

5
NOVEL



Adachi and Shimamura

WRITTEN BY
Hitoma Iruma

ILLUSTRATED BY
Non

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Adachi^{and} Shimamura

STORY BY Hitoma Iruma ART BY Non

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If Shimamura were here, what would she be thinking right now? The inner workings of her mind were generally a total mystery to me, so I paused to really consider it.

I worked hard every day to understand her; that's what my Shimamura Notes were for. That said, it did feel like I ended up overthinking things a lot of the time.

A sweltering haze ran along my jaw. I reached up to touch it...and found my answer.

If Shimamura were here, she would notice the heat and take action to fix it.

With that realization, my legs moved on autopilot to the windows. Then I flung them open, one by one, to improve the air circulation in the room.

Adachi

She has a slim, stick-figure body type with few curves to speak of. Has feelings for Shimamura and dearly hopes to spend time with her over summer break.





Yashiro

A self-proclaimed "alien girl" whose bright blue hair radiates sparkles of light. A mysterious entity who often pops in out of nowhere.

"Yes, perhaps it would be a good idea to learn more about Earthling culture."

"Wanna wear one, Yachi?"

"I'll pass. I think I'm just gonna wear my casual clothes."

Shimamura

A girl with a bit of a ditzy side. Lately she's managed to attract more than just Adachi, but she doesn't seem to realize it.

Little Shimamura

Shimamura's younger sister. Likes to play with Yashiro. Loves her big sister dearly and sometimes gets jealous of Adachi.



"I think there's something you forgot to say!"

"Oh! Right. How very impolite of me... You look dazzling."

"...Shimamura?"

Tarumi

An old friend of Shimamura's who recently reunited with her by chance. Wants to be close to Shimamura again, so she occasionally messages her and invites her to hang out.

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Seven Seas Entertainment

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TRANSLATION: Molly Lee
COVER DESIGN: Nicky Lim
LOGO DESIGN: George Panella
INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN: Clay Gardner
PROOFREADER: Nino Cipri, Meg van Huygen
LIGHT NOVEL EDITOR: Nibedita Sen
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Rhiannon Rasmussen-Silverstein
PRODUCTION MANAGER: Lissa Pattillo
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Chapter 1:

What If...All of Them Were Little?

OUR KIDS were something special. They were all about the same height, but with their own unique personalities, and you could tell them apart at a glance. For some reason, I couldn't help but marvel at the miracle of biology. By making children as cute as possible, it handily ensured that we living creatures would protect our young.

That aside, these kids had a lot more individuality than I did at their age. Across the room, a girl with sky-blue hair was playing with a friend who always wore a helmet. They were all so unique... *Then again, when it comes to blue hair, maybe "unique" is an understatement.*

"Shima-chan, wait!"

During free time, two of the kids ran back and forth from the hallway to the classroom: the most obnoxious—er, *energetic* of the older girls, Shima-chan, and the girl who always chased after her, Taru-chan. Shima-chan had a funny way of running, with both hands thrust out in front of her, yet it was oddly soothing to watch. As for Taru-chan, she ran with both hands raised straight in the air. Equally as odd...and equally as cute.

But while it was fun to watch them run around energetically, I couldn't let my guard down, since there was no telling when they might hurt themselves. Shima-chan in particular was like a runaway freight train. *If you don't want to put walls up between yourself and your friends, that's one thing, but do try to be mindful of real walls, okay? Seriously, how do you still manage to run into things face-first when you have your hands out in front of you?*

As they cut through the center of the classroom, however, I realized I wasn't the only one watching them. After I made sure the other kids were behaving, I glanced over, and sure enough, Sakura-chan was sitting quietly by herself, playing with Play-Doh and staring intently at Shima-chan.

Out of all the older girls, Sakura-chan was easily the "problem child." She wasn't violent or badly behaved; if she were, the issue could be remedied a lot

more easily. Instead, she struggled with basic communication skills—she barely spoke or reacted to anyone. According to her mother, this was how she behaved at home, too. *She's impossible to understand*, the woman had told me with a pained smile. I didn't argue with her at the time, but quietly, I disagreed.

While she might have *seemed* unreadable at first glance, Sakura-chan's behavior here in the classroom was actually quite straightforward. She didn't have any close friends, but she had seemingly taken an interest in Shima-chan, a social butterfly who could talk to just about anyone. That said, Sakura-chan never initiated any conversations. As much as she wanted to play with Shima-chan, she couldn't take the first step. Instead, she would carry her toys over near Shima-chan and simply hope to be noticed. She wasn't shy—she just didn't know how to talk to someone. And whenever Shima-chan was with her other friends, Sakura-chan would retreat even further.

In contrast, Akira-chan and Tae-chan were playing happily over in the corner. *What are they doing? Giving each other piggyback rides?*

"Nnrgh...!"

"Akira-chan, you're so strong!"

Tae-chan looked perfectly content on top of Akira-chan, whose face had turned beet red. Eventually she couldn't take it anymore and slumped to the ground, lowering Tae-chan, who crouched down beside her.

"You did a good job!"

"Uh huh, I sure did. Now pay up."

Tae-chan took Akira-chan by the hand, then planted a big kiss on her forehead. Akira-chan beamed from ear to ear. They were such close friends, it was unusual to ever see one without the other.

One time I was invited over to Akira-chan's house...only to realize it was a *palatial mansion*! With *bamboo trees* lining the path! It was all so fanciful, I could scarcely believe it. Then someone from the family came to greet me, and I mistakenly thought it was Akira-chan's young father—until he told me he was her *brother*! I couldn't believe *that*, either!

Now then, back to Sakura-chan. She was still staring intently at Shima-chan,

who was busy playing with building blocks along with Taru-chan and the other girls. The blocks linked together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, and right now they were trying to build a house. *How did she even get there? She was just running around a minute ago! I swear, I can't take my eyes off her for a single second... Man, parents have it rough.*

Anyway, I couldn't bear to see Sakura-chan sitting all alone, so I decided to lend a hand. Truth be told, I wasn't really supposed to meddle in the kids' friendships, but I just couldn't take it. "Shima-chan, can I borrow you real quick?" I asked, as she was busy building a roof for their house. She got up and walked over, carrying a block in one hand.

"But Sensei, I didn't break anything this time!" With her free hand on her head, she looked at me in confusion. *"This time," she says!*

"I know, and I'm so proud of you! But I think Sakura-chan wants to play, too."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Sakura-chan flinch in surprise. Apparently she was listening.

"Sure!"

Shima-chan readily agreed to this suggestion. She dashed over to Sakura-chan; Sakura-chan flinched even harder this time, then hastily stared at the floor like she was trying to pretend she wasn't watching us.

"C'mon, let's go!"

Without any lead-up whatsoever, Shima-chan grabbed her hand and started pulling. Sakura-chan set her Play-Doh down on the floor, then rose to her feet, looking from Shima-chan to me and back. Her eyebrows fluttered up and down like she wasn't sure whether to be happy or concerned.

Then Shima-chan dragged her over to the building blocks. "Here's a block. You can start from wherever you want." She handed over the block she was carrying, then went back to building.

At this, the joy left Sakura-chan's face, and her eyes started to tear up. As Shima-chan ran around to the opposite side of the play area, Sakura-chan followed after her and grabbed her hand.

“Hm? What is it?”

“Um...let’s play over there instead...” She pointed over at the vacant area where she was previously sitting.

“No way!” Shima-chan held up her blocks. “How come? I like it here!”

“But...I wanna play over *there*...” Sakura-chan tugged on the other girl’s hand.

“Whoa, whoa!” Shima-chan started to stumble, but she regained her balance.

“No! Let’s play with everybody!”

“Yeah! Don’t steal Shima-chan for yourself!” Taru-chan chimed in.

Now that she was outnumbered, Sakura-chan’s shoulders started to shake.
Uh-oh.

“I...I want Shima-chan to play with me... Play with *me*...!”



Sure enough, she began to cry. *Aww, sweetheart.* Honestly, I wasn't sure whether to intervene again. Maybe I messed up by butting in the first time.

Sakura-chan was *not* the type to play in a big group. This was no moral failing on her part, but still...she was just so inept. *At this rate, I'm not sure she'll make any friends in elementary school.*

"You need to show consideration for your friends."

This time, *I* flinched. Out of nowhere, another girl had appeared—and another blue-haired one at that. But while she and the girl across the room from us both radiated sparkles, their hairstyles were completely different. This one had half of her hair tied up in the shape of a butterfly, with the other half cascading down her shoulders like a bright blue waterfall. It was all quite surreal...well, except for the rice ball in her hand. I could see kelp poking out from the center.

"That's what everyone always says, and I imagine Planet Earth is no different." Her canteen wobbled as it hung across her torso. It was raining outside, and yet she was dressed for a picnic.

"Wh-whoa! Who are *you*?" Even Shima-chan was startled by the sudden newcomer. Stubbornly, she drew herself up to her fullest height.

"Keh heh heh! In your current form, you don't stand a chance against me, Shimamura-san! Hyah!"

She grabbed Shima-chan's hand and started spinning her around. *Uhhh...what are you doing?* She kept going...and going...and going...until finally her legs gave out.

"Whoa whoa whoa..." Suddenly freed, Shima-chan staggered dizzily.

"How do you like *that*, hmm?" the other girl shot back, though she wasn't in much better shape. *Where did you even come from?*

"That was mean!"

"Heh heh heh! That's what happens when you spin out of control," she smirked, still wobbling. "Unless you're well-trained, like myself."

She straightened up suddenly, though it was clear she was pressing her feet

down hard on the floor; from behind, I could see her leg muscles twitching.

“You have to be able to walk before you can run,” she explained calmly. Then she glanced over at Sakura-chan.

Sakura-chan wasn't comfortable making eye contact with strangers, so she hastily stared down at the floor. Then, for some reason, the other girl started cackling loudly. I looked at Sakura-chan, then back at the other girl; Shima-chan followed suit.

...Ah, I see. I couldn't comprehend how her brain worked, but in that moment, I could see what she was getting at. What about Shima-chan, though? Did she understand?

Shima-chan looked up at the other girl, her innocent eyes tinged sky-blue like she was absorbing the other girl's sparkle. And then, a moment later...

“I don't get it, but okay,” she nodded. “Today I'll play with Sakura-chan in *solitude*.”

That...was a surprisingly big word for someone her age. *Ugh, she must have picked it up from the kid in the helmet. I swear, I don't know where that kid learns these words.* Still, judging from her decision, she must have caught the other girl's drift.

Shima-chan looked over her shoulder at Sakura-chan, whose face lit up despite the tears in her eyes. Her lips curled, and her eyebrows raised.

“But once I stop being dizzy, I wanna play with my other friends, too.”

At this, Sakura-chan stared down at the floor again. Then, after a moment, she took Shima-chan by the hand and pulled her back over to the spot where she left her Play-Doh. Shima-chan was usually one to lead rather than follow, so it was rather amusing to see quiet, aloof Sakura-chan bossing her around for a change.

Taru-chan, however, was not amused in the least. “That's not *faaaaair*,” she whined.

Hmmm... Can't please everybody, I guess. Would it make them happier if I joined in her place? Or would that be weird? Before I could decide, however, the

girl with blue butterfly hair walked up to me with her chest puffed out.

“Keh heh heh! In the side stories, *I* take charge!”

I had no idea what she was talking about. Then I noticed how much taller she was compared to everyone else. *Was she always in my class...? No, I don't think she was!*

“Where are you from?”

Lunchtime ended ages ago, so where did she get that rice ball?

“To be clear, this is an alternate-universe story about what would happen if they met this early on. Absolutely none of this is canon.”

“Uhhhh...?”

“Care for a drink?” She uncapped her canteen, poured some into the lid, and offered it to me.

“Oh, uh, thanks.”

I accepted it and took a sip, expecting water. But it was not water. It was a yogurt drink so sweet and thick, I questioned whether it was a milkshake instead. The girl drank it all down without missing a beat, of course.

“That said, it's a shame Little isn't here.”

And with that, she toddled away, never once listening to a word I said. *What an adorable intruder... Er, should I be calling the cops, or...?*

“What do you wanna make, Sakura-chan?” Shima-chan asked as the two of them shaped their Play-Doh.

“I...I dunno,” Sakura-chan replied, her voice cracking slightly. She had the emotional intelligence to sense that Shima-chan was making an effort to be nice...and it got a smile out of her, stiff though it was. When I saw it, my heart slid down out of my throat and back to my chest where it belonged.

Sakura-chan was a girl with a lot of issues, and she had a lot of growing up to do over the course of her life. But as long as she could read the signs—as long as she could smile—she was going to be A-OK.

Chapter 2:

I'll Come See You, Whether You Ask or Not **T**HIS WAS THE FIRST TIME the words “summer break” had ever inspired feelings of *dread*. It was a month-long reprieve from my normal life at school, and while it usually felt as freeing as a cannonball into an Olympic-sized pool, this year I couldn't remember how to swim. My limbs flailed in search of solid ground.

The closing ceremony was held on the last day of the first semester. In the classroom, I watched Shimamura. Then she yawned, and as she was wiping away an errant tear, our eyes met. I hastily averted my gaze.

I knew I (probably) wasn't doing anything wrong, so why did I always stare down at the floor? Because I was ashamed to be caught looking at her? I mean, surely she had to be used to it by now. *Should I stand my ground and keep looking at her?* I lifted and lowered my head as I waffled back and forth. *No, I can't! It's too mortifying!*

My brain boiled; my neck and palms began to sweat. It was quite possible I was having the biggest emotional reaction in the entire room. Either that, or... you know...just overthinking it like always.

While our homeroom teacher was talking, I packed my book bag. Then, as soon as the bell rang, I headed straight to Shimamura's desk. She must have anticipated this, because she was already looking in my direction. Stiffly, I raised my hand and started to— “Adachi, why do you always look away when our eyes meet?” She hit me with a pre-emptive attack at point-blank range. Having missed their chance, my lips wavered in vain. Then came the follow-up: “You're like a little mouse scurrying back to your nest.”

The way she giggled as she spoke, it was hard to tell whether I was meant to be embarrassed or not. Was she laughing in a friendly way or a mocking way? *Should I take this to mean I need to cut it out?* I started waffling again. Then she rose to her feet, book bag in hand, and I took my place at her side, even though I wasn't explicitly invited.

“Oohoo!” Shimamura chuckled as she looked up at me.

“Wh-what?”

“I see you’re wearing your hairpin again!”

Reflexively, I reached up and gently stroked the flower hairpin—a gift from Shimamura herself.

“Do you like it?”

I nodded hastily, and she grinned. Personally, the sight of her wearing a matching hairpin was enough to set my chest on fire.

It wasn’t until we approached the stairs that I sensed the impending danger: that we were going to part ways without another word. Having snapped back to reality, I started to sweat all over again. “Hey, so...it’s summer break, huh?”

“Yup, sure is.”

We kept walking. Wasn’t there anything else I could say to keep the conversation going? *Complain about the cicadas? No, stupid. She won’t have anything to say about that.* “What kind of plans do you...have planned?”

The question came out a little oddly worded. She stooped slightly. “I haven’t planned any plans yet,” she replied, echoing my word choice.

For a moment I was embarrassed, but then it hit me: “Does that mean I could email you and stuff?”

“Sure. I mean, you already email me all the time.”

“I know, but since it’s summer break, there might be...a lot...I dunno...”

“It’s fine, it’s fine!”

While I struggled to get the words out, Shimamura remained cool as a cucumber. My greedy side started to rear its head. Maybe I could ask for more. “Oh, and if you have time...it’d be cool if we could...hang out sometime...”

“Bring it on, girl.”

She thumped my chest playfully. At this, I was both relieved and...um...thrown off-balance; so light and airy, a stiff breeze could have sent me flying. Er, not that I was flustered because she touched me or anything. Of course not.

Shimamura was the source of all my worries. Without school to bring the two of us together, summer break would be an empty void—unless I made an effort. Like the cicadas, I needed to be vocal in order to get what I wanted.

Then we walked down the stairs to the shoe lockers, and as I stood with my shoes in hand, I called her name. “Shimamura?”

“Hmm?”

She looked over her shoulder at me. Her neck was sweaty, and she had unbuttoned her shirt slightly. The dim fluorescent lighting overhead mingled with the sunshine streaming in through the front entrance. This was the door to summer, and I found myself drawn to it. I couldn’t think straight.

“Over summer break, I...you know...I’d really like to get to know you better so yeah okay cool.” Partway through, my brain started melting, and I started to ramble at the speed of sound. None of it was as eloquent as I’d hoped. Especially the part at the end.

“Get to know me better...?”

This must have confused her, because she didn’t seem enthusiastic. At least, not to me. But if I launched into some long-winded explanation, how would she react? What if I told her I wanted to go to the pool, or walk around town, or grab drinks at a café? Would she be uncomfortable? I wasn’t so optimistic to imagine that she’d readily accept.

Standing in front of Shimamura, my heart pounded in my chest. While this was the driving force that spurred me onward, it was also my weak point laid bare. Part of me was terrified that one day I’d reach out only to have my hand slapped away.

But then...she smiled at me.

“I’m not sure I fully understand, but...I look forward to it.”

That smile marked the start of a restless, sleepless summer.

The best part of summer break: not having to get up in the morning.

“Or so I thought,” I muttered as I lay slumped over the kitchen table at 7 in

the morning. Not to mention I had stayed up late talking to Adachi on the phone, so yeah. My eyelids did not want to be open right now.

“I don’t wanna have to deal with dirty dishes later, so this is my solution. If you want, you can go back to bed after you eat,” said my mother, the villain who woke me, as she poured me a bowl of cereal. Then the milk went in, and I pushed myself up into a sitting position, caving to the demands of my parched throat.

“Oh, Nee-chan, you’re always such a baby in the morning,” my little sister scoffed.

Unlike me, this one was a bundle of energy right from the moment she snapped awake. Apparently she got up at *six o’clock* to go do calisthenics in the park. I didn’t even know that was still a thing. *Come to think of it, when did she start sassing me like this?*

“I simply can’t get enough of this coconut flavor. Yum yum,” said the gremlin with the sparkly blue hair. It was Yashiro, of course. Apparently she and my sister had bumped into each other at the park. *Did no one ever teach you not to bring strays home with you? Now she’s eating our cereal, for Pete’s sake.*

“Hmmm...”

At least she’s enjoying it, I thought to myself as I gazed at her soft, plump cheeks.

There was something magnetizing about her; I cared about her a bit too much to write her off as a stranger, probably because I saw so much of my childhood self in her. In particular, the way she ran with her hands out in front of her was practically *identical*. But although I didn’t like everything about her, oddly enough, I still wanted to look out for her. Maybe that was why my sister liked her and my mother never objected to her presence—because they both saw traces of me alive in her. The thought made me feel conflicted.

Time passed as I ate my breakfast, then brushed my teeth and washed my face. After the little ones left the house, blissfully forgetting that there was homework assigned over the break, I crawled back into my futon. My sister had recently switched to a light summer blanket, but I slept under a comforter all year round. Was it hot under here? Extremely. But I didn’t feel secure unless I

was all curled up under something heavy. Maybe I was subconsciously seeking some sort of maternal warmth.

The exact moment I lay down, however, my phone started to ring, shattering my peace and quiet with laser precision. Instantly my skull felt like lead.

“Uggghhh...”

But I couldn’t very well just lay there and let it ring, since that would be rude. So I crawled out of bed and grabbed my phone off the table, banging my arm on the corner in the process.

“...Oh. Not who I was expecting.”

I’d thought it was Adachi, but it was in fact Tarumi. I hadn’t seen her in a good two weeks or so. These days we’d meet up periodically, whenever she randomly invited me to something. Every time we hung out, I discovered new things that had changed and old things that had stayed the same... It was actually kind of fun.

When I answered the phone, Tarumi started talking immediately. “Yo, Shima-chan!”

I don’t know who “Yoshima-chan” is, but it sure ain’t me. “Yo, yo.”

“It’s summer break for you, right?”

“For us, yeah... Well, I guess all the schools probably run on the same schedule.”

Tarumi was probably on break, too, unless she had club activities or something... I couldn’t remember ever asking her. *Wait, no, maybe I did.* The topic might have come up back before we smoothed out all the bumps in our renewed friendship. That would probably explain why I couldn’t remember. *Ugh, listen to me justifying my own memory loss. I sound like Nagafuji.*

“How are you?”

“Good, good...” I couldn’t exactly tell her she was keeping me awake, so instead I forced a laugh.

“Okay, uhhh... Oh! How’d finals go?”

“Ha ha ha ha...” *Classic Taru-chan. What a joker.*

Then I heard a cicada start chirping somewhere nearby and looked up. It was so bright outside my window, it felt like someone had cranked the dial up to 12. Everyone else in my life was a chipper little early bird; was I simply the odd one out? Honestly, even if I had the energy to do something, I couldn't think of anything to spend it on.

“That reminds me, Shima-chan... Um, this is just an idea, but... Like, for real, it's no big deal if you don't want to, but...”

“Yeah? What's up?”

Her lead-up put me on guard. It sounded like the kind of disclaimer that preceded a giant hassle. And regardless of her intentions, good or bad, it felt heavy.

Swallowing, she continued, “Would you wanna come with me to the fireworks festival next week?”

That invitation marked the start of a summer spent dreaming about a world beyond the deep blue.

~Today's Adachi Forecast~

Scribble, scribble, scribble, scribble, scribble. Erase.

Scribble, scribble, scribble, scribble, scribble, scribble.

Scribble, scribble, erase. Scribble, scribble, scribble, scribble, scribble.

Scribble, scribble, scribble, scribble, scribble, scribble.

It wasn't exactly "complete"—I just ran out of room.

Chapter 3:

Departing from the Deep Blue **A**FTER TWO NIGHTS of diligent effort, I held up the end result to evaluate its quality.

1. Shimamura lets me sleep over again. 2. Shimamura and I go shopping somewhere. 3. Shimamura lets me hold her hand and we have a fun time. 4. Shimamura and I go to the pool. Maybe the beach? Too far? 5. Shimamura It was a list of things I wanted to do over summer vacation, and most of them—okay, all of them—started with Shimamura. I hadn't thought too hard about it while I was in the process of writing it all out, but now that I was looking at it, my gaze bashfully avoided all the times I'd written her name. By the time I'd reached number five on the list, I had run out of space to write anything; why had I just left Shimamura's name there? This was a mystery of my own (sleep-deprived) making.

Still, it was technically accurate. In my head, the Venn diagram of “summer break” and “Shimamura” was basically a circle. That said, they weren't firmly linked, so I would have to make a conscious effort. Otherwise, if I zoned out in the heat, this list would never be anything more than incoherent scribbles, and by the time school was back in session, I'd be left with nothing but my regrets.

Now that Shimamura was a part of my life, I refused to let this summer turn out worse than all the others I'd wasted sitting around doing nothing. That was why I spent the past two days organizing my thoughts on paper: to go out and do things and have fun. When I thought about it, I realized this succinctly described the entire point of summer break. And having fun together, just the two of us, was surely proof of our close bond...

“Proof...”

I wasn't confident such a thing actually existed, but if by any chance I got my paws on some, I would probably strut around town for a week straight just to show it off. So how could I prove the existence of something that was invisible to the naked eye? ...With a thermometer or something?

I looked up at the clock. My shift was going to start soon, so I set my to-do list down on my desk and changed into my work clothes. Then I remembered I

hadn't eaten breakfast. *Eh, whatever.*

Honestly, I had no real incentive to keep working. When I first started, I figured it was better than sitting around doing nothing, and having money saved up would be helpful in case of an emergency. But now I had a ton of money in the bank and nothing to spend it on. Sure, it was a source of pocket money for whenever Shimamura and I hung out somewhere, but those opportunities were few and far between.

Still, if there was anything that motivated me to keep showing up for work, it was the hope that Shimamura and her family might come back to eat there again. Sure, it was kind of humiliating, but...I mean...Shimamura had complimented my *cheongsam* in the past, so I wasn't really bothered by the thought of her seeing me in it, I guess? And part of me wanted her to be... drawn to me, or something. Instead of me always having to chase her down, I wanted her to start meeting me in the middle, one step at a time. That was what being close was all about, right?

No one had ever taught me these things. In the past I never cared, but now I was actively trying to learn. When would I be able to make up for lost time?

After writing about Shimamura so much, I yearned to hear her voice, so I decided I'd call her after my shift ended. Even if I didn't have anything else to talk about, I at least wanted her to know that I missed her... I just wasn't sure I'd be able to get the words out without getting tongue-tied.

Ugh, now I'll have to wait forever. I wish I'd had this idea after work.

I grabbed my bike key and my house key and stepped outside. With no air conditioning to protect me, I discovered another sweltering summer day waiting for me. And as the sunshine slung an arm around my shoulders, the cicadas all screamed hello.

Through my eyes, it truly felt like I had opened the door into summer.

It felt like there were cicadas chirping in the back of my mind—like an auditory representation of the bright sunlight streaming in. The buildings in the distance stood out sharply against the sky, their colors distinct but muted. I

never really liked the summer season, but I still enjoyed the scenery.

“Nee-chan, what are you doing?” my sister asked dubiously as she spotted me zoning out by the window.

“Mmm... Not much...”

I was thinking back to last summer—the time I buried the dead cicada. I could still remember the warmth of the dirt against my palms. Nearly a full year had passed since I first met Adachi, and yet it still felt like just yesterday. In a blink, we were suddenly second-year high school students, and in eighteen months, we would graduate. Would I go to college after that? Honestly, probably not. So what would I do with my life?

It's only going to get even more boring from here, isn't it? Blegh. I let out a sigh.

“Ah, it appears I've found both Shimamura-san and Little.”

Yashiro entered the room next, trailing after my sister. These days I passed this oddball in the hall so often, you'd think she had moved in. In fact, most nights she stayed for dinner *and* a bath. That said, she didn't sleep here. Whether the word “yet” belonged at the end of that sentence remained to be seen, but for the time being, she always went home at night. And when we woke up the next morning, we'd often find her laying around in the living room.

“Oh, right! Nee-chan, nee-chan! There's gonna be a festival!”

My sister offered me the stack of flyers she was holding—probably just the ads that always came sandwiched between the pages of the newspaper. I took them and had myself a look. Sitting on top was an advertisement for the very same fireworks festival Tarumi and I were going to. Apparently all the local companies were going to set up stalls there, hence they were having these flyers sent out to every house, regardless of proximity. I looked at the date listed. *Pretty sure that's a weekend.*

“What might this be?” Yashiro asked, standing next to my sister and peering at the flyer. She tilted her head. “Fireworks festival? What's a firework?”

She doesn't know what fireworks are?

On second thought, Yashiro generally didn't know about a lot of things. Her utter lack of common knowledge made me wonder if she was from a different country, but on the other hand, she could speak flawless Japanese. Why was the breadth of her knowledge so glaringly inconsistent? It felt like she'd spent her life walking a very narrow tightrope and never straying an inch.

"Nnrgh..." Yashiro paused to contemplate for a moment, then put her face in her hands and pretended to cry.

"No, that's *waterworks*," my sister retorted.

"Something different, then?" She immediately lowered her hands.

"*Fireworks* are big explodey things with lots of pretty colors!"

"Ah, of course," she nodded, though it was obvious she didn't have the first clue. What she *did* seem to understand, however, was that my sister particularly delighted in explaining things.

"Did you wanna go?" I asked.

"I'll go with you if you ask me nicely," my sister told me haughtily. *Why is this kid such a brat to me specifically?*

"Well, actually, I already kinda agreed to go with a friend, so..."

"Whaaaa?" She rose up on her tiptoes in protest. After an indignant pause, she continued, "What *friend*?! Noooo!"

Sorry to burst your bubble, but your big sister's got a life of her own. It sucks, I know. My parents were both lazy bums who couldn't stand the hassle of crowds, so without me there to babysit her, my sister would never be allowed to go to a night festival.

"I can go with you," Yashiro offered helpfully (?), with her hands on her hips and her chest thrust out. *Thanks, but that doesn't exactly solve the problem. If anything, it just adds a new one.*

As my sister pouted her lips, I scratched my head. Once she started sulking, it would take a lot of work to cheer her up later.

"Okay, uhh...give me a minute."

Somehow I sensed this wouldn't go over well, but I decided to ask anyway. I pulled out my phone and navigated to my call history—*beep, boop, bip*. Two seconds later, Tarumi picked up.

"Shima-chan?! What is it?! What's going on?!" she blurted out all at once, and I could sense that she had just run full-speed to answer the phone.

"It's not that urgent. Anyway, hi."

"Heyo! Is this what I think it is? Rain check?" She sounded restless, though still reasonably calm compared to Adachi. Where Adachi hesitated, Tarumi charged ahead.

"No, no rain check, but it *is* about the fireworks festival. Can I bring my little sister and...one other?"

There was a pause. *Yeah, I had a feeling she wouldn't like this*, I thought to myself as I smiled stiffly. We were friends, yes, but I could tell it would be weird to bring a family member. Besides, we had already planned on it being just the two of us. My sister would just have to suck it up and stay home.

But right as I was about to look back at her— "What do you mean, one other?" Tarumi asked, her voice hard. Was *that* the part that worried her? *Weirdo*.

"Ummm, it's kind of hard to explain. She's like...my sister's friend? I guess?"

Technically *I* met her first, but...our relationship was really hard to describe.

"Your *sister*... Right, I forgot you had a sister."

"Yeah. I think you last saw her years ago when she was a toddler. Remember?"

"Vaguely. I guess she probably wouldn't remember me, either."

"Probably not," I agreed. Back then, my sister would hide in our room whenever Tarumi came over... *Wait, but that's the exact same as she is now. Well, at least it's cute, I guess*. "Soooo, is it cool? If not, that's okay too, so yeah."

There would be other night festivals, so I could always take her to something else later on, even if they might not have fireworks. These days they didn't

shoot off as many as they used to, so the opportunity had gotten rarer; that said, this time of year, we usually heard them going off about once a week.

“...Sure, sure. Sounds good, yeah.”

After a pause, she accepted my proposal. Honestly, I wasn't expecting it. I debated whether to apologize, but it didn't feel like I'd done anything wrong, so instead I went with “Thanks.”

“Nah, it's cool. I'm not really...you know...super, like... Basically, I just wanna have a fun time!”

“Yeah?” *You don't have to constantly look on the bright side, you know.*

“Uhhh, yeah! Yeah...yeah. No, really, it's cool. She's *your* sister, so...”

So...what? But instead of asking, I thanked her again and moved to hang up. She seemed to sense this.

“Uhhh, Shima-chan! Shima-chan!”

I put the phone back to my ear. The way she repeated my name reminded me of old times.

“I'm really looking forward to this, so don't forget!”

And with that cutting remark, she hung up. Unlike Adachi, she always committed to a single course of action, which I could appreciate. But it was hard to tell whether her final words were merely an expression of her excitement, or...a warning. Did she really think I would forget to show up? *Summer break's only just started. Trust me, I'm not that far gone*, I thought to myself as I looked over my shoulder.

Ignoring Yashiro, who was having fun fake-crying again, I turned to my sister. “Okay, she said you can come.”

“Ohhh!” She exhaled all the air stored in her puffy, pouting cheeks.

“But we're going with a friend of mine. Are you going to be okay with that?”

My sister was generally pretty aloof with anyone who wasn't in our immediate family. She nodded slightly.

Here's hoping she conquers her shyness sometime soon. Otherwise she'll turn

out like—well, *hmm. I guess Adachi's issue isn't shyness, per se.*

“Is it the same friend who stayed over the other day?” she asked. It sounded like she was asking if it was Adachi, although that sleepover had happened quite a while ago, not just *the other day*.

“No, not her. Someone else.”

“Hmm,” she grunted unenthusiastically. *What's with the attitude?*

“Any friend of Shimamura-san's is a friend of mine,” Yashiro announced with a broad smile. “I am the Friend-Bot! Rat-tat-tat!”

“Whatever...”

Rolling my eyes at her antics, I let my gaze swim into the distant sea, where my past was dead and buried. Whenever something reminded me of my old self, it made me uneasy. Did these things come naturally to her because she was so similar to the old me? Or did I just *think* she was similar because of the things she said?

Gently, I searched the briny deep for the beginning of the overlap.

All throughout my shift, I couldn't stop thinking about the fireworks festival. That said, I wouldn't be going as part of the crowd, walking beneath the rainbow of explosions. No, I was going as part of the attraction itself.

Our restaurant, which called itself “neo-Chinese Cuisine,” would be running a food stand there, and the manager had asked me to help. I wanted to say no, but any time I tried, she would always pretend like she suddenly couldn't understand Japanese. *What a jerk, seriously.* And so I had no choice but to concede. *I just hope I get paid for it.*

Still, I hadn't given any thought to festivals until now. When I thought about summer, my brain jumped straight to the pool and the beach, probably because I had past experience going there. But I had never been to any festival; my relationship with my family wasn't conducive to that sort of thing. Setting that particular can of worms aside, I decided to contemplate the idea of me and Shimamura going to a festival together.

The thought added a flood of light to my already-dazzling visions of summer. Beyond the window, even the shimmering heat haze rising from the tarmac looked beautiful. Just like that, my horizons were broadened, and I could appreciate all the little details I never noticed before. A tiny dose of optimism gave me the tolerance of a saint.

After my shift ended, my manager came waddling over to me like a penguin. “You have to come. Okay?”

“...Okay.”

If only I didn’t have to work, I could have invited Shimamura...but if it wasn’t for my job, I wouldn’t have remembered that festivals were a thing at all. It was a total catch-22—flawless and frustrating. Every now and then, I wished I could live my life as a series of happy moments and discard all the rest. Greedy, I know.

“By the way, what are we selling?”

“Chicken karaage.”

“Oh, right.”

Our chicken karaage was long and thin, like little clubs. I sincerely had no idea what part of it was “neo-Chinese.”

After I changed back into my street clothes, I stayed behind in the air-conditioned changing room and pulled out my phone. It was time to call Shimamura. Normally I always sent an email ahead of time to get permission, but this time I decided to skip that step and see what happened.

As I waited for her to pick up, my fingers started to tingle from nervousness. This was my idea of being adventurous. And after a moment, that thrill came in for a landing.

“Yes, yes, hello?”

“Oh...”

Shimamura. Shimamura’s voice! My shoulders jumped. To me, she was an oasis in the desert; for better or for worse, the pain and palpitations breathed life back into this empty husk I called my body.

“Gah! *Hey!*” she scolded.

“Huh? Wh-what?!” My eyes widened.

“Oh, sorry, the kids are messing with me,” she explained. “Hey! Quit trying to climb on my head!”

Something was going on over there. *Kids, plural?* If it wasn’t just her sister, then maybe that weird blue-haired girl was there, too. How were they climbing on her head? Clinging to her back or something? I didn’t like the sound of that, no matter who was involved. Put bluntly, I— “Behave yourself, got it?”

“Okay.” I shrank into myself.

“No, not you, Adachi...although you probably should.”

“Wha?!”

“I’m joking. So what’s up?”

Her voice grew softer; it caressed my ears and made my heart race until I was dizzy. Whatever happened to the version of me who could hold a conversation with Shimamura without getting flustered?

“Uhhh...I was wondering how you were doing...” I didn’t have the courage to leap straight into the fireworks festival thing, so instead I chickened out.

“Eh, I’m doing okay. Just so-so. It’s so hot, I don’t wanna do anything, you know?”

I could hear the sound of something bouncing on the floor while someone else shouted, “*I’m* doing great, thank you!”

“Yes, yes, whatever you say. Anyway, how are you, Adachi?”

“I’m...doing great, thank you,” I replied in a less-than-enthusiastic imitation of the other voice. She snorted quietly, and it made my cheeks flush.

“Have you been doing the homework?”

“Huh? We had homework?”

“Nope!”

She burst out laughing. Later, I would realize she was treating me like her kid

sister.

“I just got off work,” I explained.

“Ohhh, I see. You still go in during the summer, huh? You’re a real hard worker. Hard to believe you were ever a delinquent,” she teased. Was I, though?

“So anyway...er...not that I have much else to talk about, but...”

“Well, however much it is, lay it on me.”

I was so bad at transitioning between topics. I lacked the glue to stick them together. No, wait—maybe I used *too much* glue, you know, in a really forced, obvious way. I knew it was awkward, but I had already put it out there, so now I had to roll with it.

“Not right now or anything, but...sometime soon...”

“Yeah?”

“Would you want to, um, go to a festival with me?”

That really came out of nowhere, my last shred of objectivity informed me. There was a pause, like Shimamura wasn’t sure how to respond.

“When you say *festival*, by any chance, do you mean the fireworks festival that’s coming up?”

“Yeah... Uhhh, I mean, no! It doesn’t have to be that soon—sometime in the future is all!” *Not like I can go to that one anyway. I mean, I am going, but not in a fun way.* “Summer break’s only just started, so uh...let’s figure out a day when we’re both free or...something...”

She hadn’t even confirmed that she wanted to go, so I was completely getting ahead of myself. Belatedly, I realized that I was hovering halfway out of my chair. As I waited for her answer, the sound of my own breathing grated on my ears, rough and heavy.

“...Okay, sure. Let’s make a plan to go sometime.”

My jaw dropped in abject delight as warmth flooded my chest. Something in my core was set aflame. “Okay, cool... Oh, and it doesn’t *have* to have

fireworks. Just a regular festival would be fine...”

“Yep, I know. I know how it is with you.”

“What? Uh...y-you do? Really?”

It was weird to think Shimamura understood me. It was embarrassing, but also kind of nice—entirely separate from the feeling I got when I understood her.

We talked for a little longer after that. Then she told me it was dinnertime, so I reluctantly ended the call. Fatigue and accomplishment weighed on my shoulders like I’d just finished running a marathon.

I straightened my posture as I looked down at my phone. Judging from my shoulders and cheeks, I was laughing—*hopefully not in a creepy way*, I thought to myself, and yet I made no attempt to rein it in.

Lately, I spent every day in the pursuit of Shimamura. Like a bird, I circled just overhead, waiting all day for the chance to alight upon her shoulders. And when it finally happened, I would fly off again with the hopes of one day returning home to nest.

She was my goal—my start and finish line. Maybe it was too big of an exaggeration to say that she was my life support, but if so, she was still inarguably my guiding light.

This laughter was all the proof I needed.

“I want to paint you.”

I already wasn’t expecting Tarumi to call me, and I certainly wasn’t expecting her first words to be...*that*. For some reason, I’d anticipated that we wouldn’t speak to each other for another three days, when she would probably get in touch to arrange our meetup spot for the fireworks festival. So as a result, I hesitated slightly. Never mind why I was having this emotional reaction—what on earth was she talking about? Painting?

“Uhh...go ahead?”

“No, no, no! I can’t paint you unless we meet up. So what I’m saying is: let’s

hang out, pretty please!” she explained casually. *Oh, so this is your excuse. Got it.*

“What kind of ‘painting’ do you mean? Like, on a canvas, or—?”

“Yeah, that.”

“...And you want to paint *me*?”

“Exactly.”

“Right now?”

“Yeah.”

I glanced outside at the clear blue sky. A tidal wave of light attacked my eyes, making me squint. She really wanted to paint in this weather? *Pretty hardcore.*

“...Okay.”

And so there I was at the designated meetup spot: Nagara River, underneath the Kinka Bridge. I had traveled over this bridge a fair few times, looking down at the fishermen as I passed, but it had been years since I set foot on the rocky riverbed myself. The pebbles glowed gold in the sunshine, clacking beneath my shoes as I walked.

With every step, I half-wondered if the sun would fry my legs from behind. But the temperature was colder down here, as if to remind me that I was at a lower elevation. Here by the water, the lukewarm wind left me wanting; as it swirled around me, a symphony rattled up from the rocks, both thrilling and grating all at once. This was summer, burning itself into my skin.

As I walked, I gazed into the distance. From the shore, I had a perfect view of Mount Kinka and Gifu Castle. How old was I the last time I took that ropeway? The older my sister got, the rarer those kinds of trips became.

Tarumi was already here, setting up her canvas on the riverbed. *Wow, she’s got an easel and everything,* I thought to myself, mildly impressed. I was kinda expecting this to be more of a casual thing... *Oh, boy.* I reached up and grabbed the brim of my hat.

Truth be told, part of me would have appreciated a little more time to get ready, seeing as I was going to be an art model. I didn’t have time to style my

hair, so I threw this hat on to hide it, and when I realized how hot it was outside, I instantly knew there was no point in putting on makeup—I would only end up sweating it all off on the walk here. Still, I kinda wished I'd brought a mirror. *I don't have sleep in my eyes, do I?*

“Oh! Shima-chan!”

Tarumi spotted me and raised a hand in greeting; likewise, I returned it. Then I walked around to get a look at the canvas. Unsurprisingly, it was blank. But by the end of the day, a picture of me would be right there... The thought made me bashful.

“Sorry to spring this on you.”

“It's okay. I was bored anyway.”

Her pale skin suggested she had yet to spend much time in the summer sun. But though she was wearing long sleeves, she wasn't wearing a hat...and for some reason, when I thought of her getting a tan, it felt like such a crying shame.

“Here.” She offered me a black parasol. “Since the sun's so bright, I thought I'd paint you holding a parasol.”

“How very considerate of you.”

The parasol was styled like a black lily; I held it low, just over my hair. This particular parasol had prioritized form over function, and it didn't do much to block out the sun at all.

“Ooh, you look great,” Tarumi remarked almost immediately—too quickly to feel genuine.

“You think so?”

“Yeah... But then again, if you ask me, you can make just about anything look good, so I guess I'm biased,” she replied hastily, all in a single breath. Then she went back to setting up her easel. Maybe this was her way of saying: *I'm just being nice, so don't read too much into it.*

“Ha ha ha!” I could appreciate her honesty.

I started to back away from the easel, but she stopped me. “Where are you

going?”

Then I looked around and spotted a folding chair set up nearby.

“Sorry, but my eyesight kinda sucks. I need you to stay close or else I won’t be able to see all your little details.”

“Oh, okay.”

What little details? I wondered. Nevertheless, I did as instructed and sat down on the folding chair. Then I faced the river with my back turned to the shore. The sunshine reflected off the water and directly into my eyes; this mass of light was only slightly swayed by the fishermen casting their lines.

“A chair and a parasol... Maybe I should have dressed up in more fancy clothes.”



Not that I actually owned any fancy clothes. Hino probably had some... Well, fancy *kimonos*, at least. As I sat there, I twirled the parasol by the handle, making the flower-shaped shadow dance above my head.

Then, finally, Tarumi picked up her paintbrush and looked past her canvas at me. The thought that this was going to last for hours upon hours made my neck itchy. I couldn't even turn my head.

"Okay, here I go!" she announced, as if she was going to pitch a softball.

"Bring it!" I replied, like a catcher.

Not exactly the most artsy conversation we could have had, but still, it felt... seasonally appropriate, I guess? To me, summer was the season of fun, while winter was all serious and solemn.

Then, without taking her eyes off me, Tarumi started to move her brush. *Shouldn't you watch what you're doing?* I wondered. But the moment I made eye contact with her, she hid back behind the canvas like she was Adachi.

Why did it feel like I attracted a very specific type of person? Adachi, Tarumi, my sister... I didn't have enough hands for all three of them, so I could only pray that there would never come a day that all four of us would end up in the same place.

"I didn't know you were an artist, Taru-chan," I commented as I gazed at the art supplies littered around her feet.

"Well, I only started last week."

That explains that, I guess. "You're a real go-getter, huh?" No clue if I was using that word correctly at all.

"It'll be *fine*, I promise. We used to do art stuff together all the time, remember?"

"Uhh...you mean how we used to doodle on old flyers and stuff?"

As far as I could recall, Tarumi only ever drew birds, and I mostly drew candy. Perhaps this symbolized the core differences in our personalities or whatever.

"Yeah, see? There's no chance my Shima-chan painting will turn out bad..."

She shot her model a quick glance. “Hopefully.”

“That *would* be ideal.”

We shared a giggle, and I twirled my parasol, spinning the faint traces of sunlight over my head. Tarumi watched it spin, then went back to painting. *You can't blame your model if your art turns out bad, Taru-chan.*

If she started a week ago...that would be right at the start of summer vacation.

“Is this your summer hobby...?”

Thinking back over my memories of elementary school, I averted my eyes and laughed. Meanwhile, the river drifted silently by. After days and days of sunny weather, the neighborhood creek was now shallow enough that you could see the bottom, but not *this* beast.

In three days' time, this whole area would come to life, and we would be smack-dab in the middle of it. I'd have to pay attention to make sure the little ones wouldn't get lost—would I even have *time* to watch any fireworks? Had they changed at all since the last time I saw them, years and years ago? My sister was getting older, the fireworks were getting better, and my high school days were halfway spent... I could really feel the passage of time.

“That reminds me! I remembered,” Tarumi called out to me as she moved her brush across the canvas.

“Remembered what?”

“About your sister...or more accurately, about you.” She peeked at me, the tips of her curls swaying gently in the river breeze. “Just that you've always been a good sister.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah. I remember you always took good care of her.”

She spoke in a soft, wistful tone that made my back itch. No matter how beautiful the memory, it meant nothing to me if I couldn't remember it myself.

“...If you say so.”

What did she mean by “took good care of her”? I couldn’t recall. The only memories I had of the past were fragmented, like old, torn-up photographs. Naturally, there wasn’t much I remembered about my sister specifically, though I could remember firmly believing that it was my sworn duty as the older sister to protect her. Did my parents teach me that, or did I pick it up from somewhere else?

Looking at it in the abstract, I wasn’t sure what qualified as taking good care of someone. It wasn’t as simple as a hug, that much was for sure.

“Oh, and if you get thirsty, let me know.”

Tarumi reached down and grabbed a plastic bottle sitting directly on the ground. The label was bright blue, but the contents looked like barley tea; I could see a block of ice in the center, so she must have frozen it in advance. She was so thoughtful and considerate, I was impressed. Adachi was capable of being considerate, too, of course, but she always took it a little too far—probably overthinking things, if I had to guess. It made me laugh, and I always quietly looked forward to it whenever we hung out.

“Huh? Was it something I said?”

“What?”

“You’re smirking again.”

She used her fingers to stretch her lips into an exaggerated smile. *C’mon, surely I don’t look THAT weird...do I?*

“It’s nothing. Just remembered something funny.”

I vaguely remembered having this same conversation at some point in the past. What was I doing, slipping off into my own little world in front of other people? *I’d better get my act together before I turn into Adachi.* After that, I sat there with a perfectly straight face, like a proper model.

“Shima-chan, your face is turning red. Is the heat getting to you?”

“Oh, no...yeah.”

I had strained my face so much that now Tarumi was worried about me. I could vaguely feel myself getting dumber and dumber but chose to blame it on

the weather instead. *Stupid sunshine melting my brain.*

On the other side of the shore, kids rode on their bikes, breathing in that sweltering air. No parasols in sight, destined for a sunburn. They had already adapted to summer.

While she worked, Tarumi made small talk about a variety of subjects, possibly to keep me from getting bored; I was impressed she had the skill to talk and paint at the same time. And when I asked her why she suddenly got into painting, she told me...

“Well, I needed something that could bring us together, *ahem*. I mean, that’s part of it. But yeah, I just wanted to immortalize you while there was still time. Never know when we might not see each other again, y’know? I mean, obviously I’m gonna make an effort to prevent that, but sometimes there’s just no amount of effort that can solve the problem. So if that’s how things turn out, then...I’d like to make sure I have a memento.”

“...Interesting.”

Admittedly, part of me was inclined to agree. The two of us were always on good terms, and yet life pulled us apart regardless. Perhaps our connection wasn’t a strong enough adhesive to hold us together...and if so, then Tarumi had just clarified what her choice would be when push came to shove. It gave me a lot to think about.

Perhaps it was the happy memories that reminded us of what mattered most. Maybe that was what kept us plowing ahead without looking over our shoulders.

As she spoke, I followed the sun’s trajectory and wondered if this would end before it got dark. Then again, summer days were generally pretty long, so we were probably good on time. And in the end, it didn’t take that long at all. I wasn’t watching the clock, so I couldn’t say for sure, but I estimate it took about two or three hours total.

Thank god it’s over.

“Well, I finished it...” Tarumi smiled awkwardly. On closer inspection, I could see her facial muscles twitching. “Wanna see?”

This was quite possibly the scariest question she had ever asked me. “It’s not, like, brain-bleach levels of bad, right?”

“Well, I don’t think so... I hope not...”

I couldn’t tell if she just wasn’t feeling confident or if she sincerely thought it turned out badly, but either way, my morbid curiosity won out. Not like she went all out and turned me into some crazy monster with seven mouths... probably.

I rose to my feet, and the heat that had settled against the back of my legs melted away. Then I shivered as it trickled down to my shoes. Slowly, I walked around to the opposite side of the easel to take in Master Tarumi’s latest masterpiece... “Wha?”

The level of quality was so far beyond what I expected, it threw me for a loop.

“What’s wrong?”

“Uhh...I’m trying to figure out how to word this in a way that isn’t offensive...”

“Wow, thanks!”

“...Your art is so good, I regret ever thinking it wouldn’t be.”

It was so perfect, anyone could tell at a glance that it was me—my hairstyle, the parasol, the chair, all of it. I pointed at each part in turn like it was one of those “spot the difference” puzzles. She had captured the texture of my hair, the proportions of the parasol, the shading of the chair... It was nothing like the doodles I would scribble during class. Was this really her skill level just one week in? I scrutinized her for a moment.

“Taru-chan, are you a prodigy or something?”

“Naw! Hah hah!”

Why are you talking like a hick all of a sudden?

She started coughing, then averted her eyes. “You got me. To be completely honest...I didn’t start a week ago.”

“Really?”

She scratched her neck awkwardly. “I actually started practicing back when

we first reunited last winter. I have a photo we took together a long time ago, so I used that as a reference, and...yeah. Sorry.”

Frankly, it was such a harmless lie that I didn’t really see the need for her to apologize...but now it all clicked. “Okay, that explains it.” I looked back at my painted self.

“Explains what?”

“Well...my face here looks kinda young.”

My expression was so innocent, you could mistake me for Yashiro—the kind of wide-eyed naiveté that would make wiser people concerned. But this expression was no longer part of my repertoire. Was she even looking at the real me this entire time? Or did I sit there and sweat buckets for no reason? Still, even if her painting left me with more questions than answers, it was a great piece of art all the same.

“Thanks for making me look good,” I told her as I handed the overly cutesy caricature back to her. Perhaps everybody looked at their friends with rose-colored glasses.

“Huh? No, no!” She shook her head aggressively.

“What, you don’t think I look good?” I teased.

“No, it’s not that. I mean, like...the real Shima-chan is...um...f-far cuter than I could possibly capture! Or whatever!” she blurted at the ground.

That’s a compliment, right? Or whatever?

“I’m just trying to...close the...gap.”

She looked up, her eyes wide and her chin thrust out—not the most flattering expression. But it was with that momentum that she enveloped my hand in hers.

“Could I ask you to model for me again sometime? I want to keep painting you until I get it exactly right.”

A passionate plea made hand in hand... It was enough to make me sweat all over again. Her eyes looked damp with some kind of emotion.

“Uh...sure.” Overwhelmed by her...enthusiasm (?)...I nodded.

I was tempted to ask “why me?” but didn’t want to be rude. There was so much in this town—tons of people, tons of things—and yet somehow Tarumi had chosen *me*. I couldn’t claim to understand it, but I figured it probably wasn’t as deep as I was making it out to be.

She seemed to intuit that she was cooking me alive, because she pulled her hand away. “Oh, yeah, would you wanna get ice cream on the way home? If you want,” she suggested, her voice cracking.

A cool treat to beat the heat. “Yeah, sounds good.” I could feel my face light up like fireworks, as if I were a little kid who had patiently endured some boring social function solely in hopes of a sugary reward. *Honestly, not that far off, I guess.*

After Tarumi packed up all her stuff, the two of us headed back up the riverbank. Halfway up, the rays of the sinking sun pressed against my shoulder with a palpable weight, as if gravity itself had learned to shine. It was an illusion unique to the summer season, and for a moment, I reeled.

“Shima-chan?”

I stopped short, and Tarumi looked back at me. After a pause, I smiled.

“Just taking in the summer, that’s all.”

Arms outstretched, I turned around to face the bright, humid sky. Playfully, I reached out and swung my arms like I was trying to claw at it. I could feel the wind beneath my nails... Then again, for all I knew, maybe that was just what it felt like to touch the sky.

It was around noon that day when I realized I had forgotten something back in the classroom. It wasn’t a catastrophic mistake by any means, but still—I froze for a moment, holding my book bag.

What had I forgotten, you ask? My notebook. Honestly, you might wonder why I even bothered to bring a notebook on the last day of the semester, but this was no ordinary notebook—it was my Shimamura Notes. And based on that

name, I trust you can guess what kind of stuff was written inside.

Since school was out for summer vacation, the chances of anyone going to the classroom and inadvertently finding it were next to nil. And yet...on the off chance anyone read its contents... No, not just *anyone*; I didn't care about all those other people. But if, in some cruel twist of fate, *Shimamura herself* were to read it, I would literally die. Steam would leak from my ears, and then my head would explode. No exaggeration.

Especially that one part! I thought to myself as I mentally reviewed the notebook's contents. The memory was enough to make my heart flutter; my eyes widened, unblinking. I'd only brought it with me because I knew Shimamura would be at the closing ceremony, which in turn was my downfall.

So what do I do? Go back to get it, or leave it there until Monday?

I knew the campus remained open to students for club activities, but would the same apply to the school building? Would they let me in with a teacher's permission? I'd never tried to go to school during a break, so I didn't know how it worked, and I didn't know anyone I could ask, either. As I agonized back and forth over what to do about it, I found myself automatically getting ready to leave the house. *Apparently I've decided I'm going*, I thought to myself like an outside observer. And so I decided to save the thinking for later.

As usual, no one else was home. So I locked up the empty house and headed off on my bike, just like always...but a few minutes of sunshine later, I started wishing I'd worn a hat. *Why does summer have to be so hot?* I thought to myself like an idiot. Summer nights were superior in every way. All I really needed was festival lights, and...Shimamura beside me, hopefully.

While I was out, I figured I'd take the scenic route—not that I was really planning to scope the place out or anything. But nonetheless, I steered away from my usual path to school and took a detour to the street overlooking the river, where the festival was scheduled to be held this weekend. At night, the sidewalks would be lined with festival stands in summery colors, and I would be working at one of them.

Honestly, it had been a long time since I took part in a festival in *any* capacity. Last time was a family outing, and I didn't remember much except for the

sweltering crowds—no memories of sparkling fireworks. I wasn't apathetic to them, but...those stray sparks just didn't ignite inside me.

Now, however, my heart *soared* at the thought of a fireworks festival. We didn't have any concrete plans yet, and sadly we wouldn't be able to meet up at the big one happening this weekend, but still I yearned for it. Shimamura had changed me.

Reflexively, I stopped the bike and pictured what it would be like to go to a festival with her. Ignoring the sun's rays beating down on me, I hopped off.

"Right here, just like this..."

I gestured into the empty air to establish my pretend-Shimamura. In a blink, I could hallucinate that it was night, with food stands positioned with their backs to the river. *God, I'm terminal.*

Shimamura and I would walk along side by side, but it would be so crowded, we would be *forced* to hold hands so we wouldn't get separated. I would probably initiate it, and Shimamura would allow it with a weary smile. The sleeves of our yukatas would brush up against each other, and I would feel the soles of my feet throbbing.

Now and then we'd reach up and touch our matching hairpins as we walked along the dimly lit street. Following the fuzzy light of the festival lanterns, we would follow the flow of people—and thanks to the density of the crowd, we'd be one step closer than usual. Every now and then, our shoulders would touch.

With her hair in an updo, Shimamura's bare neck would change her entire aesthetic...and I would find myself both perplexed and bewitched by it. Then, as she smiled faintly, a beam of light would shoot up in the distance behind her. Fireworks would pop off one after another, and we would be dyed in the mingled colors of the crossing sparks. This would be the true foundation of summer...more beautiful than any makeup Shimamura could possibly wear...

I could practically hear the cry of the cicadas, even though there was nary a tree in sight. I was sweating buckets the entire time I was dreaming up all that; the sunlight seared my eyes, adding a green tint to everything around me. Reality was cooking me alive.

And so I swiftly returned to my bike.



But even as I set off once more, thoughts of the festival still lingered in my mind. What would I wear? Summer festivals usually meant yukatas, right? I decided I'd stop by the mall on the way home to buy one—better safe than sorry, after all. As much as I wanted to see Shimamura in a yukata, I could already foresee it being “too much hassle” for her. Would she go to that effort if I asked her to? *Maybe... No, maybe not...* It was hard to say.

By the riverside, in addition to a few fishermen, I could see a girl standing at a canvas. I was too far away to see much, but it looked like she had another girl modeling for her, holding a black parasol and gazing out at the river. *I don't think I could do that in this heat*, I thought to myself, mildly impressed. Then I turned my attention ahead of me.

I thought I recognized the girl at the canvas, but couldn't immediately place her, so I just shrugged it off. Evidently she wasn't that important—but then again, how many people in my life really were? Was there even any point to counting them on one hand?

Eventually I completed the long detour and arrived at the high school, my hair burning hot. I could hear the shouts of some sports team, followed a beat later by the wail of the cicadas that had evidently set up camp in the trees. Unlike my house, where it was faint, it sounded like an entire orchestra here, ringing out back and forth over my head.

I passed through the front gates and parked my bike in the designated bike parking area, just like I would on a school day. Because it was summer break, naturally, the spots were all open for the taking, but nevertheless, I parked in our class-designated section. Generally speaking, my brain always sacrificed efficiency for the comfort of routine. Maybe it was just part of my personality.

After my bike was taken care of, I crept along the side of the building, concealing myself from the athletic field. Not sure why I felt the need to do this, since it really didn't matter if anyone saw me, but regardless, I arrived at the front entrance to the school building. I hadn't contacted any of the teachers, but I figured I could always track one down. Experimentally, I grabbed the handle.

The door was heavy, but surprisingly enough, it opened without any trouble.

For a moment I pushed it back and forth, marveling at my own success. Then I looked to my left—nobody. I looked to my right—nobody. Just loud, whiny cicadas. I didn't know if I was *allowed* to go in, but I *could* go in.

So in I went.

At the shoe lockers, I took my shoes off—but instead of switching them out for my indoor shoes, I simply carried them in one hand and walked to the stairs in my socks. Then, at the second-floor landing, I tucked my shoes under my arm and crouched down as I passed by the window. I felt like a burglar, and if anyone saw me they would probably think the same thing, so I moved quickly.

Nobody was on the stairs, and nobody was in the hallway. As I crept along in silence, the view outside the window almost didn't feel real. The soundless blue sky and drifting clouds looked more like a painting someone had hung for me in advance.

It was that moment that I realized: As uncomfortable as I was spending every minute of my life in large groups, “school” really couldn't exist without all the students and teachers. Without them, this was just another building.

As I snuck along in my socks, I could hear sounds other than my own footsteps—the ambient noise of indoor clubs on other floors. *Oh, of course. That must be why the front door's unlocked*, I thought to myself as I hurried faster. I didn't know if this was a policy shared by all the other high schools, but it seemed a little unsafe. Not that there was much worth stealing, but still, weirdos could get in. Weirdos like me.

Then I arrived at the classroom, and when I slid open the door, the hot, pent-up air came flooding out to greet me. Assaulted by the humidity of summer, I could practically *feel* the moisture as I wiped my face.

The temperature difference between the classroom and the hallway was actually pretty astounding, considering there was only a single flimsy door in the way. If it kept building and building, would it spontaneously combust? Then I realized: No, summer break wasn't long enough for that to happen. While the summer heat often *felt* eternal, the faint chill of autumn usually whisked it away before too long.

Alone, I cut across the classroom to my desk and crouched down, twisting my

body to get a look inside. Sure enough, my notebook was right where I left it. No sign that anyone had messed with it, either. *Thank god.*

To make sure, I flipped through it and arrived at the most dangerous passage. The memory of it was enough to throttle my heart, and when I saw it in person, I reeled. There could be no doubt: If Shimamura read this, my head would absolutely explode. It was so far beyond just “embarrassing.” Worse than that, an utter nightmare would unfold afterward—put simply, Shimamura would think I was a creep and start avoiding me. These days, that was my biggest fear...probably because it was so much more realistic than my own death.

I closed the notebook. This would be the last time I was ever parted from it; I’d just have to be extra careful to make sure this situation never happened again. After that silent vow, I turned and headed out of the room.

A few steps later, I came to a stop at Shimamura’s desk and peered inside to see if she’d forgotten anything. But there was nothing inside, not even dust. As I was lifting my head, however, something came to mind.

“That reminds me...”

It was something we’d talked about a long time ago, up in the gym loft. Back then, believe it or not, I could actually hold a conversation like a normal person. Now I felt like someone else entirely...but I digress.

“I’ve always wanted to pull a little prank in an empty classroom,” Shimamura had said to me. At the time, I shrugged it off with an absent “Hmm,” but there was nothing I could shrug off about Shimamura now. As I thought back to bygone days, I folded my arms. What sort of prank was she talking about, anyway? The only “prank” she had ever pulled on me was that time she rested her chin on my head. Unless my skull was suddenly made of Play-Doh, this was probably not something I could achieve on my own.

I thought long and hard, weaving my way between the desks. Apparently pacing was a habit of mine whenever I needed to think. But like my feet, my brain only ever went in circles. After a long moment of walking, the dripping sweat gave me pause.

There was no rule saying it *had* to be a prank. What if I thought about Shimamura in the abstract?

If Shimamura were here, what would she be thinking right now? The inner workings of her mind were generally a total mystery to me, so I paused to really consider it.

I worked hard every day to understand her; that's what my Shimamura Notes were for. That said, it *did* feel like I ended up overthinking things a lot of the time.

A sweltering haze ran along my jaw. I reached up to touch it...and found my answer.

If Shimamura were here, she would notice the heat and take action to fix it.

With that realization, my legs moved on autopilot to the windows. Then I flung them open, one by one, to improve the air circulation in the room. Technically it counted as a prank, too, so it was killing two birds with one stone. Not that I was planning to leave them open or anything.

I backed away from the windows and walked to the center of the classroom. As if on cue, all the sounds from outside streamed in, and I could feel the air current rampage against my skin, swirling around the newly opened space.

One more prank for the road.

I sat down on a desk, my legs splayed out. This was something I could *never* get away with if other people were here. Following gravity's pull, I sank into myself and let out a heavy sigh. I could hear my blood pumping in my ears... If Shimamura were here, would she smile at me?

Then a cloud slipped over the sun. For a brief moment, the heat waned, and shadows streamed over the floor in place of the light. At that exact moment, the limp curtains began to sway faintly, informing me that the wind had come. I spread my arms wide and savored as much of it as I could. It was only lukewarm, but still I breathed it in, praying it would lighten my burden as it impatiently raced off to the future ahead.

And then, on the day of the festival, I gazed into the deep blue.

"Tonight we're probably gonna eat something while we're out, so don't worry

about making dinner for us,” I told my mother as she grated up the ginger for our lunch. *Ugh, we’re having soumen noodles again? I know Dad got some as a gift, but how much more of it can there possibly be?*

Meanwhile, my mother did a little victory dance. “You’re going with her, right?” she asked my little sister.

“Uh huh,” she nodded.

My mother let out a strange, wistful sigh. “You know, I’m impressed you’re willing to subject yourself to those crowds in this heat.”

Tell me about it.

“Well, we can’t see the fireworks from our house...”

“You can still hear them, though, can’t you? Whatever. You’re in charge, Onee-chan,” my mother teased, cruelly patting me on the shoulder.

She was doing this on purpose, *knowing* how I felt about it. She was a heartless witch. And lately her pats hit harder than ever, probably because she was constantly going to the local sports gym.

“Come to think of it, would you kids wanna wear yukatas?” She stretched her arms wide, swaying her imaginary long sleeves.

“What for?”

“People always wear them at festivals, remember?”

“Ohhh, right. Hmmm.”

Wearing a yukata struck me as trying too hard, so I was somewhat...*resistant* to the idea. Something was holding me back, though I couldn’t put my finger on what it was.

“Ooh, I wanna wear one!” my sister shouted, raising her hand.

Yashiro glanced around at us, then raised both hands to join in. “Woooooo!”

Oh. Didn’t even see you there. “For the record, yukatas do *not* involve free candy.”

“...Woooooo...” Her hands slowly retracted.

“Do we even *own* any yukatas?”

“Of course we do,” my mother replied, putting a sassy hand on her hip. “I have some I used to wear when I was younger. They’ve been in storage, so they should be just fine...I think...?”

She seemed to rapidly lose confidence, because she hurried off to the room with the clothing drawers in it. Then, in a blink, she was back again—clearly the gym had improved her speed, too. She was carrying two yukatas all folded up, red sitting on top of turquoise. I couldn’t make out their patterns, but the colors looked time-worn and dull.

“I made sure to put some mothballs in with ’em, so they should be fine...in theory.”

“Why do you have to sabotage your own statements every time...?”

She handed the stack to my sister, who unfurled the red one and squealed in delight.

“What strange attire you people have,” Yashiro commented as she peeked at it from the side. *No weirder than your hat, kid.*

The hat in question was tall, thin, and made of what looked like woven twigs. Through the gaps, I could see bright green leaves and vines; real or fake, I couldn’t tell. Paired with the color of her hair, she looked like a character out of a fairy tale. So what was she doing standing in *our* kitchen, eating *our* rice crackers?

“Wanna wear one, Yachi?”

“Yes, perhaps it would be a good idea to learn more about Earthling culture.”

Without missing a beat, Yashiro attempted to snatch the red yukata from her, but my sister deftly dodged. “*You* look better in cool colors!”

“That is simply not true.”

“It simply *is* true! You’ll see! Now try the blue one!”

“Gyaaaah!”

My sister unfurled the turquoise yukata and started to chase her around.

Neither of them were trying very hard; they ran in circles, out into the hall, then back in again. Frankly, *I* wouldn't be caught dead doing exercise in this heat. I already broke a sweat purely by existing in the absence of a fan.

As my mother watched the two girls chase each other around, she started to murmur loudly to herself. "Hrrrrmmm..."

"What's up?" I asked.

"That girl runs *exactly* like you did."

"....."

"I'm talking about when you were younger. Don't you remember?"

"...No," I lied. My forehead felt faintly flushed.

"You were so cute back then."

"Gosh, Mom, you make it sound like I'm not cute anymore."

"Nope."

She agreed without even cracking a smile. *Kinda wish she...you know...took hints.*

"Maybe now you can get your act together."

Oh, stuff a sock in it.

"So did you wanna wear a yukata, too?"

"I'll pass. I think I'm just gonna wear my casual clothes."

Honestly speaking, my stance wasn't much different from my mom's—I was content just zoning out in my room and listening to the pops and crackles in the distance. Sure, I couldn't see the colors, but my imagination could fill in the blanks.

"Kids, come on back! It's time to eat your noodles!"

"Comiiing!"

Yashiro ran back into the room, now wearing the turquoise yukata. *That was fast.* Sure enough, it looked a lot better on her than the red one would have. She sat down at our kitchen table like she lived here. "These *hiyamugi* noodles

are always a treat.”

They’re not hiyamugi, they’re—well, whatever. Same difference.

And so I passed the time watching the red kid and the turquoise kid run around, occasionally getting dragged into their games. Then, before I knew it, evening had fallen. As I sprayed myself with mosquito repellent, I discovered I already had a bug bite on the side of my thigh; the instant I scratched it, it started to itch. *Well, that backfired.*

Outside, the cicadas were screaming tirelessly. The sky still carried faint traces of afternoon blue, but now an equally blue moon hung there right along with it. Without a halo of light around it, I could see all the craters on its surface. During the season when the sun always overstayed its welcome, the moon and I saw a lot of each other. It felt...*closer* somehow. I kept looking up at it, half-expecting it to come crashing down.

Ever since I was a kid, I had always wanted to go to space at least once in my lifetime—so I could take the world’s most perfect nap, right there in zero gravity. What would I perceive once I was unchained from solid ground?

Buried under the sweltering, oppressive heat of summer, I could only reach the moon in flights of fancy.

Beside me, Yashiro promptly took my hand and squeezed tight, crushing the weakest part of my heart with her soft fingers. She was so trusting—innocent in the truest sense of the word—and touching her felt like plunging my hand into fresh spring water. Heck, she even had the color scheme to match. Had this self-styled “alien” touched the moon with that same hand?

I glanced down at my free hand, then offered it in the opposite direction. “Here.”

Sure enough, my sister looked up at me. “Wh-what’s *that* for?!” she protested. Her red yukata was patterned with dancing butterflies, and with her hair up, she looked much more mature than usual. Key word: *looked*.

As I waited with my hand extended, eventually she timidly accepted. It reminded me of fishing, which brought to mind memories of Hino hauling up her latest catch at the fishing hole. “Got one!” I declared, raising my prize high

in the air.

“Grraaahh!” She launched a headbutt at my derriere.

“I’m punishing you for that.”

“Grraaahh!”

As for what kind of punishment it was, I’ll leave that to your imagination.

Afterward, the three of us set off down the street. We had a long way to go to reach the river where the festival was located; if our house were closer to the train station, we could have taken a bus or something, but it felt lazy somehow.

“That reminds me...”

Something like this had happened last winter, too. I vaguely remembered bumping into Hino at the time. What about this festival? Would she be there? If so, Nagafuji was sure to be with her.

The two of them were truly joined at the hip. Did they ever get sick of each other’s faces? Voices? Mannerisms? Did their friendship ever feel exhausting? Or was I just a heartless monster for having those thoughts? Then again, I never got sick of my *family*, so maybe Hino and Nagafuji saw each other as an extension of that.

Man, that’s wild. I didn’t know any relationship could extend past family.

After Hino and Nagafuji, the next person to come to mind was Adachi. Maybe I should have invited her? I thought about it for a moment, then looked down at my hands.

“Hmmm.”

Once she found out Tarumi and the kids were going to be there, she probably would’ve declined.

Though it didn’t really feel like it, I had known Adachi for a full year now, and I had a decent grasp on the way her mind worked. She was completely antisocial, and whenever someone like that joined a group of normal people, it made both sides miserable. But she understood this about herself, so you could say she was a fairly conscientious person.

Nevertheless, she seemingly *always* wanted my attention. Maybe she had an easier time relating to me more than anyone else. Why had she taken such a liking to me? I could try to ask her, of course, but I could already foresee her panicked gaze darting in all directions as she stammered. It made me chuckle to myself.

And so I decided to adopt a laid-back stance. Sure, maybe I didn't invite her this time around, but we'd have other opportunities to go to a festival together. We already talked about it, and there was still plenty of summer left to be had. Besides, it would be such a waste of a perfectly good vacation to cram every day full of plans. Summer break had only just started, after all.

Honestly, I felt this way every year, and yet the last day of vacation always snuck up on me out of nowhere. It was tragic.

As we steadily drew closer to the festival venue at the river, the flow of people began to merge onto one street. As I gazed around, I was surprised to notice that a *lot* of people were wearing yukatas—practically all of the girls, in fact. Then I looked down at myself. *Uh-oh*. Like a fool, I was dressed in a plain T-shirt and shorts in anticipation of the heat.

Oh, well. More importantly, it was starting to get crowded. "Hold tight, you two."

If I lost track of these kids, it would be a nightmare to try to find them. Well, maybe not the one with glowing blue hair.

"We're not little babies, you know."

"Squeezy, squeezy, squeezy!"

Their verbal reactions were polar opposites, but they both obediently clamped down.

The flow of the crowd took us past a big hotel in the direction of the park. There were no bleachers or paid seating, so the focal point of this congestion was centered on staking out a place to sit. A ton of people woke up bright and early to camp out *hours* in advance, so latecomers like us didn't stand a chance of snagging a spot with a good view. Personally, I wasn't interested in expending my energy trying to compete with them. The whole point of

fireworks was that they were launched sky-high, so a little distance was fine by me. Speaking of which, I could faintly hear the explosions already.

“...Oh, there she is.”

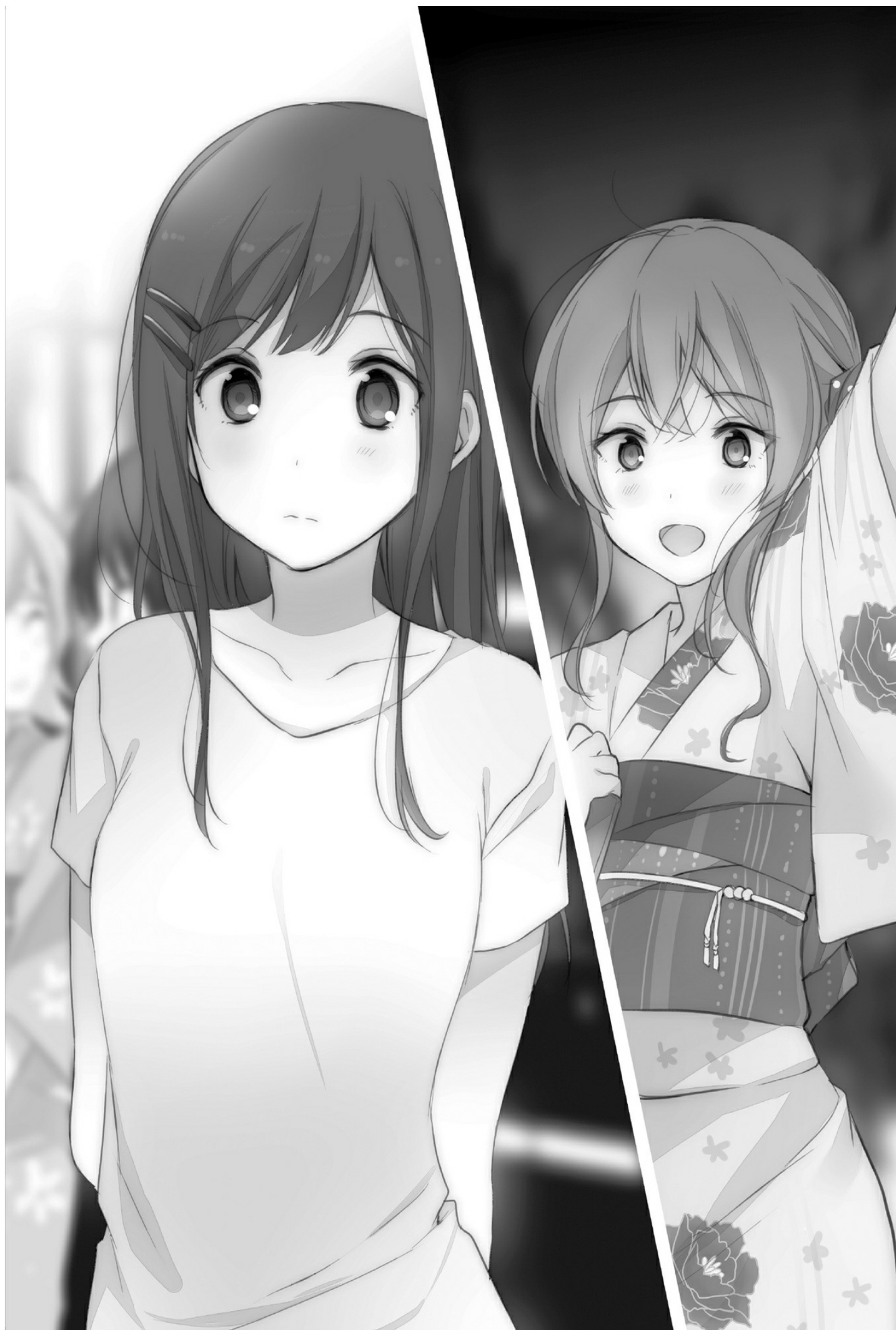
I spotted Tarumi standing in the shadow of a building, safely out of the way of foot traffic, playing on her cell phone. Maybe she was in the middle of contacting me. Belatedly, I realized we hadn't agreed on a specific meeting location—just a general time frame in which to meet up. But since she knew where my house was, all she had to do was position herself somewhere along that route and wait for me. *Clever girl, Taru-chan*. Honestly, we should have decided on a meeting spot and this issue would have solved itself.

“Heeeey! Shiiiima-chaaaan!”

Tarumi spotted me and tucked her phone away. Waving, she weaved her way through the pedestrians to reach us. As I compared her to the passersby, it once again sank in just how much taller she had grown.

“Hello, hello!” I waved back at her at point-blank range. *God, I'm so dorky*. I laughed at myself, and she donned a smile in kind.

She was dressed in a fancy yukata; under the light of the festival lanterns, its peony pattern really came to life. Add in her long, perfectly curled hair and my initial reaction was: *man, she looks just like a fashion model*. But now I was the odd one out, and it didn't feel great. Kind of like I didn't belong, or...maybe I just wasn't excited for the event... *Eh, what else is new, I guess*.



“So, uh...I take it this is your little sister,” Tarumi continued, stooping in my sister’s direction after a brief glance at Yashiro. This was proof that she had common sense and a pair of functioning eyes.

I felt my sister’s hand shift in angle and intensity and knew she was recoiling.

“Long time no see... Well, I guess you probably don’t remember, but...um... when your sister and I were in elementary school, I used to come over to your house a lot,” Tarumi explained with a friendly smile, gesturing to herself with one hand.

Evidently my sister had absolutely no memory of her, because her reaction was muted at best.

“Ha ha ha! Okay, maybe I should’ve said ‘nice to meet you’ instead.”

“Yeah,” my sister replied with a straight face, and I started giggling silently. Her “good girl” façade put all the festival masks to shame. Then she felt my hand shift and realized I was laughing at her.

“Grraaahh!” She launched a headbutt at my...well, you know. Punishment, et cetera. Kind of hard with both hands full.

“So, this would be the ‘one other’?”

I nodded. Then the “one other” introduced herself: “My name is Chikama Yashiro.”

Oh, yeah, that’s right. Honestly, I forgot she even *had* a surname. To me she was just Yashiro, and to my sister, she was Yachi.

“Nice to meet you... Gosh, your hair’s something else.”

Timidly, she stooped down, reached out, and touched Yashiro’s hair. But I was pretty sure this wasn’t their first encounter; did Tarumi somehow fail to notice her hair before now? What was she so distracted with back then?

Oh. Right. Me. Belatedly, the embarrassment sank in.

“All right then, let’s get going.”

Despite the imminent hassle, I straightened up and looked ahead. A wall of people had already formed in the distance, and the most frightening part was

that it was slowly moving. I was very much *not* looking forward to diving into the mosquito smorgasbord.

As the four of us walked along, the largest firework of all—the sun—retreated into the distance, ditching us with its heat while it ran off to enjoy the night. *Even a little kid knows to put their toys away when they're done playing*, I thought to myself wearily as I breathed in the tepid air. *Compared to Planet Earth, you're supposed to be the grown-up, so act like it.*

“Hmm?”

Tarumi looked down at my hand—specifically, the one Yashiro was busy squeezing.

“What is it?” I asked.

The way she flinched, bolting upright, brought Adachi to mind. “Oh, it’s nothing. Just admiring what a responsible big sister you’ve always been.”

“You think so, huh?”

I vaguely remembered someone telling me something similar in the past—Hino, maybe? Something about being “more sisterly than they thought.” But I had no interest in being Yashiro’s big sister, because to be completely honest, I wasn’t cut out for it. I knew what kind of person I was, and I was *not* the big sister type.

“Yeah, but in a different way compared to before. Feels like you’ve really grown up!”

“Not sure I buy that.”

Her words had no weight to them, and furthermore, her smile was twitching like it was trying desperately to conceal the truth. I stared at her and waited. Eventually, her gaze did a full lap and came back around to me.

“Well, I just noticed how popular your hands seem to be. Didn’t know I needed to put in a reservation!” she teased, laughing through her teeth.

“My hands...? Oh, this?”

I raised both pairs of joined hands into the air. They were fully booked, that was for sure. Apparently Tarumi had hoped to hold hands with me, too.

Seriously, what do these people get out of holding hands with me?

“Maybe I should have picked you up at your house,” she mused, folding her arms in deep contemplation. Judging from the frown, maybe she wasn’t joking.

However, she made a good point. If only we’d agreed to meet up outside one of our houses, we could have saved ourselves a lot of hassle. The fact that this hadn’t occurred to us sooner was proof of just how rusty our friendship was. We were both—*how do I put it?* Trying too hard, I guess.

“In that case, allow me to lend you a hand,” Yashiro declared, offering her free hand. I wasn’t expecting her to actually join the conversation, so this surprised me.

“Oh, uh, okay. Thanks.”

Naturally, Tarumi was a good sport about it and accepted, though a bit hesitantly. With both her hands now suspended in the air, Yashiro boosted herself up off the ground. *No, we’re not going to carry you. Knock it off. You look like the alien who gets arrested in that movie with the guys in suits.* As she hung there, Tarumi and I exchanged a look and laughed awkwardly.

“I swear, she’s not a bad kid.” *Like 99 percent sure, anyway.*

From what I could tell, Yashiro wasn’t offering out of the kindness of her heart. She wasn’t thinking about right or wrong or how she would benefit from her actions—she was just behaving the way she had been taught to behave, i.e., “help people who are in need.” Considering how kids these days were so often self-focused, it was a rare trait...and it set her apart from the rest of us.

“Yeah, I know... I gotta say, though, I wasn’t sure you were gonna show up, Shima-chan!” Tarumi sniffled dramatically as she clutched Yashiro’s little hand. The sigh of emotion in her voice was long and heavy.

“Why’s that?”

“Well, setting aside how you used to be, these days you’re kind of lazy and... Er, scratch that!” Apparently she misspoke. She waved a hand in front of her face to retract her statement. “I’m saying, like, you never want to do anything... Er, I mean...”

“Yeah?” I raised my eyebrows and politely waited for her to continue digging her own grave. Did she forget that I literally went out of my way to model for her painting?

“You’re just...noncommittal...? No, that’s not it. Hard to please...? Homebody...? Argh, forget it! I can’t think of the right word!” Lost in a labyrinth of synonyms, she clutched her head. It was mildly entertaining to watch.

Honestly, they *all* basically fit me. If I said as much out loud with an innocent smile, would we regain a bit of the chemistry we used to have before? I could sense the potential, but couldn’t convince myself to take that step. I just couldn’t see the appeal in going back. If there was something real and immortal between us, then surely no time travel was necessary to find it, right?

“Oh! Ohhh! OHHH!”

Yashiro started jumping up and down. *How do you do that when your feet aren’t even touching the ground?*

“I smell a most delightful fragrance!”

We were still a considerable distance from the street with the food stands, and yet here she was, sticking her nose high in the air. Her most casual mannerisms quietly marked her as someone beyond the realm of common sense. *Everything* was suspicious about her, not just her appearance. So what bizarre twist of fate had led me to walk hand in hand to a festival with her?

My sister, however, was very well-behaved. When I checked to make sure she hadn’t wandered off, sure enough, she was still holding my hand. She wasn’t staring at the ground, either—just walking along in silence. This was how she always acted whenever she was in the presence of a stranger.

On a whim, I raised a hand and poked her cheek. She scowled at me. “What was *that* for?!”

“You’re so quiet, I thought maybe you’d fallen asleep.”

The truth was that I felt bad that I hadn’t included her in the conversation. But if I admitted it out loud, how would she react? Of all the things people were meant to feel toward their family members, *obligation* was probably dead last. That’s why, even if it was technically true, it bothered me to think I was *only*

babysitting her because she was my sister. It wasn't inaccurate, and yet something felt missing.

By the time we arrived at the riverside street, the crowd was so large that we were forced to walk single file. Because we were all holding hands, naturally, both my arms were pulled backward. But when you walked around with your shoulders thrust out, you were more likely to bump into people. This was by no means a pleasant experience.

Before my good mood was completely spoiled, however, gold sparks rained down one after another. Then I caught a glimpse of fireworks out of the corner of my eye, and surprisingly enough, it worked like a charm to cheer me up. How many years had it been since I last witnessed fireworks with my own two eyes?

"See, Yachi? Those are fireworks!" my otherwise quiet sister explained smugly.

"Ooooh..." Yashiro's mouth hung open as she gazed up at the glittering sparks. What did she think of these blooming sky-flowers? Would an alien even find value in it?

Mostly joking, but anyway.

Dazzling fireworks popped and faded one after another, as if we were bearing witness to the birth and death of new stars while the moon watched in the distance. At this point, even I managed to feel something. Like atoms drawn by a magnetic force, we continued down the street until the tightly packed food stands came into view, at which point Yashiro *lost her ever-loving mind*.

"OHHHH!" Clearly this was where her true interests lay. She tugged on my sleeve. "Shimamura-san! Shimamura-san!"

"Yes, yes, I know." Since I was expected to treat them to dinner while we were here, I wasn't strongly opposed, but before we headed over, I wanted to check in with Tarumi. "Mind if we check out the stalls?"

"Sure. I haven't had dinner yet myself, so that works out."

She looked out at the stands, and as I gazed at her face in profile, I found myself wondering: How long was she waiting there in the spot where we found her? Probably not *that* long, right? *She's not Adachi, after all.*

“I have determined the true identity of the delicious smell!”

Nostrils flared, Yashiro sniffed loudly in the direction of one particular stand. It was orange with a red roof, perfectly suited to the festival lights. And among all the other stands with their lantern color schemes, this one had a giant, massively eye-catching sign: “*Fortune Takoyaki*? What’s that supposed to mean?”

Right as I stopped short, the stall worker walked out from the back, wearing a long-sleeved, stuffy robe of some sort. Whatever it was, it looked way too heavy for a muggy summer night. Her porcelain skin and rosy cheeks made me think of candy apples, not...you know...*octopus*.

“Hey, there, come on down.”

“Oh, no, uh...”

“Our *takoyaki* dumplings are very special. In each eight-pack, just one contains a bite of octopus!”

“Excuse me?” I pointed at the sign. She ignored me.

“The lucky person who gets that bite can draw a fortune at no additional cost!”

She gestured to the spinning raffle drum sitting next to her. *You call that “drawing a fortune”?*

“Anyone who draws a ‘Very Lucky’ fortune will then be awarded with a free palm reading! Very lucky indeed!”

“.....”

“But not to worry. If your palm reading ends up less than positive, you can simply buy another pack to improve your—”

“Ooookay, let’s keep walking.”

“Awww!”

Whew, that was close. Times like these, I need to stay on guard and keep an eye out for weirdo scammers mixed in with the normal people.

“Very well, then. If I may offer a word of warning...”

“Huh?”

One minute, she was standing behind the counter, and the next minute, she was suddenly right beside me. Did she *jump over*?! It was an unexpected move from someone who looked and dressed like, well, *that*. For a moment, I didn’t know how to react. And why was she chasing us?!

“I see that you will suffer great misfortune where women are concerned.”

She wagged a finger at my forehead. Where did *that* come from? She mentioned palm readings earlier; was she some kind of fortune-teller?

“But...I’m a girl...”

“You don’t really hear about misfortune involving men. Perhaps women are simply more complicated.”

I didn’t ask, but okay. Bewildered, I backed away. Was this weirdo going to follow me around for the rest of the festival now?

“So it’s...written on my face, or...?”

“No, your hands. I specialize in palmistry.”

I looked down at my palms; they were both concealed from sight, since I was busy holding hands with the kids. I looked back up at her. Her smile didn’t reach her eyes.

Oh, okay. She’s a lunatic.

“Thanks for the warning. Goodbye forever!” I started walking at the speed of light.

“Fare thee well!” she called after us, waving, but thankfully not pursuing us. Soon we both disappeared into the crowd. What was *that* about?

“Misfortune with women, huh...”

“Hmm?”

For some reason Tarumi looked to be even more upset than I was. Did some part of it ring true for her?

“Oh, Shimamura-san! *That* looks like it will be tasty for sure!”

Next, Yashiro pointed to a stand selling little cake balls known as baby castellas. “Made with honey, eggs, and milk,” according to the sign. Was that really a selling point? One look at Yashiro and it didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out whether she wanted to get some. *If only my finals were this easy.*

This time I managed to make the purchase without any wacky shenanigans. The only real “problem” was that I had to pay for it with my own money, since Yashiro was flat broke and my sister wasn’t much better, but that much I could handle. *Please, no more exhausting weirdos tonight.*

After she split her share with my sister, Yashiro savored her cake balls. “Mmmm... These castellas are delish!”

“Gee, I’m glad to hear it.”

“I wonder if that chicken karaage is any good?”

“Whoa there, pal.” *Don’t go cheating on your food with other food.*

As Yashiro ran amok like a starved child, I felt my wallet get lighter and lighter while my legs grew heavier and heavier. I tugged on her hand, keeping her in check like a dog on a leash. If I let her get even the tiniest glimpse of a stand’s smell and general ambience, she’d beg me to buy her more food, so I stared at the ground and focused on speed-walking.

“Gyaaah! Shimamura-saaaan!”

“God, just shut up!”

I wanted yakisoba noodles, not chicken karaage. My mouth was craving a departure from all the soumen.

“Shima-chan, you’re acting like a big sister again,” Tarumi teased as she worked to keep up with my pace. I felt a slight hint of protest and pouted my lips.

“It’s not a sister thing. I used to drag *you* around like this, too, once upon a time.”

For once, the conversation felt natural. The words slipped out promptly, smoothly, without a hitch. No deeper memory attached to them. But this gave me pause.

Likewise, Tarumi clearly wasn't expecting this either, because she froze...but not nearly as long as I did. "Oh...yeah, that's true!" she replied with an innocent, girlish grin. There beneath the light of the lanterns, it felt like I'd glimpsed a fragment of a dream.

Some time later, after more squabbling and some yakisoba, the fireworks escalated in level and intensity. The first one they fired off was a big rainbow explosion, provoking cheers from the crowd. "Beautiful," I chimed in, like a novelist talking about the moon. Then I checked in with my sister. "Can you see okay?"

Standing behind a wall of grown adults, she was draped in shadow. Her response was less than favorable. "Ummm..."

Looks like I know what I have to do.

"Taru-chan, can you keep an eye on this one for me?"

I relinquished my grip on Yashiro, slid both hands under my sister's arms, and boosted her up.

"Wha...huhwha?! Wha, wha, wha?!"

Apparently she didn't see this coming. Visibly flustered, she looked at me wide-eyed. She was kinda heavy, but nothing I couldn't manage.

"How about now?" I asked her.

"...Yeah..."

She turned back to the fireworks, nodding. This was an unusually well-behaved response from her. As I held her up, it felt like my arms were needles on a dial, indicating my Sisterly Quotient or however it was Hino put it.

"Wheeeee!" Beside us, Tarumi had hoisted Yashiro up into her arms. The little alien seemed quite excited about this, but then again, when *wasn't* she excited?

"You good?" I asked Tarumi, worried Yashiro might be heavy.

Tarumi's gaze wandered for a moment. "Uh, yeah," she replied, and I could hear confusion in her voice. "I'm good. Actually, she's...kinda like...I don't know, but...it feels like she's too light?"

“Oh, that. Yeah, it’s weird, huh?”

“I don’t know how you can just shrug it off like that, but it makes you pretty weird yourself, Shima-chan,” she shot back. Then I vaguely heard her whisper, “But I like you anyway.” Or something like that. How did I manage to hear it through the crowd?

Cool. Glad you approve.

“...Hmm...”

While my sister was distracted by the fireworks, I leaned in close to Tarumi so the little ones couldn’t overhear. Startled, she pursed her lips together, but I ignored it.

“Sorry about this—bringing the kids and all.” I had avoided apologizing over the phone, but now that we were in person, I felt like I needed to say it. After all, I was essentially forcing her to play babysitter with me.

“Sure, no problem.” At first she nodded vaguely, but then she hung her head. “Nah, really, it’s cool.”

I couldn’t sense any bitterness or sarcasm from the look on her face. Her perfectly polished cheeks and eyes were dyed in the colors of the blossoming fireworks.

“All I care about is having fun with you, Shima-chan.”

“That’s all?”

“Yeah, that’s all.”

She paused there to look up at the sky. Her words seemed like an expression of something more, yet nothing followed after them. But there was something refreshing in her eyes—the way they always seemed to stare straight ahead at the future to come. So much so, in fact, I could hallucinate the feeling of the breeze against my cheek, despite being trapped in a pool of warm bodies where no such relief existed.

“Gotcha.”

It felt rude to press her further—like asking a firework not to fade. A firework that lingered was no better than graffiti, tarnishing the sky.

“So yeah, I don’t mind *that*, but... Well, this is gonna sound really petty, but...” She pointedly cleared her throat. When I looked over at her, I realized she had moved a step closer, still carrying Yashiro. Then she raised her head high. “I think there’s something you forgot to say!”

At first, I had no idea what she was talking about. Then she twirled her yukata sleeves, and when I saw the bashful look on her face, it clicked.

“Oh!”

Apparently she wanted me to comment on her yukata. Her ears were tinged red, and not from the light of the fireworks.

“Come on! Don’t make me have to ask you, Shima-chaaaan!” she whimpered playfully, with all the shame of a tearful smile.

“Right. How very impolite of me,” I replied with an awkward laugh.

If I said she looked like a fashion model, would it sound sarcastic? Maybe so... I agonized over it for a moment, then looked her up and down. She shifted back and forth on her feet shyly.

“You look dazzling,” I told her sincerely.

It wasn’t clear how she chose to interpret this, because she responded with a weird laugh, her expression stiff, her mouth frozen in the shape of a croissant.

“Wh-what, more dazzling than the fireworks? Just kidding. Ha ha ha ha...”

“Yeah. You’re absolutely radiant.”

From my point of view, I was just being honest. But for some reason, this seemed to push her over the edge, because she started coughing hard. Now I was *really* worried about how she interpreted it. Of course, she was only dazzling because of Yashiro and the sparkles from her hair, but I decided to keep that little detail to myself.

And so, on that July night, we reveled in fireworks and old friendship. If we were still in grade school, I would have put it in my diary for sure.

“...Shimamura?”

My vision swirled and converged on a single point, pulling me into the vortex. Trembling, I called after her, but she was fenced off by three cheerful voices that yanked the ground right out from under me, sending me plummeting into despair.

For a split-second, the light of the fireworks weakened the deep blue of night.

Shimamura.

Interlude:
A Visit to Nagafuji's Meats
Part 1

RIGHT AS I ARRIVED out front, I bumped into Nagafuji as she was walking out. It was her own house, and yet she was carrying a sack over her shoulder like some kind of burglar.

“Oh, I found Hino. And earlier than planned. Yaaay.” She raised both hands in stoic celebration. Then I realized what the sack was for.

“Argh! You were trying to spend the night at my house again, weren't you?!”

“Bingo.”

“Not happening! Now run along back inside!” I put a hand to her tummy and pushed her backward into the store with me.

Her father was standing at the counter; as we made eye contact, I inclined my head politely. Ever since I was little, I always called him the Meat Man. Supposedly he and his daughter had the exact same ear shape—the little vertical indent in her earlobe. I first noticed it one time when she asked me to help clean her ears out, and she told me the story from there.

“Oh, settle down. Another sleepover can't hurt.” She pushed back against my shoulders, and because she had the size advantage, I started sliding backward.

“Yes, it can!”

“I miss the sound of the AC.”

“Well, not today. There's too many visitors swarming the place.” That was why I came to hide out here at her house instead.

I abandoned hope of winning the pushing competition and instead dodged past her to the Nagafujis' family living space. Then I threw off my hat and flopped down on the floor in protest. Still, I couldn't be sure this would work. It was entirely possible she would say, “Okay, I'll go by myself!” and call my bluff. Even after all these years, she was still so unpredictable at times... Why did she put all her stuff in a *gunny sack*, anyway? Was she trying to be as old-fashioned

as us?

She fidgeted impatiently by my head, like a stray cat that refused to leave. I tried to shoo her with my hand, and she meowed back at me. The lack of resemblance was uncanny; to be honest, she sounded more like a bullfrog than anything. After meowing to her heart's content, she sat down on the spot.

"Fine. Just for you, I'll try to give up for today."

"Why do you make it sound so condescending?"

With my toes, I switched on the three-blade oscillating fan, as I had done a thousand times before. How many summers had I spent in the service of this blue blur?

"Now I get it," Nagafuji nodded to herself as she lowered her sack to the floor.

"Get what?" I asked, rolling over to the spot directly in front of the fan.

"It explains why you always try to come over during summer vacation."

"I mean, yeah..."

After all these years, she only *just now* figured it out? ...Nah, she probably made the same realization every year, only to forget it a day later. She wasn't stupid; she just had the memory of a goldfish.

"The closer we get to the Bon Festival, the more it starts piling up. You know, work stuff, or...family stuff, I guess?"

My brothers would all come home for the holiday, and it was *suffocating*. If it were just them, I could tolerate it, but no—they had to bring all their wives and children, and I hated having to entertain every single one of them. Maybe if I had Shimamura's sisterly powers, I could handle it. Alas, I was the baby of the family.

Thus, I left it all in Goushirou's capable hands and hightailed it out of there. Of my four older brothers, he was the only one still single, but my family would probably arrange something for him soon. That was the kind of family I was born into. Not that I cared.

I glanced over my shoulder and noticed that the *kotatsu* blanket had already been packed away. No surprise there, of course. *You did good hanging in there*

until June, buddy—see you next winter.

I ran a hand over my hair and realized just how hot it was on the walk here. What was winter like, anyway? I knew from experience that it was sure to roll around, and yet somehow it felt like the heat would never end. Looking up at Nagafuji, it occurred to me that maybe life was just a series of “Whoa, when did *that* happen?” moments until eventually we grew up.

Meanwhile, she continued to pace in my vicinity. Then I realized her chest was so large, it had its own shadow. *What the hell?*

“What’s wrong? Looking for something and can’t remember what it is?”

If so, it was a pretty common occurrence for her. However— “Move, move!”

“Gwaaagh!”

She came sliding in like a battering ram, facedown, knocking me out of the way and stealing my spot in front of the fan. “Make way for Princess Nagafuji!”

“What kind of princess gives herself rug burn on her face?”

She remained there, flailing her limbs like a fish flopping on land. Not that fish have limbs, I guess.

“Hurry up and get where you’re going, Princess!”

“Let’s play a game! I’m bored!”

“Yes, I noticed.”

“And now my boobs hurt!”

“Oh, go to hell.” *I swear, I’m gonna jab my fingers up your nose.* “It’s too hot to do anything, anyway.”

This was not the season I wanted to spend roughhousing with Nagafuji. In the past, however, we would spend every day clinging all over each other, rain or shine... The memory made the tip of my nose burn. Shaking it away, I averted my gaze—and just then, I noticed a flyer sitting on the table. I picked it up.

“Oh, right, this thing.” It was an advertisement for the upcoming fireworks festival. All the local restaurants were going to have stalls there, so it made sense that they’d want to invite Nagafuji’s Meats.

Too bad they never sent flyers to *my* house. We always had a lot of family events, but absolutely no neighborhood events; if I asked my parents to take me to see the fireworks, they'd fly me halfway across the country to some famous festival that drew massive crowds. No, really, this actually happened once. Great fireworks and all, but it wasn't quite what I wanted.

Oh, well. At least we got red bean snow cones afterward, so it wasn't all bad.

"Tonight, huh? Hmmm..."

In the past, we would go to festivals together every summer. But after years of seeing the same thing again and again, it got boring. Besides, we could see the fireworks just fine from Nagafuji's bedroom window.

"Wanna go to the festival?"

I figured I'd ask, just in case. Nagafuji rolled onto her back and stared up at the ceiling. "Maybe if the weather cools down outside."

"Good call." I put the flyer back on the table. Worst-case scenario, we could hang out in her room.

"Oh, that reminds me!" Suddenly, she bolted to her feet. Dizzy, she staggered for a moment, then looked back at me.

"What is it this time?"

"If I can't sleep over at your house, then I need to figure out lunch plans! Moooom!" And with that, she ran off to the kitchen.

"Have her make me some, too!" I called after her.

In her absence, I could finally feel the fan again. The flyer fluttered restlessly in the wind; I grabbed it and gave it one more look.

"...Eh, I think I like it better in her bedroom, anyway."

No jostling crowds, no mosquitoes, and best of all, no need to worry about Nagafuji slipping out of sight.

Chapter 4:

Shimamura's Blade THE CALL WAS CONNECTED, and yet her voice felt so distant. My mind was distant, too. It felt like there was some unidentified spherical mass between my ears.

"You're really quiet today."

Shimamura let out a breath, or maybe an awkward laugh. She was the same as always...but for the first time, it *angered* me. The pit of my stomach felt like a cast-iron wok, hot and heavy.

I knew I shouldn't take it out on her. I was being irrational. But the more I bottled it up, the more unstable I became, and now I was on the cusp of a meltdown. Desperately, I searched for the right words. What I sought was the first step toward a calm, respectful conversation where I asked my questions and she answered them. Then we could forget all this awkwardness and go back to normal.

But of course, those perfect words didn't exist.

The air conditioning brushed against my rounded back. The sun was high in the sky, but now a big, puffy cloud had come home to roost.

"Adachi? Come on, what's gotten into you?" she asked me, like she was worried. Personally, I wanted to ask her the same thing.

"Shimamura..."

Eight days had passed since the night I saw her there. And the day after the second big festival, I...

I was completely and utterly deflated. If people's souls were attached to their bodies, then mine was hanging by a thread. I was an empty husk.

Shimamura had gone to the festival with another girl. I saw her from the karaage stand. But she probably didn't notice me; she was holding hands with her sister and that blue-haired girl.

But there was another girl with them—one I vaguely recognized from somewhere—walking along with Shimamura like they were close friends. And the *pièce de résistance*? She called her “Shima-chan,” a sweet, natural-sounding nickname. For me, nothing felt right except “Shimamura,” but now someone had surpassed me, and now she had taken my place at Shimamura’s side, and now I was sincerely, genuinely ready to tear my own hair out. Right to this very moment, I felt like crying and screaming.

If only I hadn’t been asked to work that night, I would have run after her—*no, I’m just making excuses*. Even if I weren’t on the clock, I’m sure I would have stood there helplessly. It hit me harder than I was prepared to endure.

Whoever she was, she wasn’t in our class, and Shimamura didn’t have club activities or a part-time job, so this friend of hers existed outside the scope of her everyday life—as far as I knew, at least. But now I was suddenly faced with a part of Shimamura I *didn’t* know. It wasn’t the first time something like this had happened, but last time it was just Nagafuji. Back then I was still devastated and jealous and hurt, sure, but *this*? This was an entire order of magnitude worse.

It felt like all the worst parts of summer had been condensed into a poisonous mist that slowly dissolved me inside and out. No matter how high I cranked up the AC, the humidity clung to me. Was that why I felt this way? I didn’t care about anything else anymore. I was just *miserable*.

Meanwhile, my brain was firing on all cylinders, popping like fireworks. I was exhausted, and yet my mind refused to shut off. Functionally, I was now an insomniac. Every minute of this agony felt like an eternity, and there was no way to fast-forward. Watching the clock only made me feel worse, so eventually, I stopped checking.

With each day reduced to just “daytime” and “nighttime,” my entire routine got thrown out of whack. The only thing my brain remembered was my work schedule; my body would spring up on its own, carry out its tasks, then return home, all on autopilot. Why was I somehow *more* efficient when I *wasn’t* thinking? Was all my hard work just a waste of time?

As I lay facedown on the bed, my mind continually wandered back to the cell

phone on my desk. I kept hoping she would contact me—ideally to explain herself, since I was so sure there had to be some special circumstances behind her presence at the festival. But Shimamura never reached out. No calls, no emails. As if to suggest that her calendar of events was none of my business.

This gut-wrenching misery continued for five days.

My eyes burned as I buried my face in my pillow. I was so sure I was a little more special than any of her other friends, but in the end, it was all in my head. This was my punishment for getting too full of myself.

Did I really mean nothing to her at all?

My petty side was the first to react—the part of me that selfishly resented her for breaking a promise I never communicated to her. *If she won't talk to me, then I won't talk to her either*, I decided sulkily. I held my ground, punishing her for something that wasn't her fault. Then I spent my time zoning out while I “forgot” to charge my phone.

My summer vacation to-do list fluttered in the breeze of the AC, reminding me that I still hadn't checked off a single thing, pissing on the grave of my hopes and dreams.

It wasn't until three days later that something finally broke the stalemate: I realized there was simply no way I could forget that she existed. Before Shimamura, my life was tragically bland and empty; nothing noteworthy ever happened. So if I cut her out, the details of this summer vacation would barely fill a single page of an essay, if that.

Outside of Shimamura, I had nothing. Cut me open and I would bleed Shimamura. So how could she do this to me? Every time I let my guard down, tears welled in my eyes. I knew my feelings were one-sided, and yet...was it so wrong to want her to return them?

I peeled my face off of my now-flattened pillow and pulled my phone out of the tiny nook where I had hidden it away. Its battery level was precariously low, but I powered it on and checked the call history. Nothing since last time—just a list of distant dates. My thumb hovered over her name, back and forth; when I finally tapped it, I recoiled like it was a ticking time bomb. Frozen in place, I waited for it to detonate.

“Hello? Adachi?”

She picked up right away, and now here we were. I was so emotional, I couldn't even say hi back.

Watching the fireworks alone had inspired feelings in me that refused to fade. The corners of my vision went blurry, and my hearing felt fuzzy.

“Shimamura, I...”

Who is she? Who?

I wanted to ask her. I wanted to know the truth. I wanted to press her for answers. If I wasn't careful, something inside me might explode. I stomped my foot on the floor, trying to vent it out.

“...Adachi? Did you wanna hang out or something?”

I couldn't detect a single shred of emotion in her voice, and it frustrated me so bad, I had to suppress the impulse to rip out my own jugular. Of course I wanted to hang out, but this came first. I wrapped my arms around my head like twin snakes, crushing my face in their death grip, choking back bitter regret.

“You went to the festival...didn't you?”

Everything I was holding back had pinned my tongue in place, so I could only get a few words out. But there was no going back now that I had taken the first step. Bright light flooded my brain, drowning out all thought. With more than half my vision blocked, my eyes had gone unfocused.

“With...some girl I don't know...”

“...You were there, too? I had no idea. Man, I knew I should have invited—”

“No! I was working... The restaurant had a food stand... Chicken karaage...”

My heart was pumping so hard, I could scarcely talk. The water level was at max capacity—drops of emotion spilling out with the slightest shake.

For a moment, there was a pause as Shimamura processed my fragmented feelings. “Oh, I see. A karaage stand... Oh yeah, that's right! Yashiro was tempted to get some at one point.”

“And you were...with some other girl... Someone I don’t know...”

I bluntly repeated my point. My brain was getting dumber and dumber, incapable of complex thought. Like a child with no vocabulary, I could only whimper the same words over and over.

“Yeah, my friend invited me. So, uhhh...what about it?” she asked innocently, casually, mildly perplexed by my behavior at most. *Innocently?* Of course she was innocent. From her perspective, she hadn’t done anything wrong. She probably just wanted to hang out with a friend. But to me...

At long last, the question on my mind clawed its way up from the depths: “...‘What about it’? *Why?*”

“What?”

“Why were you with her? Who is she? Why did you go with her? Why didn’t you tell me? Sure, I don’t know her, but I still want to know about your life. I want to know you better than anyone else. And I want to *be with you* more than anyone else—I don’t want anyone being with you more than me. I want us to get along. How could you?”

“Adachi, slow down—”

“I don’t want you having fun without me! Or holding hands with some other girl—just me! I want you to be with me! I wanted to take you to a festival myself! I wanted to be there while you were smiling and having fun! That’s what I wanted! My head hurts so much because I’ve been thinking about you nonstop and losing my mind and...I was waiting for you to call! Why don’t you ever call me or start a conversation? Why does it always have to be me? Don’t you...don’t you care about me even a little? Nothing? Not even a bit? Just friends? Just regular friends? I don’t want to be regular friends—just one step above that! That’s all I want... Shimamura, what do you want me to do? Well? Shimamura, are you listening? Really listen. How do you feel when you hear my voice? Do you feel something? I want you to feel something, anything, even just comfort. That’s what I want. Is that so wrong, Shimamura?! Because it’s you! You’re the one I want! I don’t want anyone else or need anyone else—I only need you. Is it really so selfish to want one measly step? Just one! I don’t care about anyone else—I don’t want them around—so why do you? Just come find

me and be with me and stay with me and don't leave! I don't want anyone being with you except me. I want to be there with you, so just let me! Who even *is* she? I don't know her. I don't want you to turn into someone I don't know! I want to know everything about you; I don't want you to keep anything from me. I hate not knowing because it *hurts*! It hurts so much, Shimamura... I'd ask you to hang out, but I wanted to take you to a festival. I wanted to go with you, but you went with *her*! Are you hanging out with her? Where are you right now? Are you with her, Shimamura? Shimamura, are you listening? It's like I've been talking to a brick wall this whole time. Normally you talk a lot more. Why? What's different? Am I different? Yeah, I must be. I can tell. But I want to know...I want to know about you so bad, it's messing me up. I don't want to be apart from you... I want to be with you all the time... I don't care where we are as long as we're together... But I haven't seen you and I miss you but if we met up right now I think I'd cry... I'm already crying... I keep wondering who she is and what she is to you... Are you still listening? Would you rather be with her than with me? Am I not good enough? What part of me isn't good enough? I'll work on it, so just tell me... I'll fix it, I swear, so please just tell me... I want to know... You're really special to me, you know that? Even if someone else was exactly like you in every way—but they're not, so it doesn't matter! Just forget all that! It has to be *you*! I want us to get along, but it's just... I want to talk about more than just this, but I can't stop thinking about it... I mean, you were *smiling*! I don't want you smiling at anyone who isn't me! It sucks, you know? Don't you ever feel like that? Have you ever had a crush? Do you have feelings for someone? Or anyone at all? Do you know what love is? Sometimes I get scared, wondering why you stay with me. I mean, we're friends, aren't we? I think we're at least friends. Do you think we're friends? Does it... Hhhnn... Shimamura, say something. Let me hear your voice. Talk about me... I want you to understand me better than...better than anyone. I want to know you, and I want you to know me. I want you to be my number one, and I want to be yours...but...whenever something bad happens, I feel like I'm gonna break down...because it never feels like...I don't know...like you *cherish* me? 'Cherish' is a weird word, but...but I want you to cherish me! I want to be cherished! Don't treat me the same as everyone else—just a little tiny bit special is all! Do you ever even think about me? We haven't seen each other all summer, but...

have you thought about me at least once? Because I've been thinking about you the whole time! Just you! *Nothing but you!* So I want you to...think about me, too... Not that we're the same... I know I'm different...but I still keep hoping... I try to stop it, but...even when you...betray me like this...I still want to talk to you on the phone... But now look at how it's turned out...and there's nothing I can do... I don't know what to do, Shimamura. Shimamura? The call's still connected, right? We're still connected? But you're so far away, and I miss you. I want to see you in person, and see you smile... I want you to stroke my hair and tell me it'll be okay... Where are you right now? Where? Are you with someone? Is it *her*? Who is she? I keep asking you—is it that big of a secret? Are you close with her? Closer than me and you? I don't want that! I don't want anyone to be closer than me! I don't want that... Tell me I'm wrong! I need to hear it! Because I think about you all the time! Is that not enough? Not good enough? If you need more than this, then what do I have to do? I don't know the answer! I keep thinking about it, but I only ever screw up, so just tell me what you want me to be and I'll try my best, I promise. Truth is, I don't really care about the other girl. The real problem is that I miss you and I need to make a change, Shimamura. I get that, really... Hey, Shimamura, what are you thinking right now? Am I being weird? Acting crazy? Tell me about you. Talk to me. *Chase* me. I'm the one who always has to do the work! Me, me, me! This is what happens when the friendship is a one-way street! I'm falling apart, so I just need you to meet me in the middle. Do you hate me now? You don't hate me, do you? Please don't hate me. I don't want that. I don't want you to hate me. I want—I want you to love me. Someone please love me...but I want it to be you... Do you hate me? Like my mom does? Are you going to stop talking to me now? Pretend I'm invisible? What do you want me to say? How do I get you to notice me? Grow wings and fly? Jump up and down? Hold your hand? Even if I tried, nothing ever seems to work...so what was I supposed to do all this time? How do I make it so nobody... Shimamura, please, I want to hear your voice... Say something... Reassure me... I just don't want you to smile at anyone else. Smile at *me*! ME! My head hurts...and my stomach hurts... I've been agonizing over this for so long—why didn't you ever call me? Why didn't you tell me? I want to know...I want to know about you... My feelings are all jumbled up now and I keep talking in circles, but I can't help it. I mean, you're all I think about,

Shimamura... You're all I've ever cared about and you're all I ever *will* care about. I cherish you... I *want* to cherish you. I can't *not* cherish you...so please just notice that I exist, okay?! I need you to notice me, Shimamura... I don't want you thinking about other girls. I don't want that... Are you going to hang out with her again? Where will you go with her? Downtown? To somewhere I've already been with you?! Don't do that! Don't replace me! Don't replace our memories together! Will it be any different if you go with her? Will you see different things? No, no, NO! I don't want that, either! You have to be with me, and we have to share the same things... Feel the same things... You're acting so *weird*! No, I know. *I'm* the one being weird. But I can't help it... I can't get you out of my head... You're always there, Shimamura... Shimamura... Shima... mura... Hhhnn...nnn...hic... Shimamura... Shimamura... Hhh...ghhck...nng... Shimamura? I want... Shimamura... Shimamura... Shimamura... All I want is you... That's all I want...so please... I'm begging you, Shimamura... Please, just... Shimamura..."

I couldn't stop myself. In fact, if it wasn't for the tears flowing into my mouth, I probably could have kept going forever. It was all going downhill, and there was no going back up...not even if Shimamura was waiting for me at the top.

She doesn't deserve this, a voice chided in my mind. *Yeah, I know*, I replied silently. I could admit it: I was just jealous. Shimamura hadn't done anything wrong. But who was I supposed to complain to if not her? Unable to sort out my feelings, I fell into a panic and choked back sobs. Because...I mean...could you really blame me?

Just then, I heard a sigh—so heavy, it threatened to cleave my face in two. And what came next was...

"...So annoying..."

"...Huh?"

In a faint flash, Shimamura's sharp blade sliced through my barrage of pointed complaints, mowing down my momentum like grass. My melting mind turned to ice as if winter had come early, and sweat dripped down my back like rain.

"This is just getting really tiring, that's all," she continued in a flat, pointed voice.

My sweat dried, and I dissociated so hard, I thought I could see my own dilated pupils. I couldn't move a muscle. It was like the stabbing pain had cut loose all of my motor functions.

Then, with one last heavy sigh, Shimamura hung up. No goodbyes—just gone without a trace. I was “tiring,” and she didn't want to deal with me.

“...What?”

Timidly, I pulled the phone away from my ear, where Shimamura's words echoed: *So annoying. So annoying. So annoying.* The room swayed up and down. My brain had curdled, and I couldn't think. Instead I froze, staring, my mouth agog.

This was more than mere shock. I was dead inside.

Interlude:
Yashiro Comes Calling
Part 8

“WELL, IF IT ISN'T Little. Where might you be off to?”

The first thing I hear when I walk outside isn't the cicadas, but Yachi's voice. I whirl around. The sweltering heat blurs all the buildings, but Yachi still looks crisp and cool.

“Oh, Yachi!”

“Little!”

We pat each other on the biceps—*pat, pat, pat, pat*. It's too hot for this, but it's what we always do.

“I'm going to the pool,” I tell her, holding up my pool bag.

She tilts her head. “Pool?”

“Wait, you don't know? A pool is...a place with lots of water...”

Turns out it's actually kinda hard to explain. It's like a bath, but not really, 'cause it's a pool... Oh, but I don't think Yachi likes to take baths, because whenever I ask her to take one with me, she runs away. I always catch her, though, and then I give her a good scrubbing. Makes me feel like a big sister.

“Is it fun?”

“Uhhhh...yeah! Lots of fun!”

I flash my pearly whites at her. She flashes hers right back.

The pool at my school is open for the summer—until the Bon Festival, anyways. Mom said they've been shortening the days every year.

“What about you, Yachi? Going on a walk somewhere?”

She's carrying a canteen and wearing a tall, thin hat made of twigs all woven together. I can see some leaves peeking out through the gaps, too. Really weird. But it looks great with the color of her hair.

“Heh heh heh. Nothing as minor as that.”

“Walks are minor?”

“I’m going out to search for my compatriot. I meant to do it sooner, but I completely forgot,” she announces like she’s bragging. “I was planning to spend a good three hundred years looking, but with the heat, I’ll give it three days.”

“Uh...okay...” I think maybe she just made those numbers up.

“Now then, I’ll see you around.”

And with that, she toddles off into the distance. That’s Yachi for you—she says exactly what she wants to say, then leaves.

“Hmmm...”

...So she’s going on a family vacation? I don’t think her mom and dad would let her go somewhere by herself. Then again, I’ve never met them. Never been to her house either. There’s still so much about her I don’t know.

I look down at the strand of blue hair still wrapped around my pinky finger. At night, when I’m in bed, I can spend hours losing myself in its faint glow. Sometimes I forget to blink, or even breathe. But I always turn out okay. Somehow this single tiny light has the power to make me feel like I’m at the aquarium.

Then the heat finally kicks in, and to shake it away, I start walking.

“Three days, huh?”

I’m used to hanging out with her every day, so it feels like a really long time. I don’t know how it happened, but Yachi’s a part of my life now.

Day one. Day two. Day three. And then...

“Well, if it isn’t Little. Off to the pool again?”

Once again, I bump into Yachi outside my house. *Pat, pat, pat, pat.* Yep, it’s her.

Exactly three days later, she shows up wearing lion pajamas. The hood is a little round lion face, and when she pulls it over her head, its fangs bite into her

skin. Kinda looks like the lion's eating her whole.

"Yup. What about you, Yachi?" Besides getting gobbled, I mean. "Did you buy that?"

"No, I received it. Chrrrrp!"

She raises both hands and a foot in a threatening pose. I don't think lions do any of that. Especially not the chirping. Still cute, though.

"I couldn't find my compatriot, but I met a strange lady who gave this to me."

"Strange how?" Stranger than you? Is that even possible?

"A strange lady with fluffy hair."

"Fluffy?"

"Fluffy like this!"

With her index fingers, she pantomimes a puffy shape around her head. What, like an Afro? Or... "Like a sheep? Hmmm."

I kinda want to meet this sheep lady, but at the same time, I'm kinda scared... Well, if she was nice to Yachi, then she can't be that bad. And maybe Yachi's right about her being weird. But if I told Nee-chan I'm going to go meet some weirdo, she probably wouldn't let me... Guess I can't go.

Wait, but why would a sheep lady be giving out *lion* pajamas?

"Too bad you couldn't find your...um...compatriot."

"Indeed," Yachi nods. "My compatriot is very naïve, so I worry they may have withered in this heat."

More naïve than you? Is *that* even possible?

"But once I find them, I'll need to go back to outer space, so I'll put it off for now."

"Uh huh..." I start to shrug it off, but then partway through I whirl around to look at her. "Wait, what?! Really?"

"Really."

I don't know much about outer space, but...it feels like she's saying she'll have

to leave.

“Well...I guess...” *Maybe we shouldn’t hang out anymore.* But I can’t finish my sentence, so instead I flail my arms. For some reason, Yachi starts doing it, too. This isn’t a game, Yachi!

Under the blazing sun, I flail my arms until my pool bag falls to the ground. It takes a few minutes before the sweat drains the white-hot emotions from my mind.

Chapter 5:

Are Souls Shared?

EVERYTHING I WORKED so hard to build had come crashing down over my head in a vicious avalanche. No...it wasn't a natural disaster. It was me—I was the disaster.

Whether I exploded or imploded remained to be seen, but suffice it to say, I burst into pieces as fast as a firework. I knew I was in the wrong, and I knew my overstepping of boundaries had caused Shimamura to bolt. But what else was I supposed to do? I only ever spoke the truth. Everything I did and said (or screamed, as the case may be) was an honest reaction to my own feelings.

I knew pressing the issue would cause friction and other unforeseen complications, but I couldn't stop myself. In the end, I was the dirty kind of firework, spraying my viscera everywhere.

Every day after that was spent picking up the pieces of my own shattered shell. This was now day three of sitting on my bed and sighing heavily. While I was gradually recovering from my despair, my heart was still plagued with regret.

I hadn't heard a single peep from Shimamura since then—no calls, no emails. Unsurprisingly, she hadn't tried to initiate a conversation, and my phone was as silent as a grave. Clutching it, I flopped down and rolled around on my bed. Depression pulled me down like gravity, and I was slowly sinking.

Now that I thought about it, this was our first fight—or was it? Did it still count as a “fight” if she had written me off for good? The worst-case scenario rose up in my mind again and again, every time just as painful as the last.

I sat up in bed. *No. I won't let that happen, no matter what.*

I felt so rejected, it made me sick to my stomach, and my brain was screaming. Why did I charge in headfirst with no respect to how it might fray our connection? I wanted—no, *needed*—to mend things with her. I needed

everything to go back to normal.

Should I call her? No, maybe email her? No, I should call her, right? I waffled one step forward, then one step back. All I knew for sure was that I couldn't let it stay like this.

Outside the window, clouds streamed past. They said the cicada population was low this year, but I could hear them clearly. Time passed as I lay there curled in a ball. But while my sadness and pain could fade with time, my love could not.

"...Love?"

The fleeting thought made my cheeks flush. Surely I was overstating things... or was I? Admiring someone deeply...yearning to know everything about them... In my view, those things could reasonably be considered a form of love in their own right. So yes, I loved Shimamura. And there was nothing wrong with that.

God, kill me! I forced myself to face forward, though I could tell I was destined for a neck cramp by the end of the day. My "love" (TBD) was goading me on, telling me something had to change. I needed to take action, and the first step was to talk to her—so the best option was a phone call.

My screen was already slick with the palm sweat of determination. Nevertheless, I hesitantly brought up Shimamura's contact. But my inner coward was already rearing her head, worried that Shimamura might just send me straight to voicemail. What would I do then? Could I accept the rejection, let go, and move on?

My heart had put up a dozen force fields to minimize any potential damage, but I brushed them away like cobwebs. With encouragement from the seventy-plus unsent emails in my drafts, I tapped the button and reached out to Shimamura.

There was no guarantee this would go well, and honestly, I wasn't prepared for what would happen if she pushed me away. But life was full of moments where the only option was to wing it, and this was one of them. For me, Shimamura was an essential part of my teenage life.

Every second spent waiting for the phone to connect was *fresh torture*. It

rang, and rang, and rang— “Yes? Hello?”

“Aaaaahhh!”

My eyes and lips faltered, betraying the panic I wasn't meant to let show. My heart ached like it was being crushed in a vise, and I curled up on my bed. It wasn't uncommon for Shimamura's voice to fluster me, but this time was decidedly different. My fear was winning out, rushing through my bloodstream like poison, making my fingers go numb.

“Helloooo? Sakura-chaaaan?”

There was no trace of annoyance or hostility in her voice, no beating around the bush—just a direct connection between me and her. My first reaction was relief, followed by: “Um, hi...Sh-Shimamura-san.”

I sounded like a kid who wasn't sure if her mom was mad at her. Classic me.

“Huh? Why so formal all of a sudden?”

“Oh, o-okay... I'll just call you Shimamura, then.”

“You've been calling me Shimamura *this whole time*, silly. Anyway, what's up?”

You and I both know “what's up”! It's been keeping me up at night, and I'm miserable! Or was it the sort of minor detail she could shrug off after three days? I hated feeling like the two of us were such vastly different people...but at the same time, it offered me a ray of hope.

Before I got started, I adjusted my sitting posture. The tightness in my chest eased slightly, granting me just enough room for my desires—and my voice—to thrive. *Let's make this happen!*

“Shimamura?”

“Yeeees?”

Seriously, what the hell happened last time? Because I didn't appreciate it and also I still have a lot of concerns and I need you to give me answers and I know you said I was annoying but sometimes this flippant attitude of yours can be really frustrating for me too so please don't scare me like that! You don't know how badly I want to scream and cry and cling to you because to be honest I feel

like I might break down and start sobbing at any minute because I have the right to complain and also I think I have the right to know more about you so please just tell me, or to put it a different way, basically, long story short— “I was thinking we should go hang out somewhere.”

As my thoughts swirled and frothed endlessly in my head, this was the end result. I didn't have the life experience to know for sure, but if I had to wager a guess, it was probably somewhere in the same vein as my younger self begging my mom to take me on a trip. As I waited for her answer, I clutched my phone. The rest of my body was now every bit as sweaty as my palms.

“Sure, sounds good.”

By contrast, Shimamura's voice was cool and composed, agreeing as swiftly and readily as the oscillation of an electric fan... *Wait, what?* This was proving to be so painless, it was actually starting to freak me out. It almost felt like the call we had the other day never even happened... My brain stalled.

“Are we going today, or...?”

“Huh? Yeah... Er, actually, let's, uh, do it tomorrow!”

I wanted to see her as soon as possible, but if I met up with her in this state, I'd probably be a nervous wreck and end up humiliating myself. In the back of my mind, a voice asked “Haven't you already done that a bunch of times?” but I ignored it.

“Ah, tomorrow. Have you already planned out what you want to do?”

“Sure have,” I replied, grabbing my summer to-do list. *It's finally your time to shine, little guy.* “First, um, I wanna go shopping...”

“Uh huh?”

“Then go to the pool...”

“Uh huh...?”

“And then spend the night at your house...if that's cool.”

And so I read the whole list, top to bottom. *Ack! I was so excited, I forgot the part about holding hands! Well, it'll probably happen at some point during the other stuff. I'll just have to make sure of that.*

“Sounds like a solid plan, but...it almost sounds like you’re reading from a script...”

An astute observation, for I was indeed reading aloud from my premeditated list. But rest assured, I still meant every word.

“I don’t mind going to the pool, but are you sure you wanna stay over? The upstairs room doesn’t have air conditioning, so it’s gonna be hot.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be fine! I like it hot, actually.”

My mouth was practically running on autopilot. *“I like it hot”? You sure about that one, brain?*

“Really? I seem to remember you complaining about it back in the gym loft...”

“Uhhhh...w-well, I’m more mature now than I used to be! Did a lot of growing over the past year. And soon you can see for yourself! Weh heh hoo hoo heh!” I finished with a forced laugh to cover my slip-up.

“Okay then... Well, to your credit, I *did* notice you’re always looking pink and flushed, so maybe you’re just naturally immune to the heat.”

What was *that* supposed to mean? She was right, though. I could blush at a moment’s notice, including right now.

And so she granted me permission to sleep over at her house. Looking down at my to-do list, I was relieved to know my dreams would soon come to fruition. But I couldn’t stumble right out of the gate or I’d never cross the finish line—then again, technically I already had. And yet somehow it was all working out in my favor.

After that, we agreed on a meetup time and location, and then I sensed Shimamura gravitating toward ending the call.

“Well, see you tomorrow.”

“Yeah... Hey, uh, Shimamura?” As her voice pulled away, I clung on for dear life.

“Hmmm?” Her voice drew close once more.

“I’m really glad I was able to hear your voice...and, um...talk and stuff.” I was

terrified this would drive her away again, but I needed to say it.

“Glad to hear it,” she laughed. And with that, she hung up. Personally, I was awful at ending phone calls, so I appreciated it...but at the same time, the absence of her voice made me sad.

For a while I just sat there, my arm frozen in place. *Does this mean the call went well, or what?* The whole problem was resolved so easily, it struck me as anticlimactic. Despite all my agonizing, the fight had ended just as quickly as it began, and without me having to lift a finger.

Wasn't there supposed to be at least one action taken to remedy the conflict? An apology or something? Evidently that scene had been deleted from the script. She changed the subject with the same frivolity as a discussion of the weather, and the resolution felt so flimsy, it was hard to put my trust in it. Did I really solve it with a single call? Impulsively, I gave my phone a little shake.

“Am I missing something...?”

I just wasn't convinced. Something felt distinctly wrong—like I got full marks for turning in a blank paper at school. But no matter how hard I wracked my brain, I couldn't put my finger on the problem.

“...Oh...”

I forgot to make plans with her to go to a festival. Looking at my to-do list, I could see it added in small print near the bottom. But the discomfort still lingered, so clearly this wasn't the root of the problem, either.

Still, I didn't have time to sit around and agonize endlessly. I needed to focus on the things I knew for sure...like the fact that I was going to the pool with Shimamura tomorrow. In which case, I would need to buy a swimsuit.

I leapt to action so fast, I nearly forgot my wallet. I could feel energy returning to every last molecule in my body. And at last, I finally realized: *Shimamura gives me life.*

Everybody likes gifts, right? Gifts are gestures intended to make people like you and make them feel good.

However...that didn't necessarily mean this was the right choice. With the slightest shift of my shoulders, the piquant fragrance stung my nostrils.

It was the day after the phone call, and I was standing at our meetup spot—the entrance to the mall—holding a bouquet. After a lot of waffling back and forth, this was the gift I ultimately decided was best. The mere sight of it made a cold sweat trickle down my back.

Was it going overboard to bring a big colorful bouquet to an outing with a friend? The answer, without hesitation, was yes. At my calmest I had the good sense to realize this, but when panic came crashing down on me, I often went sprinting in wild directions even *I* couldn't explain. For a moment I reasoned that maybe I couldn't expect to make good choices in that kind of mental state, but this didn't explain how I managed to screw things up *every single time*. Rational thought was not my strong suit, apparently.

Because it was summer break, the parking lot was packed full, and the bike rack was overflowing. I watched families and groups of teenagers walking in and out of the building while I stood there holding a bouquet. I must have looked like I was waiting for a celebrity. *Close enough, I guess.*

As the pressure of the bouquet steadily set in, other worries started to take root. Would Shimamura be in a bad mood when she arrived? She sounded pretty normal over the phone, but what if...? Uncertainty gnawed at my heart, chipping away at the surface. What if she was mean and snippy? The thought terrified me.

Of course, if I were truly to blame, then all I needed to do was give her a sincere apology...but this time around, it felt like there was more to it, like a critical difference in our values and viewpoints. Was there really any solution for that? As I gazed out at the parking lot and awaited her arrival, I could only pray that our fight was over.

Like radio towers, the scattered trees broadcasted the cicadas' song. With no wind, only the bugs could cut through the unending heat wave. My lips were dry both inside and out. Meanwhile, Shimamura still wasn't here...but of course, that was my fault for showing up early (again) as a direct result of anxiety (as usual).

Would I find happiness today?

Time passed, and I couldn't even find it in me to enjoy the smell of the flowers. I checked the time on my phone; there was still half an hour before she was scheduled to arrive. But just then, I spotted someone waving in my direction. I looked up—and nearly recoiled.

It was Shimamura, carrying an extra bag in addition to her usual one. And she was early, too! *What time is it again? Oh, right. Yeah, she's thirty minutes early!* Why did she always find new ways to fluster me?

She was still quite a distance away, but the moment our eyes met, my stomach tightened and my shoulders stiffened. I stood there and waited for her, too nervous to even blink.

"Hey!"

"...'Sup." In direct contrast with her casual wave, I inclined my head stoically. My shoulders were already locked in place.

As she approached, she gestured her waving hand in the direction of the bouquet. "What's that for?"

"Huh? Er...th-they're for you."

I offered her the bouquet. Eyes wide, she took the flowers into her arms. They flattered her a lot more than some clueless idiot like me. *Yeah... She looks great,* I thought to myself as I gazed at her.

"...But what's it *for*?"

Don't ask me. All I know is that I paid for it, and now it's here.

"Did I do anything worth celebrating lately? Reach 2,000 hits in baseball? No... Escape from the SS *Espoir*? No... Hmmm..."

"I...I thought it could be like a...token of friendship restored?"

At last, I found a half-decent excuse. But on the other side of the flower garden, Shimamura cocked her head. "What do you mean, friendship restored?"

"What?"

This reaction was not the one I had hoped for, and I could feel myself fumbling. A cold sweat broke out all over my body. *She isn't still mad at me, is she?!* I swallowed hard and waited.

“Oh!” After a moment, she seemed to remember. Then she looked at me and smiled awkwardly. “Yeahhhh...I guess we kinda *did* have a fight, huh?”

Apparently she didn't put it together until just now. But before I could pause to analyze the pros and cons of this— “Guess we're all made up now,” she continued, holding up the bouquet.

“Uh...yup,” I nodded, unsure what else to say.

It was all over in a blink—like having salad for lunch. You'd think it would feel refreshing, but instead it was bland and insubstantial.

“I think this is the first time anybody's ever given me flowers...”

“Wait, really?”

“Well, you never really have the opportunity to get any when you live an average life, right?”

Fair point. I was pretty sure *I'd* never gotten any flowers, either. But my eyes started to sparkle as the realization set in. *This is her first time!*

“When I retired from the basketball team in junior high, they only gave me, like, a can of soda at most.” As she spoke, she gave the bouquet's wrapping paper a little pat.

“Oh, I see...”



“Wait, how come you’re so sweaty? You could have stayed cool if you just waited inside, silly.”

She pulled out a washcloth and silently offered it to me. I took it, and then...

“Shi...”

“...mamura? That’s me. What’s up?”

God, she can see right through me! She knows exactly what I’m going to say!
“I just...wanted to see you as soon as possible.”

As I spoke, I felt my ears burn red-hot. Frankly, I was startled to learn my body still hadn’t reached its maximum temperature. I hung my head, glancing up at her to gauge her reaction.

“What do you mean, as soon as possible? The entrance is, like, right over—”

“That’s still too far!” I cut in, my shoulders nearly up to my ears. “I wanted to be...”

As close as possible. The words swirled around in my mind, but I couldn’t get them out. My lips quivered helplessly. But as I stood there utterly unable to make eye contact, Shimamura gently leaned in to peer at my face. Then, before I could react, she took the washcloth from my hand and wiped my forehead.

I was so stunned, I stared back like an idiot, my mouth agog. Meanwhile, she moved on to my neck. My gaze wavered to match my lips. Given the situation and my ghostly pale complexion, she was probably worried I might get heatstroke.

“So, uh...y-you sure showed up early today!” I stammered, conveniently ignoring the fact that I myself had arrived even earlier.

“Yeah, ’cause I figured *you* were gonna show up early,” she replied casually.

Once again, she had correctly predicted my behavior. But it didn’t feel like she truly understood me; she was just skimming the surface. Thus I wasn’t particularly overjoyed—just, you know, *medium-joyed*.

“Now you’re all toweled off.”

“Oh...uh...c-c-cool...”

I was so flustered, I sounded like a clucking chicken. Hastily, I lined up next to her; this was all she needed to intuit what I was after, and she held out her right hand. “Here.”

Man, I really haven’t made any progress, have I? As my brain boiled, I accepted her hand, and my emotions swirled in my chest as I thought to myself: *this is the first physical contact I’ve had with her in days.*

“If only my sister behaved as well as you.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

With my hand in hers, she faced forward and started to walk. And with the bouquet held tightly to her chest, she was the very picture of beauty. Strangely enough, I couldn’t take my eyes off her.

“...But really though, what’s this for?” she repeated after a moment as she gazed down at the flowers rustling loudly just under her chin. Then I saw her smile softly and felt a rush of relief.

My free hand balled into a fist, clutching the invisible to-do list in my heart.

Before we went shopping, we decided to make a brief return to Shimamura’s house. She said she wanted to get the flowers some water before they wilted.

“I mean, they’re so pretty... It’d be such a waste if they died. That, and it’s actually kinda hard to carry them around.”

“Oh...”

“Don’t worry. We have plenty of time.”

She smiled like she could read my mind, and my lips parted in surprise. *She smiled at me!* A warm feeling filled my chest, superseding the hot summer sun. Kinda weird how the human body can feel both “warm” and “hot” at the same time, but I guess that’s just one of the great mysteries of life.

Shimamura hopped onto the back of my bike, and we set off for her house. During the ride, my sweat transformed into something cool and refreshing.

“Oh, back already?”

Shimamura’s mother greeted us as she sat polishing shoes in the entryway. *Déjà vu*. I bowed to her politely, then followed Shimamura inside.

“Ah, hello there. Come on in!”

“We’re gonna be heading out again in a minute. I just came to drop off my flowers.”

“Flowers? From who?”

Shimamura jerked her chin in my direction. Then her mother looked at me, and I fought the urge to flee.

“It isn’t your birthday today, is it?”

“Actually, it is! Didn’t you get me something?”

Playfully, Shimamura held out her palm expectantly; Mrs. Shimamura leaned forward and bit her daughter’s fingers.

“Aaagh!” Shimamura hastily retracted her hand.

With a cackle, her mother crouched down and scurried away. She was so bizarrely agile, I had to assume she did this kind of thing all the time. I looked at Shimamura, who scratched her head awkwardly.

“Well, uh...you and your mom sure are close, huh?”

“What? You think so? Because I feel like it’s the opposite,” she protested in a pointed voice.

Then Mrs. Shimamura walked back into the room. No longer was she carrying a dust rag; now she was holding a blue, long-necked vase.

“Here’s a vase. Filled it with some water for you.”

“Yeah, I can see that... Thank you.” Shimamura took the vase and set it on the bookshelf near the front door. “Oh yeah, and Adachi’s spending the night tonight.”

“Are you now?” Mrs. Shimamura looked at me, lowered her head slightly, and smirked. “Gonna help Hougetsu with her homework or something?”

“Huh...?” *Am I?* Like a coward, I looked to Shimamura for help. I got the sense her mother had a deeply flawed understanding of our friendship.

“I’ve *actually* been a pretty decent student lately, FYI,” she pouted.

“Ha! What a baby!” her mother scoffed as she left the room.

Scowling, Shimamura untied the bouquet and lined all the flowers up next to the vase. Now that Mrs. Shimamura was gone, I was left feeling almost... impressed. Only a mother could provoke such an immature reaction from her daughter.

To her mother, she was a child; to her little sister, she was a big sister. So what was she to me?

“Whatever. This’ll only take me a sec.”

“Okay.”

I stood to the side and watched as she slid each flower into the vase. Then, finally, I caved in and glanced in the direction of the eyes I felt boring into me. It was Shimamura’s little sister, spying on us from the hall.

Her less-than-friendly gaze made me shrink into my shoulders. She reminded me of a small woodland creature peering out from the shadows. *Haven’t I seen this somewhere before...? Oh, right. In the mirror.*

Behind Little Shimamura, a head of bright blue hair appeared, glossy strands cascading down onto her.

“Stop it, Yachi! You’ll draw too much attention!”

Little Shimamura pushed the blue-haired girl away, but the other girl pushed back fiercely. They staggered backward and forward, each of them squishing the other’s cheeks... Some kind of game, I guess.

“My sister’s best friend is a total oddball,” Shimamura explained, watching the girls as she continued her work. Her gaze wandered until it fixed itself on me. She stared at me for a long moment, then continued matter-of-factly, “But I guess mine is, too.”

With that, she turned back to the flowers. A beat later, I realized what she meant. *Excuse me?!* My eyes flew open. To her, I was an oddball? Abnormal?

Well, okay, I guess I can see it...but surely I can't be as weird as the girl with BLUE HAIR!

Shocked, I looked over at the girl in question. She was nuzzling her cheek against Little Shimamura, and Little Shimamura seemed pretty happy about it, because she was smiling and blushing. At first I was impressed that they could stand to do it in this heat, but it occurred to me that if I was ever allowed to nuzzle *Shimamura's* cheek, I would do it in a heartbeat, no matter the season... *Wait, what? How'd my mind get on this topic? Where was I?*

"There, all done. Thanks for the flowers, Adachi," Shimamura told me as she neatly folded up the wrapping paper. Truth be told, I was on cloud nine, but I had to play it cool.

"Uh, sure, yeah, no problem. It's cool. I'm just glad you like them." This time I actually did a pretty good job holding myself together.

"So you said you want to go shopping first?"

"Oh, uh, yeah. Or we could do it later and go to the pool first, if you want." I lifted the bag containing my swimsuit to eye level. She peered around it to get a look at my face.

"Are you a big swimmer? You strike me as the type of person who's pretty particular about your hobbies."

"Huh? Well, I mean, it's hot outside, and I like...staying cool..." I waved a hand dismissively. No, I wasn't especially particular about seeing her in a swimsuit. But miraculously, I somehow had the good sense not to say that part out loud.

"But you called out sick during all of our swimming classes at school..."

"...Well, school is different." *Because going to the pool with you actually means something to me.*

As we talked, she opened the door and walked out into summer.

"All right then..." She squinted in the sunlight. "Let's do the pool first."

"Okay." Mentally, I added a gold star to my invisible to-do list.

"Which pool are we going to?"

“Uhhh... Any preferences?” I had done my research in advance, but I wanted to take her opinion into consideration.

“I wouldn’t call it a *preference*, but I know of one that’s indoors... Oh, but...” For some reason, she looked at me and frowned. “Maybe we shouldn’t go there. Probably shouldn’t. Or should we?”

I had no clue what she was talking about, and I was mildly alarmed. “I’m okay with anywhere, as long as we’re together.”

“Yeah, I know, but...hmmm... Well, I guess it’s fine. It’s close and cheap,” she nodded to herself. “And you’re *okay with anywhere*, right?” she added, playfully parroting my word choice. I really wanted to know why she thought we shouldn’t go, but now her lips were sealed with a forced grin. *Scary*.

And so we decided to go with Shimamura’s suggestion. Once again, she ended up on the back of my bike. Thrilled by the feeling of her weight against my shoulders, I started to pedal.

We drifted along peacefully under the summer sun, just me and Shimamura. At a glance, it felt like everything was back to normal. But I still had so many questions on my mind. For example: Who was that other girl she was with?

...On second thought, in some form or another, all of my questions led back to that one. I wanted her to set the record straight. And I needed the truth, no matter what it turned out to be, in order to make an educated decision about what to do going forward.

But if I got too emotional and started pressing her, she might push me away again, and at that point I would probably never find out. A solid foundation had yet to be established between us. We were like...I don’t know...like two leaves floating in a river. We were still together for now, but only by chance, and the slightest gust of wind or change of current would pull us apart again. Our existing relationship was far from reassuring.

That was probably why I felt such strong affection for her hands on my shoulders while they lasted. It was that fleeting gravity that kept us connected.

Shimamura’s directions brought us to a sports gym, where a crisp blue-and-

white sign greeted us out front. All the parking spots were full, including the ones across the street. The sunlight glinted off the hoods of the cars, blinding me from every angle.

“Mom has a membership here.”

“Oh, cool.”

As she pulled her bag from my bike basket, she froze for a second, then looked at me. “*My* mom, I mean.”

Why did she think I needed her to clarify that? My gaze wandered in confusion.

“Okay, let’s go!” she continued with a grin. The sight was enough to make my blood pulse with fear and excitement, and I was already sweating buckets.

According to Shimamura, her mother’s membership allowed her to purchase pool vouchers, which she had then passed on to her daughter. The system ensured the pool was never too crowded, and I could certainly appreciate why she would prefer that. At this time of year, in this heat, there were probably whole *swarms* of people interested in an indoor pool right about now. This gym pool was starting to feel like the right choice.

As we passed through the reception lobby, Shimamura led me around to the right, to the changing room. Beyond the glass windows, I could see the pool—no lights on, pleasantly dim, with a bunch of old people swimming around in it. There was a sizable number of people water walking by the far wall, all of them fifty or older. But now that I thought about it, it was a weekday during summer break, so the younger age groups were probably off working their nine-to-five jobs. Maybe they’d show up later tonight.

“There are saunas in the back, but I don’t think our pool vouchers normally let us use them.”

This didn’t especially excite me, so I just nodded. *Trust me, it already feels like a sauna outside.* Then Shimamura came to a stop by the vending machine, and I thought maybe she was going to buy something— “There are saunas, but we can’t use them.”

Why did she keep repeating things today? She was acting a good 20 percent

more strangely than usual.

Then we entered the changing room, and as I gazed around at the lockers, a certain immutable fact slowly descended upon me, reverberating louder and louder in my mind with every step I took: Shimamura and I were going to take our clothes off in the same room.

There was nothing unusual about it, and yet the thought lingered on my mind. I mean, obviously I had no interest in her naked body—I wasn't that kind of girl. But for some reason, there was a gaze-averting sort of shyness I couldn't shake. What exactly was making me squirm?

Our keys were only one number apart, and our lockers were practically right next to each other. There would be no way to hide. *Hide what?* Hide from each other. *Hide WHAT, though?!* My hand shook as I struggled to turn the key in the lock.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched Shimamura set her bag down. What was wrong with me? If I followed this panic to its source, what would I find there? I attempted to reframe my malaise as a philosophical question, but it didn't work, because my heart was still pounding.

Then Shimamura slid her clothes off...revealing her swimsuit underneath.

“.....”

It was a school-issued swimsuit. Apparently she was wearing it under her clothes the entire time. As she pulled on her swim cap, she looked at me. “What's up?”

I shook my head vigorously, all the while conveniently forgetting to clarify what exactly I was denying.

“Oh, I know. I bet you think my swimsuit makes me look like a little kid,” she smirked as she adjusted her shoulder straps.

“No, I... Okay, maybe. Just a little.” *Sure, we'll go with that.*

“Well, you're not wrong! Ha ha ha!” She averted her eyes in an uncharacteristic display of shyness. “It's just easy to wear under my regular clothes, so now it's a habit.”

“Ha ha ha...” *Ha... ha...*

Frankly, I hadn't expected her to wear her school swimsuit. If I had, I would've worn mine.

She slid her goggles on over her swim cap and waited for me patiently, her arms folded. *Wait... Is she going to stand there and watch me?!* Now I was flustered in an entirely different way. *Stripping...in front of...Shimamura...* My mind stumbled over each word as a steamy haze engulfed my head.

I froze, pinching the hem of my clothes. *What am I even worried about? It's fine! Relax!* I screamed at myself, using that momentum to strip down to my underwear. At that point, I could feel myself come to a screeching halt, sparks flying along the train tracks. My brain cells were firing on all cylinders.

“Hmm...”

Shimamura's voice made me flinch. I didn't know what exactly she was reacting to, but I ignored her and pulled off my underwear. Then I yanked my swimsuit out of my bag. *I should have taken it out ahead of time!* My own lack of forethought made me dizzy.

“Oh, ho...”

Seriously, what was she reacting to?! My mind went white as I stepped into my swimsuit and hiked it up.

“Ooh...”

Every nerve in my body was focused on my head, and it felt like I was going to pop. Unable to ignore her for a moment longer, I boldly turned in her direction.

Shimamura was murmuring over the electric fan. Every time it oscillated, she oscillated with it.

I buried my face in my hands. *Sometimes I really don't get you, Shimamura!* In fact, she was starting to remind me of Nagafuji.

“Oh, are you done changing?”

“...Yeah...”

“Oh, hey, you're not wearing your school swimsuit.”

“...Yeah...”

Given what I’d seen of the pool here, maybe it was weird that I had bothered going shopping for a brand-new suit. Fortunately for me, I had chosen a blue one-piece that ended up kinda matching Shimamura’s, so I probably wouldn’t stick out too badly.

She crouched down to peer at my frills. “Cute,” she announced in a cheerful voice.

Did she mean me or the swimsuit? As tempted as I was to ask, I had a feeling she’d say something mean like “No comment,” just to tease me. But either way, I figured it couldn’t hurt to accept the compliment.



Glance. Contrary to what I expected, the disinfectant mist that hit my feet was surprisingly lukewarm. I could see showerheads affixed to the ceiling, but no water flowed from them. Instead, a pungent order wafted from the exit, gouging my nostrils. It had been so long since I visited a public pool, it actually took me a minute to recognize the smell of chlorine. *Glance.*

Then we walked out to the poolside area. My nose quickly adapted to the smell, and before long, I stopped noticing it at all.

The entire pool was divided into six lanes, but we were only permitted to use Lane 6 right here by the door; the rest were populated with adults quietly swimming by themselves. Evidently this was no place to scream and goof off. Not that I could really picture me and Shimamura goofing off together. *Glance.*

The people doing water walking exercises along the far wall all turned to look at us. They probably weren't expecting teenagers to come here. But the attention didn't seem to bother Shimamura; maybe she was used to it. That said, I noticed her looking out at the other side of the room.

"Looking for someone?" *The girl from the festival, maybe?* My brain jumped to conclusions, and my stomach started to churn. *Glance.*

"Huh? Mmmm... Ha ha ha ha..." She scratched her cheek and laughed evasively. *Glance.*

"...Huh?"

Just then, I became conscious of my repeated eye movements and began to observe myself. She took a few steps—*glance*. I walked behind her at a reduced pace—*glance*.

The blood drained from my face. My hypothesis was right: my eyes were drawn to Shimamura's butt.

Not that I was outright staring at it like a creep, but...for some reason, I kept looking at it every now and then. Instantly my cheeks burned like they were on fire. The color in my face switched on and off like a warning light, my blood ebbing and flowing more intensely than a stormy sea.

For some reason I was particularly focused on the borderline between the

fabric and her skin. Why? One would think I'd understand my own behavior, and yet I still had so many unanswered questions. My entire face flushed like someone had dumped gasoline on the fire, and I could feel myself starting to sweat.

I need to cool off, ASAP. I looked at the pool next to us, then tilted over and dropped myself in, breaking through the malleable wall of water. When I reached the bottom, I looked back up. I wasn't wearing goggles, so my vision was blurred by the chlorine, but I could see the water's surface hanging above me like a second ceiling. I decided to stare up at the surface until I could compose myself.

Exhaling bubbles, I slowly sank. Just then, a pillar of water disrupted the surface. It was Shimamura, wearing her goggles and exhaling bubbles just like me. She stretched out her arms and legs and sank down next to me. As she bent forward, I could see the borderline between her swimsuit and her side boob. Just like that, I was transfixed.

Ugh, why am I like this?! Spluttering, I lost too much air and had to race back to the surface. As I coughed and choked, Shimamura came up after me.

"Wow, you seem like you're having fun already!"

"Uh, yeah, sure," I replied, forcing a laugh as water streamed from my nose. On second thought, maybe it wasn't safe for me to go to the pool with Shimamura. Evidently I was quick to succumb to temptation.

Once I caught my breath, I wiped my face with my hands. At long last, I could feel the chill of the water. Now that I was standing with my shoulders submerged, my eyes made the first move, swimming around the room. *So what next?* I had no intention of quietly doing laps like the people in the other lanes.

"Feels nice, doesn't it? I love it."

Apparently all Shimamura cared about was beating the heat. She was submerged nearly to her chin, floating along like a crocodile, and it was kind of cute. Cuter than a real crocodile, at least.

"Oh, that reminds me."

She swam over to me, her face and hands sliding over the surface of the

water like a frog. As I waited, she reached out and put a hand on my head. Then she moved it back and forth like she was petting me.

“I was harsh to you the other day. Sorry about that.”

She apologized to me the way a grown-up would speak to a child, but I didn’t have time to unpack all of that. It was so sudden, I wasn’t sure how to respond to it.

“Oh, uh...no, it’s nothing you...need to apologize for.”

“Yeah, I don’t think either of us are to blame for what happened.”

It was a very Shimamura answer, to say the least. If the range of human emotion could be compared to the four seasons, then she was a tropical climate. Always reasonably warm, with a gentle breeze, and yet...

“But I didn’t say it to be mean. Those were my honest feelings.”

She didn’t try to hide behind excuses like “I lost my temper” or “it just slipped out,” and I could appreciate her frank honesty. I never wanted her to feel like she had to walk on eggshells around me. Meanwhile, she stroked my head like she had been promoted from my big sister to my mother. *If only I weren’t wearing a swim cap...* I could feel myself growing as calm as the waters.

“And on that note, Adachi...”

“Yeah?”

“I think you should try making friends with more people.”

“...What?” Reflexively, I whipped my head up.

“Obviously I’ll still be friends with you, too,” she clarified in a gently chiding tone. “But I think you should try to open your eyes to the people around you. I think it’ll help you feel more stable.”

At first, I refused to hear it. But after she finished speaking, she gazed at me quietly like she was waiting for me to come around. Eventually, my shoulders fell still, and a beat later, so did the water. At last, I could think straight.

This was a perfectly reasonable suggestion, brought on by my excessive attachment to her. If anything, *I* caused this to happen... *No, she said neither of*

us is to blame. She just wants me to calm down a little, that's all. But to me, this was rejection—a force field erected between herself and me. The hand on my head felt like it was keeping me at arm's length.

“I'll...think about it,” I nodded, purely to smooth things over. Right now, I didn't have the capacity for anything else.

“Okay. I mean, I know you're your own person, so I won't force you more than absolutely necessary.”

I could hear the unspoken second half of her sentence: *But I can't guarantee I'll tolerate much more of this.*

Things had been going so well between us lately that I'd almost forgotten, but Shimamura wasn't a warmhearted person—just very tolerant. She was generous, but she didn't give out of her own volition.

Right. Of course.

It felt like someone had dumped a bucket of water over my head, and no, not because I was in a pool. I was chilled to my core, far colder than the carefully controlled temperature of the water. If you touched my skin, I'd probably feel like ice.

That was the moment I finally realized what it was I had been overlooking. The fact of the matter was that the underlying problem had yet to be solved. And not only that, but Shimamura didn't even perceive it as a “problem” in the first place.

When we spoke on the phone yesterday, she wasn't even aware that we'd had a fight, and she readily forgave me—proof that it had barely even registered as a blip on her radar. That was how we made it to today so easily. I thought we were making progress, but really the two of us were just going in circles.

Sometimes her treatment of me made my blood run cold.

“Shimamura...”

She was so close, and yet I sensed a gulf between us. Frightened, I called her name.

“Hmmm?” she answered slowly, to the point of slothfulness.

Just then, I caught sight of something moving in the water behind her. I could see bubbles rising, but what was it? Right as I leaned over to get a better look, however, Shimamura suddenly submerged. The underwater intruder had grabbed her by the shoulders and was pulling her under.

“Oh, god, Shimamura!”

As I panicked, the mystery assailant shot up out of the water. With an oddly familiar cackle, she fled the scene, kicking up sprays of water as she ran, even hopping over the dividers between lanes. Despite the resistance of the water, she was somehow eerily agile. If I ever saw a *kappa* monster in real life, it would probably move like that. When did *she* get here, anyway?

Meanwhile, Shimamura had returned to the surface. She wiped her face off, then shot a glare in the direction of the retreating offender. But from the side, I could see the corner of her mouth curling upward, and her eyes were twinkling. It looked an awful lot like she was smiling.

“Promise me you won’t be like *her* when you grow up, okay?”

“Okay,” I replied absently as I watched the water trickle down her face. She sounded upset, but I could see that she wasn’t. It seemed like she reserved all of her emotions exclusively for her family members, and I was deeply jealous.

If *I* was her mother, maybe I’d *want* her to look at me like that.

After we left the sports gym, Mrs. Shimamura met up with us like nothing had ever happened. “Go to the butcher’s shop and buy some croquettes.”

“Isn’t there something else you should say to me?”

“Look both ways before you cross the street!”

“Gee, *thanks*, Mom.”

Meanwhile, I watched their exchange and admired their mother-daughter bond. Even I could tell that they were close.

Then Shimamura got back on my bike, and we headed off to Nagafuji’s Meats.

For some reason, there was a little blue-haired fairy mascot on display out front. Why did she look so familiar? No sign of Nagafuji, either.

“Feels like I rarely ever see your daughter out here,” Shimamura commented.

“Trust me, you don’t want that. The kid’s useless,” Mr. Nagafuji replied, waving a dismissive hand. In the back, I could see a door rattling, but I decided not to ask. After all, this was another important item on my to-do list: go shopping with Shimamura.

...It still counts, right?

After we bought our croquettes, we headed back to Shimamura’s house. This was only my second time spending the night here, but this time they had prepared a chair for me in advance. As a result, we were all packed in tightly around the table, and I felt bad for causing it.

Some people might liken the warmth of a fully occupied dinner table to happiness and love. Not to be rude to the people who had welcomed me into their home for the night, but to me, it was hell. Okay, maybe not quite. More like I wasn’t...inoculated to it, since I rarely ever experienced it for myself. Without that immunity, it was poison to my system.

“I’m sorry for intruding on your meal...”

“Oh, it’s fine,” said Mrs. Shimamura.

“Hardly any trouble,” said the girl with blue hair.

“That’s not for you to say, little twerp!”

“Hee hee hee hee!”

The girl (I forget her name) was sitting at the family dinner table like she lived there. She was even joking around with Mrs. Shimamura! Meanwhile, the rest of the family didn’t even bat an eye!

“Don’t worry about it,” Shimamura insisted as she calmly sipped her miso soup.

She was just so...*tolerant*. I lacked the words to truly describe it. If I’d grown up living with her parents, would I be this open-minded, too? Because this would *never* happen at my house. My mother would sooner call the cops.

“Mom’s always like that,” she continued.

Oh, that’s what you’re talking about. Once again, I was reminded that Shimamura lived in her own little world...but it was precisely that unique quality that drew me to her. Well, that and the luster of her still-damp hair. I kept glancing at it out of the corner of my eye, admiring it.

As I unenthusiastically chewed my allotted portion of food, I thought about our day at the pool. If only we could spend every day attached at the hip... If we were stones instead of leaves, then surely even the river of time couldn’t pull us apart. Wasn’t that exactly what I wanted?

The only reason I questioned it was...well, because I had no experience with it, probably. I had no experience with a lot of things. Clearly I needed to work on that; even Shimamura was indirectly suggesting as much, and at this point, I was reasonably willing to give it a shot. Even if I already knew I wasn’t cut out for social stuff, those skills would surely come in handy at times...and now was one of those times. This was the conclusion I reached as I sipped my post-dinner tea.

So who was my first target? I peeked at her shyly with downcast eyes. *Oh, she’s already leaving the table!* I hastily downed my drink, choked out a “Thanks for dinner,” and left the kitchen.

You see, I had set my sights on Shimamura’s little sister. Partly because she was Shimamura’s sister, but mostly because she reminded me so much of myself. As hard as it was to admit, she and I had the same type of personality. I figured maybe I would have a comparatively easier time understanding her motivations.

As she headed back to the girls’ bedroom, I followed her to the hallway. From there, my pace quickened. I still hadn’t fully decided on a plan of action, but now I had already caught up to her. As it turned out, my longer legs gave me a speed advantage.

I walked past her, then turned around to face her. Startled, she jumped, her hair accessories bouncing with the motion. Reflexively, I reached up and touched my hairpin.

“Listen, um...!” I’d started speaking before I was fully prepared, and now my

voice was threatening to crack. “Uh, my name is Adachi Sakura, and...”

With a hand to my chest, I introduced myself. At first she stared back wide-eyed and slack-jawed, but over time she slowly composed herself. Engulfed in my shadow, the little girl scowled up at me, and I could feel myself losing my nerve.

“I’m Shimamura’s—er—I’m your...big sister’s...friend.” I stumbled over my words like I was trying to piece together a conversation with a foreign tourist. *God, why am I acting like such a weirdo?*

“Okay,” she replied in a hard voice.

The air between us was as arid as a desert; my throat felt too dry to continue. Instantly I felt like giving up and running away. But I couldn’t shake the compulsive feeling that something in my life needed to change, and it was this thought that kept me pinned in place. Forcing a smile, I commanded myself to hold my ground. Every muscle in my face protested, but nevertheless, I chose the exact moment she recoiled to take another step forward.

“And I’d like it”—*would I?*—“if you and I could be friends, too...um...sweetie. Uh, so I was wondering, um...would you want to hang out tonight?”

“With you?”

“Yeah.”

“Doing *what?*”

So there I was in the tub. It was so silent, I actually *did* hear a pin drop. But in reality, it was an auditory hallucination caused by an overly long, hot bath. Frankly, this tub wasn’t really big enough for two people, especially since we were facing each other.

To be clear, no, I did *not* drag Shimamura’s little sister into the bathroom and rip her clothes off. I merely made a suggestion, asked nicely, and now here we were. Therefore I think it’s safe to say she consented to this on some level. Sure, she hadn’t spoken a word the entire time, but kids her age loved to take group baths, right?

Come to think of it, taking a bath with Shimamura was on my to-do list...and since she was a “Shimamura,” technically, this counted. Hard to give myself a gold star on a mere technicality, though.

“So you’re friends with my sister?” Little Shimamura asked suddenly, her face half-submerged, blowing bubbles in the water as she spoke.

“Uh...y-yeah...?” I couldn’t gauge her tone, so I wasn’t sure what attitude to take. Instead I ended up sounding like I was afraid of a girl five or six years my junior.

“For how long?”

I didn’t know how I was supposed to answer that. If I knew for sure how long our friendship would last, I wouldn’t spend every day stressed and scared.

“Because I’ve been her sister for a lot longer,” she continued before I could respond.

Then I realized that I had misunderstood her question. She was asking how long it *had been*, not how long it *would be*. Now that I thought about it, “How long will you be friends?” was a mildly threatening question, especially coming from a grade-schooler.

“So yeah.” Her veneer of politeness popped like a soap bubble.

Apparently this girl saw me as her enemy. She was probably just as obsessed with her sister as I was, hence she was so opposed to my presence. But this thought *delighted* me. She saw me as a serious threat! Personally I was pretty jealous of her position as Shimamura’s sister. I had always wanted a special term for *our* relationship, too.

Silence descended between us as water dripped from the hair we’d wordlessly shampooed for each other. A voice in my head screamed at me: *do something!* Meanwhile, the heat intensified, crushing my skull.

Like at the pool, there was no point in just sitting here. No progress would ever be made that way. I needed to step out of the status quo, be it forward or backward, and that meant I had to take action. But what could I do? Splash water at her? She’d probably beat me up!

Still, my options were pretty limited here in the bathroom. The Shimamura family tub was a plain rectangle—decently long, but not very wide. I couldn't even stretch my legs out. Even with my knees tucked up to my chin, our feet still touched. Why did I decide we should face each other? We both would have had more room if we'd sat side by side!

Subconsciously, my gaze met hers, and tiny sparks flew. *Ha ha, looks like I'm in hot water*, I joked to myself. The heat was melting my brain to the point that I was starting to make bad puns.

"Why a bath?" she demanded brusquely.

"Well, I wanted to...get to know you."

I was supposed to be the mature one, yet I sounded so utterly pathetic. The corners of my mouth twitched in defeat. But maybe Little Shimamura mistook it for a smile. She pouted her lips.

"How come?"

This was her hardest question yet. I could feel the steam engulfing me before I could find my answer. "I...don't know."



Because Shimamura told me to make new friends? Because I wanted her approval, among other things? Yes to all of the above. But wasn't there anything more to it? What happened to "love thy neighbor"?

The longer we stayed in the tub, the redder Little Shimamura's cheeks grew. The sight reminded me of a fun question I could ask.

"So, um...do you love your big sister?"

"HUH?!"

She bolted upright, inadvertently splashing me in the face with water. Now the redness had spread to her ears—because of the rising steam? Or was it something else?

Slowly, she lowered herself back down into the tub. "Well, yeah, but...just a *normal* amount," she muttered flatly, as if entirely disinterested.

I could sense her stubbornness beneath her flushed skin. To me it was so obvious how she really felt. Were *my* feelings this obvious to everyone else?

"Oh...I see. Well, sweetie...I'm sure Shimamura probably...loves you a whole bunch." My throat felt tight, and there was a pressure on my chest. "And I care about everyone she cares about."

Warmed by the steamy air, my tongue seemed more willing to cooperate, but...did I actually feel that way? Wasn't it the exact opposite? To be totally honest, I was afraid that Shimamura would come to love someone who wasn't me. I *resented* the other people in her life. So why was I lying? What was I trying to achieve? My mind was now fully muddled by vertigo.

"Why's it matter to you?"

"It's like the Golden Rule, you know?"

Where were these wise words coming from? Certainly not from the bottom of my heart. My head was throbbing so hard, I could practically feel steam gushing from my ears. Maybe I was just that ashamed of myself for being a bald-faced liar.

"You sound like a goody-two-shoes," she remarked, aptly describing my polished outward persona. Then, after a pause... "Just like me."

With that, she smiled ever so slightly—or more accurately, she smirked. The gesture was too sarcastic to be a genuine display of affection, but I still felt like we had established a tiny bond. And if we had connected in any small way, then to me, that was (hopefully) progress. I didn't need anything to change overnight. We could take it one step at a time until eventually...

“Happily ever after?”

A head of blue hair sprouted up from the side of the tub, and I shrieked.

“Yachi! When did *you* get in here?”

“Heh heh heh! It appears you still have much to learn, Little.”

That didn't answer the question at all. We never even heard the door open, so how did she get in? And she was still wearing her clothes, too. The lion hood was sinking its teeth into her face.

Then the girl turned to face me. The billowing steam had turned her aqua blue sparkles to a light teal color; if I breathed them in, would my lungs feel minty fresh? Then again, no amount of steam would ever feel crisp and refreshing.

“Did you reach your happy ending?” she asked, rephrasing her question. This time, it was clearly directed at me. But I was nowhere near an “ending” yet. Frankly, we hadn't even gotten started.

In that moment, the innocence faded from her pure, clear gaze, revealing a tiny glimpse of their inner depths. Her eyes were so big and bright, it felt like they were endlessly vast...like they held not just stars, but an entire universe within. Face-to-face with those eyes, I lost my footing and slipped into the void of space.

“Uh...probably?” *This is probably good enough...I think.*

“Well, then, good for you.” She nodded, and her wise countenance melted away to reveal a youthful smile. “I shall be going now.”

“Oh! Yachi, wait! Now that you're here, you might as well get in the tub!”

“I refuse!”

She started to run, her hands outstretched in front of her. How she got in

here was still a mystery, but apparently she was going to exit through the door like a normal person.

“Hold it, missy!” Little Shimamura jumped out of the tub, abandoning her stiff hostility in favor of acting her age. “Gotcha!”

“Chrrrrp! What are you doing to me, Little?!”

As Little Shimamura clung to her, the girl let out a high-pitched squeal. It reminded me of Hino’s and Nagafuji’s friendship, and I realized: *that* was what a close relationship looked like.

Wait, so...have I just been wasting my time? For no reason?

I wanted to believe that wasn’t the case, but I was too dizzy to think straight. Leaning my head against the side of the tub, I gazed up at the ceiling and listened as the cheerful voices faded. Something fuzzy washed over my eyes and ears.

Too hot...

“Urggg...”

Ultimately I overheated like a computer processor.

Lying there with my eyes closed, the whirr of the fan enveloped me. I was resting on the floor upstairs, in the room I was allotted. The heat still had yet to recede, and my skin burned like it was swollen.

Was Little Shimamura okay? Last I saw, she was still playing in the bathroom with that blue-haired girl. *Kids have so much energy*, I thought to myself as I stared blankly into the distance. To a grown adult, I probably looked like a kid, too. But a lot of time had passed, and I had come a long way.

There came a knock at the door, and my sprawled legs stiffened in anticipation.

“I’m coming in!”

Sure enough, my prayers were answered, and Shimamura walked in. I opened my eyes and looked over at her. She was wearing her pajamas and carrying

something wrapped in a hand towel.

“Brought you an ice pack.”

“Th-thanks...”

A mischievous smile crept up on her face. “Or would you rather rest your head in my lap?”

“Your lap!” I blurted without a moment’s hesitation. Hook, line, and sinker.

She looked at me, startled by my choice as well as my enthusiasm. “I think the ice pack will probably feel better...”

“No, uh...I don’t need it, honest!” I started waving my hands to emphasize my recovery, but then it occurred to me she might not think I “needed” her lap, either. “I mean, I’m not at 100 percent, but yeah! Your lap would be good.”

Did I sound like a creep for wanting it so badly? *Too late to worry about that, I guess.* After all, she already saw me as a weirdo on par with that blue-haired freak. Now that I was thinking clearly, that was actually kind of a big deal.

Giggling into her hand, Shimamura knelt down in front of the fan. Then she gently grabbed my head and set me onto her squishy, soft thighs. Slowly but surely, the heat took on a pulse of its own, making my head throb.

Truth be told, this was probably dangerous for my health. My sight was unusually sharp, as if my brain had opened every pore on my body simultaneously, and if Shimamura hadn’t thought to put the ice pack on the other side of my head, I might have had a nuclear meltdown. Sandwiched between two pillows, my field of vision narrowed.

This is more than I deserve, I thought to myself, my feet jiggling restlessly. If this was what I could expect after every long bath, I might never leave the tub.

“Feel better?”

“Mm-hmm.” My voice came out muffled. Not because I was burying my face into her thighs on purpose or anything—the ice pack was just that heavy.

“I thought you said you liked it hot,” Shimamura commented, teasing me by purposely echoing the last-minute excuse I’d told her over the phone yesterday. I decided to ignore it. But as I was busy pretending to be distracted, she

followed up with something truly bizarre: “Guess you really are an ice sculpture.”

This was so baffling, I couldn’t possibly let it slide. “What?” *Seriously, where did that come from?*

“Don’t you remember? Actually now that I think about it, of course you wouldn’t. You didn’t exactly go around calling *yourself* that, after all.”

“Calling myself *what?*”

“Well, at some point near the start of the year, um...actually, I forget if it was Sancho or Panchos, but...one of the girls who went to junior high with you said that everyone compared you to an ice sculpture.”

“I...”

I had no idea about this. After all, I barely spoke to anyone during junior high... *Well, that probably explains it. But ice? Really? Was I really that cold to people?*

“But when I look at you now, I don’t see ice. More like...”

There was a pause, and I could sense her averting her gaze. “More like what?”

“...Oh, you know!”

She let out a dry laugh, and I found myself unsure whether I wanted to press any further. *Should I be offended? Ice sculpture? Ugh, that’s so cringe!* The thought that she might lord it over me for the rest of time threatened to melt my brain. I writhed in silence until at last she mercifully changed the subject.

“If you ask me, I enjoy *your* thighs more than I enjoy lending you mine.”

“Oh. Right...yeah.”

My response came out slightly delayed while I tried to decipher whether it was a compliment or a complaint. Ultimately, it was neither—just Shimamura being her usual slothful self. When was the last time her head was in my lap, anyway? Last winter? I could remember the strange thrill I felt, looking down at her face as she slept. What was the term for that? You’d think I would already know it, and yet I was still searching.

“So you wanted to take a bath with my sister?”

The sudden question made my eyes widen. If I said yes, chances were high it might create an unwelcome misunderstanding.

“No, uh, not so much the ‘bath’ part!” I explained hastily, waving my hands. “I just wanted to...get to know her...” *If anything, I’d rather take a bath with you—* I very nearly said this out loud.

“Well, did you?”

“...A little, I think...” *Maybe like 0.000001 percent.*

Weirdly enough, the weight and value of that first step seemed to fade with every step that followed. The more successful you were, the less likely you were to notice.

“Hmmm...”

Shimamura wobbled the ice pack, and my head wobbled right along with it. I could hear the hard clack of the ice just above...but how long would it last, exposed to my fever?

“Well, to be fair, you’re pretty loveable.”

My chest tightened along with my throat as I suppressed a shriek. I knew she was trying to say *her sister* loved me, but it sounded an awful lot like she was implying *she* did, too... *No, don’t be ridiculous.*

“I really don’t think she feels that way.”

“No, I’m serious... I forget if I told you, but my sister’s, like, *super* shy. I’m pretty sure she wouldn’t get in the tub with someone she didn’t like.”

“...Well...”

My response was so delayed, it probably made me sound sleepy. Honestly, her sister’s feelings for me were more complicated than pure affection. Maybe she only accepted my invitation in order to evaluate whether I was worthy of her big sister. Had I passed the test? Or was I merely a pest? If a little kid told me to *shoo, fly*, it would probably destroy any self-esteem I had.

“I think she’s more perceptive than you give her credit for.”

“Really?” At first she seemed to question it, but then her tone shifted. “Yeah, maybe you’re right. Maybe you see some things I don’t.”

Yeah, I do. Like Shimamura’s rare moments of kindness, and all the other great things about her. But if I had to guess, she probably had no idea about any of it.

Right now, most of my thoughts and feelings had no connection to hers. I could only hope that one day her vision would align with mine.

Through the narrow gap under the ice pack, I could see the fan oscillating.

“And despite how you always act, I’m sure *you* have a mature side, too.”

While her phrasing of the first half invited a lot of questions, I was more interested in the second half of her sentence. A “*mature side*”? *You mean the part where I spend every day agonizing over you?*

“Adachi, do you ever think about what you’re gonna do when you grow up?”

The word *mature* neatly segued into the phrase *grow up*. I figured she wasn’t expecting me to have some wise, worldly insight, so I didn’t bother thinking too hard. “Well, I’ll probably...get a job, I guess?”

It was a pretty dull answer, even for me. I was maybe a little distracted by the thighs.

“Yeah, I know that. I mean, like, what kind of job will you have? What life will you lead? There’s a lot of aspects, you know?”

Her questions flowed one after another, almost like she was asking *herself* more than she was asking me.

Truth be told, while I had a lot of worries about the rest of my life, I rarely ever stopped to think critically about what it was going to be like. I was already struggling with the life I had *right now*—especially the parts that involved Shimamura. Being sandwiched between an ice pack and her legs was all it took to decimate my brain cells.

If there was anything I wished of my adult self, it was to stay with Shimamura, childish though it may have been.

“Feeling any cooler now?”

“...A little,” I answered, only half telling the truth. The top half of my face was practically frozen solid, but the bottom half was still flushed. I didn’t want this moment to end, so I lied to buy some more time.

“Hmmm. Maybe the ice pack isn’t really helping.”

“Huh?”

She pulled the ice pack off my face, slipped out from under my head, and stood up. My skull hit the floor with a *thud*, and I cursed my folly. *Graaah!* As I wallowed in silent regret, she gazed out the window.

“Maybe outside...? Do you think it’d be cooler out there than it is in here?”

She looked at me for my opinion. *Graaah...* I raised my head. “Outside?”

“Yeah, like, the balcony where we hang our laundry?”

Slowly I rose to my feet and walked up next to her to peer outside. I hadn’t realized until that moment, but...what I thought was a window was actually a door to the balcony. It was a very small space, mind you—barely wide enough for two, by the looks of it.

We stepped out onto it and stood side by side. The air outside was...not dramatically different compared to inside. We waited, but no crisp breeze came to relieve us of the heavy heat.

“Not very refreshing, huh?”

“Nope...”

“Wanna go back in?”

I shook my head, then took her hand in mine—not in an aggressive *snatching* sort of way, but more calmly. We were finally alone; my heart thumped in my chest as I laced my fingers with hers. Then, after a pause, she squeezed back. Blood stitched its way through the frozen half of my face, heating it all over again.

We looked out at the scenery—a fragment of a sleepy residential neighborhood. As I trailed my gaze over the faint silhouettes of the houses and the conspicuous red lights on the cell towers, it felt like I was peering into space, or the depths of the ocean. Inky darkness filled every nook and cranny in

this town.

But when I looked up at the clouds trailing leisurely over the starry sky, I found that the night had a sparkle of its own. The windows of the tall buildings, the flashing tower lights, the moon... Like a mirror, it absorbed our glimmer and reflected it faintly back at us. And I drank it all in without ever tiring of it.

High in the sky, I could see beauty in those puffy clouds...and for one brief, shining moment, Shimamura shared the same vision.

As we held hands, we pulled apart ever so slightly—just enough to stretch our wings. And as we stood there beneath the still of night, I wondered what words I could find to describe our connection.

Interlude:
A Visit to Nagafuji's Meats
Part 2

COMPARED TO HINO'S, my room was a glorified storage closet at best. It was only three steps deep, and when you added in the bed and the school supplies and the clothes, there wasn't even enough floor space for a fan. So what could Hino possibly like about it?

"Well, you've got a front-row seat to the fireworks!" she answered as we sat at the open window.

My room was on the third floor, so there were no neighboring rooftops in the way. This was the natural result of living in a tall, narrow building. Smoke rose from the mosquito coil sitting on the window sill, its smell reminiscent of barbecue.

"Summer exclusive, huh?" I murmured as I leaned against her with my full weight.

"Hey!" she growled from under my boobs. This was what always happened whenever I hugged her from behind.

"Too heavy?"

"Excuse me? ...More like too hot, if anything."

"Oh, ho, I see. Then let's ask Mr. Fan to help us out." I switched his power level to medium. But after a few moments, the *fwssssshhh* turned into a *duh-guh-guh-guh*.

"That fan sounds like it's on its last legs. Like my dad when he gets up from a chair."

"Then maybe he needs to warm up first." *Should have given him some more time on low before I switched.* "Oh, how I miss the sweet breeze of air conditioning..."

"Just get it fixed, then."

I felt her head turn under me and realized she was looking at the little white box, yellowed with sun exposure, in the upper-right corner by the ceiling. But that wasn't an air conditioner, for the record. It was a swamp cooler—a bratty little thing that spat out air at a “frosty” 96.8 degrees (or thereabouts).

“They said fixing it would cost more than just buying a new one.”

“Then buy a new one!”

“With what money?”

Besides, if I got it replaced, it would be one less thing I'd have to look forward to whenever I went to Hino's house, and that would be such a shame.

Just then, a firework rose up. More accurately, the light in the distance made the window sill change colors, but that was all the “fireworks” we really needed. What followed was a big, booming explosion.

“Pewww! Boo-boom-boom! Pop pop pop pop pop! Pew, pew!”

“Knock it off!”

Wiggle, wiggle.

“Hey, quit swaying! You're rubbing your boobs on my head!”

She's so demanding, I swear.

“Have some class, for god's sake.”

But I couldn't hear her over the crackle of the fireworks. Bright green lit up all four corners of the window, and the mosquito coil started to smell like gunpowder. *Green...* The longer I looked at it, the more I started to crave kiwi. Or melon.

“Hey, Nagafuji?”

“What is it this time? Keep 'em coming!”

“You seriously have problems with this house?” In contrast with the sky-high fireworks, her voice was low and dark.

“A ton of problems, yeah.”

“Like what?”

“Well, I can’t eat anything from the display case or they’ll hit me.”

“Oh, that. Okay, never mind.”

She hastily changed the subject. *Hm*. Apparently it didn’t matter, then.

Boo-boo-boom! The sky lit up in red, blue, then red again, burning brightly. Then, like a cat scratch, they slowly faded.

“Hey, Nagafuji?”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, YAY!”

“What is *with* you?”

Alas, I was just trying to express what a good mood I was in. Apparently it didn’t get through to her.

“...To me, the fireworks we see through your window are the prettiest of all,” she continued, disregarding me in more ways than one. “Know why?”

Heh heh heh! The answer was all too simple. “All thanks to me, duh.” And I knew it full well. I laughed smugly.

She fell silent for a moment. Then, at last, she muttered: “Your udders are so obnoxious... Seriously, learn some class.”

This time there was no firework explosion to drown out her sass. Her voice was soft and sweet, mingling with the smoke from the mosquito coil.

Now that’s the Hino I know and love.

Chapter 6:

Adachi's Revival **O**NE BY ONE, I pasted in the rest of the stickers.

There wasn't enough room at the end, so they ended up overlapping some of the letters. Then I looked down at my star-spangled to-do list and basked in the feeling of success.

This was the first thing I did when I got home. Somehow I'd managed to check off four items all in a single day. *When life gives you lemons, you make lemonade...right? Then again, does this even count as lemons?*

Thanks to that fight we had, I decided to change. I was prepared to rethink my Shimamura-only mindset and start taking other people into consideration. No, really, I was totally fine with it! Tomorrow, per Shimamura's suggestion, we had made plans to hang out with friends in a group, those friends being Nagafuji and Hino. Apparently I was allowed to choose where we went, and they would happily go along with it.

"...Ugggghhh..."

It felt like they were taking pity on me, and the thought made me want to tear my hair out. *Ugh, who am I kidding? They think I'm a sad loser!*

"...Oh, but..."

I leaned forward and reached out to grab the to-do list. If I was forced to endure this humiliating charade either way, then I figured I may as well pick a location that would lend itself to my objectives. Was it overly ambitious? Yeah, but I liked that about myself. Recently I'd learned a new life lesson: *the squeaky wheel gets the grease*. The only reason I hadn't learned it sooner was because... well...I hadn't really *wanted* anything before now.

I trailed my finger over the paper, contemplating my next challenge. Every item on the list involved doing something with Shimamura, so if other people were going to be around, that would limit my options. It didn't help that I'd crammed too many words onto each line, resulting in a list that was barely legible. Looking at it now, I realized it was proof of just how excited I was at the start of summer break.

Is Shimamura actually enjoying this dumb vacation with me...? No, I shouldn't call it dumb. She was trying her best to be considerate of my feelings. But I had to admit, I wasn't exactly flattered that she was treating me with kiddy gloves when we were the same age. Her kindness felt *lukewarm*, and unlike true warmth, it was not a temperature I could tolerate for long periods of time. It just wasn't comfortable.

That said, forced kindness was still kindness in its own way. The world could be surprisingly nice to me, and I didn't really know how to feel about it. But instead of recoiling in fear, I knew the correct thing to do would be to return that affection. I was tasked with learning human decency: *make friends, love thy neighbor, honor thy father and mother.* Care about people, in other words.

"Yeah..."

That's probably it, I thought to myself as I tucked my knees under my chin. I had turned a blind eye to everything I didn't understand, and now it had come back to bite me. Like a tidal wave, it pulled me under and dragged me out to sea.

I swallowed. Twice. I was so thirsty, even my saliva had dried up. Then I leaned my head against the wall, and when I closed my eyes, I started to hear a faint sound, like the rustling of thread intertwined. But unlike the drone of the cicadas, it wasn't coming from outside. It was coming from within.

3. Shimamura lets me hold her hand and we have a fun time.

Technically I had already achieved the first half, so I put down half of a sticker. But what was I going to do about the second half?

"Having fun" was generally achieved in a big group—according to conventional wisdom, anyway. (Personally, I didn't see it, but I was choosing to go against my better judgment and put my faith in common sense.) With that in mind, going to the pool was off the table. The pool was *relaxing*, not thrilling. *I mean, maybe I got a thrill out of Shimamura's swimsuit, but that's not what this is about. No, really, I swear.*

After a lot of agonizing in that vein, I ended up choosing karaoke. I could

remember going to karaoke with them before, and I couldn't think of anywhere better, so I chose the exact same thing as last time—the way an old person re-buys the same model of car over and over. I had no sense of adventure; I wasn't bold enough to leave the nest.

We had agreed to meet up outside the train station, and for some reason (my natural disposition, I guess?) I had once again arrived ahead of schedule. No one else was here yet. Was I just a loser with a ton of free time on my hands? Well... seeing as I hoarded every minute without ever spending it on social activities, maybe the answer was yes. But now Shimamura was asking me to find something to fill that hole.

The only problem was...I had a sneaking suspicion I might get buried alive.

“Oh...”

As I stood in the shade near the taxi pickup area, I heard a small voice that seemed to be pointed in my direction. I looked over my shoulder and found myself face-to-face with a girl I didn't know—tall, wearing glasses, probably my age. But although I didn't recognize her whatsoever, she gazed at me for so long that I started to think maybe I knew her from somewhere. She stood stock-still for a moment, then turned and hurried off into the train station.

Alone, I tilted my head. Who *was* that? I had only ever spoken to a handful of people in recent years, so the possibilities were severely limited, and yet I couldn't place her. Before I could finish wracking my brain, however, Shimamura arrived—on bike this time, probably because the place was so far from her house.

She was wearing an old-fashioned white cloche hat, but it was *way* too dowdy to be part of her regular wardrobe, so she had to have borrowed it from her mother. Total grandma hat.

“Good morning! Well, I guess it isn't ‘morning’ anymore... Anyway, hi!”

She came to a stop next to me and raised her hand briefly in greeting. Her soft voice and warm smile paired nicely with the thin ribbon wrapped around the brim of her hat, affording her a different aesthetic today.

“Uh...hi.”

I wanted to play it cool and lighthearted, but instead I stumbled over the very first word. At this point, I started to wonder whether every attempt I ever made was destined to end in miserable failure.

“I’m guessing the others aren’t here yet?”

“Nope.”

“Those two are always late, I swear. Not sure if it’s Hino’s fault or Nagafuji’s.”

“Yeah...”

Quietly, I panicked. *What do we do now?* This always happened whenever I was with her—I would try too hard to be perfect, end up needlessly overthinking everything, and act like a total weirdo in the process. You’d think someone as self-aware as me could simply stay calm, but my brain would never let me. To this day, Shimamura could destroy me by simply existing.

What sort of conversation would lead to “having a fun time”? I couldn’t find the words. Instead, what I had were questions: *Do you get annoyed whenever I’m around? Do you hate having to interact with me one-on-one?* I wanted to ask, but couldn’t take the plunge. What would I do if she said yes?

Come to think of it, she already *did* say I was annoying once. That was what motivated me to change in the first place, and now here I was, waiting for something that wasn’t her. Then, at last, that something arrived: Hino and Nagafuji riding double on Hino’s bike. Apparently Nagafuji still didn’t know how to ride one.

If I were that helpless, would Shimamura drive *me* around? I glanced at her face in profile. *No, probably not.* She might help me to an extent, but our relationship would never go as far as Hino and Nagafuji’s. We were missing a key element—affection, or passion, or something like that. I couldn’t describe it in specific; I could only get a glimpse of a rough outline through a blurred lens, like I was gazing into the depths of the ocean.

“Sorry we took so long. It’s mostly Nagafuji’s fault,” said Hino.

“What? It is?” asked the culprit in question.

Hino turned around to look at her. “Yes, dumb!”

“Okay, I guess it is, then,” Nagafuji mused.

It was a...charming little exchange, I guess. It was clear just how fully Nagafuji trusted Hino.

“So I see we’re not in our uniforms today,” Hino continued in lieu of a greeting.

What? Did you really think we’d wear our uniforms over summer vacation?

“We didn’t wear them last time either.”

“We didn’t? No, I feel like we did... Well, no point in harping on about it,” Hino shrugged to herself. Nagafuji nodded along emphatically, which was always a good sign that she had no idea what we were talking about. “Okay, then, let’s get going!”

And so the latecomers led the way to the karaoke place. Karaoke was my suggestion, but seeing as Hino knew this town far better than I did, I had given her final say on where we ended up. And so I followed behind, feeling like an outsider on a guided tour of my own hometown.

Hino’s bike took the lead, followed by Shimamura’s, then mine. Whether consciously or unconsciously, I always ended up on the fringe of any group I tried to join. If interpersonal relationships were a jigsaw puzzle, then I was a piece that didn’t fit anywhere—set aside and forgotten. Would I ever find someone I could truly connect to?

“Shimamura?”

As I trailed behind Shimamura, I called her name. She turned and fixed me with a look that said *what’s up?*

“Would you wanna...maybe...sing a duet again?” I suggested hastily. Because of the spontaneous nature of this outing, I hadn’t memorized any songs in advance, but surely we had at least one in common.

“I don’t mind,” she nodded without missing a beat. She glanced ahead at the road, then back at me. “But what would we sing?”

“Let’s figure it out once we get there.”

I made it sound so simple, but in reality, I had no idea how we were going to

“figure it out” at all. Not like the songbook would magically tell us which tracks we both knew the words to. But in response, Shimamura smiled and turned back to the road.

That was when I noticed just how *relieving* it was to talk to her one-on-one. It was reassuring, yet at the same time, it was stressful, too. I couldn’t help but wonder if she was actually listening to a word I said.

Arriving at the karaoke box behind the train station, we headed into our reserved room. The layout was similar to the other place we went to, except the lights were blindingly bright; I could feel the eye strain setting in already.

This time, I succeeded in sitting next to Shimamura. Not only that, but she sat at the very edge of the sofa, so I was the only one who got to sit next to her. I felt a rush of joy as I set my book bag down.

Then I noticed that the other two had waited for us to get seated before they positioned themselves. Perhaps they had refrained on purpose. I could admit it: they were both a couple of “good eggs,” so to speak, and I was grateful for it.

Then Hino grabbed the mic and started singing without even queueing up a song. “All right, I’m going first! *It’s been—*”

“Stop that,” Nagafuji promptly scolded her.

“Okay,” Hino shrugged.

“*Déjà vu*,” Shimamura murmured absently, and I was inclined to agree.

“Well, then, let’s start singing, I guess! We don’t exactly have a comedy routine prepared,” Hino mused. *Who said anything about a comedy routine?*

“Very well! Then I shall take the lead!” Nagafuji declared, rising to her feet and snatching the mic from Hino.

“Hey! Gimme!” She stood on her tiptoes, trying to take it back, but Nagafuji had already put her song in.

It was a song about *making croquettes* of all things. As Nagafuji danced around the room, Hino joined in partway through while Shimamura and I sat there and watched in silence. When the song was over, Nagafuji addressed her audience.

“Thank you, thank you. That was the theme song for Nagafuji’s Meats.”

“You liar! You guys had freakin’ *cabbage* for dinner last night!”

“For the record, it was *miso cabbage salad*, and it was delicious.”

“Give me that!” Hino swiped the mic from her, then looked at each of us in turn. “Okay, which one of us is going next?”

“Wait, are we taking turns?”

“That’s how this works, buddy!”

At this, my eyes met Shimamura’s. We still hadn’t decided on anything. She set down the menu she was holding and took the mic from Hino.

“Well, what should we sing?” she asked directly into the mic for some reason. Was she asking me or herself?

Meanwhile, I was thinking about something else entirely: Hino and Nagafuji were always together, yet they still managed to be social with other people at the same time. In fact, they could even tolerate someone as utterly antisocial as me. So what did they have that I lacked? If I asked them, would they know the answer?

“What does it mean to make friends with people?”

I didn’t know, and no amount of thinking would help me figure it out, so my only option was to seek advice. The three of them exchanged a glance. Was my question too far out of left field?

Then, amid the awkward tension, Nagafuji spoke up. “Shimamura-chee!”

With both arms outstretched, she ran over to Shimamura, who recoiled in alarm. Then she tackled her.

“Boom!”

Shimamura was knocked backward; Nagafuji staggered over to me, then held up a peace sign.

“And there you have it!”

“Uh...okay...”

“I guarantee it,” she insisted with a firm nod.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Hino facepalming.

“Then again, maybe ‘Shima-chee’ sounds better?”

Nagafuji tilted her head at me; I looked from her to Shimamura and back.

“Maybe,” I replied, averting my gaze. Even I could tell I was acting weird again.

“Might as well take it one step further with ‘Ma-chee’...”

At this, I bristled. *You can’t just call her something random! “Ma-chee” doesn’t fit her at all!* For some reason I felt that the “Shima” part was an essential element of any nickname for Shimamura, though I had no real basis for this. To me, “Shima” was the essence of who she was as a person, and no one could possibly convince me otherwise.

“Uhhh... Basically, what Nagafuji’s trying to say is... Actually, I have no idea. What are you trying to say?”

Hino attempted to play interpreter, but swiftly gave up. Nagafuji cupped her cheek in her hand and tilted her head. “Don’t you see, my dear?”

“If I could see what you see, every day would be a living nightmare,” Hino shot back wryly. Shimamura reacted with a grin, and only then did I laugh along with them—a weak chuckle that tickled my chin as it left my lips. “Meh, I’ve already resigned myself to never understanding you. Anyway, if you guys haven’t decided, then I’ll go next.”

She took the mic back, then started another duet with Nagafuji. But while *that* half of the room was having a great time, it felt like someone had yanked the rug out from under me, and now I was in freefall.

My back itched. With my hands in my lap, naturally, I ended up hunched over. Every time I breathed in this fresh air, it reminded me of how dead I was on the inside. It felt like there was a blockage in my brain, preventing all neural function.

I could feel some sort of whisper ebbing and flowing in my ears, separate from the voices that echoed all the way to the back of my head. Whose voice was this, putting my skin on edge? When I tried to focus all my senses on it, it

felt like I was going crazy.

Am I actually getting worse compared to last year? Why am I always so hopeless? Why am I even here?

The struggle must have shown on my face, because Shimamura wrapped her arms around my head and started stroking my hair. The others were still in the middle of singing, so it was pretty out of the blue, but it barely even registered. I was so detached, it felt like someone else was reacting to it instead of me.

Her fingers gently combed through my hair, and it felt as though I could hear her silently praising me for trying my best.

To be perfectly honest, it was five hours of my life I wished I could get back. My shoulders were stiff, my throat was dry, and my back was sweaty. When was it supposed to start feeling fun and freeing?

“What should we do for dinner? Grab food somewhere?” Hino asked as we walked outside. She and Nagafuji had done most of the singing, and their voices were hoarse.

A group passed us on the street in the opposite direction, having what sounded like the most exciting conversation of their lives. One of them was even clutching their gut as they laughed. Sure enough, fun and games could only take root within large groups... It almost felt like they were intentionally rubbing it in my face.

“Wait, so you don’t want to eat dinner at my place? I already asked my parents to make extra for you,” Nagafuji commented, already positioned on Hino’s bike.

“Oh, did you? Well, in that case, let’s go our separate ways here,” Hino replied, retracting her suggestion, and I was grateful to Nagafuji for her unintentional assistance. “See you guys later! Next semester, maybe? Or maybe we’ll hang out again before then.”

“We’re literally hanging out tomorrow...”

“I meant *them*, not you and me!”

As they pedaled away, I watched them go in silence. It felt like I had just finished my homework—my quota of social activity for the day—and it was precisely this part of me that made me so frustrated with myself.

“That wasn’t much fun for you, was it?”

I looked up. Shimamura was still standing there, gazing at me with a half-smile on her face. She was exactly right, of course, and I had no rebuttal. In the past I managed to come up with a decent counter, but now I couldn’t even find the words to smooth things over. Sure enough, something about me had changed.

But was it really a change for the worse?

“I know this is just how you are, Adachi.”

I could tell she wasn’t just saying it—she actually meant it. She knew as well as I did that I wasn’t cut out for anything but solitude.

“But the thing is, I—”

Just then, a loud ringtone cut her off. Her phone, not mine, of course. My fingers twitched in alarm. She pulled her phone out of her bag and looked at the screen. Her eyes narrowed, and she frowned.

A dark storm cloud settled over my heart. I wanted so badly to snatch the phone out of her hand and see for myself; it was this impulse that kept the blood pumping in my veins, stronger than any survival instinct. It was unclear whether Shimamura could sense my feelings on the subject, but either way, she stowed her phone without answering it.

“I’ll call back later.”

It was hard to say whether she was actually being considerate or just being lazy.

“Anyway, where was I? Oh, right. I want you to—”

“It’s okay,” I cut in sharply, like I was afraid to hear the rest. Then, before her frozen face could recover, I continued: “I’ll be okay. Okay?”

I was so desperate, I was willing to do *anything* to keep her around. And I must have sounded like a whiny baby, because her trepidation was patently obvious. Regardless, she didn’t push further. That just wasn’t the kind of person

she was.

“Okay, then.”

Over and over, I choked back another hollow “okay” with the rest of my spit. She started to say something but gave up. Then she raised her hand and gave it a little wave.

“See you.”

“...Yeah.”

Belatedly, I waved back. *This is for the best.* Acceptance settled in, blurring and fading like an afterimage. Normally I would have followed her all the way home, but that was precisely the sort of thing I was supposed to *stop* doing, so no matter how badly I wanted to keep hashing it out with her, I had to let her go. This was the compulsive idea that kept me rooted to the spot.

Before she disappeared, Shimamura looked over her shoulder. Maybe she could sense that something was off. Our eyes met, and she gave me another wave; I waved back slightly. Then she turned back to the road and pedaled off without another glance. She glided over the sidewalks and intersections in the direction of her house until eventually she was gone.

I didn’t want her to stop, nor could I find the will to chase after her. Everything hurt, particularly my eyes. I let out a heavy, pained sigh. Then I stood there, hands on the handlebars of my bike, alone with my thoughts. Everything else—the laughter, the footsteps—faded into the background as I struggled to find the reason that I was here. I needed something to convince me that I had spent my time wisely.

The drone of the cicadas floated through the air, mingling with the train sounds from the nearby station. But I couldn’t see any trees around here, so where were those little pests hiding?

After a long, long moment spent agonizing fruitlessly, I started rolling my bike in the direction of my house. Though we both threatened to topple over altogether, I put my feet on the pedals, and as I picked up speed, I hallucinated that I was riding the wheels directly. I could hear a weird creaking sound—maybe something was caught in the bike chain. But I had no way of fixing it, so I

kept going, crouching lower and lower as I went.

In the distance, I heard something that sounded like the crackle of fireworks. It was still too bright to see their colors, but there would probably be another festival later tonight. Thus far into summer break, my nights were disturbed with fireworks about once a week. This was our big tourist season, and business was *booming*, literally.

But the sound of fireworks brought something sinister to mind: the sight of Shimamura walking away from me with someone else, exploring the festival with a girl whose name I still had yet to learn. Was she calling her back right this very moment while I was still on my way home? My hands tightened on the handlebars until the muscles in my palms hurt, but I kept it up, punishing myself for getting jealous again.

As the sun sank beneath the horizon, the sunset slid along sideways, pulling the clouds along with it. I knew I needed to watch where I was going, so I looked up, but suddenly I found myself on the verge of tears.

I tried so hard to be friends with all of them, so why was I alone right now?

The next thing I knew, my legs had stopped pedaling. I lowered my feet to the ground, letting the rising heat soak my back. I could feel my mind sharpening. In particular, the back of my neck felt especially hot, almost like it was enveloped in steam. It was reminiscent of the itch I felt whenever I wore a heavy overcoat in winter, and it made me restless. My vision swayed, and the town began to spin around me, until I could stand it no longer.

“No...”

I kicked off, and the gears in my brain began to turn in sync with the bike wheels, faster and faster and faster, ad infinitum, until I could smell the friction start to burn, and once it had filled every last corner of my skull, I yelled: “It just doesn’t MATTER!”

None of it had any connection to me. I thought maybe I could fix my lone-wolf tendencies and live happily ever after in a big group of friends, but...I had a gut feeling...

This is wrong.

At last, the whisper I sensed earlier came through loud and clear. Every fiber of my being was screaming, terrified of imminent annihilation.

“This is wrong! THIS IS ALL WRONG!”

So what if I was out in public? That wasn’t going to stop me. I was a human firework, breaking out and letting loose everything I had held inside. I wasn’t “okay” at all.

“I didn’t WANT THIS!”

The only person I’d wanted to hang out with today was Shimamura. I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that I was happier that way; it was why I always made such an idiot of myself, struggling to nudge things in that general direction. *That* was the optimal course of action for me, not burying myself in the midst of a group. What was I thinking? Even cicadas couldn’t stay underground forever. The only time I wanted to be buried that deep was when I died.

I could’ve had a hundred different friends and they still wouldn’t have added up to one Shimamura. They couldn’t reach the height of her greatness even if they stacked themselves up like *nori* sheets. At last, now I understood: I was by no means obligated to live my life according to someone else’s standards. Shimamura and I were two very different people, but I liked that. It was what drew me to her in the first place.

My legs pumped the pedals so hard, I thought my bones might pop out. The wheels flew over the pavement at lightning speed. At some point I’d risen into a standing position, and now I was racing through town faster than I’d ever biked in my entire life, searching in vain for someone I knew I wouldn’t find.

You’re all I ever think about, so quit thinking about anyone who isn’t me! I... I...!

“I love you, Shimamura! I LOVE YOUUUU!”



It was quite possibly the first time I'd ever said it aloud. The emotions left my lips and brushed against my cheek in the form of fresh air, breathing new joy and panic into my previously muddled mind. The tears that once blurred my view of the sunset now streamed down my face, cooling my cheeks. My head was a total mess both inside and out, but nonetheless, reality came rushing in to fill a thick outline around it all.

Moving at the speed of light, I no longer had time to worry about my surroundings or the people I passed on the street. For once, I was in a world of my own, with a view unlike any other. Everything I had failed to notice on my way here was now sprawled out in front of me: a twilit city punctuated by cicadas and the distant pop of fireworks. But my bicycle cut through it all. I was one lap behind, and now I raced through the hustle and bustle in a desperate struggle to catch up to the flow of time.

I had finally figured out what I truly wanted to do over summer vacation. Among the countless letters of the alphabet that filled the space on my to-do list, the answer stood out to me clearly...

To be continued in the second half of summer.

Interlude:

Yashiro Comes Calling

Part 9

“**H**OLD IT!”

“Chrrrrp!”

As Yachi runs around the hallway like a scared little kitty, I jump and grab her from behind. Wait, “kitty”? Well, I guess she’s a lion right now. She must really like those PJs.

“Give it up, Yachi!”

“Nice try, Little!” Then she pops right out of the lion’s mouth. Wait, what? How?!

She shoots into the air like a bar of soap, leaving me holding her empty PJs.

“Whaaa...?”

How can you bend your shoulders like that, Yachi?! And why are you *naked*?!

“Yachi! You’re not supposed to be naked under there!”

“Why would I wear *more* clothes during the summer?” She tilts her head at me, puzzled. Not even a little embarrassed, either. “Now then, fare thee well!”

“No, no, no!” She starts to run, but I grab her again. By the scruff of the neck, too, just like a real cat.

“In that case, I shall slip right out of *this* skin...”

“AAAAAHHH!” You really shouldn’t do that! All I wanted was to take a bath with you, so why are you fighting me?! “Yachi, do you hate the heat?”

“I have no strong feelings about it. I simply don’t want to melt.”

She grabs her cheeks and stretches them out. They look really squishy and soft... Yep, they’re soft, all right.

“You’re not gonna melt, silly—”

“What are you kids doing out here?”

Nee-chan walks out from the kitchen. She takes one look at naked Yachi and scowls.

“Yachi took her clothes off!” I shout, holding up the limp lion skin. *Wobble wobble.*

“You look like you’re melting, too, Shimamura-san.”

“Well, it’s hot.”

“You could take off your clothes.”

“I could, but I’m not gonna. Now either get in the tub or put your clothes back on. Why is our bathtub so popular, anyway...?” Tilting her head, Nee-chan walks off.

“See? It’s bath time! Now let’s go!” I tug on her hand.

“Very well. You leave me no other choice.”

Reluctantly, Yachi toddles after me. I lead her to the bathroom and start calling the shots like a big sister. “Now sit here, Yachi. I’ll wash your hair,” I explain, pointing.

“My hair does not need to be washed,” she protests as she sits down where I pointed.

I stoop down and spray her hair with the detachable showerhead. After I untie her usual butterfly braid, it all falls down past her hips.

“Blub blub blub...”

“Whoa...!”

Yachi’s hair dyes the water blue. No matter how many times I see it, it always blows my mind. And every time I comb it with my fingers, little blue sparklies fly out. Combined with the steam, it makes the whole bathroom blue. Still holding the shower head, I stop and stare for a while, entranced.

“Amazing...”

“Blub blub blub blub...”

“Why don’t you close your mouth?!”

I pour shampoo onto her wet hair and lather up some suds. She was right—her hair is perfectly glossy, with no dirt or grime. And her skin is so clear, she could give the bathroom tiles a run for their money. But I wash it all anyways.

Her head starts to sway, probably ‘cause she’s bored. Happens all the time.

“Hey, keep your head still!” I put a hand on each side, holding her in place.

“Oh, Little, you’re so demanding.”

“Excuse me?!”

I start lathering her hair super hard. The bubbles turn blue to match. Then I check my hands to see if they’re stained, too, but nope. Still regular hands.

“Your hair is such a mystery.” It’s the prettiest hair in the whole universe.

“It is merely a recreation of an Earthling’s hair.”

“Wh-what?”

“Some of you Earthlings are awfully strange, aren’t you?”

“Not as strange as you!”

Me personally, I’ve never met anybody as weird as Yachi, and something tells me I never will. It’s just not possible.

After we give ourselves a good scrubbing, it’s time to get in the tub. It’s not very big, so taking baths with Nee-chan or her “friend” can get pretty cramped, but when it’s me and Yachi, our legs have plenty of room.

Water drips from our hair—*plip, plip, plip*. I look over at her. Even with her hair down, she’s so *radiant*. I’m kinda scared she’ll turn to light and fade away.

“Yachi, you came here to find your...*compatriot*, right?”

“That is correct.”

“And when you find ‘em, you’re gonna leave?”

Feels like she might disappear at a moment’s notice. She’s like a ghost—no matter how good of friends we are, no matter how much time we spend together, she’ll never belong here. She might start floating away any second

now.

“As soon as I find my compatriot, we will leave this planet and go back to outer space,” Yachi confirms gently.

“...Oh.”

I don't know if she's serious about this “outer space” stuff, but once she leaves, I get the feeling I'll never see her again.

“We probably won't return for another three thousand years.”

“...What?”

Yachi nods gravely. Three thousand years?! Wait, but that's as long as...um... Well, my grandma is like seventy, so...

“Oh, okay, then.” I don't believe every single thing she says, but it's nice to have a reassuring number. Then I notice her looking at me. “What?”

“Mwah!”

She leans forward and kisses the tip of my nose. All at once, everything is blue. My hand freezes underwater, fingers twitching. Then she licks my nose with her tongue, and everything jolts to life again.

“Wh-wh-what was THAT for?!”

The splash of the water matches my feelings to a T. Yachi pulls away and grins. “I have heard it is a symbol of close friendship.”

“Wh-whaaa...? Really?”

Nobody ever told me that. Is this what they do in the big city? Is it a city thing? Maybe not. The room starts to spin. I feel all warm, and not just from the water.

“We *are* close friends, are we not?”

I guess she mistook my panic for something else. She tilts her head at me, and her shining gaze shifts like a spinning globe. I can see the stars in her eyes.

“Of...of course we are!”

It's not the same kind of friendship I have with the kids at school. I don't know

how to explain it, and I can't prove it even exists, but I can feel something between us, pulling me in. Even when we take all our clothes off, it's still there.

"But...why my *nose*?"

"Did I make an error of some kind?"

"Well, normally you do it on the...ch-cheek or something..."

"Ah, I see. In that case, let us try again. Mwah!"

"Mwahhh..."

I wrap my arms around my knees as she plants her lips on my cheek. And in the meantime, all I can see is wet, glossy blue.

Afterword **T**ITLES MY EDITOR came up with: Usotsuki Mii-kun to Kowareta Maa-chan (*A Liar and a Broken Girl*) Denpa Onna to Seishun Otoko (*Ground Control to Psychoelectric Girl*) Adachi to Shimamura (*Adachi and Shimamura*) Tamako-san to Kashiwa-kun (“Tamako and Kashiwa”) Tantei Hanasaki Tarou wa Hiramekanai (“Failed Detective Hanasaki Tarou”) Roppyaku Rokujuu En no Jijou (“Katsudon, 660 Yen”) Tatta Hitotsu no, Negai (“Just One Wish...”) Tsuyokunai Mama New Game (“The Unwinnable Game”) Sabaku no Boy’s Life (“Thirsty Boys in the Desert”) Bishoujo to wa, Kiru Koto to Mitsuketari (“Never Trust a Pretty Girl with a Sword”) Samurai Dead End Titles I came up with: Boku no Shoukibo na Kiseki (“My Small-Scale Miracle”) Baka ga Zenra de Yattekuru (“A Fool’s Naked Sprint”) Bocchiz (“Lonerz”) Tokage no Ou (“Tokage the Lizard King”) Kinou wa Kanojo mo Koi Shiteta (“Yesterday She Loved”) Ashita mo Kanojo wa Koi o Suru (“Tomorrow She’ll Love Again”) Jikan no Otoshimono (“That Which Time Misplaced”) Hitomi no Sagashimono (“That Which the Eyes Seek”) Niji-ro Alien (“The Rainbow Alien”) Fuwafuwa-san ga Furu (“The Fall of Fluffy 773”) Otomodachi Robo Choco (“Choco the Friend-Bot”) Europa no Soko Kara (“Europa’s Orbit”) Kami no Gomibako (“God’s Garbage Can”) Kurokurokurokku (“Sick Sick Six”) Looking back, it’s been about 50-50. Hopefully you like at least one of these.

—Hitoma Iruma



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