

Chitose Is in the Ramune Bottle

5

Hiromu

Illustration by
raemz



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Chitose the Ramen Battle

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Kuranosuke Iwanami







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NEW YORK

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Saku Chitose

One of the most popular guys in the school.
Ex-baseball club.

Yuuko Hiiiragi

A popular class princess.
Tennis club.

Yua Uchida

A self-made popular girl who tries her best at everything. Music club.

Haru Aomi

A small and perky girl.
Basketball club.

Yuzuki Nanase

Every guy's favorite, along with Yuuko.
Basketball club.

Asuka Nishino

A strange upperclassman, socially unaware.
Likes books.

Kaito Asano

Popular jock.
Star player of the boys' basketball club.

Kazuki Mizushino

A logical-minded, handsome guy.
A leading player in the soccer club.

Kenta Yamazaki

A former shut-in, otaku nerd.

Atomu Uemura

A contrarian boy with a tsundere nature underneath. Has been playing baseball since middle school.

Nazuna Ayase

A rough but cute girl. Often hangs around with Atomu.

Kuranosuke Iwanami (Kura)

Homeroom teacher of Saku and his group. Fairly hands-off and laid-back.



Chitose
Is in the
Ramune
Bottle

Hiromu

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raemz

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Hiromu

Born in Fukui, residing in Tokyo. When this series reached number one in *Kono Light Novel ga Sugoi!*, it was featured in the Fukui newspaper, and a bunch of people I knew reached out. A friend of mine who normally never reads novels promised to read it if it ended up as popular as *Demon Slayer*, so I'll do my best.

raemz

Born in California. Got a cat and has been eating lots of ramune candy lately.

PROLOGUE

What Special Means to Me



To me, the word “special” has always felt alienating. I’ve never liked having that word directed at me, even when I was a kid.

It’s like being told, “Hey, you can’t join this group. You’re not the same as the others.”

So even though I know everyone means to use that word to imply something good, every time I hear it, I shrivel a little. And I feel this strange sense of not being able to properly communicate with others. Like my stunted heart can’t play along somehow.

Not even with the boy I like. Not even with the girl I can call my best friend. This whole time...

But you know, I finally found it.

He’s always so arrogant, sometimes just outright rude.

He takes nothing seriously, always trying to act cool.

He acts like a jerk, sure, but when it comes to girls, he’s quick to play nice.

He’s always confident. And sometimes, he calls me out on things.

He puts on a smile when he wants to seem strong.

He tried to act like a bad boy, but he’s nice to the other guys.

...He was the first person in my life who didn’t give me special treatment.

It’s an incredibly simple reason, perhaps, but that alone made me fall in love.

The days of my life, days that just passed by in a transparent blur before, were now alive with color. So much so, you'd laugh if you knew.

The concept of being "special" that I'd always hated turned into something I loved.

Hey, what if...?

What if your eyes were only for me?

What if the seat next to you was the one only I could sit in?

I wouldn't care if I stopped being special to anyone else.

And I wouldn't care if I didn't.

—I just want to be the only special one in your eyes.

CHAPTER ONE

Summer Vacation, Daily Calendar



I twisted off a piece of the lonely, dull night, as if it was soft, pull-apart bread, and put it in my mouth. It tasted like a sweet milk caramel candy.

When I was really young, I'd always get a box of those candies as a kind of reward for sitting through getting my hair buzzed for sports. I remember the twisting red, blue, and white of the barbershop pole. The orange color of the little box.

Twelve candies, rolling around inside.

Each day, one by one, I'd slowly peel off the wrapper, chew lightly several times, and then roll it around on my tongue for a while. Each time I shook the box near my ear, that clunky, clattering sound from the box would bring a thrill—or the airy emptiness would sink my spirits.

It was the end of July, the day before the closing ceremony for the first semester.

After a long time hesitating between chilled Chinese noodles and soba noodles with grated daikon, I started to think I'd regret either choice, so I ended up boiling somen noodles instead.

From the FM radio I'd left playing, the voice of a sweet-sounding female DJ rang out, bright like a sunflower field in August. After a simple song introduction, her voice faded away, and mellow jazz began to play, the kind that seems to gently approach and hug you from behind. Somewhere in the distance, through the speakers of my Tivoli Audio, the sound of an alto saxophone danced softly, bringing to mind an alleyway after the rain.

I didn't really feel like doing anything. Trying to find something that felt good in the idleness, I turned off the lights in the room as a sort of test, and then lay down on the sofa with a feeling closer to calm than to loneliness.

I don't mind empty spaces in a time like this.

When I closed my eyes, the three months that had passed since spring floated up in my mind like soap bubbles and then disappeared again. Somebody's white shirt, an unfamiliar city, the hot sports field. Images, reflected in the rainbow-colored bubbles that rose and swirled.

The following afternoon would mark the beginning of a long summer vacation, like a flip of a switch.

I tried to think—which one was more like sweet caramel candy to me? Everyday school days or vacation?

I laughed a little, thinking that if I shook that box now, it would make an empty, airy sound.



—*Ding, ding. Ding, ding.*

I must have fallen asleep without realizing it.

When I opened my eyes a crack, my phone was vibrating gently, almost hesitantly, from where I'd tossed it beside my head.

My ringtone usually sounded crisp and harsh, but on a night like tonight, it felt almost soft.

The name Yuuko Hiiragi was displayed on the screen.

The time was ten PM.

Still too early for a high schooler to head to bed, but it was somewhat unusual for Yuuko to call me up out of the blue like this. Except for when it was my fault, like if I failed to show for a date we had planned. Usually, though, she'd confirm my availability in advance.

One by one, I popped the bubbles still floating around in my head with a flick of my index finger. Then I answered the phone.

“Hmm? What’s up?”

“Oh, did you already go to bed? I’m sorry I woke you up.”

“How could you tell?”

“Because you sound half asleep. Normally, you’re way more relaxed, almost pretentious, and you answer the phone like, “Sup?””

“First you wake me up, now you’re shaming me?”

“Hey, your voice is hoarse. Go drink some water.”

“...All right.”

Seriously, no one beats Yuuko for sharp perception.

I turned off the radio and switched to speakerphone.

I washed my face in the bathroom and drank some tap water from a cup I’d filled in the kitchen.

When I finally felt more awake, I let out a short breath, but then...

“Hey!”

For some reason, an accusatory voice floated out from the speaker.

“You can’t just drink tap water!”

“Maybe not in the big cities, but this is Fukui. Who worries about tap water here?”

“I only drink water from the water cooler at home.”

“I don’t have a bougie water cooler. Anyway, according to one school of thought on the matter, the tap water in Ono City, Fukui Prefecture, is said to be the most delicious in all Japan.”

“I mean, Saku, you live in Fukui City. Like, right in it.”

“It’s the neighboring city. It’s basically the same thing. Ah, hold on a sec.”

I pulled out my turquoise-blue Bluetooth earphones from my Gregory backpack.

They had a mic, so if this was going to be a long phone call, it’d be easier with

them.

“Sorry, I just switched to earphones.”

Yuuko’s response to that was odd. *“Didn’t you say you haven’t bought any new ones since your previous earphones stopped working?”*

“Oh, I got them for my birthday the other—”

“Ex-CUSE me?”

Even before I finished speaking, I knew she was upset.

Startled by the realization that I’d said something wrong, I started babbling and making it worse.

“Right, they were a gift from, uh, N-Nishino.”

“Wow! Whatever! I totally didn’t ask!”

“Right, right, of course. Sorry!”

I mean, I felt like she wanted an explanation, or maybe an excuse?

Hmm, either way, I probably gave too much information. All I could do was apologize.

Yuuko had to know it wasn’t a question she should ask directly—so she didn’t. I was the big dumb-dumb just putting it all out there.

I could picture her, cheeks puffed out indignantly, on the other end of the phone.

I almost burst out laughing, but I didn’t want to invoke her ire any more than I already had, so I decided to quickly change the subject.

“More importantly, wasn’t there something you wanted with me?”

“Right, yes!”

Yuuko had quickly returned to her normal state, placated by my response. Whether it was intentional or natural, I think one of the reasons why everyone likes her is that she never crosses the line when it comes to jokes like this.

“Saku, are you gonna do the August summer study camp?”

“Ah, right, the application deadline is tomorrow, right?”

“Yep!”

Summer study camp was a Fuji High institution.

The annual event was held at a seaside hotel and ran for four days in early August. Simply put, it’s like a large-scale focus study group.

All students except for first-years can participate if they want to. Every year, there seems to be a large proportion of third-years attending, no doubt out of a desire to prep for college entrance exams. Although there’s quite a lot of second-years who do participate.

Even though it’s a training camp, the focus of it is actually self-study.

Throughout the trip, participants are free to use seminar rooms, meeting rooms, or even their own rooms throughout the facility to study as they see fit.

That part of it actually doesn’t seem any different from just going to study at a family restaurant or at the library with friends, but the biggest advantage is that the teachers of the main subjects will be around to help guide students. From what I hear, a lot of students try to power through their summer vacation homework by taking advantage of this opportunity, since they can ask specific questions when there’s something they don’t understand or there’s a certain area they need extra guidance in.

In addition, since the camp is run by Fuji High, which values individual student autonomy, no one will bat an eye if you attend but don’t actually study much.

In fact, I’ve heard that there’s an unspoken custom in place involving spending the entire third day on the beach, and then there’s a barbecue with the staff on the third night.

Get some studying done and make some summer memories at the same time—two birds, one stone.

And incidentally, since the school encourages students to participate, we’re exempt from club activities as long as tournaments and stuff aren’t affected. Rumor has it there’s a high participation rate among sports club members, who want to have some summer vacation memories that aren’t about club practice.

“Well, what about you, Yuuko?”

When I shot her own question back at her, Yuuko responded in a peppy voice.

“I’m totally going! It sounds like a ton of fun, and I’m going to get Ucchi to give me some one-on-one tutoring!”

“Hey, cool. I bet she’s a better teacher than you’d find at some of those cram schools.”

“Yep! So what about you, Saku?”

“Hmm, I’m just not sure...”

“Aw, come on. Let’s go together!”

To be honest, I didn’t particularly want to participate.

I’m not in any school clubs, and the only thing I really have to do to pass the time is study anyway. I was planning to just hang out with the gang on an ad hoc basis all summer. My place could be our summer hangout base. Maybe Kazuki and Kaito wouldn’t get an invite, though.

I was on the verge of giving a hard no when Yuuko continued in a tone that was kinda embarrassing, a little bit spoiled, and definitely fishing for a reaction from me.

“Aw, Saku, you don’t want to see me in my...bikini?”

“—Ah. Well, yes, I do want to see that.”

No need to hesitate when answering that one.

“Then you’ll come, right?”

“Oh, for sure. Count me in.”

And in the space of a second, my mind was fully changed.

There was a moment of silence, then we both spluttered with laughter.

“Saku! You creep!”

“Hey, you’re the one who invited me!”

“All right, then. I’ll make sure to choose a super-cute bikini in time for the summer camp.”

“Or something sexy.”

“Well, what kind do you prefer, Saku?”

“Hey, don’t go asking me my preferences. How am I supposed to respond to that?”

After that, we chatted for a bit about nothing in particular, like how sad we’d be to be unable to eat the school cafeteria’s chilled ramen for a while. Then we said a polite good night and ended the call.

Whenever I interact with Yuuko, she always takes the reins like this, I thought with a little smile.

Our little back-and-forth just now was something like an extension of our usual jokes, but while we were chatting, I can’t deny that I started feeling like going on the trip might not be a bad idea after all.

Just as this brief summer vacation would end all too soon, so would my limited time as a high school student.

Next year, I’d probably have a lot more on my plate, what with choosing a career path, studying for exams, and all the farewells that would no doubt follow.

Maybe I didn’t have all that much time left to just kick back and hang with my friends.

I was wide awake now for sure, but for some reason, I felt like there were still bubbles floating around in the air somewhere.

I’d somehow broken free of those seven months I’d spent frozen, fixated on the past, then gone through four months of positivity for the future, and now I found myself at the beginning of a brand-new summer. But I’d been taking it for granted.

—I won’t get these days back.

So I couldn’t avert my eyes, couldn’t turn my back on the present. I wanted to savor every moment, like poring over an early graduation album, like sucking on a milk caramel candy.

I mean things like late nights spent alone, fresh summer days, hanging out with my friends, being in my feelings... Being in someone else’s feelings, too.

A lukewarm summer breeze blew in through the screen door, swirled playfully around my place, then exited again. The light of the cool, distant moon shone into my pitch-dark room, illuminating it.

I could have gone on chatting a little longer.

But thoughts like that wouldn't do me any good, so I put on my running shoes instead and went on out.

It was the kind of night where I felt restless, and I knew sleep wouldn't come easy.



“—All rise! Bow! Okay, now...get outta here!”

It was the following day and the final homeroom of the first semester. After listening to our teacher Kuranosuke Iwanami, aka Kura, ramble on to us for an annoying amount of time about “how to make the most of summer break,” I finally managed to get a word in edgewise and officially dismissed the class.

My command was half-intended to force an end to all the talking, and from the grateful looks shot to me by my fellow students, I'd done good.

“Tch.”

Hey, don't do that at a student, you jerk.

Kura lowered his head a notch with a truculent expression, then spoke again.

“All right, guys, anyone who wants to participate in the summer study camp, hand in your forms before you leave.”

With those words as the signal, everyone in the class began to make preparations to go home, and some headed up to the teacher's lectern where Kura stood.

I grabbed my prepared participation form from my own desk and headed over there, too.

“All right, here's mine.”

“Hmph, sorry, I'm not accepting forms from ungrateful students who ignore the wise sermons of their teacher.”

“Well, sorry, but I don’t listen to the bitter rantings of certain people who are just salty about all the young couples who are going to go all the way this summer.”

“What do you need study camp for? You’re obviously only going for the girls in bikinis and the nighttime beach scene.”

“—Now, now, remember you’re an educator. Don’t go crossing the line, now.”

Tsk, this old fart. Never wavers.

After a few more blunt jabs, I shoved my participation form into his hands and returned to my desk, where, for some reason, a familiar crowd was assembled and waiting for me.

Kaito Asano was the first to pipe up, extra loud.

“Hey, Saku! Let’s have a celebration party, all right?”

“To celebrate what?” I answered dryly.

Kazuki Mizushino elaborated, in that laid-back way he had. “Why, the first semester being completed, of course.”

“Don’t you guys have club stuff?”

“We’re all going to be training our brains out from tomorrow, soccer club included. But most club members seem to have today off, at least. Besides, don’t you think at least a few people would be really sad to just break up and say good-bye for the summer like this?”

As he spoke, he glanced behind me.

Yuzuki Nanase noticed this and brushed her black hair behind her ear with a coquettish sigh.

“Leaving aside the question of why you looked at me when you said that, Mizushino, let me inform you that if there’s anyone I want to hang out with during summer vacation, I’m perfectly capable of asking them out myself.”

Kazuki gave a crooked grin. “Oh, are you, now? Then should I be expecting a text from you?”

“Sure, how about a date to the Tojinbo suicide spot?”

Ignoring their problematic interaction, Haru Aomi grabbed my arm and pulled on it.

“The girls’ basketball team’s off today, too! Come on, Chitose!”

“...Oh. All right.”

Startled by the sudden proximity of her face to mine, I tried to pull away, but her little grip was strong, almost as if she wanted me to know escape was futile.

“Oh my. ♡Chi♡to♡se♡... Are you getting palpitations from the touch of Miss Haru’s hand?”

“Perish the thought. I was just distracted by the residual bedhead you clearly neglected to fix this morning.”

“Wanna try saying that again, huh?!”

I think it was preying on both our minds for a while there.

Ever since that day a while back, Haru and I hadn't been doing our usual thing. I was relieved, then, to see that things were going back to normal.

"With Yuuko and Yua, too?"

I spoke while Haru was still hanging on to my arm, and this time, Yua Uchida was the one to respond.

“Yes. I actually didn’t even bring my usual bento lunch today.”

Then Yuuko chimed in.

"I'm so down to party! Let's grab a bite and then all go to karaoke!"

""""""""""Yeah!""""""""""

“K-karaoke...”

That weak murmuring at the end there came from Kenta Yamazaki, by the way, just in case you needed confirmation.



After deliberating between Hachiban Ramen and our second choice, we ended up at Takokyu.

As for the former option—well, we’d no doubt frequent that place over summer vacation. But Takokyu is right next to the school, so if we missed the chance to eat here today, we wouldn’t get the convenient opportunity to do so for a long time.

The table was soon filled with our orders: *okonomiyaki*, *tonpeiyaki*, fried chicken, *gyoza*, fries, and so on.

I always order the same thing, so I didn’t notice it at first, but when I looked at the menu in detail again, I was surprised by the number of variations, like a restaurant that mainly serves set meals or something.

“All right, here’s your last order of *yakisoba*.”

The middle-aged proprietress, a woman whose high-spirited voice and short silver hair were her personal trademark, placed a large platter onto the table.

“Wait, what’s this...?” I spoke without thinking first.

Among school sports club members, it’s like an unwritten rule that you have to polish off the entirety of one of this place’s jumbo *yakisoba* plates by yourself at least once. I thought I’d ordered the regular size this time because I wanted to share it with everyone, but what had been delivered to our table was clearly the jumbo size.

“You kids are done with school today, aren’t you? I won’t be able to see your faces for a while, so I wanted to feed you while I still have the chance.”

“You’re too good to us. At this rate, we’re going to eat you out of business. If you’re gonna give us a freebie, make it a small plate!”

That was when she whacked me around the back of the head with the round silver tray.

There was a dumb sort of comedy sound effect, like *dooong*.

“Exactly how long do you think I’ve been in business here? Giving a few of you buzz-haired sports kids an extra helping of noodles every now and again isn’t going to ruin me, you know.”

“I apologize for my words and for the error of my ways! What I meant to say was thank you!”

I apologized in a hurry before she could get another whack in, and the lady snorted once before returning behind the counter.

Once I was sure she was gone, I cleared my throat in an exaggerated manner, hoping to cut off the giggling happening around me.

I picked up my glass of oolong tea.

“And so, we come to the end of the semester without major incident. Kenta, why don’t you lead us in a toast?”

“What? Why me?!” Kenta, nominated all of a sudden, visibly began to panic.

“Come on, Kenta, getting that last word in is kinda your thing. See us off, won’t you?”

Yuuko jumped in to back me up.

“He’s right, Kentacchi! I can’t just go off and get my summer started without first taking a second to appreciate all the growth you’ve done this semester!”

Yua also giggled a little.

“Go for it, Yamazaki!”

Inspired by their rousing words, Kenta seemed to make up his mind and then got to his feet, glass of cola in hand.

“Er, um... I guess it’s like... Honestly, I still can’t quite believe that I’m still here with you all, but for me... This semester has been...”

""""""""Cheers!!!""""""""

Clink, clink, clink. Cheap glasses collided above the surface of the table.

“Oh, guys, come on...”

“Kenta, pattern recognition is really a skill you need to learn. Now, cheers.”

Everyone raised their glasses to Kenta, who stood there with his mouth opening and closing like a goldfish.



“Whaaat? You guys, too?!”

After we'd devoured our food, Yuuko's voice registered surprise.

We'd been discussing this year's summer study camp.

Once Yuuko, Yua, and I had started talking about how we were going to be attending, it transpired that Kazuki, Kaito, and Kenta had also applied, and that Nanase and Haru were even planning to go, too.

"Yeah, Miss Misaki is going to be attending as a supervising teacher, so we wouldn't have been able to have club practice during that time anyway."

Haru smiled wryly.

"She didn't say it outright, since there's a participation fee, of course, but she definitely said, 'Make sure all of you attend.' She even said she's going to have us running on the beach first thing in the morning."

Nanase corroborated Haru's explanation.

"Seriously? Doesn't she have any respect for us sporty girls and the importance of making precious summer memories?!"

"Hey, hubby. Whatcha think about that? Delicate maidens, forced to run and get all covered in sweat and sand when they're meant to be on a trip? That morning breakfast buffet table is going to get raided."

Since she asked, I decided to give her my honest opinion.

"Honestly? I think that sounds badass."

""You know it!""

Nanase and Haru gazed up to the heavens in a theatrical manner, cracking everyone else up.

After we were done laughing, Yuuko continued, saying, "But you know...!"

"I'm really looking forward to going with everyone here! Barbecue, beach fun, maybe fireworks, maybe even some truth-or-dare?!"

"Well, you know, it's still just a study camp, though."

Yua scratched her cheek as she spoke.

"I know, but it's my first time having an overnight sleepover with you, Ucchi! I wanna go bikini shopping together, and then at night, we'll have girl talk... Won't that be fun?"

When the two of them came over to my place to cook dinner a while back, I remember them talking about something similar.

Though at the time, I got the impression they were being a bit more direct about it and saying it was about the boys they liked.

“Oh, are you going to buy a new bikini, too?”

Nanase spoke while licking the salt from the fries off her fingers, and Yuuko immediately responded. “Wait, you mean...”

“I mean, if I let this opportunity slip, who knows when I’ll get the chance to go to the beach again? So I figured, why not? I mean, my partner here still wears a...”

“Shuuuuut up!” Haru, with seaweed flakes stuck to her lips, rushed into the conversation.

“Oh, my bad. Right, right, you’re in the middle of late-onset puberty.”

“All right, this means war. You’d better be ready, Nana!”

“Yes, yes, don’t worry. I won’t let a literal child beat me, Umi.”

“Come on, girls,” Yua said, trying to placate the two, who were doing their usual bit. “If you want, you both can come, too.”

Haru raised her hand vigorously. “I’m in! Yuzuki tends to lecture on and on when it comes to making selections, so I’d rather pick something out with you, Yuuko. And Yua, of course.”

“I can’t help offering advice when I’m forced to witness someone blundering through social interactions when she should have learned her manners by now.”

I was watching the spat unfold with a comfortable detachment, when I noticed that the large body sitting beside me was trembling slightly.

“Buh... Buh... Bikini!!!”

““Shut up, Kaito.””

Kazuki and I wasted no time responding to that.

“But... Yuuko, Uchi... Yuzuki... In bikinis! Talk about paradise!”

“You seem to have forgotten about moi? ♡”

“Oh, Haru. Well, er, do your best, eh?”

“All right, prepare to be punched into next week. ♡”

Kazuki grumbled something about us never shutting up before he continued in a normal voice. “Speaking of which, Saku, what are we doing about fireworks this year?”

“Right, I guess it’s the season and all.”

Fukui Prefecture has several fireworks festivals that are a summer tradition.

The most well-known and popular event is the Mikuni Fireworks Festival held around Tojinbo, but for those of us who go to school in Fukui City, the one we’re most familiar with is the Fukui Phoenix Fireworks display that takes place on the banks of Asuwa River.

The event marks the first day of the Fukui Phoenix Festival, which takes place over the first three days of August. Approximately ten thousand fireworks are set off every year.

Since the fireworks can be seen from anywhere in the city without spectators having to go all the way to the venue, many people enjoy the show from the roofs or balconies of their own homes.

Every junior high school boy has scoped out the event at least once, in order to find the best secret spots for cuddling up with a girl to watch the fireworks without being interrupted. Got to start prepping early for the day you finally get a girlfriend, after all.

Last summer, I really wasn’t in the mood, but now...

“Then shall we all go together?”

This summer, I could make that kind of suggestion without any hesitation at all.

After Kazuki asked me about the fireworks, Yuuko, who’d been listening intently from across the table, was the first to lean over in enthusiasm.

“I’m down! So down! I’m gonna wear my *yukata*!”

I smiled wryly in response to her exuberance and backed her up.

“I guess I’ll wear the *yukata* you gave me, too, then, Yuuko.”

“You’d better! I’ll come to your place and help you put it on!”

“Huh? It’s just a *yukata*, but still, I didn’t think you had any skill at traditional Japanese dressing techniques, Yuuko?”

“Erm, well... Okay, so maybe Yua can help us both put them on...”

“Uh-huh, that’s what I thought. But didn’t you say you wanted to be the first one to see me in it?”

“It’s fine if it’s Ucchi!”

Yua covered her mouth with her hand and giggled. “All right, all right, I can dress you both.”

“Yay!”

“Hang on, that might be embarrassing for me, you know?”

Then Nanase, who had been listening silently up until this point, lifted one corner of her mouth in a provocative way and gazed right at Yuuko. “I’m pretty sure Chitose can put on a *yukata* by himself.”

“Are you?!”

“Remember when he and I went on that date to the festival? Well, I saw it with my own eyes. So you can take it as fact, ‘wifey.’”

“Boy, now I’m pissed. All right, you want a fight, here it comes!”

Ah, what a lively and spirited time.

We were carrying on just the way you were supposed to right after school was out for the summer.

We were all excited that summer vacation was starting the following day, but at the same time, no one was keen to head home straightaway. We wanted to make the most of this last bit of school time, this togetherness.

“Let’s take a picture,” Yuuko said.

We all laughed and agreed.

Yua quickly cleared the table, Nanase casually straightened her bangs, and Haru threw the last piece of fried chicken into her mouth.

Kazuki brushed off Kaito, who'd tried to throw his arm around his shoulder, and Kenta fidgeted, seeming unsure as to whether he should move positions or stay seated.

In the blue sky visible from the window, thunderheads were floating like a child's chalk drawing on asphalt.

Spotting one of them in particular, I started thinking idly about how there really are dinosaurs here in Fukui.

A dilapidated electric fan placed in a corner alcove clattered away breathlessly but still rotated its head proudly, as if watching over each person one by one so that no one would be left out.

The proprietress took charge of Yuuko's phone and pointed the lens at us. "Okay.

"Say cheese."

""""Yay!!!""""

With a snap, this moment of our high school second year was cut out of time, preserved for always, never to fade.

—To be looked back upon someday, in a long-distant summer.

Whenever I heard the sound of tinkling wind chimes, I would think back on this moment with infinite fondness. Of that, I was certain.



In the end, after leaving Takokyu, we all rushed to the karaoke place in front of the station and made good use of the weekday discount to sing our hearts out until the very last minute.

To start, we all sang our own signature songs, then paired up for a variety of crowd-pleasing duets. After gradually running out of material, we put in a nice little medley of nostalgic bangers one after another and passed around the mic.

Incidentally, when it's your turn at the mic, if you don't sing a line, you've gotta pay the price.

We started with the standard penalty, drinking a mysterious drink made by randomly combining different sodas from the drinks machine. We all ended up getting quite devious about it.

Kenta messed up his first round when it came to performing a signature song, but when we changed it to a medley of anime songs, he dominated. He even mastered the character lyrics that weren't included in the on-screen display.

Because of the anime song, we all ended up having to suffer at least one penalty.

After leaving the karaoke place, we strolled around the station for a while, and when the sky finally turned to dusk, we broke up.

After watching the bicycle group ride away, waving like they were rehearsing for the graduation ceremony, I headed home alongside Yuuko and Yua.

Maybe it was my imagination, but the girls seemed to be walking slower than their usual pace.

Normally, Yuuko's parents would pick her up by car, but today she said she wanted to walk as far as Yua's house with her.

I could kinda understand that feeling, so I shortened my stride slightly, too.

The shopping street in front of the station was colored a faint *nadeshiko* pink from the setting sun, the single-car streetcar trundling down the road. It's odd; even the usually deserted townscape doesn't look so bad with a little bit of color to it, I thought.

Yuuko stretched. "Ah, that was so fun! But I'm beat."

Yua giggled. "It's the first time I've sung like that. I think I'm even more tired out than I get during band practice."

"Come to think of it," Yuuko continued. "Ucchi, what are you going to do during summer vacation?"

"Hmm, I don't really have any special plans. Probably the usual. Go to club activities, study, and cook."

"You're still going to work, even after the study camp?"

“Yuuko, participating in the camp doesn’t mean you’ll be exempt from studying the rest of summer, you know? And when you think about college entrance exams, we can’t really afford to be wasting a single second.”

“More exams?! You must be the only person fretting about that during summer vacation of the second year of high school!”

“I... I don’t think that’s true...”

Yua scratched her cheek, looking disconcerted.

Seemingly unconcerned, Yuuko grabbed her hand.

“Then let’s make sure we have a lot of fun this summer!”

“Then? I don’t see how this tracks, but...sure!”

Listening to their conversation, I felt a little tickled inside.

Back then, I’d never have imagined those two would come to be such good friends.

“But you know, I see it. Saku, Ucchi, Yuzuki, Haru, Kentacchi. Everyone’s making progress, little by little, without realizing it.”

Yuuko muttered, gazing off into the distance.

“So I want to join them.”

She ran forward a step, and then whirled around.

“—This summer, I’ve decided to take a step forward.”

Then she beamed.

A step forward toward what? No, I wouldn’t ask her that.

For some reason, I felt like I could understand her feelings.

I think Yua, smiling gently beside me, could, too.

So for today, let’s walk home slowly, side by side.

We still had a little time left before the sun went down.



Then came the first day of summer vacation.

To be real, I was thinking that after I'd slept soundly until noon, I'd spend my time lazing around, doing some cleaning, some laundry, and taking care of my baseball equipment.

...But then from the early morning phone call that I received, I heard the unmistakable sound of out-of-tune radio calisthenics music.

I poured cold water on my sleepy head and sweaty body in the bathroom, put a white T-shirt with a chest pocket on over black Patagonia shorts, then slid my feet into Teva sports sandals and left the house. Now I was standing in front of Fukui Station, watching vaguely as the long neck of the resident Fukuititan moved up and down.

Checking my phone, I saw that the time was 8:50.

I usually went to school around this time, so it's not like it felt super early or anything, but I felt like I was still half asleep in bed.

How is it that on weekdays when I have to wake up, I usually wake up before the alarm on my phone, but on weekends when I don't have to wake up, I can sleep forever?

Verbalizing it makes it sound like, well duh, but when you really stop and think about it, it's kind of weird, isn't it?

As I was thinking about that, someone tapped me on the shoulder from behind.

I cast a casual glance over my shoulder, as if checking the answers of a piece of homework I knew I'd aced...

"Come on, friend. Let's go on an adventure."

...and it was Asuka Nishino, grinning mischievously at me.

Coincidentally, she wore the same Patagonia shorts as I did but in blue, with a white printed T-shirt, a simple black bucket hat, and Chaco sports sandals. On her back, she carried a square Fjallraven Kanken backpack.

It was a sporty kind of outfit that gave a very different impression than usual—but the nape of her neck was still only barely tanned, as were her exposed thighs.

While I remained silent, Asuka curled her toes in apparent embarrassment. Her toenails were light cherry-blossom pink, the polish carefully applied.

“Hey, say something.”

“Aren’t you embarrassed to have shown up in matching outfits?”

“You beast! You told me I should wear something more like this once!”

“Can you stop making me sound like some deranged older brother forcing his little sister into cosplay?”

When her lips pursed up, I burst out laughing.

“I was just kidding. To be honest, I was just taken aback by the contrast. I mean, that’s not your usual style.”

“...Really?”

“You’re as charming as Mathilda in *Léon: The Professional*. I’ll buy you a black choker later.”

“Er, that’s not really what I was going for.”

Asuka twitched, looking puzzled.

I could see the remnants of her childhood self somewhere in that innocent expression.

Come to think of it...

It was summer vacation back then, so I’d woken up early, like this.

It’s a waste of time to oversleep, like trying to fill in a treasure map that you’ve stuffed into your pocket.

When we eventually started walking, our happy-looking shadows looked smaller than everything else around us.



After riding the train for about twenty minutes from Fukui Station, we got off at a platform where a single sign read: Ichijodani.

The countryside station looked like something out of a painting. There was no ticket gate, and only one small waiting area. No one was around.

All the eye could see was green rolling rice fields, small mountain ranges, tall steel towers, and old private houses dotted around here and there.

The summer sun was still pouring down from the endless sky.

When I took a deep breath, I could smell the earth and greenery, along with the scent of stifling heat.

“Remind me why we’re here, again?” I said.

In the morning, the only thing she told me on the phone was that we were going on a date and where we should meet.

I knew Asuka wasn’t really the type to want to go shopping around the station building, but I never thought she’d bring me somewhere so remote.

Asuka’s eyes sparkled. “I told you, I wanted to go on an adventure with you, just us two, for the first time in a long while.”

“Like in *Stand by Me*?”

I mentioned the name of an old movie.

“If anything, it’s more like *Black and Tan Fantasy*,” she shot back, with the name of a novel I’d also read.

I recalled that the story revolved around four middle-aged men and women, former classmates, talking about various things while walking around Y Island, which was probably meant to be Yakushima. A simple story, but it was oddly impactful.

““After all, we are no longer the young boys and young girls we once were.”” I quoted a line at her, matching her teasing energy. “But we’re not even in the prime of our lives. If you insist on citing a novel by Riku Onda, I’d have expected you to have gone for *Night Picnic*, the one with a high school protagonist. Actually, that one’s even more fitting for you.”

“...I haven’t read that one.”

“Oh, that’s why, is it?!”

Seeing her turn away with embarrassment, I couldn’t help grinning.

She’s usually the one who’s read a book I haven’t. This was the first time it

was the other way around.

Statistically speaking, it was bound to happen eventually. Even so, I felt like I'd caught a glimpse of a side of Asuka I hadn't seen before, and that filled me with a small bubble of happiness.

"Okay, I'll lend it to you next time."

"...No thanks. It's my personal principle to buy the books I want to read for myself."

"Aw, feeling a little bit of FOMO, are you?"

"Not even a little bit."

She walked ahead, and I chased after her, unable to keep myself from smiling.



This area, called Ichijodani, is known for being the home of the Asakura clan, who ruled over Echizen during the Warring States period. It's said the ruins of the castle town at that time were excavated in very good condition, and it'd been designated as an important national cultural property.

I believe there's an archaeological museum nearby, but to be honest, it wasn't really the place I'd want to go for a summer vacation date.

Nonetheless, we didn't have a specific destination in mind, so we decided to head toward Ichijo Falls for the time being. This is also one of Fukui's modest tourist attractions, and it's said Sasaki Kojiro, the Japanese swordsman, invented his famous "Turning Swallow Cut" technique here.

When I looked up the directions on my phone, it was about an hour and a half on foot from here.

If our goal was to walk and talk, the distance was just right.

If you go out of the station and continue a little, you'll soon come to Prefectural Route 18. After that, all we had to do was just follow the road, so I checked the map one last time before putting my phone away.

"The Nature House used to be around here, huh?" I commented.

Asuka, who was walking next to me, looked at me with a puzzled expression.

“You mean the study camp lodge?”

“Yeah. Did you go there when you were in elementary, too?”

“Yeah. Ah, that takes me back.”

Fukui City Youth Nature House is a public social education facility located halfway up a small mountain. There’s a gymnasium, a small plaza, an outdoor cooking area, and a craft area, and elementary school students in the city usually attend for stays of two days and one night.

Well, it’s supposed to be a study camp, but it’s more like a fun event where everyone hangs out together making candles and wood-burning art, cooking rice, and making campfires to test their courage.

We continued talking about this and that.

“Back then, it felt like I’d ended up in the deep, desolate mountains. But it was still only about twenty minutes away from the city by train.”

“Maybe I can understand that feeling. Back then, I was reading the *Sherlock Holmes* series and the *Boy Detectives Club* series that I borrowed from the school library, so I was actually a little scared that a murder or something would happen.”

Picturing Asuka, clutching an old hardcover in terror, I lowkey wished I could have attended the camp with her back then.

As we walked, we came across an iron bridge that spanned the Asuwa River, where the road split in two.

There wasn’t really a big difference, no matter which one we chose, but while I was debating, she poked me on the shoulder.

“Hey, wanna settle it with this?”

With a mischievous smile, Asuka held up a sturdy-looking tree branch that she must have picked up off the ground somewhere.

“Now, that’s the kind of thing to tickle a man’s boyish spirit.”

“Right? Did you used to play with these, too?”

“Yeah, I was totally the type to pick up a branch if it was lying by the side of

the road.”

“Now that you mention it, that’s how you used to be when we played together during summer vacation. Swinging sticks around like swords, giving them names...”

“Whoa, stop there, Asuka.”

She was about to dig up some dark history there. I had to stop her.

All boys go through a phase like that.

If you’re born in Fukui, you’d swear it was true that the Kuzuryu River had a legendary nine-headed dragon sealed within it somewhere.

Asuka set the tree branch down on the ground and gently let it go.

The tip rolled around, until the end was pointing directly straight, indicating that we should continue rather than taking the other fork.

It would be impolite to leave it lying around on the path, so I picked it up.

Once we started walking again, Asuka spoke. “Speaking of study camp...”

This was a continuation of the previous topic, right?

“Do you remember what the bath was like over there?”

I couldn’t figure out why she was asking, but for the time being I decided to answer honestly. “Nothing really stands out in my memory about it...”

Asuka continued with a smile. “When I was in the bath...”

“Don’t tell me someone came to take a look?”

“Why is that the first thing that comes to mind?”

“Because it’s a given! Any red-blooded male would expect that kind of story.”

“...Did *you* peek?”

Her gaze was searching, but I responded with my usual breezy air.

“I didn’t have the guts to do it myself. And if I couldn’t, I couldn’t let the other guys get away with peeping at that cute girl I liked. I was the boy who told on them to the teacher.”

“Doing the right thing for extremely wrong reasons.”

“Incidentally, what you’ve got to do is give them just enough rope for them to hang themselves with it—then it’ll be too late for them to make excuses, see? The girls all thought I was some kind of hero.”

“And you’re bragging about it, too. Totally evil.” Asuka shook her head in amazement, then smiled teasingly at me. “So what would you do if you caught some boy peeping at me?”

“I’d bake him in the oven, sprinkle some salt and pepper on him, then feed him to the Fukuiraptor.”

“Hee-hee, sounds like something my dad would say.”

“...Wow, I don’t like that.”

The two of us looked at each other and burst out laughing over this silly conversation.

“So, as I was saying, I was in the bath...”

After walking for a few moments more, Asuka started over.

“It was the first time for a lot of us, including myself, to have a sleepover with friends from school, and everyone was really excited.”

Suddenly, the tone of her voice changed, as if a cork had been pulled.

“There were chairs and buckets piled up there.”

I didn’t mean to interrupt the conversation again, but I spoke up, hoping to prompt her to continue.

“I mean, it *was* a bathroom, right?”

“Of course. But normally when you go to a public bath or a hot spring, there are already other customers there, and they’re washing their bodies, aren’t they? We were the first ones there on that day...”

“It was all in a triangle,” Asuka said.

“The chairs and the buckets were each stacked in neat triangles in the corner of the room. Evening sunlight was streaming in from the big window in the back.”

I tried picturing the scene.

The fogged-up mirrors, the aged tiles, and the undulating waters of the bathtub, all dyed an evening red. The two triangle shapes, and the group of girls staring at them... Well, I was trying not to picture that part too clearly.

But I could see the scene, like some kind of dreamlike painting.

“And what do you think we were doing?”

“Um, maybe playing Jenga?”

Asuka chuckled, then shook her head. “We couldn’t do anything. Everyone stood there staring at it for a while, and eventually, we all just started washing our bodies without using the chairs or the buckets. It was just a very weird moment. And I still remember it vividly now, as a high school student.”

That seemed to be the end of the story.

Without even looking at my reaction, Asuka muttered casually, “You can see fireflies around here.”

“There’s something a little mystical about triangles, isn’t there?” I commented, and Asuka looked at me with a little surprise in her eyes. “You know, pyramids, Mount Fuji. Hexagrams are odd, too. They induce this feeling of awe. It’s like, they’re somehow untouchable? ...You know, like a girl’s shorts!”

“You can try to hide your embarrassment by finishing on a perverted note, but I can see right through you, you know?”

Darn, she caught me.

I was just expressing a thought I’d had, but before I’d even finished saying it, I got embarrassed by how pretentious it sounded.

“Heh.” Asuka exhaled. “Now that you mention it, it might have felt a little like that. Do you think that’s why we didn’t want to mess with it?”

“I mean, it’s not like I’m trying to solve a riddle here. Just spitballing. But when I pictured the scene, that’s what came to mind.”

“You...pictured the scene?”

“Hey, I made sure to censor my mental image, you know?!”

I cleared my throat and continued, not even knowing myself how much of this was just joking around and how much was serious.

“The triangle you all saw was like youth, I think.”

A brief silence passed,

“So what does that mean, exactly?” Asuka sounded lost.

“I don’t know if it was a previous bather or a member of staff, but...it must have been made by someone. There would have been little quirks, tiny imperfections and gaps. If you’d knocked it down, then tried to rebuild it—you’d still never see quite the same thing again...”

I stopped there, tapping the stick I was holding against the ground.

“—So you girls visualized that moment of youth, a moment you never wanted to end, as a perfect triangle.”

The stick tapped out a muted rhythm. *Thonk. Thonk. Thonk.*

Was this because we talked about novels earlier?

Or was it just excitement over being able to spend the summer with you again?

I was thinking of ways to cover up my embarrassment over the conjecture I’d just presented, when...

“—That’s a beautiful way to interpret it.”

Asuka grinned.

Right, I thought, smiling too.

After meeting in high school, we always shared moments like this.

As ephemeral as a mirage on a summer’s day, like water sprinkled on hot pavement, imbuing every word she spoke with deep meaning... How many times had I fumbled inside myself for the right words that would help me connect to this girl?

The silence rolled and rattled around between us.

I was happy, just talking to her.

That's how I felt about her. My first love.



I, Asuka Nishino, sneaked a glance at the side profile of the boy walking beside me.

Usually, during a tale like that, you'd expect the other person to say, "What happened then?" or, "What's the punch line?" or, "What is it exactly that you're trying to say?" But Saku didn't do any of that.

I loved these casual chats of ours, the time we spent together.

The distant footpath of summer shimmered ahead of us.

Back then, like now, the two of us would wander through our shared imaginations.

"Speaking of murders..."

Saku still had the stick. Seemed like he'd taken a shine to it.

For a moment, I wasn't sure what he was talking about. Then I realized he was referring to something I'd said earlier.

"During the sleepaway study camp, there were maybe three staff members who acted kind of like camp counselors. Each of them had a nickname."

"Oh, I think I remember that."

In my vague memory, I saw something like a name tag, worn on a chest.

"One of them called himself Calimero."

"Calimero... The black chick wearing half an eggshell?"

It's a pretty famous character from an anime or something like that.

Saku looked confused for a moment, then smiled and continued.

"I'm pretty sure that's what he was referring to. I think he was trying to make it look like an eggshell? Anyway, he was wearing a cheap white top hat with a jagged brim. But he wasn't dressed in black; he was wearing yellow from head to toe. And he had on a feather boa, for some reason. Hot pink, like something

you'd wear to a party."

Maybe he didn't have any black clothes and just went for yellow. Hmm, but that sounded kinda implausible. Maybe he thought yellow would be more cheerful and chick-like for the kids. Maybe he wore the feather boa for the same reason.

"Sounds like a crazy getup, but kids would love it."

"That's true. They did all love him." Then the tone of his voice suddenly dropped. "I was terrified of him."

"You were afraid of Calimero?" I was surprised.

Saku was always like some kind of hero. The thought of him being afraid of anything was a little unexpected, not to mention adorable. I wanted to get into big sister mode, put him to bed, and pat him reassuringly on the back until—*Ahem*. Let's put a lid on that feeling for now.

I managed to calm myself down. *Honestly, I've been on a high all morning.* Anyway, Saku nodded.

"I didn't know the character Calimero."

Hmm, well, a lot of people would have seen it before without knowing what it was called. So I could understand him saying that.

But why be afraid of it?

I stayed silent, willing him to continue.

"Without the backstory, don't you think Calimero looks kind of creepy?"

"Calimero," I muttered to myself.

I put myself in Saku's shoes, tried to imagine seeing it without knowing it was a cartoon character originally.

Calimero, Calimero. Ka-li-me-ro.

...Oh, yeah. I could see it now.

Inorganic, constructed nonsense words rendered in Japanese katakana script could mean anything, either serious or playful.

It felt almost as if the temperature had dropped a few degrees. I shook my head quickly.

“When you don’t know the original story, seeing a guy dressed like that made him seem like some kind of crazy person. No doubt it was all just an act he was putting on for the children, but his words and his actions were off, too. Overblown. Exaggerated.”

A mysterious strange man who suddenly appeared during a fun study sleepaway camp, talking away with exaggerated, pantomime motions.

“Hey, everyone, call me Calimero.”

“Hey, let me teach you a fun game.”

“Hey, kids, c’mere.”

Yeah, that might be quite scary.

Saku sighed.

“My classmates were drawn to this guy, one after another. To me, he looked like a murderous clown that had appeared deep in the mountains. Before everyone knew it, they’d be hoodwinked, lured away into the depths of the pitch-black forest.”

At night, the campfire light distorts the faces of children.

A yellow clown with a jagged top hat sits there, grinning away.

“Calimero, let’s play.”

“Calimero, what will you teach us next?”

“Calimero, take us somewhere even more fun.”

Calimero, Calimero, Calimero, Calimero, Calimero...

A chill ran down my spine, and I found myself reaching out to clap Saku on the back.

“Hey!”

Slap! What a satisfying sound.

“You jerk, you made me picture it. I got really scared just then.”

“Right? I knew you’d appreciate it, Asuka.”

Saku’s grin had this “gotcha!” quality to it.

“Looking back on it now, it’s kind of a funny story. At the time, I tried to stay as far away from him as possible, but then I heard him call out to me from behind, and my heart nearly burst out of my chest.”

No doubt there was nothing sinister to it.

Probably, the counselor saw Saku sitting alone and was worried he was feeling left out.

Still..., I thought, as I spoke again. “It’s the fear of the unknown, isn’t it? Even a kind camp counselor who just wants to make kids smile can become a terrifying clown depending on how you see him.”

Saku scratched his cheek bashfully before continuing. “Things aren’t as scary as they seem, you’re saying?”

“Summing up the mystery with a cliché... That’s kind of unsatisfying.”

“Hmm, but sometimes, the knowing is what makes it scary.”

“Really?”

I gripped the hem of my T-shirt tightly.

“—Like, for example, a second love that comes after a first love.”

I couldn’t look him in the eye as I spoke.

I know, I know, this kind of thing isn’t quite fair. But I don’t have much time left.

After a short chuckle, Saku responded.

“Or maybe like getting a yearly flu shot?”

Seriously? I’m not laughing at that.

I turned away, pouting pointedly.

Hey, have you realized?

The only place I can talk like this...like how people in novels talk...is when I’m with you.

Because you listen to my words with such sincerity.

Because you try so hard to meet me at my level.

I find that so adorable. It fills me with joy. Sometimes, you make me realize things I never noticed before. That's why I want to be with you. I want to listen to your voice, not just sometimes, but always and forever.

I was happy, just talking to him.

That's how I felt about him. My first love.

The river that flowed to one side of us rippled gently.

A drop of sweat trickled down the nape of my neck.

Even though my skin had been heavily sunscreened, I was still getting tan.

Slap, slap. My sandals seemed ready to melt as I walked.

Oh right, I suddenly realized.

—This was going to be the last summer that I could spend with Saku.

“Asuka?”

Hearing him say my name with such unease in his voice, I turned to him and stuck my tongue out.



As we loitered on the path, it took about two hours for Asuka and me to finally reach the parking lot of Ichijo Falls.

It was almost noon already.

The place was usually bustling with quite a few people in the summer, but perhaps because it was a weekday at the end of July, there weren't any other visitors ahead of us.

“Man, it's hot,” I said, wiping my sweat off with my T-shirt, which was already soaking wet.

“Hey, why are we doing this?” Asuka said.

“I was just wondering the same thing. Why don't you look inside for the answer, hmm?”

Even Asuka, normally so cool-looking, was fanning her face by flapping her bucket hat. Her forehead was beaded with sweat.

The chorus of cicadas in the surrounding area served to make it seem even hotter still.

After we continued for a while longer, the bronze statue of Sasaki Kojiro came into view.

I stood in front of it with a feeling of exhausted accomplishment over our long-awaited arrival—and a feeling of relief over having nothing left to strive for. Looking over at Asuka, I grinned.

With both hands holding the wooden stick aloft, I...

“Secret sword! Turning Swallow Cut!”

I swung it down and then flung it back up again without even a pause.

“...”

“.....”

“.....”

“.....”

“Hey, make fun of me, at the very least?!”

“Er, well, is that what you’ve been dragging that stick around all this time for?”

“I didn’t ask for detached observations!”

“Th-that was really cool, Saku...?”

“Stop it, my heart hurts.”

“Kojiro is defeated.”

“Please, send assistance.”

After that short back-and-forth, we both burst out laughing.

I finally deposited the stick I’d been holding in a nearby bush.

One side of our surroundings was covered with deep greenery, and a clear

river and narrow gravel road ran down the middle.

As we passed a gazebo with a dark-green, moss-covered roof, I heard something that sounded like rushing water, and we soon came within sight of a waterfall about thirty-three feet high.

It wasn't like a roaring waterfall or anything, but it had a nice atmosphere to it, somehow peaceful.

The water that formed the basin was shallow enough for elementary school students to play, making it the perfect spot for kids on summer vacation.

In just a few more days, their excited yelling and the sloshing of their water fights would be reverberating all around.

"Ah, it feels so good here." Asuka, walking next to me, raised both hands and stretched.

I followed suit and took a deep breath.

Every droplet of moisture in the air seemed to intermingle with the sweat on our skin.

"Asuka, if you stick around here, your skin will be looking great in no time at all."

"Er, it's already as pure as the driven snow, you know?"

"You're turning eighteen this year, right? It's time to start preparing for the future."

"Hey! That's totally ageist!" Asuka grabbed my hand, placed it against her cheek, and said, "See?" with pride in her voice.

Her skin felt like freshly made mochi, as smooth as an afternoon breeze.

It felt so nice, I almost found myself sliding my fingertips across her cheek.

"Mmn...", Asuka murmured, like she was ticklish.

We faced each other, so close our noses almost touched.

The boy gently caressed the cheek of the girl, who was gazing up at him with shining eyes.

The boy ran his tongue across his lips, then said...

“What’s this all about?”

He kept his hand on her cheek, but his voice was weary.

Was there anything else to do now, except kiss?

She must have sensed it, too.

Asuka looked away, her face red. “Are you saying it’s my fault?”

“You’re the one who created this little opportunity.”

“Well, the way you touched my skin made it weird.”

“Huh? Then I guess we’re both at fault, so—”

This time, I grabbed her hand.

“Huh? Wh-what?”

“Isn’t it obvious? We have to shake off our worldly desires.”

“Then you mean...”

“Let’s waterfall it!!!” I pulled Asuka, squealing, into the river.

““Yeeeah!””

The two of us both yelled at once.

Ice-cold water chilled my hot legs and feet.

A cool breeze blew across us, like when you open the refrigerator.

The fine spray of the waterfall enveloped us, like a natural mist shower.

“Hmph! It seems like all we do is flail around in bodies of water!” Asuka splashed me vigorously.

“Didn’t I tell you once? When it gets hot, jump into the river and play in the water!” I splashed her right back.

“Lend me your sweaty gym clothes later!”

“If you really want a sweaty T-shirt, would you like to strip right here and swap?”

“Nah, I actually brought a change of clothes.”

“Hey, that’s no fair!”

I could see Asuka’s mint-green underwear through her transparent clothes, but for today, I’d let go of my ulterior motives and think of her as an out-of-season young leaf.

Because I felt it, so strongly I almost couldn’t stand it.

—This was going to be the last summer that I could spend with you.

If only I really could shake off these thoughts so easily, I thought, smiling a little, then dunked my head under the waterfall, which cascaded down from above like a pool with a cracked bottom.



After enjoying ourselves for a while, we rolled on into the gazebo.

Both of us took sports towels out of our bags. I hadn’t thought as far as bringing a change of clothes, but I was glad I had my towel, at least.

Our T-shirts aside, fortunately both of us were wearing waterproof shorts, the kind that dry quickly and can also be used as swimwear. They’d soon dry in this heat, without us needing to do anything.

“Asuka, go into the back and change your T-shirt before you catch a cold. I won’t be able to see from this angle.”

There was a toilet block back at the parking lot, but it was kinda far.

Anyway, it was a one-way road to the waterfall, so if someone else came along, we could just ask them to wait a sec. There was something like a promenade up top, but there didn’t seem to be anyone up there. And here, under the canopy of trees, we were in a blind spot.

People would probably wonder what was going on in here, though.

Asuka spoke timidly. “...Promise you won’t peek?”

“If someone tries to peek, I’ll let the teacher know.”

“Oh, you’re an idiot.”

Asuka returned after changing so quickly, she barely even needed a lookout.

She looked refreshed, wearing a cool, mint-green light top layered on top of a plain white vest. It was a familiar color, somehow, but I couldn't think about that too deeply.

Asuka made her way to the bench, sat down, and took off her sandals.

She must have been about to wipe off the backs of her thighs.

She raised her left leg and stretched it high, pointing her toes. The pure-white soles of her feet were as smooth and beautiful as the inside of a seashell, and the slightly wet parts seemed to shimmer with pale-rainbow colors in the sunlight.

When the fabric of her soft shorts looked like it was about to be peeled off, I turned my back and took off my T-shirt, so as to cover my eyes.

"Yeek?!"

I heard a small scream, and when I looked back, Asuka was covering her eyes.

Ah yes, even Nanase had a similar kind of reaction at first.

But in her case, she quickly adapted and then got straight to staring.

When I was still in the baseball club, it was a daily occurrence for me to change my undershirt on the field, so I somehow lost my sense of concern over this sort of thing.

"You've seen the top half of the male body in swimming classes and before gym, surely? Guys just change clothes anywhere, after all."

"Right, but they usually stopped around junior high. And those boys weren't so...rugged."

"Er, is it okay if I point out that you're still peeking through your fingers?"

"—?!"

I wiped my body with a towel, squeezed my T-shirt lightly, and reluctantly put it back on. I really would have preferred to dry it in a sunny place, but oh well.

"All right, it's safe now."

When I said that, Asuka looked this way extremely cautiously. "S-sorry. I'm supposed to be the older one, but I just made a big fuss."

“It’d be more upsetting if you acted like it was no big deal, so it’s fine.”

“...Hmph, that just isn’t fair.”

Looking at her glistening eyes, I thought, *no*, that’s *not fair*, and smiled a little.

“More importantly...” I sat down on the bench and stretched out my legs. “...I’m so hungry I think my stomach’s about to shrivel up.”

Thinking back, I hadn’t eaten anything since that morning, after being awoken by Asuka’s call and scrambling to get ready.

We’d walked under the scorching sun for two hours and played in the water.

My gas tank was running on empty.

I didn’t see a single supermarket or convenience store along the way, so getting lunch anytime soon seemed unlikely, unless we headed back to the little souvenir shop by the station.

I was mulling over our options, when Asuka smiled and lifted her light-gray square Kanken backpack up in front of her chest.

“I thought you’d say that, so...” She rummaged around inside and brought out an aluminum foil package. “I made omusubi!”

“Will you marry me?”

Asuka chuckled, then handed me a rice ball and a disposable wipe.

“What’s inside?”

“Pickled plum! And, if that’s not enough, I also have salted kelp and salmon, too.”

“You like *umeboshi*, don’t you? You ate it in Tokyo, too.”

“Yeah, the flavor reminds me of good times.”

We sat side by side on the bench, and I cleared my throat.

“The aluminum foil is a nice touch. I like it better than plastic wrap.”

“It’s ’cause your grandmother always used aluminum foil, Saku.”

“Grandma used to call it silver paper.”

“There’s boiled pickled radish in this one, so eat up.”

“Amazing.”

It never occurred to me, since I’d always just eaten it ever since I was a kid, but boiled pickled radish was a local Fukui specialty.

As the name suggests, it’s made by simmering pickled daikon radish with soy sauce, sake, mirin, chili peppers, and dashi.

Cleaning my hands with the disposable wipe, I continued, “It’s all about how they’re referred to as well.”

“It’s been a long time since I heard someone say ‘omusubi’ for rice balls.”

“I always used to call them *onigiri*, too. Maybe I was influenced by your grandmother.”

“Ah yeah, she always called them ‘omusubi.’”

Asuka turned to me, saying, “You know...

“That day formed a bond between you and me, Saku. And ‘omusubi’ as a word has strong connotations of connectedness, of togetherness.”

And she smiled, so innocent and pure.

It was hard, somehow, to look her in the face as I peeled off the wrapping and bit into the pure-white rice ball.

Plump and sweet, then by degrees salty and sour.

“Hey, Saku?” my friend said, in a voice that made me want to cry for no reason.

“Rice balls are triangular, too, aren’t they?”



*

After that, Asuka and I took our time eating the rice balls, savoring them.

★

Day two of summer vacation. Five PM, after practice.

I, Haru Aomi, had been staring at the screen of my phone outside the clubroom for a while now.

His name was on the display.

I reached with my fingers tentatively, again and again, to touch that part...

What was I afraid of? Up until a little while ago, I'd been able to message him on LINE or call him without giving it a second thought.

It wasn't like the relationship between me and Chitose had changed at all.

All we'd done was train together. I'd gone to see his game. He'd come to see mine. And just because of that, I'd gotten myself all excited...

I stopped there and pressed my fingers to my temples.

No, no, what are you saying?

It's changed a *lot*, hasn't it?

Didn't I kiss him, after confessing my feelings for him, face-to-face?

Me! Haru! Perky, sports-crazy, no-fuss Haru!

Like, what was I thinking that day?

I know I don't know much about romance, but I seem to have skipped a lot of steps, here!!!

Ahhhhh!!!

So that's how I've been lately.

The only salvation was that I'd just expressed my feelings; I hadn't said anything like, "Please go out with me," or "Please give me an answer," or anything like that.

At the closing ceremony two days ago, we were finally able to interact with

each other like normal again, but it had taken serious guts to be able to do it.

...Right. Guts. But not courage.

I looked at the screen again.

It's all right. I've thought about ways to cut this whole thing off.

Even so, I'm frozen, unable to tap on his name.

"Wow, that is so annoying!"

The faint whiff of a girlish scent from behind, and my outstretched hand touched CHITOSE.

"Whaaa?" I whirled around to find Yuzuki grinning at me.

"I can speak for you, if you'd like?" she said.

"Y-you jerk...!"

And while this was going on, my phone flashed CALL.

I was the one who'd called him, so I couldn't just hang up. I steeled myself and cleared my throat.

"Ah, um, Chitose..."

"Ah"? "Um"? What's that supposed to mean?

What happened to my plan of starting with a casual, "'Sup?"

"Hey, 'sup."

And that was all Chitose said.

I looked to Yuzuki for help. She waved her hand in front of her face and mouthed, "Go on, speak."

I sighed, then took a huge breath in.

"—Can I come to your place today?!"

"...Huh? What for?"

Huh? What for?

Is that your response, really?

It was just a whim, for Pete's sake.

But wait a minute.

What did I say just now? Not even a preamble?

Isn't the usual strategy to start with some pleasant small talk and go from there?

No wonder he wanted to know what for.

...Okay, let's calm down and start over.

I need a reason. A reason. A reason why I want to go to Chitose's place.

"Um, well...because it's Marine Day?"

"What does that have to do with it?"

I mean, I'd like to know the answer to that, too.

Yuzuki looked completely done with me. She had a hand to her forehead and was staring at the ground.

"So, I mean, well, I want to come over and eat your cooking!"

"Well, sure, I don't mind if you come—"

—Beep.

Chitose was still speaking, but I wouldn't know what to say if we kept talking, so I hung up.

Either way, message transmitted, I guess?

"Phew, safe."

"You sure you didn't just bat an immaculate inning? Three batters, three strikes, three outs?"

Yuzuki let out a heavy sigh.

"Was it really that bad?"

"Bad? I can think of a lot of words to describe that, but bad barely scratches the surface."

"I guess," I said, scratching my head.

She was right. Whatever the hell that conversation was, it was a mess.

“So then it looks like I’m off to Chitose’s place. You’re coming, too, right, Yuzuki?”

“Nah, I...” My teammate smiled softly. “I won’t. You wanted to go alone, didn’t you?”

“Well, that’s true.”

To be more specific, my mind was so full with wanting to go to his house, I never thought of inviting someone else in the first place.

“I’m not desperate enough to hang around as a third wheel.”

Well, Yuzuki, if you insist.

“Okay, I’ll go alone!” I was just about to run off at top speed, when...

“—Hey, wait a minute.”

She yanked hard on my sports bag.

The shoulder strap dug in, and I turned reluctantly. Yuzuki put a hand on her hip and gave me a “This girl serious?” kind of look.

“Surely you wouldn’t, but just to confirm... You’re not going in *that*, are you?”

“Huh? Well, yeah. It’s too far to head home and change first.”

Ah, another huge sigh.

“You dummy. You realize you’re going to the place of the guy you’re into, the place where he lives *alone*?”

“Oh, right... Should I bring some rice crackers or something as a courtesy?”

“Okay, I want to give you shit for that, but I don’t have the bandwidth.”

As she spoke, Yuzuki whacked me on the ass with a loud *SLAP*.

It hurt like heck, but I had the feeling I should keep my mouth shut and wait for what she had to say next.

“You’ve just finished club practice! You’re all sweaty and gross! Are you sure this is how you want to play this?”

“Oh, whatever. Chitose wouldn’t fuss over things like that.”

“Excuse me?” Yuzuki’s eyes flashed strangely. “Listen here. What if Chitose gets in the mood when you’re alone together? He throws you down, licking all the crevices, smelling all kinds of smells...”

“—I get what you’re saying a thousand percent, just please, stop talking!!!” I yelled, covering Yuzuki’s mouth with my hand.

Was she insane? Why was she being so loud in a public place?

And you’re the cool beauty all the boys dream about? Seriously?

But... Thanks.

Thank you for calming me down a bit.

She tapped the back of my hand, and I loosened my grip.

“Good, now you understand. Come to my place and take a shower first.”

“No, no...”

“Listen, you, this kind of thing is just a courtesy. You just do it. Don’t overthink it.”

“No, not that... I think I want you to come with me, after all!”

When I said that, my trusty teammate looked taken aback for a second. Then she laughed with understanding.

“If you’re bringing a courtesy gift, make it a cake or something, okay, Umi?”

“But if I show up with a cake, won’t I look desperate?”

“...Maybe we should swing by the convenience store and grab some snacks, at least.”

“Yeah. Yeah, let’s do that, Nana.”

It’s not like I don’t know about the birds and the bees.

I mean, of course I know.

When I get overexcited during a game, I come out with a whole repertoire of dirty jokes.

Am I scared? Well, sure, a little. But it's not like I'm opposed to the idea. Not opposed at all.

Of course, I'm not arrogant enough to be like, *Oh yeah, he'll definitely try something with me.*

It's weird, though.

If I keep fluttering around, I won't get anywhere.

I know that, and I hate it.

I want to keep running with him forever.

That's how I felt, about my partner.



After finishing up the necessary shopping with Yuzuki, I stood in front of Chitose's apartment.

The four-story apartment with the brown facade looked a little dated, but it's a riverside location with a great view.

I'd heard from Yuzuki about how Chitose had decided to live alone.

At the time, I'd been like, "Hey, that's not your information to spread!" and picked a fight with her. But Chitose himself seemed willing to talk about it in a casual way, so I guessed there was no real issue there.

Well, I kind of understand.

He's that kind of guy anyway.

Even so, having made it this far, even ringing the doorbell made me seize up with nerves.

If this was a friend's place, I'd just waltz right in like, "'Sup?" but knowing it was Chitose inside, by himself, in the place where he slept and woke and ate and took baths, and... Anyway, it was his space. Completely.

"Do you want me to press it for you?" Yuzuki offered, like it was no big deal.

Grr. I knew she was provoking me on purpose, but it still annoyed me.

When she was dealing with that stalker, I was the one who suggested she go

to Chitose for help.

This girl usually doesn't show her weak side to anyone except me. Chitose was pretty much the only other person we knew that I figured she'd be able to open up to.

But I haven't heard anything about them getting close enough to the point where her going to his place and eating food he cooked is NBD.

"It's fine, I'll do it myself."

I pressed the round button.

After a moment, *ding-dong*. Then the door opened with a clack.

I looked up at Chitose, who was dressed in shorts and a T-shirt, and raised my hand casually.

"Sup!"

Okay, this time I was able to say it normally.

"Sup. Oh, hey, Nanase."

Beside me, Yuzuki raised her hand as well, in a "Sup" kind of way.

"Thanks for letting us come over!"

My thoughts were going all over the place; I felt like I was going to freeze up again, so I pushed Chitose aside and stepped into the entrance.

There was no entry corridor or anything; the door opened up right onto the living area.

Something smelled absolutely amazing. Had he actually cooked something and then waited for my arrival?

I looked around the room, and suddenly my eyes were drawn to the kitchen on my right.

Yuzuki, who was just entering from behind, bumped into my back.

"Ouch. Watch it, Haru."

Well, excuse me. After all, I've just had a bit of a shock...

"Uh, uh, good evening, Haru, Yuzuki."

Ucchi was standing there awkwardly, wearing an apron.

““Whaaat?””

Yuzuki and I ended up harmonizing.

“Dammit. I tried to tell you, but you cut me off, Haru.”

Chitose’s exasperated voice floated across the room.

All sorts of thoughts flew through my head, and I slumped my shoulders.



—Two hours ago, Haru and Yuzuki had arrived at my place.

I’d gone to Genky with Yua.

Genky is a chain drugstore headquartered in Fukui.

They call it a drugstore, but they sell a wide variety across different branches, and they also handle perishables. It’s often cheaper than buying groceries at the supermarket.

“Thanks for always helping out, Yua.”

I smiled at Yua, who was pushing the cart next to me.

Her outfit for the day was simple: a summery, light-blue pleated skirt and a white sleeveless top. The shoulder strap of her cross-body handbag—well, let’s just say it emphasized things. I wasn’t quite sure where to put my eyes.

“It’s okay. I like doing it. And you’re carrying all the shopping, plus my stuff, too, so I’d say that makes us even.”

We regularly come here together to shop for daily necessities and groceries.

It’s been almost a year since we started doing it.

There was something that set it in motion, yes, but the main reason was that it was convenient for both of us.

Since her parents are busy working people, Yua takes care of many of the household chores, including cooking. And, as long as I live alone, I can’t avoid shopping.

So, in a lot of situations, it’s more convenient for us to go together.

For example, when a multipack of something is on special sale, a great bargain doesn't guarantee you can use it all by yourself.

And sometimes items are limited to only one per household. When she's stocking up, I carry the groceries Yua can't handle alone.

Actually, this is a pretext she constructed for my benefit.

At the time, not only was I living alone, but I'd just quit baseball and was pretty depressed.

I didn't really feel like cooking for myself, so I ate nothing but instant, frozen, and fast food.

One day, Yua found out about it, and after that, whenever she had time, she would come over and cook for me and teach me simple recipes.

On shopping days like today, she usually stops by my house and prepares a variety of side dishes that can be kept in the refrigerator for a long time.

I felt pretty guilty having her do all this for me, and pretty pathetic too, but Yua seemed to enjoy it. And so, this was the way things were right now, with me relying on her kindness.

"Saku, do you still have toothpaste?"

"Oh, I think I'm almost out."

"Then I'll put some in. I think there was a little sesame oil left, but is it okay if I buy more?"

"Of course."

Yua always bought a lot. She tossed a variety of products into her basket, which was on the top shelf of the cart, and my basket, which was on the bottom.

"The food prep will be the same as what we have at my house, as usual, but do you have any special requests for tonight?"

"I'm cool with anything."

"That just makes it even harder..."

Both my parents were the type to work through weekends and holidays, so I

don't really have many memories of doing everyday grocery shopping with someone else like this.

Maybe that's why.

"Yua, let's grab coffee or something on the way home."

"Hmm, I'd like to, but we have meat and stuff."

"Then let's grab something to go or get some canned coffees from a vending machine."

"All right!"

These little errands would be nothing but a chore if I was alone, but doing them together made them into something I looked forward to.



"—So that's the situation."

I finished laying out the particulars to Haru and Nanase.

""What is she, your wife?""

They shot back an oddly synchronized retort.

Well, to be honest, I think I might have said the same thing if I was in their position.

Yua scratched her cheek, looking worried. "Um, I'm sorry, you guys. I feel like I'm intruding."

"Listen," Nanase said, sighing deeply. "Any way you slice it, it's us two that are the ones who're intruding, right?"

Haru continued then. "I should have brought a cake, at least..."

She was probably talking about the offerings they'd brought—a bag bursting with convenience-store snacks. I'd thought it was fine, but who knows how girls see these things?

"Hey, Haru. What do you think of a girl who comes to get a free meal at the house of a guy who's already having dinner cooked for him by a cute girl from his class?"

“If I was a guy, I’d be thinking, ‘Wow, I’m glad I didn’t choose that one’...”

“Do you want to help Uchi? I mean, she’s obviously the pro here.”

“What are you trying to do, rub salt *and* pepper into the wound?”

“Okay, if we don’t fight, then no one has to lose. We were never here. Okay, Umi?”

“Let’s go, Nana.”

“Um...” Yua timidly interrupted their conversation. “I’m afraid it’s not Saku’s home cooking, but if you’d like, we could still all eat together?”

To that...

““Oh, we’ll eat for sure!””

...the two girls, hungry from the club practice that had just finished, raised the white flag.

Chop, chop, chop.

Scrape, scrape, scrape.

Sizzle, sizzle, sizzle.

Yua continued with the cooking, while Nanase watched and tried to stay out of the way. Every now and then, she seemed to be asking questions.

Still..., I thought.

The other two were used to being at my place, but Haru looked particularly uneasy. Of course, it had to be because of what happened.

I felt like I’d spent the overwhelming majority of my time interacting with Haru outside—riding two to a bicycle, playing catch and basketball together...

When we were doing physical stuff, I didn’t have to think, just interact. But being indoors with her—especially when it was me and her sitting side by side on the sofa at my place—I just couldn’t initiate conversation.

Haru seemed to be feeling the same way. We kept talking past each other, our attempts at conversation clunky.

“Ch-Chitose, guess you’re a reader, huh.”

“Most of these books were bought by my parents, but you could say that.”

“Oh, right. I guess that’s why sometimes you come out with stuff that doesn’t make any sense to me!”

“Are you trying to compliment me, here?”

“Don’t you have a TV or a computer?”

“I’m not really interested in TV, but recently I’ve been thinking I might want to get a PC.”

“What for? Hacking?”

“I’ll ignore that. I guess watching movies on my phone is getting kind of tiring. Also, I have a lot of free time on my hands, so I thought I might take up writing or something.”

“You’re the type to journal pretty seriously, huh.”

“Yeah, something like that.”

After getting that far in conversation, I suddenly noticed someone standing over us.

I looked up to see Nanase, hands on her hips and smiling. “You know what? It’s kind of a distraction to have you two jabbering away over here.”

She didn’t elaborate on exactly what we were distracting her from, but I guessed what she meant.

Nanase cocked a thumb and pointed it at the entrance.

“There’s the meal prep to do, too, and it’s going to take around another half hour. So could you two go off somewhere, I don’t care where, and do some running or play some catch or something?”

““...All right.””

Rude. This is my place, you know.



So we went outside with a glove, a wooden bat, and a ball.

Asuka had said something about it being fun just to watch, but Haru was the

type who needed to get active in order to chill.

We arrived at the spot on the riverbank near the apartment where I always go to practice, and I handed over the glove and the ball.

I took the bat and moved about thirty feet away from Haru.

That's about half the distance from the baseball's mound pitcher to the home base catcher.

Checking the time, I saw it was already past six PM, but the summer sky was still bright, and the temperature showed no signs of dropping.

"Haru. If you're gonna pitch, can you aim over here?" I gestured with the bat, indicating the strike zone. "I'll hit you back grounders, and you can just scoop them up. And we'll just keep doing that."

I really wanted us to play simple catch, but I only had the one glove.

"Er, is it okay to hit balls around here? What if you break a first-floor window?"

I responded, dragging my foot through the sparse grass, which was more soil than turf. "If I couldn't control one of your curveballs, Haru, then I'd just retire."

Haru blinked at me, then grinned like she couldn't help herself. "Er, hubby, wasn't that game the other day your actual retirement game?"

"Sure, for Fuji High's team." I readied the bat.

Haru put on the glove. "You could just join the team again, you know."

The ball came zooming at me in midair.

Her pitch was faster than I'd expected, and it took me by surprise. It connected against my bat with a *clunk*.

Haru scooped up the ball with her glove on the second bounce.

"It's not like I haven't considered it. To be honest, I agonized over it quite a bit. But it'll always be the place I ran away from. I can't just slink back there and look all my old teammates in the eye again."

Come to think of it, after that, the Fuji High School baseball team lost in the second round.

I went to watch it, and everyone was really fighting to win until the very end. Honestly, it was a really good game.

Next year, they'd probably be able to go the distance.

"Everyone would be glad to take you back, though."

"I know that. But if I ever seriously consider baseball again, I want it to feel like something new."

"Something new...?"

"I want to start again from the beginning, concentrating on what feels good. Like throwing and making a good hit."

"Wow, so you shoot your raw passion all over the baseball field and then get all introspective?"

"Hey, stop making dirty jokes out of nowhere."

Haru belly-laughed. "Well, I guess I don't really get it. But you're not quitting for good, then?"

"For now, I'll continue batting practice during high school. After all, I've found a baseball fan to practice with who's got nothing but free time and a love of working out."

"All right. If that's what you've decided, I won't say anything. I'll just stay quiet and watch as your story unfolds."

Watch, huh?

So Haru was planning to stay by my side from now on, then.

Swing. Clunk.

Bounce. Grab.

We ground out a measured rhythm.

At first, she didn't even know how to grip the ball. But now she's good.

She'd go on to become a great basketball player.

If I'm not careful, I might not be able to keep up with her anymore.

I have to start the next thing, so that I can earn the right to stand alongside

someone like her.

I wanted to keep running with her forever.

That's how I felt, about my partner.



I'll level with you. I, Yuzuki Nanase, was feeling pretty panicked.

I knew from the beginning that Haru was a tough one to beat.

And I could appreciate that there was some kind of deep connection between Chitose and his friend from the year above us, Nishino.

And I don't need to mention that Yuuko's in a class of her own.

At the same time, though, I thought...

Of course, it's not anyone's fault, but a secret part of me wanted to yell out...

No one told me about this!!!

Before my eyes stood Yua, cooking dish after dish.

I've been treated to meals a time or two at Chitose's place, but I also like to think I know my way around the kitchen.

I mean, it's not really difficult to get a recipe right if you just follow the proportions and you aren't a total klutz.

I'd always thought the important thing was the taste, or whether I could build a repertoire the person I was cooking for would actually like.

But Ucchi's cooking was completely different.

She didn't even consult a recipe. Didn't use a measuring jug or spoon. She adjusted the amount of seasoning bit by bit, tasting as she went.

She was making various types of side dishes at the same time, and whenever she had a spare second, she washed the utensils she no longer needed. It was probably just to make the most of the available time, but she also rinsed out the bowl she'd filled with chopped vegetables before using it for something else, and she started with the ingredients that wouldn't dirty the chopping board first. Everything she did, she did with such dexterity.

I thought I'd try to help as much as I could, but I felt like I'd only be getting in the way.

"Do you cook a lot, Ucchi?" I called over to her as she stood, back facing me, in her denim apron.

"Well, basically every day. I'm in charge of lunch and dinner."

Aha, I thought.

Everything she was doing seemed steeped in the familiarity of daily repetition.

Oh man, she was so cool.

...Not fair.

I swallowed my bitterness and changed the subject.

"Crunchy pickled plums? What are you going to use those for?"

"Edamame were going cheap, so I boiled them up in some salt and mixed them with tiny fish to go with steamed rice. If you mix in some minced pickled plums, it gives it an interesting texture, and it tastes pretty delicious."

"Oh, really? Well, what's this cooking on the grill?"

"Takeda *abura-age* with a sheen of surface miso. Actually, I was planning to serve it the standard way, with grated radish dissolved in a mixture of soy sauce and Ajipon ponzu sauce, but today's main dish is a pork *shabu-shabu* salad with the same seasonings and condiments, so I was worried it'd clash."

By the way, Takeda *abura-age*, or deep-fried tofu, which comes in chunks similar to regular *abura-age*, is the famous product of a restaurant called "Taniguchiya" and can be classed among Fukui's own specialties. Their signature dish is called "*abura-age gozen*." They serve *abura-age* as a side dish the way other restaurants serve hamburger steak or regular *abura-age*, so that shows you how confident they are in their product.

My mother buys it regularly, but I've never eaten it this way before.

"Can you explain the rest of the dishes, too?"

"We also have some regular *tamagoyaki*. Saku likes to eat it with grated

daikon radish and soy sauce, and for some reason, *shichimi* seasoning, too. Anyway, we have a surplus of daikon, so I thought it would work well.”

“What about miso soup?”

“It was hot today, so I thought it would be nice to have something light. I made a pork soup with tomatoes, raw ginger, Chinese cabbage, and leeks. I’m afraid this clashes a little with the pork main too, but if I only served simmered pork salad, he’d probably say there wasn’t enough.”

“Tomatoes in miso soup?!”

“You bet your britches. At first I weren’t sure, but one li’l taste and lemme tell ya, hon, you’ll wanna slap your momma.” (Translation: Yeah, at first I wasn’t sure, but I tried it and it was really, really good.) “If ya say so, Ucchi... Canya load me up?” (Translation: If you say so, Ucchi... Can you give me an extra-large portion?) “Course I will, sweet pea.” (Translation: Sure thing.) I let my mind wander as we chatted back and forth in Fukui dialect.

One soup, three sides. Was this seriously a menu dreamed up by a high school girl?

It’s just kinda different from what I’d been expecting.

I’m more like, “Hey, this sounds good!” and then I charge ahead and make it, without thinking about what to do with the leftovers. I guess I’m just a cooking noob, though.

I get all worried about not being able to follow the recipe instructions perfectly, so I buy the exact seasonings that are really specific instead of multipurpose.

But Ucchi thinks about things like seasonal vegetables, what kind of meat is going cheap, the ingredients that need using up, the mood on the specific day, and the preferences of the eater, and puts together a menu on the spot.

Darn it, Chitose, you must be pretty used to eating good food by now.

I was so glad I hadn’t done something dumb like offering to make a carbonara to show off my feminine wiles, or something. I mean, that stuff sounds hard to make for a noob.

But Chitose definitely seems the type to prefer meat sauce pasta, or Neapolitan pasta, or even peperoncino over carbonara. And I bet in Ucchi's case, she'd serve some improvised Japanese-style pasta.

Thinking about it, I suddenly got all depressed, thinking those eggs Benedict must have been a huge miss.

I mean, I was trying to kid myself, but the word depressed... Once it popped into my head, I started feeling genuinely crappy.

Even his home cooking, which I raved over...

I recalled this one time, when I spotted Chitose and Nishino together.

—What seems special to me might be mediocre to someone else.

I hadn't put a name to my feelings yet, back then.

But now...

Ucchi's gentle smile, the heartwarming sound of dinner being prepared, and the delicious aromas in the air—it all made my chest tighten.

I mean, Chitose had been enjoying all those things long before I fell for him. He'd seen that smile, heard those sounds, eagerly awaited those meals. No doubt having Ucchi cook for him was something he truly enjoyed to this day.

It was the right choice, after all, to chase him outdoors.

As far as my pride was concerned, the last thing I wanted him to see was Yuzuki Nanase rolling up her sleeves and studying cooking from Ucchi.

But maybe I've got it wrong.

She's not bad at distinguishing between things.

The second thing that hurt my pride was having to play wingwoman for bumbling Haru.

And the last thing is...

The fact that I knew I'd end up feeling this way, the moment I saw her in the doorway, wearing that apron.

Even though I knew that Ucchi visits Chitose's place every now and then.

I'd gotten full of myself, somewhere along the way.

It's been a little over two months since May, and a lot has happened.

We weren't boyfriend and girlfriend, but we were a little more than friends. I'd come to this apartment, seen it as a step forward. Not just seeing it as the apartment of the guy I like, but as a place to set down precious memories. I'd thought I was the only one.

But I had to face the truth.

Whatever was special between Ucchi and Chitose, it had been brewing a lot longer than anything between me and him. It was here, in the very air of this apartment, in the memories only they shared together.

...Ah man, I hate this sort of thing.

If only I could hate Yuuko and Ucchi and Nishino.

If only I could have been a big bitch and laughed over how none of them were right for him at all.

But this kind of revelation is nothing new to me.

—Chitose helped me out when I really needed it, but I had nothing in return to offer him.

I didn't have the guts to express my feelings to him right away. The kindness to take a step back and support him. The beauty to draw him to me with admiration. The strength to give him a good old kick in the butt when he needed it.

Everything I thought I could maybe offer, he'd already gotten in spades from other girls.

So at the very least... At the very least...

I wanted him and me to understand each other more deeply than anyone else could.

And that's how I felt about him.



We headed back when it seemed like the right time, to find Nanase and Yua

setting the table.

Naturally, at this point I wasn't shocked to find a variety of colorful dishes spread out.

The living room was filled with a delicious aroma that made my stomach growl. That was almost the only sound—my grumbling belly and the muted squealing of the little kids who live next door.

“Oh, it looks really delicious! Did you make all this, Ucchi?”

After a good sweat, Haru seemed to have regained her usual composure, and when she said this, Yua untied her apron strings and responded with a bashful expression.

“I'm sorry it's such an unexciting spread.”

“Are you nuts? If it was just the two of us, we would've grabbed some Hachiban's or katsudon and split, right, Yuzuki?”

“...Right.”

“Ha-ha.” Nanase chuckled. Her smile was fake.

That tugged at me a little, but I didn't want to put her on the spot by asking directly.

I turned on my Tivoli Audio and set it to play random music from my phone, which was connected via Bluetooth.

From the speakers, the sounds of Kariyushi 58's “Owari Hajimari” began to fill the air.

When everyone was seated, Yua clapped her hands together and said, “Shall we?”

“““““Let's eat!”””””

I slurped the pork-based *tonjiru* soup first.

Yua had made this for me before.

I'd thought *tonjiru* was kind of heavy, as far as soup goes, but the acidity of the tomatoes and the flavor of the raw ginger was exquisitely refreshing, making it perfect for a hot day like this.

I took a mouthful of the steamed rice.

It tasted faintly of *dashi* stock, which complemented the plump tiny fish and the saltiness of the edamame. Chopped shiso leaves were scattered on top, and when I ate one together with the crunchy plums, it created an entirely new flavor profile. I could have eaten a bucket of the stuff.

“This is freaking good,” I said honestly.

Yua, sitting across from me, beamed and looked relieved. “Really? I’m so glad it’s something you like. There’s plenty for seconds, too.”

Beside her, Nanase wore an unreadable expression.

“Darn, Ucchi. You could make money on this stuff. If you ran a restaurant in my neighborhood, I’d be one of your regulars.” Haru was raving. “This deep-fried tofu is unbelievable! I could sink a ton of booze with dishes this good.”

“You sound like some hard-drinking old dude.”

Snarking at Haru, I put two slices of *tamagoyaki* on a small plate, threw some grated daikon radish on top, and poured soy sauce over it.

Watching me, Yua sighed. “Can you at least take one bite before slathering stuff on it?”

“I’ve eaten it loads of times, so can you give me this one? Anyway, Yua, you don’t need to worry. Your *tamagoyaki* is always delicious, each and every time.”

Holding the *shichimi* bottle with my right hand, I whacked it several times with my left.

Yua chuckled. “Saku, every time I see you do that, it cracks me up.”

“Nanase said the same thing,” I replied.

Nanase seemed to snap out of a daze, shaking her head and speaking in an oddly animated voice. “Right? Isn’t that such a weird thing to do?”

“Totally!”

Nanase looked a little pale, but I couldn’t figure out why.

After that, we talked about our plans for summer vacation and ate the food that Yua had made until we were completely full.



After finishing dinner and resting for a bit, Haru said, “I’ll wash up.”

It was usually my job, but Haru seemed oddly motivated, so I decided to let her knock herself out.

She set about stacking the plates and was about to carry them to the sink, when Yua blushed and said, “Haru, if you do that, the bottom of the plates will get dirty. It’s easier to wash them if you carry them to the sink one by one.”

Ah, I remembered her telling me the same thing, a while back. When it comes to greasy dishes, it’s definitely easier to do it Yua’s way.

As I was thinking about that, I suddenly realized that I was all by myself in the living room.

I took two plastic bottles of lemonade that had been chilling in the refrigerator and went out onto the balcony.

“Want one?” I offered one to Nanase, who was staring blankly down at the river.

“...Thanks.”

With a loud crack, we unscrewed our lids at the same time.

It was a full summer night outside. When did that happen?

As soon as I stepped out of the air-conditioned room, my forehead gradually began to sweat.

I could hear the bugs going *cree, cree, cree* outside, mingling with the sound of flowing water.

Occasionally, a gust of wind blew, making Nanase’s black hair flutter in a wistful way.

I looked at her side profile, somehow steeped in ennui, and spoke as casually as possible.

“Not your usual move.”

Nanase slowly turned to me with a blank look in her eyes.

“Leaving the washing up.”

She must have figured out what I was getting at.

She glanced back inside the apartment and said, “Oh, darn.”

“I’m not criticizing you or anything. At first I was just going to do it myself.”

“I know. It’s just weird, getting overtaken by Haru now.” Yuzuki never usually announced that she was going to do dishes. She just gathered them up and got to work, and they’d be washed before I even knew it.

During the meal today, she’d seemed preoccupied. In fact, she’d been acting weird this whole time today.

“If there’s something on your mind, you can tell me,” I said.

Nanase looked up at the night sky with a lonely, slightly crooked smile. “Yes... I must return to my home on the moon, very soon.”

“Look at you, throwing in a tricky joke with a straight face. I’m taken aback.”

“So go get your hands on the new Maison Margiela bags, the ones that haven’t been announced yet, for me.”

“Huh? What happened to you leaving a letter and an elixir of life when we part?”

“Well, if that’s too hard to pull off, a gentle kiss is fine.”

“Making unreasonable demands of a man... I would expect nothing less of Yuzuki Kaguya-hime.”

Man, maybe I was worrying over nothing.

As I scratched my head, Nanase slowly approached.

“Hey,” she said, peering at my face. “What if I asked you to be my boyfriend...? Or something like that?”

“...If that’s a serious request, I’ll give it some serious thought, then give a serious answer.”

“Huh? You’ll give it some serious thought, will you?”

“Well... Of course I will.”

As I said this, I felt something creak, deep within my heart.

I gulped my Kupa Cider lemonade so I didn't have to acknowledge the pain.
"For today, I think this is enough."

Nanase laughed politely, like she just couldn't stop herself. "Sorry for making such a long face."

"I just choked on the carbonation."

As if my fingertip had just gotten a paper cut, the place where her words had penetrated gradually began to bleed red.

This was probably something like a gentle rehearsal.

Because the person in front of me was Yuzuki Nanase.

We're alike, after all. We've taken one step into each other's hearts, and maybe, little by little, we'll carry our sorrows, pains, weaknesses, and strengths together, just like a pair holding one handle each of a plastic grocery bag.

Of course, I hoped that there would be happiness and fun, too.

I wanted us to understand each other more deeply than anyone else could.

And that's how I felt about her.



A few days later, in the evening, I went to Ten Thousand Volts by myself.

It's a consumer electronics mass retailer, known by its perky commercial jingle, "Ten Thousand Volts. ♪" Founded in Fukui, but apparently chain stores are being developed in other prefectures.

It's not like my conversation with Haru the other day led me here or anything, but I had some time on my hands, so I thought I'd take a look at the computers.

I went around the various sections, but nothing made much sense to me.

Laptop computers range in price from around 30,000 yen to over 200,000 yen. To be honest, I don't know what the difference was other than the way they looked. I'd have to ask Kenta to teach me. He seems like a guy who'd know a lot about that sort of thing.

Just as I was about to give up and started thinking about eating ramen...

"Huh? Sakuuu!"

...a familiar voice called out to me.

I turned around, and there was Yuuko, waving her hand.

After she'd come bounding happily over, I commented, "I'm surprised to see you in a place like this."

Her outfit today was a brown off-shoulder blouse and denim wide-leg pants. Her hair was tied up in a loose braid.

"Yeah, I'm here shopping with my mom." Yuuko turned, and I saw a beautiful woman walking toward us with a smile on her face.

She wore an off-white long skirt with a front slit, a simple white blouse, and a light-blue cardigan. She wore her hair in a lightly swaying medium-length bob, slightly longer than Nanase's.

It was the first time I'd seen her in person, even though I'd walked Yuuko home many times, but I would have known she was Yuuko's mother without needing a confirmation.

Somehow, they looked just like sisters.

She looked so young, I could almost believe she was in her twenties.

Normally, I'd think of my friend's mother as just, well, my friend's mother, but she had an air of something otherworldly about her, and if I passed by someone who looked like her on the street, I'd end up accidentally following her with my eyes.

Still, I thought.

Saying hello to a classmate, especially a girl's mother, is awkward.

It's not like I was being introduced as her boyfriend or anything, but somehow it made me feel antsy.

Yuuko's mom, side by side with her daughter, smiled once again and gracefully bowed her head.

The scent of an elegant perfume wafted through the air.

I felt myself straighten up, then bowed my head as politely as possible.

"Hello. I'm Yuuko's classmate, Chito—"

“Hey, hey, is this *the* Chitose?”

When I tried to introduce myself, I was interrupted.

“I’m delighted! Yuuko’s talked about you constantly, and I’ve been dying to meet you!”

“Er, uh...”

“Oh, me? I’m Kotone, Yuuko’s mother. You spell it with the characters for koto—that’s the instrument—and sound. By the way, please call me Kotone, not ‘Yuuko’s mom’ or anything like that.”

“Ah, okay, er, Ms. Kotone.”

She was more exuberant than I’d expected based on her appearance, and as she closed in on me, I found myself taking a step back.



Yuuko shyly pulled on Kotone's arm.

"Mom, could you wait over there?"

"Oh, is my daughter turning into a rebellious teen?"

"Mom!"

I was surprised at first, but when I thought about it, I realized that this kind of innocent aura of hers was exactly the same as Yuuko's, which prompted a smile from me.

Besides, it kinda took me back. I had someone kinda like that in my family, too.

Kotone continued, seemingly oblivious to the fact that Yuuko had tensed up. "Okay, let's all go to Starbucks. Chitose, you're just hanging out this summer vacation, so you're free, right?"

"Mom, don't be rude!"

"Oh, I know. It's already dinnertime, so a young boy would prefer a hearty meal, right? Then let's go to Hachiban's. Okay?"

"Hey, don't just barge ahead without checking with me first!"

I ended up getting dragged along without even being able to get a word in edgewise.



Kotone and Yuuko went by car, and I took my mountain bike to the nearby Hachiban's.

They'd offered to drive me back to Ten Thousand Volts again after, but I had a feeling if I agreed, her mom would be like, "Wait, I feel like a change of scenery. Let's drive all the way to Tojinbo!" And so I gently turned her down.

When I entered the ramen place, Kotone was already situated and waved at me, yelling, "Over here, Chitose!"

The two of them were sitting opposite each other at a table for four, so I sat down next to Yuuko.

It was really starting to feel like I was a boyfriend meeting the parents.

On the other hand, if the two of them sat opposite me, it'd look like I'd done something bad to the daughter and was being reamed out.

"...Uh, I'm sorry, Saku. My mom gets like this sometimes..."

"Yeah, you're definitely related."

"Wait, what does that mean?!"

While Yuuko and I spoke back and forth, Kotone handed me the menu.

"Here, eat whatever you want. Of course, it's my treat."

"No, no, there's no need for that..."

When I said that, I got a loaded smile in return.

"Well obviously, I want to earn points for my cute daughter."

Before I could react, Yuuko leaned forward.

"My score couldn't be worse right now! What guy would relish being dragged off to eat by his friend's mom the first time they meet?!"

"Eh, Chitose must be used to this kind of thing if he's dating you, Yuuko."

"I told you, Mom, we're not dating yet!"

"Come on, calm down. I meant as friends."

"—Nnng!"

Kotone continued, glancing sideways at her daughter, who sat down heavily and began glaring at the menu.

"I guess I should apologize for any inconvenience."

"Well, at least you're aware of it."

"Ah, yes, there's the snarky response. Just what I was expecting from what you told me about him!"

"...Er, Yuuko?"

"Mom!!!"



It seemed kind of silly to hold back, so I ordered spicy ramen with extra spring

onions and a plate of *gyoza*. Yuuko had a large miso vegetable ramen, while Kotone had vegetable soy ramen, hold the noodles, and fried rice. I'd always thought the noodle-free version of the veggie ramen was supposed to be a diet option, but the fried rice had me puzzled.

After we were done ordering our food, Yuuko went to the restroom.

Sure, I'd rather she hadn't left me alone with her mother during the first meeting, but Yuuko looked so apologetic, I couldn't get mad.

"Sorry, Chitose." Kotone spoke as if she'd just read my inner thoughts.

"It's fine—I saved money on dinner, at least."

"I heard you live alone? That must be tough."

"No, I get more than enough money, and once I got used to it, it's actually pretty easy this way. My family was never tight-knit, exactly."

"Boys are so stoic. Yuuko wouldn't make it one day without having a homesick breakdown."

"She'd say that, but if she left the prefecture for college, she'd be one of those kids that never comes back."

"Oh, don't say that! That thought makes me sad!"

I snorted, caught off guard by her overreaction.

My parents were always comfortable being alone, so even though we lived far apart, we didn't keep in touch very often. This kind of parent-child relationship is actually quite nice, I thought. Refreshing.

"She was born when I was only twenty, you know." Kotone murmured under her breath.

I was confused over how to respond, but she waved her hand quickly and dismissively.

"Now, now, it's not some terrible story. It's a normal, loving marriage. I don't know about now, but back then, it wasn't unusual for people to get a job straight out of high school like I did. I got married to my husband at nineteen and had Yuuko the following year."

Right, that was why she looked so young.

So if she gave birth at the age of twenty...

“All right, stop calculating it!”

Called that one.

This back-and-forth reminded me of Yuuko, too.

I swallowed back my repertoire of needless jokes and silently waited for her to go on.

“So then,” Kotone continued, “It might be hard for you to imagine, Chitose, but twenty is still very much childhood. You may not be a minor anymore, but you still feel like a high schooler inside.”

I felt like I was hearing a story about a very distant world, but when I thought about it, I realized I only had three more years to go myself.

If I put myself in her shoes, that would mean getting married the year after next.

It didn't seem realistic. All I had was a vague kind of “wow” feeling.

“That's why, at first, I thought of Yuuko more like a younger sister than my own child, to be honest. Oh, she was so cute! Of course, I learned a lot about what I needed to know as a mother, and I did my best because I wanted to raise her to be an earnest, kindhearted child.”

“She is that.”

Kotone lowered her eyes a little shyly. “Thank you. She's not being a nuisance to you, is she, Chitose? Badgering you for dates, things like that?”

“I don't think so. It looks like you're doing a wonderful job raising your child.”

“Amazing! What a charmer you are!”

“My acquaintance with your daughter enriches my existence.”

“Oh, that's good! More, more.”

“Why don't we step on the brakes and get back to being serious?”

Kotone laughed in a mature way. “Is it okay if I continue? I was talking about

myself when I was younger. Really, about my daughter.”

“Of course,” I said. “You said twenty years old is still childhood, right?”

Kotone nodded slightly. “It’s like a child raising a child, isn’t it? That’s why I was really worried about one thing in particular for a long time.”

I glanced in the direction of the toilet across the room.

It must have been occupied already.

Yuuko seemed to be still waiting for her turn.

“I know it’s not something a parent should say, but isn’t she beautiful? And she doesn’t have that prickliness that some beautiful girls have. It’s not part of her personality. I’ve never once heard of her having any sort of argument with a friend.”

And that’s why, Kotone said...

“—Everyone, myself included, treats her far too special.”

I chewed over the meaning of that for a second before replying.

“Well, she’ll have a charmed life in that case. What’s the problem...?”

Yuuko wasn’t the kind of person who’d become arrogant or take advantage of her position just because she was popular with everyone.

But the woman in front of me shook her head slightly.

“The fact that you can think like that is because you’re a bit special yourself.”

“People have been hating on me since I was young, I’ll have you know.”

“That’s probably because you’re a lot smarter, stronger, and a bit nicer than she is.”

“I really wouldn’t go that far...”

“For example,” Kotone continued. “Suppose you’re hanging out with a group of people, and my Yuuko starts saying, ‘I want to do this!’ Well, I wonder if other people repress their own wants to align with hers...”

I couldn’t say with certainty that there was no truth to that. Really, that was totally what usually happened.

Of course, Yuuko would just be expressing her desires openly. No malice on her part.

But such a gorgeous and attractive human being can cast a strong influence on her environment just by being herself.

If you think about it, her habit of treating everyone equally, be they male or female, has already led to a lot of guys getting the wrong idea and asking her out.

“This might sound cold, but if other kids have to hold back because of Yuuko, or end up feeling sad because of her, then so be it. These kinds of things happen in life.”

I didn’t think it was particularly cold.

Malicious harassment is a problem, but I think it’s far worse if you’ve got a parent telling you to stay in your shell and worry that just being your authentic self will harm others.

Kotone took a sip of water, barely wetting her lips. “What I worry about is how she’ll feel when she realizes this herself. I raised her to be completely honest, but I guess that could result in being blind to the way the world works.”

I quietly brought my glass to my lips, too.

“But then,” Kotone said, her voice rising a little. “Ever since she met you, Chitose, Yuuko’s changed a little. She’s started considering others’ feelings. Not in general, I won’t go that far, but the feelings of those she sees as special, at least.

“—So thank you,” my friend’s mother said.

“Actually, that’s what I wanted to tell you today. Sorry for dragging you out to eat.”

“I don’t know what Yuuko’s said, or how much she’s exaggerated about me, but I haven’t done anything that would require gratitude.”

“Is that so? I’ve heard a lot. About Yua and Kenta, too.”

“...Nope, I didn’t do a thing.”

Kotone chuckled, her shoulders shaking.

Her laugh was so familiar. It made my chest hurt, just a little.

“I’m so glad she’s got someone like you around, Chitose. That really reassures me. Even more so after having a straight talk with you.”

“I’ll be around as long as I’m wanted. She and I are friends, after all.”

“Oh, you know what I mean, but you’re just sidestepping it! I’ll tell Yuuko!”

“I think you’re just upsetting yourself for no reason, Kotone.”

“Hmm, actually, you can call me ‘Mom’ after all. Or maybe ‘Mother.’”

“Did you say ‘mother,’ or ‘bother’?”

We both stared at one another, and then we burst out laughing.

I felt like I’d become this woman’s son for just a moment there.

After a while, Kotone murmured something else. “One more thing, sorry.”

“Are you still trying to cause me trouble?”

When I answered lightly, she said, “Nope, I’ve already done that.”

A faint, self-deprecating smile.

“—What we just talked about... What I just told you...”

Just when I was trying to guess what she was getting at, our orders were delivered to the table, one after another.

Just then, Yuuko also returned with a brisk pace, so I decided not to think about it any further.

“Mom, did you say something strange to Saku just now?”

“Not a thing. All I did was suggest he forgo the daughter and give me a spin instead, you know?”

“Mom! Stop being cringe. How’s he supposed to react to that? Just cut it out!”

“Cringe?! You sound like you actually mean it, too!”

“I’m already embarrassed, so let’s just eat and go home.”

“Now, don’t say that, or I’ll add on an extra order of fried chicken and french fries.”

“No, please!”

Man, this is actually so nice.

The steam of the ramen warmly enveloped the two of them.

The background noise of the ramen joint... The colors of everyday life.

As I watched them snark back and forth, I thought about how much I wanted to blend in with this happy family scene for just a little while longer.



After we finished our ramen, Yuuko and I stopped by the convenience store and walked to the nearby park.

It’s located between National Highway 8 and the batting center we often go to, and it’s a regular stopover spot when the two of us walk home from school.

For a residential area, the playground was fairly large, equipped with standard playground equipment like horizontal bars, slides, swings, and seesaws. In back there was a small hill raised about three feet off the ground, and we usually sat on the stairway located to one end of it.

As usual, I sat down and sipped my iced coffee while Yuuko peeled the wrapper off her Garigari-kun popsicle.

Before I knew it, it was pitch-black out, and somewhat cooler than it was during the day.

Even if we looked around, there was no one but us, and the dull-colored swings creaked in the breeze.

It felt kinda nice. I stretched out my legs.

When we left, Kotone still seemed like she had something she wanted to say, but Yuuko was all, “I’m walking home with Saku!” and waved her mom off, poker-faced.

“Well, no need to rush home, dear!” was all Kotone had said. It was hard to imagine she was really the mother of a high schooler.

“Wow, your mom is a real character.”

When I said that, Yuuko laughed. “Today she was in top form. Even at home, though, that’s how she is. She doesn’t really feel like a mom, more like an older sister.”

“Kotone said something similar.”

“What were you talking about when I wasn’t there?”

“Hmm, about how she had you when she was twenty, stuff like that?”

It seemed better to obfuscate the other stuff, the stuff she didn’t want Yuuko hearing about, so I’d picked something innocuous to discuss.

“Oh yeah! I usually don’t go out of my way to tell her, because of how she is and all, but I really respect and appreciate her.”

Crunch, crunch. Yuuko bit into her popsicle, then continued.

“I mean, isn’t it amazing?! She finally graduates high school, all her friends are having fun at college. For some people, it’s the most free and fun time in their entire lives. Of course, marriage and childbirth and all that were her choice. But she spent that time of her life on me.”

“Yeah, it’s amazing.” I recalled our earlier conversation.

I couldn’t claim to know what it was like, but I’m sure there must have been hardships behind the scenes that Yuuko couldn’t even imagine.

Still, I thought, Kotone was amazingly cool. The easy way she joked around with her daughter.

“You know, my mom...,” Yuuko said, her voice a little indistinct. “She always looks so happy whenever I talk about you, Saku. It’s always the same stories, like the time you broke the window and extracted Kentacchi from his room, or that time you got all angry for him at Starbucks. I don’t know how many times I’ve told those same stories.”

“I want the latter to be banned from public broadcast immediately.”

“Oh, but you were so cool then! ‘Someone like you, who never tries to better themselves, just eating and breathing...’”

“—Stop quoting it!”

Damn, did she memorize my entire speech?

It was only three months ago. Feels like an eternity.

Actually, I was really surprised when I heard Yuuko call out to me back then.

“Come to think of it,” I said. “Thank you, Yuuko.”

“Huh?” She stared at me, her eyes blank.

“I mean, with everything going on, I didn’t say thank you properly at the time.”

“I basically just stood there watching until the end, though?”

“Thank you for that, too.”

“Oh, Saku, you weirdo.”

I wasn’t going to force myself to explain, but if Yuuko hadn’t been there at that time, I might have lost the chance to really go to town.

Besides, I was happy that she just watched me the whole time.

Although making such a scene in the first place perhaps wasn’t my proudest moment.

But Yuuko let it drop. “The thing about my mom...,” she said. “When she heard all that, it’s like she became a fan of yours, and I think that’s why she was so excited today. Sorry, I know she was annoying.”

I shook my head slowly. “Not at all. It was fun. Really nice, meeting her.”

“Really? To be honest, I’ve always wanted to introduce you to my mother, but I knew what would happen.”

“So you always told me not to come say bye whenever someone was coming to pick you up?”

“Hee-hee,” Yuuko said, sticking her tongue out, adorably. “Hey, Saku, wanna come to my place next time? I bet Mom will go all out and cook something good...”

She trailed off, and then there was a clunky silence.

“—Maybe another day, when the timing is...special.”

That walk home, just as spring was ending. Those words, casually spoken. They hit hard, in this moment.

I was sure Yuuko felt it, too.

Drip, drip, drip. Her popsicle was melting little by little, falling onto the ground like tears.

Just pretend you didn't notice.

Play it off with a joke, just like usual.

Be like, “Sounds good,” and things will go on as normal.

But I couldn't make it work.

For the first time, no smart remarks were coming out of my mouth.

“So... I have one request.”

After a moment, Yuuko timidly reached out her hand, and just before she touched me, she clenched it tightly and withdrew.

Her eyes wandered aimlessly, filled with determination, a sign that she'd made up her mind about something.

“—Saku, I want you to always be like the Saku I've come to love.”

Then she smiled gently.

Her words came without context. I could make no sense of them, nor did I want to.

But I'd spent enough time with Yuuko to be able to figure it out, sooner or later.

And once I answered, we wouldn't be able to make it back here together anymore.

When it happens, I have the feeling it's going to hurt.

Still, I thought.

Just for now, without looking away...

“Of course. Saku Chitose is the hero, after all.”

I did my best to smile.

“You got that right!”

Yuuko laughed right back.

“Yuuko, there’s popsicle dripping on your pants.”

“What? You could have told me sooner, Saku!”

“Tch, you could at least have dripped it down your front.”

“This is not the time to be a weirdo!”

We bantered back and forth, trying just a little too hard.

Like this moment in time could last forever.

Even as we both knew it wouldn’t.

If only I could have done this better.

If only I could have been smarter.

Still, we continued to face up to each other, clumsily, like this.

—The feelings of the other person. And our own feelings, too.

CHAPTER TWO

Fireworks on a Short Summer Night



—That spring, when I was sixteen years old, I, Yuuko Hiiragi, became a freshman at Fuji High School.

I think it's almost a miracle that I got here, if that's something I can say about myself.

My grades in junior high school were just above average at most, and I hate studying.

I don't know exactly when it was, but...for some reason, my mother jokingly muttered, "It would be nice if you could go to Fuji High School, too, Yuuko." And so in summer of senior year, I started studying my butt off.

I worked so hard, I could never do anything like that again.

I wasn't some useless daughter who caused nothing but trouble or anything, I don't think, but my mother gave birth to me when I was young, and raised me. I wanted her to be able to think, "It was all worth it," and give her a beautiful payoff.

When I saw the announcement that I had passed the exam, we were both so happy, we cried and hugged each other and jumped up and down.

And so, here I am, sitting in the classroom of Year One, Class Five.

I was hoping that high school would be much fancier, or that there would be facilities I'd never seen before, but it didn't feel all that different from junior high school.

We've just started at high school, so perhaps it's only natural, but everyone

wore their uniforms correctly; no one was customizing them yet.

Was my skirt too short?

Well, it's okay. Mr. Iwanami didn't say anything.

I'd memorized most of my classmates' names.

I think I'd talked to most of them at least once.

Wow, a college prep school really is amazing; everyone's so focused—that's how it felt.

So my expectations were a little high.

I'm too embarrassed to tell Mom, but there's something I'm secretly hoping to experience in high school.

—I want to find close friends who I can truly cherish, and someone special to fall for.

Wait a minute, it's too embarrassing!

Oh man, I just made myself cringe!

Shouldn't I be afraid of saying those things as a high school student?

...But, it's something I've always wanted.

I think I grew up being pampered from a young age.

Mom was that kind of mom—clinging to her daughter—while Dad silently watched it all play out with a wry smile.

I was often given guidance but never seriously yelled at nor scolded. No, I don't think I ever was. Hmm, well, that's kinda normal, isn't it?

But in my case, it was always like that outside the house, in nursery school, elementary school, and junior high school.

Even though I didn't do anything special, everyone complimented me. "Yuuko is so cute, isn't she?" they'd say.

I had many friends.

At least, I thought everyone in the same class was my friend.

It feels terrible to say so myself, but I was really popular with boys.

Both my seniors and juniors liked me, and my report card always had nothing but good things written on it.

So all the usual stuff—serious fights with friends, being bullied, having someone who refused to confess their feelings openly spread bad rumors about you, being gossiped about by the kids above and below you, being targeted by the teacher—there was none of that for me.

—I always felt uncomfortable with the kind of special treatment I received.

I know no one will understand this story.

No—someone did, once.

When I was in elementary school, I consulted with a friend who was on good terms with me, and that's when I realized.

“I'd understand being upset if people were giving you a hard time, but what do you dislike about being the most popular person in the class?”

Well, they had a point.

Hmm, what is it?

Is it feeling like I'm one step removed from everyone else?

Like I'm surrounded by transparent glass?

Everyone can see me, everyone can hear me, but no one can get through.

—Even though I was always surrounded by people, I felt so alone.

Is that really an exaggeration...?

I'm not sure I ever really agonized over it all that seriously.

I generally liked school and had fun.

However, in the end, I haven't been able to find a single person to connect with on the level you see in dramas and movies.

If I try to approach someone, it just feels like they draw back.

For example, everyone gets along well with me at school, but I'm always the one suggesting to hang out after school or during vacation.

I'm nothing special at all. Just a normal girl born into a normal family.

So I really want to confide in, and be confided in by, a close friend. I want someone to laugh with when things are fun, someone to cry with when things are sad, someone to get angry at me sometimes, to scold me, to argue with me.

That's why, in reality, I fell in love with a boy who I could see as more important, somehow, than myself. When I go to bed every night, I think of him, and when I see his face, my heart throbs. Someone to get jealous over, when I see him talking to other girls. Someone who can send me to heaven with just a phone call. Then one day, I'll pluck up the courage and tell him how I feel...

And maybe even become that guy's girlfriend.

—Just like other normal young people. If I could find that, it would be so nice.



A few days later.

Before the long homeroom started, I was chatting with the people I'd befriended relatively soon after I entered school.

The person I was talking to right now was Kaito, a tall guy in the basketball club.

I started off calling him by his last name, Asano, in the usual way, but he basically started begging, "Please, Yuuko, just call me by my first name, would you?!" And before I knew it, I'd agreed.

He's pretty good-looking, but also kinda unfortunate.

By the way, back then, when I told him, "You can call me Yuuko, too, then," he looked so happy. Like about-to-cry happy. To this day, I have no idea why. I ended up saying something like, "Whoa, chill out, Kaito."

"So I heard that two separate girls have already asked Kazuki out."

"Don't go spreading that around. Anyway, I said no."

"I know, I know, relax, this is the inner circle."

Kazuki is a handsome boy in our class who wears a cool mask. Even the girls in the other classes whisper about him.

When Kaito brought up the subject of names, Kazuki was super smooth. “Then we’ll be Kazuki and Yuuko, too.”

He was so natural about it that I didn’t mind at all, and it was like, *Aha, I can see why he’s popular with girls.*

As I was thinking about that, Kaito turned to me. “What about you, Yuuko? Have any boys asked you out?”

“Hmm, no invitations for dates, but a lot of guys asked me for my LINE contact details.”

“NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

“Do you have to overreact to everything?”

Kazuki chuckled. “That’s right. There’s no way men wouldn’t flock to a girl with such a cute and good personality. You’re exactly the kind of girl Kaito goes nuts over.”

“Hey!”

Kaito played kind of the comic-relief character, while Kazuki had a great read on people. Chatting with them like this was something I actually kinda enjoyed.

Now, he’s not the type to openly show his ulterior motives, but...

“—Huh? Then maybe I should get ahead of the crowd and put in my bid for the position of Hiiragi’s boyfriend right now.”

Not sure I like this guy all that much.

I laughed and said, “Hey, that’s not cool, bro.”

Chitose was another guy who got everyone talking, just like Kazuki.

When I walked down the hallway with the two of them, everyone looked at me.

All right, he’s cute, I can admit that. He’s definitely cool enough to warrant the level of attention he gets.

But compared to Kazuki being smart and gentlemanly, it’s like...

...It’s like he’s more of a flirt. And a narcissist.

He's quick to flirt with girls like this, and sometimes he says some slightly cruel things.

I've heard some people don't mind that, but if I had to choose between the two, I'd definitely go with Kazuki!

I have a lot of opportunities to talk to Kaito and Kazuki, since they're affiliated with the sports clubs, but Chitose was the only one I hadn't swapped LINE info with.

If he asked, I wouldn't say no, but I don't really feel like asking myself.

We still call each other Chitose and Hiiragi. We keep things light, but we haven't broached the topic of first names.

While I was thinking about this and that, Kaito opened his mouth with a grin.

"Hear that, Saku? She turned ya down."

Chitose gave a little "heh" and smirked. "All right, then, how about this...let me be your main man."

"I can't feel any sincerity coming across at all."

"I had the feeling you were special from the first moment we met?"

"Whoa, watch it, buddy."

Aw man, I thought. He and I just don't seem to get along.

Chitose bothers me, treats me special, and has clear ulterior motives. But even Kaito and Kazuki...

Yeah. They hold back a little. Treat me with a little more care than they do other girls.

My shoulders slumped. I wished they'd be rougher.



"All right, guys, take a seat."

After we'd chatted for a while more, Mr. Iwanami entered the classroom and everyone went back to their seats.

He had a shaggy head of hair, a sloppy beard, a worn-out suit, and wooden

sandals.

He doesn't seem like a teacher. Kinda shabby. But I've heard some people say he has a kind of grown-up charm.

I think... Nope, can't see it at all.

Still, I'd imagined that a teacher at a college prep school would be super strict, so I was pleased that he was so laid-back. I wanted freedom to personalize my uniform, too, after all.

"Ah, it looks like it's time to decide on the class chairman and vice-chairman."

"Looks like it's time." A very Mr. Iwanami turn of phrase.

Other teachers would be like, "Haven't you decided it yet?"

"The class president needs to collect the homework and bring it to the staff room, help carry the teaching materials that need to be used in class, and act as an organizer when class decisions have to be made. So who's it gonna be?"

No one raised their hand.

I don't think I'm the type for that sort of thing, either.

Hmm, the class president should be someone who has a sense of responsibility.

You've got to be smart to attend a college prep school anyway, but...

Aha. I had a flash of inspiration.

Why, there's someone definitely worthy of being the representative of this class.

"Yes!" I cheerfully raised my hand.

"Oh, do you want to do it, Hiiragi?"

I shook my head at Mr. Iwanami and stood up. "No, I want to nominate someone. How about Uchida? If she's up for it, of course?"

Whoa!

The reactions throughout the classroom were basically positive. Some people even started clapping.

It made me happy, even though I wasn't the one being praised.

I've only been able to talk to her a couple times, but Uchida was the one who'd greeted the new students at the entrance ceremony! That meant she'd gotten the best score in the entrance exam, right?

Having someone like that in our class... Well, who could be a better candidate for representative?

"Er, uh..." Uchida looked at me.

She had a severe bob and glasses with dark-blue square frames.

She's not the type to worry about trends or fashion like me, but when I see her nearby, her uniform and belongings all seem very neat and well-maintained.

Also, even though I don't often see her talking with others, and even though she doesn't stand out in class, her face is actually really pretty!

All the boys who give me special treatment would do well to spare her a second glance, in my opinion.

But while I was thinking that, I noticed that Uchida was looking down.

I opened my mouth in a hurry. "Ah, sorry to just spring it on you. But you were the representative for the new students at the entrance exam, and so I thought you'd be the best option for us all. But if you don't want to, you can simply say no, okay?"

Uchida lifted her head, and after her eyes roamed around a little, she smiled.

"No, it's okay. If that's okay with you..."

Oh, phew. She was just taken aback by the suddenness of it.

I took a deep breath of relief, but then...

"—Nah, I'm not into it."

A familiar boy's voice sounded, quietly but clearly.

""Huh...?"""

Uchida and I spoke at the same moment.

Mr. Iwanami was whistling nonchalantly now, for some reason.

Chitose was the one who'd just pushed his chair back and stood up. The guy who'd just been trying to sweet-talk me before the class started.

Did he just say he wasn't into it?

Not into what? Me? Uchida?

"You know, Hiiragi..."

It was me!

Chitose continued with an awkward smile. "I'm sorry to jump in, when it's already half-decided. But we just entered this school, and we don't know each other very well. That being the case, it just seems odd to recommend someone. I'd feel better if we drew straws, or something like that."

I didn't quite understand what he meant.

The class was all on the same page just then, after all.

"What? All right, maybe I shouldn't have just gone ahead with nominating someone, but she says she's okay with it..."

Worried, I looked over at Uchida, but she was still smiling.

"Hmm, there could be some truth in that. This kind of thing's hard to decide, and anyway, wouldn't it be more fun to make a game out of it?"

...Huh?

Damn. I think I'm getting a little annoyed.

What was this guy after? Was he trying to show off?

In that case, he should volunteer.

When I looked around, everyone in the class seemed to be a little reluctant.

Hmm, well, I'd hate to be assigned president based on random chance myself.

I say it a little louder. "This isn't about what would be fun. If you have any complaints, tell me clearly."

"...Agh, seriously?" Chitose scratched his head. "The thing is, Hiiragi..."

Then he laughed, frustrated.

“I think you should really be aware of your own position. Or at least your influence.”

Wait, was he serious? Agh, seriously? That should be *my* line!

Standing there, spouting cool-sounding nonsense... Be specific!

After entering high school, the changes I expected didn't come as smoothly, and I was still being treated as special by everyone. Now, on top of that, this arrogant boy was raining on my parade? Forgive me if I end up speaking a little harshly, here!

“Wait, what does that mean?!”

“It means, someone like you needs to be careful when you're getting other people involved.”

“What do you mean, “*Someone like me*”? I have no idea what you're talking about, Chitose!”

“...Are you slow, or something?”

“Okay, asshole. You wanna go, let's go!”

Chitose came walking over, clucking his tongue with annoyance.

I was a little scared, but I glared at him, refusing to back down.

Chitose didn't flinch at all and looked straight at me.

Oh, he's got surprisingly pretty eyes, I thought, though this was hardly the time.

“Listen. You're popular, Hiiragi. If you put an idea out here, then everyone else will agree without hesitation. You're like, ‘If you don't want to, it's totally cool!’ but do you really think the person you nominated is just going to be like, ‘Yeah, I don't want to’ after everyone's clapped?”

Um! Excuse me! Mister!

What the hell is he...?

“—Nnng!”

But now he'd said all that, I could see it.

What was Chitose trying to tell me here, in this roundabout way?

What I'd just done...was create a situation where someone was unable to refuse to do something they never wanted to do from the start... Right?

"Hmm, well, I'd hate to be assigned president based on random chance myself."

Realization dawned. Everything went white. And then I saw red.

Wait, wait. This is too awful.

The applause made me feel so good about myself, but now I was so embarrassed I wanted to die.

Gosh, have I done this kind of thing before in my life? Maybe more than once? Or like...constantly?

No! Stop that!

We're talking about this situation, right here!

I took a step forward. "Sorry! I said something selfish!" I grabbed Uchida's hand as she sat there, confused.

"Oh, it's okay, I..."

Agh!!!

How could I not have noticed?

Her eyes were swimming, her hand tense, her voice trembling.

"You too, Uchida."

While I was wondering what to say, Chitose was still going.

"You kinda got dragged into it this time, but next time, at least make a face when you don't want to do something. Then maybe someone'll notice, and you won't get into a bad habit of having to fake a smile all the time."

As he said that, Uchida's eyes narrowed at Chitose, her hand went limp, and she spoke in a crisp tone.

"—I don't think you have any right to say such a thing."

But then...

“Maybe not. My bad.”

...he grinned, brushing it off, like a cheeky young boy.

At that moment, I felt a tingling sensation spread through me.

Not a painful or physically unpleasant feeling, but it made me feel a little sick, a little frustrated.

I mean...

Just now...

Did I just get scolded?

Did I just have an argument with someone?

—It was like bells were ringing.

Inexplicable emotions burst forth.

“Okay, asshole”?

“You wanna go, let’s go”?

I’ve never used language like that in my life!!!

—*Drip, drip.*

And by the time I realized it, I was already crying.

When I realized the tears were there, they were already overflowing, one after another, and I couldn’t stop.

Huh? Why?

Why am I reacting like this...?

Am I sad? Am I angry? Am I deflated?

Hey, wait! I know what this is! This is...

As I sat there, flustered, Mr. Iwanami grinned.

“Uh-oh~ ♪ Spaghetios~. ♪”

“That’s the last thing we expect to hear our teacher singing!”

Chitose got in a jab, then sighed.

“Hey, Hiiragi, I may have said too much, but it’s not fair of you to start crying about it.”

Again?

I got scolded again.

Thinking about it made me cry even more.

“Man, give me a break. Look, I’ll take you for dessert or something sometime to say sorry, okay?”

Excuse me? Jerk.

You think I’m just some difficult girl you can placate with desserts?

His attempt to make amends was so ham-fisted. But thinking about it made me cry more.

I cried without knowing why, my feelings sinking into the lake of my tears.

Clunk.

Ah, right.

—I am so, so happy right now.

Kaito was the first to try to cheer everyone up.

“Hey, Saku, my condolences. Now Yuuko hates you. That’s because you tried to sneak the advantage.”

“I don’t want to hear that from you!”

Kazuki nodded, continuing.

“Saku Chitose from Class Five is a total man-slut shithead.”

“Hey, what’s this you’ve been writing on the underground site, you jerk?!”

“Terrible!”

“Chitose’s way out of line!”

“Don’t make Hiiragi cry!”

“Uchida, you don’t have to force yourself, you know?”

“Man-slut shithead!!!”

“All right, I get it!!!!!!”

Chitose stepped up to the podium and pushed Mr. Iwanami aside.

Bang. He whacked the blackboard, yelling.

“I will take responsibility for hurting both Yuuko Hிரagi, our class idol, and Yua Uchida, who isn’t an idol but still has the guys admitting they low-key have a crush on her during the class trip. And how will I take responsibility? I will be class representative myself! Has anyone here got a problem with that?!!!!”

What the heck? What a dork.

How lame, I thought, eyes still streaming with tears.

But yeah...

He could have just shrugged it off, but he decided to get up in front of everyone... Even though the class had basically turned against him.

All right, he sounded a bit pompous, but he’d spun it so that he still came off as a bit of a jerk, absolving Uchida, who hadn’t wanted to do it at all, and me, who’d suggested her. In other words, he’d made himself the villain.

Somehow, I could understand his thinking.

I’m used to having eyes on me ever since I was younger, so I know how it is.

Now everyone had forgotten about us, and they were slinging insults at Chitose.

It’s like he’d stepped up to shoulder all the blame by himself...

—Isn’t that what you call a hero?

In an instant, the world began to sparkle and shine like a shard of glass.

I was scolded. I got in an argument. Someone treated me with frustration.

Hey, why does something like this make me so happy?

Chitose was yelling over the crowd.

“Daaaah, you guys! If you talk too much, I’ll appoint you as the vice representative!”

He was still playing the villain, and it was getting worse.

I couldn't just stand here crying forever.

I scrubbed away my tears.

Hey, old me.

Hey, future me.

It's right here.

I've found it, I've found it, I've found it.

My own slice of youth. My...

I shot my hand up in the air and stood.

"Me, me, me! If Saku's gonna be president, I gotta be vice president!"

"Huh? Why?"

"It's cool; it's cool! I took great care of the class bunny and class turtle in elementary school!"

"...Excuse me, I am not a class pet."

The same frustration in the way he spoke to me. To me!

Why am I grinning? Well, duh.

It's so natural, so normal that it makes me laugh...

I've found a boy to like.

But it's funny.

Even though I hated being treated as special all this time.

I'm thinking the opposite now.

—I want to be special to you.



"So I guess it was kinda like that."

Now it was summer vacation, the second year of high school.

Nazuna Ayase and I strolled through the shopping arcade in front of the station.

Since I ran into her on a date with Saku the other day, we've been texting a bit.

So after a discussion about how we both wanted new summer clothes, we decided to go shopping today.

For some reason, it's the first time since I entered high school that I've been alone with a girl other than Uchi.

So I was a little restless.

I continued, seeing that I wasn't getting much of a reaction. "So what do you think?"

Nazuna had suddenly asked me, "Why did you fall for Chitose?" so I ended up explaining the whole story to her.

"What do I think?" she was saying. "I think it's gross."

"That's all?!"

"It's more disgusting than I thought."

"That's so mean!"

The only reason we ended up having this conversation was because of that time when we left Saku and Atomu and went to buy drinks.

"—It's gross to have to watch, so let me tell you something. If you really want to be Chitose's girlfriend, you'd better make your move soon, or you'll end up missing your chance."

Yep, her saying that to me was the catalyst. To be honest, she prodded a sore spot.

I knew that myself anyway.

"...I guess it's not a strong enough reason, huh...?" I muttered to myself.

Recently, I've been kind of stressed out.

Chitose saved Yuzuki from the Yan High guys and her stalker, and, while I don't know too much about him and Nishino, it's clear she and Chitose have a deep connection no one else can penetrate. And then it was Haru who'd created an opportunity for Chitose to start playing baseball again...

Everyone liked Saku. Whether in a romantic way or not.

“Still, it won’t last forever,” Nazuna said that day.

I’ve been averting my eyes from reality the whole time, but it was probably true.

Up until now, I’ve always thought that even if Saku didn’t come to like me in that way, at least Ucchi and I were the only girls actually close to him.

But now... No. It hasn’t been that way in a long time.

And this is no understatement.

What makes my chest tighten even more is that everyone has their own unique reasons for liking Saku.

A special reason makes for a special bond.

It’s hard to explain what I mean, but it’s like they have their own stories starring just them and Chitose, and that leads to a gradual deepening of their friendship. Giving them a reason. Which leads to feelings...

Compared with that, I can’t help but think...that my own origin story was as shallow as something like love at first sight.

While I chewed on that, Nazuna looked at me with a frown. “What do you mean?” she asked.

“I mean, I don’t have a good enough reason. Mine is weak. I need something like... Like him helping me out when I’m in trouble. Like being fated from the start. Or like if I helped him get over something that really hurt him.”

“Er, really? Wow, I’m even more grossed out now.”

“Hey, I’m baring my soul here!”

“Haaah.” Nazuna sighed.

She’s got a sharp tongue, but I like her. And I know why.

Thanks to Saku’s presence, even Kazuki and Kaito have been treating me like one of the gang, and so I stopped thinking so much about people tiptoeing around me. But Nazuna’s unusual. She’s never given me special treatment of any kind.

“Listen,” Nazuna said. “What does it matter why you fell for him? What’s wrong with it being something normal? Like maybe you just think he’s hot, or you like the way he dresses, or you just think you’d go well together?”

“I feel like everything normal is out of reach for me.”

“Huh? You want a normal high school life, right? Then what’s wrong with having a normal high school love life, too?”

That caught me off guard.

She was right, of course.

That’s all I wanted, but...

I looked down, uneasy again. “So, okay. Imagine if you were a boy and we were in the same class in the first year...”

“Okay, where is this going?”

“If Saku wasn’t there... If it was you instead, standing there like you are now... What if you were the one to tell me off? Would I have still swooned? Saku’s the first person who ever treated me roughly like that.”

“Don’t involve me in your random what-if scenarios, but... Ah, gimme a break.” Nazuna sighed. “But okay, let’s go with that. So then, what if there was another guy? A guy who’s hotter than Chitose, someone who’s your exact ideal, Yuuko. And he doesn’t give you any of that special treatment at all. So you meet him first. Now what?”

“But there *is* no guy who’s my exact ideal.”

“No, listen.” She slapped me lightly on the arm. “Isn’t that the answer? If Chitose’s literally the only guy you can imagine giving you what you want, then what better reason could there be to fall for him than that? Plus...” Nazuna’s voice lowered. “That moment was hella important, wasn’t it? The kind of moment that shapes your entire life. You have to give it the reverence it deserves. I mean, it’s none of my business, but you think about it.”

My heart thumped.

The feeling I had that day. It was special, meaningful, yes—only to me.

I could not replace Chitose with someone else and feel the same.

The catalyst was something trivial, but since then I've found new things to like about him every day, and now... Now my heart is full of them.

Yes. I nodded, mentally.

"Thank you, Nazuna."

"Fine, but drinks are on you, okay? I'm dying."

"Sure thing!"

I bounded forward.

It's all right. I like Saku the most. I won't let anyone beat me as far as that's concerned.

—But what if?

What if everyone else has their own special reasons for liking him...? What if everyone else thinks that he's the only one for them...? What will I do then?



After that, the two of us entered the Yutori Coffee Shop on the first floor of AOSSA, a complex facility behind the station.

There were a lot of standard coffee options on the menu, but it was hot outside, so I ordered fruit juice and Nazuna ordered an iced café au lait.

When we were both done ordering, Nazuna struck up the conversation again. "Anyway, Chitose knows how you feel, right? Did you confess your feelings to him?"

"Erm..."

"I mean, you said all this stuff about how you liked him right in front of him. But you're not dating? What's that about anyway?"

I found myself looking away and scratching my cheek. "Sorry. Maybe I don't want to talk about that."

"Oh, really?" Nazuna quickly backed down. "Well, then. If it's serious, then what are you waiting for? Why not get on with it and confess?"

“Ugh...”

I guess it comes down to that after all, huh?

Confessing.

I’d be lying if I said I’ve never thought about it. Actually, I think about it every day.

I’m happy just being with Saku, but I still want to tell him how I feel someday, go out with him, and be his girlfriend, of course.

I want to hold hands and go home from school together, instead of having him just walk me partway.

I want to go on a real date instead of a friend date.

I want to be his girlfriend. Not his main concubine, or whatever it is.

But...

“I guess I just don’t have the confidence,” I ended up saying. “Ucchi, Yuzuki, Nishino, Haru—there are a lot of wonderful girls around Saku. I’m not confident he’d choose me.”

“Well, that’s right. Your friends are all the cutest girls in the school.”

“So if I tell him, and he says no, I won’t be able to hang out with him anymore...”

Nazuna laughed, rolling her eyes. “Well, there are a lot of people who stay friends even after being dumped, but I guess it might be too tough for you, Yuuko. Still, you haven’t considered the other way this might play out.”

“The other way...?”

“I told you before. If one of your acquaintances ends up dating Chitose, then you’ll never be able to tell him how you feel.”

“I know, but...”

“You seem to be absent-minded, so should I be more specific? I mean the four people you just listed. It wouldn’t be strange if at least one of them had confessed to him already. I mean, that Nanase seems like a go-getter.”

“...”

It was all so obvious now that she said it, and it hit like a ton of bricks.

When Nazuna asked me this before, I thought of my rivals as vaguely just “the girls in our class,” but I think I was just mentally avoiding the upsetting truth...

Because if I started thinking like that...

But it was too late. Possible scenarios were already coming to life in my mind.

—What if Yuzuki ended up dating Saku?

I recalled the time when they pretended to be boyfriend and girlfriend.

Even though I knew, rationally, that Yuzuki was going through such a terrifying experience, my heart hurt so bad I thought it was going to burst.

Going to and from school together... Everyone gossiping about them dating... Studying for tests at the library together, holding hands and going to festivals... Him protecting her...

I’ve longed for that kind of stuff ever since that day in first year.

I even wished I was the one being stalked, which was terrible. No friend should think that. I went to bed at night hating myself.

And I couldn’t get that stain out of my heart.

—What if Nishino ended up dating Saku?

I remembered the day of the future careers meeting.

The older girl, who was so beautiful that even I, with all my special treatment, was speechless. She stood there, waving, smiling at Saku.

“Hey, you, the one who totally has a thing for me,” she said.

For a moment, I clearly remember feeling like I was falling headlong into a black hole underneath my chair.

What if Saku was already dating that older girl and just hadn’t thought to update me?

Even after I realized I was wrong, the cold, unmoored feeling didn’t go away.

Then last year, when Saku quit baseball and was totally depressed.

A time when I couldn't do anything but watch.

I just know he was confiding in that older girl.

In front of me, he always tried to act so cool and strong.

What if Nishino decides to go to Tokyo, and next year Saku chases after her? They'd live together somewhere totally out of reach.

I didn't know Nishino directly, so I wondered what kind of person she was, what she and Saku talked about. How they'd met. I was filled with horrible imaginings about it all.

And the worst thing was what I saw in Saku's eyes when he looked at her. It had to be the same way I looked at him.

Over and over again, I bit my lip to hold back tears.

—What if Haru ended up dating Saku?

When I heard from Nazuna that Saku was practicing baseball, I didn't even know how I felt anymore. I just remember thinking, *Why?*

Saku, who always solved everything by tackling it head-on, really only had one thing he avoided talking about: the baseball club.

When I heard that Haru had been with him, I realized I wasn't the right person for this.

That passionate, stubborn guy needed a girl who was just as passionate and stubborn as he was.

When I ate the rice balls Ucchi made on the baseball field, they tasted like air.

On the day of the match, when I saw Haru screaming encouragements, wearing the dress we'd picked out together, and when I saw Saku doing amazing things as a result of that encouragement, I wondered what the heck I was doing.

I thought, if this was a movie, those two would be the only ones on-screen.

Saku's smile, the smile I loved, was imbued with passion, regret, determination, and all kinds of emotions. I couldn't stand to look at it.

"Get it?"

Nazuna spoke a little more gently than she usually did.

Perhaps she sensed I was deep in thought and waited for me to finish.

I let out a heavy sigh and then opened my mouth. “Maybe I’m more of a backbiter than I thought. I care about my friends, but here I am getting all jealous.”

Before I could finish speaking, Nazuna burst out laughing loudly.

“Hey, I’m baring my soul here!”

“Sorry, but I couldn’t help laughing. I’ve never heard any real human being use that word before.”

“Oh, forget it.”

I’ve never even talked to Ucchi about this.

As I slurped my juice, Nazuna finally caught her breath. “I mean, jealousy is only natural. Love without jealousy isn’t love, is it? You’re better off being self-aware. I don’t believe people who say things like, ‘I never get jealous.’”

“R-really?”

“Oh yeah. It’s normal to get annoyed when a guy you like is on good terms with another girl.”

“But they’re my friends, though?”

“Annoyance aside, I’d hate to lose out to a friend more than I would to a stranger. If we’re close, I’ll end up picturing stuff. Like when we’re changing for gym, and I realize they’ve bought new underwear or something. Ugh.”

“U-underwear...?”

“I mean, I don’t take inventory of my friends’ underwear or anything, but it’s obvious when someone’s bought something new. And why. Total punch to the gut.”

As I listened to Nazuna talk, I felt the black haze around me fade a little.

Right. It’s normal, then.

But by that logic, that would mean...

Nazuna continued. “And you’re not the only one who gets jealous.”

Right. I figured.

“We all share the same feeling of wanting to be the only one. And you’re the one everyone says is endgame with Chitose, right? I bet there’s other girls out there who are totally on edge.”

“Well, it’s not like you’re responsible for that. People can say what they want,” Nazuna continued. Then she smiled, as if the conversation was over.

“—Isn’t it better to say good-bye after you’ve expressed your feelings, than it is to never express them at all?”

I swallowed all my feelings down and smiled right back.

The truth is, I’ve been a backbiter for a long time. I was only pretending to be oblivious.

I don’t want to say good-bye.

Hey, Saku.

—Who’s the special one, in your eyes?



A few days later, in the early afternoon, Mom drove me to Lpa.

Today’s the day Ucchi, Yuzuki, Haru, and I planned to go buy swimsuits.

I was dressed in fairly short shorts and a blouse with a summery pattern. Since it was just going to be us girls, I curled my hair and put it in two grown-up-looking ponytails. When I wore this same hairstyle before, Saku’s reaction was kind of muted. I could only wear it in safe situations like this.

When I arrived at the parking lot and got out of the car, for some reason, Mom got out, too.

“Are you going to do some shopping while you’re here?” I asked blankly.

“No, I thought I’d say hello to these friends and rivals of yours, Yuuko.”

“No, Mom, don’t!”

“Aw, come on.”

I ignored Mom, who was pouting like a child, and moved away from the car quickly.

Checking the group on LINE, it looked like the other three had already joined.

“We’re near the Mister Donut.”

I’d just gotten a message from Ucchi, so I headed for the central entrance.

When the automatic door opened, the cold air flowed in, and I sighed with relief.

“Yuuko!”

As soon as I entered, a cheerful voice called out to me.

When I looked over, Haru came rushing toward me.

I raised my hand lightly. “Sorry, did I keep you waiting?”

“No, not at all. We just joined up.”

Today, Haru was wearing black shorts and a white Adidas T-shirt. Her usual short ponytail popped out from the back of her black cap. It was a sporty outfit, but the long T-shirt looked like a dress, and the contrast was kinda adorable.

Yuzuki walked up behind Haru and raised her hand lightly.

“Heya.”

“Hi, hi!”

Gray, high-waisted pants and an ash-blue blouse. The fluffy sleeves were decorated with small bows. It was a pretty simple outfit, but it looked super cool on Yuzuki’s figure.

Last, Ucchi wore a long dress with light-blue vertical stripes.

Feminine clothes like that looked so good on her, it made me jealous!

For me, dresses don’t look right if they’re not short enough.

But isn’t it amazing?

Nazuna was right; my friends are all different varieties of cute.

“Thanks for directing me over LINE, Ucchi.”

“Yeah, I realized we never decided where to meet.”

Yuzuki laughed and rolled her eyes. “Haru said she’d go early, so I asked her to send me the place close to the time, but...she completely forgot about it, didn’t you?”

“I’m sorry, I was just looking at the baseball bats, and I lost track of time.”

“You’re not planning to buy a personalized bat, are you?”

Baseball bat... I shook my head. “Have you thought about what you want, Haru?” I asked, but Yuzuki was the first to answer, for some reason.

“One that makes her look like she has boobs.”

“Do you want me to kick your ass, Nana?”

“Then how about a micro-bikini?”

“I’m not asking you! Can you go somewhere I can’t see or hear you?” Haru looked at me and struck a reverential pose. “Thank you for your time today, Master!”

I smiled at their jokes, then...

“All righty!”

I grabbed Haru’s small hand.



And so we went into one of the shops on the second floor.

At this time of year, there were a lot of swimsuits everywhere.

With all these choices, we had a good shot at finding something we liked.

First off, we split up to check out the store, and then I realized that someone was standing beside me.

Sweet, light perfume drifting on the air.

Ooh, it smells so nice. I’d have to ask which kind it was later.

“Hey, hey, Yuuko...” It was Yuzuki, whispering conspiratorially.

“Yes, yes, what is it?”

“I thought we could have a little mutual appraisal of the enemy situation. In other words, I propose...a confabulation.”

“Fabulous? Yes, a fabulous bikini is the plan.”

“Are you seriously a Fuji High student?”

I didn't really get what she meant, and she rolled her eyes.

“That's not what I said,” Yuzuki continued. “We don't want to end up wearing something too similar, right?”

Then it finally clicked.

Yeah, Yuzuki and I might be the most likely to choose similar bikinis.

“Hmm, it's a toughie. Would you go for sexy, Yuzuki? Cute? Tricksy but fashionable?”

“Hmm, that's the question, isn't it? I think perhaps the latter.”

“Totally.”

These days, there are the tankinis and one-pieces that don't show too much skin, there are the ones that kinda look like normal clothes, and then the ones that make you look a little more grown-up and sexier. But I didn't think Saku would like any of those.

I continued, while checking the rack of swimsuits in front of me.

“By the way, when I asked Saku which one would be best, he dodged the question.”

“...That darn fence-sitter.”

“Well, I think boobs as far as the eye can see would be best!”

“I completely agree, but worrying about that just seems futile...”

Aha, Yuzuki was conscious of Chitose's gaze as well, then, huh?

Well, makes sense.

Of course, it would be the usual gang hanging out, after all...

“Yuuko, look this way.”

Yuzuki picked up a standard bikini with a colorful floral pattern and handed it to me. “Hmm, if you think about it rationally, you’re the cute type, Yuuko, and I’m the sexy type.”

“That’s it. Should we go on the attack as the enemy might expect, or should we shoot for a new, risky angle?”

“Hmm, usually I would have said go for the surprising angle, but I think that hand’s been played. You’d look great in one of these, though, Yuuko.”

This time, she handed me one where the top and the sides of the bottom were meant to be laced up. It’s true that there was a lot of visible chest area, but...

“No way! You should wear this one, Yuzuki!!!”

“I think it’ll make me look desperate. Like, I’m out hunting men on the beach or something.”

I burst out laughing at the way she said it.

But I kinda understood.

Yuzuki has pheromones gushing out from her whole body. A lot of her clothes are rather boyish, but maybe she was just carefully adjusting her image.

“Hey, where do you usually buy your clothes, Yuzuki?”

“Hmm, well, I often go to Kanazawa at the beginning of the season.”

“I know! Me too! I like Fukui, but the fashion situation is rather restricted.”

“Well then, would you like to go with me next time? Haru’s not really into that kind of thing.”

“Let’s go! I always have my mom give me a ride, so I can’t go around as freely as I’d like.”

“I basically just take the train alone.”

“You can ride the train by yourself?!”

“I mean, I’m in high school, you know?”

“So am I! At Fuji High! But...”

After all, kids who commute within the city basically either go by bicycle or car, like me, right? I think there must be quite a few who don't really know how to ride a bus or train.

But shopping with Yuzuki sounded like fun for sure!

I mean, her take on fashion seemed to be similar to mine.

As I was getting excited thinking about that, Yuzuki said, "Well," and looked over at Haru, who was over with Uchi. "Shall we take care of the problem children first?"

"Sure thing!"



"So was there something that caught your eye, Haru?" Yuzuki peered at what Haru was holding as she spoke.

"...I thought maybe this." Haru held up the swimsuit against her body as she blushed.

Yuzuki and I looked at each other.

"Are you insane?" "Nope!"

We both spoke at the same time.

"Yuuko, you too?!" Haru was holding the so-called swim dress.

Just like the name suggests, it's like a cami dress with a short skirt.

Yuzuki stepped forward, so I decided to leave the explanations to her.

Probably she was going to say what I was thinking anyway.

"You don't think your boobs are big enough, do you?"

"...Ugh, no. So I thought as much coverage as possible would be best."

"But if you choose something like that, it's just projecting insecurity. You'll make people think, 'Oh, she's probably hiding her body for a reason'..."

"I... I don't want that. But I feel like I'm being lectured again..."

"Silence!"

"Yes, ma'am!!!"

How would I feel if someone thought that about me?

Ugh, awful!

Yuzuki continued while moving in on Haru. “If you can’t fight with your boobs, you’ll have to fight using something else. What kind of weapons do you have?!”

“M-Mistress Haru’s winning smile...?”

“Take this seriously, maggot!” Yuzuki barked. “It’s not your smile. You play basketball! Your waist! Your slender hips! Your toned legs! If you cover up all the goods, what do you think that’s gonna do for you, huh?!”

She prodded Haru in the aforementioned parts, one by one.

“Ah,” Haru said, nodding with understanding. “Now that you mention it, I’ve definitely got less meat on my midsection than you do, Yuzuki.”

“Hey, keep your mouth shut, little girl. That’s just because I have a more feminine body, see?”

“You’re always worrying about calories when you don’t need to.”

“Okay, I understand. It’s war you want, huh? Bring it on, Umi!”

Interesting. So Yuzuki’s like this when they talk to each other one-on-one, too.

Their banter was amusing, but someone needed to step in or we wouldn’t get anywhere.

I interrupted while holding back my laughter. “Anyway! Let’s grab some options that’ll bring out that feminine confidence!”

“Master...!” Haru looked at me with glistening eyes.

“By the way, what are your measurements?” I asked.

“Er, what? I don’t understand,” said Haru.

“Yuuko,” Yuzuki interjected, “don’t ask Haru that.”

“Okay,” I replied. “Sorry, but I’m going to have to get handsy!”

“Huh?” I went behind Haru and gently wrapped both hands over her boobs.

“H-hey! Yuuko!!!”

“It’s okay. It’ll be over soon.”

“You’re tickling me!”

I released her after getting a good grip on what she had going on.

I tried to be as quick as possible, but Haru was gazing at me with wounded betrayal in her eyes.

“Hmm, Haru, you’re actually not as small as you might think. You’ve got low body fat, sure, but with the right bra, you know, it can look totally different.”

“Huh? Really?!”

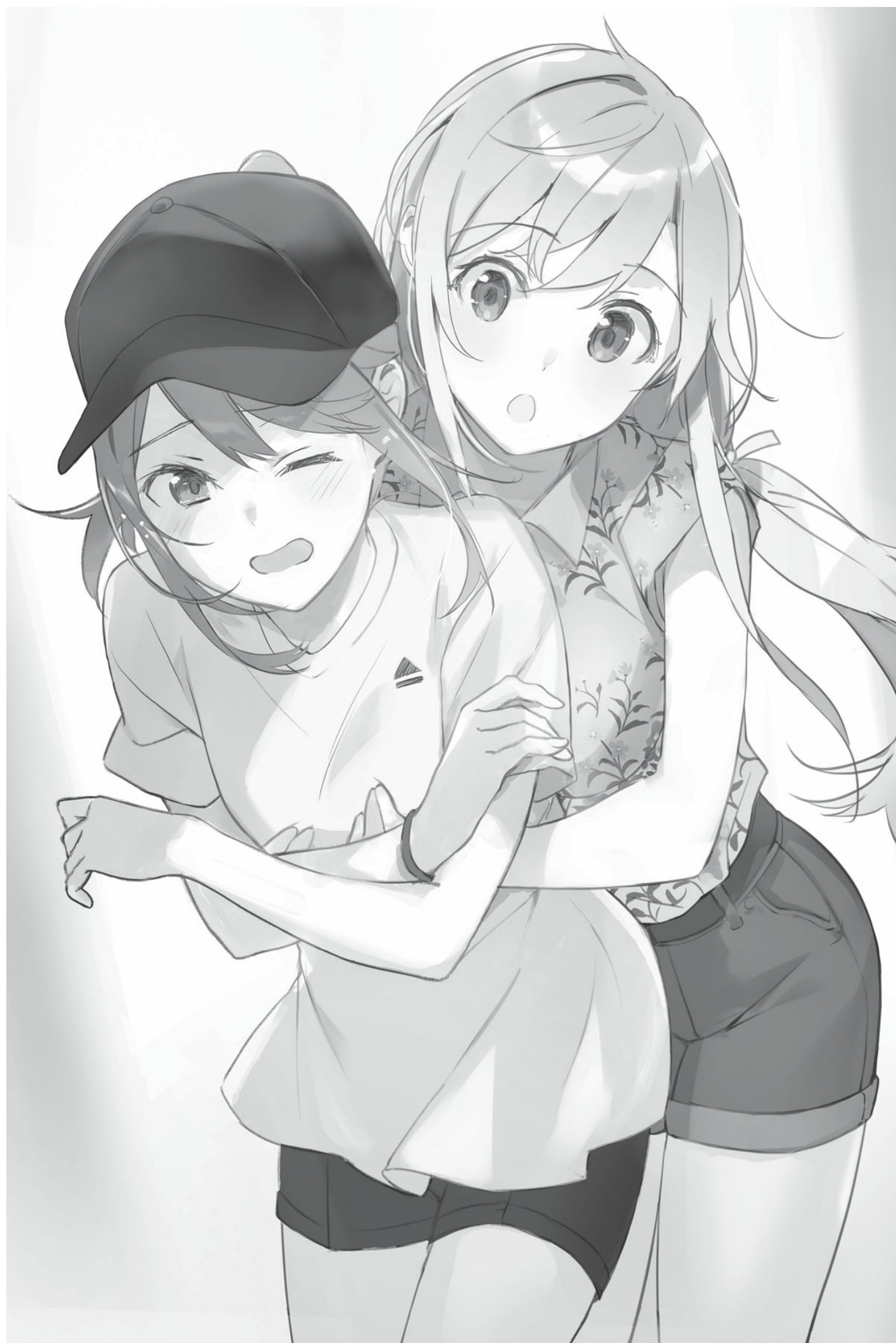
“Didn’t Yuzuki ever tell you?”

She placed her hand to her brow and lowered her head. “I guess she did, but I think I completely forgot about it.”

Well, if you’re not interested in this kind of thing, you won’t remember it.

“Well, I’ll be sure to remind you of it again later, then.”

“Yes, Queen!”



“If it’s just an ordinary triangular bikini, just choose a smaller size, and your cleavage will be fine. If it’s just a matter of constructing some cleavage, you can use a NuBra or a pad. And some people even tape their boobs to get the right kind of rigging in place, you know?”

“Really?!”

“Yep! Time to choose something else!”

Haru clenched her fists and said, “Let’s do this!” while Yuzuki grumbled, “How come you only listen to Yuuko?” Meanwhile, Ucchi, who’d been quietly watching everything going on, calmed everyone down by saying, “Now, now, girls.”

Oh my gosh, this is so much fun.

I love this. I freaking love it.

I still don’t know if I’m close enough to the basketball duo to say we’re besties, but I realized that at some point, I’d surrounded myself with friends who treat me normally, just like they’d treat anyone else.

—They’re all such precious friends to me.



We spent hours choosing swimsuits until we were satisfied.

I have no idea how many swimsuits Yuzuki and I had Haru try on.

Haru found a super-cute one, and even Ucchi got really into the process.

After that, we had drinks at Starbucks, then went our separate ways.

We had a lot of fun and laughed a lot, so I was a little disappointed that it was over. But I knew we’d see each other again soon, at the fireworks display.

By the time I left the mall, the sun had already begun to set.

Mom told me to call her on the way home, but I felt that if I went home by car, the afterglow of our fun time would disappear, so I walked leisurely instead.

I love summer sunsets—the big clouds turning pink or purple, the shadows growing longer.

The chirping of frogs and insects was audible now, and suddenly the smell of the rice paddies and rivers seemed more intense.

I don't know why, but I can feel the day ending more tangibly in summer than in other seasons.

I wonder if everyone else heading home was looking up at the sky, just like me.

When I got home, I'd try my new swimsuit on again in my room, just to check if it really looked good.

Just imagining it made me feel cute.

...Yep, trying on all my clothes as soon as I get home is something I do every time.

I was wandering along, thinking about this and that, when...

"Yuuko!"

...I saw a bicycle approaching from the front, its rider waving their hand.

I couldn't help but laugh to see that big frame on that old-fashioned bicycle.

"Hey, what a coincidence, running into you!"

Kaito's brakes squealed as he came to a halt before me. "'Sup. Whatcha doing out here?"

"I'm thinking of going to the sports shop in the LPA. What about you?"

"I went shopping with Ucchi, Yuzuki, and Haru, and now I'm on my way home."

"So then, does that mean...?"

"Yes, I bought a cute swimsuit!"

"Oh, *man*!"

"Ew, Kaito! Gross!"

He smiled and pointed at the bicycle's luggage rack. "You live nearby, right? I can give you a ride home."

"It's okay; I feel like walking today."

“But it’s getting dark. Isn’t it dangerous for a girl to walk home alone?”

“Not really. There’s no one around in the first place.”

“Hmm.” Kaito got off his bike with a smile. “Well, I’ll walk with you, then.”

“Egh, you’ll ruin my afterglow.”

“I don’t know what that means, but that’s not very friendly of you.”

In the end, the two of us started walking together.

Walking beside him like that really made me realize how tall he was. I only came up to his shoulder.

“Kaito, you know...”

I never usually spend much time looking at him, but right now I gazed up at his side profile as we walked.

“Why are you not more popular with the girls?”

“Whoa, at least give me a warning before you roast me like that!”

He made a miserable face.

But this aspect of him is kinda relaxing.

Saku and Kazuki are always so super cool.

“I mean, you’re tall, you’re decently good-looking, you play sports... Sure you’re a bit dumb sometimes, but your personality is really positive and upbeat...”

“Well, one of those things isn’t like the others!” Mumbling, Kaito scratched his head, looking embarrassed.

“If you think about it rationally, it doesn’t really make sense why you’re not popular, you know? I mean, has anyone ever asked you out?”

“Ah, uh...” After hesitating for a moment, he spoke in a tone that indicated defeat. “I mean, yes. Some of the girls on the girls’ basketball team. I guess I don’t know why I’m not more of a stud, though.”

“Isn’t that so?! I’m so happy!” Mysteriously, I was getting excited.

“Huh? Why are *you* happy about that, Yuuko?” Kaito looked at me curiously.

“Because I don’t understand why only cool guys like Saku and Kazuki are so popular! I mean, from a girl’s perspective, someone like you is the most comforting option, right?”

“Is that so?!”

“That’s right. Even if you did go out with one of those two, they’d still have girls coming up to them all the time, and I guess it’d be kinda nerve-racking to be the girlfriend.”

Of course, I know I’m not that kind of person, so this would only be from the point of view of other girls who don’t know Saku very well. Or that’s what I thought, but come to think of it... It sounded plausible.

Saku did tend to make offhand remarks... It would probably be hard to get him to fix that.

“So if someone became your girlfriend, Kaito, I bet you’d be super honest with her and treat her really well. I bet you’d completely stop messaging other girls, too!”

“...I would! She wouldn’t even have to ask!”

“See? It’s not about wanting the guy to quit other girls, it’s the sentiment behind him being the one wanting to stop! But if I said that to Saku, I’d be worried he’d start lecturing me. ‘Listen here, Yuuko, just because we’re dating, doesn’t mean I have to ditch my friends,’ he’d say. I can just hear it.”

When I imitated Saku’s pompous way of speaking, Kaito burst out laughing.

“Hey, that sounded just like him! He’d be like, ‘The thing about me is, even if my girlfriend and I are apart, I want us both to be secure enough to be able to talk to other people without it affecting our relationship in any way,’ right?”

“Stop, I can’t take it! It sounds exactly like what he’d say, but hearing *you* imitate him makes it even funnier!”

“Hey, that sounds like you’re dissing me, too, here?!”

After the two of us doubled over laughing, we stretched out. ““Ahhh!””

“Saku really is a piece of work, isn’t he?” I said. “He’s lucky to have friends like you and me, huh, Kaito?”

“...”

There was no reaction, so I looked over and saw him supporting the bicycle with one hand, the other hand against his mouth, holding back more laughter. “But in a lot of different ways, isn’t it Saku who you’re meant to be with, Yuuko?”

“Wait! What do you mean?!”

“...I mean, there are reasons.” Kaito mumbled, which wasn’t like him.

There was a weird moment, so I tried to smooth it out. “You know...of those girls who asked you out, didn’t you ever find one that you liked? I mean, you’re always going on about how much you want a girlfriend.”

“Hmm...”

“Ah, I get it! There’s actually a girl you do like!”

“No...” Kaito smiled, looking placid. “Right now, I just want to focus on club stuff.”

Oh really, I thought.

I didn’t know much about it, but Kaito seemed to be super good.

Maybe he didn’t want anything to distract him from his basketball game. He really was ambitious and driven.

And so I wanted to ask him an important question.

“Hey, Kaito...”

“Hmm?”

“What would you do if a very dear friend of yours fell in love with the same person as you? What if you realized that the person you were in love with seemed to kinda like them back?”

“Who do you mean...?”

“It’s just for instance! Recently, when I was hanging out with Nazuna, we talked a bit about it.”

Had I been too transparent?

But I had a feeling that Kaito, of all people, would give me a straight response.

I looked over at him. He seemed to be thinking hard, his brow furrowed.

“If it were me...”

Then Kaito exhaled, as if he’d achieved some sort of clarity.

“—If they were such a good friend, then I guess I’d take on the challenge, even if it meant coming between the two of them.”

His grin seemed...somehow dazzling.

Sure, if you think of it in those terms, there’s really nothing to agonize over.

I smiled, too.

“Right! That’s just what I’d expect you to say, Kaito!”

“...Really?” Beside me, he smiled a little and continued in his Saku voice. ““If that was enough to put a damper on your feelings, Yuuko, then that means our love never amounted to much, huh? For real. Like, seriously.””

“Hey, when you mix in aspects of your own personality, it sounds even funnier, so cut it out! Besides! I never said I was talking about *me*!”

After all that joking around, Kaito seemed to suddenly remember something.

“Yuuko, do you remember the entrance ceremony?”

“Huh? What about the entrance ceremony?”

“You know, when we all lined up at the gym.”

“Hmm...”

I tried to remember, but I was filled with anticipation and anxiety at the time, and all I could really recall was that Uchi did the greeting speech.

“Er, what happened, again?”

I meant it seriously, but Kaito just laughed it off. “Ah, nothing in particular.”

“What? Now I wanna know!”

“It’s no big deal.”

“Come on, tell me!”

He kept avoiding it all the way home.

I didn't want to press the issue too much, so I just said thanks for walking me home, and that was that.

"Bye, Yuuko."

"See ya, Kaito!"

I kept waving at his back as he walked off. "See you at the fireworks!"

Kaito turned, said, "Sure!" and waved.

It's odd, though...

His smile in the sunset light looked a little sad.



Then came the day of the Fukui Phoenix Fireworks.

I had Ucchi help me put on my *yukata* in my room.

Actually, I was going to ask if we could do it at Saku's place, but Ucchi said, "I bet Saku's expecting that, too, so why don't you stun him by showing up already dressed in it?" and I was like, "Great plan!"

Knock, knock.

"Yeees?"

After I responded, Mom came in.

"Thank you so much for going to all the trouble, Ucchi," she said as she put down a tray of tea and snacks.

Mom and Ucchi have met several times before.

"As a mother, I would like to dress her in a *yukata*, but neither Yuuko nor I have any knack for this sort of thing."

"Hey! At least I'm not as bad at it as you are, Mom."

"You're not exactly persuasive, you know, standing there looking like a malfunctioning robot."

"Oh, be quiet!"

But she was right. Up until a few moments ago, I'd been stiffly rearranging my body in response to prompts like, "*Can you raise your arm a little?*" and "*Can you straighten your back just a bit?*"

Listening to us argue, Ucchi giggled.

"It's okay, I like doing it. And it's not like anyone ever taught me. I actually had to look up videos online of new ways to tie the obi and stuff. Then I did a lot of practice."

Mom sighed and shook her head, smiling.

"First of all, it's impressive that you did your research, and the fact that you're prepared to look up new ways to tie the obi, well...that's a cut above."

Yeah, I got it. Actually, I'd been surprised myself when Ucchi said it might take a little longer, but she still wanted to try out the new techniques she'd recently learned.

As Ucchi skillfully manipulated the obi, she said, "This is called a marigold knot. It's perfect for Yuuko, right down to the name."

"Hey, Yuuko, where did you find this angel?"

"Mom, hurry up and get out!"

"No way, Mommy wants to chat, too."

"Okay, you're really embarrassing me."

"—Yuuko, stay still!!"

"Sure thing!"

Now look, Ucchi's mad at me.

Mom saw my face and sat down on the chair. "Yikes."

Could she please just *not*, in front of my friends? Still, she always seems to enjoy it so much, so I can't really get angry.

"Still..." Mom picked up one of the chocolates she'd brought. "Ucchi, you can cook, clean, and do laundry, you're cute, elegant, and graceful. I bet the boys at school won't leave you alone."

Ucchi looked embarrassed as she responded. “No, unlike Yuuko, I have absolutely no experience with that.”

“You must be kidding! You’re just being humble, right?”

“When I started school, I wore glasses, and I was really plain. Forget about being asked out. I don’t think the boys ever even spoke to me if they didn’t have to.”

I remembered being so surprised when I heard that.

After a moment, Mom let out an exaggerated sigh.

“Men are idiots. If it were me, I’d make you my number two girl, Ucchi. After Yuuko, of course!”

“Hey, Mom, take responsibility for the daughter you actually raised!”

Well, in reality, it’s true.

It makes me happy when my classmates say things like “Yuuko’s so feminine,” but any way you slice it, I think it’s a compliment that fits Ucchi more.

“But you know,” Mom said, “you became friends with Chitose after you started high school, right? I actually finally met him myself just the other day!”

“Oh, ah-ha-ha,” Ucchi laughed awkwardly. “At first, I actually kinda hated him. It was like he had no filter.”

I thought back to that scene in the first homeroom. When Saku got mad at me. It gave me a warm feeling.

I never thought the day would come when the three of us would go to the fireworks like this.

“Really? Then how come you and him got to be such good friends?”

“Mom, stop interrogating her,” I complained.

But Ucchi just smiled. “It’s fine,” she said. “Hmm, I guess... Saku never looks away from the person in front of him. It’s like he knew better than I did that I was Yua Uchida. Sorry, I guess this doesn’t make much sense.”

Thump, went my heart.

“It’s okay,” Mom said, basically cutting off my thoughts. “My daughter’s had a lot of friends, ever since she was little, but never a close friend like you, Ucchi. I think it would be very nice if both you and Chitose would keep Yuuko in your sights.”

“Saku aside, I don’t think I’m really that special...”

“That’s not true. I’d love it if you’d dress Yuuko in her kimono for her coming-of-age ceremony as well. I want you two to remain good friends forever.”

“I’m... I’m not sure I could handle a kimono with *furisode* sleeves...”

“Hey, that’s not something you talk about in front of your daughter! This is way too embarrassing!”

After the three of us laughed together, Ucchi said, “All right,” and stood up.

“It’s finished, Yuuko. What do you think?”

I stood in front of the full-length mirror in the corner of the room.

The *yukata* I bought for today was in the Taisho Roman style, with random black lines on a white background and a pop of camellias in bright red.

The front of the obi was a beautiful scorpion-grass color, and the back was a forget-me-not color... At least, according to the store clerk.

Forget-me-nots are a soft blue, and scorpion grasses are a little lighter than that, but still pale, as blue goes.

The obi knot that decorated the middle of the obi, and the strings hanging down, were meant to call to mind a Japanese *mizuhiki* paper knot.

Yes, this looked super cute.

I’d agonized over it, but I think I made a good choice.

I turned around and looked back, and...

“...It’s beautiful.”

I let out a sigh.

I wasn’t talking about my rear view, of course.

—There, two flowers were blooming side by side.

The colors of scorpion grasses and forget-me-nots.

For some reason, the knot, made using the front and back of the obi, looked like two flowers to me.

Similar, subtly different, and yet seeming to hold hands in friendship.

In the flat mirror, I could see Ucchi smiling from behind me.

...Just like she did that day—bright and sunny.

I felt a prickling in the back of my nose.

“How is it?”

I turned to Ucchi, who was watching the mirror with a self-satisfied look on her face, and hugged her.

“I love it, Ucchi! It’s really cute!!”

“Yuuko, watch it! Don’t mess it up when I just spent ages tying it.”

“Well, I’ll just have you fix it again, Ucchi!”

“C-come on...”

I squeezed her, my arms tightening around her.

“Stop it, you’ll wipe off all your makeup.”

Listening to that reassuring voice, I thought... *Someday.*

Someday, surely...



Ding-dong! Ding-dong!

I smiled a little. I could hear the impatience through the doorbell.

Yuuko was so the type to repeatedly hammer on the elevator call button.

It was five thirty PM.

I’d gotten an update call, but it was half an hour past the time we planned.

It was pretty unusual for Yuuko to come by, let alone with Yua.

I got up from the sofa where I’d been lying and opened the door...

“Hello, Taisho-era girl delivery service!”

Waiting outside was a crimson camellia that could have been made of a piece of sunset sky.

I gulped.

The style of the *yukata*, which combined traditional Japanese colors and motifs in a modern style, suited Yuuko’s not-so-Japanese features very well.

Her hair was pulled up so that the nape of her neck could be clearly seen, and blue earrings that looked like *mizuhiki*-style paper knots dangled from her ears.

A soft breeze blew in, and there was a delicate plum-like scent, different from the usual.

Was she wearing more blush than normal? Or was she simply blushing?

Small camellias bloomed on both white cheeks, like a tiny springtime.

Yuuko was waiting impatiently for a reaction, so I said...

“You look...I mean...really cute.”

I was planning to say something more casual and offhand to hide my true impression, but I stumbled over my words and ended up saying something pretty lame.

Even so, Yuuko smiled happily.

“...All right, looks like it was a success!” She high-fived Yua, standing beside her.

...Then my jaw dropped.

“What the heck?!!!”

I bellowed at the top of my voice, no doubt angering the neighbors.

“Saku! Don’t yell like that! And hurry up and let us in!”

But... But... But...

Yua wasn’t wearing a *yukata* at all...



“Sob... Sniffle...”

I was crying.

“—So I’d changed my clothes early so I could help Yuuko, but when I was doing housework in the extra time we had, I accidentally spilled cooking sauce on my *yukata*.”

“Sob... Sniffle...”

“I’m so sorry.”

“In this moment, I curse your organization and predilection for housework, Yua. Leave the household chores alone and choose your hairstyle, makeup, and accessories. Run around, panicking, being like, ‘Oh, whatever shall I do?’ That’s what I wish you’d done today.”

“Er, Saku? Who is that supposed to be an impression of?” Yuuko fixed me with a glare as cold as shaved ice in midsummer.

“Because I was looking forward to seeing you both in your *yukata* today! This is like... Like I’ve been swindled!”

“You’re starting to sound like Kentacchi.”

Yua laughed awkwardly.

“Well, I tried to choose a dress with a floral pattern so it wouldn’t totally ruin the atmosphere.”

“That’s beside the point! All right, Yua, if I told you that today’s dinner was going to be Seiko crab, and then I served you crab sticks, would you be like, “Oh, this is fine”? And incidentally, say that I served it the same way, boiled with soy sauce!”

“Um, what are you talking about?” Yua’s shoulders slumped. “Sheesh, Saku.”

“Then I’ll wear a *yukata* next time, too, so let’s go to the festival together, okay?”

“...You swear?”

“Yes, yes, definitely.”

As Yua and I nodded at each other...

“Hey!!!” Yuuko yelled. “Hey, I worked so hard to dress myself up! Why aren’t

you paying attention to me?! No, you're just disappointed you can't see Ucchi in her *yukata*! Before you start making festival dates, take a good look at me!"

"Sorry, I was grieving."

"Look! Look at this obi knot! Ucchi tied that!" As she spoke, she whirled around.

"Really? Hey, that looks pretty good."

"Right! Say more nice things like that!"

"Uh, good job, Yua."

"Hmm, that's definitely true, but I didn't mean like that!"

Yua and I exchanged looks and grins.

"It suits you, really."

"Hee-hee!" Yuuko let her face soften then.

"Now, then," Yua said, getting up. "It's getting a little late, so let's start dressing you right away, Saku."

"Ah, thanks."

As Nanase said at Takokyu, it's not like it's impossible to put on a guy's *yukata* by yourself.

But I'd previously just watched a tutorial video and given it my best shot, so having Yua do it properly would probably be worth it.

That time I went out with Nanase, I'd ended up fiddling with the darn thing for close to half an hour.

I handed over the bag I took out from the closet.

The *yukata*, with its white dragonfly on a black background, was a gift from Yuuko on my birthday.

Yua checked the obi before asking, "Saku, do you have underclothes to put on under your *yukata*?"

"Er, do I need them?"

"Actually, it's better to wear them because they absorb the sweat, but it's up

to you.”

“I’d rather not. It’s too much hassle.”

“Yeah, I understand. Okay, could you take your top off?”

“Sure.” As I started peeling my T-shirt off...

“Wait a sec!!!” Yuuko yelped.

Whoops, I messed up again, I thought.

“You’re just going to tell him to strip right in front of us?! And you! You’re just going to whip off your clothes the moment you’re told to?”

We exchanged glances, then Yua scratched her cheek awkwardly.

“Sorry, I guess I’ve gotten too accustomed to it.”

“You’ve gotten accustomed to *what*, exactly?!”

“But of course I’d ask him to head to the bathroom to change his shorts, though!”

“Why are you saying that as if there was ever any question that you wouldn’t?!”

It was the same with Nanase, but especially in the summer, I often end up coming out of the bathroom shirtless. For Yua, who’s been to my place a bunch of times to cook and so on, it wasn’t really something that would floor her or make her get flustered.

...Although the first time I did it, she practically ripped me a new one...

I explained the situation, but Yuuko continued pouting. “Hmm, so you have the kind of relationship where you let her see you half-naked on a regular basis.”

“Yuuko, don’t say that!” Yua said, and I was quick to follow.

“Well, if she’s going to dress me, she can’t exactly do it with her eyes closed, can she? If you don’t want to see, though, why don’t you turn around, huh?”

“Unacceptable!”

“Yuuko, think rationally. At the beach, all the guys will be shirtless.”

“...Oh, right!” Yuuko clapped her hands, as if finally convinced.

Hmm, still, I kinda got how she felt.

A bikini at the beach isn't the same as a bikini in my apartment. I mean, the latter would definitely get me way more flustered.

I put on my *yukata* and held out my arms. “All right, do your magic.”

“Okay. I'll do a front knot, so watch how I do it. You too, Yuuko, if you want.”

Saying that, Yua pinched both sides of the collar and lightly pulled them toward herself.

...Ah.

After everything I'd said to Yuuko, I didn't want it to show on my face, but I was more embarrassed by this than I'd thought I would be.

It kinda looked like she was taking off my shirt.

It doesn't bother me at all when I'm completely bare, but it was oddly embarrassing to be seen from the front like this with my *yukata* open.

Yua didn't seem to care at all and quickly wrapped the lower front and the upper front.

“Saku, can you hold this a sec?”

“Sure.”

I did as I was told and held the top part so the *yukata* wouldn't flap open.

Then Yua reached out and carefully felt around my waist.

I think she was checking where my skeletal structure was, but it felt odd and made me think *yikes*.

Yua got down on her knees, threaded the waist tie behind me in a hugging motion, and then tied it in front. Then she gently pushed in the excess cord with her fingertips, tracing my lower abdomen.

I felt sweet tingles running from my lower abdomen to my waist and all around my back.

Yua stood up with the obi in her hands and wrapped her arms around me the

same way as before.

The scent of her usual gently scented shampoo now came wafting up into my nose.

As she wrestled with the thick obi, she pressed her body tightly against mine.

I glanced down and saw a pure-white valley, smushed up against my chest.

“Saku? What are you looking at?”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

Damn, I completely forgot that Yuuko’s here, too.

Kimono dressing is delightful... I mean terrible!

These kinds of shocks aren’t good.

I looked up at the ceiling to hopefully calm down, and...

“Saku?”

...I heard a cold voice, near the back of my neck.

“You and I need to have a discussion later.”

Please, it was instinctual. I was helpless. I swear.



After getting ready, the three of us left together and headed for Higashi Park.

It seemed like too much trouble to meet up at the riverbed, which was the venue, so we decided on this as the meeting place.

It was six thirty ^{PM}.

The fireworks were due to start at seven thirty ^{PM}, and it would take less than five minutes to walk to the riverbed. That would give us plenty of time to buy food and drinks after securing a good spot.

Here and there were groups of people in *yukata*.

From the rooftops and balconies of private houses, the sound of happy voices drifted our way, and the smell of barbecue wafted through the air. It was tradition that the adults who watched from home would start drinking around this time, waiting for the first burst of color in the sky.

The fireworks display is held in a location reachable on foot from Fukui Station, so every year on this day, the downtown area is filled with a festive atmosphere.

When I was little, I used to wait for the night with a strange feeling of restlessness.

By and by, we came in view of the Europe-Ken next to Higashi Park, and I immediately saw three people: Kazuki, Kaito, and Kenta.

I raised my hand lightly as we approached...

“Whoa! Huh?!” the biggest guy bellowed.

“My bad, I already did that whole bit, so let’s skip it.”

The “Whoa” was for Yuuko’s *yukata*, and the “Huh?!” was for Yua’s lack thereof.

“Kenta, did you go all the way to Donki to buy that?!”

Oh yeah. Kaito was wearing a black *jinbei*, and Kenta was wearing an indigo-blue *jinbei*.

“Well everyone else was wearing *yukata*, so we didn’t want to be left out, huh, Kenta?!”

Kenta looked a little nervous and fidgety. “I would have been fine with wearing normal clothes, but I’m not like you, Kaito. On me, this kind of thing makes me look like a poor farmer’s boy in the Edo period...”

I couldn’t help but burst out laughing at his way-too-accurate analogy.

Yuuko smiled. “Aw, come on, Kentacchi, you look cute!”

“Y-you look radiant yourself, Yuuko.”

“Is that good or bad?”

“It... I mean...”

But before he could finish...

“Man! Yuuko, you look freaking cute!!!” Kaito bellowed again.

“Right? Go on, feel free to heap on the praise! Because *someone’s* reaction

was entirely lackluster!”

Yuuko glared at me, and Kazuki, who was wearing a gray *yukata*, finally spoke.

“If Saku didn’t give you any superficial compliments, that must mean that he found you far more beautiful than he’d been expecting, Yuuko. In fact, his mind must have gone completely blank.”

“Is that true, Saku?”

“It could be true. I don’t really appreciate having Kazuki spell it out, though.”

Looking around as we chatted, I saw a certain amount of people spreading out their picnic vinyl sheets even here, in Higashi Park.

Even though it’s a big summer event, the main venue, the riverbed, is never so crowded that you can’t find a place to sit. Compared with the cherry blossom viewing and fireworks festivals in Tokyo that you see on the news, it’s barely even crowded.

Nonetheless, from the point of view of Fukui citizens, it’s quite daunting.

With this kind of spacious and relaxing spot nearby, it’s not surprising that some people are okay with not being at the main venue.

When I was thinking about that...

“Sup, everyone!”

“Sorry we’re a little late!”

It was Nanase and Haru, walking toward us.

““““Whoa...””””

My friends expressed their admiration.

I’ve seen Nanase in a *yukata* before, but this one had a different pattern from what I remember.

Ripples like drops of water spread across a pale-blue background, and red goldfish swam swiftly among aquatic plants. A design that might look childish at times, but with a black and gold obi, it was quite sophisticated.

I remember that day. I’d felt sad, realizing that moment in time would never

come again. The two of us had a blast, scooping goldfish.

I wondered if Red Fish and Black Fish, or perhaps Chitose and Saku, were still swimming around together somewhere.

Nanase looked at me and smiled sweetly, somewhat provocatively.

Ah, I thought so. It was a strong feeling.

No surprise, the kind I'd felt that day. No uncertainty, as there'd been that day. No longer boyfriend and girlfriend, as we were that day.

...And Nanase looked so much more beautiful now than she did back then.

"Chitose!" Haru yelled my name, blasting away my frustrated thoughts.

She ran swiftly up to me in clunky geta sandals I was sure she wasn't used to.

"Chitose, ♡ what do you think of Mistress Haru's *yukata*? ♡"

Her *yukata* had a crisp-white background, with large blue morning glories stretching out their vines, just like summer itself. Here and there, dazzling yellow morning glories bloomed, reminding me of a certain girl's bright smile.

Her hair, done up with much more elegance than usual, was offset by a colorful hairpin, and in contrast to her playful demeanor, she radiated femininity.

I felt a sizzling sensation inside.

"You look beautiful. Extremely so." I found myself saying exactly what was on my mind.

But my reaction seemed to take her by surprise.

"What?" Haru looked quickly away.

I get it. I wasn't expecting me to say something like that, either.

"Um...thank you."

"Sure."

Then without finesse, Nanase butted in.

"Hmph, yes. That level of reaction is about what I'm owed. After all, everything, from the selection of the *yukata* and the accessories to the

dressing, hair, and makeup, was produced by me, Yuzuki Nanase. And by the way, this is the reason why we were late.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Haru stopped looking away bashfully and turned her eyes on me with a “Huh?” noise.

“Wait a minute, hubby—what does that mean?”

“Well, the styling is just too good.”

“What does that even mean?!”

Yuuko, Yua, and the guys all chuckled at us.

And so our second summer vacation of high school started with a lot of laughter and good vibes all around.



As predicted, the riverbed where the fireworks were to take place was still only loosely crowded.

When we settled on a good place, I realized we hadn’t prepared anything to sit down on—but of course, Yua had an old-fashioned vinyl sheet, one that showed signs of heavy use, and Nanase had an outdoorsy brand one with a stylish pattern on it.

Of course, I thought, smiling wryly.

Leaving our stuff on the sheets to weigh them down, we headed toward the food stalls together.

I bought a random selection, like french fries, *takoyaki*, fried chicken, baby castella cakes, candy apples, and cotton candy. Actually, it would be smarter to stock up on enough food to last us while it was still fairly uncrowded, but I think that’s kinda bad form.

One of the best parts of being young is sneaking out in the middle of the fireworks to browse the food stalls.

So even though we know it’s more efficient to split up, no one even suggested it. We all lined up together at one stall, then headed to the next one as a group.

Haru, walking ahead while gnawing on a candy apple, stole one of Kenta's *takoyaki*.

Nanase and Yua were chatting together, while Kazuki was coolly observing the surroundings from a distance.

Kaito and I brought up the rear, while Yuuko was walking right in front of us with a stick of cotton candy.

Looking at everyone's backs as they walked, I thought, *This is nice*.

I don't usually think about it while we're all hanging out and having fun, but seeing Haru and Kenta interact, or Yuzuki and Yua, it gets me thinking about how we all have different levels of familiarity with each other. Everyone really is an individual, after all.

I mean, our personalities and hobbies and tastes are quite different.

However, some of us have things in common, as well as interests that are complete opposites. Bound together by gossamer-thin threads, we swim together through the night, like migratory fish.

...I guess festivals get me into a philosophical headspace.

When I was lost in my thoughts, Kaito suddenly slung his arm over my shoulder.

"Hey, Saku, which *yukata*-clad beauty is your favorite?"

I gave him a light smack on the arm as I responded. "A man who makes frivolous judgments will never be popular."

"Aw come on, indulge me! It's a festival."

"Well, what do you think? And could you get your face outta mine?"

Kaito, arm still around me, seemed to mull it over and drew his free hand into a fist. "I want to answer immediately with Yuuko, since she's been my favorite since the entrance ceremony, but... Yuzuki's *yukata* is so sexy that I don't even know what I'm looking at, and I even think Haru looks kinda cute tonight. And then there's Uchi in ordinary clothes while everyone else is wearing *yukata*. Actually, the contrast there kinda makes her stand out, in a way."

“Hmm. I won’t object to any of that.”

“Do I really need to choose just one favorite?”

“Ask yourself, thirty seconds ago.”

The two of us laughed and I thought, *Yeah, what if...?*

Really, if I were to confess who’d caught my eye the most tonight, maybe it would be...

Yuuko, walking in front of me, glanced back. Her fluffy cotton candy bounced.

“Hey, what are you talking about?”

It was her usual smile, but in a different kind of setting.

“Just about how beautiful you are, Yuuko.”

Beside me, Kaito bellowed. “Exactly!!!”

Yuuko smiled back at us. “You know it! ♪”

The ground was dirt, so it should have been inaudible, but...

Clop, clop.

Clack, clack.

I could hear the sound of geta sandals in my mind.

Finally, after buying eight bottles of Ramune, we headed back to our spot.



Before I knew it, everything around us stood on the threshold of night.

After seven PM, the number of people increased, and the usually deserted riverbed was decorated everywhere with colorful floral patterns.

“Haru, I can see too much of your legs.”

“Oh, but this *yukata* is so tight, and it doesn’t have any stretch to it.”

“Don’t expect the functionality of sportswear from traditional clothes.”

“Haru, if you sit sideways, it won’t come open as much.”

“Oh yeah! Thanks, Ucchi!”

“I wish you could have told us sooner. I’m sick of sitting on my legs.”

Listening aimlessly to the conversation of the basketball girls, I thought, *Yep, it's summer.*

This was the picture-perfect summer of being seventeen.

Then my phone vibrated.

Asuka's name showed on the display.

Oh yeah, after our trip to Tokyo, we finally exchanged phone numbers and LINE details with each other.

It's a little sad that we lost the mystery of when we'd next encounter one another, but this was way better than her remaining the cool, older girl and me, the adorable boy.

I was going to change, she was going to change—we all were. Bit by bit.

I opened up her message as my mind whirled with thoughts, and...

“...”

There was a picture of Asuka, wearing a *yukata*.

I automatically tapped it, expanding it to fill the screen.

The pattern was fleeting, ephemeral-looking white lilies on an indigo background. She wore a turquoise-blue hair ornament with her slightly grown-out hair tied back.

She's probably not used to taking selfies.

Asuka's eyes were embarrassed, looking away from the camera, and there was something lovely about it.

Yikes, I was grinning for sure right now.

After that, I received another message.

“Send me a yukata selfie now!!!”

I couldn't take it; I had to cover my mouth with my hand.

What the heck? She was being so cute.

Where did the phantom woman disappear to?

My thoughts were dry and sarcastic, but even so...

At times like this, I really felt the weight of a year.

Asuka would be gone soon.

Would she be watching next summer's fireworks in Tokyo?

Next year, by her side, would there be...?

"Huh?"

Kazuki snatched up my phone.

"Yo, what?!!!"

I yelped.

"You jerk! Here you sit, surrounded by such beautiful women, and you're drooling over *yukata* pictures of Nishino!"

"Don't just grab my phone! What are you, some jealous woman convinced her boyfriend's cheating?!"

"Send me a *yukata* selfie'? What are you, newlyweds?"

"Don't read it out loud! You jerk! I'm going to bundle you up in a tube and shoot you into the sky as the first firework of the evening!"

When I was trying to wrestle my phone back from Kazuki...

"Saku?"

"Er, Saku?"

"Chi-to-se?"

A hard, cold voice, like an azuki ice pop fresh out of the freezer, called my name.

When I finally looked over, Yuuko smiled and spoke. "Can I borrow your phone for a moment?"

"It's... It's a private message."

Yua, Nanase, and Haru beside her were all grinning at me, too. *Help!*

"I'm not going to read your LINE messages; relax. I'll just take a photo of you.

You want to send one to Nishino, right?”

Kazuki desperately hid his mouth with his arm as he handed the phone over to Yuuko.

“Okay, Saku, big smile.”

“Oh, ah-ha-ha...”

I looked at the lens, the corners of my mouth twitching.

With a *snap*, Yuuko hit the shutter, then handed the phone to Yua.

“Aren’t you done?”

“All right, Saku, try making a mischievous face.”

“Er, Yua?”

Snap. Then it was Nanase’s turn, apparently.

Kaito and Kenta looked like they were trying hard not to laugh.

“Chitose’s face, when he was smushed up against my boobs and yours, Yuuko!”

“Isn’t he just awful?!”

Snap, and then it was Haru’s turn last.

“Hmm... Okay, Chitose, make a face like you’re in love with Mistress Haru.”

“Are you sure you want to send that to Asuka?!”

Once the photoshoot was done, the girls all started cracking up, like they couldn’t hold it back anymore.

Their cackling was loud enough to drown out the sounds of the festival.

Like they were trying to make this moment last. Like they were dreaming of a summer that never ends.

—*Psssh*. The first firework shot up into the sky.



After enjoying the fireworks for a while, I went to the food stalls to do some shopping.

Thanks to Haru and Kaito, we ran out of food in no time.

Usually, we decide who'll do something by rock-paper-scissors or other games like that, but for some reason, everyone was silently staring at me with intense smiles.

Wait, what?

You want me to go?

Did I do something that bad?

Lining up at a food stall by myself isn't exactly what I'd call enjoying my youth, you know?

Incidentally... When I sent those four shots to Asuka, she found it all extremely funny.

So anyway, there I was, walking alone on the night of the festival.

The area was bustling, as if all the lively voices of the city streets had been collected together and then dropped over the riverbed.

This was the first time I'd seen the fireworks at the actual venue like this.

Heard this close, the *boom* of each explosion seems to kick inside your stomach.

Being right on the scene makes for a good, social time, but well, I prefer to watch it from a little distance, I thought with a little smile.

Delicious smells wafted on the air, drowning out the scent of soil and summer grass.

Before the fireworks started, there were long lines at all the stalls, but now it'd calmed down to the point where it wouldn't take me too long to shop by myself.

I bought two packs of *yakisoba*, three round *marumaruyaki* pancakes, two frankfurters on sticks, and two chocolate-covered bananas, and managed to stuff them all into the large plastic bag I got at the first stall.

And those last two items for the four girls—I swear, I'm not trying to get revenge for what they did to me earlier.

Well, time to go back and enjoy the fireworks, I thought—and when I turned around, Nanase was standing there.

“Hi.”

“If you came to help me, I’m done already.”

“Hmm, I don’t really feel like helping out.”

Huh, I guess she saw me on the way back from the bathrooms and just waited for me.

I let out a short sigh and said:

“Wow, that’s not very friendly of you.”

“No, no, look, I’m kidnapping you.”

Then she gave me a mischievous smile.

“Hey, Chitose, let’s take a look from the top of the embankment.”

“I don’t think a little height makes much of a difference.”

“Just come on.”

I did as I was told, hurrying after Nanase as she walked off.

Reaching the embankment soon after, we stood side by side at a random spot.

Huh, the view up here actually is kinda different.

“So,” I said. “What do you want to talk about, then?”

If she was bringing me all the way up here, she wanted to discuss something she didn’t want the others to hear.

Nanase turned to me...and she looked surprisingly blank.

“Huh? No, it’s not that! I saw some, uh, Yan High guys, so...”

“Aaaaah,” I sighed, extending it to make a point.

“I know very well what you think of me. Well, my bad for bringing you so much trouble and inconvenience!”

Unusually for her, she appeared to be actually sulking. “Hmph!” she huffed,

looking away.

“Ah, I’m sorry, really! But then... What was it you wanted?”

Nanase stared at me, then rolled her eyes.

“I think there’s only one reason for a girl to ask a boy to leave with her when they’re at a fireworks display with all their friends?”

She took a half step closer.

“I wanted to watch the fireworks alone with you.”

Uh-oh. Shouldn’t have done that.

“We can’t stay long. Everyone’s waiting.”

“Thousands of fireworks will go off tonight. Can’t you spare just ten of those for me?”

Nanase brought her hand close to mine, seemingly without hesitation.

My fingers twitched.

“There’s nothing between us. We’re not dating anymore. So the least you can do is let me hold your sleeve.”

As she spoke, she squeezed the edge of my *yukata* tightly.

Flowers burst above our heads, each one illuminating Nanase’s beautiful profile.

One, two, three.

I felt like I was going to cry all of a sudden, as I looked up at the sky.

Four, five, six.

The upside down heart-shaped fireworks disappeared into the night.

Seven, eight, nine...



*

Just one more. Only one left.

Can I? I wondered...

—*Can I give a name to this feeling?*

★

“...”

★

“You took your sweet time, Saku!”

As soon as I returned to the group, Kaito piped up.

Nanase, who left after me, was planning to return a few minutes later.

“My bad. The stalls were crowded. I bought a lot of things.”

“Yuuko was worried and went to look for you. Didn’t you see her?”

“No? I mean, it was pretty crowded.”

I felt a stab of guilt, thinking of her searching around the stalls for me.

Just as I was thinking of going to look for her...

“Oh! Saku, you’re back already!”

“What did I tell you? He was just off looking at cute girls in *yukata*.”

Yuuko and Nanase returned together.

“Yuuko, you were looking for me? Sorry, we must have missed each other.”

“It’s fine. It was my idea to go off looking for you anyway, Saku.”

Then she smiled.

Did she just happen to run into Nanase? Either way, I was glad she didn’t interrogate me about where I was.

The fireworks display lasted for only about an hour.

Somehow, we were already halfway through.

“I wanna sit next to Saku!”

Yuuko kicked off her geta sandals and stepped onto the sheet, so I scooched over to make room.

“What did you buy?”

“I recommend the chocolate bananas and the frankfurters.” As I spoke, I passed around the food I bought to everyone.

“Eh, I’d rather have *marumaruyaki*,” she said.

“...Are you sure?”

“Yeah! I love those!”

“Gah, I thought chocolate-covered bananas were bound to be a hit with any girl!”

“What are you saying, Saku?”

Kaito interrupted the conversation to say, “Man, I wanna eat a chocolate banana! Haven’t had one of those in ages!”

“You want me to kick you to the other bank of the Asuwa River, huh?”

“What did I do?!”

I didn’t answer that, but I split the *marumaruyaki* in half with the tip of my disposable chopsticks.

“Here, Yuuko, you can have the bigger piece.”

“All right! Feed it to me.”

“...Er, I think Kaito’s crying blood over there.”

“Don’t worry about me! Sure, I’d like to see you six feet under, Saku, but I’d rather see Yuuko enjoying a treat more!”

Damn, really?

“Well, try not to combust.” I cut it up into bite-sized pieces and picked one of the pieces up with my chopsticks. “All right, open wide.”

I lifted it to Yuuko’s mouth, which hung open as she waited with her eyes closed.

“Nom!” With a snap of her jaws, Haru leaned in from the side and ate it.

“Ooh, it’s yummy! You can really taste the egg yolk!”

Yuuko’s eyes flew open. “Haru!!!”

“I’m sorry, did you want some first?” Haru took my disposable chopsticks, grabbed another piece, and lifted it to Yuuko’s mouth.

“Look, Yuuko, a nice big piece! Open wide!”

“That’s what I’m after!”

“Now, now,” Yua said, calming them both.

“Oh man.” Kazuki sighed.

“Kenta, what do you think of this kinda thing, huh?”

Kenta’s eyes twinkled. “This is amazing! I’m adding all the summertime events to my collection of experiences right now!”

“Yeah, I understand that you’re excited, but can you stop talking about it like you’re building one of your weeb shrines?”

“But I mean—fireworks, festivals, girls in *yukata*! And I’m experiencing all the above with actual friends!”

Kazuki opened his mouth, ready to make fun of Kenta, but then he stopped and just said, “Right on,” instead. “We finally all got to come here as a gang.”

Kenta looked confused. “So I’m just here to fill out numbers...?”

But Kazuki shook his head.

“It’s not like that. You know, we’ve only been able to become good friends with Yuzuki and Haru since we all ended up in the same class this year. I was just thinking about how special it is to be able to get everyone together for a rare event like this fireworks festival.”

Unusually sentimental, coming from this stoic guy.

Seeing that Kenta still didn’t get it, though, Kazuki continued.

“It’s nothing complex. It’s just, everyone has club activities, family trips, plans with other friends, that kind of thing...”

He paused, then muttered with a solemn tone.

“—I mean, who knows. If someone here gets a girlfriend or a boyfriend, we might not all be able to get together like this again next year.”

His words, delivered in the gaps between firework cracks, must have had a deep impact on everyone present.

Maybe he wasn't talking to Kenta but to someone else.

Maybe he was just talking to himself.

Eventually, as if to break the tumultuous silence, Kaito chuckled.

“Let's not talk about that stuff right now.”

Kazuki smiled back. “Right, it's almost the big finale.”

The fireworks were coming fast now, as if to signal that the end was approaching.

Crack, crack, crack.

Fssh, fssh, fshhh.

Yuuko, Yua, Nanase, Haru, Kazuki, Kaito, and Kenta.

Everyone was just staring, rapt, at the night sky.

If we were those fireworks...

Could we burst with this much vigor, and then dissipate? Could we make a solid promise that we'd be back again next year?

Could we be colorful marbles inside someone's heart?

—The last firework shot up into the sky.

It opened wide, like a chrysanthemum flower; then a golden rain of sparks came falling down.

...And with that, this year's fireworks ended.

Silence came suddenly with a white plume of smoke in the air, like the ending credits on a pitch-black movie screen.

“Until next year.”

Someone whispered those words quietly, like a sparkler in the dark.

CHAPTER THREE

The Cutoff Line Beyond the Waves



Bathed in the strong summer sunshine, the deep blue sea twinkled like stardust.

The horizon, as straight as a ruler, cut the landscape in half, and the sky was filled with fat thunderhead clouds.

It was eleven AM, a few days after the fireworks display.

We were heading to the hotel where the summer study camp was to be held, by bus.

Someone must have opened the window.

The lukewarm smell of the tide wafted through the well-chilled interior.

Excitement radiated from various seats.

Some people were snoring blissfully. Maybe they didn't sleep well last night.

After passing Tojinbo, the bus finally arrived at its destination, the Echizen Coast Lodge.

The hotel, which overlooks the Sea of Japan, has an ocean view from each of its guest rooms. And, of course, there's a hot spring, as well as a pool and a campsite on the spacious grounds.

It's right next to the Seaside Nature Park, a good location that's just a short drive to the beach, and a lot of visitors come from both inside and outside the prefecture during this season.

A pamphlet outlining the study camp's schedule had been distributed to us

before we left.

Like the rumors said, as long as you follow basic hotel etiquette, there are almost no concrete rules about things like when to wake up, lights out, or even mealtimes.

School uniforms must be worn only for the initial meeting on the first day and for the final meeting on the last day. But throughout the rest of the stay, everyone's free to wear their usual clothes.

This really did seem to be an independent study camp, albeit with the opportunity to consult teachers.

On the third day, the bus would make a round trip to a nearby beach, with a communal barbecue planned at night.

By the way, the allocation of rooms is basically up to the students.

Unless there are special circumstances, there's a minimum of two people and a maximum of five people to a room. Of course, mixed gender is not allowed.

So I formed a group of four with Kazuki, Kaito, and Kenta.

It sounded like the girls were in a room of their own, too: Yuuko, Yua, Nanase, and Haru.

As representative for our room, I headed over to Kura to get our room key.

Man, look at this guy. Shorts, aloha shirt, beach sandals? Is he even planning to do any teaching here?

Kura opened his mouth. "Listen, Chitose. You get any smart plans about mixed gatherings in your room, you consult me, the teacher, first..."

"Mixed gatherings'? Are you being euphemistic because we're not at school? It would be great if you could develop some tact in the classroom, too..."

"And make sure you don't get sand in the wrong places while you're doing a Bruce Lee impression for the girls at the beach."

"It's impossible for you to rephrase that in a normal way, so just give me the key."

Man, does he have to pull this crap on me every time before he's satisfied?

When I finally got the key, I headed over to my friends.

Kaito had a big square plastic bag hanging from his hand. He'd probably gotten a bento from Miss Misaki, the basketball team supervisor.

By the way, except for the barbecue on the third day, the only food we have is basically the hotel buffet in the morning and evening.

If you sign up for lunch in advance, you can have a bento prepared, though, like this.

"Sorry, it took me a while because of Kura. We're in room 301," I said, and Yuuko, who was nearby, raised her voice.

"Oh, we're in 309!"

"Ah, then we must be on the same floor."

"Maybe we'll come see your room, later."

"Maybe we'll come see yours."

There are only two beds in the Western-style rooms, so groups of two get assigned one of them, but for three or more people, you get assigned a Japanese-style room.

"See ya later," I said to Yuuko. "Let's eat lunch in our rooms, get changed—whoever needs to anyway—then meet down at the hall."

"All righty!"



To be honest, from the name of the hotel, I imagined it to be more of a well-worn and well-seasoned lodge-style facility, but when we first stepped inside, it turned out to be pretty fancy.

We took the elevator up to the third floor and said good-bye to Yuuko and the others.

When I entered the room, I was enveloped by the nostalgic scent of tatami mats.

The interior was designed to look like an orthodox Japanese-style room in a hotel or inn.

“Wow!” Kaito shoved his way into the room with irrepressible excitement.

He threw down his Boston bag and lay down on the tatami mats, rubbing his body against them while crooning, “Yes, oh yes...”

Kenta muttered in amazement next to me. “...What the heck is Asano doing?”

“It’s a wild animal marking its territory; leave it alone.”

After arranging our bags in the corner, Kazuki and I sat down in the small interim space between the wide balcony and the rest of the room. There was a little low table there with chairs on either side.

Kazuki spoke in a sentimental sort of voice.

“Well, I guess this is how kids tend to behave.”

“Yeah. He doesn’t know how to relax like a mature adult.”

“Look, Saku. The ocean. She’s beautiful.”

“Yeah, it’s not bad. Everyday life tires the mind, but she washes it all clean.”

“Forget Kaito, what are *you* guys doing?!”

At Kenta’s retort, the other three of us burst out laughing.

I clutched my stomach as I spoke.

“Don’t you feel all sentimental and spaced out, sitting here? When I’m an adult, I’ll be able to drink endlessly and watch the sun set over the sea.”

Kazuki backed me up. “It’s such a romantic view. I could talk about anything sitting here, whether I’m with a guy or a girl.”

Kaito got to the actual point, lying on the floor like a fish on a chopping block. “Okay, Kenta. We’re going to spend four days under the same roof as Yuuko, Uchi, Yuzuki, and Haru. And in bikinis, too! Aren’t you looking forward to it?!”

“...Honestly, I’m *really* looking forward to it!”

“Oh yeah!!!”

And as we four guys bantered back and forth, I realized that I’d been waiting for this day with more anticipation than I thought.

The stuff with the girls is nice of course, but this is the first time I’ve traveled

with these guys.

Aside from school trips, I don't know how many more opportunities we'll have in high school.

I plan to enjoy it to the fullest.

So that even if this ends up being the last time, I won't be left with any regrets.



After finishing our lunch, we changed into comfortable clothes and headed to the hall.

Throughout the stay, there were three places besides our own rooms that we could use as study venues: the large hall that's also used for banquets, a medium-sized conference room, and empty seats in the restaurant during designated times of the day.

When we entered the tatami-floored hall, there were many low-type desks and chairs lined up.

Apparently, up to a hundred patrons could eat in there, so it was a considerable size.

The hall was full of those who had already started studying and of groups chatting while eating bento lunches with their friends.

Naturally, no one wanted to cause a big commotion, but no one would mind us just talking quietly among ourselves.

I still hadn't spotted Yuuko and the others yet.

As I was looking around to secure some seats while it was still relatively empty, someone tapped me on the shoulder from behind.

When I was about to turn around, a thin finger poked into my cheek.

I turned, thinking this kind of classic mischief had to be Yuuko or Haru, but...

"Hee-hee, got ya!"

"Wait, Asuka?!"

There she stood, smiling.

Startled by her surprise attack, I let my jaw drop.

“I didn’t know you were going to be here!”

“I didn’t know you were coming, either, friend. What a surprise.”

Come to think of it, Asuka was a college exam prep student, so it made sense for her to be here.

But since it didn’t even come up as a topic between the two of us, it hadn’t occurred to me at all.

“Whoa!” Beside me, Kaito yelped in a stage whisper.

Hey, can it.

“Nishino, do you remember me? From the future careers talk?”

Asuka smiled. “Asano. You’re the one who wants to continue playing basketball in college, right?”

“Hallelujah!” Kaito gazed up at the sky dramatically for a moment, then continued. “Um, if you don’t mind, why don’t you study with us?”

The scene at the fireworks display the other day popped into my head, and when I was just about to stop him...

“Hmm, I’m sorry. I’m with my friends.” Asuka pointed to a corner of the hall.

A group of several guys and girls were gathered there, and among them was Okuno, who’d come to the careers counseling session.

“Nooo!”

My heart crumpled a little, even as Kaito whisper-screamed.

I’d wanted to stop Kaito from asking her to join us, hadn’t I? Now I was disappointed she’d said no. How mature of me.

I was about to follow Kaito, who’d given up and was heading over to join Kazuki and Kenta, when Asuka tugged on the sleeve of my T-shirt.

Then she brought her mouth to my ear. “We’ve got four days. Even if it’s just for a little bit...why don’t we study together?”

When I looked at her face in surprise, I saw that her mouth was tightly closed,

and she was looking down and fidgeting.

“I mean, if I miss this chance, I wonder if I’ll ever have another one like this with you.”

I knew what she was trying to say.

This was probably the last time we’d be able to study together in a kind of an extension of the school environment, not just the library or a family restaurant.

“Okay, it’s a date,” I said.

Asuka’s face lit up, and then she trotted back to her group.

At that time, the girls’ team came over.

Yuuko looked back at Asuka. “Oh, Saku. Was that Nishino just now?”

“Yeah. I had no idea she’d be at this thing.”

“Well, she’s taking college entrance exams. Has she decided on a career yet?”

“She said Tokyo.”

“Tokyo...I see.”

I studied her face, her reaction, and there was something there, but then her usual bright smile appeared instead.

“Well, let’s study!”

Watching Yuuko roll her shoulder in preparation, I followed her, wondering if it was just my imagination.



After about two hours of working on my summer vacation homework, I was getting tired, so I took a break.

I bought a can of coffee from a vending machine and sat down on a chair in the lobby.

Looking around, I noticed that there weren’t many regular guests because of the fact that Fuji High had rented out most of the rooms. Still, there were a few couples and families with large travel bags walking happily around.

I felt like my joints were stiffening up, so I stretched.

As you might expect of the best prep school in the prefecture, once we students started to concentrate, the hall became as quiet as a library.

You could hardly hear anything other than the sound of mechanical pencils scratching, reference book papers being flipped, and the gentle whispering of students in discussion.

This kind of environment would certainly facilitate intense studying, I thought. And having the teachers on the scene to advise was probably the biggest plus.

I saw many third-year students carrying red-covered college exam prep books and asking questions.

I chuckled to see the line that had formed in front of Kura, who was sitting lazily in shorts and an aloha shirt, but I knew he was a skilled teacher.

While I was lost in my musing, someone said, “Sup?”

I looked up to see Okuno, who I’d spotted earlier.

“Ah, hi.”

He smiled a little and said, “Yeah. Can I sit here?”

“All right, but aren’t there any other open seats?”

“Aw, come on. How about having a chat while we take a break, hmm?”

I didn’t think we had anything to talk about, since we’d only talked once during the career counseling session, but I’m sure he knew that as well as I did.

I nodded, and he sat down on the other side of the small table.

He had a tall and well-toned body, neat and short hair, and well-proportioned facial features. On closer inspection, he definitely looks like the type to have success with the ladies, I thought.

Okuno took a sip of water from a plastic bottle. “So how’s your first summer study trip going?” he asked.

“It’s not bad. I understand why there are so many third-year students.”

“I think most of the reason people come is to make memories of summer vacation, though.”

“How are you doing, studying for the exams?”

“Well, I’m applying to a few places, so I guess I’ll get in somewhere.”

“You’re saying that already? You must be.”

“It’s already the summer of my third year. The exams are right around the corner.”

Right around the corner, eh? I guess they are.

When I said nothing, Okuno continued. “I heard that Asuka’s decided on Tokyo.”

Of course, her name came up.

This must be what he wanted to talk to me about.

I kept my response brief. “Looks that way.”

“This way, at least, I have four more years of hope. Not many people from Fukui, let alone the same high school, end up in Tokyo. We’ll keep in touch there too, go drinking together, stuff like that, I’m sure.”

“...”

He didn’t seem to have any intention of hiding the fact that he was in love with Asuka.

I mulled over the implications, and before long, a wave of frustration had me grinding my teeth.

After understanding the situation fully, I’d encouraged Asuka, but even so...

I couldn’t make myself get angry at this guy. I mean, the tone of his voice as he spoke was sort of melancholy.

“Heh.” Okuno laughed then, more at himself than at me. “The other day, I confessed to Asuka, and she turned me down in no uncertain terms. And from the way she said it, it’s pretty clear my chances are less than dirt.”

The way he said it was so funny that a burst of laughter escaped me.

“...Sorry, I didn’t mean to laugh.”

But Okuno’s tone grew more amiable instead. “At least you’re letting me

dump my problems on you here. Laugh as much as you want.”

“I mean, why come to me at all?”

“I just saw you and Asuka talking. That’s why, I guess.”

I still couldn’t read this guy’s intentions.

Telling me he’d been dumped like this didn’t exactly make it seem like he was looking to go toe to toe with me.

“Chitose, you started talking to Asuka around September last year, right?”

“Well...around then, I guess.”

I didn’t feel the need to go into detail about elementary school.

“I’ve been in the same class as Asuka since first year, and I’ve liked her since the start. In other words, I’ve known her for around a year and a half longer than you have.”

I had no idea how to react, so I kept silent, and Okuno flung out his legs and leaned back on the chair.

“Ah, I wish I’d confessed to her sooner. Then maybe I would have had more of a chance than I do now.”

I found myself clenching my fists.

“Don’t be like me, Chitose.” Okuno smiled.

I still wasn’t following, so...

“I’ll ask you one more time...,” I said. “Why are you saying this to me?”

He frowned for a moment, then he shook his head. “Not sure,” he replied. “Maybe I just didn’t want her getting snapped up by some stranger at a Tokyo college. It’d be better if she got with someone like you, who can at least make her smile...” He got to his feet. “Sorry for intruding.”

Watching him go, I finally exhaled and looked down at the fingernail marks on my palms.

It would be easier, to just laugh it off as someone else’s problem.

But the things he’d just said seemed to overlap with my own impending

future.

Right around the corner.

Those words kept repeating in my head.



Splloosh.

So after finishing a day of studying and then eating our fill of the dinner buffet, which featured plenty of Fukui specialties, we were taking a leisurely soak in the hot springs.

It's not like we have the same pressure on us as college exam students have, so we decided on day one to work hard only during the day, and kick back in the evenings.

When we left the hall in a somewhat euphoric mood, Asuka and Okuno were still doggedly staring at their reference books, and the difference in our enthusiasm levels was palpable.

But if you asked me if I'd be willing to sacrifice my time with my friends in devotion to my studies, I'd have to say no. After all, I'm in my second year of high school.

No doubt after another year's gone by, I'll be able to understand a little better what this summer feels like to Asuka.

I decided not to think about it any further, and rested my head on the edge of the bathtub instead.

The bath was open-air, no buildings nearby, so the wide starry sky above looked unreal.

Stretching my legs out like this, soaking in the hot water up to my shoulders, it felt like I was floating among the stars.

I think it depends on the person—that exact moment where it really hits you that you're on a trip.

For some, it's seeing views you can't see back in the town where you live, eating delicious local food, hearing an unfamiliar accent...

For me, for whatever reason, it's always when I get in an open-air bath.

Even in a place like this, about an hour's drive from Fuji High School, I get this strange feeling that I'm far from home.

Maybe it's because my mind is more open and unguarded here.

I thought about the girls: Yuuko, Yua, Nanase, Haru, and Asuka.

What did they think about, looking up at the starry sky like this?

Maybe everyone was having too much fun to think.

Who's big, who's skinny, I forgot my shampoo, can anyone lend me theirs? Kazuki was looking lecherously at the older girls, Kaito's so sweet, studying away, Kenta's clothes have gotten really fashionable... Or maybe they were discussing more tangible topics.

Just thinking about it made me smile a little inside. It felt like we were all sharing the same night together. Like we were all floating in the same sky.

While I was lost in thought, the surface of the water rippled.

"Aaaaah."

"Kaito, can you enter the water a little more quietly?"

"Aw, come on. It feels great to submerge yourself all at once like this, doesn't it?"

"Just don't get too excited and start swimming laps."

"If a man over five foot nine did that, it would not look good," he said. "Anyway...this stuff is nice, isn't it?"

"Hmm?"

I didn't say anything else, just grunted for him to continue.

"Just a moment ago, I was thinking it's like traveling with people I've never talked to before. Both guys and girls, and older people like the teachers. After graduation, this kinda of thing will never happen again."

"Hmm, now that you mention it, you're right."

Maybe in college there'd be society and seminar trips, and company trips

once we'd joined the workforce. But it won't be quite like this.

Kaito wiped his face off with the hand towel he had draped over his head, then continued nonchalantly. "Hey, Saku, do you think Kazuki and Kenta have a serious crush on anyone?"

"The heck are you bringing this up for?"

"Oh, come on. This stuff is par for the course for overnight trips, right?"

Hmm, well, maybe so. All right, then, I'll give it some thought.

"Not sure about Kenta. He locked himself up in his room because of a failed romance, so I'm guessing he hasn't fallen for anyone just yet."

"Then who do you think would be the best bet for him, out of our friend group?"

"Hmm, my money's on Yua, with Haru as my long-shot choice."

"Ah, I think I see it! I agree about Ucchi, but Haru's lack of sex appeal might actually be kinda reassuring for him?"

"Haru *is* sexy, though."

"Seriously?!"

...Darn it. I should have let that one go, but somehow, I got all annoyed on Haru's behalf and found myself sticking up for her, like some kind of reflex.

I didn't want that getting around, so I quickly changed the subject. "No idea about Kazuki, though. I get the feeling he's dating and breaking up with all kinds of girls that we just don't know about. He's always like, 'Dating is such a hassle.'"

Kaito laughed heartily. "That guy is happy to tease people, but he doesn't want to be the topic of conversation himself. I've known him since first year, but I still can't read the guy."

"Totally," I said, laughing.

The other day, I was honestly surprised that Kazuki said what he did during the fireworks display.

But I kinda like him the way he is, and I like the current status quo the way it

is, too.

“What are we talking about?”

Speak of the devil, and he shall come into the bath with you.

Kenta was following behind him.

Meanwhile, Kaito answered Kazuki’s question. “We were just wondering if you two have a crush on anyone.”

Kenta was checking the temperature of the water with his toe. “I still wouldn’t say it’s at the level of a crush, but...”

“Yeah, I do.”

Aha, I thought so. It’s not at the level of a crush, but he definitely has someone he’s got his eye on.

Wait, huh...?

Surely, I was mistaken, but I just had to check...

“Kazuki, what did you say just now?”

“I said I do.”

“You do what?”

“I thought we were talking about if we have crushes on anyone right now?”

“...”

“.....”

“.....”

““WHAAAT?!!!””

Kaito and I both bellowed in surprise.

Kenta’s mouth flapped.

“I mean, you asked, so I answered.” Kazuki smiled mysteriously.

I swiped my hand through the hot water and splashed it at Kazuki’s face.

“You’re not the type to give a question a straight answer, Kazuki!”

Kazuki brushed his wet hair off his face as he spoke. “Well, on a night like this, I thought, what’s the harm?”

“Ah man, this ruins the mood.”

“Listen here...”

While we were sniping back and forth, Kaito cut in. “So who is it? Is it someone we know?”

“I guess, if you want to put it in those terms.”

“Oh maaan!!!”

“Still, I’m not going to tell you the name, of course.”

“Oh maaan!!!”

Kazuki continued. “But maybe it’s more accurate to say I *did* have a crush?”

Kaito hauled himself out of the bath, apparently overheating, and continued his interrogation. “What, did she turn you down already?”

“I didn’t even get to experience the rejection.”

“Does she have a boyfriend or something?”

“No,” Kazuki said, shaking his head briefly.

“—I fell for her when I saw her fall for another guy.”

Then he smiled, the expression on his face so unlike him.

.....*Wait a minute.*

Could it be...? I mean, surely not, but...?

Kaito continued while I was still thinking hard.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about!”

“I get it. It was a valuable experience for me, though. My great romance was over before it even began, it seems.”

“It’s like this,” said Kaito. “Kazuki fell for a girl who was enthusiastically cheering him on at a soccer match, but at that moment, she was stolen away by the opposing team’s ace after he scored an amazing shot.”

“Oh, that’s a good analogy, maybe. Nice one, Kaito,” Kazuki replied.

“But if the other person isn’t dating, isn’t there still a chance?” Kaito asked.

Kazuki rested his head on the edge of the bathtub and looked up at the distant night sky. “As I said to Saku and Kenta, it’s not my nature to get all excited. You may never think it, but that day, I was so messed up I couldn’t sleep. But you know, when I think about it, I never had a chance to begin with. When it came to my feelings, the line had been drawn before the day had even really started.”

He trailed off then, and...

“—Even if I really fell for her, she wouldn’t fall for me, so I decided to call it a day.”

From somewhere deep in the steam, he turned a grin to us.

Ah, I knew it. Damn, if you were that messed up over it, you could at least let some of it show.

And just dumping this kinda story on us out of nowhere... This guy’s such a jerk.

Kaito laughed, as if to signal the end of this topic.

“Well, I kinda get it.”

Everyone sucks, I thought.

How come they’re able to be so strong?

How come they can identify their feelings so accurately and own them?

The heat was getting to me, so I heaved myself out of the bath.

After getting out of the bath, for some reason us four guys stood side by side in front of the mirror, put our hands on our hips, drank down some coffee milk in one gulp, and then returned to our room.



After getting out of the bath, drying my hair, and putting on some basic moisturizer in the dressing room, I, Yuuko Hiiragi, returned to the room with Uchi, Yuzuki, and Haru.

After that, I carefully took care of my hair and skin and was now relaxing on the futon.

There were hotel-branded *yukata* available in the room, but everyone was wearing their own pajamas brought from home.

I was wearing a Gelato Pique T-shirt and striped fuzzy shorts. I brought a hoodie with the same design, but it was so hot that I took it off as soon as I got back to my room.

Yuzuki was also wearing Gelato Pique. Our tastes align to a point, but hers were satin, a camisole and shorts combined into one item of clothing.

Hey, come on, Yuzuki, that kinda outfit is too sexy!

I mean, that's some hella cleavage.

Well, she was aware of it too, so when we were moving through the hallways, she wore the same fuzzy hoodie as me.

Ucchi wore pajamas with a white star pattern on blue satin. She was also wearing a headband with bows that we bought together at Gelato Pique the other day. The design doesn't really go, but I was wearing the exact same one, and I loved that we were matching.

Haru had on a Champion short-sleeve dress.

I've only ever seen her with her hair tied up, but I was surprised to find that she looks a lot more girly when she wears it down. I'd have to teach her how to do different styles later on.

While I was thinking about all this...

"Yuuko, did you bring body cream?" Yuzuki sounded a little embarrassed.

"I sure did!"

"Sorry, I actually forgot mine. Could you let me use yours during the study trip? I'll make it up to you."

"I get it. I tend to forget my body cream all the time, too."

"Oh yeah, but I never forget makeup remover or lotion."

"You can share mine, of course you can." I took my body cream out of my

makeup bag and handed it over.

“Oh, you’re using Jill Stuart.”

“Yeah! It smells so good—here.”

Yuzuki opened the lid and brought her nose close. “Oh, that’s really nice. Yeah, I like that.”

“Isn’t it great? What do you usually use, Yuzuki?”

“The one by Paul and Joe.”

“Oh man, I was super curious about that.”

“Then I’ll lend it to you next time.”

“Really?! Oh, I want to go shopping with you for cosmetics, not just clothes!”

“—Excuse me!!!”

While we were talking about cosmetics, Haru raised her hand, staring at us.

“What’s up?” I said.

Haru squirmed, like she was embarrassed. “Can you lend it to me? Or, like, teach me how to use it?”

Yuzuki let out a sigh. “You always just spritz on Sea Breeze after a shower.”

“I know, I know I do! I still love Sea Breeze, but...”

Then it hit me.

“You’re wearing a swimsuit the day after tomorrow, so you want to make sure your skin looks good, right?”

“Uh...yeah. Also, from now on, I was thinking I should learn a little more about that kinda thing.”

Yuzuki teased Haru again. “Skin care? It’s going to take more than slapping on body cream one time!”

“Hey, Yuzuki, why don’t you keep it to yourself?!”

Ucchi giggled, watching the exchange. “If three of you use it, it’ll run out in no time. I’ll share mine with you. And I’ll teach you about post-bath skin care, and

all that stuff.”

“Oh, Ucchi!” Haru crooned, hugging Ucchi tight.

Ucchi scratched her cheek, embarrassed. “Although, to be fair, I learned everything I know from Yuuko.”

I felt nostalgic, thinking back to about a year ago.

“Yeah, that is true, but it didn’t take you long to learn, Ucchi. I was a little sad that you didn’t need my advice after a certain point.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that.”

As we continued to chat, I thought about the situation.

Man! This whole thing was so exciting!

It really felt like a girls’ trip.

I’ve never even been invited to a sleepover before—school trips and overnight study trips don’t count.

It’s not like I was left out on purpose, but I’d hear about sleepovers after the fact, and when I said, “Oh, I wish I could have come!” I’d hear, “Sorry, we weren’t sure if you’d want to...,” and that was that.

So I loved this moment of normal, everyday fun. I loved it so much!



Ding. ♪

After Haru and the others were done grooming, we were relaxing when someone’s phone pinged.

Yuzuki, who was lying face down on the futon, checked the screen, and...

“Ooh, hey, a message from Mizushino.” She beckoned us over, so Ucchi, Haru, and I all gathered.

Looked like he’d sent her a video.

When Yuzuki tapped the play button, Kazuki, Kaito, and Kentacchi were standing by the wall with their arms crossed, for some reason.

On the other side, Saku seemed to have pressed the start button for

recording. As he quickly moved away from the phone, we could see their entire bodies.

Their pajamas were sweats or jersey-like shorts and T-shirts with short sleeves.

Then...

“Hey, what’s this? This looks funny!” I said without thinking.

Haru followed. “Uh, why are they wearing their T-shirts like that? So dorky!”

Yes, the guys had mysteriously tucked their T-shirts in their pants, like at school sports day.

Ucchi was desperately suppressing her laughter.

“S-sorry... I don’t think I can watch this.”

Yua seemed to be trying not to crack up.

Then Saku started talking, using a plastic bottle as a microphone.

“All right, let’s get this started. It’s our Strongest Man Competition and it’s called...”

The other three spoke in unison.

“““Who’s the Kuzuryu King?!”””

What kind of name is that? Like the Kuzuryu River?

And what were they about to do anyway?

“Guhhh...”

Next to me, Ucchi was holding her stomach and gasping.

Saku continued. *“Entry number one. He looks like a gentleman, but he’s the soccer club’s sturdy and dependable commander. His nickname comes from his beautiful looks. It’s Fuji High’s Chrysanthemum Doll, Kazukiii Mizushinooo!”*

—Ucchi was in hysterics now.

By the way, chrysanthemum-decorated dolls are a local art form, and there’s an event held every year at Takefu in Fukui Prefecture.

Hearing his name, Kazuki gracefully spun around and winked.

Yuzuki laughed, rolling her eyes. “What are these idiots doing?”

Saku wasn’t done.

“Entry number two. A physical powerhouse that has descended in the Reiwa era as the ace of the boys’ basketball team. With his fighting style, he enacts justice and makes viewers tremble. Fuji High’s very own dish of Volga rice, it’s Kaitooo Asanooo!”

“Gkh!” Ucchi was choking.

By the way, Volga rice is a comfort food popular in Fukui, an omurice topped with a pork cutlet.

What was up with all the local Fukui stuff?

Kaito beat his chest like a gorilla.

Haru propped her cheeks up with her elbows on her thighs. “Oh, I’d love some of that,” she said quietly. “I haven’t eaten it in ages.”

Saku pointed at Kentacchi. *“Entry number three. Once a chubby shut-in... Now he’s a proud, svelte boy. Will this lightweight, having stripped off his thick outer skin, be the dark horse in this competition? Fuji High’s very own wobbly habutae mochi, it’s Kentaaa Yamazakiii!”*

—Ucchi was banging on the futon.

By the way, *habutae* mochi is a kind of sweet famous in Fukui.

Kentacchi was posing with flexed biceps, roaring. Even though he’s not strong at all.

And then Saku continued. *“Finally, entry number four. Ever since he was young, he has never lost in physical fitness tests. The self-proclaimed strongest and most respected man in Japan who has defeated numerous challengers. Yes, death is indeed better than an unbeautiful life. It’s Fuji High’s own ichihomare, Sakuuu Chitoseee!”*

—Ucchi was writhing, wrapped in the futon.

By the way, *ichihomare* is a kind of rice grown in Fukui, said to be a kind of

post-koshihikari variety.

Then everyone turned to face the wall and Saku yelled, *“Ready?”*

“Go!!!”

At that signal, everyone put their hands on the tatami mats and put their feet up.

I finally understood the purpose of this match.

What the heck...? It was just a handstand showdown?!

The reason they wore their T-shirts tucked in was to stop them from riding up?!

From right to left, it was Kazuki, Kaito, Kentacchi, then Saku, with a good distance among each of them.

After about thirty seconds, Saku spoke.

“Kenta, your arms are shaking.”

“No, they’re not. I’ve been working out still.”

“Hmph, you weakling. Kaito, you could do push-ups like this, right?”

“What, me?!”

“By the way, I might send this video to the girls’ team later.”

“Okay, leave it to me!”

Then Kaito really started doing push-ups.

“Wow!”

I hadn’t meant to say that out loud. Yuzuki grinned wryly. “He’s so suggestible, especially when it’s Chitose.”

Then Saku began walking on his hands and scuttled over to Kentacchi, like a crab.

That must have hurt, but from where we were looking, it just looked kinda creepy.

“Hey, whoa, King, stay back!” Kentacchi yelled. *“That’s dangerous.”*

Saku grinned. He turned his face to one side, his lips pursed, then...

"Yeek!" Kentacchi collapsed sideways, squealing.

"All right, one down, two to go!"

"Blowing into my ears?! That's a dirty trick! Where's your sense of sportsmanship?!"

"Poor, naive Kenta. We never decided on any rules, did we?"

"Are you proud of yourself, huh?!"

Suddenly, I burst out laughing.

It's nothing new to realize, but those two really are good friends.

I remembered with fondness how we'd chatted to Kentacchi through his bedroom door.

Saku moved beside Kaito, who was still doing push-ups.

"Kaito, we all agreed on handstands since Kenta was in too, but come to think of it, the core players of the soccer club, basketball club, and former baseball club are all here. Why not switch to handstands without the wall?"

"B-but it takes a lot of strength to do push-ups like this..."

"...I heard that boys who can do handstands are kinda trending with the girls these days..."

"I'll do it!!!"

What? That's totally not a thing.

The second Kaito removed his feet from the wall...

"Hee!" Saku kicked him hard.

Kaito lost his balance and tried to hold on, but he slowly crumpled onto his trembling arms.

"Saku, you jerk!!!"

"Muah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Asano, you think you should train your core a little more?"

“Were you lying about the guys doing handstands trending thing, too?!”

“It beats me how you could have thought that was a thing to begin with!”

While they were talking, a shadow was slowly advancing on Saku.

“Watch it!” Saku jerked out of range of Kazuki’s foot, moving away from the wall.

How amazing!

It might be normal for a boy in a sports club, sure, but he really was doing it without a wall!

“Not bad, dodging the foot of a soccer club member.” As he spoke, Kazuki easily separated from the wall.

“Hey, hold on! Why is that so easy for you?!”

“Hmm, why indeed?”

To be frank, it was easy to see from our POV, but while Saku was getting up to mischief, Kazuki had been resting in a three-point handstand the whole time.

Kazuki always acts so cool, but he’s capable of playing the fool every now and then.

“Kicking, huh? Sounds good to me!”

“I’m not about to let you beat me.”

While standing upside down, Saku approached Kazuki, his legs kicking wildly at the air.

““““Ugh, this is so weird!””””

Me, Yuzuki, and Haru all yelped the same thing at the same time.

—Ucchi was flapping her legs against the ground, almost like she was imitating Saku.

“And so...” Kazuki smiled.

“Kenta, Kaito, let’s get him.”

“...Huh?”

““On it!””

Kentacchi grinned, approaching Saku.

“Hey, that’s no fair!”

“Really? I don’t remember deciding on any rules stating the losers can no longer participate in the competition, right?”

Kaito was right behind Kentacchi.

“Now, let’s see how strong your core is, Chitose!”

“Hey stop, hey... Ah-ha-ha-ha!!!”

Kenta and Kaito tickled Saku’s side and the soles of his feet.

Kazuki, landing gracefully, grinned and blew a kiss at the screen.



“—What in the world did they make us watch?”

When the video ended, Yuzuki spoke in an astonished voice.

Haru rolled on the futon, piping up, too.

“Seriously. I knew it’d be something totally dumb, but that was way dumber than I expected.”

“Did their brains stop developing when they were in elementary school?”

Ucchi finally caught her breath and spoke then. “Hmph, I’m putting in a complaint tomorrow. Saku went way too far with that.”

Yuzuki lay down on her stomach and smirked, propping her chin up with her elbows. “Ucchi, I didn’t know you could laugh like that. It’s surprising, since you’re always so graceful.”

“Oh, don’t. I’m embarrassed. I sometimes find myself laughing when I don’t mean to, but once I turn on the switch, I can’t seem to make myself stop.”

“Well, seeing Chitose and Mizushino in their little shorty outfits certainly made me laugh, especially when they always act so cool. And Kaito and Yamazaki were genuinely funny, too.”

“Hey, hey, stop. If I think too hard about it, I’ll lose it again.”

“Still,” Yuzuki said. “The three of them are really good friends, aren’t they? I mean, Yamazaki fits right in, but those three have been like that ever since first year, haven’t they?”

Ucchi was still desperately trying not to break down again, so I answered instead.

“Yeah, they’ve been super tight ever since we started at Fuji High. And they’ve been that way since.”

“Huh? What about arguments?”

“They’re always joking around like today, but I don’t think they’ve ever had a serious fight.”

“Well, I guess there’s nothing to fight about.”

Haru piped up, in an ironic voice. “Hey, what do you think they’re talking about over there? Like in the hot springs or before bed?”

“Well, judging from the IQ levels on display just now, probably our boobs and... Oh.”

“Hey! Nana! What was that ‘oh’ about? Why were you looking at me? And why did you look like you were in pain? Huh?”

Listening to them snipe back and forth, I tightly grasped the hem of my T-shirt.

This whole time...

No, actually, for a long time, since way before I even came here...

There’s something I’ve wanted to try tonight, with Ucchi and everyone.

And that thing is...girl talk!

So I jumped in, hoping to create an opportunity.

“And maybe they’ll chat about what girls they have crushes on!” I squawked.

The others looked blankly at each other, then Yuzuki burst out laughing.

“Now that you mention it, it’s practically a given. Although I’m pretty sure Kazuki’s got a girl on the go.”

Haru responded to that. “But you know, he’s always joking around with you, Yuzuki. I think maybe he likes you!”

Yuzuki frowned. “No way. If there was a girl he seriously liked, he’s the type to play it straight. He wouldn’t tease her or act like a silly elementary school boy. He’s obviously just making fun of me.”

“Hmm, yeah, he’s not Kaito.”

“Anyway, I like to believe I can tell when a guy likes me or not.”

“Wow, the way you say that is so annoying...”

“Anyway,” I said. “Have you guys never had a boyfriend before?”

Yuzuki answered first. “Nope, because there was never a boy around more attractive than me.”

Haru continued. “No! There was no man around with more zest for life than me!”

Then finally, Ucchi spoke. “No. Because I’m too plain and boring.”

“Wait a minute, Ucchi. Don’t say that. It’s so sad!”

Everyone giggled in unison.

Yuzuki gently sat up. “Well, what about you, Yuuko?”

“No, never. Everyone treats me differently, you see.”

“Huh?”

I thought I’d made a joke out of it, but everyone was gazing solemnly at me now.

After a moment, Yuzuki smiled gently. “I agree. Yuuko, you were able to stay special.”

“Huh...?”

Before I could confirm the meaning of the words, the conversation moved on.

It was a little disappointing, but more importantly...

“Isn’t it crazy that none of us have crushes, when we’re all such cuties?”

Now's the time, I thought.

What I wanted to ask most, what I wanted to confirm.

I really didn't want to ask, I didn't want to know for sure, but...still.

I smiled and raised my hand.

"Okay, okay, so does anyone have a crush on someone NOW? Because I have a crush on Saku!"

"Oh, how predictable."

"I totally agree."

"Um, ha-ha..."

The responses in order: Yuzuki, Haru, Ucchi.

I know, but aren't those responses kinda lukewarm? Although that's not the important thing here.

"Well then, what about you, Yuzuki?" I asked... *Oh no, I actually asked.*

Even though I already knew the answer.

Yuzuki was startled, unusual for her, and thought about it for a moment.

"And what about you, Haru? What about you, Ucchi?!"

I asked all the girls in quick succession.

I grinned, with my classic Yuuko airheadedness, as I cut right to the chase.

"..."

"... .."

"... .."

After a silence I'd already anticipated, Haru was the first to grin with teeth.

"Right now, basketball is my only love!"

Hearing that, Yuzuki took a deep breath and exhaled. With her "perfect girl" face on, she said, "Me too... I don't think there's anyone I have a specific crush on." She tilted her head bashfully.

Ucchi remained Ucchi to the last moment.

“No crushes for me, either.”

And she smiled softly, just like she did that day.

And so Yuuko Hிரagi said, “Aw, come on, you guys are so boring!”

“I wasn’t ready to coach Haru in the ways of boys yet.”

“And I wasn’t prepared to take on the battle that is romance just yet.”

“Okay...”

Yes... Just as I predicted.

Yuzuki, Haru, Uchi...

—*Thank you, and...I’m sorry.*



“I’m thirsty, so I’m heading to the vending machine.”

After leaving the room, I, Yuzuki Nanase, finally took a deep breath.

After exhaling said deep breath, I took a few more.

This is...not ideal.

Oh man, it came as a complete surprise.

“Me too... I don’t think there’s anyone I have a specific crush on.”

I tried my best to phrase it so it wasn’t an outright lie.

I don’t have a crush on Chitose, but I do adore him.

I mean, I think he’s the one I’m meant to be with.

I can’t put him in a box marked “crush” all that easily, nor can I say I like him to his face. It’s just not me.

But I know I’m running away by fudging my words. The feelings welling up inside me were similar to the ones I remembered feeling at Chitose’s place.

It would have been nice if the other woman was some girl whose name I didn’t even know.

Then I could have held my head up with pride and been like, “I’m Yuzuki Nanase.”

I could have told her, “You’re not enough to capture the attention of a guy like him.”

But, then...

When I realized Haru had fallen for Chitose, I just didn’t feel like that.

After all, she’s my teammate, a rival I want to surpass one day. Even in love, I could fight her, fair and square.

I guess I’m just a kid, too.

But I can’t get Yuuko’s innocent smile out of my head.

Ever since I was a little girl, I’ve been special, and because of that, I’ve learned how to deal with the jealousy and envy of those around me, as well as their selfish fantasies and disillusionments.

But *that* special girl is purer, warmer, and kinder than I am, and that’s why she’s been loved by everyone and has lived an honest life until now.

...And I’m painfully aware of how dangerous that is.

I never went out of my way to tell her, just because of who I am as a person, but I was secretly really happy that I’d become friends with Yuuko in second year.

Since I used to hang out mostly with my friends on the girls’ basketball team, when it came to fashion and beauty, I tended to be the one teaching them. So going shopping for clothes together, swapping favorites, and doing girly things like that...the friendship with Yuuko was a bit of a dream come true.

Going shopping, just us two, was so much fun.

Still, I thought.

The more I yearned for Chitose, the more I tried to get closer to him, the harder it got to hear Yuuko say things like, “Chitose and I are endgame!”

I thought I had it all clear in my head, I thought I was prepared, but...

—Maybe I’d be the first one to betray and hurt that special girl.

Ah, yeah.

This is what it means to be really in love with someone.



The second day of the summer study trip.

I, Saku Chitose, stayed in the restaurant even after finishing up with the breakfast buffet.

On the third day, we'll be going to the beach and having a barbecue, and the last day would probably be really busy, so I thought today would be the best day to study with Asuka.

It looked like everyone on Team Chitose was planning to use the hall again today.

When I explained that I'd be studying elsewhere—and why—Kaito was unsurprisingly furious, but for some reason, the girls were just like, "All right, then."

Yuuko was the only one who smiled and waved, saying, "Off you go!"

The usual frigid stares were absent, which was weird, and made me wonder if something had happened within their group.

"Good morning!"

While I was busy wondering, Asuka appeared at the table.

"Hey, that's...", I mumbled involuntarily.

Asuka was wearing a short-sleeved dress with a small bow at her neck. It was cobalt blue, like the summer sea, with little polka dots—the dress I'd bought for her at Takadanobaba, the time we went to Tokyo together.

Asuka folded her hands in front of her body and spoke shyly. "Well, I had a feeling we'd be able to meet here."

"Well, what if we couldn't have?"

"Then I wouldn't have even brought this dress on the trip."

Her expression was so cute that I pressed my lips tightly together.

"So," Asuka said, timidly, "maybe you did, too?"

I swallowed.

I was wearing the retro-patterned shirt that I had bought that day.

“Uh, yeah... Yes, of course, really, I swear.” I looked away as I responded.

“...Hmm?” One step, two steps... Asuka came near, peering into my face.

With a faint smile, she said, “Would you like to go to your room now, friend?”

“*Ahem*, I’ve been warned against having impure relations by Kura...”

“It’s okay. I just wanted to make sure you have a spare shirt.”

“—I’m sorry!” I bashed my forehead against the table.

Then Asuka said something else, in a sweeter voice than usual.

“We said we’d go on a date wearing the clothes we bought together that day, right? So I wanted you to be the first to see me in it. I waited until my friends all left the room to get changed, then made sure no one else caught a glimpse of me on my way here, you know?”

“To be fair, even if I did suggest that, I never said anything about what I’d be wearing...”

She directed a faint smile at me. “I’m leaving.”

“No, no, I was in the wrong. I’m sorry, wait!”

“Hmph.”

I managed to calm Asuka and finally put her in a good mood by suggesting that we take a short walk along the beach after lunch.

By the way, I’d snagged us a four-seater table by the window.

You can see the sea from there, too, so it’s a pretty swanky self-study spot.

Asuka looked a little hesitant, then sat down on my right and spoke.

“I-it feels kinda weird.”

“I thought so, too.”

We’ve sat side by side before, but when we spread our textbooks and various implements on the table like this, it felt strange.

“If we were in the same class, would something like this have happened? Me praying for the seat beside you the day before the seat arrangements got switched?”

“Oh man, what a cute image...”

“And then, other stuff, too...”

Asuka screwed one of her earphones into my right ear.

“When we find a song we like, we listen to it together after school.”

Playing in the earphone was a song I knew well, Bump of Chicken’s “If You Pass Through the Same Door.”

I closed my eyes to see how it felt. Yeah, it felt like the two of us were really in the classroom after school.

“...I had a chat with Okuno yesterday.”

When I said that, Asuka was slightly startled.

“Wh-what did he say to you?”

I hesitated, but it wasn’t like I was under a gag order or anything. And anyway, he was the one who’d spilled the beans.

“He said you turned him down, Asuka.”

“Other than that?!”

“It’s all right, he didn’t give the reason why. He just said he wished he’d confessed his feelings to you earlier, that’s all.”

“I see...”

“Is it okay to keep talking about this?”

To be honest, the current state of our relationship seems really up in the air.

We’re no longer the elusive older girl and wide-eyed younger boy.

We haven’t gone back to being little kid Asuka and little kid Saku, either, of course.

I don’t think it’s a convenient misunderstanding or anything, that we’re starting to think of each other as the opposite sex now. But when we were

destined to say good-bye in only a few months, I couldn't help but measure the distance between us.

It was true that something had changed, but on the surface, we continued to interact as we always did.

...Well, except for the fact that we didn't hide the childish or frivolous sides of ourselves anymore.

That was why I wasn't sure if I should keep up with the deal Asuka and I had. Where I'd open up to her about my worries and get her opinion.

A little giggle spilled out of her mouth. "Yeah. I want to talk with you as much as I can, about as much as I can, in the time we have left."

Her words made the back of my eyes sting, but I continued, wanting to be understood.

"Don't you think it's difficult, finding the right timing to confess?" I regretted it as soon as I'd said it—I hadn't thought it over enough.

But Asuka didn't seem perturbed. "Confess what? From the context, I'm guessing you mean letting someone know you have romantic feelings for them?"

She looked at me, confusion in her eyes, and I nodded.

"Assuming the person you like doesn't already have someone they like," I added.

"If you confess the moment you realize you've caught feelings... Well, the chances of it going well aren't high, but you can avoid a situation where the person you like gets another boyfriend or girlfriend while you're hesitating. Also, I've heard of people starting to like someone only after they've been confessed to. Like, you can't help noticing it and thinking about it after that."

Well, yeah...

Anyone would... And then I kept seeing a ponytail flip, in the back of my mind...

"Maybe the best time is when you're sure the other person reciprocates your feelings, though. It's based on facts, so it takes the longest amount of time to

confirm, but it's got a higher chance of success than the scenario I just laid out."

"But sometimes, the other person won't return your feelings, no matter how much time passes. In that case, wouldn't that mean keeping your feelings shut up in a drawer forever and just kinda letting things slide?"

I'm sure Okuno didn't want to see his love disappear into the ether bit by bit like that.

"Also," I said. "What if you just can't hold back? What if it just bursts out?"

Yikes, that makes me think of that bobbing ponytail as well...

Oh, come to think of it, before that...

"And there's another scenario." Asuka interrupted my thoughts. "When you have no choice but to confess. Like when you find out that someone else is about to confess to the person you like. Or the person you like is about to transfer schools, or maybe you yourself are going to be leaving soon..."

Her words made me turn to my side to gaze at her.

Her gaze drifted past me and out to the ocean.

Right around the corner, Okuno had said.

No one was going to reassure me that it wasn't.

"Hee-hee," Asuka laughed, looking at me with a mischievous expression. "Hey, Saku, can you show me your notebook?"

I knew what she was after, so I smirked as I answered.

"Sure thing, Asuka. They're not very neat, though, I warn you."

"Saku, do you have any sticky notes?"

"I have, but please return the stack once you're done, Asuka."

We only have now, I thought.

Let's be classmates here in this moment, and study together.

Let's be seatmates, for the first and last time. After all, they'll switch the seats around again all too soon.



After finishing our one-on-one study session, we ate lunch together, took a light walk along the coastline promenade, and then returned to the hotel.

Asuka said she was going right back to studying in the restaurant, so we said bye at the lobby.

I started heading to the hall, figuring I'd join the gang, when...

"Saku!"

...Yuuko's shout made me stop in my tracks.

A tall guy was looking around, then raised a hand and beckoned to me.

"Hey, Saku, over here."

Yuuko and Kaito were in the hotel's shop.

"What's up? Taking a break?" I asked.

"Yeah," said Yuuko, "but I also thought I should buy some kind of souvenir for my mom."

"Ah, yes, for Kotone."

I'd only met her briefly, but she'd left a lasting impression on me.

Kaito made a noise of surprise.

"Uh, what? You've already been introduced to Yuuko's mom?!"

"It was more of a kidnapping than an introduction."

"What's she like? Beautiful?!"

"She looked more like Yuuko's older sister than her mom."

"Yuuko, why don't you introduce me, too?!"

Yuuko glared back. "I don't want you looking at my mom like that. And anyway, I don't have any reason to introduce you to my mom."

"You could just introduce me as a friend?!"

Yuuko ignored Kaito. "Anyway, what are *you* up to? Been enjoying yourself, cheating on us all?"

"Don't use misleading expressions in public."

“Abandoning your endgame wife for a fling with some older woman...?”

“Hey, this vibe has been weird all day, hasn’t it?”

Unlike me, I wasn’t playing along, but calling it out.

Never mind Nanase and Haru, Yuuko doesn’t usually make ironic jokes like this.

Even if I had a snappy comeback for her, she wasn’t the type who would usually need a snappy comeback.

Yuuko looked stunned. “Er, what...?”

“We’ve been friends how long now? You should know what I mean.”

It had been about a year and a half now.

Me, Yuuko, Kazuki, Kaito—us four had spent most of our high school life together.

“Oh, I see, Saku. So you do get it.” Yuuko smiled softly, somewhat ephemerally.

Kaito lowered his eyes. “Ha-ha, I hadn’t noticed anything was different.”

The atmosphere had changed suddenly, so I decided to hit the reset button. “So have you decided on a souvenir?”

Both Yuuko and Kaito suddenly regained their usual expressions.

I smiled wryly, already well used to this kind of thing.

“I know what I’m getting Mom! Some *momi wakame*!”

“W-wow, that’s kinda... Old-school.”

By the way, *momi wakame* is a specialty of Tojinbo. It’s like *furikake*, made by drying natural seaweed in the sun and rubbing it loosely with the hands.

When you pour it over rice, you can smell the sea, and the faint saltiness is insanely delicious.

“Well, then,” I continued. “What are you deliberating over, then? Souvenirs for yourself?”

Yuuko tilted her head. “Souvenirs for you, of course.”

“Hold on, do you understand the concept of a souvenir?”

“Oh, but I thought I’d give you something anyway. As a surprise present!”

“Do you understand the concept of a surprise?” I laughed, rolling my eyes a little.

I stood beside Yuuko and Kaito and checked out the rack of keychains.

They had Fukui Prefecture’s official dinosaur brand character “Juratic,” and a limited-edition regional Hello Kitty, wearing a crab head.

“I’m sorry, but I’m not the kind of person who hangs keychains off my bag.”

“Oh yeah,” Yuuko said. “I wanted us to buy matching ones...”

“You don’t have to buy every souvenir just ‘cause it’s available.”

“...No. It has to be something from here.”

Her voice was oddly earnest. She must have had something in mind.

“... Then how about this?”

I held up a leather keychain shaped like a puzzle piece to show Yuuko.

It came in various colors, so if we went for this, it would work well for fashionable Yuuko. Plus, the keychains could be connected, like real puzzle pieces, apparently.

Yuuko picked it up, stared at it, then...

“This one!” she chirped. “You’ll buy mine as a present, Saku! And I’ll buy yours!”

“All right. But what about Kaito?”

“*Ahem!*” Kaito said. “I’m not really into that kind of thing, so don’t mind me. I’m just going to the bathroom!”

“*Tsk.*” I sighed.

This kinda opportunity doesn’t come around every day.

“What color do you want, Yuuko?”

“Hmm, I want you to choose for me!”

“Then...this one?”

I picked up an orange one, partly because of the imagery the name conjures. It's warm and bright, and I thought it would suit Yuuko well.

“Yeah! I'm so happy.”

“Then choose one for me, Yuuko.”

“Um... Maybe this one is kinda you, Saku?”

Yuuko picked up one in a deep-blue color, like the night of a new moon.

When I put the missing parts together as a test, they connected perfectly, as if they were originally cut from a single piece of leather.

We paid for each of them and exchanged bags.

Yuuko immediately took out her keychain and squeezed it tightly in front of her chest.

Then she slipped it back in the bag, like it was a precious treasure...

“Hey, Saku?” Yuuko smiled brightly. “I'll never, ever forget, okay?”

It was odd...

It sounded like a good-bye, and somehow I couldn't bring myself to nod back.



That night after dinner, I rested a little, then changed into a T-shirt and shorts to get a workout in. Kazuki, Kaito, and Kenta headed for the hot springs, but since I'd come all the way to the coast, I decided a run by the ocean would be nice.

When I left the room, I encountered Yuuko and the girls' team walking toward me. It looked like they were on their way to the hot spring, too.

“Hmm? What are you doing, Chitose?” asked Haru, in the lead.

“I was thinking of going for a light run. I haven't worked out in two days, so I don't feel so great.”

Nanase frowned as she spoke. “Ugh, if you have that much stamina, you should take my place for morning basketball practice. We were forced to do

sprints this morning while everyone else was enjoying the buffet.”

Wow, they really did do sprints.

That must be why they arrived so late at the restaurant.

While I was thinking about that, Haru said, “Hey, Chitose. I’m gonna go change, so would you wait in the lobby for me?”

“Huh?”

“I want to run with you, too!”

Nanase laughed and rolled her eyes. “Are you crazy?”

Without waiting for a response, Haru turned and headed back to their room.

When I stepped outside the hotel, I could feel the summer air swirling around my legs.

Fresh vegetation, a salty sea breeze, and the scent of a bonfire coming from the campsite.

“We don’t need a warm-up, do we?” I said to Haru, who was walking next to me.

“Guess not. It’s hot out.”

To be honest, I was a little relieved.

We had stretched together in Higashi Park before, but I wasn’t sure I could still do the same thing now with a straight face.

When I started running lightly, Haru fell into step with me to my right. “Chitose, it’s okay to pick up the pace a little more.”

“You shouldn’t overtrain during a trip. Let’s take it easy and chat while we run.”

“Well, okay.”

As soon as we stepped outside the resort grounds, the scent of the sea became stronger.

Swoosh, swoosh, went the ocean waves.

Thunk, thunk, thunk, went our footsteps.

The road had almost no streetlights—just a crescent moon smiling above.

It was a quiet and gentle night.

With just a little stretch of my hand, I felt like I could rake up the stars like a handful of *konpeito* candy.

“...Haru.” I put my arm around her small shoulder as she ran beside me, and...

“Hey, what are you doing? We’re in public.”

...I swiftly swung her around to my other side.

“...Huh?” She grunted in surprise.

“It’s pretty dark. Let me run next to the road.”

“...I love it, but someone might have interpreted that differently, you know!”

I laughed it off, but I felt a little rattled inside.

I love it, she’d said, the words so natural.

I felt bad for grabbing her shoulder the same way I would a male friend, but she was making it sound like she wanted to misconstrue the situation.

Hearing that from Haru... It kinda hit differently.

I shook my head slightly and changed the topic.

“So how’s the team been since everything that happened?”

“Oh, it’s great! We’ve been unstoppable... We’ve won all the practice games.”

“That’s amazing. Guess it’s Ashi High next, huh?”

“You know it!” Haru smiled shyly as she ran. “Speaking of Ashi High, Mai’s been blowing up my phone since that day, so annoying!”

“Mai... You mean Mai Todo?”

The ace of the Ashi High girls’ basketball club.

Her dynamic playing style in the practice match was still fresh in my memory.

“Yeah, she’s all, ‘*Let’s play some one-on-one whenever you have time.*’”

“It’s great to be able to practice with the prefecture’s top player on a casual basis, huh?”

“Well, that’s certainly true, but...”

Just then, I spotted a side road leading to the fishing harbor.

We’d only been running for a few minutes, but...

“Wanna head to the harbor? After all, we are on a seaside trip.”

“Sure!”

When we started down the gentle slope, I suddenly spotted a graveyard at the end.

“...Actually, I changed my mind.” As we ran, Haru grabbed my T-shirt.

“It’s pretty atmospheric out here in the dark.”

“I wasn’t looking for THAT kind of atmosphere!”

What kind of atmosphere are you looking for? I was about to say, but I stopped myself.

Things between us were clunky, for sure.

After passing the cemetery at a brisk pace, we gradually slowed down and switched to walking.

The waves in the fishing port undulated calmly, while small fishing boats swayed sleepily on the waves.

Actually, I thought it would be nice to sit on the breakwater, but if we slipped and fell in the dark, that would get real bad.

But there was a small beach, so we went down there instead.

“Hey, Chitose.”

Haru beckoned to me on the beach.

I squatted down beside her, and...

“Gimme your hand a sec.”

...she put her hand on mine, then dipped our hands in the sea.

“Hee-hee, we’re the first ones.”

Her carefree smile made my heart leap.

“ ... ”

“ ”

We stared at each other for a moment, then we seemed to remember, and we moved apart.

“Ah, I’m sorry. I just thought we were lucky to be the first ones at the beach, I didn’t mean anything by it...”

“I... I know. Anyway, what was that about Mai Todo? You were just about to say something.” I forced a change of subject.

“R-right! I mean, I don’t mind talking basketball with her, but she’s always asking about you, Chitose, and other stuff like that.”

“About me.....?”

“ ... ”

Haru blinked, obviously realizing she’d just let something big slip.

She went bright red and looked away, scratching her head in a “Darn it!” kinda way.

Then she stared hard at me. “Chitose, don’t you think our current relationship is kinda uncomfortable?”

“Most definitely.”

“I think it’s probably because I ran off. I don’t know where we stand now or how we should treat each other, so I’m confused.”

I tightly clenched my fists and stared back into Haru’s eyes.

“Honestly, I feel the same. Should I respond to what you told me, Haru? Or should I just laugh it off?”

“ ... ”

Haru lowered her eyes, and her voice was a little tight.

“Um, well, it was just the excitement of the situation, I think. After watching your game, and finishing the basketball game with Mai and the others, it’s like I got caught up in the heat of the moment...”

Her voice grew weaker and thinner.

“So about that day... I don’t want you to...”

I prepared myself for her to say that she didn’t want me to worry about it.

Scuff. Haru took a step forward and looked straight into my eyes.

Then she took a deep breath, clenched her fists, and...

“...I don’t want you to just laugh it off!!!”

...she roared at the top of her voice.

“I can’t just pretend like it never happened! I want you to see me as a girl you can fall in love with, not someone you can hang out with, like a guy friend!”



*

She was gasping, more out of breath now than when we were running.

“But there’s a clear line we have to draw before I ask you to be my boyfriend, and I want to convey those words properly from the bottom of my heart, not just on the spur of the moment.”

Haru grinned.

“I won’t tell you to wait. But one day, when I’m ready to take you on for real... will you accept my challenge?”

Honestly... What are you...?

“Yeah. Then I’ll give back as good as I get.”

I laughed loudly, my eyes squinting up, as if she was a brilliant light.

Haru took a short breath, signaling this conversation was over.

“Well, then, shall we continue our run?”

I stretched. “I’ve changed my mind. I’m going to run all-out now, so try to keep up.”

“Wait, stick with me until we’re past the graveyard!”

We kicked up soft sand as we started back up again.

This kind of thing suits us much better—not just standing around avoiding looking at each other.

It’s important, though. And so...I want to treat it with the importance it deserves.

★

Back at the hotel, I found the room dark, the lights off.

I figured the three guys were in the hot springs, but only the incandescent light bulb in the back part of the room was lit up. Kaito was there, staring blankly out the window.

I went inside without turning on the lights.

Kaito looked up and saw me, raising his hand with a “hey.”

It looked like he was wearing the hotel-provided *yukata* tonight. The way he tied the obi was pretty crude, but it looked pretty good on him with his height.

“Where’s Kazuki and Kenta?”

“They’re still in the hot springs. They take ages, going in and out of the sauna and stuff. I hate doing the same things and sitting around, so I left first.”

“Ah yeah, I get it.”

As I spoke, I took off my running T-shirt, wiped my body with a towel and a deodorant sheet, and finished with a spritz of Sea Breeze.

The air filled with the smell of it, reminding me of the end of club activities, and the air conditioner against my skin felt ice-cold.

I put on the T-shirt I’d used as pajamas last night—it had to be better than the sweaty one.

I was actually planning to go straight to the hot springs, but for some reason, I ended up sitting down across from Kaito.

Beyond the window, the sea was pitch-black, like a smear of dark paint.

I started talking aimlessly.

“I was out running with Haru. I ran into her outside and she said she wanted to come with.”

Kaito lifted the corner of his mouth, rolling his eyes. “Yeah, that sounds like her,” he said, propping his chin up in his hand.

“Hey, Saku, can I ask you something?”

“No, you cannot.”

“I thought you’d say that.” He laughed, but kept talking anyway. “Yuzuki, Haru, Nishino. Be real with me. Is there something going on there?”

“...What do you mean?”

“I mean, like, romantically.”

“...”

He knew only the vaguest outline of what had happened with Nanase and

Haru, but as far as I knew, he knew nothing about me and Asuka.

Maybe he was just asking for the heck of it, just to be friendly, or maybe he had something heavier on his mind.

...Either way, I didn't want to burden Kaito, who already worried too much about stuff.

We've only known each other since we entered high school, but he's a genuinely good guy.

He's straightforward and honest with everyone, and he always thinks of his friends.

When he hears about the sorrow and suffering of others, he feels that sorrow and suffering as if it were his own, and he always tries to help in some way.

Still, his one flaw is that he tends to act without thinking about the consequences, and sometimes he needs monitoring.

Come to think of it, Kaito was the first to get angry when he heard about Kenta's story.

Kaito was the first to rush to me when I was confronted by those Yan High grunts at the library.

Kaito was the first to chase after Nanase when she left, saying she'd go home alone.

And at Hachiban's after the batting center, when Asuka came up, it was Kaito who got all fired up on someone else's behalf.

I think the word *hero* is meant for people like him.

So I can't tell Kaito about the stuff I know I need to face up to myself. He'll take it upon himself to worry, mourn, and suffer in the same exact way.



It all seemed suddenly funny, and I had to laugh.

“No, nothing romantic, at this point.”

Kaito smiled, like he didn’t suspect a thing. “Right! Good, that’s a relief!”

“Why, what’s up?”

“Well...”

After a little hesitation, he continued. “No, I don’t think I’ll say it after all.”

His face grew solemn. “Hey, Saku... Can you promise me just one thing? It’s not my place to say it, I know, but someday I want you to face up to her feelings head-on. Don’t just laugh it off or run away from it.”

“Wow, that’s poetic stuff.”

“Well, it seems like the right time for it.”

We looked at each other, and then we both burst out laughing.

“That’s right,” I said.

“Okay, it’s a man’s promise. And I’ll make sure to let you know when it happens.”

To borrow Haru’s words, it was a clear line that couldn’t be avoided anyway.

Kaito smiled.

“Just so you know, even if you do come to me with it, it’s not like I’ll be able to advise you, you know?”

“Why would you think I’d even expect that?”

Then us two jerks laughed, our shoulders shaking.

I promise, I thought.

That’s my version of sincerity, toward you and your endless kindness.



It was just past noon on the third day.

We’d come to Mikuni Sunset Beach, which was about a ten-minute bus ride from our hotel.

It was the peak of the season, so even though it was a weekday, the beach was bustling. Colorful pop-up tents dotted the sand, and more importantly, young girls were walking around in colorful swimsuits.

We boys were only wearing swim shorts and T-shirts, so we just stripped off our shirts and ran across the sand barefoot, until...

““““Agh!!!””””

...we quickly ran back and put on our sandals.

I was busy with club activities, so I actually don't know how many years it's been since I've been to the beach to swim.

I'd completely forgotten about the heat of the summer sand.

It seemed like Kazuki and Kaito were the same, and any way you slice it, Kenta wasn't the type to come to the beach each summer.

The sky was as clear as Blue Hawaii syrup, and thunderclouds floated there like freshly shaved ice. The sun's glare was strong, and it seared the skin like squid grilled at a beach hut.

We set up our rental beach umbrellas and pop-up tents that we'd registered for in advance. We spread out vinyl sheets under the former and threw our stuff into the latter.

Filled with a swelling feeling of excitement for summer vacation, for this trip, and more than anything else, for the prospect of finally seeing the girls' swimsuits, I couldn't help but dash to the beach, when...

““““Yodele-hee-hoo!””””

Kaito, Kenta, and I all hollered.

“Hey, quit yodeling! That's for the mountains!”

Kazuki rolled his eyes.

““““Goddammit, ocean!””””

“Stop yelling at it!”

Everyone burst out laughing.

The Sea of Japan was a dazzling cobalt blue, or maybe emerald green—ah no, I can't stretch the truth that far.

It wasn't that transparent; the blue was actually quite dark.

Still, it was the color of summer to us. It always had been, ever since we were young.

I called out to Kenta, who was standing next to me. "Hey, you really have gained a little muscle."

Following his success with dieting, I'd gotten the impression that he was secretly more of a skinny type, but now it seemed that he'd filled out a little. He was sturdier.

Kenta puffed out his chest and chuckled. "Recently, I've been doing a lot of research into bodyweight training and trying to challenge myself with it. I hated it at first—it was pure torture—but I guess I've gotten into the habit."

"Have you, now? That's fine. Just be careful not to overdo it."

"You mean like injure myself?"

"No, I mean I don't want to see you turn into some kind of macho muscleman."

"You're the one who told me to make an effort to change."

For a while, we screamed and ran around, and then we returned beneath the shade of our beach umbrella.

If we didn't wait here, Yuuko and the others wouldn't know where we were.

Even so, I thought...

"It's hard to just sit still."

""""Agreed.""""

The other three, including Kazuki for once, responded to my words in unison.

No matter how cool he usually tries to act, he's a healthy high school boy who gets excited by the glimpse of bra straps.

He was about to get an eyeful of his classmates—all of them really pretty girls

at that—in their swimsuits. Staying cool at a time like this was just unfeasible.

“All right everyone, let’s have a serious discussion.”

Gazing into the distance, I spoke in a mysterious, somber tone.

“Why is it that we can look at swimwear, but not underwear? The amount of cloth coverage is exactly the same, is it not? Yet a glimpse of panties gets us yelled at. Doesn’t that strike you as unfair?”

“Oh man!!!” Kaito whirled to face me, bellowing. “Oh man, I’m scared all of a sudden! What if I pitch a tent when I see them? Man, I just might!”

“Hmm, I would like to make fun of you for being vulgar, but I can’t exactly laugh at the idea, either.”

I mean, right?

Wouldn’t it be normal to get excited if Yuuko or Nanase appeared in front of me in their underwear?

Yes, absolutely.

But in swimsuits? What am I expected to do, retain a glacial calmness? I mean, does that sound realistic?

All of a sudden, Kazuki grinned a confident grin. “You’re all still just boys.”

Annoyed, I opened my mouth. “What, are you saying you wouldn’t be excited at all?”

The preternaturally cool guy that he was, he wagged his finger in front of his lips. “I’m wearing a cup.”

“I didn’t know that was an option!”

“Just joking.” Kazuki laughed.

Yeah, he was definitely as on edge as the rest of us.

I thought about what he’d divulged in the hot spring, and I looked at Kenta to distract myself.

“She sells seashells by the seashore, the shells she sells are surely seashells, so if she sells shells on the seashore, I’m sure she sells seashore shells...”

Ah, thanks. I feel a bit calmer now.

But just as I thought that...

“Saaaku.”

I was tapped on the shoulder from behind.

I swallowed and made eye contact with my group of buddies.

Then I took a few deep breaths and slowly turned around with a steely determination.

—Whoa.

Two goddesses, Yuuko and Nanase, stood there.

Yuuko was wearing a bikini covered in bright-yellow pop art–style flowers.

The center of the bra and the sides of the shorts were laced up with strings, so you could see not only the cleavage but also the underboob.

Honestly, when people describe a physique as “a teen boy’s dream,” this is what they’re talking about. She was curved out in certain places, curved in in others, and the whole effect was covered with a thin gossamer veil of “female.”

If you touched her skin with your fingertips, they’d melt in, it seemed.

The strings ate into her skin a little around the boobs and the hips, which added to the soft impression.

And the destructive power of her hemispherical E cups was formidable.

I knew they were big, and frankly, if I’m honest, I’ve caught a glimpse of her cleavage before, but in a bikini like this... Well, I couldn’t look directly at them, nor could I take my eyes off them.

“My eyesss!!!”

The guy beside me seemed to have blown a fuse.

“Hey, Saku? Whatcha think? Huh?”

“S-stay back! Let our eyes adjust first!”

“Huh? What kind of reaction is that?!”

“You mistake me. It suits you very well, but it’s a lot for high school boys.”

“Does that mean your heart’s pounding?”

“My heart *is* pounding, and it’s going so fast, it feels like I’m gonna die.”

“Hee-hee, then I guess it’s fine!” Yuuko gave a small smile, and Nanase stepped forward.

“Sorry if this makes your hearts give up the ghost for good...”

She placed her hands on the back of her head and posed like a swimsuit model.

After this demonstration, she half-turned around and exposed her back.

“...Guhhh!!!”

Yikes, I might have popped a blood vessel.

Nanase wore a navy bra top with no pattern and shorts with bright-blue hibiscus flowers on them. Now, you’re probably thinking a plain bra is surprisingly simple, right? But not when it comes to Yuzuki Nanase! Wait, who the heck am I talking to?

Two wide strings extended from near the center of the bra, then went around the back so they crossed and were then tied into a low bow.

In other words, there was the bra, and then the strappings of the bra, which were so devilishly appealing, I didn’t even have the right words.

With the thick straps deliberately concealing parts of the skin, the lustrous beauty of the skin sandwiched between the two navy blue stripes was vividly emphasized.

Just like Yuuko, she had a well-defined body shape, but the impression the two gave off was quite different.

Here, the whole body was vibrant and supple. From the top of her head to the tips of her toes, her body went in a beautiful S-shape, like a flowing waterfall, and there was something mystical about it.

And her distinguished, bowl-shaped D cups had an air of dignity, as if your fingers would bounce off when you touched them.

Despite that, the armpits visible when she raised her arms had cute depressions in them. The soft skin and muscles had been moderately trained by basketball.

Now, *the last thing she'd be expecting is to have her armpits checked out*, I thought, and I felt like I was peeking at some kind of hidden secret belonging to the seemingly perfect Yuzuki Nanase. It gave me a rising sense of forbidden pleasure.

Unusually, Kazuki had averted his eyes.

Nanase smiled provocatively, laughed, and licked her lips. "Would you like a taste?"

"I'm begging you, can I ask you not to give me any more stimulation?"

"So what do you think?"

"Your entire presence should be X-rated."

"Hey, listen here... Hmm. Well, I guess you gave an honest opinion, which is all I was after."

"Hey, I'm doing my best here?!"

Man, this was no joking matter.

"How much wood would a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood? He would chuck, he would, as much as he could, and chuck as much wood as a woodchuck would if a woodchuck could chuck wood..."

Good boy, Kenta, keep it up.

Anyway, I'd made it past my first encounter with this dangerous pair of sexy beauties.

Haru and Yua were both cute, but I doubted their swimsuits could cause an impact greater than what we'd just seen.

But as I was thinking that...

"Hey, Haru! Why'd you stop over there?" Yuuko hopped up and down and waved her hand.

This she did with such naturalness that it was scary.

My eyes bobbed up and down in rhythm with her.

Well, putting that aside, I was curious what Haru was wearing.

Calmly, I turned to see...

“...Groo!!!”

The swimsuit she was wearing was an actual off-the-shoulder.

Huh? *Huh?*

Sorry to be crude, but Haru’s boobs are smaller than the other two’s. So I’d expected her to choose a top that completely covered the area.

If I looked at this rationally (not that I could, but if I could, I’d be able to tell), it was, indeed, that sort of design.

The bra and shorts, which were a translucent sort of bluish purple, were decorated with curtain-like wavy frills, giving the chest a little volume.

However, my eyes skimmed over the fine details to the healthy skin showing from her neck to her chest.

Is it possible to appear so close to being naked just by removing the shoulder straps from a bra?

I’d never tell them, but if Yuuko or Nanase wore the same thing with their big boobs, I doubt it’d have as much impact on me.

But on Haru, it looked dangerous, like it might suddenly shift and expose too much, and it made her seem innocent in a way that contrasted with her usual strength. And she was walking out on the beach in public in it... I wanted to grab her hand and pull her away where no one else could see her.

“Uh, Chitose, don’t look at me like that.”

The sight of her fidgeting and saying my name made my heart thump again.

Looking closer, I noticed faint tan marks on her neck and arms. Seeing the parts that wouldn’t usually be exposed was distracting.

The outline of abs was visible on her stomach, which was even more toned than Yuuko’s and Nanase’s, and her small, well-shaped belly button looked like some kind of decoration.

Haru opened her mouth again. “Hey, if something’s wrong, tell me. I don’t mind.”

“Y-you look great, Haru.”

“Th-thanks, er, hubby...”

“Yeah.”

Before I could say anything else, Yuuko and Nanase both started yelling.

““Hey!!!””

Yuuko was the first to speak. “The reaction I got was completely different! I wanted that kind of serious reaction!!”

Nanase clenched her fists in an exaggerated manner. “The contrast! That was the key after all!”

Come on...

I mean, sure, something vastly different from the usual does tend to have a big impact, no mistake there.

Yuuko shows a fair amount of skin even in her ordinary clothes, and Nanase usually exudes sex appeal. And when Nanase stayed at my place, various things happened...

Even Haru often wears shorts, but she doesn’t wear girlish clothes, so maybe that’s the difference.

Suddenly, something crossed my mind.

...A contrast from the usual?

“I’m sorry, everyone, I ended up being the last one here.”

As she spoke, Yua came trotting across the sand, the last to arrive.

“...Guhh!!!”

Her dark-red and retro floral swimsuit was worn with a sarong wrapped around her waist, so she was less exposed than the other three.

But let’s unpack this.

Yua usually sticks to the orthodox school uniform style, and even in her

everyday clothes, I've rarely seen her wear anything with a low V, or short shorts, or skirts.

At school, she often wears black tights during the winter, so even just seeing her bare legs in her summer clothes makes me behave quite suspiciously.

It's rare to have a chance to worship the thighs.

Just the other day, she got furious just because I sneaked a glimpse down her shirt.

And here was Yua in a bra! A bra!

Her body was somewhere between Yuuko's and Nanase's, I'd say.

Moderately curvy, just the right amount of tightness and girlish roundness.

I guess the talk was no lie after all.

Every time she took a step, the edge of her abdominal muscles lifted slightly, and her bell-shaped D cups swayed, seemingly softer than Nanase's.

The impression she gave off seemed to be a mixture of the other three.

Looking at Yuuko and Nanase made me feel like I was looking at a photobook of a celebrity. But seeing Yua bounce over the sand came with a sense of realism—I was really seeing a cute girl from my class in an actual bikini.

"Saku, mind if I sit here?"

Yua sat down beside me without even asking for my impression.

She seemed to be putting her stuff in the pop-up tent.

She twisted her upper body, turning her back to me, and...

—*Rustle.*

...slowly, maddeningly, the sarong began to bunch up.

Her plump, white thighs were revealed, and the part hidden between her open legs was briefly visible.

Sand drifted loose from where it had adhered...

"...!!!"

Instinctively, I looked away.

I felt a sweet tingling from near my midsection.

Yua finished putting away her stuff and looked at me curiously, still propped up on her hands.

Now my gaze was arrested by the smooshed-together area between her upper arms.

“What’s wrong, Saku?”

“Can you squeeze a little tighter, Yua?”

“Er, why? I mean, I guess so... How’s that?”

Looking around, I saw that Kaito, Kenta, and Kazuki were all gazing at the ground as if in deep meditation.

Glancing at us with satisfaction, the girls disappeared off toward the sea.



I was still too riled up to go and join Yuuko and the others in the surf, so I wandered the beach for a while instead.

We didn’t discuss it, but I was sure Kazuki and the others felt the same way.

We’d spent the morning studying, taken a short break after lunch, and then left the hotel, so somehow it was past two PM.

Swoosh, swoosh. I was chatting with the sand.

If you walk on the dry sand, it comes to play in your sandals, and if you walk in the surf, the sand returns to the sea.

Hey, how’s your summer going?

Not bad. How about yours?

Not bad at all. Feels like I haven’t had a summer vacation like this since elementary school.

Thinking of the faces of my friends, I thought, *oh yeah.*

What are we going to do for our beach trip?

Beach volleyball, banana boats, snorkeling...?

We don't have any of the stuff for that, and it feels a little restrictive.

What did I use to do as a kid? I wondered.

...Ah yes, building sandcastles, digging a hole, and making a path to the sea from there and trying to get the water to flow through the channel. That was a popular one. Putting on goggles, going out past my depth, trying to see if I could touch the bottom, picking up loot from the ocean floor.

And I never got tired of just lying on the water's edge and feeling the waves coming and going.

Feelings of childish frivolity swirled within me, when...

"Hey, friend! I found you!"

...a beautiful girl with short hair came running over. I waited for her to reach me before speaking.

"Recently, I'm not getting as excited when we run into each other."

"That's so mean! Hey, you hurt my feelings a little with that!"

"Just kidding. I thought you weren't going to come to the sea."

Asuka was wearing a turquoise rash guard.

It was long and covered her shorts completely.

Normally, I would have been distracted by the translucent white legs that stretched out like thin icicles underneath, but the stimulus I'd received earlier was too strong.

And after all, I'd gotten my fill of her legs during our date the other day.

Asuka smiled. "I wasn't going to, but I saw you leaving the hotel, so."

"So...?"

Asuka gripped the hem of her rash guard and looked down.

"I figured you were going to the beach with Hiiragi, Uchida, Nanase, and Aomi...but when I thought about it, I couldn't stop myself. My friends suggested that we go at some point, so I brought swimwear...just in case. So this time, it's not a coincidence, us running into each other."

“Does that mean you came here alone?”

Asuka nodded. “I wanted to see the ocean with you, while we’re both in high school.”

Ah, man. I scratched my head.

Just when I’d finally managed to calm down.

I responded in a jokey tone, as if trying to deceive myself.

“Since I’m here to make some memories, I guess making one of you in a swimsuit would be...”

—*Zzip.*

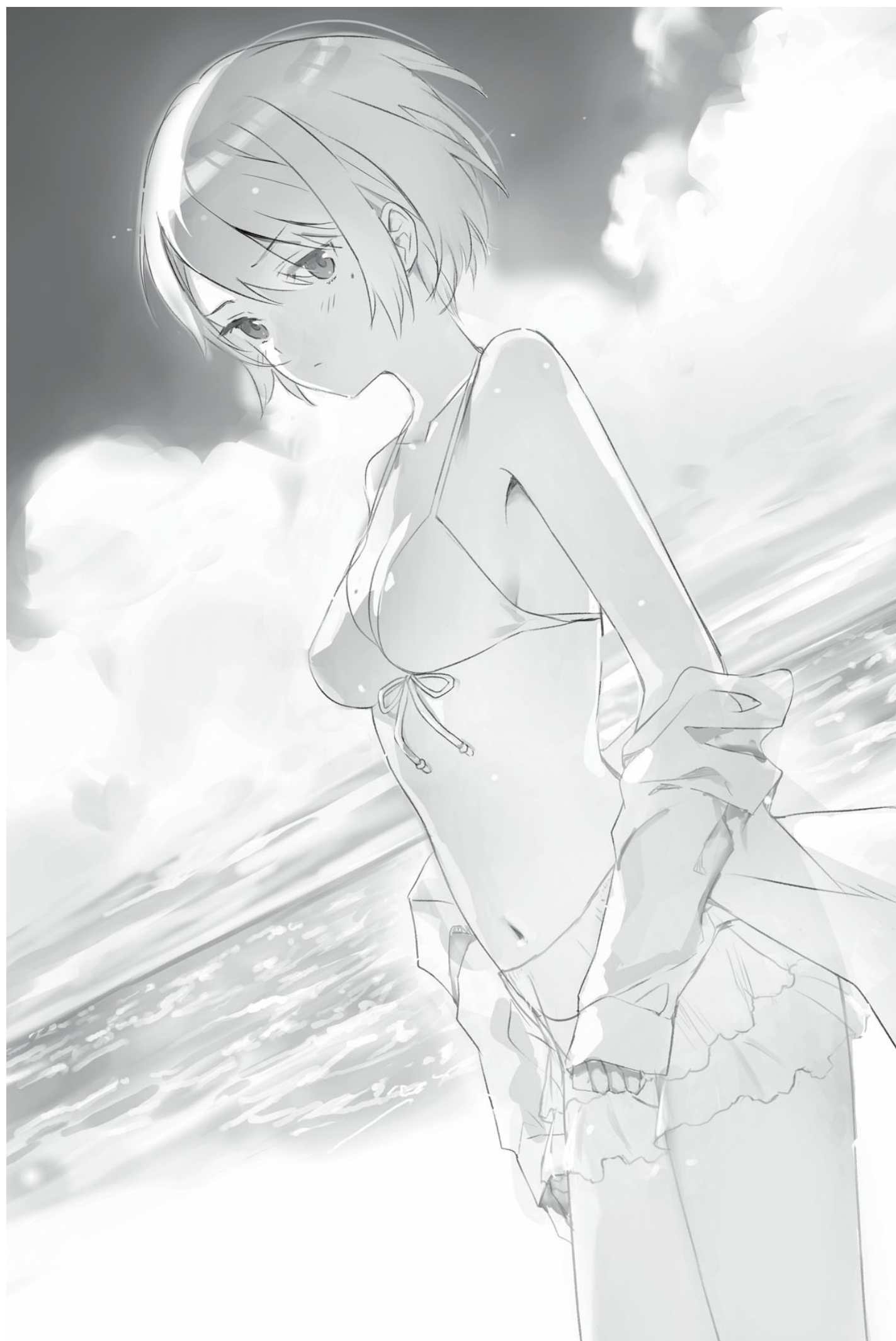
Asuka unzipped her zipper loudly, cutting me off mid-joke.

Then stripping off her rash guard...

“—So! I wanted you to be the first one to see!”

She was shouting; that wasn’t like her.

Asuka stared at me with her lips tight together, looking like a snow fairy who’d gotten lost and ended up on the beach in midsummer.



Fresh-white skin, a simple white bra, and white shorts.

The shorts were the type with a skirt, but the lower half was made of a transparent lace material, so even the tops of her thighs were clearly visible.

She was smaller than Nanase and Yua, but bigger than Haru, and nestled in her cleavage there was a single mole that floated like the first star in the night sky.

Asuka usually had a sort of androgynous aura, but there was actually a girlish roundness to her upper arms, chest, waist, and butt, and that night in Tokyo appeared vividly in my mind.

What if, back then, we'd...? I couldn't help thinking.

What if I had taken her in my arms?

What if, someday, we...? I couldn't help thinking.

What if someone else touched that skin?

...Man.

I found myself reaching out, and I clenched my fists instead as I spoke.

"You're...beautiful."

Asuka looked at me, her expression bashful. "No offensive-sounding metaphors, like usual?"

"I'm having trouble finding words right now."

"Well..." She grinned. "—I'm glad I came."

I was so happy to see that look on her face. It was maddening, adorable, and somehow made me writhe with sadness, my chest constricting.

I wished I could cry, *Don't go!* like a child.

I wished I could tell her...to wait.

But I didn't have what it took just then. So I took the opportunity to go back to those simpler days...

And the two of us kicked our feet softly in the surf.



It seemed like Asuka had just slipped out to see me, but she said she'd return to the hotel immediately on the next bus.

I saw her as far as the beach house, where the changing rooms were, and when I was walking back to join the others, I spotted Yua walking around and looking this way and that.

For some reason, she was holding hands with a little girl.

She looked up and noticed me, so I jogged over and spoke.

"Yua, what's up?"

"It looks like this little girl is lost."

I had a feeling it was something like that.

The girl had a short bob, and she clutched Yua's hand tightly as she sniffled and sobbed.

From a glance, I'd say she was about four or five years old.

Yua sounded concerned. "Should I take her to the police box or something, do you think?"

"I guess that's what we'll have to do in the end, but I didn't see one nearby from the bus. I don't know if there's one within walking distance."

I squatted down in front of the girl and smiled.

"Hi. What's your name?"

"—Waaah!!!"

When I spoke to her, the kid screamed and hid behind Yua.

"What should I do, Yua? The Chitose smile usually works on girls!"

"Yeah, they say children can see through the lies of adults."

"What does that mean?!"

But this was no time to goof around.

I spoke to the girl again. "Hey, hey, do you know what a camel is?"

"...Muh-huh."

Maybe it's because she was crying, or her way of speaking was still immature, and she was a little hard to understand, but I felt like we could manage a conversation.

To be honest, I have no idea when kids are capable of talking normally.

"Then take a look at this."

Guessing what I was about to do, Yua also squatted down and put her hands on the girl's shoulders.

I stretched my right arm out in front of me.

Then I spoke, pointing at it with my left hand.

"This is the desert. Do you understand?"

The girl shook her head.

"It's where Mr. Camel lives. There's a lot more sand than here."

The girl nodded.

"So can you and this lady both call 'Mr. Camel!' together?"

When I said that, Yua leaned in to look at the girl.

"When I say ready, set... Will you call together with me?"

"... 'kay!"

"Ready, set..."

""Mr. Caaamel!!!""

I lifted my upper arm so that my fist, which looked like a camel's head, was facing outward, and then I flexed.

"Neigh!"

I swung my fist from side to side.

"Wow!" The girl clapped her hands.

Okay, the distraction was successful. She'd stopped crying, at least.

"Would you like to touch him?"

"Uh-huh!"

The girl, still leaning on Yua's shoulder, approached and poked my fist.

"It's hard!"

"Neigh!" I moved my fists, neighing and making the camel gallop.

"Horseys say neigh."

"...Sorry, I don't know what noise a camel makes."

"But you're a grown-up."

"Weird, huh?"

"Weird!" The girl giggled as she spoke.

Yua and I exchanged looks and smiles.

Then I asked the same question as before.

"What's your name?"

"Chi!"

"Chi. That's a cute name. Did you come with your mommy?"

"Daddy, too!"

"Then when did Mommy and Daddy disappear? Just a little while ago? A long time ago?"

Chi put her index finger to her cheek and thought. "Um! Chi was looking for seashells. Then Mommy and Daddy were gone."

That means, at the very least, there should be a low probability of them being off looking for her by car or heading to a police box.

The beach was only long enough for a casual stroll from end to end, and it wasn't as crowded as it would be on a weekend.

If we looked around for her parents, we'd find them soon.

Yua stood up. "Well then, let's keep walking and look for them. Saku, I'm sorry for getting you involved, but would you come with us?"

"Of course."

"Chi, can you tell us when you spot your mommy and daddy?"

“Okay!” Chi took hold of Yua’s hand and held her other hand out to me.

As I took that small hand, I asked, “Do you have a favorite song?”

“Umm... ‘Twinkle, Twinkle.’”

“Then would you sing it nice and loud with me?”

“Okay!”

Yua looked at me with a puzzled expression.

I smiled. “It’ll be faster for them to find us like this, right?”

“...Oh, I get it!”

Compared with just the three of us blindly walking around here and there, the chances of getting noticed by Chi’s parents should be higher when we’re singing loud.

“You sing, too, Yua.”

“Er, but...”

“It’ll be fine, come on! Ready?”

“““Twinkle, twinkle, little star... ♪”””

Yua, Chi, and I all raised our voices, singing loud enough to reach the stars, too.

Suddenly, Chi looked up at us. “Are you married?”

“““No!!!”””

“Oh. You’re cute together!”

Where did such a small child learn these things?

It was just me, Chi, and Yua.

All three of us, holding hands in a row... It definitely felt like we were a family.

I glanced at Yua’s face.

She was looking at me the same way, and we both laughed and blushed.



Sure enough, after about five minutes of walking, Chi’s parents came running

over.

When Yua explained the situation, the parents bowed to us so many times that it got awkward, and then the mom, dad, and daughter left together.

Right before we parted, Chi gave me a single, beautiful shell.

Yua was examining it. "I'm glad we found her parents."

"Yeah."

"I'm glad you were there, Saku."

"I didn't do anything," I replied.

"You always say that." Yua chuckled.

The nostalgic sound of her spilling laughter made me feel ticklish inside.

"Well, I do think the camel idea was genius, if I say so myself."

"That's not what I mean. If it was just me, we'd probably have kept wandering around aimlessly, holding hands."

"Never mind the details. I spotted you because you were holding her hand anyway."

"Maybe. You were heading this way, so I think you would have noticed anyway."

Don't make it sound like more than it was, I thought.

"Hey, Yua."

"Yes?"

"You look good in that swimsuit."

"Why bring that up now?"

"You're the only one I didn't compliment yet."

"Thank you. That's a very Saku thing to do."

"It's okay to be embarrassed."

"Well, I know you compliment all the girls."

"I never thought I'd be criticized for paying compliments..."

“I meant it in a good way.”

“Really?” I smiled wryly.

“Chi and her parents seemed happy.”

“Yeah, they looked like a happy family, didn’t they?”

Eventually, we found our friend group, and that was the end of our conversation.



When we got back to the pop-up tent, everyone else was there except me and Yua.

Yuuko, Nanase, Haru... I’d gotten used to them a little by this point, sure, but it was still embarrassing to look directly at them in swimsuits like this.

Yuuko spoke with impatience. “Welcome back. We’ve been waiting for you two!”

“I’m sorry,” said Yua. “There was a little girl who got separated from her parents. Saku just happened to walk by, so he helped us look for them.”

“Huh? So you found them?”

“Yep, it was all fine.” Yua spoke with relief.

“Well, good work, you two. If it was me, I might have sat down on the sand and panicked with her.”

“Well, I was quite flustered, too,” said Yua. After she and Yuuko chuckled over that, Yua continued. “You said you were waiting for us?”

“Right, right!”

After clapping her hands, Yuuko plunged her upper body into the pop-up tent.

I looked away from the sight of her rear end sticking out, making eye contact with Kaito, who was having the same reaction as I was. Awkward.

“Ta-daa!”

As she spoke, Yuuko produced a large watermelon.

““Whoa!””

Yua and I ended up speaking at the same time.

“What’s that for?”

In response to my question, Yuuko handed me the watermelon.

It was pretty heavy.

“Weirdest thing, Kura just plopped it down and left it for us. He said something like, ‘Can’t come to the beach without splitting watermelons.’ And he left a wooden sword and a cloth for us, too.”

“Huh? That’s unusually nice of him.”

Hmm, still, it's about what I'd expect of the old guy. It's possible he just wanted a good excuse to come see the girls in their bikinis.

On closer inspection, the price was written on the watermelon with a marker, so it might have been bought nearby.

Yuuko lifted her hand in the air and yelped. “So let’s split the watermelon!!”

""""""""""Yeah!""""""""""

We yelled, all in unison.

We selected a secluded spot and placed the watermelon on a plastic sheet.

Then I held up the wooden sword and the cloth.

“Okay, who’s going first?”

“Me, me, me!” Yuuko raised her hand first. “I’ve never done it before, and I’m dying to try! Okay?”

Looking around, I could see the others smiling and rolling their eyes.

“Okay, then come over here.”

When I gestured to a spot about thirty yards from the watermelon, Yuuko came running over.

"I'm going to blindfold you, so can you turn your back for a sec?" I said.

“Okey dokey.”

Looking at her back as she abruptly turned away from me, I felt my breath

catch.

It sounds obvious, but bra straps aside, all I could see was her bare, soft skin. Drops of sweat slid provocatively down.

I didn't want to end up getting palpitations again, so I tied the towel over Yuuko's eyes while being careful not to overthink.

I brought both ends around the back of her head and tied a tight knot.

"It doesn't hurt, does it, Yuuko?"

"I'm fine!"

"Can't see?"

"I can't see anything! Where are you, Saku?" Yuuko turned this way, tentatively.

"..."

I instinctively covered my mouth with my arm.

In front of me was a beautiful woman, in a swimsuit, blindfolded, with her hands reaching tremulously.

Somehow, I felt like I was doing something wrong. This seemed horrendously immoral.

"Hey, Saku, don't go feasting your eyes while Yuuko's blindfolded!" Kaito called, his voice filled with cold reproach.

"If I do anything at this distance, it'll cost my life!" I called back. I took Yuuko's hand and put the sword into it.

"Spin around first," Kazuki suggested.

"Oh yeah, that'll be good."

Still blindfolded, Yuuko tipped her head in confusion. "Saku, what does he mean, '*spin around*'?"

"Could you hold the hilt of the wooden sword with both hands and thrust the tip into the sand?"

"Like this?"

“Yeah. Then put your forehead on the end of the handle.”

“Um, like this?”

Once she was in the right position, I spoke again.

“Okay. Now I’m going to count to ten, so keep that position and spin around in circles.”

“Clockwise, or...?”

“Nah, either way is fine.”

During this, the others gathered around us.

I made eye contact with everyone before opening my mouth.

“Okay, ready, set...”

“Go!!”

One, two...

As we counted, Yuuko started spinning around with her butt sticking out.

I was a bit worried this might lead to more erotic imaginings, but actually, she looked more comical than I’d expected, which was a relief.

As her legs moved, Yuuko yelped.

“Hey, this is kinda hard!”

Three, four...

She wasn’t kidding. It’s harder than it looks.

Nanase spoke up, mischievously. “Yuuko, try to walk more daintily.”

“Aw, c’mon!”

Five, six...

Haru was pointing a cheap water pistol at Yuuko. Wonder where she got that? She took aim and pulled the trigger.

“Yeek! What was that?!”

Seven, eight...

Yua smiled a little. “Just a little more, Yuuko!”

“Why are you the meanest one, Ucchi?!”

Whirl, teeter...

Yuuko, who finally stopped spinning, wobbled around using the wooden sword for balance. “This is dangerous! The world is spinning!”

I spoke up first. “Okay, Yuuko, straight ahead.”

I was guiding her in the direction of the watermelon.

Kaito followed my lead and spoke next. “Yuuko, don’t let him trick you. Go right, right.”

“Huh? Is it straight or right? Which way?”

Kazuki grinned, too. “No, it’s behind you. Who are you gonna trust, Saku, Kaito, or me?”

“You’re picking on me, too, Kazuki?!”

We all looked at Yua, in cahoots.

She knew what we expected of her right away.

Rolling her eyes, she called out.

“Yuuko, the watermelon’s on the left!”

“All righty!”

She believed Yua utterly, without even having to think about it.

She lurched right, then left, then...

—*SPLOOSH*.

...she tripped and fell into the surf.

We couldn’t hold back our laughter any longer. We were practically choking.

Yua rushed over and took off Yuuko’s towel.

“Are you okay, Yuuko?”

Covered in sand, Yuuko’s shoulders trembled with indignation. “Ucchi! You’re the biggest traitor of all!”

Wow, she was really yelling.

Yua winced with guilt, failing to even look at Yuuko. "I'm sorry. I succumbed to peer pressure."

"You're horrible! I trusted you, you know?!"

"But I mean... This will make a great memory to look back on..."

"Hmph, don't think that'll get you off the hook! You join me, too, Ucchi!"

Yuuko grabbed Yua around the waist and pulled her down into the surf.

Just then, a small wave came and washed over them as they rolled around in the shallows.

After a moment, the two of them sat up and faced each other, laughing.

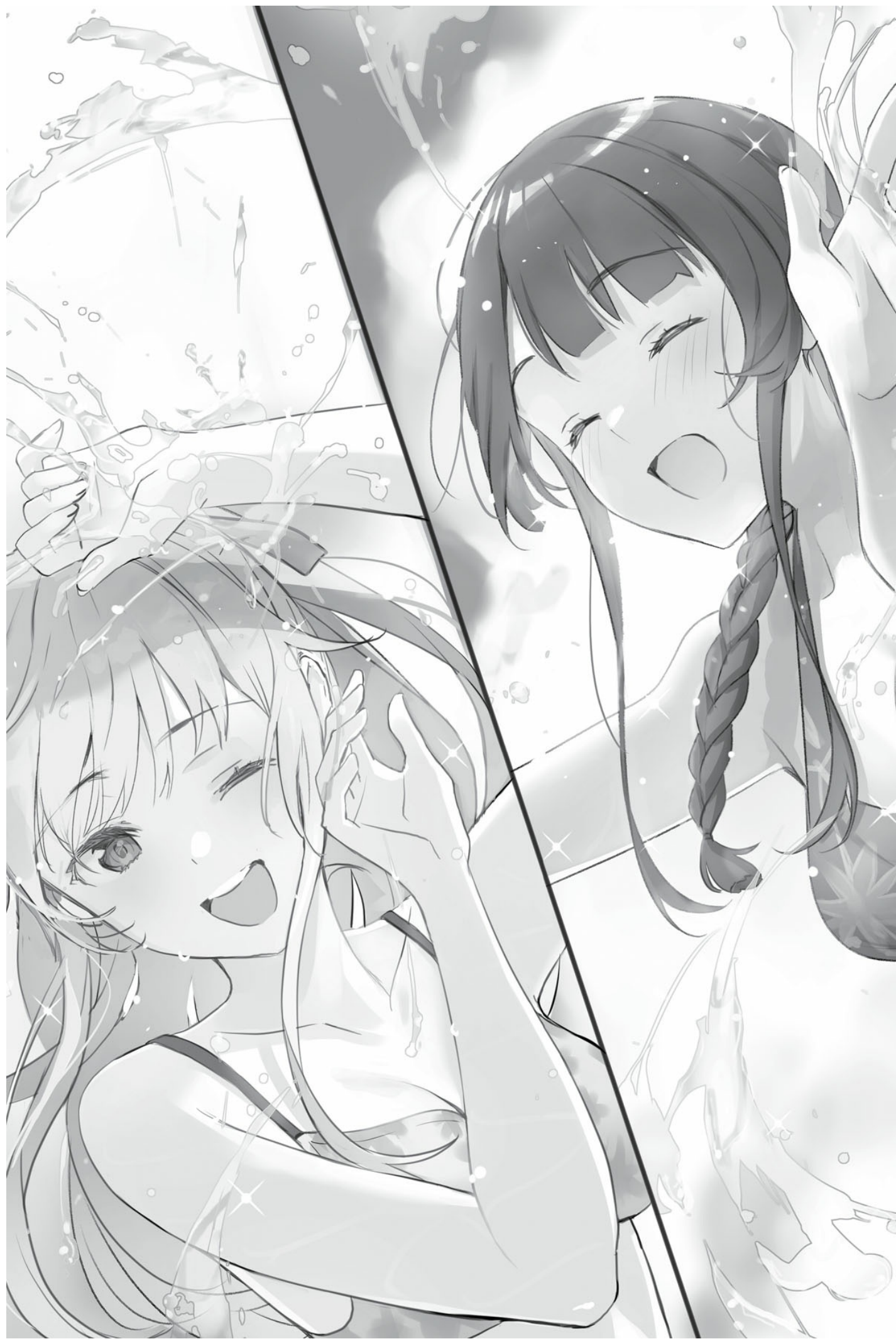
"Yuuko, how could you?"

"You betrayed me first, Ucchi!"

"Is there somewhere I can dry my hair?"

"There's coin showers at the beach house, so it's okay."

"Well, then..." Yua grinned. "Take that!"



Then she scooped up a handful of seawater and splashed it all over Yuuko.

“Are you actually angry?! That’s kinda unfair!”

While watching the two of them playing together...

““““Hot!”””””

...we four men spoke in unison.

Nanase and Haru watched, rolling their eyes.

“Well, then,” Kazuki said. “Isn’t it Saku’s turn next?”

“Do you really think I’ll do it after watching that?”

Nanase laughed. “Well, isn’t it the husband’s role to make up for his endgame wife’s failure?”

Haru choked with laughter. “You don’t need to be so cautious. Never mind what happened with Yuuko, it’s too dangerous to yell at someone like you, when you’re wielding a wooden sword. I just want to eat watermelon normally.”

Well, that’s true, too.

“All right, I’ll do it.”

When I said that, Yuuko came back from the ocean, dripping with water, and held out the sword.

“Kill my enemy, Saku.”

“Hmph, my secret sword, Swallow Cut, will cut him down with a single stroke.”

“I thought it was two strokes?” Yua squeezed the water out of the soaked towel. “All right, Saku, crouch down a sec.”

I did as she said, and my eyes were covered with the towel from behind.

If I tilt my head a little now... No, no, never mind!

Squeeze, squeeze... Yua seemed to be tying it more tightly than necessary.

The wet towel adhered tightly to my face, leaving only the slightest gap.

I could hear Kaito talking.

“Ten seconds will be nothing to Saku, so let’s make him go thirty.”

“Hey, that’s way too long!”

But my protest was in vain, and the others began yelling.

“Ready, set...”

“Go!”

Darn it, I was just going to have to do it.

“Come get some!”

I screamed and kicked off against the sand.

One, two...

I spun around at about twice the speed of Yuuko.

This has always been a standard game in the baseball club, since I was little, so I’m used to it.

Or at least, there was a time when I thought it was NBD.

I managed to hold out for about twenty seconds, but after that, I couldn’t tell if I was spinning clockwise or counterclockwise.

Even though everyone was raising their voices and shouting at me, I couldn’t understand a single thing. My inner ears were reeling.

Twenty nine... Thirty...

I thought that was what I heard, so I stopped.

But no, I couldn’t stop at all.

I’d underestimated this game.

My body felt as floppy as liquified candy, and I collapsed with all the force of a mallet pounding mochi.

My head was still spinning.

Behind the blindfold, I couldn’t tell which way was up and which was down.

Yikes, Saku Chitose couldn’t show weakness in public, now, could he?

Dumb thought to have.

With a thud, thick, muscular arms thrust beneath my armpits.

Next, thin but firm hands grabbed both my knees.

Then, finally, a limp hand supported my butt.

“Hey, what’s happening?”

No one answered. Instead, I got lifted up in the air.

“Dammit! Kaito, Kazuki, Kenta!”

I had a bad feeling about this and tried to struggle, but I was helpless.

I was being transported somewhere.

Snort. Snort. Giggle.

I could hear Yuuko, Nanase, Yua, and Haru all spluttering with laughter.

Then I was tossed, like an old futon mattress.

The sand against my back was cold, so cold... Hard to believe it was summertime sand.

Before I could speak, I...

—Spatter. Spatter. Spatter.

Something that I thought was probably sand started to pile up on my body, and...

—Pat, pat. Slap, slap. Stamp.

...the weight was building on me from above.

Darn it, was that last one Haru stepping on me?!

When I was completely stuck, the towel was removed.

I opened my eyes bit by bit against the dazzling sun.

“Does your back hurt, Saku?”

With those kind words came a pair of bell-shaped D cups right in front of my eyes.

Ah, I know how you feel now, Yuuko. I, too, was caught in a very crafty trap.

“...You traitor!”

“I’m sorry. I succumbed to peer pressure. Mizushino whispered the plan to me right beforehand.”

“I’ve heard that one before! How mean, and after I helped you look for Chi’s mom and dad, too!”

“Um, well, Saku, I thought you might like to try being the camel...”

“Are you insane, Yua? Camels don’t get buried in the desert!”

I had been buried alive with only my head sticking out.

And what’s more...

“You know, Kazuki, you were after me from the beginning, weren’t you?”

This was why he’d suggested the spinning game, and why he’d nominated me to go second.

Kazuki put his hands on his knees and looked down at me with a suspicious-looking grin.

“Since you took your sweet time coming, we built a big hole for you.”

“Oh, I thought the sand was weirdly cool.”

Because it wasn’t exposed to direct sunlight, maybe?

Before long, a shadow crouching beside Yua entered the edge of my vision.

“Yuuko...” She’d been the first to volunteer.

Maybe the others had kept her in the dark about everything?

Yuuko slowly opened her mouth and said, “Ha-ha, the plan was a big success!”

“You! You were an accomplice all along!”

“Hee-hee.”

“Well, then,” I said, “Why did you offer to go first in the first place?”

“Huh? Because I wanted to do the watermelon game, too! Duh!”

“...Are you crazy?”

“A little bit!”

Kenta, who was listening to the exchange, spoke then.

“You know, we wondered, too. Like, what the heck for? Still, it worked to lower your defenses, so that was good.”

Kaito spoke next. “That’s right. That’s why I quickly made up that whole wrong direction gag.”

Right. He wasn’t just goofing around; he had a plan in play.

“Anyway,” Nanase said, crouching down and grinning. “What cup size would you prefer, Chitose?”

“Uh... Let’s say yours, Nanase.”

“Oh, that’s your preference, is it?”

“Uh, well...”

I was screwed no matter what I said.

Haru sat down opposite Nanase.

Any direction I looked, it was a summertime treat for the eyes, but in my current position, I couldn’t really enjoy it.

Haru grinned. “Chi♡to♡se. ♡ We can use mine as a reference. ♡”

“Can’t picture it, sorry.”

“All right. Let’s give him a shell bra and make him a mermaid tail, take a ton of photos, and then send them out to everyone we know.”

“Sorry!”

Pat, pat, scrape, scrape, smooth, smooth.

...And there went the last shreds of my purity.



After everyone ate watermelon and played for a while, I lay down in the pop-up tent and took a rest.

Before I knew it, the sky was already starting to show signs of twilight.

I have to admit, the long-distance swimming showdown with Kaito and Haru was too much.

Actually, it probably wasn't just because it was a long-distance swim, but because swimming in the sea drains you way more than swimming in a pool.

Also, we all hate to lose, so we were in a dead heat until the very end.

Actually, Haru started off by grabbing my leg, so it was mostly just a mud fight.

Pulling, being pulled, being embraced with arms pinned behind my back... Not that I returned the gesture, of course.

Meanwhile, Yuuko and Yua were happily making a sandcastle together, and Nanase and Kazuki were standing side by side on the beach, drinking drinks in a cool kind of way. Kenta became the next victim of a sand burial.

By the way, when I entered the shallow water last, I knocked Kaito down and snatched the victory, so the two losers were now going to buy shaved ice at the beach house.

A feeling of exhaustion and freedom enveloped my entire body.

It felt like we'd really made the most of this time, to a degree that seemed almost infeasible, and I felt a feeling of pure wellness.

Yes, I was right here, in the moment, but I also felt like I was sitting on a chair set up in front of a white screen.

—None of us are Peter Pan.

I knew with near certainty that when I grew up, I wouldn't be able to come back here anymore. I won't be able to find the door to this summer again.

The sea we might see from this spot five or ten years from now wouldn't be the one we were seeing now.

While I was thinking about that...

"Let me join!"

...Yuuko came rolling into the tent.

“...”

I glanced over at her, then sucked in a breath.

Yuuko was lying down, with dripping droplets of seawater all over her body, the ends of her lustrous hair clinging to her supple skin.

The bikini top I glanced down at was sagging, like bags of goldfish scooped up at a summer festival and left behind somewhere.

“Hey, Saku?”

I tried to answer in my usual nonchalant manner. “What’s up?”

“...I want to take a picture.” She fiddled with her phone as she spoke.

“Well, sure.”

“Then would you lie on your back?”

I did as I was told and gazed up at the tent ceiling.

Slowly, slowly, Yuuko approached, and her shoulder touched mine.

Her phone camera snapped a couple times.

“Could you come outside, too? Unless you’re sleepy?”

“I mean, I don’t mind,” I said, sitting up, “but why...?”

“I just want to keep as many memories of this summer with you as possible, Saku. So that just looking at them will take me right back to today.”

“You don’t have to be so dramatic. We’ll probably all do the summer study camp again next year.”

Yuuko shook her head. “—I want to remember you as you are today. Once this day ends, I’ll never again be able to encounter this exact version of you.”

That was unexpectedly deep.

And when I gave it some real thought, she was right.

After today, I’d never again be able to encounter this exact version of Yuuko.

Even next year, on this same day, it’ll be different.

I realized Yuuko’s thoughts were oddly congruent with my own thoughts from

a few moments ago.

I guess even Yuuko gets a little sentimental sometimes.

When we got out of the tent, we took a ton of photos.

Under the beach umbrella, on the beach, in the shallows, at the beach house.

We got a selfie of us with Kenta, who'd been buried and then completely forgotten about, then with a sandcastle in the background, then with Yua, and Haru and Kaito, clutching shaved ice, side by side. Then with Nanase and Kazuki.

It's like Yuuko was really trying to preserve every part of the whole summer vacation.

"Let's take a group pic," Yuuko suggested.

Everyone laughed and agreed.

Yua asked a woman walking nearby to take our photo, and Nanase hurriedly activated the camera on her phone, while Haru gobbled the last of her shaved ice and then rapped her knuckles against her forehead.

Kaito and Kazuki joined us, shoulder to shoulder, and Kenta joined in next to them.

The setting sun stained the night sky with dusk colors, the horizon as crisp as a line someone had drawn. Pink, crimson, violet, azure, ultramarine...like the fireworks we saw that day.

The young woman took the phone from Yuuko, pointed the lens at us, and said, "Ready?"

"Say cheese."

""""Cheese!""""

With a snap, the summer vacation of our sophomore year of high school was cut out of time and preserved forever.

—But someday, in a distant summer...

...when we look back on this moment with hopeless nostalgia, I'm sure our memories will be far more vivid than what this photograph shows.



Once we finished changing clothes and returned to the hotel on the bus, it was seven thirty PM.

After putting our stuff in our rooms, we moved to the campsite on the premises.

The barbecue was already underway.

A number of tables, chairs, and grills were lined up, and the scene was aglow from lanterns hung all around.

Kura noticed us and yelled over.

“Hey, you guys can use the table and the grill over there. Miss Misaki’s got the meat and veggies, and I’ve got charcoal and lighters over here. Start the fire yourself.”

After grabbing the necessary items and arriving at the designated table, we found paper plates, disposable chopsticks, and sauce for the meat already set out. The meat, seafood, and vegetables were already cut, too, so all we had to do was grill everything up. For a carb, we had omusubi.

Pretty bland and standard, sure, but this was just to blow off some steam from the study camp, so nobody wanted to put in the effort for a big batch of curry or anything.

“Hey, Saku, do you know how to start the fire?” Yuuko came over to where I was standing in front of the portable grill.

“Yeah, I mean, we have fire starters. I think it’s pretty straightforward.”

I took off the grill and lined up four fire starters in the tray, then filled the area around it with charcoal.

Yuuko was watching me curiously. “Won’t the charcoal catch fire better if you put it directly on top?”

“I think you need to make room for air to flow. I mean, that’s just what I’ve heard,” I said, touching the lighter to the fuel.

“Wow, amazing!!!”

“I mean, all I did was set a fire.”

Smiling a little at Yuuko's enthusiastic reaction, I used the tongs to pile some more charcoal on top.

Immediately, I heard a dry crackling and popping sound. Should probably leave it alone for a bit.

"Hey, guys, we brought drinks."

While I'd been distracted, Yua had returned with bottles of green tea and lemonade.

She set up enough cups for everyone and poured based on our requests.

After making sure everyone had a drink, I held up mine.

"Well, here's to our final night."

""""""""Cheers!""""""""

Clunk, clunk, we brought our paper cups together.

I gulped down my lemonade all at once.

Maybe it's because I'd been playing in the sea for half a day, but I felt like my whole body was salted.

I'd drunk a lot of water, but for some reason, my thirst persisted.

Yuuko chuckled and held up a plastic bottle. "Would you like another refill?"

"Please."

With a *phwoosh*, she filled my cup.

"Brim me up."

"All right, all right."

By the way, in the Fukui dialect, "brim me up" means to pour enough in that it'll create surface tension. Technically, you'd say something like "fill it to the brim," but we mean it so there's only a few teensy millimeters left to fill. You want it to look like it's going to overflow any second, except it won't.

Which, by the way, is kinda hard to pull off with carbonated drinks.

"Hey, Saku! I think this charcoal's looking good to go!" Yuuko called over while I was sipping my soda carefully, so it wouldn't spill.

When I returned to the stove, the charcoal I'd piled up had started to break down a little.

The parts that had been in direct contact with the flames were white, and others were starting to glow red.

I distributed the charcoal evenly with the tongs.

Man, this kind of thing really is exciting for a guy, I thought.

It looked like there was some wood for a bonfire, which I was keen to try later.

When I set the grill lattice back on, Yua clicked the tongs excitedly. "Let's grill the tongue meat first."

I burst out laughing when I heard that.

I knew it. Yua's the type to take over when it comes to communal cooking-style dining, like at *yakiniku* or hot pot restaurants.

Yuuko and Haru were the type to specialize in just the eating part, while Nanase was the type to observe and order extra servings when needed.

It's weird how you can predict this kind of thing based on someone's everyday personality.

Shhh. The meat sizzled deliciously on the grill.

As she grilled pieces of meat one by one, Yua started talking. "I made some chopped salted spring onion for the table, so when you eat this, guys, try it and see how it switches up the flavor."

Nanase was surprised. "Huh? When did you make that?"

"Miss Misaki had a kitchen knife and simple seasonings on hand, so I borrowed them. It's just chopped spring onion, sesame oil, lemon juice, and chicken stock mixed together."

"You know, I'm usually always the one that gets people saying I'm so thoughtful or whatever, but this is the first time there literally hasn't been a thing left for me to do."

"Don't exaggerate. Here, Saku, give me your plate."

I held it out obediently, and Yua put a nice, juicy piece of grilled tongue on there.

Now Yuzuki, Yuuko, Haru, Mizushino, Asano, Yamazaki...

She really didn't leave anyone else a chance to help.

"Shall we just sit and enjoy it, Nanase?"

"Guess so."

We sat side by side on some outdoor chairs.

Since she went through all the trouble, I put the chopped spring onion that Yua made on top of the tongue.

Nanase followed suit.

""Let's eat!""

I popped it into my mouth and chewed. The taste of green onion, lemon, and sesame oil combined well with the crisp, juicy tongue.

""So good!"" we both said at the same time.

"Why is meat extra good when it's charcoal grilled?" I mused.

"It's so nice, eating outside like this."

"Hey, Nanase," I said. "You hanging out with Kazuki? That was kind of unusual."

Nanase grinned mysteriously.

"Huh? Are you jealous, Chitose?"

Agh, I didn't know what to say to that. I'd just said it to make conversation, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a little curious.

It's not just straightforward jealousy, though. "Just kidding," Nanase continued. "It wasn't like that. Look, we're not the types who really like to swim long distances or build sandcastles, are we? We just banded together because of that."

"What did you two talk about?" I asked, out of pure curiosity.

To be honest, I couldn't imagine at all.

“It was the first time I’d talked to Mizushino that much. We talked about normal stuff—the gang, studying, club. And if everything was okay after...you know.”

After...oh. She must have been referring to the Yan High stalker case. I’d left the trouble of cleaning to Kazuki.

“I’d thought Mizushino was just eternally aloof, but when it comes to soccer, he talks with this sudden passion, and his face lights up like a little kid. It was kinda cute. I was surprised.” Nanase chuckled, her expression softening.

Like a girl talking about a boy she’s interested in.

Looking at her side profile, something tugged at me.

For a moment, my mind clouded over.

Hold on, what was that just now?

Did I just feel...displeasure?

Simple jealousy?

As soon as I identified how I felt, an indescribable sense of self-hatred suddenly swelled within me.

The previous day, after what Kazuki said at the hot spring, I felt a little bad that I hadn’t noticed anything. But if this was what noticing meant...

This isn’t cool.

I think a part of me has been...self-indulgent.

I’d thought I was the only one who could bring out Yuzuki Nanase’s genuine smile. The only one to share such a special experience with her. The only one to get a step closer to her.

Maybe that’s why you feel like this? I pondered.

But you... Not for Kazuki, not for Kaito...

“Chitose...?”

“Sorry, bathroom.”

I got to my feet by pure reflex.

What the hell is this? This is ridiculous.

Prick. Prick. Prick. A sharp pain, stabbing at my heart.



After washing my face in the bathroom, I finally felt calmer.

I think I'd been faintly aware of it all along, but I think the time had come to face it.

But not now. This wasn't a distraction to mull over while we were supposed to be having fun.

I locked my emotions up for now and shoved them in the pocket of my shorts.

When this trip was over the following day, and I was home, I'd take them out again and examine them properly.

There was still more than half of our long summer vacation left.

When I returned to the group, Nanase looked uneasy as she spoke to me.

"Hey, Chitose, did I—?"

I cut her off. "You know what? When I was sitting next to you, I got a sudden flashback of that swimsuit."

Nanase rolled her eyes, then sighed and smiled provocatively.

It was an obvious misdirection, but she was kind enough to roll with it. I'd probably only said it because I knew she'd play along.

"Oh, really? Did that get your bat swinging, hmm?"

I grinned, teasing right back. "Well, it was a conservative play. Incidentally, the pitcher lobbed the ball well within the strike zone."

"Wait! What's that supposed to mean?"

"You were trying to decide whether to go for cute or sexy, Nanase, and landed somewhere in between."

"...You figured that out?!"

"Yeah, and that went for Yuuko, too."

"You saw right through our plans?!"

“You chose a simple navy bra type, but the playful design showed off your sense of personal style. Instead of increasing skin exposure, you chose to conceal it to create an elegant sex appeal. As for the bottoms, you added cuteness with the bow detail. You avoided an outright sexy type of bikini in all black with gold embellishments, right?”

“Hey, wait a minute?!”

“And Yuuko went for a cute style with bright patterns and colors, while the lace-up design achieves the same sexy effect as what Yuzuki went for.”

“We spent hours deliberating! Don’t just stand there explaining it all...”

Then we both burst out laughing.

I clutched my stomach, belly-laughing. “But don’t worry. You guys both hit a home run.”

All right. Now the mood was back to its usual setting.

“Saku, Yuzuki, come get it!” Yua called.

““Coming!””

We both called back amiably and wandered over to the grill.

Yua dished out meat, seafood, and vegetables to one after another—Yuuko, Haru, Kazuki, Kaito, and Kenta.

“You plan to have some, too, Yua?” I asked.

“I’m fine. I’ll eat later, when I can relax.” Yua laughed.

“Man...” I smiled and sighed. Yua never changes.

Even when she cooks for me at home, she always says, “It’s most delicious when it’s freshly cooked,” and focuses on bringing the dishes to the table. Yet she always lingers in the kitchen.

I guess that’s just her personality, but for me, sitting down and tucking in is always best.

I sprinkled some chopped spring onion on the grilled tongue and folded it in half.

“Here, tongue with spring onion.”

When I brought it to Yua’s mouth, she ate it up like a chick.

Next, I shook some *yakiniku* sauce on a *kalbi* cut of meat.

“Here, *kalbi*.”

After Yua was done with that, she requested, “Veggies, too.”

“Is green pepper okay?”

“Maybe something that’s easier to eat in one bite?”

“How about carrot?”

“Okay!”

I did as she requested and shook some salt on a piece of carrot.

“““Hey!!!”””

Multiple voices overlapped.

Yuuko spoke first, from the vanguard. “I thought I was supposed to be your endgame wife?! There’s no room for me!”

Haru jumped in, too. “Feeding her by hand? What do I have to do to—?!”

As for Nanase...

“...Gah.”

She didn’t say anything.

The other three guys were also watching and grinning.

Hey, don’t go giving me those looks. All you were doing was sitting around pigging out.

Kazuki strolled over and spoke. “Hey, Saku, feed me, too.”

“Shut up. You want a piece of shiitake to the face?”

“Saku, Mizushino, no playing with the food!”

“““Yes, ma’am!!!”””

And so on and so forth with your fun barbecue shenanigans.



Wandering around the campsite with a full belly, I noticed an unlikely couple sitting on chairs around the bonfire.

“Ah, Chitose. You sit, too.”

Beside Kura, who was beckoning me over, was Asuka.

She gave me a slightly awkward wave.

I sat down beside Asuka, and after gulping down a long can of *happoshu*, Kura spoke. “Man, I love a bonfire in summer! With beer! It’s almost too good!”

“Are you allowed to drink in front of the students?”

“It’s an annual event. Even Miss Misaki is drinking today.”

“That might be enough for some people, but I guess it’s a difference of personality.”

“So anyway,” Kura said, “how far have you guys gone?”

““Kura!!!””

Asuka and I both yelped at the same time.

In this day and age, was he trying to get sued?

Kura continued, utterly unconcerned. “What are you saying here? A high school boy and a girl stay overnight together and there’s no progress?”

“Sir, if you don’t check yourself, we’ll toss you out at Tojinbo and go home without you.”

“Nisshi was all worried about it, too.”

Asuka reacted to that. “Wait! What exactly did you discuss with my father?!”

“Just so you know, I’m the one who ended up getting roped into all that. Nisshi got all drunk and was like, ‘Kura, you think those two are going to get married?’”

“...That’s so freaking embarrassing.”

I was squirming with awkwardness, too.

“So I told him, ‘If she goes to Tokyo, she’ll soon forget about the man she left

behind in the countryside, right? She'll be bringing a new boyfriend home with her soon enough.'"

Crack, went the bonfire.

Kura was grinning right at me.

Asuka remained silent, not wanting to respond to the provocation. When she spoke, it was subdued.

"—I won't forget the town where I was born and raised. Or you."

Kura grinned. "Heh, you kids are wet behind the ears. And I'm an overly doting teacher."

Asuka stared at him.

"Nisshi said, 'My Asuka isn't a capricious sort of girl. And that Chitose, he's reckless, but he's got a spine, which you don't see a lot of these days.'"

"" ... ""

It's weird... The other day, when I was talking to Kotone, I had this same kind of thought. Is this what parents are like?

Like, if Asuka and I did end up going out, would Mr. Nishino feel happy? Would he feel sadness if we ended up being separated?

I mean, those two feelings are polar opposites, you might say.

When I talked to Mr. Nishino and Kotone directly, and when I saw them interact with Asuka and Yuuko, I thought they all had such warm family bonds, and I wanted them all to be as happy as possible... Makes me seem like a busybody, maybe.

But maybe, somewhere in my heart, I yearn for the warmth of family.

Kura lit up a Lucky Strike. "...Well, everything comes with an expiry date. You should just remember that. And we're not always the ones who get to decide when that date comes."

""Expiry date...?""

The two of us repeated his metaphor in confused unison.

But before an answer could come...

“Oh, Saku. You’re drinking beer with Kura...” I heard Yuuko say my name.

When I looked up, everyone from Team Chitose was walking this way.

Kura chuckled. “Sup. You wanna drink, too?”

“I don’t drink.”

Everyone took seats.

Apparently, our three-way conversation was over now.

Yuuko came to sit beside me, gazing at me.

“It’s really hot, isn’t it?”

“I mean, we’re sitting in front of a fire in summer.”

“How come you’re sitting here to talk?”

Pssht. Kura cracked open another beer and responded. “Hmph. Because it’s the manly ideal.”

“””””Right!”””””

The four guys all agreed at once.

“Still,” Nanase said. “It’s nice to have a bonfire. It’s calming to watch.”

“I love the smell,” Yua added. “Even though our clothes will probably stink later.”

Haru grabbed the tongs. “Hey, Kura, can I add some more firewood?”

“Yeah, go for it.”

“I sure will!”

Asuka suddenly stood up and approached the bonfire. “Aomi, can I try after you?”

“Of course! Do you enjoy this stuff, too, Nishino?”

“Yeah! I’ve always wanted to do it.”

“Okay, hubby, bring me some firewood.”

I chuckled and got to my feet. “All right. Yuuko, can you come help?”

“Sure thing!”

Crack, pop, went the bonfire.

Sway, blaze, went the flames.

Our shadows vibrated happily beyond the flickering fire.



After cleaning up the campsite, I, Yuuko Hiiragi, tapped Saku on the shoulder as we were heading back to the hotel.

“Hey, can we talk alone for a little bit?”

He turned, his face showing surprise.

“All right, but...why don’t we go see the ocean? If I remember correctly, there’s an observation spot nearby.”

“Okay!”

We left the hotel property, walking side by side.

Since the day I ran for vice president in our first year, how many times have I gazed at him like this?

Seen from the side, Saku’s lips were about level with my eyeline.

Usually, he just tilts his head back a little when he’s amused, but sometimes, he grins like a child.

I like both versions of him.

I thought about that time I was accused of being a pushy wife.

It really felt like that, at first.

If he’d asked me for my LINE info, I wouldn’t have said no, but I didn’t feel like asking him for his... But I ended up being the one to ask.

I knew he was too kind to say no, but thinking about it now, asking him to walk me home and things like that... It might have... It *must* have been a little annoying.

Still, I like it when Saku sends me off pouting.

After walking for a while, I spotted a small triangular roof up ahead.

When we got closer, I saw that there were several benches lined up under the roof.

Saku turned to me. "What do you want to do?"

"Since we came to see the sea, I'd prefer to sit outdoors, not under a roof. As close to the ocean as possible!"

"Right?" Saku smiled, walking again.

Every time he smiles like that, my heart gives a little thump.

Sitting down on a bench, I lifted my arms up and looked at the sky.

There were no streetlights, and it was pitch-black, but the stars were shockingly beautiful.

It was kind of a shame, though, that the moon was such a thin sliver. It looked as if it were about to disappear.

Swoosh, swoosh. The waves rushed in and out.

My clothes still smelled of the bonfire.

...Oh, man.

When this trip is over, when tomorrow comes, when I get home, I'll have to clean up and do a big wash.

"So..." Gazing at the sea, Saku spoke. "So what was it that you wanted to talk about?"

For a moment, I didn't understand what he meant. Then I chuckled.

"Sorry, I didn't actually have a topic in mind. I just wanted to spend some time chatting with you like this, finally."

"Oh, right. So that's what you wanted." Saku straightened up.

His T-shirt slid up, and I could see his stomach.

I quickly averted my eyes and tried to relax my expression.

Hey, Saku?

I might not get another chance to tell you this.

My heart's been pounding all day, you know?

I'd planned to show off my cute swimsuit, but when I saw Saku shirtless, my mind went blank.

I mean, his abs were super defined, his arms were bulging, and his back was broad.

When I was lying next to him in the tent, taking a photo, I wondered if he could hear my heart pounding.

It was such an embarrassing memory, I couldn't even make myself relive it.

It would be so unfair if you weren't equally flustered by me in my bikini!

...That's what I was thinking, but maybe it was wishing for too much?

Saku kept on talking nonchalantly. "It went by so quickly. Tomorrow's the last day."

"That's right. It totally wasn't long enough!"

It really, really wasn't enough.

Over these four days, I had so many more things I wanted to talk about and do together.

"Damn, I was planning to eat every single item on the buffet table, too."

"What? That's such a waste of effort!"

"I end up just picking and choosing the stuff I like the most."

"Saku, you know you have to eat vegetables, too, right?"

"I've heard that once or twice before..."

Then we both spluttered with laughter.

"Thank you, Yuuko."

Saku surprised me with that.

"Huh?"

I had no idea why he would thank me, so my response sounded a bit weird.

“I mean, you’re the one who invited me on the study trip. I didn’t really intend to come. When I got that call from you, I was thinking of refusing at first.”

“Seriously?!”

I’d thought he was down, but just needed a final push.

“Then did you just *really* want to see me in my swimsuit?” I was teasing, just a little.

Saku smiled. “Maybe. It was a very delicious visual buffet, so thank you for the meal.”

“Right, right?”

That’s right, that’s right, that’s right!

I knew he was just joking, but I was thrilled anyway.

It wasn’t the compliment on my bikini, although that did give me a rush of happiness. It was realizing that Saku, who always makes his own choices and takes action—he was rubbing off on me, a little.

He’d come because I invited him.

Saku continued talking. “If I was the only one who didn’t participate, and everyone just sent me photos, I would’ve regretted it for sure. Spending time with everyone was a blast.”

I couldn’t imagine him saying something like this last summer.

At that time, he was always clenching his teeth in obvious pain, but he never said anything to me.

In just the last four months, Saku had really changed a lot.

We had the old Saku back, the Saku he’d been before he quit baseball, maybe. But that wasn’t the whole story.

I felt that, as he became a second-year student, as the seasons progressed, the glass that had solidified around his legs had begun to crack little by little.

Saku had broken down my glass wall in one hit, but I’m sure the one surrounding Saku was much thicker.

Right after we became friends, I wondered why he always acted so casually mean.

I wondered why he drew a clear line between himself and Kazuki, Kaito, and me.

How could I reach out and touch him, if he was so far away?

How could my voice reach him, if he was so far away?

To be honest, I still don't understand Saku's complex feelings, but what was clear was that he didn't want to just be seen as a regular nice guy.

Well, it's true that I was caught up in the illusion initially myself.

—Right. Just one glance closer, and it all becomes clear.

That's why, even without the vice president incident, I'm sure I would have fallen for Saku.

Because ever since... The next day, the day after that, and the day after that...

With Ucchi...

With Kentacchi, Yuzuki, Nishino probably, and Haru...

No matter what was going on, through it all, Saku was my hero.

Maybe there was some skewed timing—too soon or too late—but I couldn't imagine any future that didn't involve me falling for him.

"Yuuko?" I realized he was peering at me.

Oh gosh, I hope I didn't have a dumb look on my face. Or a fawning look?

I didn't want that to be the last memory.

It would be the worst if Saku, as a grown adult, looked back on this and thought, "Wow, Yuuko had her mouth hanging open", or "Yuuko was smirking."

I wanted to leave one last, final, adorable impression.

"I'm sorry. I was just thinking about the past."

"Well, I get it. The end of a trip is always kind of sentimental."

That's true.

The end is sad.

I don't want to say good-bye.

I spoke in an innocent, bright kind of voice. "So is that it? Don't you have anything else to say to me?"

"I told you thank you."

"Oh, but it's still not enough! Praise me more!"

"I'm always praising you."

"You're usually being mean to me!" *And really, that makes me the happiest.*

Saku scratched his head in confusion, then...

"Yuuko, you always show me scenes I never could have imagined."

Then he gave me my favorite smile.

...Oh. It's true.

I wish we could stay like this forever.

I wish we could stay like this forever.

But I wasn't the one who made Saku laugh like that.

It wasn't me who broke the glass wall down.

No, that's not all it is...

At some point, I'd... No, that's not the fair way to phrase that.

Ever since that day, I'd always...always...

I was going to have to face them.

—The feelings of the other person. And my own feelings, too.

CHAPTER FOUR

An Evening Lake



The last day of the summer study camp had arrived.

Nothing else much happened after that. We worked hard from morning until night, and the four-day camp came to an end.

I thought it would last forever, but the ending was surprisingly anticlimactic.

I think, in that way, it was like summer vacation itself.

It was around five PM. We'd changed into our uniforms and left the hotel, and now we were chugging along on the bus back to Fuji High.

Yuuko was sitting beside me.

At first, I'd been sitting next to Kaito, but Yuuko was like, "Switch!" and forced him to move.

We'd all stayed up late last night having fun, maybe because it was the last night.

Yuuko closed her eyes as soon as the bus engine started running, and before long she was leaning against my shoulder.

The scent of her shampoo was different from the one in the hotel. It tickled me, but I didn't want to wake her, so I tried to sit still.

Her hand was on my thigh.

In her dreaming, she was gripping the material of my pants tight in her fist, then releasing, over and over again. Every now and then, her fingers twitched.

When I looked around, the others were also sleeping comfortably.

I stared out aimlessly at the passing scenery.

The days already elapsed since the beginning of summer vacation seemed to be reflected in the glittering surface of the ocean.

The date with Asuka, going grocery shopping with Yua, hanging out with Nanase and Haru, going to the fireworks with everyone, and of course these past four days.

It's weird, I thought.

We're not young men and women anymore, but we still have our treasure maps—filling them in, from the edges inward.

Yuuko, Yua, Nanase, Haru, Kazuki, Kaito, Kenta, and Asuka.

—From the next day onward, with these friends, with all of us together...

Gradually, my eyelids became heavy, too.

I started to sway, nodding off, leaning against Yuuko. The sound of the waves lingered in my ears, surrounding me. I felt like someone was softly holding my hand as we walked together, the softness of the sandy beach beneath our feet.

And I felt like that hand was trembling slightly.



"Saku? Saku!"

I awoke to my shoulder being shaken, Yuuko rolling her eyes and grinning at me.

Oh, what a relief, I thought in my half asleep state.

"Hmph, I've been calling you for ages. You wouldn't wake up."

"Oh, sorry. What happened?"

"What happened? We've arrived back at school."

When I looked out the window, I saw the familiar school building.

Most of the students had already gotten off the bus and gotten their luggage from the driver.

"You must be really tired, Saku."

“Maybe. I feel like I was dreaming.”

“What kind of dream?”

“More stuff at the beach with y’all. It was so much fun, after all.”

When I said that, Yuuko pursed her lips tightly for just a moment.

Then she spoke as if nothing had happened. “All right, stop thinking about my bikini and just get off the bus already!”

“All right.”

When I got off the bus, everyone else who had already finished getting ready to go home was waiting for us.

Yuuko and I grabbed our luggage, too.

Kura, standing a way off, shouted out. “The school’s open until seven PM, so if you have anything you need to do in the classroom, please finish it up by then. All right, disperse. You must be tired after the past four days.”

“““Thank you!””””

Voices rose in the air all around.

“Well, then,” I said, stretching out. “Shall we head home, too?”

“Oh!”

It was Yuuko who shouted.

“I’m sorry. I have something to do in the classroom, but I don’t want to go home alone after that, so if you don’t mind, would you all stay back with me?”

We all made eye contact and smiled at one another.

“All right, I don’t mind.”

The others nodded.

“Really?! Thank you!”

I don’t think we all wanted to say good-bye just yet.

Just a little longer, just a little more.

I wanted to immerse myself in the afterglow of these four days of fun.

I was sure we'd see each other all the time during the summer vacation anyway, but still.

Our footsteps echoed happily as we dashed toward the school's side door.



When I entered the classroom, I was enveloped by the smell full of memories.

The old floors and desks, blackboards stacked in the corners with the date of the closing ceremony and the names of the people on duty still written on them, lockers that were a little dusty.

I hadn't been here for about two weeks, and the atmosphere was somewhat cold and strange.

The others seemed to feel the same way, and instead of sitting down in their own seats, they milled around, restless.

"You know..." Yuuko was the first to speak. "In summer vacation, the classroom feels the same but also like a completely different place, doesn't it? Like, I know this is my desk, but..."

Speaking happily, she plunked her bag down on her desk.

Somehow the awkwardness disappeared, and everyone followed suit.

Nanase responded to Yuuko. "Yeah. It feels like coming back to a school you already graduated from, kinda?"

"Yeah, yeah! It's been four months since Yuzuki and Haru joined our class! Hasn't the time flown? Or has it been a long time? I'm not sure which one's right!"

Her black hair swayed as she chuckled.

"It feels like it's been longer than it has been, maybe?"

"Yes, that!"

Haru, who was sitting perched on the desk, smiled. "Now that you mention it, it feels like we've been hanging out as a group together for a long time now."

Yuuko replied happily. "Yeah! I feel it, too."

"Maybe because these four months have been filled with so much."

“They have! Jam-packed!”

Nanase’s expression grew soft.

“I... I feel it, too.”

Yua, who’d been watching silently, mumbled in agreement.

“We talked a lot during the last four days, too, haven’t we?”

“Right?” the four girls said, exchanging looks imbued with deep meaning.

Somehow, it looks like the distance between them had closed even more after the summer study camp.

“So then,” Nanase said. “What was it that you needed in the classroom, Yuuko?”

“Ah, that’s right! Well, I just wanted a place for us all to decompress together!”

Yuuko clomped up to the podium in her usual bouncy manner.

“All right, everyone, can I have your attention? Eyes on me!”

She raised her right hand.

“—I am about to express my feelings to Saku!”

She said it so bluntly.

A burst of laughter escaped me, and I got up from the desk I was sitting on.

I started toward the podium, getting ready to joke my way out of the situation, as usual.

I looked down at my feet. My school slippers were pretty dusty.

Should I take them home and wash them?

And what was Yuuko doing anyway? She always...

But the classroom was silent.

What? Come on, we’re supposed to be laughing now, right?

Nanase’s supposed to say, “Are you serious right now?” and Haru’s supposed to roll her eyes and say, “You’ve gotta be kidding! I’m starving, let’s go to

Hachiban's." Then Yua's supposed to say, "Come on, guys. Let's at least hear her out." Like that.

It's such a familiar scene. I've seen it play out so many times before.

So let's all lighten up a little, okay?

I mean, it's starting to seem like...

I lifted my head slowly, terrified, wanting to run out of the room, but I had to see for myself, and...

Then, at a glance, I understood.

With her hands folded in front of her, she gripped her skirt tightly, opened her mouth and smiled softly, and stared straight at me.

She was completely and totally serious.

Oh, it's a real confession.

But...why?

The thoughts flashed through my mind, indistinct.

I knew this moment was going to come eventually.

Ever since that day, somewhere in my heart, I was prepared.

But why...? Why do it now? Why do it here?

Why do it in front of everyone, when we're supposed to be wrapping up our summer vacation? This was a time for joking together, filled with fun memories, then next year we'd have fireworks at the same place again, and next year we'd all go to the beach again.

"—I want to remember you as you are today. Once this day's over, I'll never again be able to encounter this exact version of you."

Was that what she meant?

Was she bracing for this all along?

It doesn't make sense.

Does it, Yuuko?

“Hey, Saku?”

Her gentle voice was like a response to my heart’s confused whispers.

“Do you remember the homeroom where we decided on the class president, in first year?”

Time wouldn’t stop. Nor would Yuuko.

I clenched my fists and bit my lips, just barely opening my mouth.

“...You cried like a baby.”

At first, I thought she was kind of an airhead.

I mean, that face of hers made her look like a princess, but she acted like she was a normal girl, and that pretense-free act of hers seemed dangerous.

Honestly, I never planned to get close to her.

But Kazuki knew her through sports clubs, and she was friendly with Kaito, too, so I ended up getting involved with her due to my friendship with those two jerks.

And at the time, she avoided me, too.

When I made her cry in homeroom, I was convinced she hated me.

Her attitude toward me sure had changed since that day.

Yuuko nodded, still smiling her gentle smile.

“Then do you remember what you said to me?”

“Huh...?”

What did I say, again?

It’s not like I’m being particularly humble or anything, but I don’t remember saying anything special.

The only thing that left a strong impression on me was that after Yuuko, Yua, and I had our altercation, Yuuko had suddenly burst into tears.

Seeing my reaction, Yuuko gave a smile clouded over with sadness.

My chest constricted.

I didn't want Yuuko to make a face like that.

"I see. Right. But..."

She took a deep breath, smiled again, and...

"—That was the moment I fell for you, Saku."

She'd spoken the words from which there'd be no coming back.

"...Mm."

She'd expressed her feelings countless times.

But this was the first time I'd been given an actual reason.

That was it? Way back then?

Just a few days after entering school, the thing that had made us friends...had been the thing that made her fall for me?

It was like...

Like my head was spinning, my breath shallow.

Since way back, the only girls who've approached me are girls who have fantasies grounded in nothing, who've left when disillusionment sets in.

And I didn't really care, either way.

So whenever it happened...

I was just waiting to see how many weeks went by before they changed their minds.

But with Yuuko, no matter how roughly I tried to treat her, she just kept hitting me with ridiculous jokes, flirting with me, and treating me like some untrustworthy player.

...How many times had we repeated that same dance?

"You'll figure it out somehow, Saku."

"Saku's willing to stick with you to the end."

"The true heroes are the ones who are never quite sure how good they are."

"You're my hero, after all."

All those things she said, without hesitation.

Her words warmed me, tickled me, made me happy, but they'd also always scared me, too.

...Why?

Why did she like me?

Why did she have such faith in me?

Why did she treat me like a hero?

Why did she put me on a pedestal like that?

Now those feelings are even stronger.

Because...

—It wasn't anything I'd done. It was just like...love at first sight.

Yuuko continued quietly, as if walking through her memories.

“Ever since then, I've been watching you, Saku. Because you allowed me to be by your side. Because you petted me when I was wagging my tail and snuggling up to you. I was happy just to call your name. I was even happier when you called me. I was happy when you complimented me. I was even happier when you criticized me. I fell asleep thinking of you, and when I woke up in the morning, your smile was the first thing that came to my mind. When our hands touch, my heart pounds, and when I smell you up close, I get dizzy.”

That's... That's...

I feel the same, of course.

Every morning, the sight of Yuuko in the classroom is soothing to me, somehow.

No matter how many people hated me, I felt like that smile would never disappear.

I loved taking detours with her and chatting in the park. There was nothing contrived there.

I didn't really mind her asking for my opinions on the clothes she tried on

during shopping trips. I wanted her to show me different sides to her.

Her occasional calls, which seemed to come just when I needed them, helped me get through the lonely nights.

Thank you, I thought.

Yuuko's voice was as gentle as rain.

"Actually, I was a little worried about whether this would be okay. But when I faced up to my feelings, I realized I had the answer from the beginning. The feelings I started having that day grew more and more, and before I knew it, it was like a bouquet that was so big, I couldn't even hold it in my hands... I think I can say it with pride, after all."

Please, I'm begging you.

Wait. Yuuko, please wait.

I also decided to face up to this properly.

After this trip is over, when we get home, we still have summer vacation left.

Please don't leave me.

Don't come up with the answer all on your own first.

I just need a little longer... Just a little more time...

Why like this?

Her gaze, so steady, so innocent, unswaying.

"Hey, I don't think I was wrong about my feelings at all."

That gaze, directed at me.

"So you know," Yuuko said...

She took a deep breath, exhaled.

I always loved Yuuko's voice.

It's like a fully inflated jet balloon—bright, lively, light, colorful, always bouncing and skipping up and down.

Yuuko's good morning was always the best start to the day.

Every time she called, “Saku!” from far away, I rolled my eyes, but I never once complained.

Even when I was depressed after quitting baseball, it seemed like every day I was getting a shot of pure energy from her.

But I didn’t want to hear that voice now.

I’m begging you, I’m begging you, don’t say anything else...

Like the final fireworks explosion, that huge blooming chrysanthemum flower...

“I like you, Saku. I love you. And I want to be special to you.”

A wide smile bloomed on her face.

The setting sun shining through the window drew a beautiful triangle on the blackboard.

“Wait...”

Haru, who was about to say something, bit her lip, looked down, and clenched her fists in desperate self-control.

I heard it. We all heard it.

I heard Yuuko’s words...her feelings.

...And now I had to provide some sort of response.

Dull pain flared in my chest.

I couldn’t breathe; it was like my heart was being crushed in a vise.

I yanked on my tie, loosening it.

My heart hurt like hell, and I was consumed with sadness, regret, anguish, fear. What was happening to me?

“I’m so glad she’s got someone like you around, Chitose. That really reassures me. Even more so after having a straight talk with you.”

“I’ll be around as long as I’m wanted.”

I wondered if Yuuko had talked to Kotone about this.

I wondered if she'd smiled and encouraged Yuuko to go for it.

Depending on my response, would Kotone kick herself in regret for encouraging the daughter she'd raised with such care, or would she sink into sadness?

Was I going to be the one to ruin that happy family scene I'd melted so easily into?

I looked at my friends' faces.

"I wanted to watch the fireworks, just us two."

Nanase looked away, her lips a tight line.

"...I don't want you to just laugh it off!!!"

Haru looked worried, and like she was about to burst into tears.

"Then, next time, I'll wear a yukata, so let's go to the festival together, okay?"

Yua was just quietly watching me and Yuuko.

"—I'm glad I came."

I imagined Asuka's smile, though she wasn't here.

"—I mean, who knows, if someone here gets a girlfriend or a boyfriend, we might not all be able to get together like this again next year."

Kazuki gazed out the window with zero emotion in his eyes.

"Well, I kinda get it."

Kaito was smiling, with an expectant look on his face.

Looking at Kenta's puzzled face, I suddenly remembered.

—There's a weight limit for what you can carry on your back. If you carry everyone you meet on your back, one day the first and most important one might roll off.

I know. I became aware of that, long ago.

This is all self-inflicted.

Bump. Bump. My heartbeat was so loud.

I wished it would just stop.

I kept opening my mouth, then clamping it shut again.

I gripped the hem of my blazer so hard it almost tore, trying to stop my trembling legs from breaking for the door.

I hate this, I hate this, I hate this.

I don't want to answer yes or no.

Everything would change. Everything would be over.

Next year's fireworks, the camp, this summer vacation, and the days ahead would all revert to a blank, empty slate.

"You know... I have one request."

Yuuko said...

"—Saku, I want you to always be the Saku I've come to love."

Then suddenly, everything went silent in my mind.

All I could hear was Yuuko's voice, that day.

Ah. Yeah.

You always encourage me like that.

I don't know what the correct answer is.

There's no way for me to know what kind of hero Saku Chitose is viewed as.

But, just like the days we've spent together...

I had to believe I could be the me that Yuuko fell for.

I'd tell her straight.

No lies, just my true feelings.

I stared straight back at Yuuko.

I like you for your innocence, the way you treat everyone fairly.

I like your long hair, and the artful hairstyles you do.

I like your beautiful nails that are always manicured.

I like your changeable voice, your expressions.

I like your cheerful smile.

I like your big boobs, too.

So with all those feelings in mind...

“I’m sorry. I can’t respond to your feelings in the way you want, Yuuko. There’s another girl in my heart.”

I tried my best and gave her a big smile.

Because, this girl in front of me...

I wanted it to stay like this forever between us.

I wanted that, because we were friends.

After a short silence, Yuuko smiled.

“Figures!”

She put her hands behind her head and continued in a bright tone.

“I was prepared, but I guess it’s a no, huh? You wouldn’t choose a girl just because the opportunity came along. I just wanted to become your endgame wife for real already, but no biggie. Welp, starting tomorrow, I’ll have to find a new boy to fall in love with again.”

With a nonchalant face, she grabbed her stuff and started walking toward the front door.

“Too bad, too bad, see ya tomorrow! ♪”

It was like she was humming.

Like she was off on a casual shopping trip.

But in front of the door, her feet came to a sudden stop.

With a thud, her bag hit the floor.

Her small shoulders quivered; both fists were clenched.

“...But, no.”

She looked back, saying: “If it’s not you, Saku, I don’t want anyone.”

She was trying to smile through her tears, her features distorted.

—*SMACK*.

First, a dull sound echoed through my head, and then suddenly, I was lying on the floor, my desk overturned.

Eraser shavings were strewn about in front of me, and the legs of overturned chairs were clustered with clumps of dust.

A few seconds later, my left cheek burned bright red.

“You jerk, Saku!”

When I heard the scream, I thought, *Yeah... I’m sorry.*



Grabbing me by the shoulders and forcing me upright, Kaito straddled me and grabbed me by the shirt front.

“What the hell is this? Yuuko’s the one who’s been there for you all this time!”

The hot rain of his words hurt, and I averted my eyes from my friend before me.

“Look at me, you jerk!”

Clunk. My back hit the floor.

““Kaito!”” Nanase and Haru both yelled out.

“Shut up!”

With tears welling up in his eyes, Kaito looked at me again, searchingly.

“Saku, you’re doing it again, right? The whole casual joking act? Sorry, I just acted on reflex. But that was real pathetic, okay?”

Hearing his trembling voice, I silently shook my head.

“Hey, you’re lying, aren’t you? Say it. Why wouldn’t you make Yuuko happy? Look, say it like you always do. You should be like, ‘Darn it, you’ve got so much brawn, you haven’t even got enough brain to pick up on when I’m joking.’ You’re not done right? You’re gearing up for a happy ending, aren’t you? Then I’ll be like, ‘Hey man, that’s so not cool,’ and I’ll apologize over and over for hitting you. You can order anything you want at Hachiban’s, on me...”

“...I’m sorry, Kaito.”

“Give me a freaking break!”

My body was lifted up and slammed against the floor once more.

“You’re a man! You’re supposed to stand by your promises! Remember what you said? That’s your response? Really? I thought you and I were friends!”

“...I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize when you don’t even mean it!” Kaito’s yell cut right through to my chest. “At least think it over first! At least go home and stay up all night

agonizing over it. Was Yuuko really nothing to you? Was she worth being discarded in ten measly seconds? So what, you're just going to pick some other random girl? Huh?!"

Twisting my shirt front, he continued.

"I thought I could... I thought I could trust you to take care of her! I was like, 'Oh, well. I'll just have faith that he'll make her happy.' I accepted that I wasn't the one who'd be able to give Yuuko what she needed..."

He readied his fist again, and I was about to flinch, when Kazuki grabbed his arm.

"Let go! This jerk! This freaking jerk! He knew how Yuuko felt, but he acted like it was no big deal and went off chasing whatever other random girl he could find!"

"—Stop it!!!"

It was Yuuko's scream that interrupted Kaito.

She wiped away her tears with her arm, and said...

"... Kaito, you're wrong. If you can only be kind to people you like, then you can never make true friends. Me, Ucchi, Yuzuki, and Haru... Saku's kindness saved all of us, right? The reason I got rejected is because I wasn't the kind of girl that Saku likes. At the very least, I would never blame Saku for showing kindness to me."

And then she smiled her infinitely kind, gentle smile.

"...Mgh."

Kaito and I gasped at almost the same time.

Watching this, Kazuki let go of the hand he was gripping.

"Well... That makes sense."

He looked down at me with his usual impassive face.

"But I don't feel like covering for you, Saku. You saw this coming a mile away, didn't you?"

His tone was flat, dry.

With a thud, Kaito let go of me and got off.

I got up, brushed off my blazer, and picked up my bag that was lying on the ground.

Yuuko started walking to the door across the room.

No one moved or opened their mouths.

Then turning in the doorway...

“See you, everyone. Next semester.”

And she smiled brightly.



—I wanted to get home. Fast.

After running out of school and crouching in a park off the main street for a while, I finally washed off my face with tap water, straightened out my messed-up uniform, and dragged my unbelievably heavy body homeward at a tired walk.

When I looked in the mirror, my cheek was red where Kaito had punched me, and there was blood smeared on my lip.

Throb. Throb. Throb. The dull pain came in pulses, in rhythm with my pounding heart.

It's your fault, your fault, the pain seemed to be repeatedly whispering in my ear.

I knew that. I didn't need to be reminded.

Right, left, right, left.

I just put one foot mechanically in front of the other.

If only this were all just a bad dream.

If only Yuuko were shaking my shoulder on the bus, and when I woke up, we'd all go to Hachiban's to round off the trip.

Four days of fatigue rushed over me, and I realized I was starving.

All that good buffet food at the hotel had me used to feasting.

Today, all I wanted was two bowls of Chinese noodles with extra green onions and a double serving of *gyoza*, and a side of fried rice, too.

Half my order would get stolen by Kaito and Haru anyway.

Yua would be scolding them for their bad table manners.

Nanase and Kazuki would be looking on, rolling their eyes.

And Yuuko...

But there was no point in imagining this.

Those days were gone now.

It was all over.

I could try to recreate it in my mind all I wanted, but this kind of scene would never happen in reality again.

Scuff, scuff, scuff, went my Stan Smiths.

The seams here and there were still encrusted with sand.

I stamped my feet, but it still clung on tenaciously.

Oh. I forgot to bring my school slippers home. I shouldn't leave them at school over summer vacation...

I walked along the same old riverbed with a heavier tread than usual.

And suddenly, I thought of her.

The one who always listened to me here.

—*SMACK*.

But as the thought crossed my mind, I punched myself hard on the cheek, right where Kaito had punched me.

That was so damn self-indulgent to think about now.

You decided to be the Saku Chitose Yuuko believed in to the end, right?

So at least own your arrogance.

Don't act like the one you wronged was the one who wronged you.

And as I lifted my head to go on...

“—Good, you’re still here.”

I heard a soft voice.

Huh...?

I looked up fully, and...

“Saku, let’s walk home together.”

With the sunset behind her, Yua’s smile was like a bright-yellow dandelion.

“Why...?”

I’d brushed myself off, but left school right after that.

If she was here now, that would have to mean that after I left the classroom, she’d run right here, if she hadn’t gone with the others to comfort Yuuko.

On closer inspection, I could see that her shoulders and chest were rising and falling slightly, and she was breathing harshly through tight lips, as if trying not to show outward exhaustion.

But when she spoke, her voice was soft.

“I like Yuuko. I like Yuzuki. I like Haru. I like Mizushino and Asano and Yamazaki. I like spending time with everyone. But...”

She took a step forward.

“If the day ever came when I had to make a choice... I decided a long time ago that I would choose the one I liked the most.”

Calmly, she continued.

“Saku, you helped me discover myself. So if you went for Yuuko, or Yuzuki, or Nishino, or Haru, well, I’d have been fine with it.”

She lowered her gaze, then looked at me again.

“But if I ever found you alone, with your head hanging down... Weak, suppressing your voice, the way I did back then... If I found you lost on a moonless night...”

With infinite softness in her voice, she said...

“—Then out of everyone, I would be the one to be by your side.”

She gripped my hand tightly.

“Come on,” said Yua, and she started walking.

We descended the narrow one-person path to the sluice gate and sat down together on it.

“I went to the clubroom to pick it up, so I almost wasn’t in time to catch you.”

Before I knew what she was doing, Yua had taken her saxophone out of its case and was standing before me.

“Yua, what are you...?”

“It’s okay.”

She turned her back to me.

“I’m going to practice now, but it might be a little noisy. Sorry in advance, okay?”

Her slim, neat shoulders rose smoothly, and the air was filled with the mellow tone of her alto saxophone.



The setting sun began to descend to the surface of the twilit riverbed, mirroring the interior of someone's heart...like a face smiling through tears.

The sky, filled with broken clouds, reflected off the surface of the water as it slowly flowed away, like a final good-bye.

The whole scene was dyed a mellow red, like a gas lamp.

“ ... ”

Yua took a half step forward and leaned over, releasing a powerful sound.

“Ah... Ugh...”

Her performance intensified, as if to cut right through the damp air, as if to drown out the sobbing of the weakling who was listening.

I buried my face in my arms and sobbed, like a small child.

AFTERWORD



It's been a while. I'm Hiromu.

Sorry for making you wait so long this time.

There was a...how can I say it, an unforeseen situation...

Yes, in *Kono Light Novel ga Sugoi! [This Light Novel Is Amazing!]* 2021, *Chitose Is in the Ramune Bottle* won first place!!!!!!

Both myself and Iwaasa, the editor in charge, were really caught off guard, and between the time I got the call and the announcement, I was running around every day doing interviews and creating new PVs and merchandise, and I just didn't have much time to work on my manuscript... Forgive me.

I talked about my feelings when I heard the results, and about my thoughts on my work in an interview for *Kono Light Novel ga Sugoi!*, so I won't include that here. Please buy it and read it!

I cried a little when I saw a pile of *Chiramune* books in my nearby bookstore, where there was once only a single volume on the shelf on the initial release day (lol).

And we have a special edition out for the first time in the series!

I have a sort of ulterior motive here, hoping that maybe those who didn't know about it might go and buy it specially, but let me explain a little about it first. The special edition comes with a 130-page short story booklet, and the cover is an illustration of Yuzuki and Haru by raemz. This booklet was written as a bonus for those who purchased in-store at places such as Animate and Toranoana when the new book was released. Each story is short, but they include scenes I wasn't able to touch on in the main series. For example, in Volume 3, Yuzuki is actually waiting for Saku, who has returned from Tokyo with

Asuka, and so on.

In addition, there's also a newly written story about Yuzuki and Haru in year one included, too!

And now, in order not to spoil the lingering impression of the main story, I'll stop teasing new stuff and move on to the acknowledgments.

Raemz, when I saw the cover, I was blown away. The illustration for Melonbooks' bonus tapestry did the same. I was especially blown away by the special version's Haru and Yuzuki illustration, but there was also the Yua one... Forget alcoholism, I'm suffering from raemzism. I will do my best to make it so you can draw new *Chiramune* illustrations as soon as possible.

Iwaasa said he learned at the special exhibition of the picture book *Frog and Toad* that good editors motivate authors by telling them what they love, and apparently, he put it into practice right away. I think next time it would be better if he included in the afterword something like, "It's just a joke, so don't get too upset by it," the next time he covers everything with heartless red pen.

In addition, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to all the people involved in *Chiramune*, in areas such as advertising and proofreading, and above all, to all the readers who voted for that number one *Kono Light Novel ga Sugoi!* spot. If I keep them waiting for a long time with the continuation after this fifth volume, I think there might be a riot, so I'll try to release the next one a little sooner... I hope?

HIROMU

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