

小説 少年チャンピオン・ノベルズ

SHONEN CHAMPION NOVELS

小説版

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中  
大  
大



巻島・東堂二人の約束

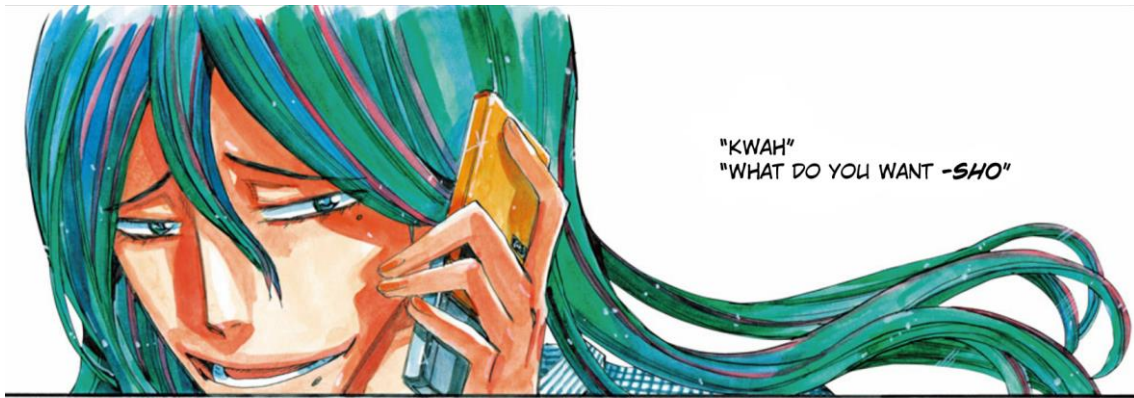
渡辺航  
時海結以





MAKISHIMA YUUSUKE AND  
TOULDou JINPACHI.  
THEIR FOURTEEN RACES ARE TIED  
EVEN AT SEVEN WINS AND SEVEN  
LOSSES.  
SWEARING TO SETTLE THEIR  
RIVALRY AT THE LAST  
INTER-HIGH OF THEIR  
THIRD YEAR,  
THE TWO OF THEM MAKE THEIR  
FIRST PROMISE IN THE  
POURING RAIN.





"KWAH"  
"WHAT DO YOU WANT -SHO"



"ARE YOU WELL,  
MAKI-CHAN?"  
"THAT'S THE ONE  
THING THAT'S BEEN ON  
MY MIND"



NOVEL  
YOWAMUSHI  
PEDAL

MAKISHIMA  
AND TOUDOU  
-THE TWO'S  
PROMISE-



WATANABE WATARU  
TOKIUMI YUI

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editing/ buttface  
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NOVEL YOWAMUSHI PEDAL

# 弱虫ペダル

MAKISHIMA AND  
TOUDOU  
-THE TWO'S PROMISE-



**TOUDOU  
JINPACHI**



STYLE: CLIMBER  
BIKE: RIDLEY

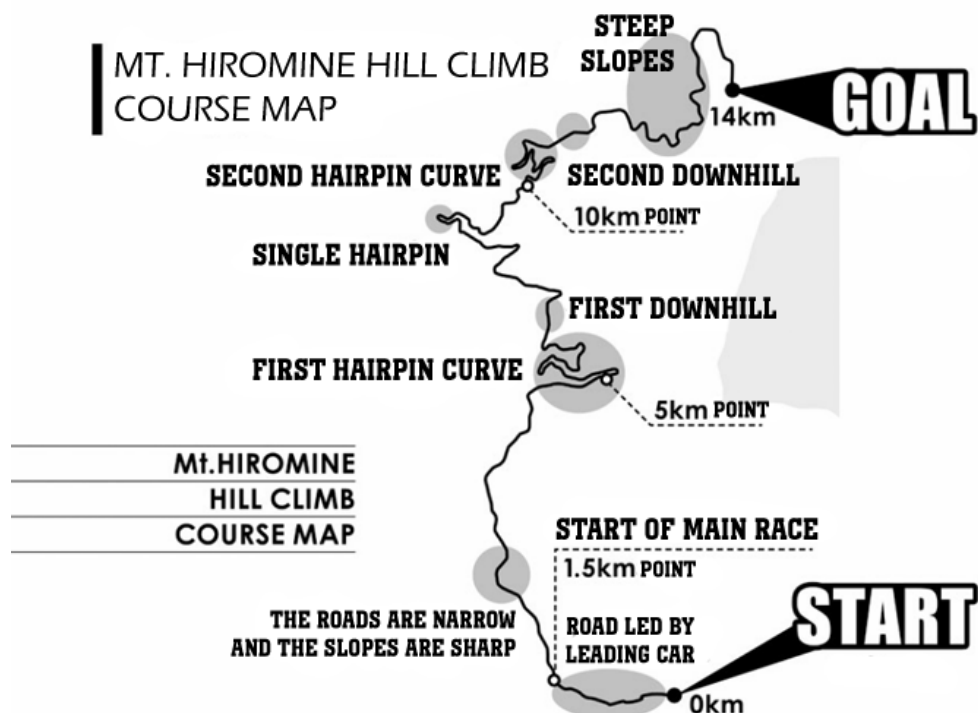
A THIRD-YEAR CLIMBER IN HAKONE ACADEMY'S ROAD RACING CLUB NICKNAMED "MOUNTAIN GOD." USING THE LEAST LOSS, HE SPEEDS ON HIS BIKE WITHOUT A SOUND LIKE FLOWING WATER. HE IS A SELF-PROCLAIMED "SLEEPING BEAUTY."

**MAKISHIMA  
YUUSUKE**



STYLE: CLIMBER  
BIKE: TIME08 MODEL VXR5

A THIRD-YEAR IN SOHOKU HIGH SCHOOL'S ROAD RACING CLUB. WITH HIS LONG LIMBS, HE CLIMBS MOUNTAINS USING A UNIQUE DANCING STYLE THAT ALMOST TILTS HIS BIKE TO THE GROUND. A CLIMBER WITH THE NICKNAME "PEAK SPIDER."



SOHOKU HIGH SCHOOL'S MAKISHIMA YUUSUKE AND HAKONE ACADEMY'S TOLIDOW JINPACHI. BOTH ARE RACERS IN ROAD RACING, AS WELL AS CLIMBERS WHO SPECIALIZE IN CLIMBING MOUNTAIN ROADS. AS MAKISHIMA AND TOLIDOW FIGHT TO BE THE BEST CLIMBER, THESE RIVALS EXCHANGE ONE PROMISE: TO RACE FOR THE MOUNTAIN PRIZE IN THEIR THIRD YEAR, THEIR LAST YEAR, AT INTER-HIGH. IT WAS NOT ONLY MEANT AS A SIMPLE RACE FOR THE TOP, BUT THE CONCLUSION TO A FIERCE BATTLE BETWEEN TWO MEN WHO PUT ALL OF THEIR BIKING SKILLS, AS CLIMBERS, ON THE LINE...

## BRACKET

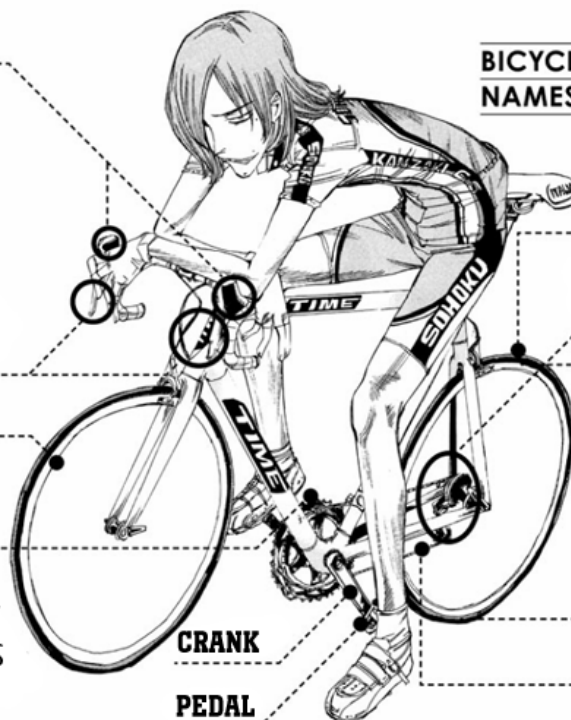
**BRAKE LEVER**

**SHIFT LEVER**

**RIM**

**FRONT  
DERAILLEUR**

**NAMES OF  
BIKE PARTS**



**CRANK**

**PEDAL**

**BICYCLE  
NAMES OF PARTS**

**TIRE**

**REAR  
DERAILLEUR**

**WHEEL**

**CHAIN**



# I N D E X

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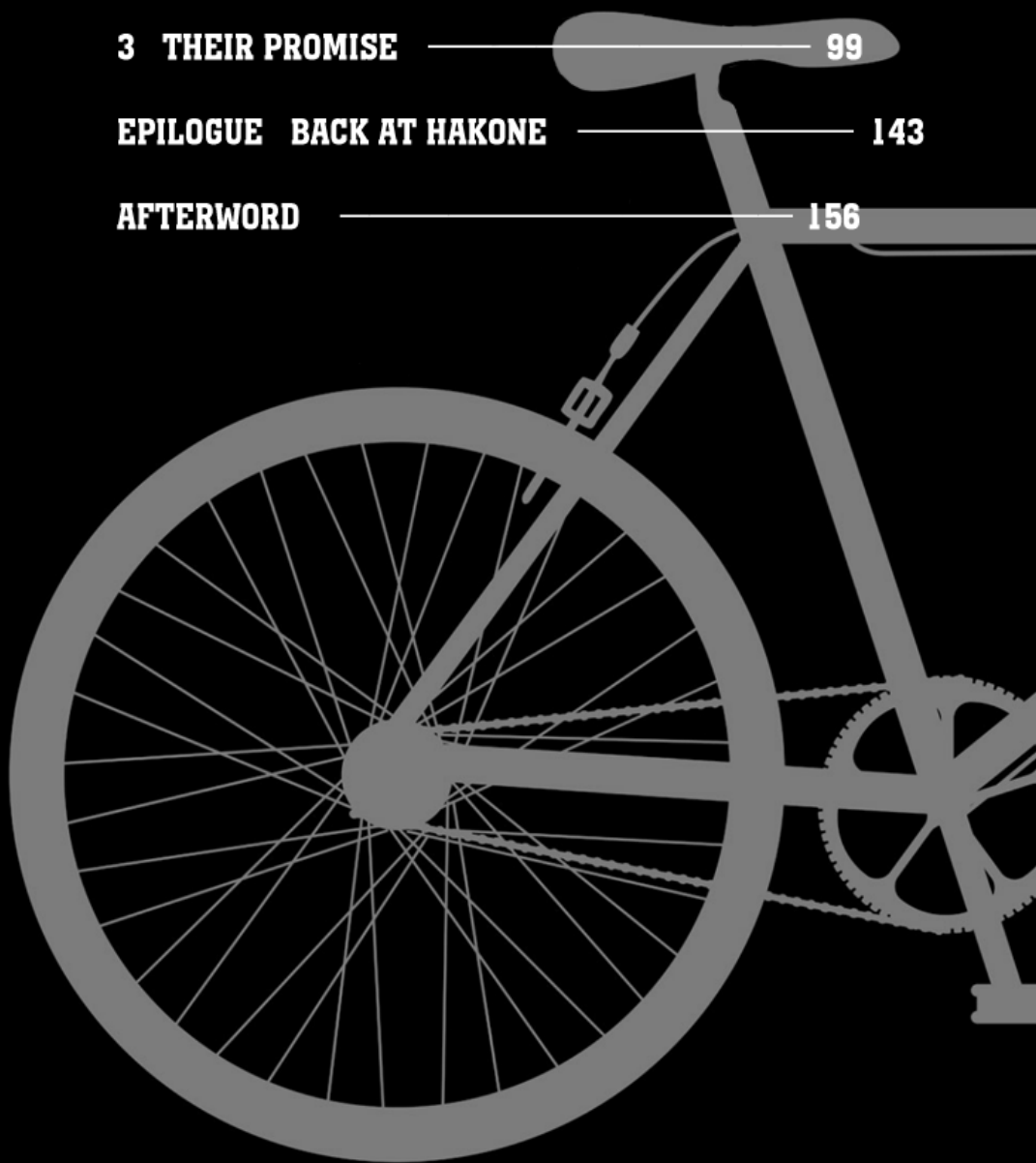
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## Prologue, On Hakone Road

August 1st, under the blazing sun in Kanagawa prefecture. The 41st interscholastic athletics meet — otherwise known as Inter-high — is a three-day road racing event for high school boys. Its first day opened with its participants racing at full speed along National Route #1 from the starting line at Enoshima to the goal at Lake Ashi.

Japan's National Route #1 was closed off specifically for this race to prevent vehicles from passing through. The spectators massing along the streets waved colorful banners and flags with words of support written on them, cheering for their favorite team.

Amid the roaring cheers, the six members of Chiba prefecture's representative team, Sohoku High School's Road Racing Club, were riding at the front as one of the top teams along National Route #1 from Odawara to Hakone Town. It was at this moment that one of their members, Naruko, a first-year with the Osaka accent clearly recognizable on his tongue, cried out.

"Wait, please— Captain!! This is bad!"

At his frantic tone, the team's captain — third-year Kinjou, looked behind him quizzically.

"Naruko, what's the matter?!"

"Onoda-kun en't here..."

Their sixth member who bore the number logo 176, first-year Onoda Sakamichi, had disappeared without any of his teammates noticing...

Cries of astonishment could be heard from the road racing participants at the back.

"The rear of the pack took a spill!"

"It happened at the crank in front of Odawara's city hall. Seems a lot of people had a fall."

In road racing, falling over on your bike is called a "spill."

"Ya don't think Onoda-kun is...?"

Naruko's fears came true. It wasn't long before Sohoku's team learned what had happened to Onoda by reading the bulletin that a referee held up from inside a car leading the pack. The board, poking out from the passenger seat window, listed the current position of each participant to inform all teams. There, they saw that Onoda was listed last.

"Tch, he got caught up in it," first-year Imaizumi said, clicking his tongue.

"Onoda...!! In last place?!" third-year Tadokoro murmured with a groan.

“...The chances of Onoda catching up on his own will be... pretty slim...”

Kinjou made an immediate decision. Changing strategy was unavoidable.

“Makishima!”

He called out the name of one of the members as they kept pedaling.

“Sho!!”

Responding with his usual phrase, Makishima Yuusuke, bearer of number 173, pulled his white bike out in front of the team, his long hair waving in the breeze. While Makishima was conspicuous with his gangly, thin arms and legs, what caught people’s attention first was the color of the long hair that fell all the way over his back. It was green, with streaks of red here and there... People around him called it the colors of a jewel beetle.

“I know, sho.”

“I wanted you to do the job of holding back the other teams, but we have no choice. Move up front and pull us.”

Makishima gave a careless nod, and took his place in front of the team as they lined up and headed for the hills. The hot August air bore down on him.

Road racing is not only a competition for individual placement, but a fully-fledged team sport. To protect their ace, the other members form a line around him and bring their ace to the top where the goal waits. They do this because a person who rides alone faces full wind resistance and thus uses up energy quicker. By riding closely behind another rider, it's possible to take advantage of the slipstream and retain stamina.

In this way, Sohoku’s team alternated the members that pulled to protect their ace, Kinjou.

Ever since the Edo period, the hills of Hakone Hachiri were well-known for its perilous slopes. Competitors who excel at climbing uphill and specialize on these sharp inclines are called “climbers.” The plan was for climbers Makishima and Onoda to pull the team on Hakone’s hills.

According to the plan that Kinjou had thought up, Makishima would act independently to hold back the climbers from other teams, while Onoda would be their shield against the wind, pacing the team as he pulled them forward.

Makishima himself also had a rival at climbing.

Whoever climbed the fastest to the top of the route’s mountain interval not only placed at the top of the overall pool of competitors, but also received the

“mountain prize.” Makishima, who was aiming for this “mountain prize” and wanted quickly to compete with rivals from other teams, thought of Onoda who was supposed to have been left in charge of leading the team...

Onoda had taken a spill — he slid and fell, along with his bike, and was now in last place. With the team currently leading the front of the pack, there was no chance that he would be able to reach them in time.

They were lacking one member who they needed to protect their ace.

“Maki-chan!”

A voice called out and a man in a blue jersey moved up silently next to Makishima. He rode at the front of a team wearing the same blue jersey. This team was from the local private high school, Kanagawa prefecture’s representatives, Hakone Academy — Hakogaku for short. The man’s name was Toudou Jinpachi. Hakogaku, the top national team known as the kings of high school road racing, relied on him as its ace climber.

As he rubbed the strand of long hair that fell from his helmet to the bridge of his nose, Toudou smirked. Makishima glanced at Toudou. He knew what this guy wanted to say.

“It looks like one of your mates got caught in that spill. Number 176, was it? He’s in last place.”

Toudou’s awfully bright and insolent tone of voice made everyone on Sohoku's team bite their lips.

*Ahh, and so it begins*, Makishima thought, and in a bright voice to match Toudou’s, he made a sweeping gesture with his hands and looked back at his teammates.

“What’s with those dark faces? There’s no helping what’s been lost. Face yourselves forward, guys, forward!!”

No one answered, but Makishima didn’t care. He continued talking.

“When it comes to hills, the weak fall away. That’s the law. Now, let’s begin the zigzagging climb with no pause to rest.”

With their bikes, they would climb the hills. They would climb while their pedals got heavier and heavier without warning; they would have to keep pedaling and yet watch as their speed plummeted, huffing and puffing as they fought against gravity. Compared to even ground, the difference between who did well or not on the hills was made starkly apparent. Only those who do better on ascents than others could call themselves climbers.

“This is where we ride up 800 meters in one shot, the stage of climbers!!”

Makishima changed his front gear to an inner that was better suited for climbing and pedaled on. If he didn’t lead, who was going to bring his team forward?

“Wait!”

Naruko shouted from the rear of the line. He moved up to align himself next to Kinjou.

“Captain, Onoda-kun hasn’t retired. Even though he’s in last place, that means he still wants in. Ya wanna leave behind a teammate who still wants to fight? Besides, Onoda-kun is a climber. Having two climbers is better than one! Let’s slow down ‘ere and wait for Onoda-kun!”

Naruko appealed to them ardently.

*I would do that too, if I could, sho...*

Barely holding back the urge to grind his teeth together, Makishima looked coldly at Naruko and shot him down. “Oi oi, you’re pretty much saying that because one person got burned, we should all jump into the fire.”

“Makishima-san, I’m not talking to ya, I’m talking to Captain here—”

Kinjou cut him off.

“I have high regard for Makishima’s ability and the accuracy of his decisions in the mountains. Whatever decisions we make here in the mountains, I leave to Makishima.”

Unwillingly, Naruko swallowed back his vehement words on this. Makishima spoke.

“Well, then, to pull ourselves back together again... All five of us are moving on. Match the rhythm of my breathing. There are tougher ascents than this one waiting for us still.”

Even so, Naruko would not give up shouting.

“Makishima-san! Yer a climber too, aren’t ya?!”

After Onoda turned out to have the makings of a racer and joined the road racing club despite being a complete beginner, Onoda had put all of his efforts into earnest practice these past three months. Onoda looked up to and admired Makishima, who excelled at ascents like he did. And it was Makishima who had acknowledged Onoda as a climber and rejoiced in it.

But that didn’t matter now. In front of Naruko, Makishima pointed at the champion Hakone Academy team riding alongside them. If they let their guard down here, they would end up eating dust.

“If I don’t pull you guys, who will?”



Makishima downshifted once so that his pedals grew lighter and began to pedal rhythmically as he increased his cadence. His speed rose.

Heart rate, pedal cadence, speed, hill gradient, atmospheric temperature, distance traveled, and time were all displayed in the small “cyclo-computer” device that was fixed onto his handles. With this information, he would be able to monitor his pace.

As the slope got steeper, the breaths of his teammates who excelled better on flat surfaces grew more ragged. Makishima could hear their breathing quicken. They had been pulling the team earlier, in turns, along a coastal course that ran from Fujisawa to Ninomiya. Naturally, they were tired.

Makishima thought: *Imaizumi, Naruko, Tadokorocchi... They must be feeling the after-effects from cruising the flat road in their legs. Not to mention this heat...*

The temperature was showing close to 33°C. It had been slightly higher while they were crossing the coastal course, but at least speeding up on the flats caused a breeze. Since climbing prevented them from picking up speed, it probably felt hotter than it really was. What’s more, this was a hard course where they had to fight against gravity to keep ascending.

Choosing to ride in the shadows of trees would be a way for them to preserve stamina. Unfortunately, here the sun was directly above them. The trees’ shadows did not extend out very far, only reaching about as far as the edges of the road.

Now as they started up the worn dirt path that threaded along the mountain surface, with a loud chorus of chirping cicadas ringing in their ears, the race continued. This sloping path was the same course used by Kanto University’s Hakone Ekiden league held in January. From the coast that was zero meters above sea level, they would climb in one spurt to the top of National Route #1, which was 874 meters above.

In addition to this steep slope that was the most precipitous in the country and overworked the heart, it contained multiple large curves that circled practically 360° around themselves. It wasn’t going to be easy to pick up speed.

*Think... the angle, the cadence, the gear, the level of fatigue, the moves of the opposing teams... What we need is an optimum pace and I’m the only climber. My job is to bring my whole team to the top of the mountain. Conquering Hakone’s perilous roads is the minimum Sohoku needs to win the championship... sho!*

Makishima looked furtively to his side. Hakone Academy’s Toudou kept glancing back at him, his face bursting with anticipation as he kept perfect pace with him.

Toudou was yearning so badly to have a one-on-one against Makishima that he could barely contain himself; a fight between just the two of them, to determine

who won the mountain prize.

Makishima next looked at his right handle. In his grip was the part sticking out of his handle called the bracket. His fingers rubbed the gear shift lever that was there alongside the brake lever.

*If I tap this twice, the gear will change. I could pedal as much as I want.*

By switching to heavier gears and putting more power into his pedaling, he would be able to climb this hill faster than anyone else on the team. And only Toudou would be able to keep up with him. With a look of pure joy on his face, Toudou would chase him.

If he were able to do that now, he would in an instant... but Makishima was the only one who could pull his team right now. He couldn't afford to act on his selfish impulses.

"I'm sorry, Makishima," Kinjou said abruptly, as if sensing this. Makishima kept his face carefully blank as he responded.

"Hah, you're too considerate, Kinjou. I did this last year anyway, I can bring you up again. To the top!"

Kinjou knew that Makishima had been secretly pleased at the prospect of being able to compete against Toudou this year, without having to hold himself back for the team. Because they had Onoda...

"What's wrong, Sohoku?! What's wrong, Maki-chan?! Come on, *race me!!*"

Toudou said next to them, trying to provoke them. "We're just about there, aren't we? There aren't many of the other climbers to get in our way. It's a good time."

He brought his bike closer.

"I'm going to be switching with Manami any time now. Then I'll be free."

Manami was the first in Hakogaku history, among its throng of members, to be skilled enough to win the privilege of participating at Inter-high in only his first year.

"I can't wait! My heart feels like it's dancing! You feel the same way, don't you, Maki-chan! You're a climber too, after all!"

Toudou's eyes moved up to what lay ahead of them at the top of the hill, and Makishima followed his gaze. The bright blue sky, filled with gigantic clouds, stretched across the distance of Hakone's mountains.

"The result line at the very top of National Route #1! The summit of Hakone's winding, overlapping roads! It's on this Inter-high stage that we'll see which of us gets to the top of the mountain first. Isn't that amazing?! It will decide which of us gets to call himself King of the Mountain!!"

"Manami, switch", Toudou said, before speeding up without a sound. He moved

as if he were gliding through air, not on a bicycle. There wasn't even squeaking from his chain nor the sound of tires scraping the ground. This quiet acceleration was Toudou's best weapon.

“Maki-chan, in the fourteen big-name hill climb competitions that I've fought with you in the past, I've won seven and lost seven. We've raced for personal records too. Our results are even. That we be able to settle it here at last, at this Inter-high, makes me very happy.”

“...Sorry. It's not happening.”

Makishima responded back easily enough, but Toudou looked as if he couldn't believe what he'd just heard.

“Haah?! What are you talking about, Maki-chan!! Did you not understand me? I said, race me! We're going to settle our match once and for all, right here, right now!”

“...I just told you, I can't.”



The hope that had been sparkling all over his face turned dark, and Toudou's shoulders visibly sagged.

“Hey... what— is this a bad dream or something? You can't? You, climber Makishima?! When you're in the best condition, on the best stage, at Inter-high, and the result line is there at the summit...”

Toudou took a deep breath and pointed to the top of the hill.

“With all of that happening... you'd want to climb there faster than anyone else. Isn't that what a climber does?!”

Makishima couldn't bring himself to look where Toudou's finger was pointing. Instead, he brought up a hand to pull his helmet over his eyes. His heart hurt.

*I'm sorry, Toudou. I'm the only climber my team has right now... I can't leave them...*

“What's the matter?! Come on! Now is the time to go! Let's go! Let's race!!”

With a look of distress, Toudou kept provoking Makishima. Toudou had reason to be dismayed. This would be their last competition in high school. Makishima and Toudou were both third-years.

After Inter-high was over, the third-years would retire from the club. This was their very last chance... The last chance for climbers Makishima and Toudou to reach a once and for all conclusion.

“Move... move, Maki-chan... Come on...! This can't be happening...”

Toudou's irritation finally exploded.

“What are we going to do then? When, when are we going to settle this?!”

That day when these two had promised to bring their rivalry to a conclusion at Inter-high...



## Chapter 1, Hill Climb

It happened about two months before Inter-high, in the early morning of the last Sunday of May.

The rainy season seemed to be well under way, because it had been raining non-stop since two nights ago. While the rain had lost most of the previous day's intensity, it still came drizzling down.

At Chichibu, the northwestern part of Saitama prefecture at the Gunma border, Makishima Yuusuke was crouching in the traffic circle outside of the Chichibu railway station, putting his road bike together. The drizzle soaked through the back and shoulders of his windbreaker.

Disassembling his road bike and packing the pieces in a carry bag allowed him to bring it with him on the train. Reassembling and disassembling was simple enough, and since the weight of his bike totaled eight kilograms, it wasn't particularly heavy. Also, racing tournaments were held rain or shine.

Rain clouds hovered over the bright green mountain range surrounding him. Looking up at the gray skies, Makishima said to himself, "This doesn't look like it'll go away any time soon... Well, as long as it doesn't start pouring like it did yesterday, it ought to be okay."

Today was the day of a hill climbing tournament that took place nearby at Mt. Hiromine. It was an individual race with people competing to reach the mountain's summit on their bikes. Makishima was going to be participating in its U-18 (under 18) student group.

He faced his road bike once more. He was fond of the white "TIME" logo outlined in red against its white frame. The TIME brand was a carbon frame made by a French manufacturer. Since he maintained it carefully and constantly, it looked brand-new despite years of use.

Just as he'd finished checking his wheels for wear and had fitted both the front and back tires into the frame, his cell phone vibrated in his pocket. He was receiving a call.

The caller I.D. told him it was "TODO."

Makishima sighed. He glared at the phone vibrating in his hand for a moment before apparently giving up and pushing the Accept Call button.

"Gooooood morning, Maki-chan!"

A voice that was too cheerful for so early in the morning echoed into his ear. It was Toudou Jinpachi. Toudou was the son of a family that owned a hot springs inn

in Kanagawa's Hakone. Not only was he the same age as Makishima but he was also his greatest rival.

"How are you feeling today? I'm in top condition! On the Seibu line right now."

"... Don't make phone calls inside the train."

"Oh, don't worry. I reached the station and I'm on the platform now. Maki-chan, naturally you're heading here too, right?!"

"Who knows? It's raining pretty hard."

"Wahahaha, Maki-chan, you can't fool me. I can feel your fierce, fighting soul from all the way over here! Don't be late to the starting line. In fact, come to the registration desk early and get your details sorted out. When you get your bib number, don't lose your safety pins. And don't pin it upside down."

"... You talk too much."

"I do not talk too—"

Pulling his phone away from his ear, Makishima ignored the voice still talking on the other end and hung up.

"That Toudou is so persistent. He knows that I'm coming but he keeps calling me anyway."

Even as he grumbled, Makishima's mouth widened naturally into a smile. After inspecting his brakes, putting on his helmet, and straddling his saddle, he clipped his cleats onto the pedals.

"Well, it's time I got going then. To Mt. Hiromine."

The Mt. Hiromine Hill Climbing Tournament was open to everyone from professionals to average cycling enthusiasts. The groups were divided by age, with each group crossing the start line at hourly intervals. The U-18 group — which contained the youngest participants, even as young as middle school — was made up of around sixty high school student entrants who lived mainly in the Kanto region. While there were female participants in the non-professional group, the U-18 group was all male.

Makishima, who normally rode bicycles as part of club activities, participated solely in hill climb races in his free time. Hill climb races are competitions for the fastest time climbing up to the mountain's peak on a course that ranges from ten to twenty kilometers in length.

The entire course of the Mt. Hiromine Hill Climbing Tournament was about fourteen kilometers long. There was around 750 meters distance of elevation from

the start line to the goal, and they would have to go from the foot of the mountain to the camping grounds near its summit. It was a course that ran through forests, initially passing through inhabited villages part of the way.

Makishima got off several stops before the one that he was supposed to; he was closer to Nagatoro with its famous tourist spots. From there, he rode his bike to the race's starting landmark.

By the time he got there, the rain had changed to a heavy mist. The air still clung humidly, but the drops of water hitting his face weren't powerful enough that he minded. While it wasn't cold enough to turn his breath white, it was still pretty chilly.

The start time for the U-18 group was at the early hour of 8 AM. The registration desk was located inside the gymnasium of a middle school close to the starting point. About twenty high school students were already milling around inside the school's garden that was their designated meet-up area. He couldn't see any adults from the non-professional group yet, but that was probably because they would be starting an hour later.

After checking in at the registration desk and leaving items that he didn't need with them for holding, Makishima accepted his bib number. He unzipped his windbreaker and pinned his bib number to his short-sleeved cycling jersey. Like the other participants, he began to circle around the surrounding area to warm himself up.

Racers have slim, supple bodies with no unnecessary fat. Climbers, in particular, had to defy gravity as they ride, so weighing little was an advantage. As Makishima was pretty tall for a climber, with long arms and legs — not to mention his yellow, red-lined Sohoku jersey and above all else, his long green hair — it wasn't long before all eyes were on him.

"Hey, Makishima is here," he heard voices whisper around him. He was used to it, so he pretended not to hear them as he passed through the school gates onto the town's streets. Just when he'd found a reasonably-sized hill in between the houses and was about to climb it... a hand suddenly touched his back.

He whirled around in surprise and, just as he had expected, found Toudou. Toudou was wearing his usual Hakone Academy jersey (light blue with dark blue lines) and blue racing pants. He was straddling his white-framed Ridley with its black brand logo, a frame manufactured in Belgium that excelled on both flat ground and hills.

Toudou's long bangs were pulled back by a hairband and he wore his helmet on top of that. A few of his bangs fell over his face and along the bridge of his nose, a style which he seemed to strongly prefer.

When they had first met a year ago, Makishima — disregarding his own green-colored hair — had looked at Toudou and thought with exasperation, *A guy wearing a hairband? That's so weird.*

"You're here, Maki-chan! I've already circled once."

"... Ah."

"What's the matter, Maki-chan? Are you feeling ill? Is it your stomach? Your head?"

As he kept pace with Makishima, Toudou peered into Makishima's face. Without a word, Makishima shifted gears and began to casually climb the hill he had chosen, wet with rain. His climbing was a unique style that made his frame slant right and left, almost to the point that it wouldn't have been surprising if he fell. By normal standards, you would expect such movements to be so inefficient that you lose speed in the process, but Makishima was able to cover greater ground surface with his tires in this way and put more power into the pedals, thus making him able to climb faster than anyone else.

"Oh, Maki-chan, you're perfectly fine! Now this is something to look forward to. My heart soars! It pounds!! Today will be the day that I win and tilt our tie of 7-7 in my favor!"

Toudou trailed after him, chattering. Although he talked loudly, Toudou's bike didn't make a sound and he rode with a straight form that didn't give off even the slightest tremor. His style was the perfect model for how one should ride a bicycle, the complete opposite of Makishima's.

"Come on! Let's race, Maki-chan!!"

"... I know."

*He ought to save that energy for the tournament. What an overly excitable guy,* Makishima thought, but he began to race Toudou to see who climbed the hill fastest. "Come on, I'm going on ahead if you slack off."

As he watched Toudou accelerate soundlessly up the hill, his spine straight, his body supple and arched beautifully like a statue, Makishima felt a tiny bit of joy at being able to race this man again.

After their warm up, they went back to the school's garden where the opening ceremony was held, and Makishima listened to greetings from the sponsors and

things to look out for on the road from the committee director. Then Makishima inspected his bike one more time before heading to the starting line.

Toudou, who had been by his side during the opening ceremony, had vanished at some point. Makishima looked around for him, thinking that was strange, but couldn't pick him out from the crowd. It wasn't like Toudou at all to disappear without a word.

*Well, either way, it'll just be me and him near the goal line anyway, so I guess it doesn't matter.*

At the starting line hung a banner wide enough to cross one side of the expressway. It had the tournament name written on it. Several climbers and their bicycles were already lined up beneath it. Positions at the starting line are on a first-come, first-serve basis. Those who arrived there the quickest were able to choose the spot they liked.

There were already two lines formed, with seven bicycles lined up in the first row and eight in the second. People were beginning to form the third and fourth lines.

Makishima took the center of the fourth line from the front. It wasn't an excellent position, but acceptable. If he took up position too far back, he could get caught in a wipe out if someone ahead of him screwed up on the starting dash. Starting from the front of the pack would have been ideal, but... he wasn't fond of the idea of insisting on taking the extra spot at the front and standing out more than he already did.

He had just accepted that he would stay where he was when—

“Maki-chan! Where did you go?! I saved a spot for you, over here! Come here!”

Hearing Toudou's loud voice from the very first line, Makishima's eyes went wide. He shot a quick glance ahead of him. Toudou was looking behind him, his head moving back and forth and his gloved right hand waving wildly in the air as he searched for Makishima. Toudou gained the immediate attention of the other climbers around him.

“That's Hakogaku's Toudou.”

“Mountain God Toudou...”

“He's definitely the number one candidate for winning this race.”

“Man, I want to at least catch up with him in the first kilometer.”

Their murmurs spread to the participants lined up behind him. Makishima brought a hand up to his helmet and tried to hide his face behind it. What an embarrassing guy.

“Maki-chan, where are you?! Maki— oh, there you are! You can't make a proper



starting dash over there!”

*Maki-chan, Maki-chan!* Toudou called out to him repeatedly. The other climbers turned to look at who Toudou was talking to. Unable to get away with ignoring Toudou now, Makishima helplessly raised his hand at Toudou in a tiny gesture of acknowledgement. The climbers in front of him opened up a path for him.

At the front line, slightly to the left next to Toudou, Makishima brought his bike on standby again.

“Don’t be so embarrassing...” Makishima muttered, but that didn’t dampen Toudou’s high spirits.

“Here you won’t have to worry about wiping out because someone slipped and fell on the starting dash. It’s best to start at the front on rainy days.”

Ah..., Makishima thought. He couldn’t deny that Toudou was right. *He knew that. That’s why he snuck away, so he could grab a spot first...*

Realizing Toudou’s good intentions, Makishima gave him a small nod that he meant as his way of showing gratitude. But his low-key gesture seemed to worry Toudou instead.

“What’s the matter, Maki-chan? Do you not like wet roads?”

“... No, that’s not it.”

“All right, Maki-chan! Our real match is coming... Don’t panic, there will be some guys who’ll try to break away. But they won’t succeed. They’ll lose power soon enough and get dropped. Don’t let their attack lure you. Have you got the course in your head?”

“I saw last year’s video on the internet.”

There are some people who attach cameras on their bikes or helmets to record themselves during a race and upload the video online. Not only did it act as advertisement for themselves and the race, but also as reference material for those wishing to participate in the next race.

“The one from that non-professional racer, right? I saw it, too. My simulation is perfect. The roads are narrow and rough, but it has rhythmic curves. It’s a good course. As for the turning point of the first half... we’ll throw off as many of them as possible in the hairpins going through the villages. The steep hill in the latter half is when we have our real race, got that?”

“Okay.”

“Are you in perfect condition? Both you and your bike?”

“Do you have to ask??”

“Wahaha, that was an obvious question was it! I’m in perfect condition, and so are

you!” Toudou said happily, making a thumbs-up sign.

Makishima looked up at the sky again and noticed that the rain had stopped. Mt. Hiromine’s peak, their goal, was surrounded by rain clouds.

*I hope the weather holds.*

“The hills have a 14% incline with continuous hairpin curves. I want to climb them so much, I’m itching to get started.”

“Can’t say I blame you,” Makishima murmured. Then he added casually, “So am I,” and turned to face ahead of him. Small groups of people, in teams of twos and threes, stood along the roadside, and the motorcycle that would be leading the pack came trundling out onto the almost empty road.

Even Makishima could tell that within the comfortable feeling of anxiety his heart was racing. Toudou had also closed his mouth and was gazing ahead of him. Makishima, glancing secretively at Toudou, noticed the sparkle in Toudou’s eyes grow brighter and this, for some reason, lit a flame in his chest.

*I can race against this guy again. I get to race him now.* — That feeling was setting his heart ablaze.

“We will be starting momentarily,” the announcement speakers repeated several times. There was a countdown, then the signal to start. Mt. Hiromine’s Hill Climbing Race had begun.

They cautiously began to pedal, following the motorcycle in its wake. Without having to worry about watching their surroundings for anyone miscalculating their start, the two of them came out smoothly at the top of the pack.

Before they could enter the woodland path, the motorcycle led them at a leisurely pace along the town’s greenery-lined roads. The motorcycle was of medium size, with a passenger seat attached so that two people could ride. The staff member sitting in the tandem seat had a flag in hand, unfurled and ready. When they waved this white flag, the real race would begin.

“Hill Climb Course, Turn Right→” read a sign on the railing of a short bridge. The flag was waved in front of that bridge, and all of the race participants instantly pedaled harder. The motorcycle increased speed and drove away. Just as the sign had indicated, when they’d crossed the bridge, there was a T-junction nearby that turned into a woodland path.

The sound of gears changing could be heard all around. Wheels creaked and all of the participants rushed in to make the turn.

The road immediately grew narrower and everyone groaned. There was no center line, as it was only wide enough for two cars to barely pass each other. Fighting for position became imperative. The road became full with a mere four or five bicycles lined up next to each other. With a human wall like that, no one could sail through and pass.

There were some who tried anyway, only earning themselves scraped elbows that bled when they brushed along the concrete wall of the cut road.

Sensing that small scuffle for advantage behind them, Makishima and Toudou kept their position at the front of the pack and entered the woodland path.

Their climbing was slow. Houses were lined up here and there on their right. It was a low, easy hill that they could have climbed in an instant without thinking if they hadn't been pacing themselves.

In truth, there were some people behind them who were eager to climb and yelled impatient provocations at those around them. Toudou and Makishima, after exchanging looks, let them go ahead. Now that they were no longer at the starting line, they went smoothly up to the front without any trouble.

It didn't matter either way; these guys didn't seem to be very experienced. If they went over their pace, they'd end up too exhausted later to continue. Unlike the flat road races, where you could rest after using a burst of power, hill climbs were not a place where you could pedal leisurely. You were always going uphill in hill climbs. Maintaining your own pace and persevering was one way to succeed.

After a few minutes, the road suddenly widened. That seemed to make people breathe easier, because some more of them passed by Makishima and Toudou, creating small sprays of puddle water on the road as they did. Many of the people who passed them did so with loud cries of astonishment.

"Eh, it's Toudou and Makishima!"

"They were the race leaders when we started, what the heck are they doing?"

"I can brag about getting past them to my juniors!"

"They're riding so sluggishly, must not be feeling well today. They're done for."

Because of Makishima and Toudou's reputations, there were many who wanted to get past them.

"You okay with this, Maki-chan? Looks like there's fewer of them behind us than ahead."

"Leave the idiots alone; it was you who said that. Never mind. As long as we're in the lead at the end, it's fine."

"Still... There are too many of them who broke away. I'd hate it if there were any

nuisances around when it's time for us to race.”

Toudou's eyes turned serious and he gazed at Makishima.

“This race is only supposed to belong to the two of us.”

“... Y—eah.”

At the beginning of the race, the course was such that the road suddenly got narrow when it entered inhabited areas, then when houses could no longer be seen and there was a mountain stream on the left and fresh, dewy leaves of the mountain slope on the right, the road changed to one that was slightly wider with a center line.

That happened twice, and each time the road got wider, people behind Makishima and Toudou raced past them.

But there wasn't a third time.

The trees suddenly jutted out from the slope, their field of vision darkened, the road narrowed, and the incline got steeper. It was as if the easy hill had decided that it didn't want to be easy anymore. The ride up to now was only a warm-up... Having covered three kilometers of the fourteen kilometer race course, the remaining eleven kilometers from here would be where the real hill climb began.

“Holy!”

“Crap, it's heavy! Even dropping gears, it's still heavy!”

“T—This isn't fair!”

Everyone began to dance — meaning they stood up on their pedals in order to push more power into them and gain more propulsion. But because dancing wore out the body faster, they couldn't keep at it for long.

While the other climbers were breathing sharply and losing speed, Makishima and Toudou easily slipped past them, still sitting in their saddles.

“They're already falling behind. Not as tough as they seemed, this lot, wahahaha!” Toudou said with a loud laugh as he slid ahead of them. In shock, they all watched the two go.

“... They're not even dancing yet.”

“The hill's this bad already, and they're not putting any effort in yet?!”

“You're kidding...”

Makishima and Toudou had passed by more than half of the other climbers on the steep slope when they came upon a clump of private houses ahead that seemed to cling to the uphill incline. There were more lined up on the other side of the river as

well. A traffic sign for the race was posted at the entrance to the villages, and a staff member dressed in rain gear stood on standby to guide their way on the road.

Toudou grinned. “That looks like a nice hill. Maki-chan, I think we should start putting in a little more effort.”

Makishima met Toudou’s gaze and nodded in response. Lifting his hips off his saddle, Toudou accelerated without a sound. It was as if he had warped several meters in the blink of an eye.

Meanwhile, Makishima followed him, his hair trailing behind as he steered his frame left and right with his long arms and legs. With each push of the pedals, he sprang forward as if he were bouncing. From the side, he looked very unbalanced.

“What the heck? He’s bending all over the place!”

“T—That surprised me. I can’t believe he doesn’t fall over from that.”

“Uwah, so that’s how the Peak Spider rides!”

One by one, those they rode past looked at them wide-eyed. “Spider” was the nickname that had been given to Makishima’s style. As for Toudou, his silent acceleration had apparently earned him the nickname “Forest Ninja.”

But as for what *he* called himself...

“He’s not making any sound at all! I didn’t even realize he was close...”

One of the climbers that Toudou passed cried out in sheer surprise when he saw the white frame and blue jersey that had suddenly appeared in front of him without him noticing.

“Wahahahaha, you’ve got that right. By the time you notice me... I’m already on the horizon!!”

Toudou spoke cheerfully, pointing a finger at the climber over his shoulder.

“They call me ‘Sleeping Beauty’!! My climbing puts even the forest to sleep. When they speak of Toudou of the Sleeping Climb, that’s me! You’ve got yourself a good story about this race to take back to the others now.”

“... No one calls you Beauty.”

“Maki-chan, did you say something?”

“No, nothing. Must have been the sound of water dripping,” Makishima said innocently. He combed back his hair with his fingers. It was dripping with warm water from the drizzle.

It wasn’t long before they could see glimpses of the front pack, as well as the second pack, above the hill every time they crossed a curve. Each pack consisted of about ten people, more of an elongated line than a clumped group. One by one, those losing speed were dropped from the end of the line.

A cruel competition for survival had begun.

Makishima and Toudou continued climbing, with Toudou slightly ahead as Makishima followed him from behind. The backs of the one or two people in front of them who were dropped from the line got bigger as they came into sight, then dropped away again as Makishima and Toudou easily broke away from them.

Those they broke past all had exhausted faces and ragged breathing. They hadn't even gotten to the really intense part of the mountain yet, but from the looks of this, there were some who probably weren't going to reach the goal. The race sponsors provided a recovery vehicle for lagging participants which followed behind them as close as possible to the time limit. Once it caught up to you, you had to retire.

Makishima and Toudou caught up to the line of the second pack. The distance between the ten people in the front pack and this second pack was roughly a hundred meters. The number of people in the second pack had been reduced to seven. Five of them were lined up in a row, moving in unison.

A small man wearing a gold helmet at the front of the second pack seemed to be pulling it, controlling it. He made small, quick movements. His bicycle looked very flashy with its black frame and gold lines with gold logo. The back of his jersey said "YAMANASHI" in white letters, while the jersey itself had a rather fancy color combination.

Toudou tilted his head. "What's up with that fancy jersey?"

"Fluorescent orange with deep purple polka dots... Oh, since it's Yamanashi, I guess those would represent their grapes," Makishima said in a low voice.

Toudou nodded. "The lines on his shoulders and racing pants are shocking pink. That must represent their peaches. Rather colorful jersey, isn't it? Makes my eyes hurt looking at it."

"It shows his love for his hometown. I think it's pretty neat."

Toudou stared at him.

"... Maki-chan, you're kidding, right?"

"Hm? About what?"

Rumors about Makishima's rather peculiar taste in clothes had reached even as far as the ears of Hakone Academy's team. Now that Toudou thought about it, he *had* seen Makishima wear a strange-looking jacket once after one of their races together. The jacket had a blue and yellow border, while the collar and one of its sleeves had been bright red. Toudou had thought that he had borrowed it from someone...

That rumor about his fashion sense being atrocious just might be true, Toudou thought with dawning horror. Makishima looked at him blankly, not realizing what Toudou was thinking.

“... Never mind. I don’t want to know the truth...”

Keeping his eyes averted, Toudou turned his face forward.

The small man with the grape jersey must be quite skillful. He was maintaining the hundred meter distance to the front, keeping his pace. No doubt he was going to make an attack in the latter half. But the others in the pack following him appeared to be at their limit; their faces were scrunched with pain.

Makishima got closer to Toudou and signaled him with his eyes. *What do we do?* Toudou grinned again.

“See that right turn sign there? The one for the camp entrance. Once we turn there, we’ll play with these guys a bit. Got that, Maki-chan?”

“What are you acting like you’ve got all the time in the world for? I thought you said the race was important.”

“Wahahaha, this *is* for the race! We’ve gotta crush whoever gets in our way early on. If any one of these guys came to attack us during our sacred race together, that would be annoying.”

“... You’re the annoying one,” Makishima muttered, scratching his cheek lightly with his forefinger.

“Did you say something? Let’s go.”

They both kicked their pedals.

Not only was there a display sign guiding them to the summit’s campgrounds where the goal was, there was also a sign on the opposite side of the road that said “Hill Climb Course ↑ ” to indicate that they were entering a curve. A staff member waved a signal bar in the air, signaling them to turn in that direction. Another staff member was counting the number of people as they passed.

Makishima and Toudou followed the second pack into the turn and the slope rose. The hill they were on was already steep enough to make anyone sigh if they were asked to walk it on foot, for instance, and here the slope got even steeper than before. The first ten minutes of it from here was going to be an obstacle.

Toudou made the motion for ‘go’ with his fingers, and the two accelerated. They broke away from the pack in one swift move. Voices mixed with surprise and resignation rose from behind them.

“It’s the mountain god...”

“Spider Makishima!”

“Damn it, I want to race them but I can’t move anymore!”

There didn’t appear to be anyone who had energy left to increase their speed.

Toudou was grinning triumphantly at this when—

“Fwoohhhhhhhh!”

With a throaty roar, the grape man in the gold helmet riding at the front abandoned the pack and accelerated.

Toudou frowned in annoyance and tried to shake him off, but the grape man persisted in following him. The petite grape man, his skin dark and his eyes like saucers, lined up beside Makishima, shook off the water on the top of his nose, and happily introduced himself.

“Hey, those jassys you’ve got! You’re Hakogaku’s Toudou and Sohoku’s Makishima, aren’t you? I’m Tobukuro Kouji, a third-year at Yamanashi Kai Shouhou High School’s bike club. Why don’t we get lost together?”

Toudou and Makishima exchanged looks at each other that clearly said, *What’s jassys? Does he mean jerseys?*

Not noticing, the man in the gold helmet and grape jersey, Tobukuro, grinned widely at them as he kept pedaling with strong strokes.

“You guys are famous, right? Meeting famous folk like you and getting to ride with ‘em makes me so happy. Seriously, you guys are, like, my idols! And you’re the same age as me, so I’ve always wanted to ride with you guys one day. Never got the chance to meet you though.”

“Well, thanks. So, this ‘get lost’... does that mean we’re doing this race or not?” Toudou quipped, not a little dryly.

“In Yamanashi, ‘get lost’ means ‘to go,’ and ‘what a loss’ means ‘don’t go.’ And ‘lost’ means ‘lost.’”

“Daah, that’s too complicated!”

“It’s the code for Koushuu dialect that Lord Takeda Shingen decided on, after all. Also, what’s great about Lord Shingen is that he taught that people are like stone walls, like castles. In every strategy, we must be as swift as the wind, as silent as the forest, we must attack like spreading fire, be as immovable as a mountain—”

Tobukuro began to chatter endlessly.

Toudou and Makishima were struck dumb, but they would be over-exerting themselves if they tried to shake him off. They wanted to reserve their energy for the race that laid ahead.



*I can't believe there's someone in this race who talks even more than Toudou,* Makishima thought to himself. Nevertheless, it was evidence of Tobukuro's abilities. He was climbing this hill with enough energy to spare talking.

"What do we do?" Toudou asked Makishima this time.

"... If the guy seems useful, use him... sho?"

"Use him, huh? Well then."

The both of them exchanged looks and, not quite knowing whose idea it was first, decided for the time being to watch how this situation would play out on the hairpin curves ahead. Then from there, they would drop him at the steep slope.

"... So with that said, ebeshi!" Tobukuro said proudly.

Makishima and Toudou stared.

"Ebeshi means 'Let's Go!!' in the Yamanashi dictionary."

"O... kay..."

His hips still raised in the air, Tobukuro stretched his hands forward and began to dance. He picked up speed, leaving Makishima and Toudou behind.

"Ebeshi!! Hurry and get here!!"

*This guy is a real pain,* Makishima and Toudou said to each other with another silent exchange of looks.

They'd reached the five kilometer landmark... With nine kilometers to go, the road from here continued with elevated zigzag hairpin curves. It was a tough spot where no matter how much they climbed they were no closer to reaching the mountain's peak.

Tobukuro boldly plunged into the first hairpin curve. Riding the outer course along sudden curves meant greater distance to cover, but the slope was not as tough. Choosing to ride the inner curve in spite of the angled slope meant that he was confident in his legpower.

Turning around to look at them with innocent pleasure, his face dropping with sweat, Tobukuro said excitedly, "See that? See my curve attack?! This is one of Lord Shingen's strategies, to attack like spreading fire! The moment I see my opening, I make an all-out attack on the shortest course and break away! You can tell how awesome I am, can't you?!"

"Grapes is pretty good."

Watching Tobukuro's back, Toudou's eyes turned serious. He brought his mouth closer to Makishima's ear and whispered, "... I quit. It's a waste to just watch how things turn out. Maki-chan, how about we get this guy revved up and bring the ten people in the pack ahead down to half? We'll make him do the work for us. Then we

can be alone together a little quicker.”

Toudou quietly slid closer to Tobukuro. “Hey, Tobukuro. Show us what you can do. There are three huge curves up ahead. Let’s ride through them and see how many people in that pack up there we can get past. Me, Maki-chan, and you.”

The front pack that he pointed at with his chin was no longer grouped together enough to be called a proper pack. The hills had sloped even higher since they had entered the road to the campgrounds, and due to individual technique at riding curved courses there were huge gaps in between the participants.

“You serious? Racing against Toudou-san and Makishima-san, that’s like a dream come true! Ebeshi! Ebeshi!!”

Tobukuro leapt forward happily. His small frame was like a coiled spring. They could see his muscles working even through his jersey. His dancing was powerful. He advanced by leaning all of his weight on one side of the pedals, then alternating to the other side.

“Let’s go, Maki-chan.”

“...Oh, all right then.”

Makishima shrugged, changed his gears and went into dancing mode. Makishima, with his dangerously bending frame, and Toudou, with his straight and poised glide, raced each other as they aimed for the next curve.



“Guh! Grapes is fast!”

Attacking the curves using the shortest distance seemed to be Tobukuro’s strategy. He raced through them without a trace of hesitation. His wheels left tracks on the muddy road, leaving a trail that traveled along the inside of one curve to the inside of the next.

They followed that trail. Catching up to him in speed was simple enough, but Toudou and Makishima also had their own best ways of riding the course. Their tracks showed gradually curving lines in the mud, not straight lines at all.

“Attack like spreading fire!”

As he yelled, Tobukuro closed in on the climbers ahead until they were only a few meters apart. Toudou and Makishima stuck right behind him.

His upper body unmoving, as if he were pedaling on flat terrain, Toudou attempted to go around Tobukuro. Makishima was even further outside than him, closer to the center of the highway. Every time he danced, his hair waved and water sprayed from his scraping tires.

“You’re here, Toudou! This is my attack! Watch this!”

Tobukuro’s bicycle sped ahead.

“One down!”

Tobukuro, using the curve, easily swept past a climber that had fallen from the pack. The climbers ahead realized that they were being attacked. There were two responses to this — those who tried to break away, and those who kept their pace to prepare for a comeback. But the result was the same. Before long, they were dropped.

“This is awesome! It feels so good! Next, two more!”

He really did attack like fire. When Tobukuro caught up, he didn’t just go past. He eased a bit on his speed for a moment, sticking behind his target before magnificently breaking away from them at an inside curve. If he had shown even the faintest hesitance on the steep incline of the inner course, he would have lost.

The light in Toudou’s eyes changed. His breathing got careful and his eyes narrowed.

“That Grapes can climb surprisingly well.”

“What are you getting revved up for?” Makishima said.

“Grapes seems to know these roads well. That’s apparent from his boldness at diving into the shorter course. But we have more power when it comes to climbing. That will become clear once the hills get steeper. Don’t fall behind, Maki-chan!”

As the slope got sharper, Toudou increased his cadence. Makishima also matched

his pace. Naturally, none of the people that Toudou and Makishima broke away from were a match for them.

Makishima and Toudou lined up next to Tobukuro and went ahead of him, as if to show that they were faster. The three of them continued on, breaking away from two more out of the pack.

“Three people, four... Toudou and Makishima are so cool! No, now’s not the time for me to be feeling impressed, this is my once in a lifetime chance! I can’t afford to lose!”

They raced up the steep slope to the next curve. Their muscles felt as if they were on fire. The scenery wasn’t particularly nice, and it wasn’t as if they could see clearly ahead of them anyway. The forest rose thickly around them, and in the areas where it didn’t, there loomed concrete walls that supported the foundations of houses built on the hill’s sharp inclines. As the wet gray of concrete took up most of their field of vision, they pedaled singlemindedly for the next large curve.

Makishima and Toudou progressed side by side, but they were unable to shake off Tobukuro. No matter how many times they dropped Tobukuro, he would always plunge into the inner edge of the short curves and end up right behind them again.

A cold uneasiness crept up Makishima’s legs to his back.

The cold wasn’t due to the rain. The rain had stopped, turning into heavy mist again, and their surroundings were brighter. The clouds rolled quickly overhead.

*I don’t dislike the rain*, Makishima thought, looking up at the clouds. His riding wasn’t all that affected, despite the bad conditions — Makishima considered his toughness at handling irregularities to be his strong point.

Toudou, his gaze still ahead, pushed away a strand of black hair that clung to the side of his face, shaking away drops of water, and said in a low, impatient voice, “Maki-chan, has your body warmed up?”

“... Rather late asking me now.”

“Thought so. Hmm..... Hm?!! ... Do you feel that?”

“Yep.”

“When we get past the next guy... Then we go.”

Makishima looked at Toudou with a half-smirk.

The next guy... In their endless uphill climb, the three of them at last caught up to the next climber who couldn’t break away from them completely.

“Attack like spreading fire!”

Tobukuro raced past using the inner curve, while Toudou and Makishima did the same along the outer curve.

“Damn it! I thought I had the lead, you’re here already?!” the climber cried out in frustration, but he seemed to have lost the will to fight. He didn’t go after them.

They turned into the third large curve that had been designated as the end part of their little competition. There was about eight kilometers left to the race. They were at the halfway point.

“*Pant, pant, pant*, now, five people! Toudou really is ‘as silent as the forest,’ that is seriously so cool.”

Tobukuro was breathing hard, but he had a look of exaltation on his face.

“You too, Makishima,” Tobukuro said, complimenting him as well.

Makishima and Toudou both shifted gears at the same time and lifted their hips, their breathing matching each other’s naturally, when—

“Hah! You guys are already breathing hard. How terribly unrefined.”

A nasal and oddly sweet voice spoke up. Its owner lined up next to the three of them as he spoke, breaking away smartly after a breath and then matching pace with them again after he was several meters ahead. He blocked the three’s path as if to purposely agitate them.

“Dweh?!” Tobukuro cried out hysterically. Apparently he had been so absorbed by his competition with Toudou and Makishima that he hadn’t paid attention to what was behind them.

“He’s here! Better hold this guy back, Maki-chan!”

“Sho!!”

The uneasiness that Makishima had felt earlier, as well as the presence Toudou had sensed — it was coming from this guy who had been chasing them from behind. He had a dangerous air about him.

“Do you think I would let you?”

The blue bicycle that appeared abruptly before them in a gust of wind was ridden by a man wearing a light green jersey with thin bars of white and light blue — for an athlete, he looked rather delicate. Water dripped off the bangs sticking out from the edge of his helmet. He had a finely chiseled face and a nicely shaped nose. The man brought his long fingers together and made an empathic motion at eye-level. He then placed that hand over his heart and turned his face to the side dramatically.

“I will not let Toudou or Makishima win this race, no matter what it takes!”

Even the inflection of his voice was exaggerated and dramatic. Maybe he thought he was a stage actor of some kind.

“My my, I’m most ashamed of myself, to have taken this long to catch up to you. I shouldn’t have underestimated you after all. But you will be having a tough fight

from here on. Be sure to take a good look at my power.”

“Hmm, who are you? I haven’t seen you in a race before, but you seem rather confident,” Toudou said.

As if to test him, Toudou advanced ahead, blocking the man’s path. Makishima followed behind the two of them, so that he could watch the situation. Toudou’s pace quickened, as if he had been putting in only the most minimal amount of effort until now. Tobukuro appeared to have at last run out of energy because he slowly fell behind, no longer riding with them.

Toudou would divert the attention of this man on the blue bike without fail. When that happened, Makishima would take advantage of his blind spot and get past him. So Makishima believed.

The three of them began to fight for the lead. The slope was a few degrees easier here, so it was the perfect place to increase speed.

The man raised his cadence. He pedaled at a good pace, despite the incline. Normally, the ideal way to get through a hill climb would be to switch to lighter gears and pedal often. In that sense, this man was a true climber.

“Wah, wait! What a loss!”

Tobukuro panicked upon being left behind, but his pedaling had lost much of its earlier intensity. He wasn’t going to catch up that quickly.

“I will not lose from this! Toudou, Makishima! I have practiced to the point of exhaustion every day! This mountain belongs to me!!”

Tobukuro’s shouts gradually got further before disappearing altogether at the curve.

Toudou lined up his bike next to the delicate man who was keeping up with them and called out to him.

“...You’re pretty good. You left Grapes back there in the dust.”

And Grapes had not been a weak opponent. As Makishima lined up his bike next to theirs, he agreed with Toudou’s words. While it didn’t show in his face, he made his agreement known by flicking away the rain dripping down his bangs and looking at Toudou.

“Naturally!! I’ve ridden this road thousands of times. Every day, morning and night. This is my hometown, and I was born and raised at the foot of this very mountain.”

The delicate-looking man glared at Makishima, then at Toudou.

“This mountain is my mountain. I will not let anyone else conquer its sacred summit.”

Saying this, the delicate man brought his bike ahead of them. He got past them

half a bike's length away when Toudou immediately lined up with him again.

Makishima, his face carefully blank, also stuck close behind the two.

"Being confident in yourself is nice and all, but you are wrong. The summit only belongs to the strongest."

The delicate man looked annoyed at Toudou's statement. "In that case, Toudou, would you be able to sit back and laugh as you watch a stranger run around in your garden without your permission?"

"Mm," Toudou said, a bit put off. "Your love for your hometown is strong, but I don't see why you have to flare up at me like that. This is the first time we've met."

The delicate man raised his shoulders in an overly-affected swagger and said in an obnoxious tone of voice, "But I know you, Toudou and Makishima. I've seen you in other tournaments. You two only care about each other. I bet you don't remember the face or even the name of the guy in third place, let alone pay any attention to those who didn't even win a prize. It's like you treat the rest of us as background decorations to help yourselves stand out."

"... You were in third place?"

Makishima, who had been watching the whole affair, thought back on this delicate man's name.

"Oh, if I remember correctly, you're... Musashigawa-kun... Sorry," Makishima apologized. "This guy doesn't look at how anyone else has placed besides himself. If that offended you, I'm sorry."

Toudou smiled ruefully at that. "No, no, Maki-chan, don't go easy on him!"

"... What are you, his parent?"

Brushing off Makishima's sarcasm, Toudou spoke to Musashigawa, the delicate-looking man.

"Musashi-kun, telling us to acknowledge your hard work even if you didn't show results is an idea that's only applicable to school sports day. This is a race, and results are everything. It's only, at most, up to middle school that you can get away with crying at strangers to look past the results. Besides, if there was anyone who beat us, we'd remember them even if we didn't want to."

The man gave a suppressed laugh and an arrogant 'very well.'

"My name isn't Musashi. I'm Musashigawa Shin, third-year at Chichibu Midori High School. In the name of my hometown's pride and honor, I will not let you have this mountain! Hahahahaha!"

Musashigawa's haughty, self-possessed smile flashed white with teeth. He looked so conceited that if his hands hadn't been on the handles, he probably would have



folded his arms together and leaned back in an arrogant manner.

Unamused, Toudou's face slid into a cool expression.

"All right then. Try to take this mountain's peak from me!"

Saying this, Toudou silently broke away. After a pause, Makishima shrugged his shoulders and followed him.

"Hey, what did you try to get under his skin for?" Makishima asked when he caught up.

"It's okay," Toudou said quietly. "We'll get to see whether he's all mouth or not. Then when we drop him regardless and get the race to ourselves, it'll be fun."

*Oh jeez*, Makishima thought, but he followed Toudou.

"I'll show you that this mountain belongs to me," Musashigawa declared.

Without appearing bothered at all by the steep slope, he chased them.

Musashigawa's panting breath was right behind Makishima. It was as if he could feel his warm breath on his back.

"So what if you're the Mountain God. So what if you're Peak Spider. I'll teach you that on this mountain, titles like those are meaningless!"

The two of them broke away. Musashigawa gave chase. He caught up, they accelerated, he caught up and lined up beside them.

*This guy is persistent*, Makishima thought, apprehension creeping in. No matter how hard he tried to break away, he felt as if he could still hear Musashigawa's panting right behind him. Makishima could tell that his own heartbeat was quickening without having to look at his cyclo-computer. He was clutching up.

*He's just another participant like everybody else.*

Makishima took a deep breath to steady himself. But the uneasiness that he felt by instinct didn't fade from his chest.

In the last rising curve of the continuous hairpin, Makishima plunged in first, just barely avoiding running into the guard rail along the road edge. His pedal hit the guard rail post, making a dull clang.

The instant that Makishima slanted his frame, Musashigawa thrust his bike further inside the curve, even more so than either Toudou or Makishima. That curve was slightly lower along its inside. If he had gone in too deeply, he could have hit them and they would have gone sprawling across the road. Musashigawa could judge and act upon that small opening...

"This guy...! He knows the diameter of the curve... He knows it completely...!!" Toudou groaned.

Musashigawa scoffed. "Do you know how many thousands of times I have ridden

this route?”

Musashigawa quickly shifted gears... And it was from there, where the climbing of the hairpin curves ended, that they entered a downhill slope for the first time. They were passing from undeveloped land into the vein of the mountain ridge leading to the summit further in.

By the time Makishima understood what was happening, Musashigawa was ahead of them. The distance between them grew further and further. It was evident that Musashigawa knew every bit of this road.

It may have stopped raining, but rainwater still sloshed along the road surface, flowing particularly fast downhill.

On downward slopes, whoever know the road has an extremely strong advantage. Just knowing how much speed to put in at what curve gives you better control of your bicycle's speed.

Musashigawa probably knew, with a negligible margin of calculation error, where it was best to brake on this downward slope. But Makishima and Toudou did not. They had only watched a video of this road several times and had imagined what it would be like; this was their first time experiencing the actual road.

Their postures lowered and their bodies bent as they turned the downward curve. Their wheels kept skidding dangerously.

Keeping his finger on the brakes, Makishima bit the inside of his mouth. This race was not just about climbing alone.

*I won't brake until the very last moment. This road should keep going downhill until that bridge up ahead. My distance between Musashigawa will change depending on how fast I can go on the bridge.*

Toudou must have been thinking the same thing. Toudou also had his finger over his brakes and was gazing skeptically at Musashigawa.

Okay, Makishima thought and prepared himself. But just then, a spray of water hit his eye and as he wiped it away scowling, Makishima's wheel splashed into a mud puddle and jumped.

There was a thud of impact and Makishima's bicycle suddenly lost force. His pedals spun helplessly.

*My chain!*

Holding back the cry that had almost escaped his lips, Makishima managed to go the rest of the way downhill by momentum and unclipped his cleats from his pedals at the foot of the bridge, placing his feet on the ground.

“Maki-chan?!”

“My chain came off.”

He said it matter-of-factly. When Toudou turned back to look at him, Makishima shouted. “Go ahead of me! Do you want to let Musashigawa get away?!”

But Toudou unclipped his left cleat and pulled the brakes on his bicycle hard enough to come to a full stop.

“Maki-chan...”

“Do you think that I won’t be able to catch up with you?”

Makishima’s voice was slightly rough, which was so rare coming from him that it made Toudou go quiet. He thought he heard Toudou gulp.

“... Be quick about it,” Toudou said. “By the time you catch up with me, I’ll have soared past Musashigawa and taken position at the top.”

Toudou put his left foot on the pedal again and rushed away like a gale before the sound of his cleat clicking in place could even be heard.

After seeing him off with one hand raised in the air, Makishima brushed off the wet hair weighing down on his shoulder.

“I guess I used too much lube on the chain because of the rain.”

He had meant to use the lube to repel the water, but it appeared to have ended up making the chain slip off the side of the gear instead.

“Stuff like this happens. It’s no big deal.”

Makishima brought his bike over to the side of the road. He picked up the fallen chain and laid it on the gear. He lifted the bike up from its saddle so that the back wheel was suspended in the air and twirled the crank (the part that connected the pedals to the chain) with his other hand.

The chain locked back into place.

Makishima brought his bike back onto the ground and began to ride again. But after a few turns of the pedals, the chain slipped off and got caught between the gears and the frame again. This wasn’t going to be fixed right away.

*Tch. Right when I’m in a hurry.*

Just as Makishima got off his bicycle again and stooped down to fix the chain, Tobukuro raced past. He heard Tobukuro say, “You’re done! Bike trouble? I got past Makishima!”

While Makishima struggled with his gears and chain streaked with mud, six more people flew past him.

*... It’s no big deal.*

Makishima forced himself to remain calm. When it came to irregularities and accidents, he was tough.



## Chapter 2, Demands of Battle

His chain fixed, Makishima saddled his bike once more and began to chase after Toudou.

Across the bridge was another uphill slope. There were no more houses in the area; it was a proper mountain path now. The road was narrow, much too narrow for two bicycles to share, and its surface was bumpy. It was no longer a paved road under the administrative hand of a government office. There was a warning sign to be careful when passing through.

Another pair of staff members was waiting here. One indicated the course with his signal bar while the other counted the number of participants passing through.

“The road is bad up ahead, so please be careful!”

The staff member’s voice that called out to Makishima quickly faded behind him.

The downward face of the mountain became a deep valley that made you feel dizzy when looking down at it. The guardrail alongside the road was broken here and there, with a danger of falling off the steep side of the mountain if you got too close.

The inner side of the road, away from the mountain face, was lined with stone or concrete retaining walls and trees. Wet branches hung overhead in intervals of ten to several hundred meters.

The forest was thick around him. The road was very narrow, only wide enough for three bicycles probably. There were turnouts in places along the road shoulder to allow bicycles to pass each other.

Open holes here and there in the concrete retaining walls drained the water that soaked into the mountain ground, and muddy water poured from them. The road gutters were blocked up by fallen leaves, so the muddy water washed over them onto the road.

*Looks like yesterday’s rain here up to this morning was far worse than other places. It’s a mountain road, so can’t help the mud puddles.*

Pheeeew... Makishima blew out one long breath. Then he breathed in, filling his lungs with fresh air. He felt as if his vision got clearer. Switching to lighter gears, Makishima pedaled in a sitting position.

The cold mud that splashed against his legs dripped down into his shoes. His shoes had ventilation holes, but every time he pedaled, the water squished out of the holes with a squelching sound.

*I should have expected it, but the conditions are even worse than I thought...*

The white bicycle that he was so proud of was naturally by now quite muddy in places. Makishima looked down at his front tire. His wheel was cutting through the muddy flowing water with a heavy splashing sound. The back of his jersey felt cold. Road bikes didn't include parts that shielded you from the mud, so whenever the rear tire splashed up mud, it splattered directly onto his back.

*... When you like bikes and ride them all the time, you're bound to ride through rain and storms one day. I can work with irregularities. If I think about it that way, there's nothing to be afraid of.*

He raised his head. He checked the time.

*Toudou... How far has he gone? I'm about three — no, four minutes behind. If I want to catch up to him, I'll have to climb at a quicker pace... By the time we meet up again, there'll be five kilometers to go... or five and a half.*

Toudou was here, ahead of him on this road hidden by green branches. Makishima flicked away the water dripping down his bangs with his thumb and index finger, changed gears, and pedaled onward at a quicker pace.

There was still a seven kilometer distance to the goal. This was pretty much the mid-point. The elevation got even higher and fog gradually came swirling around him. The white fog enveloped him each time he passed through a channel, making it difficult for him to see. If someone at the foot of the mountain had been watching this white fog, they probably would have thought it was part of the rain clouds.

He thought he saw a figure ahead of him in the mist.

*Found them.*

Makishima raised his hips off the saddle and leaned his body to the side. It was time to give chase.

It was not long before Makishima had in his sights the hesitant bicycle meandering through the thin, sometimes heavily thick, mist. The climber seemed uncertain on how to approach the course, probably because he couldn't see ahead of him. He was wearing a fluorescent orange and purple-dotted jersey. Judging by that flashy color combination, it was Tobukuro.

*Grapes... When he passed me, he went up from ninth place to eight, if I remember right. Then five or six more people passed by after him. But he's the first one I meet, huh? Did he overpace himself? Did the cold weather get to him so that he got dropped by those five or six people?*

Makishima pedaled harder, closing in, when Tobukuro sensed him and turned around.

"Makishima... You're already here."

Since he caught the full-on glare of Tobukuro's saucer eyes, Makishima couldn't pass by without some sign of acknowledgement, so he said "Yo" to Tobukuro, when—

"Oh... I mean..."

Pouting his lips, Tobukuro looked down. He kept his gaze downward as he pedaled carefully as if testing something. He seemed concerned about his wheel. Thinking that was strange, Makishima also looked down at the front tire of Tobukuro's black bike.

"... A flat?"

The rubber of his tire was clearly floppy.

*It's not a problem that I can't sympathize with.*

Flat tires were an unavoidable part of road racing that happened to the unluckiest of people. In a long distance road race, there would be a support car that arrived to replace your tire for you. But this race they were in now was designated to end in an hour. They also weren't carrying repair tools as they would have during practice.

Tobukuro flushed at Makishima's pitying gaze, saying hotly, "I can still race. I won't give up just yet!"

It pained his heart, seeing a rival that he had competed against only moments ago now reduced to this crippled state by forces beyond his control. Makishima gave him his sympathy.

"You were unlucky. This road is pretty bad, so it's understandable what happened. I feel bad for you, and seriously, it's not as if I'm a stranger to it. When I dance, the sides of my tires scrape the road, so it's easy for me to get flat tires too."

"... Makishima, I thought you would look at me and jeer too... When everyone else passed me, they sneered like they thought I deserved it, or they would look at me with desperation without really looking at me at all. Like they didn't care about other people besides themselves."

Tobukuro's eyes were wide with surprise. When Makishima replied with a mild, "Oh yeah?" his face changed into a rueful grin.

"You're pretty laid-back, surprisingly. I thought famous top racers like you would be more aggressive about taking the goal."

"... Really? I'm laid-back?"

Thrown off by Makishima's blithe response, Tobukuro bit his lip and asked in a low voice, "Hey, Makishima. How far do you think I can go on this tire?"

"To the goal, I bet. It's still working for you."

"But I can't race on it, right? So... to be honest, I'm wondering if I should retire. Is

there a point crossing the goal when you're at the bottom? I joined this race because I wanted to compete. I chased those guys after they went past me with their jeering faces. But I lost... I couldn't catch up to them with this tire. In that case..."

As he took in Tobukuro's words, Makishima chose his response with care.

"Let's say for example that I had a flat. If I retire from the race, I won't be able to compete with the others anymore. But as long as I'm still riding, I can still challenge them. I can at least stop people from trying to get past me. I won't have won the race, but I won't have lost either."

Holding a conversation with someone he wasn't particularly close to was not something he was very good at. Noticing Tobukuro staring hard at him, Makishima's embarrassment got the better of him and he looked away. He rubbed his cheek lightly with his index finger, keeping his eyes averted, to hide his faint blush.

"Um, so, what I mean is... you're in fourteenth place right now and there are more than forty people behind you. If you manage to keep all of them behind you, you'll still be in fourteenth place when you cross the goal."

"... You're amazing, Makishima! So that number includes you too, right?"

"Eh...?"

Ignoring the confused Makishima, the tip of Tobukuro's nose turned red and he was suddenly in high spirits. He dove in front of Makishima and blocked his path. His flat front tire skidded, but Tobukuro paid it no mind.

"... Kwah! Guess I lit a fire in you."

"That's right! Makishima, you made a mistake helping out your enemy in his time of trouble."

Tobukuro looked with a challenging expression at Makishima, who shrugged.

"We'll just have to race, then. I'm in a hurry, too."

Carefully sticking to the inside of the curve, Tobukuro tried to get ahead, ahead of Makishima. Makishima broke away by dancing along the far outside. Mud sprayed and large drops of water fell from the tips of leaves as if aiming for their eyes. But they couldn't afford to hesitate.

Leaning towards the outside curve, Makishima picked up speed and tried to dodge Tobukuro. His shoulder brushed tree trunks and twigs hit his helmet, but he paid them no mind. All of his concentration was being put into pedaling.

But Tobukuro kept persistently attacking him.

*I'll have to make a change of plans.*

Makishima stuck right beside Tobukuro. Since there was only space for one bicycle



to move ahead on the road, he could block his path. He just had to stop him from getting ahead.

Their shoulders bumped and their pedals hit each other. Holding back Tobukuro, who was recklessly slamming him, Makishima just barely brought himself through on the outside. Below the guardrail was a precipice that continued down into the ravine. He couldn't help breaking out into a cold sweat seeing it.

But... above that precipice was a wide, open space. It's all or nothing, Makishima resolved, and he leaned his body towards the outside of the curve, bending himself towards Tobukuro on the recoil. At the same time, he pushed his bike forward.

Makishima's head blocked Tobukuro's view, who flinched back on reflex. His flat front tire slipped and Makishima succeeded in pulling ahead of Tobukuro.

"Yes!"

In that instant, he switched gears and accelerated instantly. Their distance extended two bicycle lengths, three... three meters, five meters, he could feel with his senses that he was gaining.

"Get lost! ... I mean, go, Makishima! I'll be fifteenth place!"

Tobukuro's voice was unexpectedly bright and cheerful.

The mountain road was narrow, with branches sticking out from both sides and the rain hitting its leaves. The sharp scent of the forest hit his nose.

The narrow mountain road curved through an endless climb.

Makishima sped past the climbers ahead with his unique Spider Climb dancing. His breath came hard and his heart kept thumping in quick beats.

*Pant, pant, pant, that makes... five people.*

When they heard the scrape of Makishima's tires and his wild breathing, some climbers tried to break away. Others had already spent their energy and didn't notice his approach, getting dropped easily.

Panting, his heart overworked, Makishima gave chase. He aimed for the top of the uphill, on the other side of the curve. He pedaled rhythmically, but at a quicker pace.

"Geh, Makishima is here already!"

"He was still having bike trouble when I passed him!"

Some cried out in panic. Some whispered resignedly, "I knew that was all I could do." Still others said, "Whoa..." in admiration.

*How many people left?*

Makishima counted his fingers, thinking back on the number of people who had

passed him.

*... There should be three more, not including Toudou and Musashigawa. My legs are starting to feel the burn. And the slope has gotten even steeper.*

The next curve. The back of the next climber. Makishima chose what goal to aim for next in small steps, catching up to one, then breaking away for the next one.

After he broke past the three climbers that didn't include Toudou or Musashigawa, the hairpin curve that he traveled through alone ended suddenly in another uphill slope. This was a ridge of the summit further in — from here was where the real, true mountain lay.

As he tried to control his harsh breathing, Makishima checked his cyclo-computer. *I can catch up in the next two minutes, but if I run out of energy when I reach them, I won't be much of a challenge... No, I'll think about that after I've caught up.*

He furiously pulled out an energy bar from his back pocket and stuck it in his mouth.

*Forget everything until after I've caught up with them!*

The sudden steep slope of the mountain ridge... but it still wasn't the slope that Toudou had been looking forward to for their match. Makishima slapped his thighs and psyched himself up. He chewed the sweet-tasting bar, washing it down with water.

With the clearing of the fog came faint sunlight. Even the flowing muddy water on the road glinted from the light.

As he squinted from the reflected light, Makishima's spirits rose. He controlled his breathing, checking his body's condition. He felt warm and still had plenty of energy left. Thanks to the sunlight, the temperatures looked to be on the rise too. He wasn't exhaling white clouds anymore.

"Here I go!"

It was in less than two minutes that Makishima finally saw his prey ahead of him on a large curve. The road was fairly straight, and they were about fifty meters away. The light green jersey was Musashigawa.

And there was one more person.

He was there. Toudou was there up ahead. There were several meters between him and Musashigawa.

He only saw Toudou for a split second before he disappeared around the curve. Musashigawa looked to be sidestepping him, unhurried.

*I'm here!!*

His heart danced. 5.2 kilometers left to go, and he was here at last. It had gone almost exactly as he had anticipated.

Makishima chased after both of them. The distance between Musashigawa and Toudou didn't decrease, but Musashigawa wasn't completely left behind either. There weren't many people who could keep up with Toudou like that. It was clear evidence of Musashigawa's skill.

*I'm here, I'm here, I'm here!*

The mud that had splattered onto his face had dried, and as he wiped it off with his middle finger, Makishima could feel his lips forming naturally into a smile. His aching throat, his constricted breathing, and his thundering heart straining to pump his blood were like a thing of the past. Power surged through him as if he had only just begun to cycle.

*Here's where it all begins!*

Makishima attacked Musashigawa with his unique dancing. When he was about ten meters away, Musashigawa heard the sound of water being sprayed up by Makishima's bike and turned around.

His fair-skinned, chiseled face still looked unruffled. Musashigawa narrowed his eyes in a spiteful look, and tossed back the hair that clung to his forehead with an exaggerated flip of his hand.

"Makishima, you caught up already. That's pretty amazing. I'm impressed. Now this means that when I cross the goal before you and win, I'll get to see your face twisted with resentment. You are the foil that will prove that I am this mountain's king, its supreme leader, and that this mountain belongs to me. You should feel honored to be chosen for such a role."

"... You sure are confident..." Makishima said with exasperation.

"It won't be just you. That guy will go down with you. Good thing you don't have to feel lonely, eh?"

And Musashigawa pointed an outstretched hand in front of them. Then he asked something surprising.

"... By the way, I have just one question. Are you and Toudou together? You always seem to be with him in races."

"Huh?"

Unable to understand right away what he meant by "together," Makishima questioned him in return.

"I'm asking you if you're partners, if you're cooperating with each other to bring

down the others so that you two can race by yourselves. Are you working together?"

"No? Why do you ask?"

"That's how it looks."

Makishima shook his head and answered. "A climber is always alone. At least that's what I think. When you climb a mountain, how fast you go or how well you climb depends solely on your individual ability. So there's no point working with friends. At the end of the day, only one person gets to cross the goal line first and claim the unclaimed peak. Even in the one in a million chance that we were working together, we'd have to bring each other down in the end."

Musashigawa was still looking at him skeptically, so Makishima said assertively, "The only thing a climber wants is the peak, not friends to get along with. If there's a climber who thinks differently, I'd like to see them."

"Hmm," Musashigawa said, nodding, although he didn't look convinced. "I will accept your explanation for now. Now then, Toudou has gone on ahead. It's about time this break ended."

It wasn't as if he had stopped moving and was resting his legs. He was climbing up a steep slope. And yet, without as much as panting, Musashigawa took in a few short breaths and fired himself up.

Musashigawa raised his cadence at the same time he switched gears. He rode through a puddle, sending up a curtain of water that glittered in the sun. It made a "shaa" sound.

The very moment they rushed through a curve that twisted like a coiled snake, the angle of the slope suddenly got steeper. Musashigawa smoothly switched gears and climbed without losing speed. Makishima, who had been less prepared, clicked his tongue before switching gears as well.

*I don't hate developments like these!*

Makishima pushed on his pedals, putting his back into it. His bicycle sprang forward as though bouncing. He swung himself right and left and pedaled, and pedaled, and pedaled.

Makishima's dancing, as it scraped the road surface, was as if he were swaying through an incredibly intense dance. The water that had pooled in the ruts sprayed with droplets.

While Musashigawa moved quickly to close the distance between himself and Toudou, Makishima moved even more quickly to close the distance between himself and Musashigawa.

They climbed. They competed at climbing and climbed some more.

Using the turnout on the road shoulder, Makishima caught up with Musashigawa. He glanced at Musashigawa's face before blowing at the bangs in front of his eyes and speeding up. He broke away about two bicycle-lengths from Musashigawa when — whump!

He felt something hit his rear tire.

*Crap!*

He hadn't been able to see it because of the muddy water, but there was apparently a large crack in the asphalt between the turnout and the road. The side of his rear tire, which had leaned in that direction, had bumped through it.

*It's okay... right?*

Makishima purposely pedaled harder several times to test his tires. There didn't appear to be any change in their air pressure.

Relieved, Makishima kept climbing. There was fifteen meters to go before he could catch up with Toudou.

There was the sound of wheels directly behind him, and Makishima realized that Musashigawa had been carefully watching the whole thing. He looked over his shoulder.

"Makishima... Just now..."

Musashigawa was smiling faintly. Feeling an eerie chill run down his spine, Makishima pedaled even harder. His bicycle swayed as he aimed for Toudou's white back. Ten meters to go... seven meters... five meters... three.

"Yo, I'm going ahead of you," Makishima spoke to Toudou as he passed.

"You're here, you're here, Maki-chan! I've been waiting for you this whole time! I believed that you would catch me, fighting for the top without rest!"

His eyes sparkling, Toudou sat up in his seat and spread out his right arm like a wing, speaking joyfully. Sunlight peeked through breaks in the mist. His wet frame and wheel spokes glinted in the light. The wet road also was also bright from reflected light, and Makishima squinted.

4.5 kilometers until the goal.

"Thanks for that. Then I guess I'll have to get past you to pay forward on my hard work."

Makishima lunged ahead of Toudou, attempting to break away from him. He could feel passion roiling in his chest.

*Kwah, what's with this heat I feel inside of me?*

He felt as if he would give a yell of delight, which was completely out of character

for him.

“You’ve done it now, Maki-chan! Take this!!”

Toudou chased after him happily, lining up next to Makishima and diving into the inside of the next curve.

Since Makishima’s dancing took up a lot of space, he rode as close to the center of the road as possible. Otherwise if he was on a course outlined by a concrete retaining wall he would hit his shoulder against it.

In comparison, Toudou’s dancing held a single position, without movement of the body. It wasn’t any different from if he’d been riding flats in a sitting position. He could also get through narrow openings.

“Wahahahaha!”

With loud laughter that sounded truly happy, Toudou turned to look at Makishima. “How’s that, Maki-chan?!”

“I’ll just have to get past you again.”

During this conversation, they heard the splash of wheels spraying water as someone else approached. It was Musashigawa.

“What are you frolicking on about? And don’t ride in front of me on this mountain, you’re being an eyesore!”

Saying this in a low voice of barely contained rage (actually, not very successfully contained), Musashigawa lined up beside Makishima and Toudou.

“Then line up with us and ride. That is, if you can.”

Toudou accelerated quietly, taking the lead. But then...

“This mountain is my mountain, my body! Its horrible roads and difficult passages are my flesh and blood!!”

With that strange exclamation, Musashigawa accelerated his pedaling. The water that splashed from his wheels hit Makishima’s legs, leaving him taken aback by the coldness and the deluge of it. In that moment’s hesitation, Musashigawa skirted directly in front of Makishima, blocking his course.

“Do you see, Makishima? Because I climb here every day, I have experience on this road whether rainy or windy, even bad roads such as this one.”

Saying this, Musashigawa chased after Toudou. Toudou also accelerated. The distance between Makishima and the two of them shot up in one go. Ten meters, twenty meters...

*Musashigawa... That guy is trouble.*

Makishima pedaled. With his Spider Climb, he soon caught up to them.

It became a three-way battle. Toudou would take the lead, then Musashigawa

would ride past him, then Makishima would hold Musashigawa back and Toudou would grab that moment to take the lead again.

It repeated over and over: breaking away then being dropped, lining up to fight for the lead and breaking away again. Who was in the lead alternated in dizzying turns.

“You’re an eyesore!”

Musashigawa finally lost his cool composure and snarled at them. He took the lead, blocking Makishima, and turned to yell at him.

“It’s two against one! Makishima, you liar!”

Makishima raised an eyebrow and scowled. “I wasn’t lying. Seriously, we’re not that close.”

From behind Makishima, Toudou’s voice piped up in agreement. “That’s right. We just end up being together when fighting for the top. Like we are now.”

“It can't be helped.”

“...What do you mean, it can't be helped, Maki-chan?! Take that back!! Are you saying you want to compete with someone other than me?! I’m the only one who can satisfy you!! Fine then, go and enjoy yourself with this snob!”

“Haah?”

Toudou quietly picked up speed, moving a bike’s length ahead of him... then, still facing forward, said with humor in his voice, “You didn’t think I’d actually mean that, did you, Maki-chan?”

“Not a chance.”

Makishima smiled wryly, wiping away a fleck of mud that had landed on his cheek.

“Cut the crap! I’m fed up with you!”

Musashigawa increased speed even more, brushing past Toudou and taking the lead.

“You’re not getting away from us! Come on, Maki-chan!”

*That right there is exactly the reason why people get the wrong idea,* Makishima grumbled, but he made to match Toudou’s acceleration... But then—

*Hmm??*

Something about his rear tire felt wrong. Not quite so wrong that he could place it, there was just something slightly off... But still, something different from usual.

*... Don’t tell me that what happened earlier...?*

Letting Toudou go ahead, Makishima peered quickly at his rear tire, in a way that he wouldn’t be noticed. He didn’t see any visible changes. It was a plain old muddy tire.

*Is it... my imagination?*

He kept pedaling.

*Just my imagination.*

But for some reason, he wasn't speeding up as much as he thought he would. He switched gears several times to test his speed, and it was still different from usual.

"What's wrong, Maki-chan? That snob dropped us because you're going too slow!"

Musashigawa's back looked smaller and smaller, disappearing past the curve. When they turned it, they saw Musashigawa already several meters ahead at the next curve before he disappeared from view altogether.

Toudou pointed, frustrated.

"Ah... ahhh. He got away... Maki-chan, what happened? Is something wrong?"

"Oh. No, sorry. My legs got a bit achy."

Makishima dodged the question with the first thing he could think of. Toudou looked at him worriedly, his brows furrowed. He kept staring, so Makishima looked away.

"... There's no helping that," Toudou accepted. "You came all this way. The hills are going to be even higher up ahead. Save up your energy until we reach the steep slope. We can get past him again from there."

Toudou didn't attempt to go ahead on his own. He matched Makishima's pace and rode alongside him. But his lips did thin with disappointment, and he was quiet for a while.

Eventually, Toudou whispered, still quiet, "Let's have our race, just the two of us, before reaching the goal. No matter what."

"Yeah..."

"Otherwise, you catching up to me would have been for nothing."

Toudou looked at Makishima, his expression serious.

"A climb that doesn't have the two of us competing together isn't a climb at all."

It was clear from looking at Toudou that he was upset and irritated. The unchanging bumpy road appeared to add to his irritation. Every time he bumped slightly in his saddle, he clicked his tongue.

"Then why don't we race from here? I'm okay now," Makishima murmured. That feeling that something was different had vanished from his rear tire as he rode at low speed. He felt that he could speed up.

*It was just my imagination after all... Thank goodness it won't affect our race.*

Inside, Makishima felt relieved.



“Okay then, let’s race from that curve over there to the next!”

They exchanged looks and stood up from their saddles at the same time. Toudou rode straight and upright, while Makishima rode by moving wildly from side to side.

“Maki-chan, the mud and stones come flying at me every time you swerve! Step back a little.”

“The road’s too narrow, I can’t.”

“Then get behind me.”

“The mud that sprays up behind you gets in my face, so no.”

“... Fine. So you’re saying I just have to win, right? By getting far ahead of you.”

Toudou slipped ahead. Makishima made to follow him... but his rear tire got heavy again, as if something was dragging it.

*No, no, it’s just my imagination. My imagination. Even if there is something wrong with it, it’s not serious. I can keep going through this type of accident without it bothering me.*

Winning that round seemed to have mollified Toudou, because he dropped his speed and was waiting for Makishima to catch up. Makishima pedaled carefully, lining up next to Toudou.

“All right, Maki-chan! As I recall, there’s a hairpin up ahead. Once we enter the hairpin, we’ll race again. See, I knew you were pushing yourself too early. Get those legs rested up. Otherwise, it would be boring.”

“... Leave me alone.”

The road went uphill in another slow climb for several hundred meters before they reached another set of continuous hairpins.

“We’ll take down that snob at the steep slope that’s ahead of the hairpin.”

Since Toudou made the decision on his own, Makishima nodded noncommittally. The fact that they could not compete for the goal together unless they dropped Musashigawa was true enough.

But judging by Musashigawa’s high cadence pedaling and his familiarity with the road... Musashigawa was a formidable climber.

“That snob can pedal at quite the high cadence... I don’t think there are many who can climb at a high RPM,” Makishima murmured. Toudou looked at him, puzzled.

“So? What is it about him that’s bothering you?”

“Oh... nothing...”

Makishima was remembering a small first-year with glasses who had joined the club on the last day to choose club activities, about a month earlier.

Onoda Sakamichi, for such a merry name, was a complete amateur when it came to bicycles. He even admitted that he wasn't any good at sports.

However... riding an old granny bike, he was able to climb the school's rear entrance, a hill of up to a 20% angle, without trouble. It was a steep slope that made the legs of any normal person give way under them just from looking up at it.

When Onoda had climbed that slope on his granny bike while wearing sneakers, he had done fairly well against Imaizumi Shunsuke's fully-equipped road bike. And Imaizumi was a top-class racer in middle school.

Onoda's weapon was his cadence. Being able to pedal faster and longer was a matter of individual skill, and he was blessed with that ability. Apparently, he had built up his legs by making a round trip to Akihabara (a distance of ninety kilometers) every week on a bicycle that had been modified to prevent him from going very far, ever since fourth grade in elementary school.

Persuaded by Imaizumi, who discovered his talent, as well as another club newcomer Naruko, Onoda found the willingness to join the road racing club despite his dislike for clubs involving physical activity.

While watching the first-years race the other day — a race of sixty kilometers that new club members competed in to get an idea of their strength — Makishima received a shock. Before then, he had been disappointed that no climbers had joined this year.

But during that race, on the climb up Minegayama, a mountain close to the school, Onoda rode a real road bike for the first time in his life. A normal person would have taken some time to get used to the new sensation, but he took to it immediately, pedaling while wearing sneakers rather than cleats. Easily and nonstop he pedaled, on an uphill slope.

When Makishima saw Onoda riding from inside the van running alongside him, his heart shouted with joy.

*—What's with that amateur...? Could... Could he be...?*

And when he climbed the hills with Onoda during individual practice, what had been an inkling at the back of his mind turned into conviction. It was enough to make him bound excitedly into the clubroom seconds after practice was over.

*—“Hey, Kinjou! That guy! That amateur!! With training, he can climb! He's got the instincts for it!! That guy's a climber!”*

*Onoda... With him around, perhaps...*

Makishima held a great responsibility for the team. In the climbing interval of tournaments, Makishima had to pull his teammates and control their pace. Tournaments involved teamwork, unlike hill climbing tournaments where he could compete individually.

That was why he rarely had the chance to climb as freely as he wanted. Sohoku was a strong team despite their small numbers, and the stronger they got, the more they would rely on Makishima to pull them in climbs.

*Sohoku has got itself a climber that shows promise. He could be relied on to pull the team on mountains next year. Since he's a newbie, I have to drill everything I know into him starting now. But at least I won't have to worry about the team as much after I graduate.*

"Maki-chan, what are you smirking for? You look creepy," Toudou said suspiciously. "... It's nothing."

"It can't be nothing. I know! You're excited for our race, aren't you! You can't help yourself from looking forward to it!! I am too, Maki-chan, my blood boils! It burns! I'm trembling with excitement!!"

"Excitement? Are you sure it isn't with cold because of the rain earlier?"

"... Probably," Toudou agreed easily, and he faced forward again. "In that case, Maki-chan, we just have to raise our pace to warm ourselves up."

"Yeah, okay."

But even though Makishima answered, Toudou showed no signs of moving. He was looking into the distance, his expression heartfelt.

"Maki-chan, do you remember when we first met? It's been one year, one month, and twenty-three days since then."

"... You said something along those lines to me over the phone last month. About an anniversary date or whatever. What are you, a girl?"

"There's the day when I beat you for the first time... and then the day I first turned the tables on you and won within the last 100 meters... And then—"

"Oi! You really are a girl!"

"It's rather nice, keeping your memories close and talking about them together as we are now, while riding the course."

"Uh-huh... I thought we were going to warm up our bodies?" Makishima asked in exasperation, putting one hand to his head.

"Talking comes first. Not only am I a good talker, but I can climb, and I'm beautiful!"

The heavens have blessed me thrice, after all!”

“The cold must be affecting your brain.”

But Makishima was also feeling the cold. Sunlight was peeking between the clouds, but they were in the forest right now so the trees blocked them from receiving any warmth. Makishima didn’t have energy to spare to make further retorts. As Toudou rode slightly ahead, he began talking about the past with rapt, satisfied relish.

“That day took place in Saitama too. Last year in spring, at the Okuchichibu Hill Climbing Tournament.”

It was at the beginning of April one year ago, in Saitama prefecture.

It was still cold since it was early spring, but fine weather otherwise. The tournament was held on a mountain where the new green leaves of the year were still folded buds. Toudou was warming up just before entering the race for the U-18 student group. It was almost time for the opening ceremony. Better start heading there now.

*Okay. I’m in great condition today, as usual. This mountain will be another claim under my name.*

As he languidly guided his bike towards the area where people were gathering, Toudou could hear whispers all around him. Everyone was looking at the blue jersey he was wearing.

“Hey, it’s Toudou.”

“Toudou is here.”

“Hakone Academy’s Toudou... So that’s him...”

“He’s the guy who won last winter’s hill climbing tournament, isn’t he?”

“He’s a second-year.”

“Are you serious? You mean he was a first-year only a few days ago?”

Toudou was proud of himself. As he got off his bike to push it towards where the others were lining up for the opening ceremony, he secretly patted himself on the back thinking, *Nothing less from me*. Just then, he bumped shoulders with someone walking past him in the opposite direction.

Looking up, he saw a yellow jersey... It bore the logo “Chiba Sohoku High School”. The guy had a slender face and green hair. His surly expression was so off-putting that Toudou at once lost any inclination to even apologize to him.

“Sohoku? Never heard of it.”

Hearing Toudou's murmur, the guy, who was also pushing his bike, stopped walking and said bluntly, "Never heard of you either."

That touched a nerve. Toudou turned around and yelled at the guy who was about to resume walking away.

"Don't you know who I am?! I'm Hakogaku's Toudou Jinpachi! People call me the Mountain Go—"

Before Toudou could finish speaking, the guy glanced at Toudou over his shoulder and talked over him.

"That hairband is lame."

His lethargic way of talking made that statement sound even more insulting than it should have and Toudou was deeply offended.

"Oh yeah, well, what about your hair?! Are you an insect? A jewel beetle?!"

"...I'm a spider."

"Wahahaha, a spider?!"

What the heck is this guy talking about? Toudou had thought with scorn. He also thought that they would never see each other again... and yet.

*He really is a spider... What's up with that dancing?!*

It was, without any doubt, that guy with the jewel beetle-colored hair from earlier.

On this sudden incline, where Toudou had thought that he had no equal, that guy was riding in front of him. His long arms and legs moved his bike from side to side at extreme angles as he danced. His pedals almost looked as if they would scrape the ground. Parts of his tires that normally wouldn't touch the ground were hitting the asphalt.

*I've never seen anything like it!*

And yet he was fast. His gaze was wholeheartedly for the goal alone, and he aimed for the peak as if he were a starving beast greedily yearning to sink his teeth into his prey.

*But the championship here will be mine—*

Toudou lost only inches before the goal. The announcement speakers broadcast for all to hear, "The winner is Sohoku High School's second-year, Makishima Yuusuke!"

The commotion that rose from the crowd exclaiming "Toudou lost!" surrounded Toudou like a vortex and swallowed him up.

"Damn it!!"

"After that, we met constantly in other races and fought for the top! In the courses that tested our true abilities, we clashed! Isn't that right, Maki-chan?!"

“... I wonder why...”

“There’s no why about it!” Toudou lightly slapped the stem of his handlebars. “We were born under the same star that brought us to this fate. A fate written as ‘worthy rivals’ but read as ‘best friends,’ written as ‘best friends’ but read as ‘rivals!’”

“Since when did we become best friends/rivals?”

“When I acknowledged you and started calling you Maki-chan. That was... a month after we first met, at the Mt. Okutama Hill Climbing Tournament. The fourth race that we competed in on the weekends.”

Makishima didn’t deny that. It was true that back on that day, when they were racing for the goal and Toudou had told him “You’re Maki-chan!” before speeding ahead, he had accepted it and chased after him.

As Makishima remembered, Toudou suddenly pointed. “Maki-chan! Here it comes now! The continuous hairpins!!” This second set of hairpins was even steeper than the ones that they had raced through with Tobukuro earlier.

Because of the sudden incline, the greenery there was sparse. Past the grove of trees was a winding road that slithered along the mountain surface like a snake. The interval between curves was also shorter than before. He could count the curves that twisted right, then left. There were enough to make him dizzy. And as steep as this incline was, they still hadn’t reached the steep slope of the mountain that had an even more severe incline.

They could see Musashigawa peeking out from the top of the second curve of this winding road. He looked about 200 meters ahead.

“No matter what they try now, no one from behind will be able to catch up to us. That one nuisance guy that’s in front of us, we’ll drop while climbing these hairpins. This is the start of a fierce fight that’s just between the two of us, what do you say? Once we get through the hairpins, it’s three kilometers left to the goal. It’s going to be a heated, heated journey for the two of us!”

Toudou lined up beside Makishima and pointed a finger in his face. “In the fourteen races that we’ve competed so far, we have an even seven wins and seven losses! In this past year plus one month, it was always either me or Maki-chan that won the student group of the hill climbing tournaments! If I won, you would win the next one. If you won, I would win the next one. You won our last race and brought the score to a tie... now it’s time that we settled this once and for all. To see if I win, or you win!!”

Toudou’s hands gripped his brackets.

“I won’t lose! Not to you, Maki-chan!!”

“...Sho!”

First things first, they had to get past this set of hairpins — the two changed gears and pedaled with all of their effort.

*As I thought....The rear feels strange?*

Makishima’s eyebrows, which were normally furrowed constantly in a troubled expression, furled into an even grimmer expression.

The feel of it was different from usual. The tube felt distinctly loose.

*Is it a slow leak? After all this time, the rear is losing air.*

For the first time, Makishima felt a twinge of ill premonition.

*Even with a flat, the worst-case scenario is that I ride on the rim alone... But that would only take me to the goal, it would be absurd to use it to compete. I... won’t be able to ride as usual. It’s only a matter of time.*

A slow leak. Unlike a flat tire that lost all of its air at once and didn't work anymore, in a slow leak a small amount of air leaked out from a tiny hole bit by bit. It took a longer time before the tire became unusable.

Now that he was approaching the opening of the hairpins, there were three kilometers left to go. The goal was about fifteen... no, maybe even ten minutes away. They had covered eighty percent of the route. Even if he raced Toudou the rest of the way at full strength, his stamina and legpower ought to hold until the end.

But that was if he didn’t have wheel trouble.

*Even if it is a slow leak, if I ride with all of my power, will the tube hold for the next twenty minutes?*

Even as Makishima was thinking, Toudou plunged powerfully into the curve, his wheels dividing the flowing muddy water as he ran. He rode at a surprising speed for a sudden uphill. It was about the same speed as a granny bike riding a flat road.

Makishima fell behind from Toudou far enough that Toudou was soon hidden by the trees lining the curve. The tracks that Toudou left in the muddy water also disappeared without a trace.

As he chased Toudou, his wheel got slightly heavier each time he danced. It felt like he was being pulled backwards, like he couldn’t lift off from the ground... He wasn’t going as fast as he wanted, although the difference was too slight for Toudou to notice.

*There’s no mistake, it’s a slow flat. At a time like this... Is this some bad joke??*

Dancing on a tire that lacked sufficient air pressure brought unexpected wobbling,

and it could lead to a quicker flat. It was even worse when you used dramatic angles in your dancing, like Makishima did. There was also the slipperiness of the road. The bad conditions kept piling up against him.

If he wiped out and ended up hurling himself over the cliff edge...

No, even before that, would he be able to bring enough speed to be a challenge in this race?

“Tch... What now, Yuusuke...” Makishima asked himself.

*No matter how tough I am against irregularities and accidents, it's a different story with flat tires. If I choose to compete with Toudou and go all-out, I'll be able to climb by brute force, but that leads to a greater chance of my tire going dead. Or should I hold out to the end for the time being? I'll be able to keep up with Toudou while he's resting his legs... But if we have a real fight to reach the goal in the end, I won't be able to hide it from him anymore.*

Makishima hesitated.

“What's wrong, Maki-chan!” Toudou called out to him. “Come and get here, Maki-chan! Climb up, c'mon! You'll feel warmer from riding a fierce contest!!”

“...Grhh...”

Here and now, he couldn't meet Toudou's expectations.

*Why... Why did it have to be a slow leak... If it had burst right away, I'd feel frustrated but at least I could say that's that. But why this dragged out torture instead... Why?!*

If he thought that he could still ride at full power, he would have. He certainly would be able to, for several minutes anyway, on these hairpins. He could even have a contest with Toudou. But it would hasten the discharge of air pressure from his tube, do a lot of damage overall to his tire, and he would soon stop riding altogether.

*Tobukuro's situation isn't just for sympathizing anymore.*

Toudou probably wouldn't accept a win obtained on his own. Between the two of them, their contest stretched from whatever point they were on the course to the goal line.

*I don't want to disappoint him. I don't like this either... Having to abandon a contest over something like this? I can't do it.*

But... That was only the worst-case scenario.

The tube might not be as badly damaged as he thought it was. In fact, the feeling he had that air was leaking out with each pedal, and that he was making things worse, had only been for the first few turns. Otherwise, it felt stable.



It might not be as much trouble as he thought...

Makishima stopped his dancing. He sat down in his saddle, switched to lighter gears, and tried pedaling quickly.

It was okay, he could ride without issues. If he rode normally in a sitting position, it wouldn't have much effect on his wheel. If he used his dancing only when he really needed to... he could do this.

*With this, there's enough chance that the tire can hold out until the goal!*

The damage really could be less than he thought. Even if he overdid himself on everything, there was still the slight possibility that his tire could hold out on all of the many areas where they would hold their contest.

He would be able to race.

But Makishima knew from experience that such an optimistic outlook was not 100% accurate.

The worst situation, the I-can-manage-somehow situation, and the There-was-nothing-to-worry-about-in-the-end situation. It was hard to tell which was true or which had a greater likelihood... But right now, he couldn't afford to get off his bike to check the wheel.

If he did, he would lose the option to have a direct competition. It would be the same as being unable to ride at all.

While Makishima remained indecisive, he turned the curve again. It was only when making turns that he tried dancing. This time, he didn't get the feeling of air escaping his tire.

*It might hold for longer than I'd thought.*

I can still ride. As long as I choose my course with care and keep it low-impact.

Fortunately, while the road was still wet, there was less mud and flowing water here. According to the video of the road that he had watched, the path was also going to widen up ahead and have less mud and rocks. It should be easier to ride through.

*—"How far do you think I can go on this tire?"*

Tobukuro's voice came back to him, as well as the answer that he had given.

*"As long as I'm still riding, I can still challenge them. I won't have won the race, but I won't have lost either."*—

Makishima raised his head.

*As long as I'm still riding, I haven't lost yet.*

If he let the distance between them grow any further, Toudou would suspect that something was wrong. Toudou was still there, in front of him. When he saw

Toudou's back... The memories of how he had chased him so many times before arose vividly in Makishima's mind.

In the moments that counted most, he climbed with Toudou. He competed with Toudou.

It's because he is there that I climb.

I wanted the goal, the summit. That's how it had always been, always.

It's because I compete with him that I yearn for the top.

That was how it had been for Makishima this past year. Even he was aware.

*I've decided, I'm going.*

Makishima put power into his pedals and bent his body.

"Sho!!"

Toudou was climbing up the hairpin curve. With no fear of faltering, Makishima jutted out so far over the guard rail that he could have fallen over it, and flew through the inside. The two fought for the next inside. When Makishima got slightly ahead, Toudou attacked powerfully from way outside.

Lining up next to each other and fighting for the lead with only a few centimeters between them, they climbed to the top of the hill at almost the same time. They looked at each other, and before either of them could proclaim who had won, the road suddenly went downhill.

The road got wider as they went downhill. Before now the road had needed turnouts for bicycles to pass by each other, but here even small cars could cross paths if they moved slowly.

They hadn't been able to catch Musashigawa. He disappeared at the curve of the downhill slope. There was about 150 meters between them.

Toudou glared at Musashigawa's back before turning to Makishima.

As proof of how much power he had put into his riding, Toudou's breathing was ragged and he gulped air as he spoke. Sweat poured off his forehead. Just like Makishima, it was the first time that day it wasn't rainwater he was wiping off his face.

*"Pant, pant, pant, we haven't settled this yet! Pant, since there's a downhill, there must be an uphill again. Pant, pant, the goal is always the summit! We'll compete again at the next uphill slope. Don't be late, Maki-chan!!"*

His breath coming in hot gasps, he pulled out the water bottle attached to his frame and swallowed from it in one loud audible gulp. His eyes on Makishima,

Toudou wiped his mouth and grinned.

Letting gravity do the work for them, the two of them rode the downhill slope side by side.

As Makishima panted, trying to control his breathing, he felt something wrong with his rear wheel again.

*Tch... It is heavy. The air pressure decreased after that race on the hairpins.*

Even though he had decided to go... the same indecision circled through his head again: whether he should avoid their competition and make it to the goal, or whether he should fight their battle even if he might not make the goal.

*If I don't overdo it, I can make it to the goal. But we'll probably be competing three more times. If we fight each other on the same level as those hairpins... The risks are too great.*

Makishima stole a look at Toudou's profile. He had his head ducked and was looking down so that he would face less wind resistance while going downhill. The sweat that he'd worked up was dripping from his chin and the tips of his hair.

"... Is there something on my face?"

Makishima hurriedly looked away. Because the road was wider, there was less shadow from the trees, and the road reflected sun glare as he rode down the center of it. When he looked down suddenly like that, it made him squint.

"No... I was just thinking that we're soaking wet, with all the sweat and rain."

"It happens, Maki-chan."

"I know."

*I want to go with Toudou to the goal... if I can...*

Makishima looked at Toudou once more. Then he averted his gaze and asked on a whim, "... Why do you always invite me?"

Toudou seemed surprised by the sudden question because he asked back, puzzled, "Why what?"

"Why is it always me?"

Toudou blinked several times and pouted. "Isn't that obvious? Because you're Maki-chan."

Makishima fell silent, confused, and Toudou took on a pleased expression, laughing loudly.

"Listen, Maki-chan. Stuff like this, it's based on feeling, not logic. You don't need logic when you're pursuing pleasure. Leave it all to instinct."

“...I just don’t get it.”

“What?!”

Toudou’s eyebrows shot up. He glared at Makishima’s face hard enough to pierce holes into him, not noticing that he was heading for a rift in the guard rail.

“Front, look in front of you!”

Crap, Toudou yelped and he jerked his handle. His bike turned soundlessly, and he avoided injury by making a minute change to his route.

“What do you mean, you don’t get it, Maki-chan! Was it not fun for you?! Do you not feel anything when we compete?!!”

“I have no idea... why it’s you, or why I climb... But I can say this—”

Feeling somewhat embarrassed, Makishima cut himself off and he turned to gaze far into the distance. Then he whispered, “I’ve never experienced anything else as fun as this.”

Toudou’s cheeks turned a bit red at Makishima’s answer.

“Right, Maki-chan?! I’m so glad I invited you today. If I leave you alone, there’s always a chance that you ‘ll forget to register or you’ll think it’s too much trouble. If I don’t call you, I get so, so worried...”

“...Are you a girl?!”

“Hey, whose fault do you think it is that I worry this much in the first place?! You’re always forgetting our anniversaries, for one thing.”

“Oh my god, you *are* a girl!! You’re female, aren’t you?!!”

As he made retorts against Toudou with fervor, Makishima remembered the phone call when they had talked about those anniversary dates.

—“Maki-chan, it’s the last Sunday of May. Don’t tell me that you forgot.”

That sudden phone call from Toudou came to him in the middle of last month...

Makishima had returned home from school and was lounging in his room for a little while after dinner when it came.

Toudou’s calls were always sudden. Regardless of whether it was the afternoon or the evening, he called two to three times a week. Because they had classes at different times, the worst time he’d chosen to call was when Toudou had a recess period while Makishima was still in class.

The minute he picked up the phone, Toudou kept repeating to him “the last Sunday of May.”

“Huh?”

“See, I knew you’d forget! I bet you even forgot what today is.”

“... It’s Monday.”

Is there something else? Makishima wondered.

“One year ago, on this day, was when I beat you for the first time! Last year, it was a Sunday.”

“... Ookay.”

“Don’t ‘ookay’ me! That time, our score was one win, one loss, and it was also when I awakened to the joy of competing with you. Although I only figured that out after the fact. The moment I truly understood was when my score of one win, two losses became two wins, two losses at our fourth race. That was when I acknowledged you as my best friend/rival for the first time! We’ve been competing with each other since, and now I’m at seven wins, six losses. You registered for our fourteenth race two weeks from now, right? So now I’m talking about the one after, the fifteenth one. The deadline for registration is this Friday for Saitama’s Mt. Hiromine tournament. You know, the one that’s going to be held on the last Sunday of May.”

“Y—Yeah.”

It wasn’t that he had forgotten. He just hadn’t been sure. There was going to be another tournament on the same day at Kanagawa, and he had been wondering which one Toudou would be participating in.

But he also hadn’t wanted to ask him. There was just something about *that* idea that annoyed him.

Makishima had expected Toudou to register for the tournament that was closer to home in Kanagawa, so he asked back, “Is Saitama really okay with you?”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s another tournament that’s closer to you.”

“It’s too close and I know it too well, so it’d be boring. I’d have the advantage. Races like this year’s Inter-high that are held in my hometown can’t be helped, but I want us to fight each other on equal terms. Somewhere where neither of us have already had a test run.”

“... Kwah, so that’s it, huh?”

He smiled wryly and sighed in spite of himself.

“What, do you have a problem with that? Or are you certain that you’ll win? You did register for it, right, Maki-chan? If you forgot, then do so right now!”

“... We’ll see.”

“I’ll be waiting!”

Toudou sounded as if he was going to say more, but Makishima took his phone away from his ear and hung up.

*So that's why he chose Saitama... I see.*

Makishima headed to his bookcase and started up the computer that rested on an empty shelf. After searching for the homepage for the Mt. Hiromine Climbing Tournament and checking that they were still accepting applicants, he searched for the application form and began to fill it in—

And now, they were competing in this race.

Makishima turned his gaze to the road before him.

*No matter how much I think in circles, it isn't going to fix my flat. I'll go with Toudou as far as I can!*

Thinking that, deciding to bear the consequences that came with it, his mood felt lighter.

There was 2.5 kilometers left to the goal. They had risen up to 800 meters in elevation. They had climbed close to 600 meters up from the starting line. Another uphill slope was going to be upon them soon — the toughest area of this race, the steep slope with a 14% incline.

## Chapter 3, Their Promise

With 2.5 kilometers left to the goal, they came to a fork in the road. A sign there said “Hill Climbing Tournament, Turn Right →”

When they made the turn, the road got wider than ever and the nature of the road surface changed completely. It was beginning to dry, and they were no longer spraying up mud and rain as they rode. The wet road wasn't reflecting as much light either.

But the clouds overhead rolled by quickly. Sunlight spilled through for an instant before vanishing behind them again. The light gradually got weaker before there was nothing but clouds in the sky.

The abrupt transformation of the weather made Makishima glance up at the sky.

*The gray clouds are thickening again. It's true that I don't dislike the rain, but I was feeling more cheerful while the sun was out.*

The road went downhill past the fork for some time before going uphill again. They would use the force of the downhill to add momentum to their climbing.

“That snob keeps getting away.”

Toudou, who was half a bike length ahead of Makishima, bit his lip.

“We'll bring him down no matter what before heading to the goal. No way is he going to bother us.”

But the winding road delayed them, and they still couldn't see a trace of Musashigawa riding in front of them.

“Hey, Maki-chan. Since I'm going to climb at full speed up ahead, I want to ask you this now while I still have the chance.”

As he pedaled easily in a sitting position on this downhill slope, Toudou talked while keeping his face forward.

*He really is energetic,* Makishima thought as he looked at Toudou. His back was straight, without any heaving, as if Toudou had just begun to ride. Makishima didn't have any issues with his own body either.

“You are going to join us in the fight for the top in this summer's Inter-high, right?”

“Who knows... My school isn't like the kings, after all.”

Last year's national champions Hakone Academy had become Kanagawa's representatives again this year, and their skill was superior even on the national level. Naturally, they were the top candidate for the championship. As for Sohoku, they had won their regional preliminaries to represent Chiba just the other day.

“What are you talking about, Maki-chan? You're so dishonest with yourself. The

hills of Hakone's National Route #1 will be where our precious race takes place. It will happen. That's what I believe."

"There are other hill climbing tournaments before that one."

"There are. But Inter-high is special!"

"I can't act on my own without the team."

"We... Hakogaku and Sohoku will compete for the top on Hakone's hills. We will."

Makishima thought Toudou was being stubborn.

"That's your dream. There are strong teams throughout the country—"

Toudou cut him off. "Then answer me this, Maki-chan! Are you okay with not racing me? It's the best stage for our last team race... We're third-years now. Inter-high is our last high school tournament. After that, we retire from club. I believe that you will come to compete with me. I believe that we will be able to compete on the hills of Hakone."

Toudou grabbed with his left hand the "NE" part on the right arm of his blue "HAKONE" jersey and turned for just a split second to look at Makishima. His eyes were quiet but they had a fierce light in them.

"It will be the last time we compete while wearing these jerseys."

Still facing forward, Toudou pointed his right hand directly behind him at Makishima's yellow jersey.

"Maki-chan's Sohoku jersey..."

Then he brought his hand up to stroke down his left shoulder, so that he was hugging his upper arms.

"And my Hakogaku jersey."

As if he were trying to control his rising emotions, Toudou paused, then said each word carefully but significantly.

"On the road where these two ride side by side, where the words Hakogaku and Sohoku compete and gallop over the hills, we will have our last race."

His voice seemed to tremble slightly. Makishima felt Toudou's strong feelings vibrating from his back and was unable to speak for a while.

"...Y... Yeah, that's right. That's... how it's been..."

"What's with that pitiful response? Maki-chan! Let's compete at the Inter-high, absolutely."

Toudou didn't turn around. That was why his feelings were carried in his words, his voice.

"...I want to. But I can't do it on my own."

"Kinjou and Tadokoro won't give up! They have a connection with us as well."



“Yeah, but... We don’t have many members. Who knows if we’ll be able to compete at the top...”

“You have new members, don’t you? The rumor is that you have someone with a lot of promise. I hear he was top-class in middle school.”

“Oh, Imai... I mean,” Makishima dodged the question. “That’s a trade secret.”

But complicated feelings arose in the back of Makishima’s mind.

The Inter-high was a team effort. As Sohoku’s sole climber, Makishima would be responsible for pulling the team on Hakone’s mountains. In fact, Kinjou had even said so himself. He would not be able to ride freely.

“Does that mean... that I can hope for a positive response?”

“Who knows.”

No matter how much Toudou pressed for answers, Makishima didn’t intend to give him any more.

*Our last race wearing these jerseys, huh... If our teams could fight for the top like this, that would be great. But... when it comes to competing just between the two of us...*

Makishima looked down at his yellow jersey. Written across his chest were the words “Sohoku High School Road Racing Club.”

*I want to hope for a positive response too.*

But with only one climber... Suddenly, he thought of a boy with glasses. The way he’d looked pedaling in earnest up a climb...

*No, no, no way. He has the makings of a climber but... he’s still a complete beginner. He doesn’t know how to hold back others or pace himself yet; he doesn’t know anything. He still lacks the stamina. No matter how much I teach him, those are the basics. He has to gain the experience for himself and train... Next year, he could be of use. That’s what I’m expecting. Put him in Inter-high now? That’s in two months. He won’t make it in time. Besides, it hasn’t been decided if he’ll be one of the six people on the team yet. The training camp that’s coming up will decide that.*

But it wasn’t that he didn’t wish for it.

That guy... That Onoda, he grew at frightening speed. He also possessed the basic qualities and natural talent in enviable quantities. It would be worthwhile teaching him. He was hardworking and earnest.

It wasn’t that Makishima didn’t wish for it at all.

Realizing what he was thinking, Makishima secretly smiled ruefully at himself.

Toudou’s clear voice broke through Makishima’s thoughts.

“Maki-chan, there’s the hill. Let’s race.”

Beyond an easy slope too short to be used as an approach run was a steep slope. It was a climb that turned gently several times, a length of about one kilometer. They looked up at it to see a shadow flitting through the trees for an instant before disappearing around the curve.

“I see him. There’s Musashigawa... We’ll just have to get past him! Hurry, Maki-chan!!”

Toudou pedaled forward gallantly. Makishima bit the inside of his lip and followed.

He breathed lightly as he chased Toudou, who was charging up the slope by dancing. Makishima was close enough that his front tire and Toudou’s rear tire were overlapping and Makishima had just switched gears when—

“Oh?!”

By the time he heard Toudou’s yell, it was already too late.

There was a ramp crossing through the road that was about ten centimeters high. Furthermore, the road beneath the ramp was hollowed out, making it more of a ten centimeter ditch.

The sound of “clunk clunk” vibrated through his frame. There was quite the impact.

*Guh!!*

Makishima’s heart froze.

*This is really bad...!!*

Sure enough, his rear tire went abruptly heavy, as if something had clung onto it and was dragging it down.

*My rear tire is dead. I’ll have to ride on the rim alone before long...*

Makishima knew with certainty that his rear tire was fully flat now. But even if the tube was completely deflated of air, it would be possible for him to ride on the rim — the metal wheel that the rubber stuck to.

The pedals were what turned the rear wheel, providing the propulsion.

While it wasn’t impossible to ride on the rim of the rear tire, the diameter of the tire was smaller without the inflated tube, which meant the distance covered in one pedal cycle was less than before. Also, because of the loss of elasticity, there was greater friction which meant less speed.

*If only the tube had lasted even a little until I’d gotten past Musashigawa...*

“Maki-chan, that was pretty awful just now. It caught me by surprise. I got away with it though.”

“... Yeah.”

It was Toudou who got away with it. That was what Makishima’s affirmation meant.

Makishima stuck directly behind Toudou so as not to bring attention to his flat tire. As their quick breathing continued, Toudou asked, “Mm? What’s wrong, Maki-chan?”

“Nothing...”

“Don’t tell me you want me to pull you on this hill! Are you still frozen from the cold? I told you this was a competition, didn’t I?!”

As his attention kept turning to Makishima behind him, Toudou looked confused. Makishima turned his head slightly so he wouldn’t meet Toudou’s gaze. Toudou spoke up as he gasped for breath on the precipitous slope.

“Pant, pant, Maki-chan, even the road is dry here. Come at me harder.”

“Yeah.”

Makishima’s breathing was also fast. With every second, it got faster.

“There’s only a bit left to this race and... that annoying guy is still... up ahead... Pant, pant, we have to bring him down quick and... make this race just the two of us.”

“Okay.”

With water still squirting from his shoes with every step, Makishima pedaled, still breathing hard. He wasn’t sure if it was his imagination or not, but he thought he heard his bike creak. It hit him that he was pushing things too hard.

*... I’m not pushing too hard. I can still go on. Still.*

As he felt his wheel get even heavier, they circled one curve.

“Pant... pant... Hey, there he is.”

Toudou pointed one hand in front of him. At around the halfway point of the steep slope, they could see clearly the light green jersey a few meters ahead. It was closer than they had thought.

“Let’s go, Maki-chan!”

In high spirits, Toudou gave chase. Makishima followed him. But by now, the wheel damage that Makishima could feel traveling through his bike and up his body made him very uncertain whether it would be able to endure this climb.

*Damn, it’s heavy! I’m going to slip...!*

But... he couldn’t afford to lose here. Since he’d come this far already... He wanted to fight with Toudou for the goal.

Ever since hearing from Toudou’s mouth that their last race was close, even one

race became all the more precious. Makishima bit his lip once, then pedaled earnestly.

But the distance between him and Toudou grew more and more apparent.

*Maki-chan isn't behind me?!*

Feeling the presence behind him grow further and further away, Toudou panicked and was about to turn around.

But the slender man in the light green jersey, Musashigawa, was right there. Just a few meters away. A few turns of the pedals on this sudden incline and he would be within reach. And naturally he could hear that Toudou was approaching him. If Toudou took his eyes off him now, he could escape again.

*I'll stop him for good this time. Maki-chan, hurry and get here!*

Toudou stifled his aura and used his special sleeping climb to slip past Musashigawa. He still had plenty of strength for conquering the slopes. Giving a sidelong glance at Toudou as he accelerated half a length ahead, Musashigawa called out to him.

"I see Makishima got dropped. There's only two kilometers left to the goal. Makishima won't be able to catch up anymore. Now Toudou, why don't you accept that this race is between you and me now?"

Toudou gritted his teeth audibly and glared at Musashigawa. There was a smile plastered on Musashigawa's face, but his shoulders heaved up and down and he was breathing considerably loud.

*He's at his limit too*, Toudou realized, and suddenly found it all very funny. Toudou took a deep breath to keep his breathing from speeding up naturally, puffed out his chest, and laughed.

"Wahahaha, what are you talking about? Maki-chan will come."

They were on a hill, a steep incline that made it difficult to talk at all. But he did talk, to show his opponent that he was unfazed by this, untouched. Even if it meant overexerting himself.

Musashigawa drew in one labored breath after the other. And then, in broken words, he spoke.

"You have... a beautiful friendship. But it was Makishima... who told me that... a climber is always alone."

Toudou pointed two fingers at Musashigawa's face. Musashigawa's fine eyebrows knit together in displeasure while he kept breathing heavily. Toudou's breathing

was also labored, but he spoke without stopping.

“There are two types of loneliness. One is the wretched kind of loneliness, the kind where you can’t put faith in anyone and no one can put faith in you. The other kind is loneliness you can endure because you have someone you believe in, and they in you. You probably only know one kind.”

They climbed. As they climbed, Toudou grinned and placed a hand over the left side of his chest. Right over his intensely beating heart.

“We know the second one. We know it here, with our hearts. You’re right, it’s true that a climber is alone.”

He drew in a breath. It hurt to breathe, but there was something he really wanted to say now.

“In the end, a climb is a fight with yourself. It’s only ever one person who can pass straight through the goal and earn victory.”

Musashigawa didn’t appear to have the luxury to answer. This area was the toughest of the route. Even Musashigawa, for all his claims that this mountain belonged to him, had a tough time climbing here with all of his strength.

Toudou took another deep breath and continued.

“Even if you gain a comrade in arms and become faster by competing with him... that’s only an outcome. A fortunate outcome, but not something to be sought or made an objective from the very beginning.”

He paused, took another breath.

“But, as it so happens, we were lucky enough to gain that fortunate outcome.”

Toudou’s lengthy speech appeared to have gotten on Musashigawa’s nerves. A blue vein popped on his temple.

“*Pant, pant*, you can... make up all the arguments you want... You can have all the hope... you want. *Pant, pant, pant*, but there is only one thing that is true.”

Musashigawa stood his arms on the handlebars as if to hold his bike down, and controlled his breathing. As he kept pedaling, he said,

“This race is mine.”

While he said it dramatically, he no longer seemed able to expend the energy to gesticulate as before. Instead, he pedaled faster. Toudou also stubbornly brought his bike forward, blocking his course.

The air steamed with their hot breath.

Musashigawa gritted his teeth and tried to shake Toudou off. But Toudou kept blocking him, even as they bumped handles and wheels in the process.

“*Pant, pant, pant*, Toudou... Makishima isn’t... coming. He’s dropped. He’s done

for.”

Toudou thought Musashigawa said those words because he was a sore loser.

“The idea of me being close to the climb’s goal without Maki-chan? That’s impossible.”

As oxygen traveled through his body, as he moved his muscles and breathed in and out with agonized gasps, Toudou said, bluntly, what he believed.

“Maki-chan will come. He’ll come so that the two of us can head for the goal. So that the two of us can fight for the goal.”

Musashigawa’s uncertainty became more apparent in the face of Toudou’s unshakeable confidence. His pale cheeks were flushed. Agitated by Toudou’s words, he panted before gulping audibly once and turning every so often to look behind him.

Toudou didn’t look back. Even though his breath came in quick gasps, he wouldn’t stop talking.

“Maki-chan will come. It isn’t me you’re most afraid of. You’re afraid of the one who’s tough on bad roads, who can handle irregularities. It’s Maki-chan you’re afraid of. Isn’t that right?”

“... He isn’t coming. Toudou, haven’t you realized? Makishima is—”

Musashigawa’s mouth was twisted into a triumphant grin when a figure that bent noticeably from side to side rose up over the bottom curve of the hill.

Musashigawa held his breath. Toudou, relieved, turned back to look.

Sweat fell from the figure’s swaying hair, and with every bend of his body, he advanced a great distance. He was climbing up. He was approaching them closer and closer.

“See?” Toudou said, his chest puffed up with great pride, and he extended his arm out to Makishima as a greeting.

“No way... Impossible!”

Musashigawa was wide-eyed.

“Maki-chan, you’re late! What were you doing?”

“Pant... pant... pant... Oh, I found a gravure magazine on the ground, so I had to stop to pick it up.”

Even though he was breathing hard, he answered with feigned ignorance. One corner of his mouth was twisted slightly upward — and Toudou, knowing that it was probably Makishima’s attempt at a smile, laughed out loud.

“Wahaha, you’re so laid-back, Maki-chan! You’re saying that to make this snob nervous, right? I know! I know you!”

Makishima had come, just as Toudou had believed he would. He hadn't gotten tired nor had his body stiffened from the cold. Toudou believed they could still ride on and on.

Makishima had climbed up the steep slope without falling behind.

This green-haired man whose meager expressions made it hard to tell what he was thinking had chased after him on this difficult slope and smiled. That was enough to make Toudou happy. He felt his heart grow warm.

There were 300 meters left of this steep slope.

And then...

Rain began to fall again. It was a sudden rain. Plump raindrops came down incessantly from the skies with a loud patter.

The rain fell on their warm bodies.

The sudden shower dampened the drying gray concrete into black again. The rain beat down on Makishima's arms, back, thighs, and bicycle.

Droplets of water danced all around him as they soaked his entire body. The forest, the roads, and everything around him also reverberated with the *thuk thuk thuk* of rain.

*It's pouring again. There's only a little more left to the race so it's not a bother... but...*

When Makishima caught up to them, he secretly sighed upon seeing that Toudou had not passed Musashigawa on this slope. He couldn't help himself from throwing complaints at Toudou.

"*Pant, pant...* you didn't have to stop and slow him down. It would have been the same if you'd just quietly gone ahead to the top. All we need to do is ride faster than anyone else."

That seemed to have struck a nerve for Musashigawa because he glared at Makishima. He rattled on in between wild breaths.

"*Pant... pant...* that aloof attitude, those words that mock other people. Makishima, that's what I don't like about you! *Pant... pant... pant...* if you two don't get it, then I'll prove to you irrefutably that you cannot beat me on this mountain. Don't come crying to me later."

With gritted teeth, Musashigawa pedaled once, twice, and then vanished.

"What?!"

Toudou was taken by surprise.

“That little... I thought he’d reached his limit already...”

“You don’t know what your limits are until you’ve fallen to the ground. Not for yourself, and definitely not for other people.”

Toudou nodded at this, his expression returning to one of concentration. He slapped his cheeks with both hands to rouse himself. Raindrops mixed with sweat scattered from him.

In the area of this shoulder bend, the trees jutted out further, creating a low ceiling with their branches. It was like a green tunnel— and Musashigawa’s light green jersey blended in easily with it.

“*Pant, pant...* Tch, that guy is like a ninja,” Toudou grumbled.

You’re one to talk, Makishima thought, but he kept that to himself. Toudou might be called the “Forest Ninja” behind his back, but he considered himself a “Sleeping Beauty.”

“I won’t be played by such underhanded methods,” Toudou said, and began his pursuit. Makishima followed. He didn’t want to lose. His last race with Toudou was close. Because of that, he wanted to enjoy all of the remaining races they had together.

Because he knew that their races, between just the two of them, weren’t going to last forever.

The air in his rear tire had leaked out completely by this point. It carried on turning heavily, unsteadily. Even so, he wasn’t going to hesitate anymore.

He didn’t want to throw away his race with Toudou here.

It wasn’t long before Toudou, climbing the hill, caught up to Musashigawa and attempted to go past him.

But this time, it was Musashigawa who blocked him. His heavy-handed move made Toudou’s front tire slip when he jerked away to avoid collision. The wet roads were no help with traction.

“Whoa!”

Normally Toudou would have been able to dodge easily, but his slippery front wheel caught a slight dent in the road surface. That alone disturbed Toudou’s beautiful riding style; his solid form shifted.

While he looked quite worn out, Musashigawa grinned daringly.

“*Pant... pant... pant...* I know all of the dents on this road... *pant...* their location, their width, their depth... Even if you guys went through this road before as a test run... *pant... pant...* you could never beat me when it comes to picking the best course!”



“Ghhh!!”

Swallowing in annoyance, Toudou became stubborn and tried to get past. But every time he did, his wheel hit a dent and he was thrown back again by the momentary delay.

“Damn it!”

Toudou’s breath was also getting ragged.

While his breath was ragged as well, as he too climbed with all of his might, Makishima observed them calmly.

*It’s because he focuses on Musashigawa and tries to get past him, to compete with him, that he gets caught in his trap. Well, not that I have any right to be smug about that since I got caught in it too. Climbing at your own pace and your own chosen course, that’s what a hill climb is supposed to be about. Just think of Musashigawa as a big rock that happens to be there.*

But from this distance, he wouldn’t be able to tell that to Toudou. He was too close to Musashigawa not to be overheard.

*I’ll have to show him with my riding. But with this tire— Idiot, I decided not to hesitate anymore.*

Go!

Bending his body, Makishima put power into his pedaling. His unsteady wheel got caught on the wet road surface and he couldn’t avoid slipping. He had to advance recklessly.

He breathed hard. His heart pounded with pain. His legs were suffering. But he could feel elation rising in him. He felt like he could do anything.

While Musashigawa was distracted by Toudou on his right, Makishima broke past him on his left. His bike took half of a lead before Musashigawa pedaled even harder and—poof— vanished again.

“Huh?!”

“Maki-chan! Wall!”

At Toudou’s yell, Makishima just barely avoided hitting the protruding wall of bedrock.

It was by a hair’s width— indeed, several of his hairs got caught and pulled out by the clumps of crusted green moss on the bedrock. When he raised his head up, the rain veiled his field of vision, so it was hard for him to tell what was bedrock and what was brushwood in front of him. With brushwood, he could manage to get through by charging his way in, but with bedrock, he would only end up hurting himself.

Naturally, being scared out of his wits had given Musashigawa time to drop him.

“Damn it!”

He tried again, bearing down on him from behind, but when he attempted to get past him on the road shoulder, tree branches suddenly stuck themselves out in front of his face. When he ducked his head from the branches and looked down, the next time he looked back up, he had lost sight of Musashigawa again.

“*Pant... pant...* Now do you get it... I am one with this mountain!”

Musashigawa’s voice echoed back to them from somewhere among the trees on the road ahead. Musashigawa was able to use this mountain’s terrain and natural environment – all of it – to his advantage. The two finally understood.

They rode on. In a landscape that had turned gray from the persistent rain and was now also full of shadows from the overhanging branches, they rode on.

*Pant, pant, pant*, their breathing grew faster. Their temples pulsed from underneath their helmets.

But they still couldn’t catch Musashigawa.

“You little...!!”

They had at last managed to climb the steep slope.

But... they were still unable to reach the point in the race where the two of them had the road to themselves.

Having climbed the most difficult slope of the race didn’t mean that the road got easy after that. There were still hills, all the way to the goal, that posed a challenge.

“The king of this mountain... huh...” Makishima whispered as he tried to control his breathing. Toudou responded happily. He appeared to be on a biker’s high.

“*Pant, pant*, having someone with, *pant*, bite around sometimes can sure change the look of the future. This gives me shivers.”

“Oh? Smooth words make for smooth ways, I see.”

Toudou seemed to panic at Makishima’s words. He looked as if he didn’t want Makishima to think that he was making excuses.

Or so Makishima thought.

“Maki-chan, this doesn’t mean that I’ve gotten bored with competing against you, okay! I’m sure you already know that, but I’m just saying!”

“That was your concern?”

“I meant that this is a spice that adds more stimulation to the race. It made me remember that spice isn’t simply about how rugged the course is.”

Licking his lips, Toudou pedaled on as he wiped the rain from his face with a gloved hand.

“Just as I thought, a race can’t be made with just one or two people. Competition can be done between two people, but it can’t make a race. Not only in a team race, but individually as well.”

“No doubt about it.”

They nodded at each other. Matching their breathing, they pedaled on. So that they could catch Musashigawa.

“Don’t get scared anymore, Maki-chan!”

“Right back at you! Don’t slip.”

“Who do you think you are talking to?! People call me the mountain god! Whatever mountain paths there may be, they will all come under my domain! No matter how bad the road is, or how steep, no matter where the mountain may be, that goes for all of them!!”

Musashigawa was at the curve ahead of them. The tracks that Musashigawa’s bike made on the muddy, puddle-filled road showed that he was cleanly avoiding the slightest furrows, even every single small stone that came rolling in with the rainwater.

The green branches that jutted out were reminiscent of claws, pulling the two down to prevent them from reaching Musashigawa. It felt as though the hills were slowly changing shape to preserve Musashigawa’s lead. After Musashigawa passed through, the branches felt like sturdy gates that blocked others from entering, while the hills seemed to suddenly spring up at sharp angles to cut off those behind him.

Musashigawa appeared to be freely controlling this mountain... That was the illusion that they were caught in.

Toudou groaned.

“Mmm... It’s as if the mountain is opening up a path for him. I’m starting to think of this mountain as a demon.”

Musashigawa’s home field advantage, not to mention the thousands of times he had ridden this path, made this ordinary mountain seem fearsome... When that fear took hold, not even the most able-bodied opponent could move on to compete in a two-person race for the goal.

“Mountains are demons,” Makishima said over his shoulder with a slight knitting of his brows.

“When someone thinks they’ve conquered a mountain, they think they’re in

control now and they get full of themselves. But have you ever seen guys like that win the peak? For every one of them, their legs gave way and they lost speed. When they got cocky and underestimated the mountain, the roads, the hills, and the other racers— when that happened, what happened to them?”

Opening his arms wide and shrugging his shoulders, Makishima said assertively, “They all fell into the mountain’s trap. As though the mountain willed it, they were prevented from going straight to the peak and instead sank to the bottom. That’s why mountains are demons.”

Toudou, his eyes wide, braced himself.

“You’re right! Maki-chan!! But we will not fear it!”

He readjusted his grip firmly around the brackets.

“Unless I feel not only nobility and pride but also respect for the mountain, I cannot call myself the mountain god.”

“That’s right.”

Makishima and Toudou nodded at each other.

“I’ll distract him,” Makishima said to Toudou.

“Ah? You’re telling me to go ahead? What will you do?”

“... You already know,” Makishima said without pause, and Toudou roared with laughter.

“Naturally.”

Toudou fell back. At the same time, Makishima noisily clung behind Musashigawa, making it apparent that he would get past once he saw an opening. Musashigawa furrowed his eyebrows as if bothered by the noise. His breathing was ragged.

“*Pant, pant*, Makishima? So Toudou has given up already. *Pant, pant, pant*, what a disgrace to the mountain god’s name.”

“Don’t look at me, I don’t know about him. I’m just going where I want to go. He just happens to be there too, sometimes.”

“Is that true? *Pant, pant*, I know you guys are close.”

Musashigawa was looking at him suspiciously again.

“There you go again. Don’t treat us like we’re a team. I told you before, those who climb the mountains are always lone wolves. We may compete with each other, but we’ll never conspire. Am I wrong?”

Instead of answering, Musashigawa pedaled harder. Makishima also climbed beside him in earnest. Because he was riding on his rim, the sound of his bike traveling would now be different— but thanks to the heavy noise of the pelting rain and the water spraying from his wheels, he could cover it up.

While Makishima had told Toudou that he would distract Musashigawa, he really did intend to go past him. If it weren't for the condition of his tire, he could have probably gone a lot faster. But no matter how recklessly he rode, he couldn't get past him, not yet.

*Never mind this guy. I'll go on the road that I make.*

Every time Makishima attempted to overtake him, Musashigawa would make various attacks.

As if to lure him, he would suddenly pick up speed, and when Makishima took the bait and followed, the slope of the hill would suddenly change and Musashigawa, who was quicker to change gears, would come out one step ahead. When Makishima took a stab at an opening from the inner curve, the road immediately twisted into the opposite direction, so that the inner curve became a wide outer curve that he had to come around instead. Musashigawa left him behind.

Nothing he did could beat Musashigawa's experience on this road.

But... someone who'd climbed mountains in all sorts of regions, on all sorts of different roads, would that do the trick?

*I have experience too!*

Makishima approached the steep slope with brute force, and Musashigawa appeared to have lowered his pace slightly to prepare for the slopes that lay ahead, when—

*"Pant... Aahh?! T... Toudou?? S—Since when..."*

Toudou was there a few meters ahead of them.

*"Pant, pant, pant, I didn't notice at all... I didn't hear a sound. Not even a sound from the water!"* Musashigawa groaned.

*"Wahahaha! This is Sleeping Beauty's true talent, the Sleeping Climb that puts even the grass and the trees to sleep! No matter where the mountain is or who it belongs to, I put all mountain forests to sleep."*

While Toudou was cheerfully naming himself, Makishima looked down quickly at his feet. Then, he kicked up water with his flashy dancing style.

The waves of muddy water rolled towards Musashigawa's wheels, and as he plunged through them, they made a huge wet slapping sound. Sheets of spray poured from Musashigawa's rear tire as well.

The water that he had kicked up smacked across his own back, making Musashigawa cringe, and in that moment, Toudou disappeared... No, to be more precise, he was several meters ahead when Musashigawa looked again.

*"Wahahahaha!"*

When Musashigawa saw Toudou laughing loudly, his face paled.

“Kuhhhhhhhh!!”

He glared at Makishima with burning eyes, then took in a deep breath and pedaled with all of his might. The force of it made his chain rub against the gears so hard it looked like it could draw sparks.

Musashigawa gave chase. Toudou rode on, as if he were skating on ice. Makishima used Musashigawa to pull him, secretly keeping close.

From the vibrations that ran up his saddle, he could tell that his rear wheel was reduced to only the rim now. There was no more air in his tire. His wheel probably gave off a different sound as well, but the blood was rushing to Musashigawa’s head, so it went unnoticed.

“Toudou...”

Musashigawa was desperate to catch up to Toudou. Drops of water that could be either sweat or rain fell from his hair, his face — no, his entire body, and he chased singlemindedly after Toudou without even glancing at his surroundings. He was pedaling hard enough for his legs to fall off.

“Waaaaait!!”

“I won’t wait. The goal is waiting for me. That’s what you should use the word “wait” for!”

“You little...!”

Toudou’s use of his supple body made his riding sharp. Musashigawa kept chasing and chasing him, but Toudou flaunted the difference in their strength. Despite his familiarity with the course, Musashigawa’s attention was distracted by the opponent that flitted about before him, upsetting his concentration.

“Wahahaha, this is how the mountain god rides! Take a good, long look!”

“Cut the bullshit! This mountain is mine!!”

“You have ridden this mountain thousands of time. You are strong, I will give you that. But you are alone. If you’d had someone to ride with, someone who rivaled your strength, you might have been able to grow faster.”

Admonishing him, Toudou took an easy, efficient course on a wide curve.

Makishima, who had been pursuing them, danced far enough inside that curve so that his body bent over the guardrail, and slipped through the inner road to get past Musashigawa.

It was all thanks to how Toudou chose to take his course. Musashigawa, with the blood rushing to his head, had let his guard down. Because he was too close to Toudou, Musashigawa missed taking the course he usually would have and left an

opening at the inside of the road.

“I’m going on ahead, too.”

“Aaaaaaah!! Not Makishima too!”

Makishima caught up with Toudou, lining up with him as they broke away.

“*Pant, pant*, Toudou! Makishima! *Pant, pant, pant*, you little, *pant, pant*, how dare you... I *knew* you two were working together!”

Maybe Musashigawa had used up all of his energy, because he was breathing with his shoulders and his graceful looks were twisted with gritted teeth and resentment.

“Who knows?”

“I wouldn’t say that. After all, this guy is...”

Makishima and Toudou pointed at each other. They spoke in unison.

“My enemy!”

Because they had someone to compete against, they got faster. Because they had someone to compete against, they wanted to get faster. It didn’t matter what roads they were riding or what mountain.

On all roads, on all mountains... they wanted to get faster.

They wanted to reach the goal before the other could.

Not changing their pace after leaving Musashigawa behind, the two of them silently, without any words of confirmation, surged right into the competition that they had been preparing for.

All they did was look at each other.

With that, they knew everything that the other felt and thought.

The uphill continued. They squeezed out their remaining strength.

*Pant, pant, pant, pant*. The more they reached for power that would propel them forward, the faster came their breathing, the faster came their pulse, the hotter became their bodies, the more their blood circulated, the more their muscles flexed.

They pedaled. They stepped down on their pedals, pulled them up, then down again.

The goal was a little over one kilometer away. In terms of time, it wouldn’t last for more than five minutes, but the time had come at last for the fierce all-out race between them that would feel so much longer than that.

A serious match between just the two of them. A one on one.

To take the goal.

They pedaled. Their hearts pumped. The muscles of their thighs spurred them on. They climbed.

The two fought with each other. They competed.

Toudou, his back straight, his upper body parallel with the ground, supple and beautiful. His muscles heaved only ever so faintly, and he climbed straight ahead without any wasted movements or sound.

Makishima, with full control of his long limbs as he tilted his bike so far that it looked as if it would fall. His pedals almost scraped the ground as he climbed with a bounce, swaying left and right.

These two polar opposites competed with each other as they climbed.

As they raced for the goal at the top of the hill.

The incline of the hill wasn't as difficult anymore. They pedaled at full force, as though they were riding on flat land. As they faced wind resistance, they urged their weary bodies to keep pedaling.

They climbed up the hill.

Just the two of them.

It would be one or the other of them who would reach the goal a centimeter faster, even a tenth of a second faster.

Once they pulled out of the green tunnel, the rain poured on them even worse. It fell down their cheeks and onto their lips and was sucked into their throats with every intake of breath. Large drops of rain fell all over their bodies.

*This feels so good! The cold rain feels great on my warm skin.*

Makishima rejoiced, overtaken with excitement.

He could ride. His wheel was still revolving. All of his hesitation had vanished.

*I can do this... I can do this. It's heavy but I can still go. My legs are fine. I can pedal. I can ride to the finish. Kwah!! I've gotten used to riding on the rim as well.*

Makishima concentrated on his pedaling so as not to wobble on his unstable tire. Even in a situation like this, he was still keeping up with Toudou. If he kept hanging on to the end, the chance for success that he had almost given up on became more and more plausible.

*I can still go on! I can still ride!*

He could no longer feel the rain hitting his cheeks, nor even the water sliding over his thighs.

Toudou was beside him. That was all he felt.



*I can still go on, with him!!*

He could still climb. All the way to the peak.

Toudou aimed for the inner curve and Makishima stubbornly chased him from the far outside.

When Makishima went into the inner curve, Toudou came in from the outside to get in his way.

All Makishima had in his mind now was advancing ahead. With his awareness on Toudou, as he fought with Toudou, he pedaled to advance himself ahead so that he could be even faster than Toudou.

*I've come this far. I want to race with Toudou, to the end! Go, go, move, move move, I don't care if everything breaks, as long as it takes me to the goal, move, pedal, ride!!*

Ride, ride, ride!!



It was a dead heat on the straight line... their breathing gradually grew fast and shallow. But their bodies were warm with heat, their minds cold and sharp, and their entire beings surging with exaltation.

*I know I should be tired, but I don't feel it. I can still go on. I can still get faster. Even with just the rim, I can climb. I can make it to the top!!*

Makishima almost forgot even his tired breathing. The thought alone that he could go faster was making his legs turn, his heart pound, and his feelings stir.

Faster, with more intensity, aim for the top. Take me as close to the heavens as you can.

Faster than my rival.

By sharpening his senses, he could feel the other's harsh breath against his earlobe. He could feel the other's heat with his own skin.

Right by my side is another guy who's trying to go faster. No matter how many times I shake him off, he will ride by my side — overtaking me, being overtaken, and then overtaking me again — until we reach the top. He is what drives me on.

It's because he's here, that I am going to climb this slope faster than he does!

The steep hill opened up.

The rain fell even heavier on them, like a curtain.

Toudou made his attack; with quick ease, he changed gears to pull away from Makishima. Makishima calmly increased his speed.

The hill that they were riding now was where the decisive moment of their race would take place. Even if they kept climbing it at a leisurely speed, there would be no time for them to rest their legs. It was the prelude to the steep slope that waited for them at the end...

*My critical moment starts here, Toudou!*

Makishima's body and emotions heated up even further. His feet pushed the pedals.

On his right was a retaining wall made of concrete blocks, on his left was a cliff.

In order to get past Toudou, through the line where Toudou was riding parallel to him, Makishima would have to bring his bike just five centimeters closer to the concrete wall.

He moved his handlebars a perfect five centimeters and his bike followed when, at that moment... a small stone that rolled in along the streaming water of the road surface came into Makishima's vision.

Why was he able to see it so clearly... This small, small stone—

*Ugh!!*

Holding his breath, Makishima turned his handlebars to dodge the incoming danger, but... with an imperfect bike that he had lost control of, he was unable to avoid it completely.

Thump!

He pitched forward.

The front tire instantly lost pressure.

*Aaaaaaaah...!!*

For several meters, his bike staggered forward, losing speed precipitously before stopping as though it were about to collapse. He unclipped one cleat, putting that foot on the ground.

His foot sank into the new puddles that the rain had formed, making ripples.

*Why.*

That was the first word that came to Makishima's mind and it wouldn't go away.

*Why...*

*Why did my luck have to run out here?*

*Am I... not able to ride anymore?*

Unable to throw away his wish... Or rather, still unable to grasp somewhere in his mind what had happened, he clipped his cleat back on and tried pedaling.

It was no use. His front tire was completely dead.

He couldn't climb anymore.



*This... can't be happening, right? This can't be real... right?*

But it was real.

Makishima's entire being deflated.

Perhaps alerted by the suddenly absent sound of spinning wheels, Toudou kept pedaling as he shouted, "Come on, Maki-chan. It's the last difficult slope. The road in front of the goal is an easy one, so here is where we'll race—"

But Makishima couldn't answer him at all. He unclipped both cleats and stood on the ground.

His bike had stopped completely.

Seeing that Makishima had gotten off his bike, Toudou also braked and turned around.

"What—"

"Flat tire," Makishima confessed before Toudou could even pose the question. He couldn't ride anymore, so there was no point trying to hide it. Resignation washed over him.

Toudou's eyebrows furrowed at Makishima's words. He looked like he didn't believe him.

"Flat tire...?"

The rain pounded the road surface. Seeing it from here, it really is horrible rain we're having, Makishima thought. Even his emotions were cooling off.

Turning his eyes to Makishima's wheels, Toudou's expression took on a look of despair.

They faced each other in silence for some time, as the rain poured upon them. How long they stood like that ... in reality, it was probably only a few seconds. But to Makishima, it felt much, much longer.

Toudou suddenly raised his head and looked directly at Makishima. He looked angry. Cold water had been thrown on the climax of their race. Toudou lost his temper.

"What are you doing?! The goal is right there! Ride on your rim! You ought to be able to get by on it!"

Makishima shook his head. Water droplets fell from the edges of his helmet.

"I can't. That's what I've been doing, and this time it's the front tire that's dead. Both tires are flat."

Two flat tires, and the front wheel had burst instantly. Riding on it would make the wheels twist. And in an instant, he'd be back where he started again.

*Both... flat...* Toudou whispered, dumbfounded. Now that he knew the full

situation, he fell silent.

The cold rain kept falling on the silent, downcast pair.

I never knew a jersey wet with rain could feel this heavy, Makishima thought. It felt heavy enough to make him want to slump to the ground.

Toudou suddenly punched his own thigh. It made a dull slapping noise.

“Damn it!!”

He glared at Makishima.

“This was the perfect race to settle our competition. We were both in perfect condition! I called you so many times to be sure!”

“Flat tires are a stroke of bad luck. They can’t be helped.”

Makishima gave a small shrug.

“Go. You win this round.”

Toudou gritted his teeth. The hand gripping his thigh was quivering. He looked as though he had a lot to say, but he managed with effort to swallow down the words.

Because Makishima didn't show any emotion, Toudou must have understood that he would only make himself look like a fool in comparison, no matter what he shouted.

“...The other racers are coming.”

Toudou still wasn't letting Makishima give up this race. He would urge Makishima to at least finish. But Makishima knew his wheels wouldn't hold out that long. Toudou's emotions just hadn't caught up with reality yet.

“Don't worry about me. I'll read gravure or something and wait for the recovery vehicle.”

The recovery vehicle at the end of the line.

There was no way he'd brought a gravure magazine with him to a race.

If only Toudou would at least laugh at his pathetic joke and be exasperated by it. If only it would exasperate him and make him give up...

Makishima's poker face slid into place. He was not going to show his bitterness, his sorrow, and his self-pity. Never. If he did, it would make Toudou sad as well.

He wanted Toudou to accept his victory without being bothered by this.

Toudou's eyes quieted. He looked to have regained his composure.

“I see... You must be more frustrated about this than I am.”

He put his foot on the pedals.

“This race doesn't count! Listen up! Our next race will be when we compete at the Inter-high this summer.”

As he clipped his cleats back in and rode away, Toudou bit his lip before turning

around to point high into the air towards Makishima.

“That will be the stage of our last battle!!”

His bike moved away in an instant, and Toudou left without looking back again.

*Yeah... At Inter-high. The last time we'll get to race each other wearing these jerseys.*

Makishima grabbed the front of his own jersey.

*Our last race.*

“You got it,” he said to Toudou’s retreating back.

Toudou’s form, hazy from the rain, disappeared around the curve.

*We made a promise for the first time. Until now, we'd never made a promise to fight each other. Because you were always either in front or behind me.*

For the first time, Makishima made a promise with Toudou.

The rain made everything hazy. The horizontal banner telling Toudou that he was approaching the goal line entered his vision.

It had ended all too quickly.

The parking lot for the campgrounds at the peak was the goal for this Mt. Hiromine Hill Climb Race. It was a rather wide space for a summit, enough to park twenty bicycles. Several white tents for race staff lined the area. Tall trees surrounded the parking lot.

On the other side of the parking space was a small building block where water fountains, gazebos, and toilet stalls were located. The campgrounds were a short walk down along the mountain ridge, so they weren't visible from here.

The road for the race ran directly into the parking lot. The boundary between the two made the goal line. A thin strip of white tape had been applied across the road surface. The moment his front tire crossed that white line would be the moment he reached the goal.

A number of spectators were waiting in front of the goal line. Many of them were most likely participants’ family members.

Among the spectators were Toudou’s fan club, a group of girls gathered directly before the goal who were holding umbrellas in one hand and a flag of support in the other. They were very enthusiastic groupies.

“Kyaaaah, it’s Toudou-sama!”

“He’s in first place, he won!”

“I just knew Toudou-san would win!”

“Do the finger-pointing thing!”



“Ready? *‘The heavens have blessed me thrice—’*”

They screamed at him excitedly.

*Ahh... I have to respond to them. It's not my policy to disappoint my lady fans.*

He brought his right hand up to the sky and then down to point at the girls.

“You have my utmost gratitude for coming here to support me in this rainy weather! The heavens have blessed me thrice. Not only can I climb, but I’m a good conversationalist, and I’m beautiful! I am Hakogaku’s Toudou Jinpachi, the man known as the mountain god. My climb puts even the forest to sleep—”

Toudou himself could tell that his voice had no vigor in it. But he smiled at the girls so that they wouldn’t suspect that something was wrong.

“Here, let me shelter you with my umbrella!”

“I have a hot drink prepared just for you, Toudou-sama!”

“That’s not fair! Don’t try to get a head start!”

Even their adoring cries sounded distant in Toudou’s ears.

Toudou crossed the finish line without feeling at all that he had won. He raised both arms into the air... and automatically dropped them back onto the handlebars, feeling empty.

“Congratulations! The championship goes to Hakone Academy’s Toudou Jinpachikun,” a male staff member said, coming up to him and checking his bib number. He put a towel around Toudou’s shoulders.

“... No. This victory doesn’t count,” Toudou murmured and got off his bike.

Girls circled around him, squealing. To the girl who held out her umbrella over his head, he said, with all the effort he could muster,

“You getting wet and catching a cold would be more painful to me,”

and gently pushed her hand holding the umbrella back towards her. She blushed and nodded quietly.

“Kyaaaah, I’m so jealous!”

“He touched your hand!”

The girls were beside themselves with excitement.

Toudou turned his back on them and walked towards a gazebo at the corner, sluggishly dragging himself through puddles as he pulled his bike along. After leaning it against a pillar, he flopped down feebly onto the bench.

“You idiot...”

His reproachful words weren’t aimed at Makishima... but at the mountain god who had brought about the flat tires.

He bit down hard on his lower lip... then let out a deep breath.

He took off his helmet and gloves and laid them beside him. Shaking the water from his hair and sending it flying in all directions, he fixed his hairband back into place.

Raindrops pattered heavily on the sheet-iron roof above Toudou's head. There were sounds of cheers rising up and down like waves as other climbers crossed the finish line.

But Toudou didn't hear any of it.

Instead, he just stared vacantly through the eaves of the dripping roof, at the gray clouds rolling quickly through the sky.

As it came up around the curve at the bottom of the hill, the recovery vehicle blew its horn.

Makishima made a slight wave of his hand at the arriving car to get its attention.

Makishima's race was over.

Cold drops of rain fell from his bangs onto his cheeks. Water landed on his lips and Makishima blew it away, smiling slightly.

He shivered and wrapped both arms around his shoulders.

"... It's cold."

The rain continued to fall.

Makishima Yuusuke and Toudou Jinpachi.

They made a promise.

For the first time, the two of them made a promise. A very important promise...

## Epilogue, Back At Hakone

“... So why can’t that promise come true? Maki-chan, come on, let’s aim for the top together!”

Back on Hakone’s winding hills, Toudou was screaming loud enough to drown out the chorus of cicadas around them. Sohoku’s team and Hakone Academy’s team were still racing side by side.

The summer sun burned their backs. Their sweat fell, they breathed in wild gasps... All of them pedaled earnestly as they headed for the peak.

Even as they pedaled with all of their might, Toudou and Makishima’s teammates watched them with bated breath.

Hakone Academy’s third-year, Arakita, was clenching his teeth in irritation.

Sohoku’s captain Kinjou looked on at the two wordlessly, while Tadoroko was sour-faced. Sohoku’s first-years, Naruko and Imaizumi, looked at each of their seniors in turn with grim faces. The rest of Hakone Academy’s team — their captain Fukutomi, third-year Shinkai, second-year Izumida, and even first-year Manami — were concerned about the climbers from other teams breaking away from them.

Drops of sweat ran off Toudou’s forehead and down his cheeks, falling to the asphalt with the force of every word that he shouted.

“Maki-chan, this is the last time. This is the last time we’ll be able to compete with each other. We’re third-years! This Inter-high is our last race!!”

Toudou lifted a hand out to him as if beckoning. His imploring voice was close to a scream.

Makishima gazed at Toudou and gritted his teeth, almost grinding them. His right index finger kept rubbing over the gear shift lever. After a moment of hesitation... the chain on his gear shifted with a clink and his pedaling got heavier. All of Sohoku held their breath.

Makishima’s whisper sounded as if it was being squeezed out of his throat.

“... All right!!”

“Makishima...” came Kinjou’s faint whisper, but it was carried away by the wind. Sohoku’s members looked stricken.

Toudou was overjoyed.

“That’s more like it! You’re finally getting into it! Maki-chan, Maki-chan, *Maki-chan*!! Let’s race to the mountain result line!”

“Sho!”

“A race to decide who is the strongest climber!!”

Makishima lifted himself off his saddle at the same time Toudou made his joyous cry. There was his unique dancing. His bike leaned over the side, and there was the sound of tires scraping the ground. His wheels turned and hummed— But before any of his teammates could draw in a breath, Makishima dropped back down onto the saddle.

His hands were shaking. He was gritting his teeth.

Naruko was struck dumb for an instant, but snapped out of it and rode to the front in a panic.

“I’m sorry, Makishima-san! The way I spoke to you before was out of turn... You’re the one who’s really putting up with this the most... for the team...”

Makishima’s mouth formed a grin.

“Kwah... Putting up with it? Come on, don’t get the wrong idea. I was just stretching. Never mind that, don’t break up the ranks. You’ll waste energy.”

“MAKI-CHAAAAN!!”

Toudou despaired.

“TOUDOU!” Arakita yelled at him impatiently. “What the hell are you doing, get going already! Quit letting these trivial things slow you down!”

Arakita brought his bike closer to Toudou and whispered. “Christ, don’t you get it, moron? Don’t lose your cool. Sohoku’s Makishima isn’t going because he doesn’t want to. *He can’t*. Sohoku only has one climber.”

Before Arakita had even finished talking, Toudou, keeping his head down, wordlessly shifted gears. Without making a sound, he moved ahead, promptly picking up speed.

They were at the hairpin curve where the land sign “Hakone” was affixed— at the Ohiradai curve that was well-known even in Hakone’s Ekiden for the many tiebreaker matches that took place there. It was the place Toudou had decided, within himself, would be the start of his race with Makishima.

In that place, Toudou had no other choice but to accelerate on his own and leave Makishima behind.

After traveling far enough to be sure that neither his team nor his rival could hear him, Toudou gripped his brackets tightly enough to dig his nails into them and screamed.

“You idiot... You should have come prepared, you idiot!! Damn it!”

Something that wasn’t sweat came close to pouring out from the corners of his

eyes.

Letting his anger and frustration take over, Toudou singlemindedly put himself to the task of pedaling.

Meanwhile, back at the two teams, Arakita called out to Sohoku.

“You made a smart choice there, giving up. Right, Sohoku?! If your only climber abandoned you on the hills, it would break the team apart. You made a level-headed decision. But thanks to that, the result for the mountain interval is ours—”

“Three minutes... sho,” Makishima said in a low voice, interrupting Arakita. “As long as it’s within three minutes... I can catch up to him.”

“Huh? Three minutes? What?” Arakita asked loudly, as if he hadn’t heard correctly. “You think this situation will be any different in three minutes?”

Arakita looked at Makishima, who broke into a slight grin.

“... Did this guy just... laugh?”

“I don’t care about the mountain result. As long as I get to race Toudou, that’s all... If it’s within three minutes, I can still catch up...”

“Catch up? What about your team? You can’t climb while pulling your worn-out sprinters. The game is up! We know that you’re the only climber on your team!”

“He’ll come. Sohoku’s—”

Makishima thrust two fingers into the air.

“Second climber!”

Arakita seemed taken aback by this, but quickly looked unimpressed and sneered.

“He’ll come? In three minutes?! Ahahaha, don’t talk crazy! You mean that guy in last place who got caught in the spill?”

But at that moment, the hearts of everyone on Sohoku’s team pounded with excitement.

They chose to believe that Makishima was right.

Onoda will come! To keep his word and fulfill Kinjou’s order to pull everyone except Makishima up Hakone’s hills, he will come.

As he kept pedaling earnestly up Hakone’s hills, Toudou could hear cheers of support getting closer.

“Ha-ko-ga-ku! Ha-ko-ga-ku!!”

“Toudou! Touuudouuuu!!”

“Ka-na-ga-wa! Ha-ko-ga-ku!!”

Because it was a home race, his school’s cheer squad as well as their fellow

students were lined up along the side of the road, cheering for him. Since Toudou was especially popular with girls, several members of his fanclub had hung banners on the stone walls and were screaming as they jostled one another, as if they were at an idol concert.

“He’s here! It’s Toudou-kun!”

“He’s first, he’s in first place!”

“Kyaaaah, Toudou-san, you’re so cool!”

“Toudou-samaaa, you can do it! You can do it!!”

Normally, he would strike a confident pose in front of the girls, as if he had all the time in the world, and say a few cool lines. But, right now, Toudou just couldn’t bring himself to do it.

His pedals were light. He still had strength in his legs to keep going. And yet... his heart felt heavy.

*This is a first... There’s a huge crowd watching me. I’m riding all alone at the top, and it’s a race in my hometown... and yet I wish it was over already...*

This wasn’t how things were supposed to be. Ever since they had made their promise, he had been looking forward to seeing it fulfilled. He even called Makishima over and over again, to be sure that their promise still held.

—On lunch break, a few days earlier, he had called Makishima from inside the school cafeteria. The line rang for a while before he finally picked up.

Hearing Makishima’s voice say “What” curtly on the other end made Toudou so happy that he spoke rapidly.

“How are you, Maki-chan, are you well? You aren’t injured or sick right before Inter-high, are you? I want you in your best condition, so I called because I got worried!”

He heard a faint sigh in his ear.

“...This is the third time this week.”

No matter how many times it was, he couldn’t help wondering. This promise was important to him.

“Are you drying your hair properly after baths? Sleep under warm blankets and turn off your A/C. Oh, and be sure to take your minerals.”

“What are you now, my mother?!”

“Hahaha, sorry! I’m just so excited.”

Makishima gave another exasperated sigh and fell silent. Toudou could hear the

noise of cicadas on the other end. Makishima must be outdoors right now. He could hear small slurping sounds, as if Makishima were crunching on a frozen ice cream bar, before he finally got a response.

“...I’m in good condition. Better than ever before.”

“Me too, Maki-chan! And you know what? I’m in even better condition than you!!”—

He had been waiting for this day for so long. Now that promise was cruelly broken. He was certain that their promise had been mutual. Had it only been Toudou who had been looking forward to this?

*You idiot! What are you hoping for, Jinpachi?! Throw away your hope. He isn’t coming.*

“Throw it away!!”

Pedal harder, so that you forget everything. Your hope, your promise, your friendship, your motivation, just throw them all away. Forget everything and keep moving until your head is empty inside.

*Throw it away, throw it away, throw it away!!*

Now that Makishima wasn’t coming, the mountain hills belonged to Toudou alone. He broke away from the other climbers chasing him and rode solo.

*I won’t let this position be taken from me. I won’t let a single person ride in front of me. I am taking the mountain result. For that, I have abandoned everything!*

He took the first, and probably only, promise they ever made with each other, and threw it away. Rivaling each other at their truest abilities had given him a thrill that he couldn’t taste from competing with anyone else. That was why he had been looking forward to his race with Makishima more than anything. He took the feelings that he had wagered on that race, took everything... and threw it all away.

*Take the mountain interval result. Help the team to win. Protecting the name and honor of Hakogaku, the indomitable kings, as top in the nation, that alone is now... my sole reason for existing.*

It was the moment when Toudou caught a glimpse of a sign that read “National Route #1 Result Line — 2km,” that the spectators lining the roadside cried out.

“Hey, look over there! Someone’s coming up behind Nagano.”

Toudou’s heart gave a single, sharp thump. He had passed by Nagano just now,

only moments ago.

*Hah, it doesn't matter if there's one or even two behind me. I won't let anyone in front of me, no matter who they are.*

The spectators' murmurs grew louder.

"Hey, look, he's swerving side to side."

"He must be at his breaking point."

"That dancing is so unbalanced, he's moving too far side to side."

Unbalanced... Swerving side to side... Toudou looked behind him. Nagano's climber was approaching him fast. But the unbalanced climber that was supposedly behind them was still on the other side of the curve. He couldn't see him yet.

*The guy I know would often bend his frame at crazy angles right and left... but I left him behind. He stayed behind for his team.*

A faint hope had flared back into his chest and Toudou pedaled even harder to keep it from taking a hold of him.

"He isn't coming!!"

From behind, he thought he heard the sound of tires scraping the road. A familiar sound of a very unique style...

"What's with that hair color?"

"Wow... it's like the color of a jewel beetle."

Toudou swallowed.

A man with long, flowing hair the color of a jewel beetle— "But it can't be him..."

The climber, his figure shadowed, went over the curve and headed in his direction. It can't be him.

Wondering if he was seeing a mirage, Toudou slowed his pace and turned his entire upper body around to look. Nagano's climber blew past him, but Toudou didn't care. He strained his eyes to look more closely at the shadow.

The shadow was approaching quickly. His bike bent wildly under his long arms and legs as he climbed the steep slope at high speed.

It can't be—*But if it isn't him, then... who is that...? That spider-like man...*

Underneath the full summer sunlight, he could see, with perfect clarity, the long tail of green hair streaked with red swirling through the air. Every time his bike swerved, the spokes of his wheels glinted in the light.

*If this is a dream, don't wake me...*

The commotion from the spectators grew louder.

"That dancing's incredible! I can't believe he made it all the way out here like that."



Toudou couldn't stop the pounding of his heart. He couldn't believe it. But this...  
The rider's hair waved against the backlight. Hair that was the color green... *The guy I know would always... come up from behind me with his hair waving in the breeze and a smirk on his face...*

Spotting Toudou, the rider raised his head. Sweat flew off him and glittered in the sun.

"Yo, Toudou. How's your condition?"

Toudou couldn't speak. Even though there were a billion things that he wanted to say, his heart was overflowing. He was closer now, not even a couple of meters before his bike would line up with Toudou's.

"I climbed here at a quicker pace, so I'm already warmed up."

His breathing was ragged as he gasped for air. But from his flushed cheeks and the powerful gleam in his eyes, Toudou could feel his intense desire to compete with him right now, immediately.

"My condition's better than it ever has been before."

He looked Toudou right in the eyes, the corner of his mouth curved up in an expression of happiness.

"Onoda came up from last place to pull our team."

"... Maki... chan... I..."

A drop of liquid fell down Toudou's cheek, glittering as it splashed to the ground. It could have been sweat.

Could have been.

To that guy— To Makishima, who had chased after him to keep their promise, Toudou cried out.

"All of a sudden I'm in my best condition!!"

## Afterword

Pleased to meet you. I am Tokiumi Yui, who was in charge of writing this manuscript.

This story was made by first fleshing out the story that Watanabe-sensei had thought up and then having him fine-tune the smaller details.

When we met to discuss the manuscript, Sensei introduced it as “this kind of story” and told it to me, but the unending flow of ideas that came with it, along with the specific images of even the smallest detail, made me think, “This is such an interesting story! Amazing, in fact, how is he able to create the story so easily?” I remember as though it were only yesterday how I had to keep myself from falling into a listening reverie and memo everything so as not to miss a single word.

Even when it was written out as a draft, I received from him more amazing ideas as well as instructions to revise spoken lines so that they had more emotional impact. Although I have been writing professionally for a long time, his instructions were so “interesting” — in other words, so “precise that they were certain to make the story even more interesting” — that my back shivered and I had a difficult time suppressing my excitement. This was the first time that I have had such an experience.

It’s because of truly amazing experiences like this that I think to myself that I can’t give up writing!

I would like it very much if that “interesting” side, despite being only words, can be conveyed to everyone. I sincerely thank Watanabe-sensei and everyone involved for the great learning experience. And to everyone who read this book, I offer my greatest thanks.

### Writer’s Profile

#### **Tokiumi Yui**

Writer. Born January 6th in Nagano prefecture. Debuted with “Goutahime” (Fujimi Shobo). Other works include “Novel - Genji Monogatari Asaki Yumemishi,” “Novel - Chihayafuru Middle School Edition” (Kodansha), “Kobayashi Ga Kawai Sugite Tsurai!! -Himitsu no W Date?!-” (Shogakukan), etc, from children’s books to novelized series.