. Even though they were partners in the campaign, what was special to Alisa was not so special to Masachika. And for many people, the relationship between Masachika and Yuki was still special.....

"Yes!"

Alisa bit her lower lip as she realized this. The two are currently not paired, and everyone who had talked to Masachika and Yuki so far has wondered why they were not paired together. That's how special they are, and that's why they were recognized as an ideal pair, as Sayaka once tearfully exclaimed.

I am.....

Until now, many people, upon hearing that Alisa and Masachika were paired together, have asked, "Why, Kuze?"

"You don't match Kujou-san, do you?" They would say.

But Alisa understood what was really going on. And she thought the people here knew it too. It was not that Masachika was not a good match for her, but that Alisa herself was not a good match for Masachika.

I am.....

A sense of helplessness and frustration enveloped Alisa's entire body. At the same time, a strong sense of defeat reared her head.

I've made up my mind.

She couldn't go on like this. Her pride will not allow her to remain as a portable shrine carried by Masachika.

I will make him admit it.....!

In doing so, Alisa secretly made a new vow to everyone present that she was the right partner for Masachika.



"Oh my."

Two days later, after finishing her business in the staff room, Alisa returned to the student council office and met a female student in front of the student council office.

"You must be Alisa Kujou. Is this the first time we've spoken?"

Alisa recalled the meeting the day before yesterday when a senior spoke to her, swaying her hair which was honey-colored in a ringlet roll hairstyle.

[T/L note: Same character from V4.5 C8. Basically her appearance (and even the way she speaks) is like a carbon copy of Beatrice from Re:Zero.]

"Nice to meet you..... I believe you're the head of the women's kendo club....."

"Oh, I forgot to tell you my name..... Nice to meet you, my name is Sumire Kiryuin."

"!"

That name sounded familiar. A few months ago, she heard it from Masachika himself——

"Were you one of the candidates for vice-president at the middle school.....?"

"Oh, did Kuze-san tell you about me?"

"Yes."

"Yes, I am indeed a friend of Suou-san and Kuze-san. I was once a competitor with both of them in the election campaign."

The Kiryuin pair. The pair of Yusho and Sumire was unique in that they were cousins with a one-year age difference. Yusho was the son of the Chairman of the Kiryuin Group. The fact that he was the son of the chairman and Sumire was the daughter of the vice-chairman may have had an influence, as it was Yusho who was the candidate for the chairman of the group.

And Sumire, although a year older than Yusho, was his partner in the election campaign. She used to be the most popular female candidate in the school.

But, however.....

"I heard that you conceded your campaign after losing in a debate with Taniyama-san."

"Well, yes, I suppose so. But that is why I am very interested in you, who beat Taniyama-san in a debate."

She looked at Alisa with a faint smile as if to judge her. Alisa also looked back at her with an imposing gaze. The first few seconds passed, Sumire suddenly gave a small smile and quickly looked away.

"I'm sure we're both busy," she said. "Let's get to work for the time being."

She then knocked on the door of the student council room and entered.

"Excuse me."

Then Masachika, who happened to be the only one left, looked up and made a face that said, "Huh?"

"Violet, isn't it?"

"It's Sumire, desuwa!"

[T/L note: Her real name is apparently "Violet." She just "calls herself 'Sumire' to conform to the people around her." From the words of Chisaki in V4.5 C8.]

A sharp denial without a pause. Alisa blinked at the change in attitude from the calm demeanor she had witnessed earlier.

"My God, that's the first thing you say to me when you see me.....?"

She then walked past while exhaling, mumbling and complaining, and gave an earful to Masachika.

"Um, who's Violet?"

"Hmm? Her real name is Violet."

".....That's not so bad."

It was a terrific name. Like Alisa, she had heard that one of her parents was foreign, but even so, it was quite impressive. That's what Alisa thinks too. But——

"(I don't think it's a good idea to mess with a name the other person doesn't like)."

"Oh~..... That's right."

He looked at Alisa's straightforward face and replied with that line. Following that, as Alisa was looking at him.....

"You're so familiar.....with me, like we're best friends....."

There was Violet-senpai, who was somewhat telepathic while complaining. Alisa opened her mouth to express her unexpected reaction.

"She actually likes the name."

"I see."

"Oh, so you wouldn't mind if I called you Alya? Would you be happy?."

"I won't be happy!"

Alisa quickly denied it and glared at her ringlet roll hairstyle.

"Are you sure? The only ones I let call me by that name are those I've truly opened my heart to. It's not a name that you can easily obtain!"

"I see. I beg your pardon, Violet-senpai."

"I told you to not call me that!"

"I wonder, do you turn into Violet when you evolve?....."

Sumire stared at Masachika with a slightly peculiar protest, but it was not quite convincing enough.

"Oh, my God. You're still the same old....."

Sumire exhaled in resignation and placed the proposal in front of Masachika, who did not seem at all perturbed.

"It's a project of the women's kendo club."

"Thank you very much... I mean... This is..."

Alisa, too, looked down at the proposal when Masachika seemed at a loss for words.

"The play.....? Heh."

Alisa raised her eyebrows at this unusual project for the kendo club. However, after reading the details, she was at a loss for words, as was Masachika. The play itself was what you would call a sword play. It was said that female kendo club members dressed as men spar each other in a spectacular manner on stage. That part was fine. There are safety considerations and other things to be taken into account, but it wasn't a big deal. The problem was.....

"We have more members from the public morals committee than in our women's kendo club. This is the right project for us, isn't it?"

"Well.....that's right."

Violet proudly puffed out her chest. What was written there was that she was going to make rounds as a member of the public morals committee while wearing the stage costume, as well as to advertise her project.

".....It is going to be one hell of a spectacle."

"I'm sure there will be a lot of people in cosplay that day..... Well, it's a little late for that, but.....I'll leave this with you for now. We'll see if it's a good idea or not at the next meeting. Then, see you at the next meeting."

She bowed gracefully at the door, glanced at Alisa, and left the student council room. Masachika watched her go and let out a small sigh.

"Oh dear..... We have a series of pretty difficult projects in a row now."

"A series of difficult projects. What's going on?"

"Yeah. I'm going to have to ask you about this one..."

"According to the head of the quiz show, it's a groundbreaking project.....that adds an element of campaigning to the good old quiz show. I don't know the details myself."

"Why? An ambiguous proposal like this won't be accepted, will it?"

"No, that's..... If I told you the details, it would be a spoiler or something. In order to prevent any countermeasures in advance, the

President, Executive Committee Chairman and Vice-President are the only ones who will be notified of the details."

"——So, what's the opinion of the Chairman?"

"Well, he said that there are no problems with the planning and that he personally thinks it will be quite interesting."

Then he cowered his shoulders and looked up at Alisa recently.

"But... Whatever it is, if the parties to the project don't agree to it, that's the end of it. Hey, Alisa, how about your opinion?"

"I have no problem with that."

Masachika's eyes widened in surprise at Alisa's immediate response.

"Are you sure? Personally, I think it's not a good idea to rank two people in such an irregular way."

"Oh, you think you're going to lose?"

"No, that's not what I meant....."

Slurring his words a bit, Masachika collected his thoughts with his eyes downcast, then spoke slowly.

".....This is the kind of thing that has happened in election campaigns before. Individuals or groups who are in favor of a particular candidate, with

the intention of bringing down the opposing candidate, set up some kind of playing field."

For example, a soccer team might play rough during a physical education class and make the students look ugly in front of their classmates. Or a flower arrangement club might have a beginner flower arranger put flowers on display for the class to experience the art of flower arrangement, and then display them in a conspicuous place to embarrass the classmates.

"It's just so outrageous....."

"No, this one is particularly blatant and vicious, though, isn't it? But how can we be sure that this project won't be one of those, too?"

Masachika then waved the Quiz Lab's proposal in a flippant manner.

"Maybe the quiz lab is pushing Yuki, and they're playing the answers to the questions to Yuki in advance."

"No way....."

It's not impossible. Or, the other candidates may have planned it so that Yuki and Alya would be eliminated together, but when it starts, it would be a huge mud-slinging match because of all the hard questions.

"....."

Alisa thought about Masachika's intuition for a while, considered this possibility, and then swallowed it.

"But the chairman of the board, after reviewing the details of the project, decided there was no problem, didn't he?"

"Well, yes, but....."

"I'm sure it's fine then. Even if there is some underlying agenda, we can just find it out and break it down"

Masachika blinked at Alisa's ever more assertive attitude. Strange as it may seem to Masachika, this project was a unique opportunity for Alisa. Whatever the form, it was an opportunity for Alisa to confront Yuki directly, something she would not expect. And it would be at a school festival, where many students would be able to see the showdown.

If I can win without Masachika's help here, everyone will surely recognize me.

If not, it would certainly give her confidence. As long as she has that, she would be fine. As long as it's there——

I will be able to stand out in the crowd with my chest out proudly.

Alisa's fighting spirit was boiling over with a vow in her heart. Masachika lowered his eyebrows a little at the sight of her and looked down at the proposal.



"So, what are you up to?"

"Greetings from out of the blue, onui-chan."



After returning home, Masachika greeted his sister, who was relaxing in the living room. Yuki returned it with a laugh and then looked at Masachika intently.

"If anything, I'm thinking that you're up to something~"

"....."

They stared at each other silently, but no matter how much understanding they had for each other, it was difficult for even these two siblings to see the true meaning of their poker faces when they were really serious. Yuki exhaled, rummaged through her bag, and pulled out something.

"All right, all right. I wouldn't say it's free either."

Yuki then snapped the USB memory stick onto the table.

"What's this?"

"This? I call it an X-file..... Whatever it is, I'll destroy it now."

"Destroy it.....? Are you sure? What is the most important data about Alya-san that you have in here?"

Masachika replied calmly to Yuki with a villainous smile with one eye wide open.

"It's probably a swimsuit picture anyway."

"How'd you know?"

"You said you'd only give the picture to the person in question, but I know you're going to claim picture rights or something!"

[T/L note: Reference to an event which took place in V4, where Yuki wanted to take a group photo during the student council summer camp, but Alya was uncomfortable with taking a picture while in a swimsuit.]

"You're right on the money! That's it anyway! I didn't say I would give you the images. Damn, what an insight..... I lost. Here, this USB is yours."

"No, no, no, I don't need it."

"What? That's not enough? Hmph, you greedy little..... I have no choice, let's add Masha's photos here."

"Don't add on to it on your own."

"The protagonist's 'What?' is answered with 'Is it still too little.....?'"

"Are you a merchant?"

"That's a long tsukkomi. No, I understand."

[T/L note: Tsukkomi is an angry guy. Often used to describe a Japanese anime character who is frustrated, under appreciated, or just plain ticked off. They attempt to keep a calm facade, only to be thwarted by someone, or something, they find irritating. Often resulting in violent actions.]

After replying, Yuki smiled like a villain again.

"So what do you say? If you're honest with me, I'll give you these two USB drives."

"Seriously, don't carry that stuff on a USB."

"Don't worry, I've locked it up with a password just in case. Here's a hint: it's my birthday."

"What a hint."

"Come on, come on, just be a little more honest with me. All it takes is a little honesty, and you can get those two in those big, fat, pudgy, booby booby swimsuit pictures, okay?"

"That onomatopoeia is so old-fashioned."

"Then they'll be all chubby and yummy and boing-boing-boing."

"That's graphic!"

"Busty."

"Not happening!"

Masachika shouted back at Yuki, who was staring at her brother's lower body, with a sigh and a straight face. Then Masachika let out another sigh and slid two USBs toward Yuki.

"Hey, man. Don't use Alya as a bargaining chip, and don't use Masha, who has a boyfriend, as a bargaining chip either."

".....'Who has a boyfriend' my ass."

Yuki's voice leaked out meaningfully at Masachika's words.

".....What the hell?"

"No..... You know, Masha? Does she really have a boyfriend?"

Masachika's heart jumped for a moment, but Masachika, who had somehow expected to be asked that, raised one hand with a blank expression on his face.

"Why?"

"Well, I have a lot of friends. I've talked to some of Masha's friends, but none of them.....know what Masha's boyfriend looks like. I've never met him, let alone seen a picture of him."

"Hmmm~"

"I heard that the only reason why people think he looks Russian is because his name sounds Russian? It's kind of vague.So I wondered if he was her real boyfriend."

"I see. Well..... It's possible she's saying she has a boyfriend to ward off other guys. But anyway, it's none of our business..... I mean, even if Masha doesn't have a boyfriend, you can't just give her a picture of her swimsuit. No, that goes for Alya too!"

"Tch, you weren't fooled."

When Yuki reluctantly stuffed the USBs back into her pocket, Masachika sighed in a show of disdain.

".....Well, screw it. Even if you were up to something, all we have to do is find out what you're up to and use it against you."

"I'm the one who should be saying that..... Well, for now, am I correct in assuming that onii-chan is not setting anything up regarding this project?"

"Ah. It's up to you whether you trust me or not."

"Hmm~.....I'm not going to play any tricks on you this time, okay? I don't care if it's an academic exam, and if it's a quiz, I don't feel like I can lose to Alya. We'll fight like normal and win like normal."

"I hope that's what you really mean..... Because Alya is going to take you head-on, as she should."

Thinking back on his partner, who seemed more enthusiastic than ever, Masachika lightly covered his shoulders.

"What do you want, my dear brother?"

"No....."

After slurring his words a bit, Masachika reconsidered if it was not enough to deceive and confide his mild concerns.

"I don~t know, but Alya seems to be in something of a hurry these days..... I wish she could tone it down a little though."

It was true that it was Masachika who encouraged her to develop her leadership skills. But recently, he felt that Alisa was getting worked up over it, or was always on her toes. And.....for some reason, he also felt a bit distant from her.

I don't know, I feel like there's a line being drawn.....

Masachika scratched his head, adding, "She's so serious," though he was not quite sure how to explain Alya's recent behavior. Staring at him, Yuki slowly stroked her chin.

"Onii-chan..... Isn't that what it's called? The arrogance of the possessor."

"What is it?"

Suddenly, Masachika's eyebrows furrowed at the unfamiliar point of view. In response, Yuki's expression suddenly relaxed and she said in a gentle tone while looking a little far away.

"Onii-chan..... Does Masha lift her boobs when she washes herself in the bath?"

"Wh-What?"

Masachika dropped his mouth half open in response to that absurd statement. Yuki, however, did not seem bothered and continued with a somewhat melancholic expression on her face.

"Because of the size of her boobs, her under boob would sit on top of her abdomen and.....the line at the base of her boobs would get steamy and sweaty."

Suddenly, Yuki suddenly lifted her hand and hit the table with a thump. Then, as if trying to hold something back, she screamed with all her might, keeping her face down.

No, no, no, no! Boobs overlapping on her abdomen? What is this, some kind of a joke?

"To understand, I would need to have big boobs. I mean, I don't get it! It's like how pudding on a plate doesn't have a shadow, but if it was Daifuku, it would have a shadow!"

[T/L note: Daifukumochi, or daifuku, is a wagashi, consisting of a small round mochi stuffed with a sweet filling, most commonly anko. Daifuku is a popular wagashi in Japan and is often served with green tea. It comes in many varieties. The most common are white, pale green, or pale pink-colored mochi filled with anko. She's using the size comparison of pudding to Daifuku here to convey how big Masha's boobs are.]

After shouting that much with all her might, Yuki looked up with a look of satisfaction on her face.

"Like this, those who have desirable characteristics unintentionally hurt and punish those who do not....."

"Was that crap really necessary? I mean, haven't you been making so many dirty jokes recently?"

"It's okay for me to make dirty jokes, I'm still in my adolescence."

"Don't make it sound like you're speaking wisdom. Also you're more of a jelly at best than pudding."

"In what world is jelly thin? You mean the ones sold in summer festivals despite being so expensive?"

"Yuki-sama, I also love Jell-O."

"Shut up, you little brat. I'm going to rub it in your face."

".....Go ahead."

"Woo~hoo! Ayano!"

Yuki immediately jumped into Ayano's chest and enjoyed the feeling of her chest with her hands and face. Seeing this yuri scene, Masachika thought.

There you are, Ayano.

There were shoes in the doorway, but he had not been aware of their presence until just now. As he was secretly shuddering at Ayano's only increasing stealth, Yuki, who had her face buried in her chest, glanced over at him.

"Well, that's why..... You know, onii-chan may be hunting down Alya-san without even realizing it. I'm just saying."

"Huh.....?"

At Yuki's words, Masachika responded indistinctly and thought a little.

Am I pushing Alya too hard? Was the band too much for her? No, that's not what she's talking about.

That is not what he thought, but something about Masachika was making Alisa impatient. But even if he thought of it that way, he still had no idea what it was. To begin with, he couldn't think of anything that Alisa didn't have that he did.

Well, I have a lot of talent for nothing...and maybe my sense of comic relief? But it's the same for Yuki, too..... If anything, it's Yuki who's showing more communicative abilities at school than me, right?

Masachika could understand being pressured by Yuki, a potential opponent, but he could not understand being pressured by him, himself. After Yuki and Ayano left, he continued to think about it, but he could not come up with an answer.

"Hmm?"

As Masachika was about to take a bath, he casually stuck his hand into the pocket of his short pants. Noticing that something was in there, Masachika took it out. And——

"That girl....."

Masachika frowned when he realized that it was the USB flash drive that seemed to contain an image of Alisa's in her swimsuit.

"I told you to take it home....."

He wondered when it was put in his pocket.....and decided he had too many things on his mind right now and decided against thinking about it. With a single sigh, Masachika took it in his hand and headed for his room. He then placed the USB memory stick on his desk.

"Really..... I mean, why am I naturally starting up my computer right now?"

Masachika sat down in his chair and started up his laptop as if it were a natural matter of course, and with a straight face, he tutted at himself. But that didn't stop him.

"Oh, come on, seriously? How dare you try to plug in a USB stick so naturally, my hand."

His left hand stopped the right hand from grabbing the USB memory stick as it was about to be inserted into the port. However, it was obvious that his dominant hand had more strength. Gradually, gradually, the USB device moved closer and closer to the port.

Wait! Be calm! What you have here are images that Alya did not want others to see! It's the worst human behavior to look at them without permission!

And that's when reason spoke up in Masachika's mind and his left hand tightened.

"Noooooooooooo!"

Masachika gritted his teeth and tried to push back his right hand holding the USB device. Then, this time, Masachika's desires spoke up.

No, to begin with, when the picture in here was taken, I was in the vicinity of it. What's the problem with seeing the scene later when I had witnessed it in the first place?

Masachika's desires made his left hand relax a little.

Even so! If she says she doesn't want to be seen, then I should respect her wishes! But isn't that the same for the chairman? How do I know he doesn't want me to see it? In the first place, I even saw her in her underwear the other day. It's a little late for that, don't you think? No, no, no.

Masachika's desire and his rationality were in fierce battle with each other. At the end of it all, he finally found a compromise.

For now, let's think about it after plugging in the USB.

Yuki said that the contents were locked with a password. He couldn't just plug it in and immediately see the image. Then, he should think about it only after inserting it for the time being, because his hand was getting tired. That's what he said. So, Masachika plugged the USB into the device for the first time. And then——

"Nope!"

The moment the PC recognized the USB memory device, the password input screen that he had expected did not open, and the contents were immediately displayed. Suddenly, Masachika could not turn away.

".....Huh?"

Masachika let out a doubtful voice. Because all of the image files displayed in a row were all the same color.

"What the hell is this? Is the data corrupted?"

Masachika scrolled through the folders with a purely questioning mind. Then, at the end of the cluster of all-white image files, he found a text file. The title of the file was "D for the brother who has given in to his desires."

[T/L note: “D” as in the grade D.]

"..."

Masachika silently opened the text file. It read.....

「These are images of Alisa, who is so pale that her whites have become washed out.」

"I don't give a shit!"

Masachika clicked his tongue violently and closed his laptop with a bang. Then he stormed wildly to the bed and dived into his pillows.

"Ahhhhh ~~~~~"

He was caught red-handed. He had, somehow, almost given into lust. The mixture of all these things made Masachika twist his body violently. After that, he managed to spend 40 minutes and finally succeeded in cooling his head down, but by the time he returned to his senses.....the bath he had heated had cooled down.

Chapter 8

That's Why Men Blush...

"♪~~~"

After a discussion in the classroom, the song list for the school festival live performance was decided, and band practice was off to a serious start. Today, as usual, the five members booked the music room for a session.

As expected from Alya. She can already sing this smoothly.

While listening to their performance, Masachika was once again impressed by Alisa's hard work ethic. It was only three days ago that the songs were decided, of which Alisa had never heard before. How much time had she spent listening to and singing? Alisa's voice was rarely out of tune, and in fact, she had reached the point where she was able to add emotional effect to the song. Masachika was a bit overwhelmed by Alisa's clear and beautiful voice, which also sometimes had a sense of awesomeness. But on the other hand.....

"Oh, I'm sorry! My mistake!"

Some members were not able to keep up with Alisa's perfection. Takeshi made mistakes frequently, resulting in stopping and restarting the performance time and time again.

"Seriously, I'm sorryCan we have another go for now?"

"Shall we start with "Until now~" then?"

Under Sayaka's suggestion, the performance resumed. However——

"Oh, shit! I'm so sorry!"

Once again, Takeshi made a mistake and the performance stopped. It could simply be attributed to his lack of practice. But considering that this was Takeshi's first time playing this piece, it would be harsh to blame him. And that was not the only reason. It was also the fact that Takeshi was performing with members who he had not yet deepened their friendship with. Moreover, Alisa and Nonoa were two of the most beautiful girls in the school, and Sayaka was somewhat difficult to get to know. That alone would have been enough to put him off, and then adding the fact that.....

Ah~..... Alya is starting to look annoyed.....

Alisa, at the head of the band, was exerting silent pressure. It was not hard to understand how she felt. Alisa, as a beginner, had made it this far, and Takeshi, who had experience in a band was the one who was lacking in

quality. Even if Alisa was not a perfectionist, it was understandable that she would be irritated.

But then, Takeshi would become more and more demoralized....Well, it's better that I don't say it out loud. It can't be helped.

That's when Masachika thought:

I guess I should step in as their manager.

"Maruyama-kun, don't you think it would be better to let us go through it once without worrying about any mistakes? This is the first time we are playing together after all. So for today, let's just try to figure out which parts are prone to mistakes."

Masachika's eyes widened at the unexpected words that came out of Alisa's mouth. Takeshi blinked for a moment as if he didn't understand what was being said, and then he hurriedly raised his voice.

"Oh, thank you. No, seriously, I'm sorry. I should have practiced a little more."

"Well, make sure it's perfect by next time, okay?"

"Yeah, I'll do my best....."

"I'm just kidding."

Saying this, Alisa gave a small laugh. After opening his mouth as if momentarily taken aback by her smile, Takeshi slapped his cheeks to get into the mood.

"Yes! Let's start from the beginning again!"

".....Well then, let's go from the beginning."

Then Sayaka looked at Hikaru, signaling him to click his drumsticks, and the performance resumed. There were still some minor mistakes, but Masachika could see Takeshi's shoulders, ...and Hikaru's, looked more relaxed than before. The part that Takeshi had missed so many times was easily cleared this time, and he played through to the end without any change. When the song ended with Alisa's long tones and Takeshi's guitar leaving a final lingering impression, Masachika's applause echoed in the silence.

"Oh~ that was good. I was so moved by it that I cheered without realizing."

Masachika's genuine compliment was replied with a smile from Alisa.

"Yeah..... I know there's still a lot of room for improvement, but that felt good."

At these words, Takeshi and Hikaru smiled at the same time.

"Oh, that felt good to me too! But I still made some minor mistakes, I'm sorry!"

"Ha, I can't criticize the others either... I mean, Taniyama-san and Miyamae-san are very consistent, aren't they? They're a whole lot better than us members of the light music club."

"Oh~. To tell you the truth, this song is not that difficult to play on the keyboard. There is no solo."

After a brief discussion about each other's performance, Takeshi turned to Alisa.

"But still, Kujou-san is really amazing. She sings so well! I'm sorry I'm such a shitty guitar player!"

"I don't play an instrument, so I don't know how hard it is for you and Maruyama-kun..... But even so, I can kind of understand how hard it must be, so don't worry about it, okay?"

At Alisa's words, Takeshi scratched his head with a shy face, completely relaxed. He then continued practicing with a more enthusiastic look on his face. Masachika was completely impressed as he watched this scene.

Alya, that's great. You didn't need my follow-up.

Masachika never expected that Alisa would not only encourage Takeshi on her own initiative, and she even made a joke to break the tense atmosphere. What kind of change of heart did she experience? It was hard to imagine considering Alisa used to be very bad at working with others.

Through student council activities...I guess that means Alya has grown too.

Masachika's intention was to have Alisa get used to being a team player through this band activity before the work of the school festival committee got into full swing. He was also hoping that she would learn some leadership skills..... The mistakes made when playing today had a positive overall effect.

If she keeps this up, she'll do well on the school festival committee, too.

Takeshi was strumming his guitar in his usual groove, while Hikaru smiled while telling him to calm down. Nonoa was a little more excited than usual, and Sayaka seemed to be getting into it as well. And then there was Alisa, who was singing happily with a calm expression on her face. It was a much more band-like scene than Masachika had imagined. However, he was a little concerned about——

Alya.... Isn't she somehow kinder to Takeshi than she is to me?

That was the case.

Huh~? Isn't that strange? Your expressions seem to be calmer than when you're with me~?

It was probably not his imagination. But if you wonder why her expression was usually moody when she was beside Masachika.....

.....Yeah, I guess it's my fault.

Masachika pursed his lips as he realized that this was the only cause of his own words and actions.

I need to be a little more.....nice to Alya.

As he watched the five members and their performance, Masachika secretly reflected on his own performance.



"Tasting?"

"Yeah, could you do me a favor?"

After school the following week. Masachika, in the midst of his work as a member of the school festival committee, came to check on his class during his spare time. There, the class president and executive committee member asked him to taste the drinks to be served at the school festival. Many students in Masachika's class were unable to participate in class activities due to student council or club activities, so after some discussion, they decided to put on a less complicated event. The name of the event was "Isekai Cafe," and the founder behind such an idea was Masachika, in case you were wondering. This project was inspired by the collaboration café that he and Sayaka had recently visited. The concept was to have classmates dress up in otherworldly fantasy-like outfits and serve drinks such as potions and elixirs, which were standard beverages in fantasy worlds.

However, it was only drinks that were to be served. There was no time-consuming food, and the drinks were simply made from a combination of ready-made drinks. At this school, it was common to serve authentic tea and coffee at school festivals, but with this, all you have to do is mix and prepare a large quantity in advance and pour it into paper cups! It was as easy as that.

Cosplay was also generally acceptable, as long as you wore a wizard-like robe and a tri-cornered hat over your school uniform and claimed that you were a student at a magic academy mixing magic potions. Those who wanted to do more serious cosplay were also free to do so. Well, it looked like his classmates were making up an important drink today...

"We used a lot of different drinks that even if you're trying to make it in small quantities, if you mix a few things together it naturally makes a large final product."

"Well, I guess so....."

On the table, there were a number of paper cups lined up that could only be assumed to have been made due to getting too carried away.

No, this one can't even be considered a drink anymore.

Masachika twitched at the mysterious red but floating product that looked like some kind of sludge. Although this whole thing was his idea, he

wanted to say that the person who made such a product should be responsible for testing it properly.

".....I mean, I thought we were only supposed to combine drinks? There are obviously a few solid objects in this drink....."

"Oh, yeah~ that's right. No, I thought it might not be innovative enough to use only drinks, so I tried using some seasonings as well."

".....For example?"

"Let's see..... Gochujang, harissa?"

[T/L note: Harissa is a chili sauce common in Mediterranean countries, gochujang is a common chili paste from Korea.]

The class president slurred his words as he looked away. His classmates around him looked away as well, looking subtly guilty.

".....Well, if you're doing it on a budget, I don't think it's a big deal."

"Well, then, I'll let you sample a little of this."

The next drink had a color that was grayish-brownish and a bit iffy, but there were no solids floating around. There is no particularly strange odor, so it probably does not taste terrible. Masachika thought.

"Oh....."

Masachika looked up when the class president let out an unintentional sound. Then, the other classmates also looked up with the same "ah....." look on their faces.

".....What?"

"No, nothing....."

"Well then....."

"Ah....."

"No, so what?"

When he tried to take a drink, the class president again looked as if to say "Ah, that drink...", and Masachika raised his eyebrows. But again, no one said anything. Masachika looked at the liquid in his hand again and took a sip.

Yeah.....? Hey, what's this drink?

The basic base was vegetable juice-like.....but he could also taste the flavor of tea leaves somewhere, and some kind of cacao-like aroma. There are probably a lot of things mixed in there, but Masachika wasn't sure of the details. And the carbonic acid, which was faintly present in the distance, was indescribably bothersome.

It's not that bad..... It's kind of medicinal, isn't it?

He took another sip and tilted his head back, still with a subtle expression on his face. It was not a great taste, but it was not so bad as to make Masachika say, "Woah, that's disgusting!" It was the most difficult one to react to.

Well, it's better to drink it first.

Thinking it would be a bad idea to leave the rest of the drink after taking a little sip, Masachika gulped down the rest of it in one gulp. Frowning at the subtle discomforting after taste in his mouth, he poured some oolong tea into a paper cup and took it to refresh his palate.

"Well, it wasn't terrible, but it wasn't great either."

"I see....."

"By the way, what was in this?"

"It's a.....trade secret?"

"I'm obviously your classmate and someone very involved, right?!"

However, the class president still looked away. All other classmates rustled at once.

"No, seriously, what was in the....."

Masachika, too, felt uneasy. The class president looked at Masachika with a reserved look and opened his mouth.

"Hey, Kuze, are you alright?"

"What do you mean?"

"Ah, no, really. It's a relief that you're okay. Thank goodness....."

"Wait, seriously, what was in it? I'm scared."

"No, it's fine. There's nothing harmful in it, okay?"

"You've got to be sure of that!"

"But if anything goes wrong, you better get to the hospital as soon as possible."

"I wish you hadn't said that!"

"If you don't have any symptoms within two hours.....you'll be fine."

"What are the symptoms?"

After that, Masachika kept pressing for answers, but in the end he was unable to find out any more details.....and left the classroom, only feeling more and more anxious. Then, he returned to the student council office and worked for 30 minutes. Masachika's body was experiencing a change that had been feared.

I don't know why but I'm feeling really horny!

.....The symptom, though, was too unexpected.

What? Huh? What's this?No, shouldn't it be girls who are supposed to be in this kind of situation? It's arousing to see a normally cool girl being tossed around by an unfamiliar emotion.....Who benefits from a guy who's horny!

Even as Masachika made a long tsukkomi, the situation remained unchanged. Yes, even now.....he was stuck in a situation where his crotch could go ape-shit at a moment's notice!

Damn. Seriously, what the hell is this.....! Those guys must not have been kidding around and put in some kind of energizer...

While doing paperwork, Masachika can't stop grumbling in his head about his classmates. No, of course, he was the one who drank it so it was partly on him.

"Masachika-sama, may I have a word?"

"Oh, yeah, what is it?"

While concentrating all his attention on the papers at hand, a voice called out from the side, and he had no choice but to look up. There, he saw Ayano's face, looking 30% more attractive than usual.

Gah! I feel guilty.....

Masachika secretly bit his back teeth as he felt his stomach knot up. He hated himself for almost harboring even the slightest filthy desire for this

pure and good childhood friend. Even so, Masachika tried his best to keep his eyes on Ayano's face so that he wouldn't gaze at her breasts by accident. But then, he found himself staring at Ayano's cherry-colored lips, and his stomach groaned with guilt.

"And that's why..."

"Oh, yeah, if it's not enough, you could always borrow from the middle school, you know?"

"But isn't it hard to carry?"

"I think you can ask the janitor to send a light trolley for that. Well, although it feels bad because I've asked him so many times to take it out, and I heard that the trolley will be more stable the more it's loaded, so when we ask for it, it will definitely be done all together."

"Oh, my God, is that true~?"

Masachika bit his lip for a moment as Maria called out to him from the other side of the room.

"...Yeah, I borrowed some equipment from the high school when I was in middle school, and vice versa."

"Oh, I see~. I wonder if it is possible to ask them to help us carry out the items we are putting out?"

"That is..... What do you think? Wouldn't that require consultation?"



Ugh, Masha..... Your new summer uniform is making more and more of an impact.....!

Even when he tried to fix his gaze on her face, his amplified male instincts forced him to focus on that distinctive part at the edge of his vision.

Even when Maria was wearing a blazer and a jumper skirt, her chest still had a powerful presence from underneath, but now that.....they were gone, he could see the more realistic size of it, or so he was thinking.

"Wow~! I guess it's reassuring to have someone with experience!"

Maria smiled innocently and clapped her hands together. Trapped between those arms, was a symbol of an Onee-san that seemed like it could break her uniform's button at any time...

Oughhhh

With blood about to gather in the lower half of his body, Masachika quickly turned to the sofa seat behind him.

"Huh? What is it?"

Alisa looked up from the accounting documents on the table and turned around suspiciously.

Oh, no. She simply looks too good.

As soon as Masachika saw her buoyant beauty, a hot sensation welled up in the pit of his chest, and he looked away.

"No, I hope there's nothing wrong with you....."

"Yeah?"

Ugh! Damn, why does this student council have so many girls with such pretty faces?!

With the President and Vice-President not present, there were beautiful girls on both sides and behind him. A dream situation for a man, but a nightmare for Masachika, who could very well become a sex offender at any moment.

Yuki is the only one who is safe anymore.....!

"Hmm, Masachika-kun? Why are you glaring at me?"

When he turned his stern eyes on Yuki, who was sitting opposite him, Yuki looked genuinely puzzled. Because her brother suddenly looked at her with a look similar to that of a cornered beast, it was only natural.

Oh, yeah. Good. I'll settle down after all~

He thought he would have to die if even his sister stimulated his desires....., but fortunately that was not the case at all. In terms of her face alone, she was on par with Alisa or Maria, but there is nothing wrong with that because she didn't omit the tiniest bit of sex appeal for him. In fact,

Masachika even felt that his desires were subdued by the mysterious sense of security that he felt when dealing with his relatives.

Okay, I'll be fine.I'll just look at the basic documents, and if things look bad, I'll just look at Yuki and we'll get by.

[T/L note: Masachika is talking about Yuki's breasts. In v5 c7, he described her breasts to be like pudding.]

Masachika was relieved to have found a way to get out of the chaos created by the mysterious juice, but his relief was short-lived.

"Ayano, I want to find some old documents. Will you come with me?"

"Sure thing."

With that, Masachika's source of relief was easily severed.

Ehh~~~

While he was stunned, Yuki and Ayano left. What was left was Masachika and the Kujou sisters. The three of them in the student council room. The incident naturally came to mind.

S-shit.....

The paradise he had witnessed back then came back to his mind, and Masachika was struck by a fierce sense of urgency. He rushed to his feet, determined to leave the place for the time being.

"Well, I'm going to go buy a drink."

He quickly made an excuse, but then unexpected words came from behind him.

"Then I'll get it for you. I just found a document with an incomplete receipt."

"Eh, ah....."

"Barley tea?"

"Uh, yeah."

After nodding his head subconsciously, Masachika thought his history would end here.

"Then, I'll go with you..."

"You don't have to. I'm not a kid anymore anyway."

He at least offered to accompany her, but Alisa casually declined and quickly left. Masachika's hand, halfway outstretched, scratched the sky.

"Eh~...."

He found himself alone with Maria. The situation seemed to be better than before, but being alone with Maria seemed to have its own problems.

"Alya seems to be working hard lately, huh~"

On the other hand, despite Masachika's inner thoughts, Maria was still carefree as ever. She placed one hand on her cheek and gazed at the door where Alisa just exited.

"Ah yes, that's right too...In band practice she does her best. She looks more energized than usual."

In fact, Alisa had refused to be helped several times, just like the incident earlier. For Masachika, he was worried that Alisa might be a little too enthusiastic.

"Is that so? But, Alya, she's trying hard to practice singing at home, you know~?"

Maria nodded her head in agreement, unmindful of Masachika's concern. Masachika, having lost all excuse to leave, settled back into his chair. Seeing his strangely tense face, Maria lowered her eyebrows a little.

"Kuze-kun..... Are you maybe feeling a little sick?"

"No? I don't think so."

"Why won't you look at me?"

Because I cannot look at you. If I look you in the face right now, I will be reminded of my desires.

There was no way he could honestly say such a thing, so Masachika kept his face turned to his hand and tried to cover it up. Maria then gripped both sides of his cheeks with her hands

"Mou, Saa-kun! Turn around!"

Then he was forced to turn toward Maria. When confronted, Maria's face was filled with genuine concern and therefore anger.

"Look, look at my face and tell me. Are you sure you're feeling alright?"

"Uh, no....."

Masachika was at a loss for words due to their close proximity, so close as if he was about to be kissed. The touch of a hand on his cheek and the close-up view of Maria's face spurred his confused brain. Suddenly, Maria lowered her eyebrows as if she was concerned about him.

"You know, Kuze-kun. I understand how it feels to find out that I am Maa-chan, and to hear my confession, and not know what to do. I'm also sorry for troubling Kuze-kun. But you know what? I don't want you to avoid me because of that."

"....."

"I want you to depend on me when times are hard, and I want to spoil you when times are tough. I want you to show me the weak Kuze-kun that

you don't want Alya to see. I don't want you to think that I'm expecting you to do something weird. Regardless of the fact that I like Kuze-kun, I am his childhood friend and his senpai."

Somehow, he felt like he was being told something extraordinary and important, but what a pity..... It never entered his head. With Maria up close and personal in the student council room, with just the two of them, Masachika's brain was completely overheating.

Spoiled..... Spoiled, huh? Is it acceptable to hug you as hard as I can?

His brain, dizzy from the strange heat, began to tilt his thoughts in dangerous directions. At any moment, he felt as if he was going to blow away all reason and dive into Maria's chest.

"I'm back~"

The door to the student council room opened, and Masachika escaped from Maria's hands like a bullet. He turned around with his momentum to see Chisaki just entering. With her hand on the doorknob, she furrowed her brow and looked around the room with a grim expression.

".....What? Somehow, I can smell a male pervert."

It seemed that for the first time in a long time, her man-hating sensor had been triggered. Masachika silently got up from his seat and walked over to it and approached Chisaki with a clear expression.

"Sarashina-senpai."

"Hmm?"

"I'd like a shot at the reset, please."

"Okay, here we go."

This way, Masachika's rationality and desires were reset in a clean slate.

Chapter 9

Aren't These Guys Too Strong?

"It's coming together pretty well! At first I was really worried that we wouldn't make it....."

"Yes, especially with "Phantom", we had to start from the beginning by writing the score for each part."

"Yes, I think so. But when we all put it together, this 'Phantom' is, once again, an amazing song."

"Uuu, it's okay to call it "Mugen" for now....."

"I laughed because the composer started whining."

"I'm sorry, Taniyama-san. Not that I'm complaining about the song title....."

The five members of the group seem to have gotten along well with each other, and were talking amicably. Masachika watched from a distance, tilting his head slightly.

Hmmm~ Is my presence here really necessary?

That was Masachika's rather sincere feeling at the moment. He did think they would do well, but they were doing better than expected, and there was no room for Masachika to interject.

I thought it would be hard to put together such a mismatched group of individuals.....

At least now, they all have their shoulders relaxed. And it was definitely Alisa who was at the center of it all. It was Sayaka who was leading the band in practice, but it was Alisa who united the members' hearts. By nature, Sayaka was skilled at motivating people, but she does not take it upon herself to be close to the hearts of those she worked with. If anything, she would say, "With your ability, you should be able to do it. Mental problems? It's none of my business, so please talk to your friends or cry to your girlfriend to get yourself back on track. If you can't do that, I'll leave your job to someone else."

To Sayaka, every human being was a pawn, including herself. She was a pawn, but was a commander who moved the other pawns, and the care of the other pawns was not the commander's role. That's how coldly and calmly

she divides her time. Taniyama was a superb commander, but if you ask if she was a leader, she was not.

.....So this time, Alya had taken the role of caretaker and leader, without a second thought. No, perhaps..... Could it be that Taniyama's calculations were correct?

In any case, at this rate, Alisa may win the band leader's position on her own, even without Masachika's support. That in itself would be a great thing, but if that were to happen..... The meaning of his existence as a manager will be questioned in earnest. Leaving aside Alisa, now that he wasn't doing any favors or follow-ups for Takeshi and Hikaru, what could he really do.....?

.....*I'm sure we'll be taking a break soon, maybe I'll get a drink that's gentle on the throat.....*

Mocking himself inwardly for feeling like the manager of an athletic club, Masachika quietly left the music room.

"I don't know why~....."

As soon as Masachika stepped out into the hallway, leaving the five members behind, he felt strangely alienated and unconsciously let out a complaint. Then Masachika smiled wryly to himself.

I'm failing as a manager if I feel dissatisfied when I see them doing so well...

If they were doing so well that they didn't need a manager, that was good news. First of all, Masachika became manager not because anyone asked him to, but out of his own desire. He had no right to complain about losing his job. If he didn't want to, he should have just joined them as a keyboardist instead of inviting Nonoa from the beginning.

Just kidding~

He knew very well that he couldn't do that. Masachika had no intention of playing the piano anymore. It was partly because of his stubbornness towards his mother. However, there was more to it than that.....

My music doesn't have the power to make people smile.

It had always been that way. When Masachika played the piano, everyone would leave blank looks on their faces. The children who had been cheering their friend's performance with all their might, and the parents who had been applauding their children's performance with smiles on their faces, all became expressionless when Masachika started playing. They looked at Masachika as if they were looking at something foreign.

Now that I think about it, that was a total turn off~! Well, I guess I wasn't a very childlike kid myself, and I didn't even really like the piano itself. The only one who seemed to be happy and innocent was Yuki. No, there was one guy who was really competitive and glared at me.

In general, he had no good memories of playing the piano. The addition of such a person to the band would only lead to dissonance.

To begin with, I don't know if I can play the piano anymore.....

With this in mind, he bought drinks for everyone and returned to the music room, where the five of them were just taking a break.

"Good work~ I bought some drinks——"

On the surface, Masachika held up the cans with a smile as if nothing had happened. But that smile soon hardened.

"By the way, Alya is getting better and better at singing. No, she was always really good at it, but..."

This was a nickname for Alisa, which came out of Takeshi's mouth in a casual tone. Until then, Masachika was the only boy at the school who had ever called her by that name. Masachika felt a black flame burning in his guts at once when he heard that another boy was calling her by that name.

"Hmm? Kuzecchi, you brought us something~?"

"Uh, yeah.....A little something."

He resumed his steps awkwardly at Hikaru's call and placed a can of juice on the desk nearest to him. While he does so, he couldn't help but overhear the conversations of the other members.

"Alya, do you have any singing experience at all?"

"Not particularly.I was in a choir for a little while when I was little?

"Oh, so you're a Christian, Alya?"

"Not really. I mean, I think most young Russians today are not religious, just like the Japanese people, right?"

That nickname just didn't come out of Takeshi's mouth, but Hikaru's as well. Masachika became dizzy with agitation and intense jealousy.

"What's wrong with you, Kuzzechi? Uhh, bing bong. Masacchi?"

[T/L note: The "bing bong" here was Hikaru mimicking a doorbell because Masachika wasn't responding.]

"Masacchi.....? Ah, it's nothing....."

Smiling awkwardly at Hikaru's question, Masachika asked in a desperately casual way.

"So you decided to call each other by your first names?"

"Hmm? Ah~, Alisa suggested it~"

"Oh, I see....."

Suggested by Alisa. In other words, Alisa herself asked for herself to be referred to by her nickname, and——

"I'm going to go check out my class's progress."

Masachika left the music room again.

"~~ Damn it!"

Then, as he approached the stairs, he scratched his head and exhaled wickedly, and headed for the classroom with a brisk pace. There was something about this whole thing that he just didn't like right now.

Alisa, who easily allowed someone other than himself to use her nickname, his two best friends, who were now familiar with that nickname, and of course.....himself, who was showing his possessiveness with this kind of feeling.

"Tsk."

Masachika descended the stairs, his heart pounding in his chest like never before. Just as he reached the floor, a familiar voice called out to him from behind.



"Eh? Masachika-kun?"

Alisa looked at Masachika suspiciously as he left right after he returned. Exhaling a light sigh of relief, Sayaka called out to her in a curt manner.

"Shouldn't we go after him?"

"Huh?"

"It is your responsibility to follow up with him, isn't it? Please talk to him about it before things get complicated."

"Eh.....I understand, really?"

Alisa followed Masachika, still not quite sure what to make of the situation. Sayaka looked away and let out another sigh.

"Aren't you so sweet~ Sayachi?"

"Yes?"

Then she was approached by a grinning Nonoa, who raised an eyebrow at Sayaka. Then, turning away, she pushed up her glasses.

"I just moved people around to make sure everyone on the team was in tip-top shape."

"Hmm~?"

"What is it.....with your eyes?"

Sayaka looked uncomfortable as Nonoa smiled cryptically at her. Then, Hikaru also called out to her with a bit of a wry smile.

"I also want to thank you. I've been a little concerned about it myself....because I think it would have been best to get Alya to make the move."

"What? What's that supposed to mean?"

Feeling somewhat uncomfortable, Sayaka went to her own bag. Then, she took out a glass cloth from her spectacle case and began to wipe the lenses with it.

"Huh? What is it?"

"Ah, no.....Sayaka, your mood changes quite a bit when you take off your glasses, doesn't it?"

".....Oh, I'm aware that I have bad eyesight."

[T/L note: This is nothing major, but this is the illustration with Sayaka playing the guitar.]

"No, I mean.....it looks kind of cool, right? I think it's wonderful, you know."

"Eh?"

"?"

She put her base down. She seemed to be somewhat upset, but that was because she had her glasses off, so she could not see him clearly. With the feeling that it was not good to worry the others, Sayaka looked away from Takeshi and quickly put her glasses back on and put down her bass guitar.

"I'll leave for a moment as well."

"Oh, the bathroom? I'm coming too~!"

She looked at Nonoa, who said the word "bathroom" without any shame, with a bit of reproach, and Sayaka replied with a sigh.

".....I'm just going to get some fresh air."

"Well? Then I'm going with you."

"....."

She was sure she was planning to follow her no matter what she said.

After staring at her in effort to try and understand her intentions, she gave up and left the music room with Nonoa. Then, Nonoa immediately approached her with a smirk on her face.

"But still, I can't believe that Sayacchi is so concerned about their relationship~"

"Like I said, it's for the team. It has nothing to do with personal feelings."

"I think you've been paying a lot of attention to Alisa, though, haven't you? If Sayacchi had her way, she could have organized the five of us better."

".....I just didn't want to spend my time worrying about unnecessary things when I was going to start being in a band. If there is someone else who can lead, wouldn't it be easier to let that person lead?"

"So you're willing to let Alisa take over as band leader?"

"....."

Somehow, she felt like she would be teased no matter what she said, so Sayaka kept her mouth shut with a bitter look on her face. Then she stared at Nonoa and fought back a little.

"You seem to be enjoying yourself a lot more than usual, Nono-chan. Is it that much fun to be in a band?"

"Oh~, yeah."

Sayaka was at least aware that the feelings that Nonoa, her childhood friend, usually showed outwardly were not from her true heart. She was also aware that Nonoa was always looking for the reactions of those around her and acting out the best solution for the situation. She was aware of this, but did not intend to go deeper into it. She knew that she could get along better with this childhood friend. However, even from Sayaka's point of view, Nonoa had been giving off an air of genuine enjoyment over the recent days. This was surprising.....to Sayaka, and at the same time, it was also a joyful thing.

".....Well, maybe it's more fun than you think, the band"

"Yes."

With a slightly relaxed expression, Sayaka walked down the hallway with a sense of calm, and then stopped when a familiar face appeared around the corner.

"Hey, it's Yusho!"

"Oh, it's been a while. Miyamae, Taniyama."

It was Yusho Kiryuin, the current head of the piano club and a former member of the middle school student council. The two had a history with each other, having defeated each other in a debate during the middle school election campaign and having both lost the student body presidential candidate's seat. Whether she was aware of this or not, Nonoa was completely natural...but Sayaka was not, and she approached Yusho with a bit of caution.

"Long time no see, Kiryuin-san. What can we do for you?"

"No, I'm not here for anything in particular. It was just a coincidence that we met here."

After saying this and stiffening his shoulders, Yusho smiled meaningfully.

"I just overheard that you guys are going to be in a band with Alisa Kujou at the upcoming school festival."

"Yeah, so what."

"No? I just thought it was unexpected. I didn't think you'd be so supportive of a new student."

The way he said it, not even trying to hide the implication, Sayaka slowly pushes up her glasses with a cold expression on her face.

[T/L note: Anime moment 💀]

"What do you mean, "Oh, no"? As far as I know, you and Kujou-san never had any contact."

"Without meeting her in person, I already knew. You know what I mean, don't you?"

Yusho then sarcastically raised the corners of his mouth.

"The student body president should be someone who can contribute to the Raikokai in the future. A person who can move Japan with his or her wealth, power, or any other ability is the right person to be the student body president, but what about her? She has no large wealth, no position, no

connections, nothing. In fact, it is doubtful how much she can understand anything about Japan. How can she be the student body president?I thought you agreed with me here."

It was a look of intense self-consciousness and ambition that one could not imagine from his usual aristocratic behavior. Sayaka, however, exhaled lightly, unperturbed.

"I understand, but I don't remember agreeing with you."

"Why? As the daughter of the president of Taniyama Heavy Industries, you were also aiming to join the Raikokai as a future leader of Japan, weren't you? Didn't Miyamae run for office so that he could join the Raikokai and further develop her family's business?"

"Me? No, it's nothing. I only cooperated with Sayachi because she wanted to be in the show."

Yusho blatantly scoffed at Nonoa's response. He then cowered his shoulders in disdain.

"I'm surprised at this. I had no idea that all of us were so unaware.....that the student body presidents are so underestimated these days."

Sayaka's eyes narrow at the scorn directed at her from the front. However, rather than Sayaka saying something, Nonoa, who was smiling, was quicker to retort.

"You know, Junyuusho-chan, you said something very arrogant."

[T/L note: Junyuusho is most likely the nickname Nonoa calls him here to mock him.]

In an instant, a deep crease was carved between his eyebrows and his teeth peeled back from the gap between his distorted lips. But the expression was soon hidden by a taut smile.

"You know, I really don't understand why people like you are so popular."

"I wonder why? I don't get it either."

Nonoa, looking at her fingernails as if she didn't care about Yusho's anger, sighed lightly and looked at Yusho with a cold glare.

"You say a lot of things, but the bottom line is, you just want to be student body president, don't you?"

"I'm not interested in being student body president. But currently, if you don't become student body president, you won't be able to join the Raikokai , so I'm just trying to get there."

[T/L note: Raikokai is a made up thing for the Light Novel. It doesn't exist in real life. As a reminder, the Raikokai is a collective body made of ex-student council presidents and vice presidents.]

"I see. For all that, I haven't heard anything about you campaigning."

Yusho's mouth twisted into a sneer at Sayaka's nonchalant retort.

"Isn't campaigning for public popularity the only way?"

Sayaka's eyebrows furrowed at his implication.

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

"Well, you know. But if you think either of those two, Suou or Kujou, will be the student body president, I'm telling you it's too early to tell. The more things seem to be going well, the more people lose their footing when you least expect it.Well, I guess it's none of your business."

Crawling his shoulders in disdain for this, Yusho penetrated Sayaka and Nonoa with a small, silly smile on the edge of his mouth.

"I'm relieved to talk to you.Now that you guys don't have to be on your guard about anything."

After saying this, Yusho started walking away from them.

"See you later. Please don't be greedy now and enjoy your band activities as much as you can."

Yusho said this as he passed them and walked away. Looking over her shoulder at his back, Sayaka pushed up her glasses.

"I don't care what you do, but you should "look" at your feet, not "scoop" them, right? Why don't you question your own Japanese blood before you worry about Alisa-san?"

"Sayacchi is very agitated, isn't she? So funny~!"

It was a retort to the fact that he had been told to do as he pleased so many times, but Yusho did not react in any particular way. Sayaka also sniffed lightly and turned around to face forward, then resumed her steps.

"Good grief, I don't know what I was trying to say after all."

"I think he wanted to show off that he's involved in something. Yusho is quite assertive, isn't he?"

"Something like that....."

"So what's the plan? I'll give a heads up to Yuki and Alisa, okay?"

At Nonoa's question, Sayaka raised her eyebrows for a moment before shrugging her shoulders.

"There will be no need. Whatever he is planning to do, if Suou-san and Alisa-san are defeated by his scheme, what does that have to do with us?"

"I see, you just want to be a spectator from afar, huh?"

Despite her voice being calm, there was a smile on Nonoa's face that looked somewhat dangerous, almost as if she was plotting to do something. Sayaka noticed it, but did not mention it in particular.

"Well, inevitably they'll have to deal with it."

Sayaka said so while shrugging her shoulders.



"Masachika-kun!"

Masachika frowned for a moment at the voice calling out to him from behind. For now, he did not want to face her. Despite this, he quickly adjusted his expression and turned around as if nothing had happened.

"Alya? What's wrong?"

".....That, hey."

At Masachika's seemingly dubious expression, Alisa's gaze wandered and her words were muddled. Then, as she descended from the staircase, she looked troubled for a few seconds before opening her mouth hesitantly.

"I was kind of concerned about your condition."

"!"

Masachika was at a loss for words, not expecting Alisa, of all people, to notice. However, Alisa, who was looking away from him, did not seem to notice, and he continued on with a sly smile.

"For some reason it feels like you're avoiding me. Did I do something wrong?"

Upon hearing these words, Masachika became a little irritated.

"That... Aren't you the same?"

"Eh.....?"

"Ah."

He made an unintentionally accusatory remark, and Masachika immediately regretted it. It's true that he had been feeling a bit distant from Alisa lately. He wouldn't say that she's avoiding him, but he did feel that she had been holding back for awhile. But it was not right to blame her for that here, and it was just a matter of taking it out on her.

"Ahhhh~"

Masachika scratched his head to shake off his uneasy feeling and bowed to Alisa with an awkward expression on his face.

"Sorry, that was me taking it out on you."

"Uh, yeah....."

"Huh..... Well, you know, what the heck. I mean, seeing you getting along with those guys...what can I say?"

I was jealous.

Masachika thought, but couldn't get rid of his embarrassment to say that literally.

"I just got a little lonely!"

Instead, what popped out were words that were not lies but also not true. Still embarrassed, Masachika fell on his face, clenched his teeth, and endured his shame.

"Hm~mm, yeah."

Masachika then heard Alisa's voice indicating she was clearly smiling. He glanced up and saw that the slightly anxious expression on her face was gone. Like a cat that has found a mouse, Alisa was peeking at him with a giggle.

"Did you get lonely when you saw me getting along with Takeshi-kun and the other guys?"

"Takeshi-kun."

Masachika found himself clearly furrowing his brows as he heard Alya's way of addressing Takeshi. Naturally, Alisa, who was standing in front of him, could feel it too.

"Hm~mm?"

Like a cat slowly hunting down its prey, her eyes narrowed tastefully with a grin, and Alisa moved her face even closer. Then, she whispered to Masachika at a distance where he could almost feel her breath.

"By any chance..... Are you jealous?"

"Okay, yes! I'm jealous! I was jealous~! I was so disgusted with myself that I ran away~! Are you satisfied now?"

Masachika, in desperation, blurted it all out, saying, "I don't care anymore." Alisa laughed with the greatest amusement and quickly moved her body away.

"Hmm, yeah, I feel satisfied, you know?"

With light steps, as if she were about to start dancing, Alisa turned to Masachika's right side in an agitated manner. Then, placing her hand on Masachika's shoulder, which was shaking with shame, she kissed him gently, just grazing his cheek.

"?!"

Masachika froze for a moment at the touch on his cheek, then turned around as if he were being played. Alisa peeked down into his face and smiled mischievously.

"Don't worry, okay?"

Then she whispered softly in Russian

【Because you are special.】

Masachika's heart leapt at those words.

"What?"

When he asked her awkwardly, she lifted her chin a little, laughed, and walked lightly up the stairs. Halfway up the stairs, she turned around and put her finger to her lips in a mischievous manner.

"Well then, I'll give you a little of my time, you jealous, lonely little thing."

"Huh?"

"I'll stay with you during the free time of the school festival, so please try your best to entertain me, okay?"

With that, she turned her back and walked up the stairs and disappeared down the hallway. Masachika watched her back for a few seconds, then staggered over and leaned against the wall behind him. He then sat down on the stairs.

"Uwaaaaaa! ...What the hell was that?"

Masachika scratched his bangs while letting out a moan. Then, as if trying to force some words out, he mumbled a few words.

"That's cheating, using that method."



Even Masachika himself could clearly see the heat in his cheeks were burning, and that his heart was floating like an idiot. His heart was pounding loudly in his ears. He had experienced jealousy, which he himself was even disgusted by, and then Alya arrived.....

"~~~~! Ugiiiiiiii!~~"

He held his cheek and writhed violently as he remembered the feeling. He twisted his body and pressed his forehead against the wall with a gurgle, and there, unexpectedly, Masachika was brought back to himself by multiple voices coming from downstairs.

"And, then....."

He rushed to his feet and flapped his pants with his hands to remove the dust. Then, as if to escape, he went into a nearby restroom, where Masachika decided to cool his head for a while. Then, after he felt somewhat calmer, he walked awkwardly back to the music room.

"Oh, I'm back."

Then, Masachika tilted his head slightly to Takeshi, who seemed to be waiting for him.

".....What's going on?"

"No, something like..... We were just talking about it earlier. I was just saying that we should all call each other by our first names."

"Yeah..... That's fine, right?"

Feeling his heart skip a beat again, Masachika nodded, trying not to show it. In response, Takeshi gave a smug smile.

"Oh, I knew it would be a good idea! It's the symbolization of youth!"

When Masachika returned a wry laugh with his innocent smile, Hikaru called out to him.

"Just so you know, that includes Masachika too, okay?"

"Huh?"

"What? I mean..... Masachika is one of the "Fortitude" members, isn't he?"

[T/L note: Just as a reminder, Fortitude was what they decided to call their band.]

Masachika, who was momentarily taken aback by Hikaru's words, swallowed his remark, and then chuckled plaintively.

"Ah!Right."

When he casually looked at Alisa, she made a small cowering gesture so that only Masachika could see. Masachika's heart lightened at the sight and the words he had just received.

Yeah, that's right..... I don't know what I was jealous of, at all.

It was embarrassing to have such good close friends and have such dark feelings for them, even for a moment. To cover it up, Masachika turned to Sayaka and Nonoa.

"Um, so... Sayaka and Nonoa..... Is that right?"

"Oh....."

"Isn't that right?"

Masachika chuckled again, not expecting to be brought closer in this way to two people who he used to work together with in the student council. The dark flame that had been burning in his chest was extinguished.

"Hmmm, so..... Masachika."

"Uh, yes."

".....It's kind of odd."

"Haha, right. We were together so much in middle school, and now it's just....."

And then, he felt some kind of burning heat there.

Huh? Did I catch on fire?

When Masachika turned his eyes in that specific direction while breaking out in a cold sweat, he saw Alisa looking at him with some kind of cold eyes. But.....

Wait, wait, wait, wait. This is my chance to fight back, isn't it?

The memory of having been tossed around so much earlier brought a naughty feeling to Masachika's heart. Then, Masachika quietly approached Alisa and whispered to her so that no one around would hear.

"Perhaps..... Are you jealous?"

Alisa turned her head away in shame when he said this,....

"Ugh."

....but it didn't turn out how he expected. Instead, he was glared at sharply.

"Ah, that hurts."

Masachika felt depressed after receiving a response that was ten times stronger than he had expected.



"Well, I'm glad to hear things are going well."

In a room of a high-rise apartment building, Yusho was making a call with a smartphone in one hand.

"Well, there might be a few injuries, but.....wouldn't it make sense to do that?"

Yusho's beautiful face was twisted into a wicked smile. As if to ridicule the other's foolishness. And yet, his voice was always gentle, and he whispered sweetly. It was like a devil inviting people to the path of evil.

"Then please stay on schedule...Chairman-san."

As time progresses and the school festival finally opens..... Amidst the intertwining of the agendas of certain parties, the curtain rises for the event.

Chapter 10

Willpower and Pride

The Seirei Academy's school festival began with such an announcement from the chairman of the organizing committee. Since the first day of the event was held only for family members and relatives with no outside guests, the committee members did not have to go through such a chaotic situation.But if anyone thought they did not have to at all, then they were still very naïve.

"Kuze-san! It looks like the next performance won't be ready on time!"

"What about the next performance after that person's performance?"

"They still haven't arrived!"

"Approximately how long will it take to wait for them?"

"Ummm..."

"Please quickly ask the person in question. This is the supervisor. Moderator, after the current performer leaves the stage, can we have a short break? Kindly respond."

At the Shuureisai Festival, there were three stages provided at three different venues at the gymnasium, auditorium, and school grounds. The operations were managed by the Organizing Committee, Broadcasting Club, and Drama Club. Masachika was then directly appointed by the Organizing Chairman as the person in charge of the progress of the stage events in the auditorium. Of course, there were two other people in charge as they took turns.

[T/L note: The Shuureisai Festival is made-up for the school festival, it doesn't exist in real life.]

"Here are the sub-supervisors, they want two more minutes."

"Understood. Moderator, please check if you have enough time to extend it for three minutes. All the lights on the stage will be turned off, the audience will remain as they are, and the spotlight will be focused on the MC. We will cut the rest of the break after this to accommodate the event, for the equipment section committee scheduled to take over, please take over while the moderator is still connected."

[T/L note: MC as in "master of ceremonies", aka the host of the staged event.]

He gave instructions to staff through walkie-talkies, while keeping an eye on progress charts and time schedules. On the other hand, another staff member gave a brief reply.

More than half of the staff were older than Masachika, but there was not a hint of disrespect for him in their voices. This was a testimony to the trust that Masachika had built up through much practice. Under Masachika's leadership, the stage project in the auditorium was successfully completed despite some problems, but it was time to move on with the next program.

"Then, I'll leave the rest to Senpai."

"Okeee~, good work~"

After handing over the program to the 3rd year committee members, Masachika quickly went to the bathroom, and then headed to the stage on the school grounds. The venue for the stage event on the field was separated by colored cones, and about a hundred chairs were lined up in front of the stage. There were still a few empty seats in that section, but Masachika did not sit down but stood behind them, right at the edge of the colored cones.

Soon after, two chairs and a moderator's table were set up on the stage, and two faces that Masachika knew well appeared there.

"Sponsored by the quiz research club! The Election campaign quiz battle~!"

Then, the president of the quiz club, wearing a magician-style hat, came out from the end of the stage and announced that the event was about to begin. Masachika was still standing at the back of the audience.

This was not because he was specifically instructed to do so by the Quiz Club President. However, in a situation where the whole picture of the quiz show was unknown, Masachika decided that it was better to act alert in case of an emergency. The same was true for Ayano, who had unknowingly stood some distance away from Masachika, and was standing upright like a statue.

"Then without further ado, let me introduce the two stars of this quiz battle event!"

After introducing herself as the moderator, the Quiz Club President pointed her hand at the two people sitting at the center of the stage. Then, Yuki's face was projected on the screen above the stage.

"The daughter of the Suou family, who have been in charge of Japan's diplomacy for generations! The amount of knowledge a future diplomat possesses is incomparable! Whether it's politics, economics, entertainment, subculture, or any other topic, she can handle it with ease! Will his vast knowledge be put to good use in this quiz battle!? Let's give a big welcome to the participant Suou Yuki~!!!"

After being introduced by the host, Yuki waved her hand with a smile towards the audience seats. Then, cheers and finger-whistles echoed from the audience seats, and the students around the field began to gather one after another as if caught up in the excitement.

"Subsequently... Since her transfer, she's been an unwavering first in the exams! The most talented girl in school. No one doubts that title anymore! She is a girl who is good at academics, good at sports and her talent is still unfathomable! Will her myth of invincibility continue in the quiz game too!? Give a big round of applause to participant Alisa Mikhailovna Kujou~!!!"

"The host turned out to be quite good too."

At the same time that Masachika subconsciously commented on the club president, Alisa's face appeared on the screen above the stage, and

bowed lightly with a serious expression. In contrast to Yuki's greeting, the applause and cheers from the audience were quite warm, though much less enthusiastic than before.

Hmm~... To be honest, I thought there would be a more noticeable difference in the cheers of her audience...but, does that mean she's more accepted as a sassy idol? I think it's a convenient miscalculation.

As Masachika thought about that while clapping his hands, the flow of people heading around the stage died down a bit. Since the topic of the event was a direct confrontation between the two candidates for the most beautiful girl in school, that was what attracted people to gather. In addition, the fact that the event was held around lunch time was also a big factor. Many of the students gathered had snacks in their hands, and seemed to be preparing to watch the match while enjoying their food.

The seats in front of the stage are already full, and if you include the students standing and watching from offstage, I think there are around 130 people.

At this moment, Masachika calculated that less than 20% of all the school's students had gathered here. Not everyone would watch the event

from start to finish, but with all these people, the details of this fight would soon be spread throughout the school.

"Then, let's start right away! This quiz battle was a path of success but an innovative rule that added an election element to the good old quiz program. Of course, other than the two participants on stage, everyone here can participate as well. All quiz questions are multiple choice questions; there were no written questions. If it's an essay question, it's difficult for everyone to grade it."

After saying this with a hint of prankishness, the host continued their explanation.

"The time to think is 10 seconds after I finish reading the question! The quiz consists of six different themes, each with five questions. The last question will be added, so there will be 31 questions in total, and each competitor's scores will be visible to the audience. Aside from the two participants, the person with the highest score will receive a luxurious prize, so everyone please participate with us, okay? Now, how to participate...But before that, there is an important warning for everyone."

Then, after a short pause, the host raised his voice as if to remind everyone around the stage.

"Although this is to be expected, all spectators are prohibited from speaking during the quiz match. It is strictly forbidden for the audience to give answers or hints to the two participants. Once caught, the person will be removed from the stage area immediately. The quiz will also be rescheduled. Is everything understood? Please don't make too much noise, okay?"

The audience's voices gradually grew quieter, as the host reminded them. Then, when the audience was completely silent, the host smiled with satisfaction.

"Thank you for your cooperation! Then everyone, please use your smartphones to read the QR code displayed on this screen. Please click on the quiz club's special answer format. You can also find the URL and QR code on some signs at the end of the stage."

Obeying the directive, Masachika picked up his smartphone just like the rest of the audience around him, and read the large QR code projected on the screen.

How awesome that they bothered to make something like this...hmm, eh?

After loading the page, Masachika raised his eyebrows lightly at the first page that appeared. There was a question, "Who do you think is best suited to be Student Council President?", and Yuki and Alisa's names were listed as choices.

What is this, some kind of survey? Is this an element of the election campaign? Something like, the number of votes gives you more points?

With that thought, Masachika looked around and noticed that some of the other spectators were also looking around with confused expressions on their faces.

"Now, while the audience is getting ready, let me tell you about a special rule that applies only to the two participants. As I mentioned earlier, this is a quiz that also incorporates elements of an election campaign. In other words, their campaign partners, Kimishima Ayano-san and Kuze Masachika-san, will also be participating as allies!"

But then his name was suddenly called, and Masachika hurriedly headed to the stage.

"Each pair, be it Suou-san/Kimishima-san and Kujou-san/Kuze-san, has the right to use the "Help call" only once. As the name suggests, this is the

right to ask for help from each other's partners. If you want to use it, raise your hand and say "Help." You will be connected to your partner on the phone for ten seconds. Oh, and please set your smartphone on speaker mode so we can hear the conversation, okay?"

Yuki raised her hand while the host was still explaining. When the host allowed it, Yuki's voice, which was scattered due to the use of a microphone, echoed on the stage.

"If that's the case, approximately what is the time limit for the quiz? Also, if we use speaker mode, it's not like the other party can hear the conversation too, right?"

"Oh, I apologize for my oversight. If you make a help call, you can only be allowed to make a call after the opponent's answer has been locked. In other words, after the ten second time limit for the quiz has passed. Then, after the 10 second call to get advice from your partner, only the caller will have another 10 seconds to answer the question."

"I see. Then, what if we use "Help Call" for the same question?"

"Only one person can use "Help Call" for one question. In other words, when one person declares "Help Call," the other party cannot use "Help Call" on that issue."

"Alright I understand, thank you very much."

"No problem, that was a good question. By the way, please remember that both Kirishima-san and Kuze-san are forbidden to send instructions to the participants other than answering this 'Help Call.'"

Hmm~... So I can only give Alya an answer once, huh? Well, even if there are questions that I can understand but Alya finds it difficult to answer, anyway...

While thinking like that, Masachika looked back at the two choices displayed on the screen.

Well, I'll choose Alya as usual.

Then, when tapping on Alisa's name, the screen displayed the words "Loading...." and entered the loading status.

"Then lastly, I will discuss the point distribution for each question. Actually, the point distribution of this quiz is not the same. Points are

allocated depending on the general percentage of correct answers for each question theme."

"Huh?"

When he heard his explanation, the host turned back to the audience at the front of the stage.

"Everyone must have seen it at least once on a quiz show, right? Percentage rate of common correct answers. The higher the percentage number, the easier it is, the lower the percentage number, the harder it is. We, the quiz research club, also independently calculated the percentage of correct answers in general for this quiz. In many quiz programs, easy questions are worth ten points. While difficult questions are worth 20 points... But this time, we'll use the format 100 points - general percentage of correct answers = point share! In other words, if a question has a general percentage of correct answers of 80%, then the point distribution will be 20. Conversely, if the general percentage of correct answers is 5%, then the points will be 95 points!"

[T/L note: In a nutshell, if 80% choose the correct answer, they would receive 20 points. If 5% choose the correct answer, they will receive 95 points.]

"That... What does that mean?"

In other words, there was a slight difference on easy questions and a big difference on difficult questions. Moreover, the quiz is not a descriptive question, but a choice question. That means....

Even if it's a very difficult question, just being able to guess correctly is scary enough. If one side gets 70 points at once, and all the questions after that are just general questions with more than 90% of the percentage of correct answers, the other side will never be able to catch up again... Well, I guess the balance isn't too biased either.

Apparently, this point distribution is the most special rule.

All in all, there were 31 questions, and the time to answer each question was 10 seconds. The point value for each question is determined by the general percentage of correct answers, and Alya and Yuki can only ask their partner for help once.

Overall, other than the scoring rules, there is nothing new, including the "Help Call" option. Other viewers may have the same opinion, or have gotten a little bored with the explanation. As if sensing the mood of the audience, the host asked the two participants, "Is there anything left to ask?" They both

shook their heads from side to side, then the host turned to face the audience and extended a hand.

"Thank you for waiting patiently. Then, let's begin! A fierce quiz battle between fellow student council members!"

The host then walked to the moderator's table and operated the laptop placed there.

"Then~...the first theme is 《Social Science》! First question!"

[T/L note: Social science is one of the branches of science, devoted to the study of societies and the relationships among individuals within those societies. The term was formerly used to refer to the field of sociology, the original "science of society", established in the 19th century.]

As if in response to the voice, the question text appeared on the screen.

"Which of the following has the lowest elevation among the highest peaks of the seven continents!?"

Wait a minute, isn't the question not that difficult!?

While Masachika tsukkomi'd inwardly, a row of choices was then displayed on the screen.

"(1) Vinson Massif, (2) Kilimanjaro, (3) Aconcagua, (4) Kosciuszko.

Now it's time to think!"

"Uwaahh, seriously."

Before his shock subsided, the timer displayed in the upper right corner of the screen began to count down, and Masachika's head spun at high speed.

Ummm, first of all, let's get rid of the Kilimanjaro option first, especially since I've never heard of Mount Kosciuszko, where is it? Wait a minute, the highest peak of the seven continents means that the continents of Australia and Antarctica are pretty dubious considering the size of the continent. No, Antarctica is actually quite big, isn't it? Also, the highest peak on the Australian continent seems to have the lowest elevation point. ...I thought Aconcagua mountain was somewhere in the Americas, if Vinson Massif is where...?

After thinking that much in less than two seconds, Masachika casually turned his gaze to his phone screen and.....was stunned.

"Hmm? What the hell is this?"

Because there is something unexpected there. Question text, options, and time remaining in the top right corner. So far, it makes no difference to

what is displayed on the screen. But above the question sentence....was something that wasn't on the screen.

It was two square frames. On each of them were written the names Yuki and Alisa.

Umm, what is this...? Oh, does it have something to do with the voting I just did at the beginning?

Masachika thought so and tried tapping the square or name area to test it, but there was no response. At the mysterious display, Masachika forgot about the quiz for a moment and tilted his head, but when the countdown in the upper right corner reached four seconds, he naturally understood the meaning of the display.

"Hmm?"

The number 4 suddenly appeared in the side box where Yuki's name was written. Not long after, the number 4 also appeared on Alisa's side.

Uh, could this be...the answering status of the two of them?

Just like Masachika, many viewers were confused, but this was quickly calmed down by the host who gave a reminder to "please be quiet".

In other words, this is their interface, so...? Oops, I have to answer that too. Yup, this Kosciuszko mountain name that I've never heard of still looks suspicious.

Encouraged by the fact that Yuki and Alisa chose the same answer, Masachika tapped option 4. A second later, the countdown turned to zero and the choice was locked.

"That's it! Now, let me announce the correct answer! The correct answer is~~.... Number 4! Kosciuszko! Incredibly, both participants chose the correct answer! The overall percentage of correct answers for this question is 68%! Therefore, both participants will receive 32 points each!"

Hmm? Normally, the host would confirm the answers among the participants and only then announce the correct answer.... Ah, I see. Since there was no screen in front of the participants' table, the audience couldn't see both of their answers, huh.

The answer table for the two participants looked simple, consisting of a regular classroom table with a tablecloth and a tablet. Since there was only a tablecloth in front of the table, there was no screen displaying the answers of the two participants, as is often the case in quiz shows.

The thing on the screen was probably a pre-prepared presentation, and they wouldn't be able to display the participants' answers...which is why they displayed both participants' answers on the answer form here. But I still felt something was off...

Meanwhile, the following question was again issued. However, Masachika had directed more than half of his consciousness to consider this mysterious display of answers. There was something in this unnatural specification. Following his instincts, Masachika turned his head.

If you think about it normally, this display refers to the two people's answers, right? But even being forced to give such a hint would only detract from the excitement of the quiz...Is this a specification that allows one to choose the same answer as their favorite candidate? If so, the meaning of the first questionnaire means....No, then it still doesn't make sense to have both their answers displayed. It's just a matter of seeing something that I chose myself...

"Ahhhh, we've got two different answers from the two participants! The correct answer is 2! Kujou-san answered it correctly, unfortunately, Suou-san answered 3, which is the wrong answer~!"

Masachika quickly moved his face towards the host's voice that he heard there. Unexpectedly, it seemed that Alisa had taken the lead over Yuki as soon as possible.

Not bad, Alya. Is this the result of your hard work?

With simple textbook knowledge, Alisa was just as good as Yuki. However, Masachika predicted that just being armed with that knowledge was still not enough to win the quiz show. So, when Masachika visited the quiz club room for some business after the planning of this quiz battle was decided, he casually looked through the titles of the quiz books there and memorized them all. Masachika then asked Alisa to prepare everything later. Then, Alisa put everything into her head more perfectly than Masachika thought.

Most likely some of the questions must have come from there...there might have been some settings added, but Alya could handle it!

Masachika felt his spirits begin to rise with his partner's dependability. He looked at Alisa on stage with a sense of admiration and support. However, Alisa was focused on her tablet, and did not make eye contact with Masachika.

...As expected, it feels like she's just acting strong... Well, I hope she can keep her concentration until the end.

While feeling a little anxious, Masachika, who missed the point count, looked at his phone screen to see how many points she had in the lead. Then he realized that there was no indication of Yuki and Alisa's points anywhere.

What? Even on stage too...nothing. Did I miss it?

Masachika started to get impatient, but fortunately both of their points were soon revealed.

"Alright! After completing the theme questions, the points for both participants are....participant Suou scored 148 points! On the other hand, participant Kujou managed to pocket 192 points! Participant Kujou is one step ahead!"

"Oh, it looks like she can lead more than I thought."

To be honest, the fact that Alisa was leading after the first five questions was a happy miscalculation for Masachika. But he could not let his guard down. Because there was always the possibility of a reversal of the situation depending on the theme of the quiz questions.

Especially in subculture and entertainment themes, both of which were areas that Alisa was not well versed in. According to Masachika himself, he could only hope that there were no questions with such themes...

"Let's move on to the next theme! The second theme is ~..."

Masachika was naturally anxious when he heard the host's words.

"...The second theme is 《Science》! Here's the first question!"

After letting out a sigh of relief, Masachika once again turned his attention to the mysterious answer display. As for the quiz itself, Masachika decided to leave it to Alisa's abilities.

Since there are elements of an election campaign...it's only natural to think that someone could use these two visible answers to support your favorite candidate, right? What was the poll at the beginning then...? Normally, if participants choose the wrong answer, they can gesture from the audience seats...but that's against the rules...

Or maybe one of the conditions was "It's okay to cheat as long as you don't get caught"? But the problem is that the two participants on stage might be able to realize this mechanism. Under those conditions, Masachika

couldn't think of an effective way to do it within the short time limit of 10 seconds.

No, on the contrary, if I can convey how this works....If the opponent changes their answer in the order from 1 to 4, and the cooperator nods their head at the moment the correct choice is made, that's a pretty valid technique. Maybe....that could be done? If that's the case, they can do it without people realizing.

In an election campaign, there was nothing wrong with doing this kind of petty cheating as long as it was not exposed. Even if it is done in a slightly conspicuous manner, as long as the opposing party does not get strong evidence, it can be an aspect that enhances their reputation.

The problem is...How do I convey this situation to Alya? And to be honest, I don't know if I'll be able to get through it, because the previous problems were too difficult for me.

Masachika had checked the questions a while ago, but he doubted if he could get the correct answer to any of them within ten seconds using the Internet. Considering the time it took to go through the system, it would take about five seconds at most to actually find the correct answer.

Ummm~, it seems like cheating is still difficult, huh...?

While thinking so, Masachika turned his attention to Alisa on stage to at least inform her of the situation. However, Alisa seemed to be completely concentrated on the tablet in her hand and did not notice his gaze.

...Alya?

Seeing the appearance of Alisa, who seemed to be oblivious to what was happening around her, Masachika's impatience grew even more along with his anxiety.

No, I need to calm down first... Why am I in such a hurry? If Alya can't calm down, I'm the one who needs to cool my head first.

After shaking his head and saying that to herself, Masachika changed his mood and stared at his smartphone screen.

First of all, let's check Yuki's answer first. If she's been cheating, there should be signs of it in her answers.

While thinking so, he watched Yuki's answer on his smartphone and also turned his attention to Ayano, who was standing a little far away. But neither of them made any suspicious movements.

No change at all, yes.... Well, I don't think that Ayano could cheat on her own initiative.

It wasn't in Ayano's nature to create a cheating scheme and execute it herself, even if Yuki ordered her to do so. Ayano was too kind-hearted to carry out such a devious scheme.

"Alright, after finishing the second theme, the points for both participants are..... Participant Suou with 344 points! On the other hand, Participant Kujou scored 390 points! This result caused Participant Kujou to further expand her lead!"

Masachika let out an exclamation of "Oh!" at the host's words that sounded there. He then turned his eyes in pure admiration to his partner on stage.

But on the other hand, Alisa was so nervous that she was unable to realize his gaze.

So far, all the questions have been answered correctly...and my preparation has paid off. Don't worry, I can win. I'll beat Yuki-san with my own skills.

[T/L note: This is Alya's thoughts here.]

The tension and relief caused by the short ten-second thinking time, and the answering session that immediately followed, cut through Alisa's nerves faster than she could have imagined. When she realized that this was only a third of the total quiz questions, her confidence was slightly shaken, and she questioned whether she could maintain her concentration until the end. However, Alisa overcame her own feelings of weakness and concentrated on the quiz questions.

But in the next moment, a sentence uttered by the host caused Alisa's spirit to be shaken.

"The theme of the next quiz is 《Trends》! The first question is here!"

Alisa's sense of crisis surged at the theme the host announced. And that feeling was soon proven correct.

"The soap opera "Detective Family Holiday", which took the drama world by storm last year. The sentence the main character said in episode 8 was quite a big topic, but which of the following sentences is the correct sentence?!?"

I have no idea!

Alisa at least remembered hearing the title of the soap opera on the news, but the news didn't mention the content at all. She tried to at least guess what the sentence was from the drama scene shown, but all her choices were.....almost identical with only a few differences in words and word order.

Assuming that I know the sentence, but the question is whether I remember it correctly, is that what it means...? At this rate, I'll have no choice but to go by instinct...!

For a moment, the existence of "Help Call" crossed her mind. But Alisa quickly dismissed that option.

Don't worry, if it's a normal genre, I won't lose to Yuki-san. Even if the situation reverses from this genre, I can catch up with her later.

While saying that to herself, Alisa chose her answer instinctively. Then, she hoped that the answer was correct. But.....

"The correct answer is choice number 1! Ahhhhh! Participant Kujou got the answer wrong for the first time here! Participant Suou closed the gap by one step!"

Wrong answer. This fact made Alisa's stomach churn. She felt her heart tremble, but with her iron will, she suppressed her anxiety.

It's okay. Based on simple calculations alone I still have a one in four chance, so I should be able to get one or two questions right even if I answer them by instinct. As long as I can get two questions right, even if Yuki-san gets all the questions right, the point difference won't be that big.

"Second question! Which local mascot from which city and prefecture has recently become very popular on social networking sites?"

Alright, 2 questions. If I can answer two questions correctly...

"Third question! This multi-purpose item that has become a trending topic lately, what does it do?"

I'm fine, I'm still...

"Oh! Things are finally starting to turn around here! Participant Suou managed to overtake the Participant Kujou!"

One question, my next answer must be correct...

.....

"All questions for the third theme have been completed, and the position has switched! Participant Suou has earned 496 points, while Participant Kujou is still struggling at 390 points! Very unexpectedly, Participant Kujou answered all the questions incorrectly in this theme! What a huge difference! Now that the first half of the theme is over, let's talk about the two participants first! Then, let's start with contestant Suou. That was quite an amazing reversal of the situation, wasn't it?"

"Thank you very much. I was quite surprised that the problems turned out to be harder than I thought. Does everyone from the quiz club always solve questions like this?"

"Well, this problem also made us....."

The host and Yuki were chatting about something, but Alisa barely heard them. With her eyes unfocused on the tablet, she could only grit her teeth in annoyance.

As a result of her stubbornness, she ended up with a point difference that could never be reversed by a single question. Although she was prepared for this, Alisa couldn't help but curse the stupidity of her own instincts in answering the question incorrectly from the start.

"I tried to keep up with the trend to be able to make it a topic of conversation, but... It seems like Alya-san is a bit clueless when it comes to trends, huh. I think she should have used "Help Call" during that segment...."

As soon as Yuki mentioned her name, Alisa snapped back to reality. Alisa looked up from the tablet and looked straight at Yuki. Yuki also looked at Alisa with a charming smile.

"Knowing that it's not a theme you're good at, are you acting stubborn by not using "Help Call"? Or maybe you won't use "Help Call" if I don't use it?"

Stubbornness...That was true. But it was not the stubbornness that came from her rivalry with Yuki. It was her own stubbornness. For her own sake, Alisa had to cling to this stubbornness.

"...What was your reason for accepting to participate in this event?"

At Alisa's counter question, Yuki blinked slightly as if she was a little surprised. Alisa continued calmly without waiting for Yuki's answer.

"I accepted to participate in this event in order to prove my own strength. To prove that I am the one who is suitable to stand alongside

Masachika-kun as the candidate for student council president.

Therefore——"

Alisa then picked up her smartphone on the table and flipped it over. It seemed to show her determination to never use it.

"I have no intention of involving Masachika-kun in this match. Be it victory or defeat in this battle, everything is mine alone."

It was a fierce determination that shone through even when cornered. The audience was captivated by this proud display.

"I will defeat you with my own strength. I won't lose."



Alisa's bold declaration left everyone stunned. Everyone in the audience seemed to gasp, and even the host was speechless for a few seconds. So was Masachika who was watching Alisa from a distance.

"Alya..."

He unconsciously called out his partner's name. Masachika squinted at the dazzling figure.

Ah... She's really cool.

Masachika really thought so from the bottom of his heart. It was wonderful to see people making every effort to become the ideal they aspired to be. He sincerely believed that the effort they dedicated was far more valuable.

Hahaha, I guess she doesn't need to cheat, huh...

Slightly embarrassed, Masachika put his smartphone back away. The only thing he could do now was trust his partner. All he could do was watch and believe that Alisa would be able to bounce back from her own insecurities.

But still...That's how it is, so that's what you're thinking, huh.

Apparently, Masachika himself was the reason why she seemed tense lately. At first he didn't take it too seriously, but it seems like what Yuki said was true.

Even though I deliberately helped Alya with many things as an experienced campaigner, it actually cornered Alya, huh...

Come to think of it, he felt like he was overprotective of his partner. Perhaps that overprotectiveness made Alisa feel as if she was considering herself an unworthy partner.

Without even having to worry...you always walk in front of me

With a hint of sadness, Masachika looked at Alisa on stage. Alisa was shining on stage, and he was just an audience member who could only watch. It seemed to imply the future, and Masachika felt a strange feeling of loneliness.

"Alright~, let's go back and continue the next round!"

The host then announced that the quiz battle was resuming. At the same time, the audience cheered enthusiastically.

The audience watching this battle no longer thought that this was just a school festival entertainment show. This was a serious, pride-filled contest between two opposing candidates. The enthusiastic cheers of the audience showed that fact.

"The next theme is~.....《Arithmetics》! Here's the first question! Which is the correct answer to the size of the following three-dimensional spaces? The time for thinking starts now!"

"Uwaahh."

Masachika was surprised by the difficulty of the question.

No matter what, it was not a question that could be solved in ten seconds. Even if one was able to organize the formula for the size of the shapes in order of thought, ten seconds was still not enough time. In fact, Yuki and Alisa's answers that were chosen almost simultaneously with two seconds left also fell apart.

"That's it! The correct answer is number 3! Wahhhh! Unexpectedly, for the first time both participants chose the wrong answer!"

"Wow~... Something like this can't be helped."

It's almost a matter of luck. Masachika smiled wryly at the thought...

"By the way, the percentage of correct answers to this question is 11%!"

Well, maybe it's still too difficult to come up with the correct answer within 10 seconds~"

"...Huh?"

His smile immediately hardened when he heard the host's next words.

Wait a minute... What did they say?

A shiver ran down Masachika's spine. The strange information sounding in his ears caused his confused head to start speeding up at full speed.

The percentage of correct answers is 11%? No, that's impossible. Even if they answered by guessing, the percentage should still be around 25%. Given that there are some people who can answer the questions correctly on their own, the percentage can't possibly be less than 20%. How could it be 11%? It feels like...

It felt as if it was affected by Yuki and Alisa's wrong answers.

"!!!!"

Masachika felt his heart skip a beat as soon as he thought of this. His breathing stopped for a moment, and something akin to fear ran through his body like an electric shock.

Wait, wait, wait, wait, in other words...

Masachika didn't really care about the progress of the quiz battle anymore. Masachika put his hand over his mouth and fell into his own thoughts.

The percentage of correct quiz answers does not come from the initial calculation, but rather the percentage of correct answers from the audience here? Does that mean the audience can manipulate the points? No, even if the audience could manipulate the points and both participants got the correct answer, it would be meaningless... Damn, I'm so stupid, why didn't I realize that earlier!

Isn't that already the way it is? There was a sure way to manipulate the division in favor of one side, whether it was for Yuki or Alisa. That way was now right in front of his own eyes.

So the reason why the answer display format is like this is because of that, huh!!!

In the extreme possibility, what would happen if everyone here copied Alisa's answer? Of course, if Alisa answered correctly, the percentage of correct answers would be 100% because everyone in the audience would also answer correctly. In other words, the points earned would be zero. Let's say Alisa answered incorrectly, while Yuki answered correctly. The scariest thing is that the percentage of correct answers will be 0%. Only Yuki would get 100 points at once. And no matter how many correct answers Alisa collected later, the point gap between them would not be overtaken.

Hahaha... This event is really like an election. Every viewer here can vote in the form of an answer. That action will change the points for Alya and Yuki.

Most likely many viewers were unaware of this fact. At least, not yet.

But what happens if more people realize it? How many viewers here are Yuki supporters? First of all, Masachika was sure that Alisa's supporters were far more numerous. Then, what she needs to do now is....

I need to find some Alisa supporters and ask them to follow Yuki's answer! So they can somehow reduce the judgment bias! And there's one more thing....

After thinking of an idea, Masachika immediately went into action. He returned his phone to the home screen and opened the contact list. At the same time, he turned around to leave the stage area for a moment.

.....Masachika's decision wasn't wrong at all. However, the only thing that Masachika miscalculated was....There was already someone who understood the scoring system much earlier than himself.

"Oops, sorry Kuze-kun, please don't leave here yet."

"Huh...?"

When he turned around, a familiar girl was standing in front of him. Just as he was about to make his first move, two familiar female students took up positions on his left side and behind him.

"You guys..."

The three of them were people he had met several times in the guise of friends of friends. The fact that they were blocking Masachika's path meant...

"Please forgive my impudence, Masachika-sama. Can you keep quiet without doing anything unnecessary?"

Suddenly, just when he thought he heard someone's voice beside him, his right arm gripped the smartphone tightly. Masachika turned around and wondered how long she had been standing there. Masachika stared at a very familiar girl staring at her with an expressionless face.

"You... So it seems."

Among more than a hundred students present, it was neither Masachika nor anyone else in the audience who first realized the scoring rules for this quiz match.

"I'm well aware of my rudeness. But all this is for the sake of Yuki-sama's victory... Until the quiz competition is over, I won't let Masachika-sama do anything."

The person who noticed it first was Yuki's partner in the student council election, Kimishima Ayano.

Chapter 11

The Winner Is...

There were several reasons why she realized it faster.

Unlike Masachika, Ayano was able to quickly realize that the difficulty of the quiz, and the general percentage of correct answers, were unbalanced because she was paying attention to both participants' points. Unlike most of the students present here, Ayano had never watched a quiz show before, so she didn't assume that "general percentage of correct answers = something to be calculated first." And most importantly,Ayano, as a servant to both Yuki and Masachika, was very skillful in anticipating the actions of her master, Masachika.

"Umm, Yuki-sama... Why did you choose me as your partner for the election campaign?"

That was the question Ayano asked Yuki after the introductory greetings as student council officers at the closing ceremony of the first semester. Ayano realized that she was mediocre compared to Yuki, Masachika, and the other candidates, so she was ready to step down at any time.

"If it's Yuki-sama, I think you can get a more capable and popular partner than me..."

It was not a condescending attitude, but a pure opinion based on calm self-analysis. Yuki answered Ayano's words with strong determination.

"Hmm? Well, if you look at it in terms of popularity alone, there might be people who can gather more votes...but if it's just that alone, it's not enough to beat Onii-chan, right?"

She then laughed fearlessly and said:

"In this world...there's no one better than Ayano at reading my and Onii-chan's mind, right? That's why... Ayano has not only become my best right hand, but also my strongest anti Onii-chan resistance weapon. "

Yuki's entire words were deeply engraved in Ayano's heart. And with those words in mind, Ayano spent all her energy to read Masachika's mind as soon as this quiz battle started.

How would Masachika think and act given the information at hand? What conclusions would Masachika draw from this information? Her usual course of action would have been to assist Masachika, but this time she chose to obstruct Masachika.

As a result, Ayano was able to move two steps ahead of Masachika. One option was to directly obstruct Masachika's movements by summoning her friends. And the other was...the manipulation of points with the assistance of her friends.

"After choosing Suou-san... Ah, it's in, it's in. Now all we have to do is just keep following Kujou-san's answers, right?"

"Yes, please help."

"Okay~, just relax~. I talked to the people in the class a while ago, so I think they're all willing to help, right~?"

"So that's how it is, I'm really sorry~ Kuze-kun. Because this also affects the election campaign, you know."

"Don't tell me that a student council member would do something so cruel as cornering a weak male student by force, right?"

While circling Masachika, the three girls smiled fakely at him. With her usual expressionless face, Ayano grabbed Masachika's right arm.

"I don't want to do anything rude. Can you put your smartphone in your pocket again?"

"Something rude...? Specifically, what are you going to do?"

Masachika's annoyance at being outsmarted was replaced by a stiff smile.

Even if it's four against one...Do they think they can beat me?

With that intention, Masachika turned his cold gaze on the girls around him. At the sign of danger, all the girls except Ayano withdrew their smiles.

"If you won't obey my instructions..."

Meanwhile, without changing her expression, Ayano looked straight at Masachika and told him.

"I'm going to kiss Masachika-sama."

"Yup I surrender~. I'm really giving up, I'll just obey her~"

Masachika slid his smartphone into his pocket in the blink of an eye, then raised his hand as if giving up. Then, as instructed by Ayano, he turned around and faced the stage quietly.

"Please don't do anything unnecessary, and watch this match unfold."

"Yes~"

Masachika lowered his hand, nodding his head attentively. Of course, that was only surface level, and he was already plotting a counterattack in his head. Masachika had already figured it out from the previous conversation.

I think I've got the full picture...All that's left is how I need to convey it to Alya...

While summarizing the information in his head, Masachika looked at Alisa on the stage. However, Alisa once again never noticed his gaze.

"Alright, now the fourth theme is over. For those who are curious about the two participants' points~... Participant Suou has 570 points! While participant Kujou has 492 points! Participant Suou still has a big lead!"

I can't catch up... Even though there are still eleven questions left...

Alisa had one more question than Yuki in terms of correct answers. The point difference, however, was not shrinking as expected.

If it continues like this... Will I need 3 questions to catch up with her? No, before that, if Yuki-san doesn't make a mistake, I won't be able to catch up with her again...

Impatience began to rise within Alisa.

Kugh! No! Don't think about what I can't think about! I need to focus on the problem at hand!

Alisa tried to refocus her mind, but her brain began to complain of fatigue as the high difficulty questions kept attacking one after another.

"Then next, let's move on to the fifth theme! The theme is...『Inspiration』!"

Inspiration...? Somehow, it feels like I'm going to use my head again...

That kind of bad omen would frequently come true. The next thing she knew, a row of numbers appeared on her screen.

"The following numbers are arranged according to certain rules. 1, 2, 2, 1, 2, 1, 2, 1, 2, □, 2, 2, 2, 2, 1.. Which number is right in □? (1) 1, (2) 2, (3) 3, (4) 4. Thinking time starts!"

[T/L note: Alisa has to guess what number □ is here.]

Ummm, in this type of problem, the number of numbers must first be counted! One, two...there are a total of twelve! Something that adds up to 12? Twelve months? Yes! The Japanese calendar? Wrong! January and February! So, in English? No, something easier...Some other item with a total of 12.....! The Chinese Zodiac!

Alisa began to read the zodiac signs in order in her head and began to realize that the numbers represented the number of letters of the zodiac names.

Horse, sheep...Since there are three characters, the answer is 3!

Then, with one second remaining, she selected option 3 just in time. The correct answer was safely announced immediately after, but the point difference was not reduced because Yuki also answered correctly.

Impatience began to creep into her heart.

No...I have to concentrate. I have to concentrate, otherwise...

The word "defeat" came to mind. She closed her eyes firmly, desperate to get rid of her negative thoughts. The next question appeared on her tablet when she opened her eyes.

"Question two! How many stars were there on the archway of the venue of this quiz program?"

"Help"

Alisa's thoughts were interrupted by a voice from her right. Alisa looked in the direction of the voice, her head frozen, and saw Yuki raise her right hand, a faint smile on her face.

"Thinking time begins!"

Then Alisa heard the host's voice and became pensive again. When she read the question again...

"What the hell is this?"

Alisa raised her face with a stunned expression. In the distance, a billboard advertising a quiz show program stood. However, Alisa had no idea

how many stars had been drawn there. How could she have known? Because she could only see the back side of the sign from the stage.

"That's enough! Time's up!"

And she could hear a merciless voice. Alisa immediately rushed to her tablet, but the selection button was already grayed out and unable to be pressed.

"Fufu, only one person can use the 'Help Call' assistance for one question."

Alisa was taken aback when she heard a voice filled with laughter. When she turned around, she saw Yuki with a triumphant smile on her face.

"When I heard this rule, I expected it for a long time, you know? Questions that require Help Call assistance."

Then, Yuki relentlessly carried out a mental attack on Alisa's mind.

Whether it was her smile or the look in her eyes, she made one thing clear to Alisa. Yuki's words from a few minutes ago were replayed in Alisa's mind.

"Or do you mean that you won't use 'Help Call' if I don't use it?"

Perhaps, the question during that short pause...was a provocation to find out whether I intended to use "Help Call" or not.....

Alisa answered truthfully despite not knowing what her intentions were.

"I don't intend to use 'Help Call.'" she stated.

Since then, I've been dancing in Yuki-san's palm continuously...

Alisa felt that her vision was shaking violently.

"Then, are you ready for 10 seconds?"

"Yes."

The host held Yuki's smartphone in her blurry vision and tapped the screen; not long after, Ayano's voice began to come through the smartphone's speaker.

"Yuki-sama, the stars are seven. So, the correct answer is 3."

"I see, thank you, Ayano"

How could it be wrong? Because Ayano herself was checking it directly on the other side of her phone right now.

Yuki gently thanked her partner and casually tapped the tablet. The result was clear.

"Participant Suou's answer is correct! The general percentage of correct answers for this question is 26%! So she managed to earn 74 points!"

"Huh...?"

74 points? In other words...The difference is 152 points?

The number was so large that it made Alisa feel hopeless and her vision became very blurry this time.

Impossible. That point difference couldn't be reversed with nine questions. No, from the very beginning, Yuki-san has been leading the match so far. No matter how much I try to fight now, there's nothing I can do...

"Now, the third question!"

The next question was still being read by the host, but Alisa couldn't hear it. Her brain was simply not attempting to comprehend the statement that should have been visible to her. Her brain had completely shut down due to despair and resignation. In a daze, she just waited for time to pass. Then, while Alisa was in that state, her ears suddenly heard....

"Help!"

From afar, her partner's loud statement sounded very clear.



Uwaahhh, I'm getting so much attention~. Well, that's only natural.

As soon as he raised his right hand high and raised his voice, Masachika felt the attention of the entire audience immediately focused on him.

Not only the standing students, but even those sitting in the chairs turned their bodies to look at him. And also the girls who were still surrounding him. Well, from their point of view, since he suddenly raised his voice loudly, it was only natural.

But...I didn't break the rules, you know?

When Yuki mentioned the "Help Call" rule, Masachika also remembered the rule. Before that, the rule had also been explained by the host.

"Each couple, be it Suou-san/Kimishima-san or Kujou-san/Kuze-san, has the right to use "Help call" only once. As the name suggests, this is the

right to ask for help from each other's partners. If you want to use it, raise your hand and say "Help." You will be connected to your partner on the phone for ten seconds."

Each partner is only entitled to use the "Help Call" once. There is no rule stating that non-participants cannot use it!

With that intention, Masachika stared silently at the host. Then, the host opened their mouth after a moment's pause.

"Umm~, Kuze-san, the partner of Participant Kujou, declares the use of "Help Call." There is no rule that says the declaration must be made by the participant, so there is nothing wrong with it. Umm, it seems that the answer from participant Suou has been locked...Then let's connect with his phone right away. Kuze-san, can you call directly to Kujou-san's smartphone?"

After waving his hand in response to the host's words, Masachika checked on Ayano next to him in a whisper...

"As you've already heard, this is an action in accordance with the rules of the game. As Yuki's partner, there's no way you'd do such a sneaky sabotage in front of so many students, right? Of course, you definitely wouldn't do something that would be a disgrace to Yuki, right?"

Ayano's gaze shook with anxiety and confusion upon hearing Masachika's words. The other three girls looked at Ayano as well, seemingly at a loss for words. Masachika quickly called Alisa while the girls were debating what to do.

"It's connected! Participant Kujou, are you ready? The time limit is 10 seconds."

The host who took Alisa's smartphone asked her, but even from a distance it could be seen that Alisa's reaction seemed slow. Masachika could feel Alisa's eyes staring at him in a daze. Masachika immediately looked straight at his companion who was like that with eyes without hesitation.

Don't worry, you're not wrong at all. Your pride and determination were not in vain at all. Since you never used Help Call until now, it paved the way for you.

That's why Masachika had already decided what he needed to say. He would never do anything to undermine his colleague's self-assurance. What Masachika said in those ten seconds provided no clue to the quiz question.

"Then, please begin!"

The host then tapped the screen of his smartphone. The two smartphones were then connected. Within ten seconds, the message Masachika had to deliver was...

"Alya! From now on, you must answer only at the last second!"

A strategy to destroy the enemy's strategy. And...Words of encouragement for Alisa who looked depressed for a while!

"Alya! You're the one who deserves to be the Student Council President! I can guarantee it! So don't give up until the end!"

Then 10 seconds went by. With a few exceptions, the people around him exchanged puzzled looks and were taken aback by Masachika's seemingly insignificant words. However, there was a voice that clarified their confusion.

"So that's it..."

The person who answered on stage was not Alisa....but Yuki.

"I thought it felt weird during the quiz questions before...But, so that's how it works, huh."

She slowly began her words by shifting the view of the place from Masachika to herself. After that, Yuki looked at the audience seating and said stern words.

"Is it possible that everyone can see my and Alya-san's answers?"

Unrest spread through the crowd before they had a chance to try and quell it. That was the best proof of all.

Laughing out loud, Yuki continued.

"The general percentage of correct answers in this quiz is a direct calculation of everyone's personal answers here right now. If that's the case, then it makes sense that the general percentage of correct answers was only revealed after the correct answers were announced, especially since the general percentage of correct answers in the previous question was also very low. From the beginning, the quiz question can only be solved in this place."

Yuki revealed the hidden rules in detail while chuckling. Many viewers, who were unaware of the rule, looked surprised and excited as they listened to her words carefully.

"In other words, it's a quiz where each member of the crowd can manipulate the percentage of correct answers to manipulate the points we

receive. So this is the election campaign element in question, yes. I think it's an interesting rule."

After glancing at the host and saying this, Yuki got up from her seat, then placed her hands on her chest and spoke to the audience in a sincere manner.

"However...I now want to have a fair and serious match with Alya-san. For the people who have heard what I just said and are thinking of manipulating the answers in my favor. If there are people like that, I already feel happy about your feelings. But please don't do it. Please don't interfere in our match. So, please believe in my victory and watch quietly, okay?"

The audience admired Yuki's willingness to fight one-on-one without the intervention of others. Many people were drawn to the seemingly noble performance. Masachika, on the other hand, gave her a bitter look.

That's good... She's good at this. Anyway, thanks to my suggestion earlier, she couldn't manipulate points against Alya anymore. So she deliberately revealed everything herself and told her supporters to stop cheating to show that she was a good and honorable person? She deliberately drew back the attention of the audience who had been interested in Alya during the short break?

In fact, the speculation doesn't seem so far from the truth. The atmosphere that secretly hoped for Alisa's reversal drama had been annihilated, and now the atmosphere in the audience wanted to support the two.

"For everyone else too, please do the same. From now on, please don't look at our answers and purely participate in the quiz?"

The audience began to obey Yuki's request, who was acting cute and graceful. Each individual would demonstrate their neutrality by covering a portion of the phone screen with their hand or a handkerchief. Yuki managed to persuade the entire audience and change the rules of the game in less than a minute.

"Hmmm! Umm~... Is everything ready? Let's start again"

"Yes, I apologize for interrupting the program."

The host raised their voice, Yuki bowed briefly and thanked them, then sat back in her seat. On the other hand, the host only responded with a wry smile.

"No, let's start with the Participant Kujou's answers. Once again, 10 seconds starts from now!"

Alisa was given ten seconds to answer the question again after the "Help Call" session ended. Masachika's words just now provided no hints about the quiz question. Her response, on the other hand, was unequivocal. Alisa opened her mouth slowly after finishing her response in about two seconds.

"Thank you very much, Masachika-kun."

Alisa's thanks rang out across the stage. At the same time, Masachika realized Alisa had awoken from her slumber as he gazed into her blue eyes, which had regained their radiance.

"And I feel very grateful to you, Yuki-san. For wanting a serious match with me... Now I can beat you fair and square."

"Fufu, that's my line."

The two of them exchanged glances and the crowd was energized again.

"The answers of both participants are locked! The correct answer is.....4! Well done, both participants answered correctly!"

And before long, the cheers and whistles grew louder as neither side showed any signs of relenting.

Nobody cared about the host's warning to be quiet during the quiz, which had lost its meaning.

"Don't be so wary, Ayano. I won't do any more sneaky tricks, really."

Masachika said while lightly shrugging his shoulders and turning to the person next to him, Ayano only responded with a silent gaze.

"I'll leave the rest to Alya. You should also trust Yuki and keep an eye on her."

Masachika turned away from his childhood friend, who appeared unsure of his statement, and turned his attention to the stage.

Masachika, on the other hand, was not lying at all. He had no plans to do anything else. He'd done what he needed to do and said what he needed to say.

Even now, people from Yuki's side who were gathering at the venue one after another to respond to Ayano's call could no longer act in favor of

Yuki. On the contrary, from Masachika's point of view, their presence was welcome.

"Alright, the fifth theme is over! With six questions remaining, both participants' points are~.... Participant Suou! 776 points! Participant Kujou! 680 points! Participant Suou still had a big lead, but...from here on, the difficulty level will jump higher. Perhaps with a larger division of points, there is still a chance for Participant Kujou to turn things around! Now, let's move on to the sixth theme! The theme is 《Super difficult questions》!"

The host's words were true, and from there the questions continued with more than sixty points earned. However, neither Yuki nor Alisa could answer all the questions correctly, and started giving wrong answers. Despite this, Alisa managed to show her intelligence and managed to answer three questions correctly here. She was one step closer to Yuki who only managed to answer two questions correctly.

"Hiyaa, what an amazing battle! Even in this thrillingly fierce battle, there is only one last question left! Following the conclusion of the sixth theme, each participant's points are~... Participant Suou! 904 points! Participant Kujou! 880 points! The difference between them is 24 points!!!!"

The excitement in the audience reached its peak due to the extremely tense match. In the midst of it all, Masachika breathed a sigh of relief.

"Alya is great. She's really amazing."

Ayano looked suspiciously at Masachika, who put down his cell phone and gave a soft clap.

"Isn't it still too soon to feel relieved? Yuki-sama is still leading the points."

However, Masachika replied firmly to Ayano's question.

"No, it's all over. This is Alya's victory."

Ayano widened her eyes as she heard her words filled with conviction. After looking at her for a moment, Masachika then said:

"You've never watched a quiz show, have you? That's why you immediately realized that the percentage of correct answers is generally calculated directly... That's why you don't understand the rules of the game."

"The rules of the game?"

"Ah, in a good old quiz show..... The last question is the one that's supposed to be the big surprise."

Ayano's gaze fluttered when she heard Masachika's words. However, she immediately looked straight at Masachika, and answered in an unyielding tone.

"Even so, if Yuki-sama answers correctly, the situation will never turn around. I believe in Yuki-sama."

"Just trusting her doesn't help much. After all, thanks to you already calling a lot of friends, Alya is definitely ahead by 24 points."

"What's that supposed to mean...?"

[T/L note: He's basically saying here that if Ayano hadn't called Yuki's supporters to manipulate the points, Alya would be winning on her own merit, and therefore would most likely win the whole thing.]

Masachika did not answer her and simply turned his gaze back to the stage. As if affected by Masachika, Ayano also turned her head to the front...

From the very beginning, the point rule favored the team with the most supporters as long as they were aware of it. You could say that it was unfair.

If that was the case, then there must be a chance for the team with fewer supporters to score a lot of points. And what if it's the final question that's completely different from the previous quiz questions? If so, what would that question be? The answer was already stated before the quiz started.

"Who do you think is best suited to be the Student Council President?"

Or maybe....If Yuki knew about this question, she would have realized it.

But now it was too late. The support ratings for both of them have been confirmed.

"Now for the last question! The final question is ~.....here!!!"

The host then waved a hand at the screen and the final question was displayed.

"Do you feel suitable to be the student council president!? Please answer with 'yes' or 'no'? The time for thinking begins!"

The audience cheered loudly at the final question which was very different from the ones before. Among them, Masachika suddenly looked up,

and his gaze immediately fell on Alisa's gaze. She then nodded slowly and deeply.

【Win, Alya!】

Masachika knew that she wouldn't be able to hear the line he whispered.

Alisa laughed with an expression that was both troublesome and pleased as she placed her finger on the tablet.

"That's it! Both participants' answers have been locked. Now...Let's talk about the point distribution on this last question!"

Epilogue

Aroma

"That was seriously one heck of a heated battle. Ohii-sama was so close to winning, too....."

"No, no, no, but in terms of number of correct answers, Ohii-sama wins, right? Besides, she was trying to figure out the rules while solving the problems, you know? It may have been reversed at the end, but in terms of content, Ohii-sama won, didn't she?"

[T/L note: These are the words from the audience. If I can recall correctly, "Ohii-sama" was Yuki's nickname.]

"You say the number of correct answers, but that was due to Kujou's mistakes in the 『trend』 section. In most of the other genres, Kujou-san won, and in terms of quiz competition, she won, didn't she?"

"Speaking of finding out the rules, Ayano-chan is the one who's amazing! You may not know, but Ayano-chan realized the rules of point distribution from the very beginning, right?"

"Seriously? But if you say so, Kuze-kun is equally amazing. When he used that "Help Call", at first I wondered what he was really talking about... Well, even without doing that, couldn't he have guessed the content of the last question?"

"Ohhh that's right. I got goosebumps at the end."

"I actually felt mesmerized by Kujou-san's words. That dignified behavior when in a disadvantageous situation... I'm already a fan of hers."

"Oh, so is Suou-sama. She's very graceful when responding to Kujou-sama's wishes and expects a serious and fair match."

"That's right, too....It feels like when it's all over, who will be the winner in the end?"

"The quiz rules are pretty special, aren't they? But it was very interesting!"

While listening to the excitement of the audience, Masachika and Alisa sat on the chairs at the back of the stage. The organizers were busy preparing for the next event and there was no one around them. After the fierce battle, the two of them just sat side by side without exchanging any words.

"I want to be a partner worthy of you."

Finally, Masachika quietly listened to the words his partner had just spoken. Alisa also pondered her words while looking ahead.

"There are many people who rely on you and...there are many people who recognize your ability. And... You and Yuki-san look like an ideal couple..."

There, Alisa stuttered as she put more energy into her voice. Her competitive spirit and fighting spirit surged as she strongly expressed her thoughts.

"That's why, I want to prove my strength. I want to defeat Yuki-san with my own strength, and just not be an ornament that is just a burden to you. I am the one who deserves to be your partner. I just want to be recognized...."

The words faded at the end. Alisa then lowered her eyebrows and looked at Masachika.

"But... It turned out to be in vain. In the end, without your help, I would have lost."

After saying that sentence in a self-deprecating tone, Alisa lowered her face. Her facial expression was hidden by the silver hair and could not be seen, but her hands, which were clasped tightly over the skirt, clearly showed her feelings.

How dazzling.

Masachika felt envious when Alisa honestly admitted her own incompetence and frustration. She regarded that integrity as something noble from the bottom of her heart. And at the same time, Masachika had a premonition.

Someday.....Alya will definitely not need me anymore.

Even if she doesn't rush now, Alisa will attract more people in the future. Many people will be touched by Alisa's dedicated and proud way of life and will gather to support her. In the midst of it all, Alisa must continue to walk straight as always. And then...Masachika, who was forever stuck in the past, will definitely not be able to keep up.

If...

If Masachika confirms Alisa's words here and now while saying platitudes, "It might be so, but don't worry because I will continue to support you." Alisa might rely on Masachika again. She might take Masachika's hand and smile as she said, "From now on, please help, okay?"

But that should not be done. Just because he could not walk at the same speed as the other party, he should not say something that would hinder someone who could actually walk on her own two feet.

The thing to do now is...

Masachika quietly sat down and spun around in front of Alisa and knelt in front of her. The scene was akin to a knight swearing loyalty to the princess.

"Alya, since the beginning...you have never lost."

After hearing those words, Alisa looked up slightly and was wide-eyed by Masachika kneeling in front of her. While gazing attentively into her eyes, Masachika gently grasped both of Alisa's tightly clasped hands.

"The determination and pride you showed on stage attracted many people there. Many people in that place will want to support you. Therefore, you were not defeated from the start."

He didn't need to embellish his sentences with sweet words. All Masachika needed to do was speak straight from the heart.

"All I did was fight against Ayano as a fellow vice-chair candidate...and only achieved a victory in that match. You got something much more valuable than that. It was all thanks to your own power that attracted the people in that place, and that was your own accomplishment. So, there's nothing to regret."

Upon hearing Masachika's words, Alisa's eyes shook. The hand that had been clenched tightly reached for Masachika's hand.

"Really?"

"Hmm?"

"Do you think...I'm really recognized by everyone?"

She must have been very tense the whole time. She was worried and struggling alone. It was Masachika's lack of experience that made her do so.

"Yes, of course."

He assured Alisa of this as a way to make amends, but this was still not enough to relieve Alisa's anxiety.

"Why can you say that for sure?"

"It's because..."

Masachika was lost for words for a moment, and immediately felt ashamed of himself. He had already decided not to use sweet words. As he wished, Masachika conveyed his honest thoughts.

"It's because...I was attracted to you on stage more than anyone else."

Alisa's eyes widened when she heard Masachika's words. Conveying his heart, Masachika continued further.

"You looked cooler than anyone when you declared that you would beat Yuki head-on. I really feel proud to have you as my partner."

Masachika then told her firmly while showing a slightly sad smile.

"That is why, you must continue to move forward with dignity. I will eliminate everyone who stands in your way."

Even if that person is myself. Those words were added only in his own heart. Alisa, who did not realize that, suddenly smiled with a grimace on her face.

"...Thank you."

Alisa pressed Masachika's hand to her forehead after saying that in a hushed tone.

"I feel happy that you are my partner."

Masachika's heart ached as he heard the sincere whisper from Alisa. Alisa softly lowered her hands to her knees and smiled softly as Masachika held his expression to hide his emotions.

Masachika returned her radiant smile with a genuine one. Then, as they exchanged calm glances, one of the committee members who served as management staff returned backstage.

"E-Ehh!?"

When that person saw Masachika kneeling before the seated Alisa while holding hands, they took a step back in surprise. They blinked a few times, then took a step back and....scratched their cheeks, confused and embarrassed.

"Umm, ummm... Are you proposing?"

"T-That's not it! He was just checking my pulse....."

"No, Alya. That excuse doesn't make any sense."

When Masachika tsukkomi'd unintentionally, the management member stepped back with a half smile.

"Ah, then, please enjoy your time together..."

"H-Hold on!"

Alisa hurriedly got up from her seat, but how could she follow them to the side of the stage?

"~~~~!"

Alisa struggled to decide whether or not to chase after them while raising something like a moan sound in her mouth. Then beside her, Masachika, who was also standing up, smiled bitterly.

"What's with "proposal"? After all, we can't get married yet, right?"

When Masachika pondered, Alisa gave him a dissatisfied look.

"Even though we can't get married yet,we can still get engaged, you know?"

"No, no, no, don't take it seriously. We won't do it anyway, okay."

"Ara, are you dissatisfied with me?"

Instantly, Alisa smiled wickedly while grinning like a little devil. With a gasp and an "ugh" look on his face, Masachika quickly escaped into citing the common accepted opinion of society.

"It's not that...It's just that, there's no way you can get engaged while still in the first year of high school."

"Is that so? I don't mind if there's someone I've decided on in my heart."

"Huh?"

Hearing the unexpected response, Masachika raised one eyebrow and smiled provocatively. He then quickly moved to counterattack.

"Hearing your answer on this occasion...seems to imply that you want to urge me to do something? As a gentleman, should I ask for your engagement here?"

Alisa raised her chin in a mocking tone at Masachika's counterattack.

"Ba~ka."

Then, while playing with her hair with the fingers of her left hand, Alisa said....



[T/L note: Here Alya says "No way!"]

Author's Note

Hello, it's Sunsunsun here again. Sunsunsun, who has kept you waiting for more than a half-year after ending volume four awkwardly. Is this a punishment for what happened? Once again, it appears that there are twelve

pages of additional notes. For those of you who are thinking "huh?" when you see the word "also" this time. This is a story based on Extra Volume 4.5. If you've read it, you'll know that, as usual, there's nothing interesting to be gained from this afterword, so feel free to put it down.

Now I'm in serious trouble. I didn't expect an afterword of more than ten pages in two consecutive volumes. The previous volume ended when I wrote a series of sentences in a mysterious tension and let myself go..... As a result, I can't recall more than half of what I wrote. I'm not kidding. It was simple to double-check what I had written, but I was afraid to re-read it because I remembered making black history. I'm currently in an uncontrollable state of tension. I wasn't in a position to write an afterword with any vigor.

Although I don't have to force myself to write an afterword, if you normally place an advertisement after the afterword, that's the story, right? I'm curious if it's different. Personally, I don't think it's attractive if there are numerous advertisements at the end of the book. Besides, Roshidere is quite popular, if I may say so. You'd expect a certain advertising effect if you put ads there. Then, wouldn't it be strange to allow free advertising? That's right, if they want ads on Roshidere, they have to pay for them! Cover the advertising cost!

.....While saying that, I couldn't help but notice a huge contradiction in my current situation, in which I was writing an afterword that didn't cost me a dime no matter how much I wrote. Is this what they mean by mis-prioritizing? As an example...

.....

.....

.....But never mind. I couldn't come up with a good analogy. Not surprising, given that I had the idea while watching a video ad on Magapoke. Oh, I'm not even kidding. On November 5, 2022, I just finished opening a treasure chest (you'll get points and tickets) by watching advertising videos up to three times per day, and if you read them, you'll get points for reading the manga you want. In addition, the manga I'm currently speed reading is... Huh? What's the deal with these lovely character designs? Eh!? An incredibly beautiful girl with a trash-gazing gaze!? Ah, Ahh~~~! This wonderful work turned out to beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee...

Isn't this the manga adaptation of "Tokidoki Bosotto Roshia-go de Dereru Tonari no Alya-san" drawn by the legendary Tenamachi-sensei?

That was a lie, of course. Because it was so cold, I just got goosebumps. No, the manga version of Alya is so beautiful and attractive that it makes me cringe when I see the look in her eyes as if she's staring at trash, but the part about swiping my fingers quickly while writing was a lie. Because I read it right after the date changed. No, because I was given access to the draft and final versions first.

That's why I mentioned it in the afterword to the last volume... It ought to have been. Huh? Didn't I already publicize it? My memory is a little hazy... Oh, please, please. Thank you, thank you, thank you. The obi on the side of the cover clearly states that the serialization of this manga begins in October. Yes, as previously announced, Magapoke has begun the manga adaptation of Roshidere. I'm constantly impressed by the excellent work being done. I am truly amazed from the bottom of my heart.

Depending on the work, there is sometimes speculation that the mangaka has ignored the original work and done whatever he or she wants, or questions if the original author is satisfied with this? However, the original author is extremely pleased with Roshidere. Tenamachi-sensei drew the manga himself, believing that "the best manga adaptations are made in a form that satisfies the original author," so I can leave it to him with confidence. I

occasionally express my thoughts to him and, in turn, I receive advice from him. I consider myself extremely fortunate to have a good mangaka.

As a result, the manga version of "Tokidoki Bosotto Roshia-go de Dereru Tonari no Alya-san" is continuously released on the manga app Magapoke every Saturday. As I previously stated, if you read the advertising videos and comics that you earn points for every day, you can easily accumulate enough points to read the most recent chapter, so give it a shot!

.....Ah, bad. "A series of rambling sentences with no substance," I wrote at the start, followed by a bold and important advertisement. Hmm....okay, I just rewrote it to read "little or no substance." I don't believe the meaning has shifted significantly, but it's all a matter of mood, mood.

Is it okay to put up a lot of advertisements for other companies' manga apps like this? For now, let's first check with my editor.... I've already written about Tenamachi-sensei, so I'll check with him again. Though her schedule is already overburdened, if I add any more work, editor-san will have a nosebleed and exceed her limit. Nonetheless, I want to see for myself.

Oh, it appears that editor-san is very busy. She did, after all, edit Sneaker Bunko's Grand Prize-winning novel, which hadn't been published in twelve years. I can't even fathom the magnitude of that responsibility. The

editor told me in his notebook about his enthusiasm for taking on this heavy responsibility, which was also a very passionate story. I couldn't help but be taken aback when I learned that he planned to launch an award-winning work as the culmination of his life's ups and downs. I'd like to impress someone with my own writing as well.... That desire has resulted in this afterword. Ha ha!

.....Wait, what? Perhaps it is not too late to begin now. Perhaps I can still present a serious and intense episode while making the readers' hearts skip a beat.

The first thought that occurred to me was a good one. Fortunately, I still have a lot of pages left. Okay!!! Let's get started! Ehemm! Oh, dear! Uhum, Eunnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn Ah~... Mmmm..... Is everything all right now?

I'm more serious now than I was before. The sound of a flute is followed by the sound of puhiyooo, which is followed by the sound of kannkak an! Huh...? What is that noise? A clapper made of wood? "Kabuki," "beginning of curtain opening," "Kankan," and many others..... It reminds me of the rhythm of a wooden clapper. My prediction proved correct. I am, in fact, very well educated. Hmm!

Oops, excuse me. Let me repeat that.... I'm going to talk about how SunSunSun, me, went from writing novels on the web novel site, Syousetsu, to publishing Roshidere.

First and foremost, my first steps as a novelist began in a university lab. I know some will say something right away, but please bear with me. I was a graduate student who was addicted to novels at the time. And the lab where I worked was relatively free as long as I delivered results. It was a good lab, and one student inquired, "Professor, can I watch YouTube in the lab?" "Hmmm, well, you can, because I watch too," the professor replied. Furthermore, because alcohol is usually lined up in public places, there is a rumor among students that one must be able to resist drinking in order to enter the labs there. When I was here, however, that rumor was completely false. Roshidere, by the way, is now housed in a common room with a number of scientific journals. Among the current juniors, there may be whispers that "only Otaku who like to drink sake are allowed in that lab." Yes, I understand if you want to tsukkomi about it, but hold on a second.

As any science major student or graduate will tell you, some science experiments take a long time to complete. I did at least ten hours of research, but more than half of that time was spent waiting. Of course, I used that

waiting time to conduct other experiments, read papers, and attend lectures, but I still had plenty of free time.

Those of you who are astute should have guessed it by now. In the interim, I began writing novels. The first story I wrote was a short story with more than 20,000 words. I began writing as a fad activity to try out one day, and as I continued to write, my writing began to form a story, which I first showed to M-san, a senior student in the laboratory. This M-san was a doctoral student two years my senior, but she was the only other otaku in the lab at the time, as well as an aspiring novelist, so she was a senior writer in my eyes. M-san then suggested I publish it somewhere because it was well-written, so I published my first novel as a writer on Syousetsu, which had previously been a reading-only site.

As a result, I received a much larger response than I had anticipated. I enjoyed writing novels and began posting them one after the other. To be honest, when I first started writing novels, I had a vague desire to see them turned into books. Rather than becoming a novelist, I wished for my works to be recognized by industry professionals and to continue to exist in novel form in the world. There is a yearning for that. It is one of those desires that every human being should have at least once in their lives: to leave at least one trace of themselves in the world while still alive. I don't have grand plans to

make money from my novels or have them adapted into anime. Instead, I just wanted to leave evidence that there was a novelist named SunSunSun in this world, but I quickly abandoned that hazy fantasy.

Because I'm surprisingly unsuited to the concept of a long story. This is not humility, but rather reality. The longer the story went on, the more I wanted to write about this and that along the way, and eventually everything became redundant. Furthermore, it becomes tedious, so the longer it goes on, the less I am able to maintain the quality of the story. I read my own novels and discovered that they were all amateur hobbies unworthy of being published in book form.

On the other hand, I was a natural at writing short stories. I had a lot of ideas for situations and characters to write about, so short stories that could be written with just a series of ideas were ideal for me. So I called myself a short story writer and wrote one after the other. Thousands of people eventually favored my account, and more and more of my short stories began to appear in the short story rankings. Then, one time, my short story work was ranked 18th out of 300 in the overall short story rankings. However, the majority of my works were ranked below one hundred, and only one of my short stories was ranked among the top fifty.

Yes, one of those works was a short version of the Roshidere series. Then, in mid-June 2020, a month after I posted the short version of Roshidere, I received a message from a publisher asking if I wanted to publish it in book form.

"Huh?"

That was my reaction when I realized the message. I was surprised to find out that the sender of the message was the editor of Sneaker Bunko. Actually, it wasn't exactly the 'book deal' stage, but more like an invitation that said, "why don't you try making a long story out of a short story into a book?" But in my mind, my heart had a strong feeling of, "No... Isn't that impossible?" It felt a bit like a sprinter who has done quite well in amateur competitions and is suddenly asked to become a professional marathon runner. Nevertheless, it was still a great honor and joy to have caught the attention of a professional editor, especially that of the prestigious Sneaker Bunko editor. Although I was still confused, I decided to at least listen to her first.

That's how I established contact remotely with Miyakawa-san who is now the editor in charge of the series. Miyakawa-san first praised the title, "Tokidoki Bosotto Roshia-go de Dereru Tonari no Alya-san", and the

synopsis, "However, she doesn't know that I can understand Russian", as perfect. In addition, she then spoke passionately and enthusiastically about the appeal of the short version of Roshidere, and said, "I think this is a work that has great potential, so why don't we work together to make it into a book?". Being touched by her enthusiasm, I replied, "Of course, go ahead."

Then, a long-distance meeting with Miyakawa-san ended with a promise to start plotting the story. Suddenly, the road to book publishing opened up before me. The vague dream of publishing a book, which I thought I had abandoned long ago, might come true. The unexpected possibilities that suddenly appeared made me exhale from deep within my chest and mutter one word....

"Alright! I guess it's time to write a new short story!"

.....Seriously. I'll say it one more time. It's real. Not non-fiction at all. Actually, as you can see from my Syousetsu account, I've been posting short stories for some time now.

It's surprising, isn't it? There are many people in this world who even when they hear the passionate words of someone like Miyakawa-san, don't seem to be affected by it. That's me. Feel free to mock me.

If I may make some excuses, I was really in the groove as a short story writer at the time. In addition, I've also heard here and there that this kind of book publishing proposal is often canceled halfway through....It felt like it was better to have six thousand words in front of me and get a response, rather than a hundred thousand words in the distance that I didn't know whether it would get across or not. And also simply put, I'm the type of person who is very reluctant to try new things. Well, that's not really an excuse. I can directly feel that the favorability points of writers and aspiring writers towards me are decreasing. Ahh~, maybe that's it. Sometimes there are people in this world who say, "I went to the audition as my friend's companion, but I was the one who got auditioned", and you can think of me as a variant of that. Sometimes, even for people like me, opportunities can unexpectedly fall into my lap. In a sense, the world is both fair and unfair.

I, who had no such drive or energy, was somehow able to finish writing the first volume of Roshidere, thanks to Miyakawa-san. She kept supporting and encouraging me time and time again with her enthusiasm. I had the naïve thought that I couldn't write 100,000 words without feedback from readers, so she sent me detailed feedback for each story. When I was writing this fifth volume of Roshidere, I asked her, "There is currently no fanservice scene for Alya, should I make her undress for the front?" to which she immediately

replied, "Please do it for everyone's sake". When I received that answer, I sincerely thought, "Ah, it was really nice working with her."

When looking back on it like this, I feel that my life as a writer has been blessed by many people. Not only editor Miyakawa-san, but also illustrator Momoco-sensei, Mangaka Tenamachi-sensei and others who have helped promote Roshidere to a wide audience. And to my parents who fully support me as a dual-career writer. Roshidere's work was made possible thanks to the support of many people. And I'm trying to recover some good feelings by saying something nice. Umm~, does it seem strange? I'm talking rather seriously about myself, but I feel that people's favorite points about me are getting less and less, huh? I guess some people have to talk about themselves and some don't. I mean, at the beginning of the afterword I mentioned that there was little substance in this article, and then out of character, I talked about something that had little substance. Well~, what the heck. I'll rewrite it as "A series of stories without any special advantages".

And that's it, no more pages. Yup~, that's just the way it is. I'm not suited for serious speaking at all. Besides, it's not enough to just have a long afterword. On the contrary, I think I might be able to write something more interesting if it's short... The longer it is, the less quality it has, and the shorter

it is, the more it can show its true potential. Yes, I'm still a short story writer. This is called a foreshadow. Also known as complications.

I'm running out of pages after all this nonsense, so it's time to move on into the thank you session. I am very, very grateful to Miyakawa-san, an editor who is always very helpful. Once again, Momoco-sensei, who drew beautiful illustrations in response to my detailed requests. Kinta-sensei for drawing Alya in a beautiful and cool way as a guest illustrator. Similarly, Ogata Tei-sensei for drawing Masha who is a feast for the eyes of all men as a guest illustrator. I would also like to express my deepest gratitude to everyone involved in the production of this work and to the readers who have purchased this book. Thank you very much! I look forward to seeing you again in Volume 6. See you soon...

P. S. For those of you who have read the afterword this time, and thought, "Hey, how come you're talking so seriously, are you fake?" You understand it very well. Alright, quickly come to the back of the gymnasium.



「ロシデ」
これからもよろしくお願ひ
します

Momo

Translator's Note

Hi! Thanks for reading my translation of Roshidere volume 5! NaCl and I put in a lot of work to make this possible, and I could not have done it without his help. Also, big shoutout to Volva92 for the English illustrations and Indi for the English translations for volume 5's Short Stories!

I enjoyed translating volume 5 and seeing the progression between Alya and Masachika. I can't wait to see how their relationship changes in volume 6! (Confession??)

Anyways, that's enough from me. See y'all in volume 6! Can't wait to see what happens then. - Darrk