

The following morning began as usual - except this time, I'd actually managed to wake up in time to meet up with Elodia and Ikuya to walk to school together. The entire time, however, while Elodia was his usual chipper self, Ikuya seemed particularly on edge. He was even less talkative than usual, even when we'd made it to class. I was concerned, but it wasn't until we'd arrived at our seats that I finally decided to speak up.

"What's wrong, Ikuya?" I finally asked, turning around in my seat. "You've been really quiet this morning."

He didn't seem willing to answer, and instead just stared down at his desk.

I frowned. "C'mon. You know you can tell me anything." I ducked down a bit in effort to meet his gaze, but he dodged it, looking away. Taking the hint, I finally turned away to sit in my seat as normal, but I was still on edge. What wasn't my friend telling me?

Just as Mr. Corn began today's lesson, two kids - one a small, pale-skinned girl with shoulder-length white hair and striking yellow eyes, the other a taller, dark-haired young man with dark eyes to match - stepped into the room. The girl had a sheet of paper in her hands, at which both were staring when they entered.

Mr. Corn looked at them as well, perplexed. "Can I help you two?" He asked.

"Ah?" The girl looked up at Mr. Corn. "Oh, yes. This is... 'AP World Connections', right?"

"That's right... oh! You two must be the new transfer students I was told about, am I right?"

"That would be us," the boy replied.

"Excellent! You're just in time. We started a new chapter yesterday - there's plenty of time to catch up."

"Ah! That's..." the girl began, but trailed off when she looked in my direction. She and I locked eyes, and her expression became strange - as if she was studying me. For what felt like several seconds, we maintained eye contact before she finally shook her head and looked back at the teacher. "That's good!" she finally said.

"Yup!" Mr. Corn didn't seem to have noticed. "So, you two can just take a seat wherever, and we'll get you set up."

The new students nodded, and after looking over the classroom for empty seats, the boy finally pointed toward the back of the room, and they made their way there.

Mr. Corn spent the next few minutes ensuring the pair were seated and ready. In the meantime, the other students - Elodia, Ikuya and I included - exchanged looks and hushed comments. I felt bad for the two - I knew what awaited them from here on out. Even now, three years after I'd moved here, Elodia

and Ikuya were some of the only people in the school who considered me their friend. Most of the rest of the student body hardly gave me a second glance, and the ones who did only wanted to talk about my weird eyes. It was hard to blame them, knowing how rarely foreigners came to Bishop Heights, but... it still didn't feel very good.

Eventually, the class began as normal. Today, we were assigned a quick group project - something not meant to take more than the class period to complete. Naturally, Elodia, Ikuya and I chose to work together. Despite the chatting and joking we exchanged in the meantime, the three of us had a decent work ethic, and it wasn't long before we were well on our way to completing the project. It was at this point, however, that the two transfer students approached us.

"Excuse me," the girl began, "we were wondering if you would allow us to join in on your group for this assignment? The other groups keep... claiming to be full." *Ouch*, I thought. It'd already started for them.

"Sure!" I replied cheerily. No way was I going to be part of the problem. "It's no big deal, right, guys?"

"The more, the merrier!" Elodia agreed. Ikuya simply stared at the two, but didn't seem to object.

The girl smiled softly and... actually bowed a little. "Thank you very much." She and the boy each grabbed an empty desk and pulled them toward us so they could sit in on our group.

"Ah, also, welcome to Bishop Heights!" I said. "I'm Skye. These boys are my friends, Elodia and Ikuya." I gestured to my friends in turn.

The girl nodded in acknowledgement. "My name is Mia," she replied. "And this is my friend, Kirya. Our families transferred here together." She gestured to the boy, who also nodded in greeting.

"Where are you guys from?" Elodia asked.

"Ah... Checkmere. A small village, a bit to the north of Everest Peak."

"It doesn't even have a name, huh?"

"Not one that anyone here would recognize," Mia giggled a little.

Ikuya remained silent through all this, continuing to study the pair with a wary gaze. Mia glanced at him, noting this, and arched an eyebrow.

"...Ikuya, right? Is something wrong?"

"Why did you two come here?" Ikuya suddenly asked.

"Ah- huh?" Mia's eyes widened in surprise. "Well... my family wanted a change of pace. We'd been

living in that tiny village for generations, and decided to move to a more metropolitan and hi-tech city, like this one."

"And you chose to move here in particular? Even knowing this city's policy?" This confused me. Bishop Heights' laws were strict - sometimes ridiculously so - but nothing came to mind that would make life hard for anyone. After all, the laws were made to keep people safe.

Mia's expression didn't change, however. "Yes. The policy is fine." Ikuya's wary expression didn't change either, and for several seconds, the two simply stared at each other.

"I-I'm sorry," I finally cut in, in effort to cut the tension. "I don't know what's gotten into him. He's been in a pretty poor mood lately."

"Is that so?" Mia replied. "Well, it's fine. No harm--"

"I'm not in a poor mood," Ikuya protested, interrupting her.

I shot him a glare. "Then what is it?"

"I'm worried. About you and Elodia."

"About us?" I repeated. "Why?" Ikuya was clearly seeing something I wasn't. What I couldn't wrap my head around was what. Did he think these two were somehow dangerous?

"Hm..." Mia looked down for a few seconds, pondering. "I think I understand now. It has to do with this, doesn't it?" She raised her arm and pulled back her sleeve, revealing a thick metal bracelet curling around her forearm. It was gorgeous, intricately crafted with four glass bands woven into it glowing light blue. It still confused me, however. This wasn't a new discovery for me. After all, Ikuya had one as well - several people around the city did. Theirs didn't look as intricate as Mia's, but they looked similar, with anywhere from one to four bands glowing with a vast variety of colors - Ikuya's in particular had three bands of another light blue, I remember. I'd always liked them, but the things eluded me. I could never find them in any stores.

To drive the point home, Kirya flashed his as well. His also appeared more custom-made, also with four bands, but his glowed dark, coffee brown, matching his eyes. I looked at each of them for a few seconds, then looked back at Ikuya.

"What about them? I asked. "They're really pretty bracelets."

Ikuya didn't respond. Instead, he just nodded wordlessly, confirming what Mia thought.

Mia nodded as well. "I thought so. You have nothing to worry about, though."

"But where'd you guys get the bracelets?" I blurted out. "I can't find the darn things anywhere, and

here you two have really pretty ones..."

"Hm?" Mia looked at me, then at Ikuya, her expression registering a bit of concern. "Er..."

"They're only given out on... certain occasions," Ikuya replied for her.

*Hmph. Figures.* "Do you at least get to pick which color you want?"

Now it was Mia's turn to seem confused. "Color?"

"Yeah. You know. The colors in those glass bands. Like how yours and Ikuya's are blue, and Kirya's is brown, and--"

"No, you don't," Ikuya replied quickly.

I frowned. "That sucks. I wanted a cute yellow one."

"I'm sure if you got one, it'd be yellow either way. It'd match your eyes."

That made me smile. Even from the beginning, Ikuya was one of the few people not weirded out by my eyes, even when I'd first moved here. While most people pestered me about them - asking me what they were all about, wondering if I had colored contacts or whatever - he'd actually complimented them. It was a welcome change of pace.

Mia, however, still hadn't quite gotten the picture. "But I don't..." she began."

"Just because you don't see it doesn't mean it isn't there," Ikuya told her. Mia stared at him, and then her eyes widened briefly as if she'd just realized something, and she nodded.

"So, everyone ready to get started?" I asked.

"Uh... yeah!" Elodia replied - poor guy must have been completely lost when we'd started our little discussion.

We set to work, and despite our little distraction, we managed to finish just in time. Kirya and Mia proved to be highly knowledgeable on the subject - how was beyond me; there was no way they could've read the chapter that quickly. Had they taken a class like this at their old school? It got me wondering, but unfortunately, we didn't have any time to discuss it. Just after turning in our assignment, the bell rang and we had to part ways.

Like with Ikuya and Elodia, I didn't see Mia or Kirya again until that afternoon. Incidentally, we spotted the two of them walking the same way we were. Curious, I sped up my pace to meet with them.

"Hey, guys!" I called. "Are you headed this way?" I gestured up the road.

"Ah! Hello!" Mia replied. "Yes, that's right. Our homes are in the neighborhood up the road here. River's Edge, I think it's called."

"Hey, that's where the boys and I live!" I grinned. "What a coincidence! Do you wanna walk with us?" Mia smiled. "Sure, why not?" Kirya also nodded.

Gesturing to Ikuya and Elodia to meet up with us, we paused so they could catch up, then the five of us walked home together, chatting amongst ourselves.

We took our usual detour off the sidewalk and toward the wooded divider between the street and our neighborhood - much to Mia and Kirya's confusion. Thankfully, they didn't need much convincing, and we led them up to our usual path, where... curiously enough, there was that woman again, looking every bit as annoyed today as she was yesterday. She noticed us as we approached this time, and again, nodded in greeting before looking back down at the snow.

"Uh, hi again," I said to her. "Here today, too, huh?"

"Yup," the woman replied absentmindedly.

"You should be a bit more careful," Kirya commented. "You look like some sort of kidnapper."

"A kid-- *what?!'*" That got the woman's attention. She shot a glare at Kirya. "You know damn well I ain't looking to kidnap anyone. I'm just here waitin' on someone."

"For someone to kidnap?" Kirya joked.

"I'm gonna fuckin'..." the woman growled, and looked like she was about to advance toward him, but trailed off and stopped herself, looking away with a heavy huff.

"I'm only kidding," Kirya assured her, his tone unchanged.

"Damn right, you're just kidding."

"Um..." I cut in. "So, you're meeting up with someone here again? Is this a daily thing now?"

"I hope not," the woman replied. "Fuckin' hate standing out here in this gods-damned snow."

"Then do something useful while you wait," Kirya joked again.

The woman stared at him, arching an eyebrow incredulously. "Yeah, okay. Excuse me while I go build a fuckin' snowman or something." She kicked up a layer of snow. Seemed she hated the stuff as much as I did.

"Oh, come on, Mercy," Mia cut in. "You know he's just teasing."

The woman, now addressed as Mercy, rolled her eyes. "Yeah, I know."

"I only tease people I like, you know," Kirya added.

"Wait a sec," I interjected. "You guys all know each other?"

"Indeed," Mia replied, nodding to me. "Friends, this is my good friend Mercedes. Mercy, these are our new friends." She proceeded to introduce us, gesturing to each of us in turn.

Mercy nodded again in greeting. "Hóla," she said.

"So, you were waiting for someone after all," Ikuya commented.

"Course I was," Mercy replied. "What, you thought I was lyin' or something?"

"Yes."

Mercy scoffed. "Real trusting kid, ain't ya?"

"So, you were waiting for Mia and Kirya out here?" I asked. "Why?"

"Cause that's what we arranged."

"Is it for a secret meeting of superheroes?" Elodia asked, excitement in his tone.

"Secret meeting of...?" Mercy tried and failed to stifle a laugh. "Er... sure, kid. Whatever you say."

"Yay, it is, then!" Surely he knew full well the woman was patronizing him. Or was he just playing along?

With Elodia, it was impossible to tell.

"Well, it's definitely a meeting," Mia added. "The '*superhero*' part is... arguable."

"What kind of meeting is it, then?" I asked.

"Can't tell ya," Mercy replied quickly.

"Silly Skye. Superheroes know better than to reveal their secret identities!" Elodia added in.

Mercy gave him a quizzical look. "Uh... yeah." Elodia simply giggled.

"So I guess we should leave you guys to it," I said. "Since you guys found each other."

Mia nodded. "That would be best."

"Alright. See you tomorrow!"

We exchanged goodbyes before Ikuya, Elodia and I continued on our way. To be honest, part of me wanted to stay and listen in on their secret meeting, but I had a feeling that wouldn't be a good idea. Elodia seemed to have latched onto the idea of them being superheroes quickly, but the thought was admittedly more than a little outlandish to me. Superheroes weren't a real thing. They only existed in comic books and on television. Why the secrecy, though? I wondered. The three of them were much too old to be playing pretend and holding secret meetings for a club. Even more interestingly, the three of them appeared at roughly the same time, all knowing each other. Had they all transferred here together, despite not being related? Was Mercy even from the same area as Mia and Kirya?

The mystery surrounding the three of them held my attention for some time - enough so that I'd gotten to be absentmindedly following the boys, rather than turning off to my street. However, instead of being shaken out of it and reminded that I was home, by the time my mind returned to the present, I'd found that we'd skipped over my street as well as the boys'. Elodia was leading the way now, chatting Ikuya's ear off about the conversation he and I had had last night about that "ghost party."

"Wait, where are we going?" I asked. "Our houses are back this way." I pointed behind me.

Elodia glanced behind and giggled. "I wanted to see if there was really a ghost party last night!" he replied. "I was just telling Ikuya about it. Were you spaced out, silly?"

I laughed sheepishly. "Yeah, I kinda was. Wait... you wanna actually go *in* that building?"

"Yeah!" Elodia replied excitedly. "It'll only be for a minute. Naomi will never know, I promise!"

"I'm going if you two are," Ikuya added.

"Well..." I thought about it. I did want to see what that activity Elodia had reported to me was all about, but at the same time, Naomi would tear me a new one if she found out I'd gone into that condemned building. That was something I'd have liked to avoid if at all possible. But... if it was only going to be for a minute, it wouldn't hurt anything, right? We would be in and out before anything bad could happen. Surely it would be no big deal. "Alright," I finally relented. "But only for a minute, okay?"

Elodia grinned. "I promise!" He repeated, and picked up the pace toward the old apartments, Ikuya and myself trailing behind.

It was only a few minutes' walk to the old apartment complex. Even from outside, the place looked positively ominous - boarded up windows and doors, cracked glass, vines growing up the walls... it'd just been condemned this past summer, but the signs of neglect were already starting to show. Curiously, however, the boards blocking one of the doors had come off, and were now scattered along the ground nearby. The door itself was also ajar. Elodia, undeterred, eagerly took the opportunity and pushed the

door open, stepping inside. *Hoo, boy*, I thought. *Here we go*.

Ikuya and I followed Elodia inside. I had to cover my nose and mouth with my jacket - the air was thick with dust. The boarded-up windows also made it nearly impossible to see, save for the tiny streaks of light that managed to squeeze their way through the cracks and holes in the boards. Thankfully, I had the remedy for such an occasion - a small, pocket-sized flashlight. Taking it out of my jacket pocket and clicking it on, the light was barely enough to allow us to see. There were three passages from where we were: a hallway on either side of us, and immediately in front of us, the stairwell leading down to the basement, to which Elodia was already headed, beckoning to us to follow him. Reluctantly, I obliged, Ikuya bringing up the rear.

The further down we went, the darker it became, until we reached the basement level, which was nearly pitch-dark. The walls were entirely made of concrete, making the air feel even more stagnant and stuffy. The only one completely unfazed by this was, of course, Elodia, who was cheerfully making his way down the gray corridor to where he'd seen the light last night. There were more doors down here, likely leading to storage rooms. Part of me wanted to see if there was anything still in any of them, but I was reluctant to touch the doorknobs. They were rusted and probably stuck, if not still locked. One of them, however, was cracked open, and showed signs of being handled recently. We stopped briefly, exchanging wary glances, then looked to Elodia, who nodded - this was right about where he'd seen the lights last night. I nodded to him in turn, then let him take the lead again as we began our wary approach. Were there really ghosts in there? I wondered. Or was it the base of a dangerous serial killer? Either way, my gut was tying itself in knots just thinking about it. There was definitely no way Naomi was finding about this. If I died down here, she'd kill me. Even if I made it out unscathed, she'd kill me. It was a lose-lose no matter what.

Suddenly, with a loud *bang*, the door we were approaching slammed shut, sending a sharp chill up my spine. I stopped, casting another wary glance at Elodia. He'd also paused, but after waiting a second, kept going. For a brief moment, I simply watched him. Was he *nuts*? There was no mistake that there was something in there at this point. The logical thing to do would be to get the heck out of here, not walk toward it! And yet, onward he went, cautiously approaching the door. I glanced at Ikuya, then sighed - much as I wanted to leave, I wasn't about to leave my best friend behind. After gathering my strength, I stepped forward as well, continuing to keep the light steady.

"Hello?" Elodia called cheerfully as we approached. "Hello, ghosties!" He paused, waiting for an answer. When none came, he continued. "*Ghostiiiiies*~ Let us join your ghost party!" He stepped toward the door and knocked. "Is there a password? I dunno what ghosts would use for a password? Is it, um... is it 'swordfish'?"

As if in response, whoever - or whatever - was on the other side of the door started banging on it hard enough to shake it, shouting in coherently. The voice was not only loud, but terrifying - four voices in one, all screaming in their own pitch.

Elodia backed away. "W-Was that the wrong password?"

"I don't think the password's the problem here!" I shouted in reply, struggling to hear myself over the noise. "Let's get out of here!" I was ready to pull Elodia along with us, but he started toward us instead, and together we all turned tail and fled down the hall and back up the stairs.

We didn't stop running until we were on the other side of the street from the building. By then, I could barely hear anything over the sound of my own heartbeat pounding in my ears, and my chest was burning. Turning around, I rested my hands on my knees, taking heavy breaths.

"That was... really scary..." I commented in between huffs.

"Yeah..." Elodia replied. "Hey... where's Ikuya?"

I looked up at him, then around us. Sure enough... Ikuya was nowhere to be seen. My chest tightened. Had we left him behind? If he'd been captured by whatever was down there, then...!

"I'm right here," a voice calmly said from behind us. I glanced back over my shoulder to find Ikuya, perfectly fine, standing there.

Immediately, the knot in my stomach unwound. "Ikuya! You're okay!" I stood up and jumped toward him, gathering him into a hug.

"Of course I am, you silly." He returned the hug.

"But... we thought we'd lost you to the ghosts or serial killer or whatever! How'd you...?"

"I was here all along."

"Oh..." I exhaled heavily, trying to calm my still-pounding heart. At least now that we were all okay, maybe Naomi wouldn't kill me so hard.

"That was fun!" Elodia chimed with a giggle.

I couldn't help but breathe a laugh as well. "Yeah... I guess it was!"

"Oh! Hey, Skye! Let's go to your house now!"

I blinked. "Huh?"

"Yeah! For a sleepover!"

"Uh..." Naomi knew Elodia and Ikuya, but we'd never slept at the same house before. No way she'd let me sleep in the same room as two boys.

"Pretty please?" Elodia was giving me his best puppy-dog look. Dangit, it was hard to resist that...

"Um... let's go see if it's okay with my sister."

"Okay!"

I chuckled a bit again, then stood up, and together we made our way to my house - for real, this time.