

WRITTEN BY
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ILLUSTRATIONS BY **raemz**

CHARACTER DESIGN BY **Non**

11
NOVEL

The illustration depicts a scene from a light novel. A young woman with long, straight brown hair and bangs stands over a young man with short, wavy blue hair. She is wearing a white t-shirt with the text "Abiding Diverge Alien" in a teal, cursive font. She has her hand on the man's head. The man is lying on his back, wearing a white shirt and blue pants, and is holding a pair of orange-rimmed glasses. He has a small yellow hair clip in his hair. The background shows a room with a window, a fan, and some furniture. The overall style is soft and anime-like.

Adachi^{and} Shimamura

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Adachi^{and} Shimamura



Adachi^{and} Shimamura

STORY BY Hitoma Iruma ART BY raemz

NOVEL

11



Maybe *you* think this is boring, but I choose to laugh. When I say I'm going to find the fun, I mean it. And one day, the fun is going to find you, whoever *you* are!!!

Never8

Then, she straightened up to her full height, and when the sunshine lit up her face, I estimated her to be maybe a year older than me.

"Let's find the fun!"

I had said it to myself, not intending to be heard. So when she whipped around to look at me, I flinched in surprise.



Ever15

Several minutes after I left the house, I began to wonder if my parents would yell at me for leaving without telling them, and my stomach clenched. But I didn't have the energy to go all the way back to talk to them, or even to look them in the eye. I was aware that I was mired in the world's most unsubtle rebellious phase, but it kept me bogged down, and I couldn't climb out of the feeling.



Just then, as I looked up, I made immediate eye contact with Adachi, who for some reason, instantly whipped her face away. She wasn't even remotely looking at her textbook or notebook, so where was she looking? I recreated the trajectory in my mind's eye.

I pointed a finger out in front of her, tracing out the direction. That finger arrived at my chest.

Hmm... I see.
"Adachi, were you just checking me out?"

Summer18

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ADACHI TO SHIMAMURA VOL. 11

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Illustrations by raemz

Character Design by Non

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Adachi and Shimamura Production Committee

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Adachi and Shimamura

NOVEL

11

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Seven Seas Entertainment

Chapter 1:

A Bright Star on a Dark Night

FOR VARIOUS REASONS—various, varied, variable reasons—Adachi was trembling, and I was gripping her right leg in my hand, entranced. “Entranced”? Don’t ask. Like a cicada, the vibrations rose from deep within her.

My ears resounded with the *tick, tock* of the clock on the shelf; with perfect clarity, I could see every dust mote in the air. My five senses were heightened... and yet my brain was filled with static.

Now that she was at my house, we were supposed to be planning our trip, and I was having trouble remembering how exactly *that* turned into *this*. Perhaps the all-engulfing summer heat had dehydrated my common sense.

You know, as a joke.

Incidentally, we were playing a little game called “see who can make the other blush the hardest with a kiss.” Naturally, the one who blushed the hardest lost. Kissing in an “unusual” spot scored highly, and we awarded points based on our own judgment. So far, I was the undefeated champion.

My prize: this suffocating heat and not much else.

So there I was, gazing at Adachi’s leg up close and debating where to kiss next. At this point, she was blushing all the way down to the soles of her feet. Then again, I didn’t exactly spend much time looking at other people’s feet, so for all I knew, maybe they were always red. Her toes were as slender as the rest of her; curiously, I gave one a poke, and her entire ankle joint flinched. Only then did it finally occur to me that maybe, *just maybe*, I was being a bully.

“What do you think, Adachi?”

“*Huhwha?* About what?”

Her ears were like the wings of a bright red butterfly—how artistic. An idea struck: I could kiss her ear. But were ears an “unusual” place to kiss? Given that it was left to my own judgment, the rules of this game had fallen apart right out

of the gate.

But as long as the game itself was fun, the rules didn't matter; in fact, if the pointless rules *added* to the fun, then we were better off embracing it. And yes, this game was indeed fun—well, “fun” wasn't the right word. *Addicting*, I guess. When was it that the act of touching Adachi started to hold such deep meaning to me?

The way her eyes had darted around nonstop for the past thirty minutes, I had to wonder if her face ever got tired. The answer, in her case, was no. Maybe she stored up a lot of excess energy whenever I wasn't around.

“Hmmm...”

“Y-y-yes...?”

“Are you looking forward to the trip?” Might as well get back on topic, I figured.

“The trip...?” she replied weakly, like a deflated balloon, reminiscent of when we were in high school. “Y-yeah...I guess.”

She raised her chin like she was fighting not to drown, choking out the best answer she could manage. Evidently, she wasn't getting enough oxygen up there on the second floor. I gazed at her lower lip and the tongue that occasionally peeked out from behind it.

“Me, too. We're gonna go on a journey together! A *journey*. Has a nice ring to it, don't you think?”

“Uh...more importantly, Shimamura...”

“Shimamura speaking,” I answered in my over-the-phone voice.



Everything about this was silly, but I decided to blame it on the season. This was simply the way some summers went. Sure, the heat and the cicadas seemed the same, but each year—even if I kept doing the same things with the same person each time—summer was always something new.

“Never mind...” As we gazed into each other’s eyes, Adachi’s voice sank to rock-bottom, like shaved ice melting and mingling with its syrup.

“It’s okay. I think I know what you were going to say.”

“Really? You could tell?”

“Of course!” *Not*. If I was a mind reader, my life would be pretty dull.

She clapped her hands to those cherry cheeks flooded with love, her eyes wide, as if me knowing was a problem in and of itself. She had mellowed out a lot in adulthood, but in close proximity she let her old self show. It was her most noble trait.

“Noble”? I had the tendency to make things needlessly complicated where “cute” would suffice.

With perfect timing, just as the drone of the cicadas drifted off, a wave of memories rolled in—so hard and fast, it threatened to bowl me over at the knees. Shivering from the chill of my wet feet, I squinted out at the sea in front of me. The distant stars each projected a different memory of summer onto the dark ocean. But I couldn’t swim out to them—the past was too far gone. I could only stand on the shore and look back.

“Sh-Shimamura?”

As I knelt there, unmoving, with her leg still firmly in my grasp, Adachi was growing increasingly perplexed. She probably didn’t have the slightest inkling that I was the *sentimental* to her *sensitive*.

Adachi. Old memories. When I tried to look at both at the same time, my eyes crossed, and all I saw were dozens of fragmented Adachis. So I lifted a hand over her head and prayed that this moment, too, would one day join the sea. “I wish you the best.”

“Um...uhhh...what?”

Neh heh heh heh heh heh!

Adachi and Shimamura, age twenty-two. At last, we were old enough to take our first big steps on a real journey.

Chapter 2:

Never8

BASED ON my mother's reaction—"Wow, they still do that these days?"—maybe it wasn't common for an elementary school to open its pool over the summer. But this was the one and only thing I looked forward to over the break: a fun, refreshing swim in the pool. Plus, all my friends would be there. There was literally no downside to going.

With my swimsuit on under my regular clothes, I grabbed my pool bag and dashed to the front door. The momentum made me bounce like a bunny. "Let's gooooo!"

"Put your shoes on first."

"Oops, I went too fast!"

I doubled back and grabbed my shoes from the bottom of the rack. It wasn't until I'd already put them on that I realized I'd forgotten to wear socks, but oh well! As I fidgeted with my hands, I noticed how warm my shoes already were on the inside.

When my mom came to the front door to see me off, she was carrying my baby sister in her arms. These days she'd grown up into a little chatterbox, which made playing with her lots of fun.

"Be sure to watch out for cars and strangers."

"Yeah, yeah."

"Just try to remember for at least the first five minutes, kid." She squished my cheeks together in one hand. "Sadly, you take after me, which means you're a little on the slow side."

"Hey!" This was a shocking revelation. "I suspected as much!"

"That's my girl."

"So this year, my goal is to be a little on the *smart* side!"

“Good luck with that.”

Now that I had said goodbye to my mom, I turned to my sister. “Little one, your sister must go and become healthy!”

“Gimme a break. You’re plenty healthy as it is,” Mom retorted. This time she stretched my cheeks out, and when my sister saw her doing it, she started copying her. Now my face was a new toy for everyone! Cool! Great! Always good to have lots of fun things around.

“I wonder if Taru-chan will be there...”

“Maybe,” Mom replied, utterly disinterested. My sister and I chuckled in unison.

Unlike me, Taru-chan didn’t always show up at the pool every single day. She said sometimes she had to do stuff at home. *They grow up so fast...*

“Oh yeah, turn around real quick.” Mom grabbed my shoulder and spun me around.

“Are you gonna kill me in my sleep?”

“Keep those eyes open, missy.” She started messing with my hair one-handed while holding my sister, gathering and tying it up, away from my ears. Then she tapped the high ponytail with one finger. “There, all done. Nothing beats a ponytail on a hot day.”

“Hmmm...” I tensed the muscles in my newly exposed ears and made them wiggle.

“You can do that, too, huh?”

“Ho ho ho!”

“You’re like a little mini-me, right down to the most mundane details, huh? All right, run along now.”

“Back later!”

Waving goodbye, I turned and crossed the threshold into the world of light. A wave of heat enveloped me up to my shoulders, like I’d stepped into a river, except without the sound of water. Summer was always so intense right from

the jump. As I walked deeper into the blinding light, it felt as though the sun itself was combing its fingers over me.

On my way to school, I spotted my friends here and there, and we all joined up in a big group that kept growing and growing. With their voices at my back, I cheerfully led the charge along the green school gates, around to the front entrance.

One time I tried climbing that fence, but then a teacher caught me and chewed me out. Later, when I told my mom about it, she shouted, “You big dummy!” and pretended to slap my face. She even clapped her hands together to make the sound effect. The next day, she gleefully informed me that she’d just climbed it herself and “it was easy.” *No fair!*

The bronze statues out front were peeling, exposing the green beneath. I waved to them as I passed, then cut across the breezeway until the athletic field came into view. In one spot, plants curled around iron poles, creating a roofed area; that was where the early-bird kids were sitting and waiting. At first glance it was a cool, shady spot, but caterpillars would frequently rain down on anyone who sat there, so lots of kids avoided it. Taru-chan was one of them.

I handed my pool attendance card to the teacher and got my stamp. Thus far I hadn’t missed a single one. I didn’t know if I’d get a prize for filling it out all the way, but it felt good to look at my card and see a stamp in every square.

Pool times were separated by grade; today, I was here early in the morning. As I was playing tic-tac-toe in the sand with my friends, however, it came time for warm-ups—something we always had to do before the pool opened. These warm-ups were the same radio calisthenics the grown-ups did in the morning at the park. Some kids did them right, while others didn’t try at all.

Personally, I was a do-it-right kid. Shocker, I know! I just didn’t want to turn something fun into something boring. It was hard to turn boring into fun, so if something was fun from the start, I wanted to keep it that way. When I explained this to my mom, though, she said, “Hard for *you*, maybe.” *No fair!*

As I was warming up, I spotted Taru-chan in the back row and got excited. *She’s here today!* I had lots of friends, but she was my bestest friend: Tarumi, aka Taru-chan. *Wait, what’s her given name again...?* To be fair, we never called

each other by our given names. Maybe that's why I forgot hers.

After warm-ups, my face and back were drenched in sweat like I'd walked through the rain. I exhaled, trilling my lips, and half-expected steam to come gushing out. But when the pool gates opened, instead of rushing inside with everyone else, I went in the opposite direction.

"Yo!"

"Oh, hi, Shima-chan."

I met up with my bestie at the back of the line. Today she was wearing a yellow T-shirt with blue pants—why did it look so familiar? Absently, I looked her up and down for a moment, then realized: *Nobita-kun from Doraemon!* Now I wanted to see what she looked like with glasses. But the more I squinted at her, the more she started to fidget for some reason.

The two of us arrived at the changing room fashionably late. It was dimly lit, painted in dull stone colors, and reeking of condensed pool-smell. And since it was packed full of kids, it was humid, too. *Supah hot!* I didn't know what it would feel like to be a sardine, but I suspected it was something like this.

"Your hair looks cute today, Shima-chan."

"Does it? Hee hee hee. It does, huh?" I swayed my ponytail back and forth—so hard, I made myself dizzy. "My mom did it for me."

"That's cool."

It felt like a shame to have to undo it, but I couldn't wear a ponytail into the pool, so off came the hair tie.

"Now you're regular Shima-chan again," Taru-chan grinned when she saw me with my hair back down as she was stripping off her shirt. We always made sure our lockers were next to each other.

"I may *look* regular, but today I'm a different flavor!"

"Oh yeah? What flavor?"

"Ummm...jungle flavor!"

I watched the question marks sprout up over her head, then started

undressing, bumping elbows here and there. The changing room was so cramped, you could expect to smack shoulders with whoever was around you. But I'd shown up with my swimsuit on under my street clothes, which saved me most of the hassle.

Walking over the duckboards at the exit, I left the sweltering changing room and waited outside for Taru-chan to catch up. Meanwhile, the concrete was already starting to scorch my feet, so I hopped over into a puddle of cold water flowing out from the shower area. I stomped my feet again and again, enjoying the fun splish-splashing sound.

The sun hung above like a tribute to the sky, and as I gazed up at it, oddly enough, I could feel my spirit rising. Beneath the pain of the sunshine plastered all over my skin, my heart was racing. I nodded hard to myself and something warm flowed from my throat to the depths of my stomach—a gentle warmth, accepting of summer, yet unaffected.

Once Taru-chan came out, we took a shower next to each other, sterilized our feet, and went up the stairs, chasing after the wet footsteps to the poolside. The other kids were already lined up, so we joined the end of the queue.

The shallow end was on the left, and the deep end was on the right. Only the older kids were allowed in the deep end. One time I snuck over to the borderline and stretched a foot into the deep end but couldn't feel the floor. Pretty cool, right? I'd have to get taller before I could swim there. Taru-chan was already getting tall as it was, and secretly, I wanted to catch up to her.

Around the time the sweat on my back had dried into flakes, the teacher began directing the line of kids to enter the pool. First, we would be assigned a lane to practice specific strokes, but we were only supposed to swim in a straight line from one end to the other, so there wasn't much of a game to it. Nevertheless, when my turn came, I sank into the pool up to my shoulders.

“Aaeegh...”

A weird hiss slipped from my mouth. Instantly, I was relieved from the heat and gravity, as if the water was connected to a different world altogether. My limbs swayed like the tentacles of a jellyfish, and I was tempted to just float there—but then the kid next to me started swimming, so I followed suit before

the teacher could yell at me. I made an effort to swim correctly, thrusting my fist out here and there.

At the start, everyone was on their best behavior, but the best part of the day was at the end: the rec swim period. Like pancake batter on a hot griddle, everyone moved to the center and started splashing each other. Not to be outdone, I jumped into the pool ahead of Taru-chan and started swimming hard.

When I found what I decided was the “perfect” spot, I came to a stop, letting my legs dangle as I floated to the surface. *Bring it on! Hyah!* Then I trounced the predictable attacks from every angle. (Or at least, I tried!) Bubbling wildly at the mouth, I swam all around, running so low on oxygen that my extremities went numb, then hastily popped back to the surface. Water streamed down my face, tickling me, and as I was wiping it away, Taru-chan caught up.

“Hi—*yah!*” She prodded me in the back, and after we exchanged some sick karate chops, she paused to tilt her head. “How come you suddenly started drowning?”

“I was pretending I got attacked by a piranha.”

“What’s a piranha?”

“Real scary fish,” I replied, eager to recount the facts I had just learned from watching TV yesterday. Those teeth were serious business. “Its face looks like a monster.”

“A piranha... I can’t pretend to be one if I’ve never seen one before!”

“Like this!” I curled my index fingers at my lips, using my nails as “fangs” which I then sank into her arm.

“Hmmm...” She didn’t look convinced. “Like a crocodile?”

“No, a *piranha!*” I chomped up her whole right arm. *Yum yum yum.*

“Where do they live?”

“In the jungle.” I couldn’t remember the name of the place, but it was definitely deep in a forest somewhere.

“You’re going to the jungle?”

“Maybe.”

It was impossible to predict what I’d be doing a year from now—but I had the power to decide for myself. At least, that’s what my mom told me. No clue what it meant, though!

“Battling a piranha in the jungle seems a lot more likely than meeting an alien, don’tcha think, Taru-chan?” I’d heard there was no oxygen in space, so it was probably like being underwater. Could be fun.

“Yeah...I think you’re right!”

“Of *course* I’m right. Thus, I battle with piranhas every day!”

“Wow, you already started fighting them...” Clearly, she was amazed by what a trailblazer I was. Then she seemed to have an epiphany, because her face lit up. “If we go to the jungle together, I guess I’ll let you handle the piranhas then.”

“Darn tootin’! It’s Shima time!” And then I’d catch them and eat them like a native. *Wait, I’d better look up how to cook piranhas.* “You handle the crocodiles, okay?”

“H-huh?!”

“I’m counting on you!” After all, there was no way I could beat one.

“Me, fighting a crocodile...?”

“Gator battle!”

“*Alligators* are a different species, dummy.”

“...Gator...”

Now I wanted to sink up to my eyeballs like the reptile in question. Bubbling at the mouth, I tried to remember the nickname for crocodiles. “*Diles*”...? I skulked around in the water for a while to get into character, then swam back to Taru-chan.

“Welcome back, Shima-chan.”

“My face is cold now.”

With that, I had regained the courage to stand tall once more. She beamed

brightly, eyes twinkling at the sight of my recovery. “I sure hope we can go to the jungle together.”

“What? You really want to?”

In the jungle, there were as many dangers as there were trees. Perhaps Taru-chan was more of an Indiana Jones type than I gave her credit for. Maybe she liked to explore.

She recoiled slightly, glancing around the pool, as if fearful of a piranha she couldn’t see. The other kids were wearing smiles as sweet as candy, splashing in the water and rocking with the waves.

“I’d go if it was with you.”

I heard the sound of someone kicking up the water, and a beat later, felt the wind rush past.

Taru-chan was—and would always be—my best friend. I couldn’t imagine going *anywhere* without her there by my side. Maybe I couldn’t predict what I’d be doing a year from now, but I at least had a vision of it. I felt the same way she did: *I’d go if it was with you*. And so I shouted it like a war cry: “GATOR!!!”

“I told you, that’s not the same thing!”

With the momentum pushing me forward, I must have gobbled her arm four or five times.

“That’s weird.”

“What is?”

As we were getting dressed in the corner of the changing room after pool time had ended for the day, Taru-chan suddenly started sniffing loudly in my direction. “We were both in the same pool, but you’re the only one of us who smells like chlorine.”

“What’s chlorine?”

“The stuff they put in the pool water.”

“So *that’s* the secret ingredient...” I was wondering why it tasted funny!

After I towed my hair off, I gazed down at my hair tie. My mom was the one who put my hair up for me when I left the house, so what was I going to do now?

“Hmmm...”

I spun it around on my index finger as I waffled. Then I decided: I’d give it a try myself. So I gathered up my wet hair like I was wringing it out, then attempted to get the tie around it. I could probably manage a low ponytail, but for some reason, putting it up high like before seemed *impossible*! Frustrated with my failure, I tugged hard on my hair and heard a scream of pain—from my own mouth, of course.

“Want me to do it for you, Shima-chan?” Taru-chan volunteered. Apparently, she had been watching me while she was changing.

“You can?”

“Of course I can.”

“Then it’s Taru time!”

“What does that even mean...?”

I handed her the hair tie and turned around. “Don’t kill me in my sleep, okay?”

“You can sleep standing up?”

“I think I could if I tried hard enough.”

Especially after all that swimming. As I stood there, I watched a snot bubble of drowsiness inflate and pop, over and over. Meanwhile, Taru-chan finished tying up my hair. I walked to the far wall of the changing room to see if it would hold, then turned back to her and wiggled my newly exposed ears.

“My head feels a lot lighter! Cool!”

“Yeah, um...you look cute, Shima-chan.”

“Nyeh heh heh heh!” The praise threatened to send my cheeks into orbit. It was like each word was a cicada’s wing beating against my face.

“Wait, it’s lopsided. Let me redo it.”

“No, no! I like it just the way you did it!” Dodging away from her reaching hands, I shrieked and started running, and for some reason, she laughed at me. “Hey, what are you laughing at?!”

“Well, you run weird!”

“Say that again, punk?!”

I looked down at myself with my arms stretched out in front of me. Was it really that weird? *Whatever*. I flipped my palms up in a shrug.

“Taru-chan...it’s the thought that counts, you know.” I could hear the pool water splashing outside. “And I bet you put a lot of thought right here.”

I grasped the end of my wet ponytail, soaked through like a calligraphy brush dipped in ink. When I gave it a squeeze, water rose up to meet me. *Her thoughts sure are cold*.

As she stood there, halfway between swimsuit and street clothes, staring at the floor and wringing her hands, she began to nod to herself. “A lot...yeah! A lot of thought!”

“Then that is what matters most, my dear. Ho ho ho!”

Case closed. She nodded along eagerly. And when she finished getting dressed, we left the changing room together.

My body was swaying like I was still in the pool. Once I got home, I’d eat lunch, and then I’d sit around feeling fuzzy—both mentally and physically. It wasn’t exactly a *fun* feeling, but if I had to describe how happiness felt, it was the closest.

“Hey, can I come over to your house later?” Taru-chan asked, peering at my face as she swung her pool bag in front of her feet like she was kicking it.

“Why not just come over now? Yeah, that’s the kind of suggestion a smart person would make!”

“But I haven’t had lunch yet...”

“Oh, right. Okay, let’s eat lunch first and then you can come over.” I was kind of hoping to take a nap after lunch, but... *Oh, I know! We can take a nap together!* Another step closer to the smart side.

“Do you think your sister still remembers me?”

“Not sure. She doesn’t even remember *me* half the time.”

“Wow. How could anybody possibly forget you?” After a pause, she added quickly, “In more ways than one.”

To me, anybody who could identify all those different ways was *definitely* on the smart side.

“Well, see you again soon, Shima-chan!”

“See ya!”

When the street branched away from the deep irrigation ditch, Taru-chan and I parted ways. Then I saw her start running, and I was tempted to do the same, but then I remembered how mad my mom got last time, so I decided to just speed-walk.

The insides of my shoes were damp, like I was leaking Shima-chan juice from the soles of my feet. With every step, it was my eyelids that grew heavier, not my legs. Evidently, I’d really tuckered myself out at the pool today. But I couldn’t help it—it was just so much fun!

Still, I couldn’t let myself fall asleep if Taru-chan was coming over. I tried to force my eyes wide open, but it made my face hurt and feel like it was about to explode. The pain seemed to help fight the drowsiness, at least. I opened my mouth wide toward the sky and took a bite of something invisible, crushing it between my molars. Then it began to swell up from deep within me.

Soon we would all go to my grandpa’s house. I’d get to see Gon, plus the neighbor girl too. Summer break was full of nonstop fun.

“If only it lasted forever...”

At the start of vacation, it always felt like it’d never end—and then the next thing I knew, I’d realize I was running out of time. The days all blurred together, but time was marching forward—and so was I.

I had made it to elementary school, and in a few more steps, I would be in junior high. Then, eventually, high school after that. That was probably a good thing. So why didn’t I want summer break to end? Clearly, I was in a rather

philosophical mood.

If it has to end, then please give me just one more day, I wished to myself, like any other grade-schooler, as I walked beneath the summer sun. With paddy fields on my left and persimmon fields on my right, the smell of dry earth intensified. But just then, I spotted another girl walking my way up ahead.

Her skin was so pale, she looked like she'd melt into the sky behind her. At first glance she looked taller than me, but she was slouching. Her dark hair glinted blue in the sun, and as she trudged past, I could see narrow eyes and lips pursed in misery. Unlike me, she didn't smell of chlorine—on the contrary, she looked like she'd never been to a pool in her life. A girl like her probably never wished for summer break to last longer.

I suppose it was the novelty, then, that drew me in.

“Let's find the fun!”

I had said it to myself, not intending to be heard. So when she whirled around, I flinched in surprise. She looked at me in alarm, the same way anyone would react to a stranger suddenly talking to them. Then she straightened up to her full height, and when the sunshine lit up her face, I estimated her to be maybe a year older than me.

I waved hello, and when she turned back and rushed off down the street, I waved goodbye while I was at it.

“Good.”

Maybe you think this is boring, but I choose to laugh. When I say I'm going to find the fun, I mean it. And one day, the fun is going to find you, whoever you are!!!

Ha ha ha ha ha!!!

Chapter 3:

Little Ancestor

WHENEVER I HEARD the cicadas cry, I would catch myself gazing into the distance, just feeling their presence. Times like these, I stepped away from the current moment and allowed myself a little freedom.

Eh, whatever. I put my shoes on, straightened up, and waited a good five seconds or so. Nothing but the drone of the cicadas.

“Hmm. Welp, guess I should run to the store,” I announced to the door in front of me. Just like that, footsteps erupted from halfway down the hall, as if she teleported.

“I shall accompany you, Mama-san!”

“Ooh, you’re a dolphin today.”

I turned to find an alien dressed as a dolphin barreling straight toward me. She leapt at an inhuman angle, arcing over my head and landing gracefully right in front of the door. That was all well and good, but...

“Put your shoes on first.”

“Ah, it seems I went too fast.”

The dolphin walked back over and stuffed her feet into the rubber flip-flops I’d bought for her. Her toenails were sky-blue and sparkling faintly, shaped so smoothly that you might think waves flowed from her digits. I hauled her up and put her on my back, then felt her climb up to my shoulders. This, I learned recently, was a *much* easier way of traveling with her than letting her run around off-leash. She weighed next to nothing, and for that matter, she could even float in midair. Really, she only sat on my shoulders as a formality.

“Hold on tight, okay?”

“Okaaaaay!”



I'd heard of a boy on a dolphin, but a dolphin on a woman? Now *that* was rare. And so I left the house feeling like a VIP.

Outside, the climbing sun had tugged the temperature up with it, and the brisk morning had evaporated. Idly, I pointed my index finger into the air like an antenna picking up cicada chirps. As they hummed in unison, the vibration shook my memories loose—as though someone had opened the cardboard box where I'd haphazardly dumped all those summers past. When I returned to the present, I caught a glimpse of fins wiggling on either side of my head.

"You know, I haven't seen a dolphin since that field trip to the aquarium in grade school." And I don't mean my daughters' field trip—I'm talking about my own. *Maybe we should go back there one of these days as a family...*

"The aquarium, you say?"

"Ever been?"

"No, but I saw it once when I was watching television with Papa-san."

"Oh really..." Idly, I decided that if the opportunity arose, I'd bring this kid with us.

Out on the street, the passersby all did double takes at us, which was kind of funny. A dolphin, on land, with a little girl's face in its mouth. Peak entertainment.

"All right, dolphin, tell me about something," I demanded out of sheer boredom as we were caught up at a red light.

There was a lot about our little freeloader that piqued my interest—I could learn thirty new facts about space simply by walking to the store and back! I tried bragging to my husband about it, but all he said was "That's great, hon." The *hon* really pissed me off.

"How about you finish telling me about that one thing from the other day?"

"What 'one thing'?"

"I dunno. I forgot." I snickered in spite of myself. "Tell you what. You can pick the topic and we'll just *pretend* it's the thing from the other day."

“In that case, let’s see... Why don’t I tell you about the time Little fed me fish food?”

“Hey, that’s not about space!”

But it did seem like a funny story, so I walked along listening until we finally arrived at our favorite old supermarket. It was a bit chilly inside, but the seafood smell helped me wake up. A jolt of excitement shot across my skin like static, melting my feet and shoes together into something lighter.

“Mama-san, the candy section is that way!”

“I’m afraid we’re not going there today, my dear.”

“We’re not? Hmmm...” The dolphin murmured to herself as we walked around the produce department. Then she quietly extended a fin. “The bakery section is that way.”

“Sounds like my little GPS is glitched.”

On second thought, it might be fun to have a GPS that only gave directions to where *it* wanted to go. Sort of like a second me.

“No, wait...I had one of those once...”

A little gremlin who used to try to drag me by the leg to the candy aisle. *Right this way, Mom!* Then I’d grab her by the scruff of the neck and carry her over there while she shrieked in delight. Was it the act of grocery shopping with a kid that had put me in the mood to wax nostalgic? Even my youngest never came with me anymore...

Now I get it. I prodded the dolphin’s little fin.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Nothing.”

As we passed by the butcher section, I made eye contact with the old granny who worked there. She was so short, you had to peer over the display case to see more than the top of her little hat.

“Sup!” I waved, preempting her with a surfer’s greeting.

“Well now!” Her eyes widened at the sight of the dolphin on my shoulders.

“Isn’t it too hot for that?”

“Nah, she keeps me cool in the summer.” Hers was a gentle chill, nothing like winter’s freezing bite. Similar to a blancmange, maybe.

“Hello, ma’am!” the dolphin greeted her. They were already acquainted enough to make small talk.

“You two are glued at the hip, aren’t you?” the old woman mused.

“Mama-san is a good friend.”

“Friend? But she’s your mama.”

“Nothing wrong with being both,” I shrugged.

Being a mom didn’t entitle me to anyone’s unconditional love. It was up to each person to figure out what they wanted from a relationship with their mother, then pave the road to it. So if a daughter of mine wanted to be friends, I’d respect that. Hell, even if she wanted to date me, I’d at least hear her out.

As we moved away from the butcher section, the dolphin started peering down at my face. Another novel aspect of this dynamic: having a blue glow orbiting my head. “Is it really so strange to be friends with you?”

“Nah, not at all.” A grin stretched across my face.

“Hee hee hee! We are inseparable!” she announced as she played the drums on my head with those little fins.

“Yeah, I’d say we’re good buddies, more or less.”

“That sounds just like what Shimamura-san would say.”

“...Heh heh heh!” *Yeah, well, I’m something of a Shimamura-san myself.*

After we made it through checkout, we headed for the narrow space along the exterior of the store. There, I set my basket down on the table and started packing the groceries into shopping bags—but with my head tilted down, the dolphin’s tail fin kept swinging and smacking me in the face.

“Hop down for a sec.”

“Okaaaaay!”

I felt her slide down my back to the ground. *Can you believe it? A dolphin with legs!* She kept staring up at me relentlessly, so I grabbed the daikon radish and held it up.

“Yaaaaay!” For some reason, she raised her fins in celebration.

Then I lowered it.

“Ewww.” For some reason, she recoiled.

It was obvious she was just reacting at random, but I liked it. Being predictable was for squares. After humoring her for a while, I finished bagging the groceries. “All right, let’s go home.”

“Yaaaaay!” She leapt onto my back with the same jubilation she showed the radish.

“That reminds me—don’t your parents ever worry about you?”

“I beg your pardon?” the dolphin asked as she slid her legs back over my shoulders.

“You spend every day at our house. Don’t they ever want to spend time with you?” As a parent myself, I couldn’t help but wonder.

“My mama and papa, you mean? Mmmmm...hard to say.”

“What do you mean?”

“Either seems equally likely.”

“Oh. So they’re flexible.” Frankly, the whole situation sounded complicated. I kinda wanted to meet them.

And so I strolled home with the dolphin on my shoulders, receiving friendly waves and horrified stares in equal measure. The little cryptid seemed to absorb all the heat from around my face, eliminating the feeling of walking through dog breath. Convenient!

Along the way, I stopped at the railroad crossing, even though there were no trains coming. Then, once I checked the chalkboard out front to make sure they were open...

“How about I take you to this hoity-toity cafe for a change?”

“Hoity-toity?!”

She struck a victory pose, and I smiled. Her thought patterns and body language were identical to my daughter when she was little.

“There’s a banner that says they have shaved ice,” the alien observed aloud.

“Fancy-schmancy, am I right?”

“Ooooh,” she murmured, as if impressed by Earthling culture.

Welp. Another day of pretending to be classy.

It was a small, old-fashioned cafe with only two tables plus counter seating. The interior was predominantly brown in color—whether due to the wood furnishings or the passage of time, it wasn’t clear. The overall vibe could be described as “cave with stuff in it,” but for a summer day, maybe that was actually perfect.

“Welcome!” I called out before the owner could, just for the hell of it. The old man looked up sharply from behind the counter, his irritation palpable. Just as I’d hoped, his sour grimace indicated he was *not* happy to see me. “Guess what? I’m a customer today! Isn’t that awesome?”

“Do you have no perception of how loud your voice is?”

“Nope, none at all!”

“Then I envy you. Secondly...” His gaze shifted to the dolphin, where it lingered.

“Hello, sir!”

“...Hello there. Never thought I’d live long enough to talk to a dolphin.” He seemed amused—and easily bought. “I always knew you were an oddball, but to think you had a fish for a daughter...”

“Well, my husband’s actually eighty percent merman, so yeah.”

“It all makes sense.”

If you say so, pal. Dolphins aren’t fish, though.

“My name is Chikama Yashiro!”

“Oh, so *that’s* what your name is.” I never knew that! Well, someone probably told me at some point, but I forgot. After all, I never needed to use it.

Generally, I could remember faces easily enough, but names just wouldn’t stick. For example, I only had a vague recollection of Adachi-chan’s mom’s name. *Was it...Ou...ka? Ouka? Yeah, Ouka. A real sophisticated sort of name.*

“You didn’t know? What kind of mother are you?”

“I’m a work in progress. Go on, kid, order whatever you like,” I told the dolphin. *What do dolphins drink, anyway? Sea water, I guess?*

“If this is a hoity-toity cafe, then I should like to have a frappuccino!”

“Ooh, you really know your stuff.”

“Heh heh heh... Papa-san tried to order it through the television last night.”

“Well, they don’t have those here.”

“W h a t ? !”

“Look at the menu. No *frap*, no *puccino*.”

On second thought, there probably *was* a *puccino* lurking somewhere on there. *Frap* sounded more like something you could order at Doutor.

“You’re one to talk, given you’ve never had a *frap* or a *puccino* in your life,” the old man snarked.

“Say that again? I’ll have you know I drink coffee with teenagers every day.” That much was technically true. Never mind about the frappu—*whatever*. “Hey, how about you get the shaved ice? It seems like something you’d like.”

Pretty sure I’d never tried to make it for the kids at home. Plus, I wanted to see if this place actually served it, or if the sign was just for decoration.

“Is it hoity-toity?”

“The hoitiest-toitiest, broski.”

“In that case, I shall have the shaved ice.”

“One shaved ice, coming right up!”

Oh my god, they actually have it. I was mildly impressed. “Make me a katsu

curry!”

“Abracadabra, you are now a katsu curry. I assume you’ll settle for an iced coffee.”

“Ideally, I wanted *something* katsu-related...”

He shooed me off to take a seat, and as he lowered his hand, he briefly pinched the dolphin’s tail. Evidently, he was curious about it.

As for the dolphin herself, she leapt over my shoulder and landed perfectly in a chair. She could probably get a job as a street performer with no training needed...or a job at the aquarium...but they only hired dolphins there, and she’d probably be a giraffe or a tiger by tomorrow...and the aquarium at our house was only big enough for little fish... *Meh*. This plan was riddled with setbacks, so I promptly tossed it out.

“Look at me, relaxing at a hoity-toity cafe. Clearly, I have acclimated to this planet. Keh heh heh!” She folded her fins smugly across her chest.

Come to think of it, what brought her here to Earth in the first place? Sightseeing? I gazed across the table at her as I carefully set my grocery bags next to my chair.

Even in broad daylight, I could see the bounds of space in her eyes. Unnamed galaxies swirled in a vortex while countless undiscovered stars twinkled and faded. The light danced and merged to form complex patterns within the confines of her irises. All of it ultimately drained into the pupils at the center. And from that inky darkness, a new light—a new galaxy—was born.

For this metamorphosis, there was no end, only limitless beginnings. It was cosmic, and eldritch, and, uh...*dolphin*.

“What a fishy creature, indeed.”

“Ho ho ho! Not as fishy as you, Mama-san.”

“Excuse you?!”

Was she trying to insinuate that an ordinary suburban mom was somehow *more* suspicious than a dolphin sitting primly in a fancy-schmancy cafe? If I asked my husband, though, he’d probably agree with her. A while back he

called me *avant-garde*, and I hadn't taken even one fencing class! *Get on my level.*

"Anyway, circling back to the topic of your parents. Do you not know who they are?"

"Well, I thought about it, but...I don't think there exists anyone I could reasonably call my mother or father."

"What?"

Now they didn't even *exist*? I needed answers, and since we had to wait for the shaved ice either way, the little dolphin decided to regale me with her story.

"In the not-too-distant past, we were all one singular entity; when the world took shape, we just sort of...came into being. But for some reason—perhaps out of necessity, perhaps not—we divided into twenty-eight individuals. In the beginning, only the primary vessel possessed free will, but it evolved in the rest of us over time, or so I was told. I was a late bloomer, so I don't have all the details myself. But around the time all twenty-eight of us had developed our own consciousness, we realized we didn't know how we were meant to merge back together."

"*Hah! Dumbass!*" Like taking a broken clock apart without making sure you know how to put it back!

"Thus we gave up on the prospect and began to wander the universe."

"So there's a whole flock of you out there? I might go blind from all the sparkling."

"Some float through space, some are in stasis, some run around with a spear... They all live as they see fit."

"And one eats free shaved ice."

"Ho ho ho!" The dolphin downed her entire glass of water, then rattled the ice around the glass for fun.

"If you've been around since the birth of the universe, then you've had a pretty long life, huh?" *At least, I assume so.*

"It's only been approximately six hundred years since I developed a

consciousness of my own, but I expect to be operational for around eight hundred million. After that, I will enter a dormant period.”

“A *what* now?”

“For approximately twenty thousand years, I will cease all function and regenerate my microparticles. Then I will resume activity as before.”

“Wow.” She was tossing out the kind of numbers I wished I could see on my bank statements. “Will you operate for another eight hundred million years after that?”

“I am supposed to, yes.”

“So you’re saying you’re immortal.”

“*Immortal...?*”

“In other words, you won’t grow old or die, right?” I was pretty jealous, more so of the former than the latter.

“Yes, I suppose one might say that,” she nodded offhandedly.

This little creature was more impressive than I would have guessed by looking at her. To think Hougetsu randomly brought her in off the street...not to mention the oddball Adachi-chan. Perhaps my daughter was simply a weirdo magnet.

“Is it strange to be immortal?”

This little alien seemed awfully concerned about other people’s opinions. If she wanted to live in the shadows as much as she claimed, then why the animal onesies? Did she just want to get a reaction? “I mean, it’s inhuman, I’ll say that much.”

“Hee hee hee! Am I not also human?” she asked, as if to challenge me to a battle of wits. So I looked her up and down, and...well...

“No, you’re a dolphin.” *And yesterday you were a jellyfish.*

She looked around the room, wiggling her fins, then smiled brightly. “Touché.”

“I should really take up fencing, huh?”

Apparently, she *did* want a reaction. Kind of a long wind-up for this punchline, but I digress. Anyway, if she didn't have a mom or dad, then I was happy being her Mama-san for the foreseeable future.

As we continued our casual conversation, the shaved ice arrived along with my iced coffee. This heartless geezer was liable to bring me a hot coffee regardless of my order, so I was surprised to find that it was actually cold this time. As for the shaved ice, it was served in a clear, chilled bowl—no fruit or ice cream on top. Then he set down three bottles of syrup: red, blue, and green. “You can add whatever syrup you wish.”

“Yaaaaaay!”

“Hey, how come *she* gets the VIP treatment?!” And from the same guy who refused to bring milk or sugar for me!

He glanced at the dolphin's head and replied blankly, “Because I like dolphins.”

“What about me?!”

“At my age, I'm afraid I can't stomach katsu curry.”

“Sucks for you, then.” I had half a mind to put the syrup in my coffee instead.

After a moment of hesitation, the dolphin grabbed a bottle and flooded the mountain of ice, staining it bright blue—almost like a metaphor for her presence here on Earth. “By your leave, I shall now partake.”

“Knock yourself out.”

“Would you like...some sort of...repayment?” she asked, haltingly.

“*Repayment?*” I repeated.

“If you have any requests, let me know. Believe it or not, I am quite capable.”

“Not when it comes to chores.” Be it dishes or mopping, she always seemed to find a way to bungle things.

“Anything you desire, I can make it happen,” she insisted.

“Riiight,” I replied skeptically. “Look, I dream about world domination as much as the next girl, but...is that really something you're supposed to have

someone else achieve *for* you? Like, you wanna give me nine trillion yen, that's one thing... I mean, I wouldn't say no to nine trillion yen, obviously! But world domination is hard to pass up..."

"Uhhh..."

Her mouth hung open in visible confusion. To be fair, the difference was proving tricky to put into words. Maybe it all came down to the process versus the conclusion... *Gah, I'm too old for this.* "My point is, one of these days I'm going to rule the world!"

"Ooooooh!"

"You'd better still pay for your food when you're in charge," said the peanut gallery.

"Ugh, you're no fun." *On second thought, never mind.*

Future aspirations were a lot more feasible if you were a kid with years ahead of you, but in my opinion, grown-ups needed a little dream of their own, too. As for the other option, nine trillion yen—asking an alien for money was a mistake in the making. If I had her duplicate the bills I had on hand, I'd end up arrested for counterfeiting, and they'd call me next year's Miss Eurega.

"Oh, I know. How about you gimme a bite of your shaved ice?" Like dolphins, it was something I hadn't experienced in many years, but perhaps it was time to rectify that. "That's all the 'repayment' I'd ever need from you."

For that matter, she was eating it on my dime, so frankly, she had no right to decline.

She paused for a moment, grinned, then snatched up a spoon in her bright blue fin and steered a heaping bite of matching blue ice in my direction. "I daresay I enjoy that aspect of you, Mama-san."

"Oh yeah? Well, I daresay *all* my aspects are great!"

Neh heh heh heh heh!

Chapter 4:

Ever15

THE BOUNCE of a basketball was a perfect match for my uncontained impatience. I liked the way its heavy *thud, thud* seemed to reverberate in my heart.

Evidently, the cicadas weren't used to waking up early, because there weren't many chirping at dawn. I walked across town with what felt like a curtain of faded heat affixed over my eyes. Only the bounce of the ball seemed to have the power to tear through summer's breath. When I left the house, it was the only thing I took with me—spurred by something that had been smoldering in my gut since well before school shut down. The humidity was out in full force, but at least I was spared from the brunt of the sunlight.

Several minutes after I left the house, I began to wonder if my parents would yell at me for leaving without telling them, and my stomach clenched. But I didn't have the energy to go all the way back to talk to them, or even to look them in the eye. I was aware that I was mired in the world's most unsubtle rebellious phase, but it kept me bogged down, and I couldn't climb out of the feeling.

Having traveled a considerable distance from my house, I crossed a big, long bridge. Well, maybe not *big*, but definitely *tall*. At the bottom of the concrete spiral was a grimy bench and a basketball court, neither of which anyone ever bothered to clean. Dribbling the ball against the hexagonal tile, I checked to see if anyone else was around. Nope. This early in the morning, the place was deserted, save for maybe the occasional dog walker.

Slowly, I approached the hoop, and once I was within range, I casually took a shot. With a loud *clang*, the ball hit the edge of the ring and fell. I recovered the ball on the first bounce, then aimed my second shot, this time with proper positioning. The hoop here was a little different from the ones at my school, so I needed to make small adjustments.

Shooting drills were the one part of practice I actually made time for. Why? Because they were the most fun. I used to like dribbling because I could measure my improvement, but once my teammates started getting mad at me for “hogging the ball,” I lost interest. More accurately, my heart still raced every time the ball hit the floor, but I was less invested in overtaking my opponents. Thus my enjoyment of basketball was relegated to shooting drills.

The simple action of throwing the ball offered immediate results. This, I suspect, was why I stayed with it for as long as I did. I was a kid who wanted everything within eyeshot, and because of that, I agonized needlessly over the hazy uncertainty of my own future. Ironical, isn't it? A girl who could only ever see five feet in front of her, yet she was focused on the distant horizon.

But while I knew it was precisely this contradiction that was stressing me out, there was nothing I could do. I was powerless to change the source of my turmoil. I couldn't stop my social circle from dwindling.

I jumped, I shot, I fetched. As I repeated the steps between ball and hoop over and over, I grew tired, but more importantly, my mind stopped wandering. If I had to guess, it was in pursuit of that very escapism that I loved sleeping so much.

Despite all my dutiful shooting drills, however, I never got the chance to make a single winning shot in all three years of junior high. After I got into an argument with the coach, I was benched—permanently. But I didn't regret it much. Looking back, it was the right call. After all, I simply never developed a desire to achieve something as part of a team. But now I had a gradually improving skill with nowhere to put it to use.

“Ooh, it went in.”

Just then, perhaps owing to a brief lapse in roadway noise at just the right time, I heard someone mutter under their breath. I stopped dead in my tracks and whirled around to find that, out of the blue, someone was sitting on that grimy bench—a woman who was clearly older than me, dressed in a kimono. Our eyes locked.

She was wearing clothes I never encountered in my day-to-day life, and her facial features made my vision pitch sideways. But she showed no alarm at our

eye contact; she simply offered a friendly gesture in the form of a smile.

To be clear, she was a total stranger. Her vibe was unlike anyone I'd ever passed on the street. It felt like I was looking at an ice sculpture—maybe that was the best way to describe her refinement. To be blunt, she was a city girl in a hick town.

But what exactly was this woman doing here? Even if she just wanted to spectate, frankly, I was deeply uncomfortable with being watched. I had no reason to strike up a conversation with her, either. So I went and retrieved my ball. As I was picking it up, I casually glanced over my shoulder. Naturally, she was still there.

She kept watching me, her smile never wavering. Awkward. Surely, she could tell from my glare that I didn't want her there, but she seemed immune to it—almost like she wasn't really seeing me at all. For that matter, how could she bring herself to sit on that dirty old bench without batting a lash? Her kimono looked expensive, yet she showed no interest in taking proper care of it.

I had shown up at the butt-crack of dawn at least partially in order to be alone. Seriously, what was she doing here? I could feel her gaze pinned to my back, and no amount of dribbling could cut through my unease. Trying but failing to focus, I attempted another shot.

But when I jumped, my upper and lower halves of my body were completely out of sync, and I knew before I even took the shot that I wouldn't make it in. The ball slipped impotently out of my grasp and barely managed to hit the corner of the backboard. I jogged after it as it rolled, then rubbed my palm against its surface like I was trying to distract myself with its texture.

“How cool.”

I nearly leapt out of my skin. The voice was so close, it practically stroked my hair. Twisting my body away in recoil, I turned to find the kimono lady standing directly behind me. Intimidated by the height difference, I took another step back.

“Good morning!”

“...Good...morning...?” I replied, on the off chance she was in fact someone I

forgot I already met. But I was confident she wasn't. Even a space cadet like me would surely remember someone who looked like her, and not just because of her exotic fashion.

Her light brown hair fell to her shoulders. Glossy lips sparkled atop skin so pale, I didn't dare imagine touching it, lest I tarnish it somehow. Her gentle smile disintegrated my glare on contact, and her scent was soft and unobtrusive, possibly floral. But most of all, I was drawn to those pale olive eyes—so beautiful, they threatened to whisk me away to a distant land.

"You're in junior high, right?"

"...Yes...?"

She smirked at the confirmation. She seemed placid at first blush, but when she smiled, it became obvious just how much she was enjoying herself. "Third year?"

"...Wh...? And who are you?"



I wasn't even wearing the one thing that functioned like a business card for kids our age: my uniform. With each correct guess, it felt like she was tugging on my loose threads, trying to unravel me, and it wasn't pleasant.

"Oh, I'm just a college student."

"...Right." With those clothes, and those *eyes*, I already knew she wasn't "just" anything. I could feel it as I craned my neck up at her full, grown-up height.

"Woke up early for basketball practice? I see someone's starting the day off right."

"Yeah..."

I still had no answer for my most pressing question: why was she talking to me? When she held out her hand, I paused for a moment, then set my basketball on her palm. A stunning beauty...playing basketball...in a kimono. *Wait, no, her beauty has nothing to do with it.* Who the heck would wear formal Japanese attire in a backwater town like ours, anyway? Was she part of the family who lived in that bougie mansion?

"I can't even remember the last time I touched a basketball."

As if following my lead, she dribbled the ball with an untrained hand for a few bounces, then got into position. When she raised her arms, I watched idly as the sleeves of her kimono hitched on her elbows as they slid down, exposing her biceps.

"Imagine you're on a date, and you see a ball lying forgotten at a basketball court. You pick it up...and casually make a three-pointer mid-conversation."

"What?"

She threw the ball in a straight line; it slammed into the backboard and bounced back. Hastily, she crouched and caught it right in front of her face. Then, without moving a muscle, she smiled. "Wouldn't it be so cool?"

"...If you were trying to be cool just now, you failed."

Honestly, if this chick wanted attention, all she had to do was walk around town holding the ball. Her smallest gestures gave shape to something worth watching, and in a world as shallow as ours, I suspected she could get whatever

she wanted purely by virtue of being pretty.

“Haaah...”

“What are you sighing about?” *And why are you looking at me?*

“Oh, just lamenting the fact that friendship is the most I can offer a junior high schooler.”

“...What’s *that* supposed to mean...?”

“But hey, friendship’s not so bad, right?” She tossed the ball back to me, and her newly vacated hands spread wide like her smile. “Next time we meet, I want you to teach me to play basketball so I can be cool.”

She gave me a modest wave—a mature gesture, yet shockingly adorable at the same time—and oddly enough, my first thought was: *I didn’t know you could be both at once*. With that, she strolled off briskly, with flawless posture and light steps, as if she couldn’t even feel summer’s curtain. Dazedly, I watched her go.

Well, that was weird. Am I supposed to stop her...? No, I’m sure it’s fine... right? Who even is she, anyway?

Looking at it logically, there wasn’t going to be a “next time.” I didn’t come here every day, nor did I always show up at the same time. Even if she staked the place out, I could simply decide never to return. Without at least one of us making a conscious effort, there would be no second coincidence. And yet she left such a deep impression on me that I found myself suspecting it might just happen.

We hadn’t spoken for long, but the words she said packed a punch. And in addition to her good looks, her flowery scent seemed to be toying with my brain, filling my skull with imaginary petals. I glanced at the empty bench. Would she come back?

Her clothes, her eyes, her smile—she was full of treasures I would never have.

When I arrived at the basketball court early the next morning, a certain someone else had beaten me there. Almost as if we had both wanted a “next

time.”

Not me, I growled at myself silently. I just so happened to wake up unusually early, and everyone else in the house was still asleep, and I didn’t want to wake them by being loud, so I left the house with my basketball and decided to go find a place to use it. For the second day in a row.

“Oh...”

When she turned, and I came face to face with that refreshing smile, it felt as though the boiling summer heat flickered off for a moment. She was a cool person in more ways than one. Airy, you could say. Or perhaps simply full of holes.

And so the kimono lady, whose name I had yet to learn, walked over carrying a basketball of her very own. “Check it out! I bought it yesterday!”

“I didn’t ask.” She was so aggressively friendly, it put me on guard instead.

“I’m going to get a great workout from the elbows up!”

What about the rest? I thought, scanning up her body from her feet to her shoulders. *Ah. Never mind.* “You could exercise in different clothes, you know.”

“Nothing I can do about my clothes, sadly. Circumstances beyond my control,” she explained, pinching her sleeve. “I’m obligated to come here dressed like this. Not that I *mind* formal wear, but...I’d prefer something with fewer layers, like a yukata.”

“Huh.”

“Anyway, good morning,” she continued warmly, seemingly unbothered by my disinterest.

“...Good morning.”

Other adults, like my teachers or passersby on the street—they all seemed so...you know...*distant*, like buildings on the horizon. They’d been around for years before me, so they were just part of the scenery, like...a permanent fixture, I guess? I couldn’t explain it. Basically, they were beyond my reach.

But her? She was just one step ahead...like a neighbor, in a way. She was an adult who still felt real, like an evolution of the older students on the basketball

team.

“Now, then, teach me how to shoot hoops.”

Grinning brightly, she held up her ball like a trophy. She switched from grown-up to child so easily, it drew my attention like a magnet. Whether she was merely expressive or outright emotionally unstable, I couldn’t decide.

“Not sure I have much to teach. I just kinda throw it.”

“Okay, then, maybe I’ll start by watching you throw.”

She gracefully stepped back, gesturing for me to take the stage. I never agreed to teach her in the first place, yet I found myself walking forward, gazing up at the hoop. The more I told myself to play like normal, however, the more it slipped away from me. Biting back the urge to scream in frustration, I jumped into the air and took the shot.

Before my stiff arms could extend all the way, the ball left my grip, unsurprisingly missing the hoop and hitting the backboard. *Great, I have to fetch it too?* I grumbled silently as I ran after it.

“It seems the key is to keep your elbows high and your feet shoulder-width apart.”

That’s what she was watching? For some reason, picturing her gaze made me feel weird. When I returned with my ball, she grinned in greeting, holding hers at the ready.

“Anything else I should know, Sensei?”

This term of address tickled my side, and I rubbed the itchy spot with the heel of my hand. “The only other thing I can think of is...try to visualize a metal pole running down the center of your body. It makes it easier to jump. For me, anyway.”

The goal was to keep that metal pole straight when you jumped. Any deviation and you’d lose strength in your arms—like what happened to me just now.

“You got it, Sensei.”

“I’m not your sensei.”

“Roger that, junior high schooler!”

I get the feeling you were way too eager to switch to that.

Kimono Lady widened her stance, revealing her zouri sandals—the world’s least-athletic footwear. But with a basketball at the ready, she did at least look cool. I found myself captivated by the porcelain elbows that peeked out as her sleeves fell. Even without touching it, her skin looked smooth and faintly cold.

Then those elbows bent to form a crease, and the ball went flying.

Its trajectory had improved since yesterday, but it hit the front of the hoop and bounced off with a *clang*. As her hair and sleeves billowed in midair, that floral scent washed over me in full force, nearly making me choke.

“I hit the hoop!” she exclaimed.

“Uh, yep,” I replied somewhat meekly, overpowered by her sheer glee.

She ran off, arms swinging, to fetch her ball—so rambunctious, so *dynamic*, it caught me off guard. Once she retrieved it, she walked it over to the bench and set it down like she was scoring a try in rugby. Swinging her legs wide, she plopped down next to it.

“Why don’t we chat for a bit?”

“Chat...about what?”

“If you don’t have any ideas, I’ll think of something.”

I’m so cool, she mouthed to herself playfully. At her prompting, I walked up next to her holding my basketball. But I didn’t want to sit on that nasty bench, so instead I walked in slow laps around her, orbiting her like a moon.

“Okay, well, let me ask you this. Why’d you start talking to me?” I asked.

“Hm? When I talk to a girl, I never have much motive outside of the ulterior,” she declared loftily, scraping the edge of her sandal against the ground.

“Ultrior...?”

“But *you* have no ulterior motive whatsoever. Innocence personified.”

“Uhhh... Either this conversation is too stupid for me, or I’m too stupid for this conversation.” I genuinely couldn’t decide. Meanwhile, Kimono Lady gobbled

up my confusion like it was her favorite dessert.

“Well, the thing about me is: I love high school girls. Nice to meet you.”

She placed a hand to her chest and introduced herself in the same tone you’d use to offer a business card. The only aspect that wasn’t professional was her word choice.

“You love high school girls?” I repeated.

“Yes, and I have absolutely no interest in anyone younger. It’s the way I’m wired, and it’s not changing anytime soon.”

Why was she acting so proud about this? A stunning beauty...who loved teenage girls...who wore a kimono...who smelled of flowers...whose voice was soft...whose *everything* was soft... There was so much going on with her, I couldn’t keep it straight.

“There’s something special about girls in high school. You’ll understand what I mean when you get there next year.”

“No, I don’t think I will...”

As for what exactly she meant by *loving* high school girls, I could hazard a guess, but I couldn’t relate. Would my peers suddenly seem “magical” to me the moment I set foot on that campus? Fat chance.

Granted, I was the kind of girl who preferred to fill the gaps in my knowledge. But in this case, I didn’t dare ask her to clarify, lest I take a wrong step somewhere. For that matter, was this really something she should be shouting from the rooftops? Did she have no grasp of common sense?

“Uhhh, okay, so that’s...your type, I guess...?”

I had no clue how to phrase it. At face value, “loving high school girls” had dangerous connotations. Or was I just closed-minded? I wasn’t trying to judge her...but then again, maybe I was right to.

“That’s right! High school girls are my field of expertise.”

“Hm.” Apparently, there was an entire field. My brain was more than happy to note down this new information that I would most likely never use for the rest of my life.

“But apart from that, there’s something about talking to girls that makes me feel complete, you know?”

She looked at me for confirmation, but I didn’t know what I was supposed to say to that, and my gaze wandered. If only each person came with a basketball hoop. Maybe then I wouldn’t struggle so hard trying to figure out how to score points that I inevitably flopped down on the floor in defeat.

“You’re a cute girl. I’m sure you’ll attract lots of people and attention in the coming years. Maybe one of those people will be me! But your life will get a lot easier once you figure out how to absorb the nutrients you need from them. In *that* sense, I don’t limit myself strictly to high schoolers.”

All I knew for certain was that she *really* wasn’t supposed to say that last part with her eyes sparkling wistfully. More importantly, however—she just offhandedly called me cute. That was the deepest cut. I could almost feel a phantom breeze against my cheek, and it set me on edge.

“From here, the goal seems so high above us, doesn’t it? So far away...”

She pressed a hand to her forehead, shielding her eyes from the sun. I followed her gaze, mildly surprised to learn that someone taller than me would feel the same way I did.

“But hey, that’s what makes it a worthy ambition to pursue. Now, then!”

She pushed herself up off the bench and grabbed her ball. Then she turned—not to the hoop, but to the city—and I realized she was leaving. *Already?* I thought, followed by confusion at myself that rendered me speechless. Where had that come from?

Meanwhile, Kimono Lady crossed her arms with a grin and a sidelong glance, as if she could see right through me. “I’m just glad I got to see you.”

“What...? What?”

“Exactly the reaction I was hoping to get.” I could see her smiling, but I couldn’t picture what my own face must have looked like. “I’ll be sure to practice on my own, so let’s have a competition sometime soon.”

“A competition?” I repeated.

“What’s it called again? Free throws? Something like that. I’ll see you again.”

She didn’t waste much time saying goodbye. Reeling from the *thud* of her dribbling ball, I stood there in a daze and watched her cheerfully stroll away. Had you told me it was all a dream, I would have believed you. Every inch of her was just so otherworldly.

“...Again...?”

Part of me was skeptical, but it was hard to discount the fact that it had already happened twice. If I showed up here tomorrow, could I see her again? She was so kind—even to a complete stranger. What emotions shaped that kindness? Part of me wanted to investigate the source, but I was afraid the abyss would gaze back at me. Curiosity and fear passed the ball back and forth over my head.

I could feel something building at the joints of my fingers, and I didn’t like it.

The next day, I woke late in the morning. I checked the clock near my pillow, rolled over...then bolted upright. By most people’s standards, I’d woken at a normal time. But my mind was wide awake as if I’d never drifted off at all, which was actually kind of frightening.

What reason did I have to panic?

Gazing up at the bright light visible through the curtains, I concluded that she probably wouldn’t be there if I left now—and immediately afterward, I was overcome with a surprisingly intense feeling of guilt, or perhaps unease. Cursing myself, I hugged my arms to my chest and curled into a ball.

I know what’ll happen if I get attached.

I could see it. I could remember. I closed my eyes.

Starting tomorrow, I’m quitting.

“I said I was quitting, but here I am, wide awake.”

Every summer vacation in elementary school, I would happily sleep in until my

mother came to wake me—but now that I was in junior high, the heat seemed to cook me alive. No wonder I was overly sensitive all the time. My skin was raw.

As if to make up for yesterday's failure, I stirred from shallow slumber at the very cusp of a quiet night's end, as if my consciousness was in a race to beat the dawn. *Don't*, I told myself, pressing a hand to my head. *I said I'm quitting, remember?* I flopped back onto the futon and closed my eyes, determined to sleep until the cicadas chirped. But my eyes felt abnormally heavy behind my eyelids, demanding to be freed with a persistence slightly different from genuine wakefulness.

She was a stranger I had only met twice—the sort of grown woman who, I suspected, would remain an enigma no matter how many conversations we were to have. And it wasn't just the kimono. Her scent seemed to travel up my nose and fill my brain.

Part of me was resistant to the concept of going to see her every day. But what was I so opposed to? There was a distinct feeling of contempt that I just couldn't identify. I skimmed the surface again and again, taking shots in the dark, but all I got in return was frustration. I was agonizing so hard, my body threatened to break out into a sweat. Deprived of relief, I scratched at my head with my eyes closed. Every dry strand of hair was like piano wire, slicing at my fingertips.

Normally, my mind was hung up on very different, more depressing things, but now I found myself thinking nonstop about this kimono woman. *Ugh*. Emotions lapped at my inner cheeks once again, and it left a bitter taste in my mouth. Add in the humidity of early morning, and I was drowning in a misery for which there was likely only one escape: to go see her. Just a little to take the edge off.

God, I sound like a drug addict, I thought, chuckling softly. My eyes drifted open a crack...and the next thing I knew, I nearly jumped out of my skin. On the futon next to mine, my little sister was staring at me, wide awake.

"Huh...? Oh, did I wake you?"

Now that she was in elementary school, she had started sleeping on her own

separate futon...mostly. Every now and then, she'd crawl under my blanket. Tonight she hadn't, but in exchange, her little eyes were boring holes in me.

"Oneechan, are you going somewhere?"

"Huh?"

"You always go somewhere in the morning."

I was mildly surprised that she'd noticed. "Oh, I just...go for a walk, that's all."

"Then I wanna go with you."

"What?"

"I'm going, too!"

"Listen—"

"What's the harm? Spend some time with her for a change."

The sudden voice in the dark hallway nearly made my heart stop. Then the door opened, revealing my mother standing there with her arms folded.

"I was just leaving the bathroom when I heard voices, so I thought I'd eavesdrop."

"Gee, thanks..."

"So, where exactly has my dear daughter been going this early in the morning? Is it a man? A rendezvous with a *booooofriend*?"

"Don't be stupid." I turned away and closed my eyes to stop them from rolling.

"Were you just about to roll your eyes at me, young lady?"

"Shut up."

"Hmph. Everyone can see right through you, y'know." She laughed like it didn't even faze her—but what irritated me most was the way she prodded at my sides. "Sheesh! You used to be such a cute kid, and now look at you."

"Oh, I see. So I'm not cute anymore?"

"Nope! That's one ugly mug."

It was so frank and direct, I was rendered speechless. The blood in my face rushed and drained like the tide, and the temperature change made me shiver.

“Ooh, but you *are* kinda cute when you’re mad.”

The veins in my wrists boiled and frothed until my fingers twitched. “Just shut up already,” I grumbled, biting back an expletive.

I really, truly struggled to suppress the impulse to flip out. Staying calm drained my energy to the point that I felt like passing out on the spot. The whole world was so infuriating, I wanted to scream and claw at my face and scream some more. The only reason I didn’t was because my little sister was there beside me.

With fire still churning in my gut, I ignored my mother and headed for the front door. I didn’t want to go, but I wanted to stay here even less. My little sister toddled after me, and I didn’t have the energy to convince her not to come, so I retrieved her shoes from the rack along with my own.

“Safe travels!”

“...Khh...” All that left my lips was a tiny half-formed word, like a shred of cabbage.

With my baby sister in tow, I stepped out into a quiet town yet to wake. Now and then I felt my sister’s hand squirm in my grasp, tickling my palm.

“It’s gonna be a long walk, just so you know.”

“I like walking.”

“...Okay.” The fact that I had the good sense not to lash out at her was proof, I hoped, that I was a good sister.

And so we walked the same path I always took, except a lot slower. Around the time my palm started to sweat against hers, we arrived at the spiral bridge—and I summoned the resolve to cross a different sort of bridge if a certain someone happened to be there.

At the bottom, shrouded in the last vestiges of night’s shadow, the basketball court and bench...were both deserted. The contents of my heart spilled out into my chest, and now I didn’t know where I was supposed to put the empty box.

“So you were playing basketball!”

I walked her over to the hoop, where she hopped up and down like she was trying to reach it. Her ponytail bounced with the motions, and I felt my hardening anger begin to crumble at the surface. What kind of game could we possibly play with just two of us and a basketball? Even I wasn’t so self-centered as to trounce my baby sister in a serious competition.

“...Hmm.” I lifted her into the air.

“Wheeeee!”

Once she was at the right height, I put the ball into her tiny little hands. “Can you bounce it?”

“Ooh, okay!”

At my prompting, she threw the ball to the ground, and when it bounced back up, I guided it back into her hands. Each time she slapped it down, it shot up a lot higher than I was expecting, and I realized I had been underestimating her strength. And so we chased after the ball while I helped her dribble.

The weight in my arms helped drive home what I had witnessed in her bounces: she was getting bigger. In the beginning I carried her all over the court, but over time I started to lose my breath. Since no one else was around, I panted and wheezed without restraint—that is, until I suddenly felt a gaze during our game. I looked over my shoulder, ignoring the sweat that rolled from my forehead into the corners of my eyes, and saw Kimono Lady sitting on the bench, smiling cheerfully like before.

“When did *you* get here...?”

“Just now.”

She rose to her feet and walked over. In my arms, my sister clung to me cautiously. The footsteps, slightly different from the sound of shoes, made a beeline straight for us.

“Good morning. Is this your...sister?” Kimono Lady smiled down at her as she shyly shrank into herself. “Just old enough to be at her maximum cuteness, I see.”

“Oneechan, who is she?” my sister asked in a tiny voice.

Unfortunately, I didn’t have much of an answer to that myself. “She’s...my friend,” I replied, choosing a simple lie over the complicated truth.

“Your big sister is teaching me how to play basketball,” Kimono Lady chimed in, crouching down to my sister’s eye level. “I don’t have any candy for you, but you can have this if you like.” She pulled a pouch from her kimono sleeve and held it out.

“What’s that?”

“Mung beans. I feed them to the pigeons.”

“...Is that really all you have?”

“Ha ha ha ha!” It was a jovial laugh, the sound bouncing high overhead.

“But there’s no pigeons here...” My sister glanced all around the court.

“If you choose to feed them, they’ll come back. It’s not a choice to make lightly.”

Then why did you give her the bag? She clutched it in her little hands, looking confused.

“See, whenever there are no pigeons around, I do this.”

She untied the pouch strings, grabbed a dried bean, and put it in her mouth. A pleasant *crunch* rang out from behind her lips. My sister stared in wide-eyed shock, then followed suit by putting a bean in her own mouth.

“Hey, hey, don’t eat that!”

“Relax. It won’t hurt her.” Kimono Lady, or should I say Pigeon Lady, swallowed her bean without batting a lash.

Meanwhile, my sister started out chomping with gusto but gradually began to grimace. “It doesn’t taste like anything!”

“I know, right?” Kimono Lady smiled with delight, took a second bean, and popped it into her mouth. “Want one?” she offered to me, the one person who wasn’t eating.

“No, thank you.”

“Okey doke.” She nodded so vapidly; it was obvious she would have responded this way regardless of what I said.

“Something smells like flowers.” As my sister wiggled her cute little nose, Kimono Lady leaned in close; my sister’s shoulders flinched in alarm, but then she detected the source of the scent. “Flower lady!” she exclaimed, pointing at the older woman.

“Ooh, I like that,” Kimono Lady beamed, looking genuinely thrilled. “I wish I had a flower on hand for this occasion, but this is all I have...”

“You have more?!”

When she produced a second bag of beans, a dopey smile spread across my sister’s face. Evidently, the joke landed with her. “Bean lady!”

“Hmmm... I think I prefer ‘flower lady.’ Can we go back to that one?” Kimono Lady pressed her palms together, beseeching my sister, who was still grinning from ear to ear. I never imagined anyone could break the ice with her—especially this quickly. Maybe it was the inner child she let show through her classy exterior.

Well, since she’s here, I may as well ask.

“Hey, could you watch my sister for a bit?” My arms were tired, and I couldn’t get any practice in if I was holding her the whole time. But when she heard this, Kimono Lady’s tone hardened.

“Absolutely not! What are you thinking?” She put a chiding hand on her hip. “You can’t trust someone you just met with your little sister, no matter how nice they may appear to be.”

“Rrgh...”

Her argument was further bolstered by how quickly she switched back to the polished persona I was used to. “Listen here—you mustn’t be so quick to trust people. If you truly care for your sister, then you must keep her close and protect her yourself. The thing about predators is that they disguise their true nature around their prey.”

“...Are you saying *you’re* a predator?”

“Hmmm...” Her gaze wandered as she wrestled with what was apparently a difficult question. “Well, we all have our moments, don’t we?”

“Most people don’t! Ever!” Not to suggest this woman was anything resembling *most people*.

“Enough about me! My point is you shouldn’t take your sister for granted... Well, not that *I’d* ever take that advice.”

“You have a sister?”

“Maybe, maybe not.”

With a flippant tilt of her head, her eyes locked onto the sky, her lips twisted in a crescent moon smile. What was *that* about? Still, she had a point, and oddly enough, I didn’t feel like fighting her on it—possibly because it didn’t sound like she was attacking me. But without any protruding thorns, I couldn’t grasp much else.

“Let’s just say that if I *did* have one, I’d be more inclined to treasure her now. All thanks to you.”

“What?” *But I didn’t do anything.*

“Seeing you taking such good care of yours has changed my mind.”

I looked down at the girl in my arms. Yes, I supposed it *did* look as though I was taking good care of her; my heart wasn’t so complex that I could pretend not to see it for myself. On the contrary, everything about me was painfully straightforward.

“Well, there you have it. Now be a good girl and play with your sister.” Smiling softly, Kimono Lady stooped to make eye contact with the girl in question. “You want to play with your *oneechan*, don’t you?”

“...Yeah...”

With this confirmation, Kimono Lady beamed up at me, flashing her pearly whites. “That said, I’d be bored just sitting on the bench alone, so I’m willing to compromise!”

“How?”

“By joining you, of course!”

She and my sister shared a gleeful high five. My sister, the shyest creature known to man, was having fun in a social situation? If anything, it put me more on guard.

This woman seemed to have a knack for worming her way into people’s hearts. Through the art of misdirection, she pounced the moment your defenses were down. Most likely it was a multitude of different factors working together: her good looks, her smile, her tone, her word choice. And I suspected she could control her threat level at will.

“Now, what shall we play? As one might expect from an old-fashioned kimono lady, I’m quite good at jacks. I didn’t bring any, though.”

“What’s ‘jacks?’”

“Oh god, she doesn’t know... I feel so old...”

She extended a hand in my direction, prompting me; I stared down at her palm for a moment, then relinquished my basketball. Evidently, she hadn’t brought hers with her today. She crouched down and began to dribble at high speed, grinning at my sister like she was showing off. If this was jacks, she would have lost after the first bounce.

Drawn in by the woman’s smug chuckling, my sister reached for the ball. Kimono Lady handed it over, then gave me a little pat on the shoulder. “Teach her how to play, Oneechan.” Waving her thoroughly battered right hand, she retreated like she was tagging out.

“Oneechan!” my sister shouted. As a kid, I always made a beeline straight to her whenever she called for me like that. Back then, I was just so happy to be a big sister.

“...So you dribble the ball like this... We’ll go slow at first...”

I watched from a short distance away as she practiced dribbling the ball, just as I’d taught her. Beside me, sun and shadow stretched across the ground—the faint outline of a woman with a cheery smile—and I was easily engulfed. As I was gazing at its source, she called out to me gently: “Yeeeeees?”

“...I was just thinking about how tall you are.” *And looking at your legs.*

“Oh, yes, I suppose I am. But you’re only in junior high, so you’re still growing.”

“Not that I have much time left before I’m in high school.”

“And that’s a good thing.”

“What?”

“Oh, nothing! Ha ha ha!” She wasn’t even *trying* to cover up her comment. “As a third-year, you’ve retired from the team, correct?”

“Yeah.” I still had no clue how she could have guessed what year I was in.

“How did your final tournament go? Did you get closure?”

Suddenly, she was asking questions like an old relative, and I didn’t know how to react. *As if*, I thought, averting my gaze. “I was benched the whole time, so... it’s whatever.”

“Hmmm... Yes, perhaps you’re not the sort of student that coaches tend to like.”

I had purposely concealed that part, yet she saw through me regardless. I had to wonder if she’d only asked about my basketball team in order to arrive at this topic. “My coach has nothing to do with it.”

“Oh, I doubt that very much.”

“If I was talented, they would have put me in. End of story.”

In response to my opinion, her eyes twinkled as she smiled, as if it was all just a game to her. “You’re so young, it’s actually quite promising.”

“You think this is funny?”

“I think it’s admirable, that’s all.” The moment I showed the slightest hint of hostility, she defanged it by changing the subject. “Have you ever witnessed talent with your own eyes? Your own, or someone else’s?”

“...I don’t know.” And perhaps that was proof that I didn’t have any myself. “What *is* talent, anyway?” I asked in return. She was so tall, my neck ached just looking at her.

“To me, having talent means you can do things you were never taught,” she replied without missing a beat, waving over at my sister as she started to get the hang of dribbling. “I’ve known a lot of people in my life, and this is the conclusion I’ve come to. It’s hard to explain, but...some people come into this world already having all the answers.”

“Huh...”

She didn’t sound jealous of this, either; a beat later, she raised her voice back into a playful tone. “Because of that, I often wonder if I could be considered talented myself! Ha ha ha!” Her airy laughter reverberated against my skin.

“At what?”

“Hmm? Oh, you know. Putting girls in the m—in a good mood.”

“Uh, what...?” Weird place to stumble over her words.

She always looked so well put together, and yet she skipped away from me like a child. Whether she was coming or going, it was always with a jaunty stride.

“Hey, wait.”

“Yes?” She stood in front of my sister with her arms stretched wide like she was playing defense. Then she turned her head to look over at me.

“...Am I ugly?”

I could only imagine what my face must have looked like while I asked this question. I stared down at the ground like the faint morning sun was somehow too much for me.

“You, my dear, are adorable,” she declared softly, firmly, without a hint of shame. Her words painted my cheeks like the dawn. “Why, I’ll bet you’re the third-prettiest girl in your class!”

“...Uh, wow.” Much higher than I was expecting, yet still low enough to keep me humble.

This woman was the only person who had ever called me pretty to my face. Even my own mother, who had seen more of me than anyone else, insisted I was ugly. But if I had to choose who to believe, well...obviously, loath as I was to

admit it, it would be the latter. Did that mean Kimono Lady was lying? After a moment of consideration, I realized: no. Most likely they were both right—because they each saw a different side of me.

“Oneechan, carry meeeee...”

“My arms hurt.” But I did it anyway.

On the way home, I carried my sister back up the spiral bridge, battling with the rosy morning sun, sweating bullets. Now I had an actual good reason not to take her down there. Next time I’d stick to the neighborhood park. *I’m gonna take a shower ASAP*, I decided as I rooted around in my pocket for my key.

“Don’t tell Mom about that older girl, okay?” I gently warned my sister before we walked into the house.

“How come?”

“...Because she’s a secret.”

This turn of phrase was something I’d come up with off the top of my head, but surprisingly, it captured her pretty well. When I pressed my index finger to my lips, my sister’s eyes lit up. “Ooooh.”

Evidently, I had convinced her and thank god for that. If she let slip that I was meeting up with some strange adult woman, things would only get complicated, and I wasn’t eager to waste time fighting with my mother any more than I already did.

“Can we play together again sometime?”

“Mmm, I’d like that.” I wasn’t sure who exactly was included in that “we,” so I answered vaguely.

The older girl—the Kimono Lady. I didn’t know her name, or where she came from. All I knew was that she was drop-dead gorgeous, as soft as my favorite blanket, and smelled so strongly of flowers that one could mistake her kimono pattern for the real thing. She was so far beyond me, it was hard to believe she lived just one step outside my world. One look at her and I felt as though I’d witnessed an elusive, beautiful butterfly.

And yet, for some reason, I couldn't bring myself to go back. I woke up early each morning, as if to the sound of a phantom alarm clock, but when I saw my sister's legs stirring beneath her blanket, I couldn't bring myself to get up.

"Oneechan...?" a sleepy voice called.

"...I'm too tired today," I lied.

I gestured for her to go back to bed, and she slowly drifted back to sleep like whipped cream melting in the heat. I watched her go, then rolled over and closed my eyes. But no matter where I shifted, the cool side of the blanket quickly turned warm.

It felt like I was drowning, and whenever I couldn't sleep, it was always my old friend who came to mind: Tarumi. In elementary school, it had truly felt like we'd spend the rest of our lives together. But in junior high we were assigned to different classes, and after that, we just sort of...fell out of touch. These days I could pass her in the hall and not even notice.

One could say that was just how friendship went sometimes; what was once routine, without diligent pursuit, quickly stopped being routine at all. Hell, even *with* diligent pursuit it would eventually die out. Lately I'd realized there was simply nothing I could do about it.

This included Gon, the dog that lived at my grandparents' house in the countryside. Recently I'd witnessed him getting undeniably weaker; his energy had dulled with age to the point that he could no longer keep up with me. And ever since then, I had felt stressed, irritable, emotionally unstable. My stomach ached like it was crying nonstop.

This, in turn, reminded me of something else: a dog that had once lived at a house on the route I took to elementary school. Whenever a big group of grade-schoolers passed by, that dog would come out and sit in the front yard. All the kids would greet him, and naturally, I was one of them. But one day, he moved to a new house—a sign was posted out front, written from the perspective of the dog with a photo attached, thanking us for being such nice neighbors. At the time I was only mildly disappointed, but now I understood the truth.

So where would Gon “move away” to? I couldn’t find the answer.

Behind my eyelids, shooting stars streaked past in trails of white. And as I watched them fade, I felt my consciousness sink.

Ah, so I’m just running from my fears, I thought. Story of my life.

Thinking solely about the future would keep me rooted in place, so I forced myself to look at the present.

My sister was sleeping like she was supposed to—proof that she was a good girl. I gazed at her for a long moment, wondering how deep her sleep was. When I heard her snoring, I took it as my cue to slip out from under my thin summer blanket.

Playing outside with my sister required a lot of emotional energy; I could handle it now and then, but not every single day. Careful not to wake her, I stepped out into the hall. As I passed by my parents’ bedroom, I wondered idly if my mother was awake. Then I arrived at the front door, where I put my shoes on.

Looking back, I realized I’d never once bothered to brush my hair prior to leaving the house, and only now was I belatedly embarrassed about it.

The last time I went to the spiral bridge was five days ago, with my sister in tow. Five days was all it took for your best friend to turn into some girl from some other class. Likewise, perhaps Kimono Lady had stopped showing up. “Not that I care,” I muttered to myself as I ran to my destination, basketball in hand. I hadn’t done any warm-ups, so even a light run was enough to raise my core temperature. The drowsiness lifted like fog.

This was perhaps the first time I had ever run down the spiral bridge. As I picked up speed, the buildings disappeared behind the concrete walls. The temperature must have been lower than usual, because no suffocating heat threatened to engulf me. And with my body feeling light, I could delude myself into thinking that my life was going well.

At the bottom of the bridge, I transitioned into a jog, all the way to the basketball court. There I came to a stop, breathing hard. One glance told me no

one else was here—*good*. I bounced my ball. Then, belatedly, I remembered to stretch.

With my arms straight out in front of me, my elbows made a pleasant popping sound, and a groan slipped from my lips. Next, I switched to shoulder rotations.

If no one was here, then why did I come here? To practice, obviously. That was my plan from the start. Then I met some weird lady who threw a wrench into everything, but now life was going back to normal. Nothing more, nothing less.

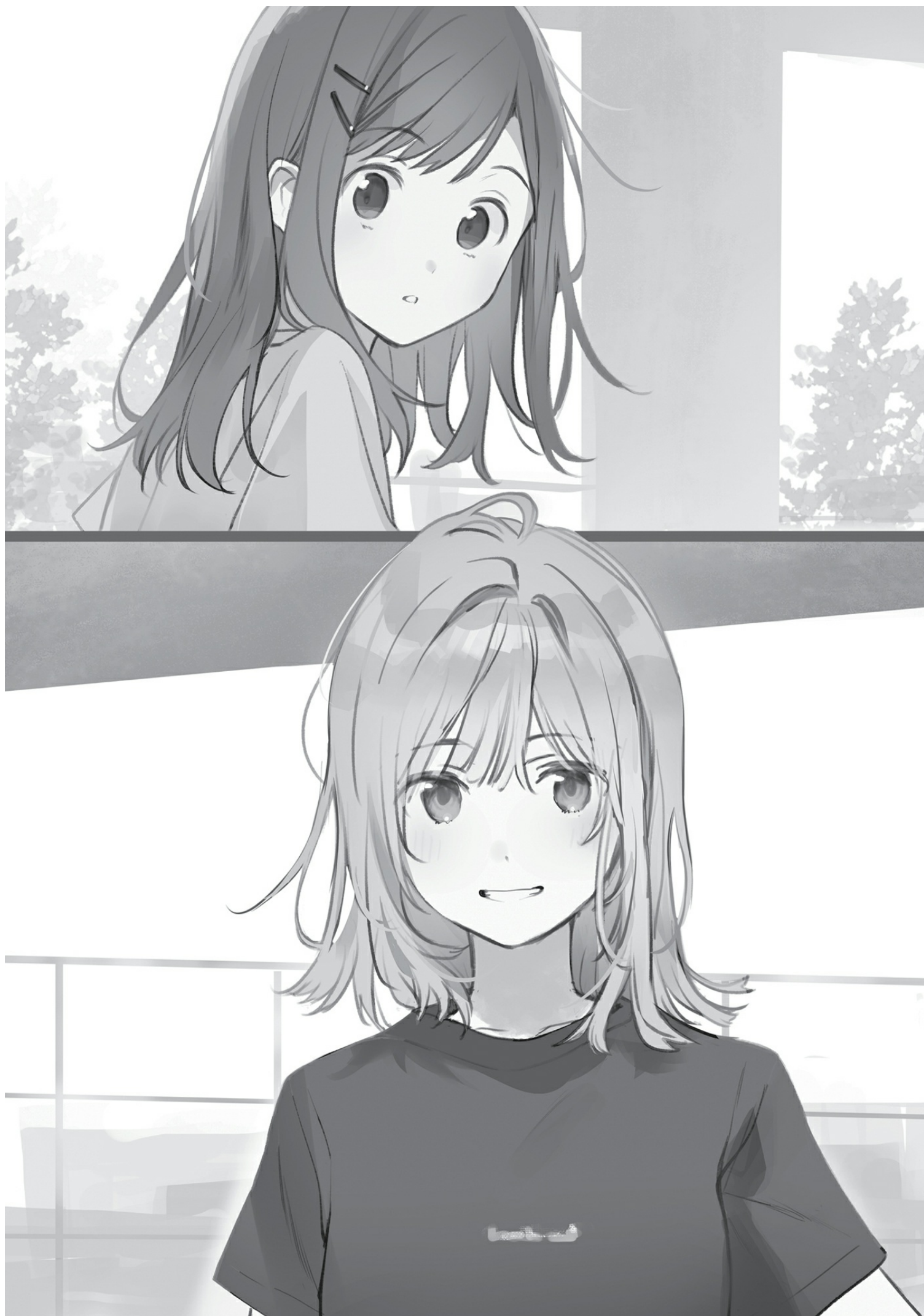
“Oh!”

The sudden voice made me whirl around. But I didn’t need to see who it was to know it wasn’t *her*.

“...Senpai...?”

“Well, well, if it isn’t my kouhai!”

It was an older girl who used to be on the basketball team, now away in high school. She was wearing a no-frills T-shirt and sandals, suggesting she was only out for a morning walk; when she spotted me, she sauntered over. I couldn’t remember when I’d last spoken to her. Had I bothered to say goodbye the day she retired from the team?



“...Sorry, were you hoping for someone else?”

“What? No.”

Me? Disappointed? As if.

While her clothes were nothing to write home about, her natural blonde hair was exotic and gorgeous. At our school, she couldn't take a single step without attracting attention. This added an extra layer of difficulty during basketball games.

“You retired from the team, right? I'm impressed you still practice,” she mused.

“It's just a way to kill time.”

“Shouldn't you be spending that time studying for high school entrance exams?”

“I'll be fine.” I noticed she didn't ask me how the final tournament went. Maybe she could read between the lines. “What about you, Senpai?”

The newly minted high schooler gazed up at the hoop, then slowly shook her head. “These days I'm not doing anything. No sports, no study group...just vibes.”

“Huh.”

Her pale complexion was further washed out by her light hair, magnifying her aura of fragility. Unlike me, she could easily rank first or second place in beauty, and people fixated on her to an abnormal degree. But she always seemed to have her plate full, because she'd never socialize more than strictly necessary... and today, I sensed that same energy from her.

This was a reminder: when people walked out of your life, they left no trace behind. But even on the off chance you reunited, it would only end in awkwardness. Most likely this was exactly what would happen if I ever saw Tarumi again.

When the conversation petered out, Senpai took the hint and waved goodbye. “See ya.”

“Have a good life.” I didn’t realize how heartless it sounded until after I’d already said it, but she turned and walked away without taking offense.

Looking back, her level of friendliness had suited me perfectly. Of all the older students, she was the one I’d spoken to the most; neither of us were especially amiable people, but maybe that was what made it easier to relate to each other. She would always complain to me about all the chores she had to do after practice, and I felt vaguely sorry for her without being emotionally invested. Her life sounded complicated.

I’ll probably never see her again, I thought to myself. Even though we lived in the same town, somehow that was how it went for all my ex-friends. Strange, since one would think we were all still traveling to the same places. If I had to guess, it was proof that there were more people living in this dump than I could even fathom.

Rolling the basketball in my hands, I started walking back to the court to continue with my practice. Just then, I gasped and whirled around. A shadowy figure peeked out from behind a bridge beam, staring in my direction...and even at a distance, I recognized those olive eyes. I looked at her; she looked at me. Silence.

“...Uh, hello?”

Since she made no move to step out from behind the beam, I contemplated whether to go over there myself. Experimentally, I beckoned to her; only then did she leap out into view, as if she’d been waiting for a formal invitation. Today, instead of a layered kimono, she was wearing a thin yukata. Because of that, she appeared to move with even greater ease than usual.

“Good morning!”

“...Morning. Why were you hiding?”

“Mmm, no real reason. I was just having fun spying.”

“Uhhh...okay.” It seemed this woman could find the fun in any circumstance.
What are you, my mom?

“When I arrived, I saw you standing there all zoned out, so I thought I’d see how long it would take you to notice me. Turns out, not very.”

“...I just thought I felt someone watching me, that’s all.” I didn’t want her to think I was actively *looking* for her or anything.

Evidently, she hadn’t seen me talking to Senpai, because otherwise she would have been over the moon to meet a high school girl... Out of context, she really *did* sound like a predator, didn’t she?

“No little sister with you today? That’s a shame.”

She peered down at my chest like she was scanning for my sibling. *Don’t you have eyes?* I chuckled. “You really like her, huh?” Likewise, my sister had opened up to her quite a bit, all things considered.

“It’s not that I like her, per se. But I like seeing you be so sweet to her.”

Her words turned to silk at the drop of a hat, and it flustered me. Not that I cared that she said she liked me.

“I noticed you haven’t been by in a while. Been sleeping in?”

“...It’s not like we made plans to meet up or anything.”

“That’s true,” she replied, in a perfectly calm and gentle voice. “Truth be told, I finished my business two days ago, but I really wanted to say goodbye, so I’ve been loitering around here every morning.”

Somehow she seemed to add a hidden meaning to every word she said. “*Goodbye...?*” I muttered as I digested this information. “So you’re not coming back?”

“Right. Not for a long while, at least.”

“...Huh.”

“Gonna miss me?”

“Nope.” But it was a bit of a stretch to insist we were still strangers.

“Anyway, I was thinking we could chat for a bit.”

“Sure, I guess...”

Kimono Lady walked over to the bench and sat down without a second thought. She gestured for me to join her, but the visible grime kept me at bay.

“What, you don’t want to get dirty? You can sit on my lap, then.”

She spread her arms wide, grinning from ear to ear, as she jostled her knees enticingly. She wanted me...a junior high schooler...to sit on her grown adult lap? Maybe if it was my sister, but... How would I manage to keep my balance there?

Regardless of the logistics, I knew she was just messing with me, so I decided to see what would happen if I walked over. Her smile remained as wide as her arms. I came to a stop directly in front of her. Still smiling. I turned around and bent my knees slightly—

“No, you’re supposed to refuse!”

“You’re the one who offered.”

“I mean, yes, but...”

Even then her smile didn’t falter, her wavering beauty provoking caution and relief in equal measure. Her expression was so flawless, surely anyone would wonder whether they were supposed to play along or not. Even I wasn’t confident that I understood fully. But one thing was for sure: I felt weird continuing to point my butt at her. Still, I’d have to overcome a lot in order to actually sit on her. I wasn’t used to making physical contact with people I wasn’t related to.

“Ah, the mysteries of the human body...”

“What?”

“I look at your junior high butt and I feel nothing! How does the brain categorize these things, anyway?”

“How should I know?!”

“If you were in high school, my eyes would be glued to you. But for now, I have the composure to enjoy the moment.”

Wait a minute... Is she a complete and total loser? Outside of her good looks and affability, I couldn’t see any other positive traits. Maybe that was all she needed.

“Aren’t your legs getting tired, sitting on that imaginary chair?”

“Of course they are.” I must have been tensing my neck muscles, because the back of my skull felt like it had been sanded down.

“And yet you continue to choose pain. Are you a tragic heroine, perhaps?”

“Is that sarcasm?”

“Yes.”

“...No one’s ever answered ‘yes’ to that before...”

For some reason, her response seeped into me at the perfect temperature—like washing my face with fresh spring water. Finally, I caved and sat down next to her on the bench. At this point, I no longer cared if my clothes got dirty. This was their purpose, I decided: to shield the body from germs.

As I sat, the bench creaked beneath my weight. *Quiet, you.* It wasn’t particularly comfortable, either. Scarcely different from sitting on the ground, if I had to guess.

“Welcome.”

“What is this, your house?” I let out a weird little laugh.

This was the closest in proximity we’d ever been. Her smile was shining just inches away. And whether it was the yukata or the close-up view, I couldn’t say for sure, but...there was something else I noticed for the first time:

Her boobs were big.

Not that it was relevant in any way, but...once I became aware of it, I couldn’t stop my gaze from flicking down and back.

“Aha! You’re looking at my boobs!”

“Excuse me?!” She was completely right, of course, and as I played dumb, my vision went utterly blank.

“Puberty will do that to you. Then again, I still like them, and puberty ended ages ago for me.”

“I don’t...get what you’re saying...”

My panic was so visibly obvious, I wished I could throttle myself. Kimono Lady took this as her cue to thrust out her chest and give it a slap. “Not to ruin the

fun of boobs, but there's something else just as important that we need to talk about."

"Implying boobs are important...?"

"You seem like you're perpetually suffering," she continued, in exactly the same tone—and I felt invisible fingers thrust straight through my ribcage. "Perpetually angry" was something I'd heard before, but no one had ever suggested I was in pain. Until now.

"I look like I'm suffering to you?"

"Very much, I'm afraid."

Just like that, she had identified the discomfort that gnawed at my heart. Was I really suffering? Over what? What was so painful? What was making me miserable?

The thing I was hiding, that I pretended not to see—somehow the smile of a stranger was enough to cast a light on it. I leaned forward, put my chin in my hand, and closed my eyes. Perhaps it was this posture that helped the blockage come free at last.

"There's a dog who lives out in the countryside... He's not doing well." As a result, I was sad and miserable and stressed and I hated every minute of it. "So I think maybe that's got me all...depressed or whatever."

The answer to my frustration was right in front of me—I just had to be willing to see it. But I was afraid. Afraid of what the passage of time would take from me next. Afraid of a world where someone died every time I closed my eyes.

"I see," she replied curtly.

No surprise there. Obviously she wasn't going to have much to say about some random kid's dog. But then her hands grasped my head, and she pulled me close, as if it was something she'd done a thousand times.

How many other people had she subjected to this before me? And how many more would come after me? As I mulled it over, I buried my face in her chest.

It felt like I was lying in a field of flowers.

Resting against someone was reassuring, and warm, but awkward at the same

time. I wasn't used to this, and I felt restless. But my body had given in to gravity, and it refused to budge. Though I wasn't crying, I couldn't bring myself to look up at her.

"It's not easy, but...I suggest you hold space for that pain," said the person lying on the other side of the flower field. "It's best not to run from your emotions."

For the first time, I heard a hint of complexity in her voice. But these were adult concepts, and I couldn't yet grasp them. After an immeasurable amount of time being held like a basketball...

"Feel better?"

"...Yeah." Normally, I would have thrown a fit, but right now, I didn't want to move. It felt like an awful waste to trample the flowers.

"If only you weren't in junior high right now... What unlucky timing."

"...Shut up." If I was in high school, what would she have done instead? And would I have been able to laugh it off?

"Do you feel better now?" she repeated.

"Just peachy," I replied, more firmly this time. And as if that was her cue, she let go of my head.

"Well then, let's compete."

"What?"

"Remember? I said I wanted to compete with you once I got some practice in."

As she rose to her feet, I followed her away from the bench, dusting off the seat of my pants. Had she come here today solely to tie up loose ends? How very...diligent, maybe.

"Let's do the thing where the loser has to do whatever the winner says."

"The what?" There was no such history between us, and frankly, giving this dangerous woman that kind of power over me was tantamount to placing my beating heart in her fist.

“Granted, as I’ve said before, I have no interest in junior high schoolers, so there’s nothing I really want from you.”

Then why had she struck up a conversation with me? Was it just to kill time, or was some part of it a lie? So much was hidden beneath her friendly veneer.

“Wait, you think you’re going to win?” I scoffed back.

But she simply smiled—the most mature response she’d ever given me. “You can go first,” she offered, almost as if she just wanted to watch me score.

With her guidance, I stepped forward, dribbling the ball two or three times to get the rhythm down. Then I dropped into my stance, holding it in front of my face, feeling the pleasant weight on my wrists. I exhaled, then inhaled, enjoying the oxygen running laps through my veins. At the same time, the lingering scent of flowers permeated every inch of my body.

The flower lady.

As my heart began to pound, I summoned my strength. Over months and months of daily practice, I had slowly but surely built up a foothold to bring me closer to the hoop, but in the end, I never got to use it. Now, though? Now I was at my greatest height.

The ball and I jumped as one, without fear, leaping off into the great beyond. The pile of rocks beneath me crumbled soundlessly as my feet cut through empty air. My eyes only saw the ball and its flawless arc, tracing across a cloudy sky still too dark for dawn.

Something ran down my arms that made my elbows tingle: a jolt of pure euphoria.

“Looks like you win.”

When I landed, I was met with celebration. She smiled like she was satisfied enough merely having seen me take the shot. As if drawn in by the flowers, I approached. But as a tutor, it was my job to teach her that it was too early to grow complacent.

“Here.”

I offered her the freshly retrieved ball. Looking back at my time on the junior

high basketball team, passing the ball was something I'd always struggled with—and yet somehow I pulled it off on my first try.

“Seeing as you already put all that practice in, you may as well give it a shot.”
Like I did. “If you make it in, you can have the win.”

Why did I say this, you ask? The only explanation is that I simply felt like it. Maybe I was in a good mood now that all those months of effort had finally achieved something.

“Are you sure?”

I nodded. “And if you win, I'll do whatever you say.”

“Hmmm...” Her eyes wandered. “I wish I could say it sounds enticing, but...I feel nothing.”

“How come?”

“Instead of someone *volunteering* to do what I want, I'd rather *make* them do it.”

“Huhwha?!”

The last-minute reveal of her evil smirk sent a shiver down my spine. Laughing, I straightened up so stiffly, it felt like my spine might burst through my skin. My suspicions were confirmed: she was terrifying.

And so the terrifying lady stepped forward and assumed her stance, holding the ball at a low angle. With her excellent posture, she was like an illustration on a postcard of our town. I watched her intently, praying neither for her victory nor her loss, but still praying all the same.

Her jump was perfectly in line with everything I'd taught her. Softly, she tossed the ball. It traced a lazy, yet unwavering arc straight through the air toward the hoop.

CLANG—a loud, fierce noise like the swing of a fist in protest. Alas, it was the sound of failure.

As she watched the ball bounce backward, Kimono Lady smiled. “I accept my loss, but if you don't mind, could I keep trying until I make it in?”

“Go for it.”

The grown woman sauntered after the ball like a little girl. She missed four more shots after that, but on the fifth, the hoop relented. “Sensei, I really like it when the ball goes in!” my pupil reported back gleefully.

Her form was all over the place, and she’d forgotten basically everything I’d shown her, and she threw the ball like she wasn’t even trying...but her smile was like fireworks, and her forehead glittered with sweat, and she smelled like a bouquet of roses. So I decided to forego all the complaints and see her off. “You pass.”

As she handed the ball back, she beamed from the bottom of her heart, as though my unamused expression meant nothing in the face of her joy. “Well, you still won. Any requests?”

Just as she wanted nothing from me, I had nothing to ask of her, either. There was no desire between us, yet some form of curiosity had brought us together again...and it was a relationship I actually kind of liked.

“Okay then, um...if you have a little sister, I want you to be nice to her...or something.”

“...What?”

“Picking her up, running around with her... Believe it or not, it’s hard work.” *And it’s high time you did some!* As I thought back to the way she sat and watched us from the sidelines, I retroactively got a little annoyed. “Oh, and the same applies if it’s a little brother,” I added hastily as the possibility occurred to me.

Unless something was an immediate part of my life, I tended to forget it existed. And since it was near-impossible to change how my brain worked, my only option was to make sure my life was filled with everything I wanted to remember. At some point—be it sooner or later—she, too, would fade from my mind. So I stared up at her while I still could, cherishing our final moments just a tiny bit.

“Okay. I promise I will,” she conceded without argument or delay.

Her smile was no mere decoration, nor was it forced; she was simply wearing

her heart on her sleeve. As for how I could have known that, well...most likely, so was I.

“Anyway, if you don’t have a girlfriend by the time I see you again, we should go on a date. See you!”

Of all the statements to go out on. “Girlfriend?” *Not boyfriend?* It was such a massive leap in logic, I couldn’t help but chuckle.

In the end, she and I never even introduced ourselves—but our brief connection never needed it.

I dribbled the ball, ran around the court like I was doing laps, took a shot and, when I inevitably missed, diligently retrieved the ball once more. *Tap, tap, tap.* I hadn’t jumped, but I could still hear the rhythm through my soles.

“...Ha ha...”

Alone, dopey chuckles spilled from my mouth like pebbles. Everything from the shoulders up felt so light. Whatever stress that had pinned my head down was gone now...and I was ready to move on.

I looked up at the morning sun, soundlessly washing across the town like the tide. Its orange sparkle was fainter than sunset, filling in the gaps between the buildings. Thin clouds trailed like claw marks with puffy thunderheads rising in columns just beyond. The occasional hum of a car traced a spiral along the road. And oddly enough, the scent on the lukewarm breeze was enough to make me smile.

It had been an eternity since I truly saw the dawn for what it was. At last, it sank in: whether I woke up like an early bird or zoned out like a night owl, the day would begin and eventually end. With a more open mind, my heart stopped charging ahead for once. I let the wave of morning rays splash over me without even bothering to wipe my sweat.

I couldn’t explain it, but...life felt fun again, and it was a load off my shoulders. Or maybe it really was just that simple.

The bounce of the ball felt so good. With a flick of my wrist, I added a spin to it. I was frolicking like a child, but hey, it wasn’t so bad. Yeah...it felt kind of nice.

She was impossible to read, but something about her felt genuine deep down inside. Her laughter was crisp, yet ever so faintly cold. And the mysterious feelings that engulfed my heart quietly ushered me into the best possible mood. It was two conflicting states of being—a peaceful thrill not unlike popping bubbles as they rose to the surface.

As for the answer to that mystery...

By any chance...this wouldn't happen to be...my first love...?

“Yeah, right.”

As I joked to myself, I slammed the ball down hard once more. When it bounced back up again, I reached out...and in the distance, I saw a girl racing down the bridge on her bike with a bored look on her face. Without so much as a glance, she was gone again—nothing more than a passerby. But for some reason, as I was walking home that day, I caught myself thinking about the trail of dark hair that had flowed behind her.

Chapter 5:

Edge of Infinity Loop

“THE HECK is that?”

“It’s a canteen, thank you.” The cross-body strap seemed to give her a childlike flair.

Just outside the front gates of my house, I discovered a fellow eighteen-year-old geared up like a hiker. When I tried to leave, she tackled me hard—and the pairing of her size advantage plus the element of surprise resulted in both of us smashing into a pillar.

“Dude!”

“My name is Nagafuji, thank you.”

I didn’t ask, thank you! Also, it was the same canteen she’d used for elementary school field trips, so it was a real throwback. But never mind that.

“Are you here to hang out, or are you going on a hike?”

“A hike, thank you.”

“Then keep walking!”

All I wanted was to go for a stroll, and now look where that got me. I encountered her at the front gate so often, I was starting to think she camped out there. Perhaps it was her presence that drew me to go outside in the first place.

“Ugh, whatever. Fine, let’s go! Get off me!” I pressed a hand to her forehead and peeled her off of my waist. With a companion now in tow, I doubled back to the front door.

Only then did she suddenly take her glasses off, as if only just remembering—and the sharpened angle of my neck as I looked up at her informed me that she had gotten taller once again. As I debated whether I could have possibly shrank instead, we entered the house, and I took off the shoes I had literally just put on. After I set them back on the rack, Nagafuji followed suit with her own pair.

“I found the canteen hidden at the back of the kitchen cupboard and it put me in the mood to hike,” she explained concisely. The heck was she doing, digging around in the kitchen? “But I could die of dehydration if I went too far, so I decided my destination would be your house, Hino.”

“You just wanted an excuse to come over, didn’t you?”

“I did, thank you.”

“...Hm.” Even my best tackles weren’t enough to make her budge.

“Well now, that was quick!” Enome-san turned to look at me as she was dusting a shelf halfway down the needlessly long hallway. Then she saw Nagafuji and smiled slightly. “Welcome.”

“I’m here!”

“She said she wants to have lunch in the yard.”

“I see,” Enome-san replied, straightening up without batting a lash. Evidently, she was familiar with Nagafuji’s quirks by now. “In that case, I shall fetch a picnic blanket.”

“Sorry for the trouble.”

“I’m used to it,” she replied offhandedly as she started to walk off. Then she thought of a question and turned back to ask. “Will you be sleeping over tonight?”

“Hmmm... If I do, this’ll turn into more of an overnight trip than a hike,” Nagafuji mused.

“Then don’t,” I replied.

“But I like overnight trips just as much, so I think I will.”

You were planning to from the start and you know it, I thought as I glanced at her giant hiker’s backpack. Feeling the residual heat of summer on my neck, I sighed in defeat.

“Then I shall make the necessary arrangements. One moment, please.”

“You don’t have to do anything special for her. Seriously.”

I felt bad interrupting Enome-san’s work because of this cow. When I hoisted

up her udders, she smacked me lightly over the head. Then I realized belatedly: maybe all that smacking was how I shrank.

“Oooone moooooomeeeeeent,” Nagafuji announced, like a grandfather clock.

And since a moment had indeed passed, we decided to go out to the courtyard.

“Oooh, how *artistic*...”

Next to the large pond was a streak of red, as if someone had run a paintbrush over it. I didn’t mind the blanket, but couldn’t she have found something more fitting than a beach parasol to block the sun with? Not only that, but it was watermelon-themed. Then again, I *did* say she didn’t need to do anything special.

“Very elegant.”

“Is it?”

We sat side by side beneath the parasol. Since it was watermelon-themed, naturally, the light that shone through was pink. A visibly watermelon-flavored Nagafuji set down her backpack and canteen, then stretched her legs out and smiled. “You tend to kneel a lot, don’t you, Hino?”

“Huh? Oh...yeah, I guess so.”

She grinned down at my reflexively bent knees.

“What?” I scowled.

“I like it.”

“Good for you.”

I’d developed something of a knack for cutting her tangents short. Not like I ever understood her anyway.

Behind us, I could hear the chirp of cicadas lurking nearby on the courtyard trees. The heat that made it through the barrier of the parasol began to nip at my skin, and I could smell the pond moss practically baking in the sun.

“Let’s hurry up and eat so we can go back inside.”

“No, we should stay and enjoy this nice picnic that Enome-san set up for us!”

“Your priorities are ass-backwards, just FYI.”

At my insistence, she reluctantly retrieved a bento bag from her backpack. Inside was stir-fried *udon*, most likely made by her mother.

“Did she just dump a bunch of leftovers in there and call it good?”

“Smart move, Mama.”

In addition to the bento box, I could see another little container in the bag, so while she was busy eating the onions out of her *udon*, I pulled it out. A goldfish was painted on the lid—*classy*, I thought as I opened it. Inside...was a whole bunch of canned mandarin orange slices. The sweet citrusy syrup wafted up to greet my nose.

This was something she would always bring whenever we went on a field trip. But at some point in elementary school...I forget what grade we were in...she lost the goldfish container during the trip. That was the first time I saw her get visibly sad about something. So I searched for one that was identical, and bought it, and gave it to her as a birthday gift later that same year. She was overjoyed, and in return, she...

Well, we don't have to get into that. Anyway, it wasn't really all that old...or was it?

“...I guess it *was* a long time ago...”

So much of our friendship felt like it was only yesterday, but I had simply grown numb to the passage of time. Grade school...prior to that, the day we met...then junior high afterwards...all of it was in the distant past now. This was our eighteenth summer, and there was no telling how many more were in store for us.

To this day, I was still a rich girl with a big yard and a free-spirited best friend. I wanted for nothing and couldn't ask for more. I was born with happiness right beside me, without ever needing to define it or go out and search for it. My life was on easy mode. In private, I agonized over it a little...but when she was with me, it felt right. I was fine with things staying exactly as they were in perpetuity. She was enough.

“The precocious thoughts of dear young Hino.”

“Do *not* read my mind.”

I knew it wasn't actually possible, but shook my head all the same.

We were close enough now to read each other's fine print.

Chapter 6:

Summer18

IN THE MIRROR, high school Shima-chan looked the same as ever: “Sleepy.”

My eyes were so droopy, it was hard to tell if they were open at all. Perhaps I was meant to feel shame that I presented myself to the world like this on a regular basis. Did Adachi ever judge me for it?

She never lashed out at me; she only ever touched me with trepidation. Well, except for whenever the trepidation meter maxed out—then she’d explode and tackle me. And she was bigger than me, so I had to brace myself if I wanted to catch her. Was I really that scary, though? Personally, I felt I was a lot friendlier than junior high Shima-chan ever was. *Love’s just complicated, I guess.*

On a whim, my gaze drifted to the chirping of the cicadas that seemed to rise up from the back of my neck, as if on tiptoe, trying to peek over the wall. This was the final summer break of my high school career, and if I tried to count my remaining time on my fingers, I’d end up graduating before I was done.

Funny—part of me thought that I’d be in high school forever, that these days would never end. This was a sentiment I’d never felt in junior high, and it was a weird misapprehension to have. Perhaps it was proof of just how fulfilled my life was these days.

“So maybe try to look like you’re having fun.”

I squished my face all around and made myself laugh, then walked away from the bathroom sink. On my way back to my bedroom, my parched throat started to bother me, so I changed course to the kitchen instead—and just as I turned, a streak of light shot over the top of my head.

“I sense Shimamura-san’s presence.”

“The rest of me is here, too, you know.”

I snatched the gremlin that had suddenly manifested on my head and lightly flung her into the air. When she turned and landed gracefully on her feet, I saw

that she was dressed as a penguin. That was all well and good, but she was wearing a *SHAVED ICE* banner, like the kind a cafe would display out front, across her tummy.

“What’s with *that*?”

“Is it hoity-toity?”

“Hmmm...” I prodded her stomach as she thrust it out proudly in my direction. “Fancy-schmancy.” *I guess.*

“Yaaay!”

She seemed happy, so I let it go. Together, the fancy penguin and I headed for the kitchen.

“It appears Mama-san is not here.”

“Yeah, she’s usually at the gym around this time.”

“Good to know,” Yashiro chuckled behind her beak.

Tangentially related, I always felt like she peeked out from the wrong part of the animal’s face. It looked like she was being swallowed whole. Then again, I didn’t exactly have a better suggestion. For that matter, where did she keep getting these onesie pajamas, anyway? I realized recently that her choice of animals was a perfect match for the ones found in my sister’s encyclopedias, but beyond that, I couldn’t begin to fathom the inner workings of an alien mind.

The instant I opened the fridge, the penguin zoomed up to take a look, and I had to physically stop her from getting in. Then my sister walked into the kitchen, her exposed skin now sun-kissed brown with little pale tan lines peeking out from under her sleeves.

“Well, if it isn’t Little!” The penguin turned and waddled over to greet her.

“Hi, Yachi. I see you’re...um...Happy Feet today.”

“Am I hoity-toity?”

“What’s that?”

“She doesn’t know! Ha ha ha!”

“Why do you gotta be rude about it?!”

As my sister amused herself by tugging Yashiro's cheeks in all directions, I poured myself some barley tea. Instead of heading back to my room, I sat down at the table and watched the kids at play. Then I got back to my feet, poured two more cups of tea, and handed them over. "Here."

"Whoa. Nee-chan's actually being considerate for once."

"Get that nose out of the air." I pinched (what I imagined to be) her haughtily raised nose and made her squeal.

"Much obliged," the penguin replied as she took her cup. Her word choice was jarringly self-serious compared to the dopey grin on her face.

"You know, I've always wondered: where do you learn that stuff?"

"From watching the television with Papa-san, of course."

"Ugh, you watch too much TV..."

These days I'd often spot her in the living room at night, sitting in front of the TV next to my father. Evidently he'd gotten used to having her around—so much so that whenever he brought home treats, he'd always have an extra for her. And just the other day he was happily telling me: "Apparently, she's an alien! First one I've ever seen." All I could say to that was "No kidding."

Put nicely, the Shimamura family was open-minded; or, less charitably, none of us cared too much. And that included me.

"What do you wanna do today?"

"I humbly request a sweetie treatie."

Based on her word choice, I could feel my mother's influence at work.

"If you ask really nicely, Nee-chan, we could even let you join us."

"Look here, kid, I'm in super study mode right now. I've got colleges to apply to."

No joke—I was genuinely taking this pretty seriously. After I started my third year of high school, I thought about it offhandedly and decided I'd pursue higher education. And when I asked my parents if they were cool with it, they said yes.

“Nee-chan, are you really going to...college?” my sister asked, staring at the floor.

“That’s the plan.” *Assuming I get accepted.*

“Ho ho... Harvard, perhaps?”

“You’ve heard of Harvard?”

“The birthplace of Harvardi cheese!”

“I think you mean Havarti...”

The penguin smiled wistfully, as if recalling the taste, so I decided to let her be. Meanwhile, my sister steered the conversation back on track: “Does that mean...you’re gonna move out?”

It was the first piercing question she’d ever asked me. Her eyes wavered with uncertainty, reminiscent of the days she used to address me with actual respect. And here I thought she didn’t love me anymore... *Well now.*

“No, I’m gonna enroll somewhere close to home.” If I tried to live on my own, I could already tell my life would fall apart, and who knows what would happen after that.

“Hmmm. Okay then.” She looked up at me with a feeble smile that suggested only half of her concerns had been allayed.

“Oh, I get it. You’re scared you’re gonna miss me!” I teased.

“Am *not*!” She kicked my shin under the table.

“I know just what to do. I’ll relieve some of that loneliness with a nice *massage*!”

“Mmffffmmghh!”

I pinched her cheeks and stretched them in all directions, just as she was doing to Yashiro earlier. Meanwhile, it occurred to me that we *would* eventually have to part ways someday, and then I started getting a little sentimental.

Deep down, I was fond of living in this house. Now that I had survived the greater part of puberty, with junior high Shima-chan’s rebellious phase in the middle, I was ready to admit it. Perhaps that was why my mother never gave

me a hard time aside from a little teasing now and then—because she could sense it, even though I never said it outright. *She's so flexible, it's probably unhealthy.*

“Oh?” Just then, Yashiro's smile vanished, and she glanced over at the kitchen wall. “It appears your phone has beeped, Shimamura-san.”

“Wait, really?” If so, I didn't hear it. But this alien could sense things on an entirely different level from the rest of us, so I decided to trust in her and go see. “Make sure your penguin stays out of the fridge,” I instructed my sister on the way out. Sure enough, out of the corner of my eye, I saw her physically restrain the penguin as she flailed desperately for freedom.

Life with a pet penguin... Fancy-schmancy indeed.

I walked down the sticky-humid hallway and returned to my room. For a moment I stood there, trying to remember where I put my phone. *Oh, that's right;* I had plugged it in to charge. I grabbed it where it lay.

“Huh, I *do* have a message. From Adachi.”

Nice going, penguin. Not only could she hear distant phone sounds, she could also somehow detect whenever someone was arriving at the house. If I tried asking her about it, she would only laugh in response, so I'd given up and accepted it as a fact of life.

“*Go ahead and call...* Message sent... Aaand she's calling.”

Every time this happened, I always found myself thinking it'd be more efficient if I was the one who initiated the phone call—but part of me was opposed to prioritizing efficiency in this relationship. Not like *she* ever took efficiency into consideration. Besides, the only relationships she really had were with me and her mother... *On second thought, maybe her mom doesn't count.*

“Hell—”

“Hellooooo?” I cut in before Hell-Adachi could finish, then waited for her reaction.

“...Hellooooo...”

“You know, I say this a lot, but I really like that about you.”

Adorably pathetic, one might call it. Then again, *pathetic* was a little too harsh. After all, she was a lot stronger than I was—and in this case, by *strong*, I meant she fought to keep herself from devolving into weird giggles when she was flustered. On the other hand, if she ever completely stopped getting awkward around me, I'd probably start to miss it. Selfish, I know.

"So what's up? Just wanna chat?"

"I do want to chat, so..."

"So?"

"Is it okay if I come over right now?"

"To my house? Sure, but it's probably really hot in here."

The former storage-room-turned-study-room on the second floor did technically have an AC unit, but lately it was undeniably on its last legs. I could only survive the summer by using it in conjunction with an electric fan. So why would Adachi want to go out of her way to visit?

To see me, duh, I realized, and quietly smiled like an idiot.

"Well, I haven't seen you at all lately..."

"Uh...y-you sure about that...?" I counted on my fingers to double-check. *Yeah, it's only been, like, three days.* "Didn't we just go on a date three days ago?"

Our date destination: the mall. Seriously, there was virtually nowhere else we could go around here. Plus, the mall had basically everything we could ever want, so really, it was no surprise the parking lot was full every day.

"Yeah. Three whole days." I could practically hear her pouting through the phone, and it made me chuckle.

"Three days of hell for you, huh?" *Hell for Hell-Adachi*, I joked to myself.

"Every second without you is the same as, like, a hundred years...or something. It's a long time."

"Oh, Adachi, you're such a poet."

Every now and then, her love for me seemed so overblown, it made me

question whether I truly deserved it. Nothing about it was a criticism of me, and yet...it was so grand in scale, it cast a shadow over me, and I was forced to take a harder look at myself. Suddenly it felt like torture to keep standing while on the phone, so I flopped down on the pile of folded-up blankets, using them as a cushion as I stared blankly up at the ceiling.

“Oh, I know. We could—what if we...studied...together?”

Classic Adachi, stumbling weakly over her words. “Sure, let’s have a study party.” It was something I’d never done before, and the prospect sounded exciting. Frankly, I rarely went to *any* sort of party. Last one was probably... something to do with Girl Scouts. “Okay, I’ll be here. Take your time and don’t rush, or you might hurt yourself.”

“Okaybye.” She answered so quickly, and ended the call so abruptly, I could tell she hadn’t listened to a word I said.

For a moment I set my phone down and spread my arms out. But I could tell I was in danger of falling asleep if I kept lying there, so I swung myself into an upright position. In the past I would have closed my eyes and fed myself a line about how I needed to “think for a while,” so clearly some part of me was different now.

Indeed, a lot had changed since I met Adachi. And when I summed it all up, it gave me the motivation I needed. She was my energy—and it was pretty amazing. Now that I understood what I had been living without all this time, I had a newfound respect for that little fireball.

But anyway, uh...not to ruin the whole “motivation” thing I was just talking about, but...a study party...at my house...with Adachi...

“Hmm.”

Yeah, that’s not gonna happen, is it?

I sat in front of the electric fan, watching a penguin float in midair right in front of me. It was a testament to summer’s devastation that I couldn’t even find the energy to be shocked. Though I will say, it was pretty surreal when she did it as a jellyfish.

One time, when I asked her how she did it, she actually gave me an answer. To be totally honest, it was so complex, I couldn't make heads or tails of it. All I could recall was that she said she wasn't technically floating, just...*rewriting her positionals*, or something to that effect. It made me think perhaps this alien was actually galaxy-brained and beneath her usual veneer of innocence was a cunning monster watching vigilantly for her opportunity to take over the world. So I brought her a bag of Sakuyama Chocojirou, and she ate them with the same old dopey smile. And that was the story of how I saved Planet Earth...maybe. But I digress.

I listened closely, hoping I could develop a special skill, too. But I didn't have a clue what I was supposed to be sensing, so the most I could do was wiggle my ears. The longer I sat there in silence, the more I began to focus solely on my own slow heartbeat.

Am I doing it right? Maybe I should think about Adachi a little more...

As idle thoughts shook the darkness in my heart, the penguin gently landed next to me, then pointed a wing stiffly in the direction of the hall. "Adachi-san is approaching."

"...Man, I couldn't tell at all..."

I really wanted to perceive her arrival like Yashiro could, but it just wasn't possible. Maybe if she was out there singing as loud as the cicadas or something. Too bad it wasn't a matter of simply sensing her love, because in that case, I could probably feel it from the dark side of the moon. No, yeah, definitely.

That said, love didn't have one specific feeling assigned to it, so what the heck *was* it, anyway? I wanted to figure out a non-scientific answer eventually. It certainly wasn't going to happen if my only hope was some alien's mystery organ. But I kinda suspected Adachi might just find it one day.

"You've got some weird talents for a kid who can't even wash the dishes."

"Ha ha ha! If you can't feel it, then simply go and wait for her outside."

"Mrgh... I can never tell if the things you say are deep or not. Now go find my sister."

I gave the penguin a little push from behind, and she ran off down the hallway. Why had this bizarre creature decided to live with a family that was mostly ordinary, save for my mother's extreme open-mindedness? She could have chosen Hino's house, where there was a big backyard and plenty of room for an alien or two. So why here? Was her beloved "destiny" involved?

In pursuit of my *own* destiny, I headed for the front door. My old basketball was still sitting on the shelf like a decoration, gathering dust; I ran my hand over it, then put it back in the corner. Whenever I touched it, it felt like I was in junior high all over again.

Before she could ring the doorbell, I unlocked the door—and when I stepped outside, I was greeted by sunshine and the shadow of a bicycle.

"...Shimamura?"

"Yup, that's me. And *you* are Adachi Sakura."

Adachi stared at me, eyes wide, as she stood beside her bike. *Wow, she really is here*, I thought, impressed by the alien's superpower.



“Wh...um...were you just waiting there the whole time...?”

Her eyes sparkled hopefully, like two miniature suns. If the roles were reversed and I was going over to *her* house, she'd probably wait at her front door for me in the exact same way. Not that she ever invited me! I once jokingly hinted that I'd like to see her room, and in response, she shook her head vigorously. What exactly was she hiding in there? A Shimamura shrine she prayed to every night?

“Well, I kinda sensed that...someone was telling me you were here.” I started to tell a lazy lie, then fumbled my way through it. Now I sounded like a crazy person...and yet Adachi's face lit up with a beautiful smile.

“That's...kind of amazing!”

If we were in each other's shoes, I'd ask if she was hallucinating. But evidently, she didn't even consider the possibility.

“Ha ha ha!”

It was too late to tell her I hadn't actually sensed anything, so now I was starting to feel pretty guilty. Nevertheless, I grabbed her bookbag out of her bike basket and brought her into the house with me. There, I struck a cheerful pose.

“It's me, high school Shima-chan!”

“Uhhhhhhhhh...what?” She gave it a moment of thought but ultimately didn't get it. It was so funny to watch the question marks sprout up over her head.

“I just felt like I needed to say it. And also this.”

I started to walk past her—to the closed front door. No clue where I thought I was going. But before I could pass her, she slid in front of me, blocking my path. No missed connection happening today, apparently.

“And so our story began.”

The question marks filled her eyes next. “Sorry, Shimamura. I'm having trouble keeping up with you today.”

“That's okay. Some days are like that.” And since *she* was usually the one

operating at full throttle, I deserved a turn now and then. “Anyway, welcome! I’ll show you to the second floor, like always.”

“Thanks for having me... Oh, what about your mom?”

“She’s at the gym, so we don’t need to go say hi.” I glanced down at the porcelain skin peeking out from under her skirt, then headed up the stairs.

She was still wearing the hairpin I gave her a while back, and I was impressed that she took such good care of it. With Adachi, I was impressed a *lot* of the time, actually; her life was just so strange and new to me. And yet, for all our differences, we were still together. The majority of my time in high school was spent dealing with her odd behavior, but I was satisfied with the way things turned out. Maybe we were just that compatible.

Inside the study room, the AC unit was working its ass off. Despite the fact that I’d been making use of this old storage room for quite some time, it was still super dusty every time I opened the door. Perhaps rooms, like people, had certain innate qualities they were born with.

“Happy to see me after those torturous three days?”

“Yeah.” She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and stared hard at me as we faced each other. Neither of us had anywhere to run. “My...my crops are watered.”

“Impressive vocabulary you’ve got there. I’ll take it as a compliment.”

I imagined myself raining down and soaking into her withered body, making her all waterlogged. For someone with so much moisture, however, she sat stiff as a board on the floor. Her posture was meek and modest, yet she was actually showing a lot of skin in that off-the-shoulder top.

I should have gotten dressed! I cursed myself as I looked down at my ratty old pajama shirt. Between you and me, there was a little hole in the bottoms, too. And since I wasn’t planning to leave the house, I wasn’t wearing makeup, either. The time I could have spent making myself presentable was instead spent...um...trying to awaken a latent superpower.

No matter how deeply she loved me, I probably needed to put in a little more effort before she gave up on me completely. *She’s always got her act together...*

When I peered at her face, she flinched and straightened her hunched back.

“Wh-what, what?!”

“I was looking for the crops.”

It was still hot in the room, so I turned on the electric fan. The first-floor fan had lost all its blades, but this second-floor hand-me-down hadn't given up the ghost quite yet. It spun like a little green windmill. Meanwhile, Adachi pulled a notebook and pencil case from her bookbag and set them on the edge of the table.

“Wow, you actually brought study stuff?”

“Wha?!”

“I mean, we *are* going to study.”

I was thinking we'd end up chatting the whole time. I set the seal plushie aside and settled into my spot at the table. Across from me, she shifted over on her knees. As I watched her move, she flushed faintly; she tried to smile, but messed up, and her eyes watered.

Whenever I was around, Adachi seemed to forget how to smile. Written out like that, you'd think I was intimidating her somehow. But though I hadn't seen it for myself, I'd heard that her normal personality was cold and calculating—even colder than the version of her I first met. The kind of girl who wore a poker face no matter who she spoke to. Scary stuff.

“Hey, Adachi, try being cold for a bit,” I suggested, mostly as a joke.

“Being...cold?” she repeated, grasping her bicep. She didn't seem to understand. “Are you saying you wanna go to the pool or something?”

That was a pretty funny interpretation. *The pool, hmm?* A viable suggestion, but I didn't want to risk encountering that *kappa* monster at the gym again.

“No, I mean personality-wise. I wanna see what the normal you is like.”

“The normal me? I'm always normal... This *is* my normal.”

“You sure? A little birdy told me you're normally calm and collected.”

In junior high, her personality was a perfect match for the modest clothes she

was currently wearing. Obviously, I wanted to see it for myself. Of course, I'd sooner die than show anyone what I was like in junior high, but this wasn't about me!

"I'm already calm as it is."

"You *suuure*?"

I rose to my feet, walked around the table, and bent down over her. Her alleged composure vanished in an instant as she tilted her whole body hard to the left. I closed in, and...*well, now what?* Her guard was completely down, and all I could think to do was the most rote sexual harassment.

The light made her dark hair glow blue and added a hint of green to her eyes; her facial features still carried faint traces of childhood. When I took a moment to take her in, she was beauty incarnate. Flawless. Shameless.

Her cheeks looked so soft—and indeed they were. Her shoulders flinched as I gently cupped her face. Now her eyes shone with uncertainty mixed with something else. So I squished her cheeks flat.

"Eee hee hee..." Cackling ominously, I returned to my spot. Truth be told, I just couldn't think of anything else to do to her.

Okay, that was a lie—I *did* think of something, but didn't have the courage to act on it, so I ran away. Part of me hesitated, worried that it wasn't right. Especially since Adachi was the kind of girl who'd let me get away with anything. *We're both such awkward nerds*, I thought to myself as I put my chin in my hand and smiled at the wall to hide my embarrassment.

"Shimamura...?"

"Hee hee hee..."

Now and then I could hear Yashiro and my sister shrieking about something downstairs. Yashiro in particular had a very audible voice.

"Once we're back at school, the Culture Festival's right around the corner, huh?" I figured I may as well change the subject to something high schooly for a change.

Having finished lining up her supplies, Adachi sat twiddling her thumbs. Then

she processed the unfamiliar phrase and cocked her head in confusion. “Our school has a culture festival?”

“Believe it or not, yes, we always have.” Weird—I couldn’t remember taking part in it last year, or the year before that. “Since we’re not in any clubs, we won’t have much to do, but yeah...”

“Huh.” She’d never shown any interest in school events, so her initial reaction was muted. Then she realized what I was getting at, and her voice leapt up an octave. “We could...explore it together!”

“Sure, sounds good.”

She didn’t need to rush. I didn’t have anyone else to go with—not a single soul. Adorable, sweet Adachi was my everything.

“Anyway...shall we hit the books, or whatever...?”

“You don’t sound excited.”

“Nobody’s ever excited to study!”

At the very least, my brain wasn’t wired that way innately. Nevertheless, I’d kept at it every single day thus far, so if you asked me, I was actually pretty gung-ho about my future at the moment. I knew that if I started slipping, my path would split off from Adachi’s; thus my brain was willing to work hard for the time being.

I’m doing something good, I told myself as I opened my textbook and notebook. Naturally, it wasn’t until summer break had already started that I began to wonder if I should enroll at a cram school instead of self-study. Was that the smarter move? If there was one in the neighborhood, I could see myself attending—or was it too late now? *Maybe I should search online for summer courses.*

Much of my life had started later than it was supposed to. *Too* late, in a lot of cases. So right now it was generally a good idea not to procrastinate on anything important. That mindset was bound to diminish at least one regret down the road.

Today I would review everything I’d written down yesterday. Believe it or not,

going back to old material actually really helped it stick...or so it seemed to me, at least. As I peered down at the notebook, I caught myself leaning forward, then course-corrected back into good posture.

Just then, as I looked up, I made immediate eye contact with Adachi, who for some reason, instantly whipped her face away. On top of that, she started smacking her stomach like a sumo wrestler psyching herself up right before a match. I started to ask her what was wrong, but then I realized it might have something to do with her line of sight.

She wasn't remotely looking at her textbook or notebook, so where *was* she looking? I recreated its trajectory in my mind's eye. First, I pointed a finger out in front of her. When she flinched and recoiled, I gradually reeled it back in, tracing out the direction.

"Gah, er, n-no, I wasn't...!" she began to splutter, but I ignored it and proceeded with my inspection. The finger arrived at my chest.

Just now, Adachi's gaze was somewhere at chest level—*my* chest. I looked down at it through the ratty old shirt whose English slogan had long since faded in the wash. Given how stretched-out the collar had gotten, perhaps I had inadvertently given her an eyeful when I bent over.

Hmm. I see.

I looked up to find her sitting there with her face looking like it was covered in strawberry jam—so bright, it threatened to stain her teeth pink as they peeked out from behind her dewy lips. But I liked strawberry jam, and I liked Adachi, so I debated whether I might simply shrug it off like it was a two-for-one deal. Still, I couldn't pretend I wasn't a little bashful myself; the heat in my ears was proof enough.

"Adachi, uh..." I hesitated, unsure whether to take that step. My foot dangled in midair, awaiting its orders.

"Yup...that's me..."

She looked like her every molecule was composed of panic. *What do I do?* My indecision spun in circles like a pen between my fingers. I could have ignored it and gone back to studying, but part of me felt that this was another important

thing that I shouldn't procrastinate on. Now that she and I were dating, we would need to discuss this topic sooner or later—so I decided now was as good a time as any. The words leapt out of my mouth, charging blindly forward.

“Adachi, were you just checking me out?”

Now that I had said it, the memory of it would prevent any attempt to take it back. Meanwhile, I could practically see steam rising from her head—and a moment later, she slammed her face straight down onto the table. The blow was so direct, the vibration traveled through its legs and across the floor to me. For a second I was stunned, but when she didn't raise her head afterwards, I started to worry even more.

“Uh, Adachi?!”

“...*I wasn't looking.*” Apparently, that was the best response she could manage. Right now, though, I wanted to know if she was okay in the head—physically, that is.

“You shouldn't, uh...slam your face like that.”

“It's okay. I'm calm now.”

This composure she had paid for with a visible mark on her forehead. Her face was stiff, but her lower lip was quivering, and I could tell she was consciously holding back a veritable torrent of Adachiese. Part of me was confused by the dramatic reaction, but since I was the one to bring it up, backing down was not an option. I could tell if I tried to revisit the subject in the future, this would only happen all over again.

“Serious question, though. I'd like to make sure I know what you want from our relationship.” As I spoke, I couldn't stop myself from tracing circles on my knee. I had yet to identify exactly why I felt like I couldn't sit still without fidgeting.

“From our relationship? There's...lots of stuff,” she mumbled, as if her mouth was full of candy.

Lots of stuff? Am I not meeting her needs? Hmm. Evidently my appearance wasn't the only thing I needed to start working on. In that case... “I've got an idea.”

“Hhhg?!”

Sheesh, what was that sound? I raised a hand like I was about to swear an oath. “I will now ask you a few questions.”

“Huhggh?!”

If she was already biting her tongue at this stage, then she was in danger of biting it clean off. I started to have second thoughts. “These are important questions—for both of us—so try to answer them honestly without feeling awkward.”

I was feeling pretty awkward myself, so by no means was I trying to torture her. By analyzing her love for me, we could steer the ship in the right direction. Or so I decided for myself just now.

She took deep breaths over and over, but the air seemed to leak into her words. “But I’m...always...honest with you...” Apparently, she was so panicked that she needed to space her words out in order to speak at all. Concerning! Then again, it probably wasn’t much different from her normal self.

And so I asked her the sort of question that, were the roles reversed, would have made me bolt from the room.

“I noticed you were looking at my...boobs? My boobs, right?”

“I wasn’t looking.”

“I said be honest!”

“Don’t be silly Shimamura.”

Her voice was cracking all over the place, but for some reason this seemed to help her speak more fluidly. Maybe her brain had disengaged from everything except her tongue. I could picture something spinning in circles in her mind—stars, maybe.

“It’s fine, seriously. I mean, you were ogling me pretty hard in the bath during the school trip.”

“I was just—! I...was...” Unable to think of an excuse, she began to flounder. “I was...just looking...that’s all...”

“Really now.” If I tried to ask *why* she was looking, I could already tell she’d repeat “just looking” over and over. “So you were ‘just looking’ a second ago, too?”

She shook her head vigorously. “I really couldn’t see anything...just...”

“Just what?”

“Just the shirt!”

She was holding her ground like her life was on the line. But if I let this go, the conversation would be over. I tried to think of what to do, but it seemed my only option was to confront it in full sincerity.

“Adachi, you don’t have to be embarrassed about it. Please, just be honest with me. I gotta come to terms with this stuff before I can be ready for it... And I promise, no matter what you say, I won’t hate you for it! If anything, I’ll love you more!”

The last part sounded a little too hastily tacked on to be believable, even by my own standards. And I knew I was asking a lot by telling her to admit the truth without feeling shame. But I didn’t get many opportunities to seriously confront this stuff, and I wanted her to join me.

As she looked at me fearfully like a lost child in search of her mother, I responded with a bright smile. This method was surprisingly effective back when I struggled to open up to people. Thus I weaponized it myself.

When she saw that I was taking this seriously, she seemed to relax a bit, returning to the table. Her fingers tapped anxiously on her knees.

“...I was looking. I’m sorry,” she confessed sheepishly, like a little kid.



“You don’t really have to apologize.” *Probably*. “Now, back to my first question. Deep down, is there anything, y’know... Feelings... Desires...”

I fumbled, searching for an indirect way to say it. My kingdom for a thesaurus. But if I tried to look it up, I’d probably turn to strawberry jam myself. She and I were burning so hot, the AC unit and fan combo couldn’t keep up. Our relationship had progressed past its spring into the sweltering summer.

“Okay, okay, okay...I’ll just sum it all up. Do you wanna do sexy stuff with me?”

It was surprisingly a lot easier to just come right out with it. As my chin rested in my hand, my fingers tapped restlessly against my ear, making a sound like the patter of rain. Across the table, I saw her suck in a stiff breath. Her expression was fluctuating so fast, I was starting to worry she might make herself sick.

“For the third time, I really just, y’know...want your honest opinion on this. I want to make sure your needs are getting met.”

If I had to guess, that was what it meant to take someone seriously. Especially if that someone was your girlfriend. *Girlfriend*... The mere thought of the word made my skin itch. Sometimes I was surprised to remember I *had* a girlfriend. And right now, the girl in question was struggling with a particularly sensitive question.

“Ado...ma...waba...”

“What was that?”

I could practically see stars circling her head like a cartoon character. “Nnn,” she whimpered as she looked up at me. If only her tongue was as expressive as those puppy dog eyes. “What about you?”

Wait, what? Was that garbled mess supposed to count as her answer? Then again, it was obvious enough from her stammering and avoiding all eye contact. She could convey so many feelings without a single word, projecting them with her whole heart and soul...and that was probably what I loved about her.

“What *about* me?”

Her soaked eyes were in free fall, tilting down, then flashing back up at me.

“You know...Shimamura...sexy...”

“Please don’t shorten it to that.”

My name is Shimamura Hougetsu, thank you very much. And yours is Adachi Sakura...y’know, A.S. Just one letter away from a really naughty word. As I was having these stupid thoughts, I ruminated on her question.

“Well, let’s see... Hmmm...” Put simply, she was more or less asking if I wanted to do sexual stuff, or if I ever looked at her in that way. *Hmmm.* I started ogling her up and down. “To be totally honest, I can’t say I’ve ever thought about it before.”

Being with her was fun, but I couldn’t recall ever picturing what she looked like under her clothes. I simply embraced the version of her that was already right in front of me. But maybe that fell short of her hopes. Could she accept it?

As she continued to peek up at me, her lips began to pout a bit. “Then forget it.”

“C’mon, don’t sulk...”

“I’m not. It’s not that... Okay, okay, okay. You want me to say it? I’ll say it... If you’re asking if I have...those thoughts...then, well, you know. But it has to be mutual.” She sat up straight, closing the distance between us. Indeed, whenever she wanted to make progress, she always charged forward. “So I’ll just wait...you know...until you get sexy.”

“...Adachi...”

I admired her courage, but also: Did she have to phrase it like that? My mind was going blank just trying to think of a response.

Still, I was surprised she had the patience to wait for it. In the past, she would have pounced without asking. Maybe she could tell how I felt. Well, if it was even a little bit reassuring for her, then...I was pretty satisfied.

“Sorry I’m so slow, Adachi.”

“*You’re not you’re not I’m fine.*” She looked like she was about to pass out, and I hastily bit back a giggle.

“That being said, personally...I *do* want to show my appreciation for your

kindness, so...you can touch me a little, as a treat.” I spread my arms wide, welcoming her to go wild.

“Hoh?” Her lips formed a perfect circle for her dopey grunt.

“Wherever you wanna touch me. Just one spot, but it can be anywhere.”

Since she was my girlfriend, it surely couldn’t hurt. For a moment I thought maybe I shouldn’t make this offer lightly, but I quickly thought better of it. This was *Adachi* I was talking to. No matter where she touched me, I wouldn’t be grossed out—only flustered at most. *Love conquers all*.

Meanwhile, she was still frozen in place, leaking steam from that perfect circle. “I can touch...your body...?”

“I mean, it doesn’t have to be mine... Wait, no, yes it does.” I could only give permission on my own behalf and no one else’s.

Her delicate fingertips bent slightly, as if tracing out each letter of *touch*. She glanced all around the room, then quietly curled into a ball, writhing and grinding her forehead against the floor. As she rolled around in the fetal position, she suddenly arched her body backwards like a shrimp, then just as suddenly curled up again. Her eyes were wide and empty as her sweat sprang to life, and I watched as her once-glossy lips withered and dried before my eyes. She was burning through all the energy in her body.

Wow. If I had to guess, Adachi agonized more powerfully than any other girl in the entire world. It was the first time I’d ever witnessed a human being wriggling like a bagworm in distress on the floor, and by my estimation, her mind was currently a bar brawl of conflict versus desire versus principles versus fear versus integrity. So who would win? Would desire mow the rest down with its roundhouse punch? Or would integrity leap in from the sidelines to seize victory fair and square?

More than ever, I was dying for a peek inside her head. I could imagine the screams were enough to fill a room floor to ceiling. But once she made it through this struggle, she would surely come out the other side having grown in some way.

Wait, really? Hang in there, Adachi!

No, absolutely not. Hang in there, Adachi.

Eventually, after she'd had her fill of rolling around with the seal plushie, she sat upright, a dull glint in her eyes. Now I was about to see the result of whatever turmoil she'd just clawed her way out of.

She closed her eyes...extended her left hand out in front of her...and started inching along like a snail in my direction.

"You sure you should keep your eyes closed?"

"I can't do this if they're open!"

"Oh. Sorry," I replied reflexively. Didn't know that was how it worked.

At the end of her mannequin-rigid arm was a fist clenched so tight, it seemed to hold the reins of her passion. To an outside observer, it might have looked like she was about to punch me. And yet, though her eyes were closed, the hand was advancing directly toward...somewhere. Maybe she was just squinting really hard.

I shot a sidelong glance at our open notebooks and chuckled silently. *Yeah, I knew we weren't going to study.* So I closed my eyes, too, vowing to accept her touch no matter where it landed. I could picture it: two girls facing each other with their eyes closed, one reaching out to bridge the gap. *This is so weird,* I thought to myself as I waited in the dark.

And as I waited, what should come to mind but the friends I would hang out with this summer. Every time we met, I always wondered if this would be the last time. But I wanted to see them, so off I went—just as Adachi had come here today.

A soft light, like the gentle flicker of a candle, rose up inside me, and the timid heat gradually consumed me. Which would melt first: the wax, or my skin?

Funny how I still recognized her fingers, even with my eyes closed. I could feel her...soul? Was the soul in her hands? *Ah, I get it.* If I kept honing this sensation, perhaps I too could learn to sense her presence from afar.

My thoughts were a stark departure from what was actually happening.

"Ah..."

Her slightest exhale contained so much, and when I heard it, I returned to reality. My eyes opened, and...

“So that’s your move, eh?”

This was her intention. What had touched me was her heart.

As for *where* she was touching me...well, some things were meant only for the two of us to know.

Her fingers opened and closed faintly, as if grasping at something fuzzy, like a dream. As I watched her, a small smile crept up on my face. *She’s in heaven.*

Here we were in a world where someone could die while our eyes were closed, and what on earth were we doing? Maybe you’d roll your eyes at us and scoff. But one day *I* was going to die, and so would the girl living so recklessly right in front of me.

If I imagined her face without the panic, without the blushing, all ice and no heat, it made me want to scream. If I pictured her frozen for the rest of time, unawaking and unchanging no matter what I did, the screams in my head got louder. You know...*aaaaahh*. It’s hard to explain, but I just really didn’t want that. The mere thought was crushing, and painfully so.

The thought of losing Adachi made me feel like shredded cheese. I could viscerally imagine the sensation of my upper body being torn in half at the shoulders. That was how deeply she was embedded in the fabric of my every day. The roots of her Sakura tree had curled around me, and I could tell I was stuck for life. But the flowers that bloomed overhead were admittedly very pretty, so...it seemed I had chosen to accept it.

Though she was in a constant battle with herself, she had once again held her ground to the very end.

Someone once told me *talent* is the ability to do stuff you were never taught. Maybe that was true. But Adachi was at least *trying* to do the things no one had ever bothered to teach her. Even though she wasn’t sure she could pull it off, she still did her best, in spite of her fear. And if you asked me, that was a type of talent, too.

“Adachi?”

“Wheh?!” She froze, startled, as her sweat levels increased by thirty percent.

“You’re talented, you know that?”

“Hggbbhhg?!” It sounded like she was biting back an explosion.

With all the emo feelings stuff left out, my comment could be interpreted in a lot of ways. But if I tried to delicately explain what I meant, I was liable to yelp and bounce around myself. *Eh, forget it.* To minimize the damage, I rerouted my embarrassment into the grade-school approach: “Ada-cheechee hor-neenee!”

“Yyhhh, stbbgg?!” Flailing her empty right hand, she switched from ghostly pale to bright red and back.

This. *This* was the Adachi I wanted to see. Satisfaction enveloped me like a warm hug as I realized: this was what I wanted from Adachi right now. Maybe it wasn’t the exact same as what *she* wanted, but I would do my best to reach a compromise.

By studying, learning, and understanding deeply, I could get there with or without any god-given gift. Surely we had the time—time enough for that. And perhaps that was the biggest blessing of all.

I may not have talent, but I’ll fight tooth and nail to keep up.

I looked at Adachi’s swinging fingers, and as the knowledge that they had touched me slowly sank in, I quietly closed my eyes. Elsewhere in this world, people were dying...and others were taking their first breath.

Chapter 7:

Not Really about Summer at All

ON THE WAY home from pool day at my school, I spot a panda cub toddling along. This I wasn't expecting to see, so I stop in my tracks on the street corner. It's wearing a blue backpack that's as big as, or maybe bigger than, its body. Kind of surreal watching it march through the searingly bright sunshine. Hoping maybe it's Yachi, I chase after the panda and peer at its face.

"What the?"

I lock eyes with a girl a lot shorter than Yachi. A pure white glimmer swirls in her eyes like clouds.

"What. Do. You. Want?"

"I'm getting *déjà vu*..."

I feel like I encountered this same girl in this exact same way last year. Was she dressed like a panda back then, too? As I recall, I mistook her for Yachi and called out to her. No clue why I thought I recognized her from behind, but upon further inspection, she *feels* the same as Yachi, even if their faces look nothing alike.

Her silver hair and eyelashes shine bright enough to dazzle me. Her eyes are pale blue, lighter than Yachi's purple. Almost like each one is an image of Earth from space.

"Hm? Do you know me?"

"Not really. I just realized I've seen you before."

"I see."

With this brusque reply, she acts like the conversation is over and starts walking again. For someone so short, she sure talks with a tongue as sharp as a grown-up's—but from behind, she looks like she hasn't even made it to elementary school yet. I watch her toddle along for a bit, then jog up beside her.

“Hm?”

“Can’t let a little kid walk around on their own, y’know,” I explain smugly, pointing my index finger into the air.

“Little kid...?” The panda tilts her head for a moment, then shrugs.
“Whatever.”

Beneath her panda hood is sparkly white hair so delicate, it looks fragile to the touch, and I can’t take my eyes off it. It feels *cold* almost, like moonlight’s shining directly onto it. But her soft cheeks look like they’d stretch for miles.

“That’s a big backpack you’ve got.”

“When I said I was going out, they made me take a few things.” The panda chuckles like she’s in a good mood.

“Where’s your mom and dad? Are you lost?”

“I am *not* lost this time.”

Answering only my second question, she points in the direction of an intersection. Heading straight from there, we reach a public park, which she cuts across to head next door. And next door...is a little cemetery.

In the back is a field with a great view, and I can count the number of graves on my fingers. But I haven’t spent much time in a cemetery before, so I feel a bit awkward. Then the panda walks up to the largest grave in the cemetery and comes to a stop. I can’t read most of what’s etched onto the headstone.

“Whose grave is this?”

Standing here in front of it, I’m not sure how to ask. Is it a friend or family member? A grandpa or grandma? A bunch of ideas come to mind, but something tells me I need to tread carefully.

“My guess is as good as yours.”

“What?”

“But I made a promise, you see.” The panda pulls a tall, skinny jar from her backpack. It’s full of *kompeito* candy. “And it seems keeping promises is our favorite hobby.” Placing the jar by the headstone, she stares firmly at the grave.

“What do you mean?”

“A hobby is something you do for no benefit whatsoever, is it not?” she asks dryly as she slings her backpack back over her shoulders. “Okay, that’s enough. I’m eating it.” With a devilish grin, she grabs the jar she only just gave as an offering. “Put out your hands and I will give you half.”

“You sure?”

“That is how these are meant to be eaten.” Then she lets out an evil laugh that doesn’t match her voice whatsoever.

Specks of purple, blue, and white spill from the jar into my waiting palms. I can feel their medium-firm bumps poking into my skin. But I’d better eat them fast before they melt and make my hands all sticky.

Meanwhile, the panda pours the rest of the jar into her open mouth. So instead of picking them up one at a time, I decide to funnel them all into my mouth, too. Together we stand in front of the grave, our cheeks stuffed full of candy. She manages to smile without spilling any, and a chuckle rises in my belly.

“Wanna come over to my house?” I offer once we’re done visiting(?) the grave. “I know someone you’d really get along with.” Yeah, she and Yachi would make super sparkly friends.

“Hmm.” Her gaze wanders for a bit. “Sadly, I must return home by dinnertime.”

“Darn.” Apparently the panda has a home to go back to, and I don’t mean a bamboo forest.

“...Hrmmm?”

Just then, she suddenly leans in close to my hand, looking at the strand of sky blue still tied around my finger. Even after all this time, the butterfly continues to sparkle and flap its wings.

“What is it?”

“Oh, I just thought the color was familiar.”

“Blue...? Wait, does that mean you *do* know Ya—”

“Fare. Thee. Well!” Instead of letting me finish, she toddles off down the street at full speed.

“She and Yachi have *that* in common, too...” She doesn’t look like she’s running all that hard, but somehow I can tell I won’t be able to catch up.

Will I see her again next year? Maybe summer is the season of encounters.

I turn away from the cemetery and start heading home. My pace quickens with the urge to tell Yachi everything that just happened.

“Welcome hooome!”

“Wow, she was right...”

When I open the front door, I’m greeted by a dolphin riding my mom’s shoulders. One thing’s for sure: I can count on having a strange home life all year round.

Chapter 8:

Remember22

IT WAS the day we first traveled farther than our legs could possibly reach in a single step. I couldn't recall the last time I rode a bullet train, but it was faster and more fun than I was expecting.

"Right?" I asked Adachi beside me, even though there was no possible way she could have known what I was thinking.

At first her eyes widened, but then she nodded. "Right."

It was nice to have someone validate me, even when she didn't understand.

My twenty-second summer was rapidly accelerating like it was trying to catch up to something. As I watched the scenery blur together outside the window, I thought of all the other summers I'd let pass me by. First there were the grade school summers where all I did was smile, followed by junior high summers where all I did was stress, and then there were high school summers where all I did was meet Adachi.

With each new summer, the season regained a bit of its lost sparkle. The sun ripened both the things I needed to remember and the things I wanted to forget, making it easy to look back. For someone who struggled with names and faces, when it came to myself, I suddenly had a photographic memory. Perhaps I was actually a lot more self-obsessed than I realized.

Likewise, Adachi was also twenty-two now, and her hair was longer than it used to be in high school—like the nurtured roots of a sapling that had grown into a tall tree. Before I knew it, she suddenly looked right at home with a soft smile. Someone once told me they thought she was frigid, but I still hadn't met that version of her. Admittedly, it was probably for the best.

Our travel destination was a city known for its tourist attractions, and in summer, I expected it to be crowded with swarms of other visitors. So why would I still choose to go there, when the thought of summer crowds made me feel all *blegh*? Because it was a step closer to my long-term goal: a trip abroad.

In terms of distance, anyway. Perhaps it was an uncommonly simple reason for someone to travel east.

Plus, this particular city was located close to the ocean, and since my hometown was landlocked, I was hoping the sea breeze might make me feel like I'd come a long way.

"Shimamura, look."

When I turned in response to Adachi's voice, I found an origami crane. Apparently the wrapper from our train meal had been given new life. Either she was bored, or she wanted to show off her skills, because she held it up with a hint of pride. And as I gazed down at the bird spreading its wings in her palm, I felt nothing but joy.



After the bullet train carried us across the country, we transitioned to a smaller local train. Unlike the bullet train, this one was packed, and there was nowhere for us to sit. Thus we stood beside the door, shoulder to shoulder, waiting firmly for our destination. While Adachi barely had any luggage, I was carrying a fairly big backpack, and it felt indicative of something—our personalities, maybe. I contemplated this as I swayed with the motions of the train.

And so, at long last, we arrived at our destination, all without taking a single step. I was feeling oddly inspired by the power of technology.

“Thoughts, now that we’ve arrived?” I asked Adachi on a whim as we walked down the station stairs.

She paused to think for a moment, gazing into the distance. “Uhhh...well...crap, I don’t have an opinion yet.”

“What a coincidence! We match.”

At this, her face lit up with relief, and she smiled. No longer was emoting a struggle for her.

We passed through the turnstiles out into the sparkling sunshine, where a rickshaw was waiting like a taxi at the curb. *Yep, this is a tourist trap, all right.* “First time I’ve ever seen one of those in real life,” I murmured, pointing subtly.

Adachi turned to look. “I bet it’d be hot and miserable riding one of those right now,” she mused, and indeed, there was no roof. But if it was waiting here, then surely there had to be a market for it.

Standing next to the rickshaw was, presumably, the driver: a young woman with blonde hair, dressed in a *happi* coat. Behind her, the deep blue sky was such a stark contrast, it was like she was carrying it on her back. Driving a rickshaw seemed like hard labor to me, but if women her age could do it, then maybe not.

As I stood there, lost in thought and staring absently, the woman suddenly turned, and our eyes met. Instantly, we both froze.

Hard to say which one of us was the first to realize, but...

“Senpai?”

“Welcome, welcome! Step right up for a summer memory like no other! So what if there are taxis right there? So what if the bus is cheaper? This is a *rickshaw*! Oh, and the heat—great weather we’re having, isn’t it? This season may feel like hell on the best of days but hop on in and it’ll brighten up your vacation real quick! We’re on fire, folks! But one day you’ll look back on it—yes, it’ll be the first thing you remember about your life as you lie on your deathbed! So why not skip the hassle and burn more than fireworks into your—*Senpai*, you say?”

Instead of a two-sided conversation, she rattled off a slew of words in my direction, only to belatedly react with confusion to my question. *Wait, is this really her?* I was starting to think maybe I had the wrong person.

But no, it was my senpai from junior high basketball. She was a year older than me, and the last time I saw her was probably at some point at the start of high school, so it had been quite a while. Nevertheless, I recognized her on sight, probably thanks to that bright blonde hair.

I amend my previous statement: apparently, *I* was the first to realize.

“Well, well, if it isn’t my kouhai!” I could hear hesitation at the edges of her voice.

“Can you remember my name?”

She froze, which made me think the answer was no. But after a pause, or perhaps a loading screen, she spoke up: “It’s Shimamura, right?”

Well done. “Took you long enough.”

“Ha ha ha ha ha! What can I say? I’m married to the job.”

She laughed wholeheartedly, without a trace of guilt. But the version of her that I once knew had never laughed like that. Or much at all, really.

“It’s been what—six, seven years since I last saw you? If you met a kid when they were in kindergarten and they showed back up on your doorstep in sixth grade, wouldn’t you be like, ‘¿Dónde estás?’ or something”

“I mean, yeah, probably.” *Pretty sure your Spanish is wrong, though.*

“Just look at you now, too old to play with dolls...”

“Okay, you haven’t known me *that* long.”

“For that matter, I never dreamed I’d encounter you *here* of all places, Shimamura What’s-Your-Name.”

“Yeah, that’s fair. I wasn’t expecting to find you here either, Senpai.”

Her entire existence had been erased from my mind. Thankfully her golden hair was so memorable, it all came rushing back in seconds flat. Seriously, how could I have bumped into an acquaintance so soon when we were this far from our hometown? Did the bullet train *actually* go straight, or just loop around in a circle when I wasn’t looking? Then again, our town didn’t have rickshaws...

“Shimamura?”

Adachi tugged at my elbow. Times like these, why did she always pinch my elbow skin? *There’s no fat there!*

“We were on the basketball team together in junior high,” I explained briefly. Well...actually, that was pretty much the whole story. Not a lot else I could say about her.

“Hmm...” Adachi offered her a tiny nod of acknowledgment.

“Whoa, it’s a pretty lady!” Senpai exclaimed. “So pretty, in fact, I’d love to have *you* as my kouhai, too.”

“Right,” Adachi replied dully.

At this, Senpai let out a creepy little cackle—like the sort of laugh when you just remembered something. I would sometimes burst out laughing like that when I thought back to old memories. Though in my case, I was more subtle about it.

Anyway, it was starting to sink in just how beautiful Adachi was to anyone who saw her. Gazing up at her, I decided to play along. “Whoa, it’s a pretty lady.”

“Hweh?” Her face crumpled, and I experienced the mysterious phenomenon of the stunning beauty who could transform into an adorable creature at will.

“It’s not a competition,” Senpai scoffed. “Wait, are you *jealous*, mayhap?”

“...Indeed I am.” Truth be told, it wasn’t that deep; I just wanted to try it out myself. Now I was starting to see how simple-minded I really was.

“So, do you and the pretty lady live around here? No, that can’t be it. You don’t have the smell of the city.”

When she talked about us like we were Beauty and the Beast, she made it sound like I didn’t fall under the beauty category at all. That was fine, though. The highest I’d ever been rated was third place. And Adachi’s compliments were so dramatic, they were in a league of their own.

“We’re on vacation. I’m guessing this is...your career? Not a side hustle?”

“Correct. I didn’t feel like there was a place for me at home anymore, so once I graduated high school, I was outta there. Luckily, I found some money, and one thing led to another, and now I’m a rickshaw driver.”

“*Found* some money...?”

Playfully, she spread her arms wide as if to flaunt her dark indigo *happi* coat. The sunshine seemed to glide down each strand of golden blonde. It reminded me of the days when I bleached my hair...and how much everyone in my life hated it.

Our basketball team was neither skilled nor passionate, but Senpai played in pretty much every game. As for me and my bad attitude, I never played in a single one all three years.

“Hey, Shimamura. Seeing as fate reunited us here, why not take a ride?”

She jerked her thumb at the passenger seat, and judging from the grin playing at her lips, I suspected she was hoping I’d feel too awkward to say no to an old acquaintance. I was split fifty-fifty between *no thanks, have a good life* and *since you’re offering, sure*. Thus, I decided to check with Adachi next to me.

“What do you think? Wanna try it?”

“Your senpai...”

That wasn’t an answer, and the look in her eyes was rapidly going cold. She may have seemed more stable these days, but deep down, she was still the

same girl. Did she really need to be jealous of my *senpai*, of all people? From my perspective, Adachi was getting *way* more attention, and I was...well, I wasn't bothered much at all. But only because I knew what she was like.

"We're friends! Best friends! Come be besties with us!" Senpai reached out affably, her fingers wiggling like tentacles. But when Adachi shot her a look, she stopped dead. Reading between the lines, she began to backtrack: "On second thought, we're not friends. I don't even know her. Kouhai who?" Like trying to flip a fried egg only to throw the whole frying pan instead.

"I guess we don't know each other, then. We'll be going now."

"C'moon, isn't it obvious? I wanna show my kouhai what I do for a living!"

Am I your kouhai or not? I gave her a summary of all my thoughts thus far: "You've really changed, you know that?"

At this, she combed the hair out of her face and grinned. The look in her eyes had a wistful sparkle, as if to suggest *I* hadn't changed much at all. "Yeah, well, I wanted to reinvent myself." Laughing to herself, she headed back to the rickshaw like she'd decided we were getting in.

Reinvent herself?

While it was an amusing prospect to blithely ignore her and head to the bus stop, I could already imagine her chasing after us, dragging the entire rickshaw with her. "Eh, what the heck. Let's give it a try."

"Sure, but...I'm gonna be sitting next to you."

"Huh? Yeah, I meant both of us... Oh, good grief, my dear Adachi-chan. I haven't forgotten about you, silly."

Quit giving her all your attention, she was trying to say. I heard it loud and clear. Taking her by the hand, I headed for the rickshaw.

"Here's a parasol for you. Sorry we don't have a roof on this thing. And I hope you brought your own refreshments."

Senpai reached into the back seat, grabbed a purple paper parasol, and handed it to me. The dry smell of the *washi* paper wafted up to my nose. As I took it and stepped closer, I realized there was a faint scar on her brow that

wasn't there before. It looked like a cut, and I could only imagine how it got there, but I kept my curiosity to myself.

Hand in hand with Adachi, we settled into the red seats with some assistance from Senpai. Once we were secure, she ran around to the front. From behind, I could see her arms tense up and her waist muscles harden.

"We're ready to depart, ladies. Now where am I taking you? Got somewhere in mind? Or would you like the guided tour?"

I exchanged a glance with Adachi, then answered, "The tour."

"You got it!"

It was a bit unnerving to look down at the ground from a higher vantage point than I was used to. Then, as I was watching the scenery go by, I realized belatedly: I had no business expecting Senpai to remember my name, because as it turned out, I couldn't remember hers, either. What was it...? I could vaguely recall that it was something unique, but nothing more concrete than that.

"I gotta say, Shimamura, you're pretty careless."

"I'm sorry?"

Facing forward with her hands on the shafts, she chuckled. "You really shouldn't get in without asking what it costs first. Eee hee hee!" She sounded like a little kid who just pulled a prank.

"Well, how much is it?"

"Three thousand yen for fifteen minutes."

"Rip-off!" Fifteen minutes? We'd barely make it down the street!

"Good thing the two of you can split the cost. How does that saying go again? Joy shared is joy doubled; sorrow shared is fifty percent off?"

"Not sure that's correct, but I get what you're saying."

I opened the parasol and adjusted its position so a shadow would be cast over both of us. It dyed our skin as if soaked by purple rain. Most likely it didn't deflect the heat in the slightest, but the purple made it *look* colder, at least.

“I kind of like it,” I remarked, and Adachi smiled gently, her face painted in purple shadow—soft, pale, peaceful. All the things the old Adachi never had.

“Okay, folks, first up: here we have some *ojizo* statues.”

Within moments, a...tourist attraction?...had appeared right next to the rickshaw’s big wheels: six statues wearing red caps and bibs. “Those are *ojizo* statues, all right.”

“Yep.” The rickshaw moved past without even stopping.

“Uhhh...don’t you have any anecdotes or trivia about them...?”

“No? I’m not from here, remember?”

“...Ooooookay.”

“If you want all the nitty-gritty details, I can refer you to a different rickshaw after we’re done.”

“Great sales ethics.”

“Let me ask the pretty lady: Would you rather hear about the local places of interest, or stories about Shimamura in junior high?”

“Let’s not, actually!”

“Shimamura in junior high,” Adachi answered, leaning forward eagerly.

“Stoop,” I whined, shaking her by the shoulder. “Forget the past—let’s talk about the *future*, Adachi!”

“It was the spring of her first year, and a teammate was yelling at her to ‘pass the damn ball.’ In response, young Shimamura What’s-Her-Name said, ‘Okay, how’s this?’ and flung it directly—”

“STOOOOPPPP!” How could she remember that trivial moment when she didn’t even remember what I looked like?

Incidentally, it had taken place during our first training camp, and in response the girl kicked me, at which point it became an all-out catfight. Some teammate I turned out to be. I wanted nothing more than to take bitter little junior high Shima-chan, bury her in a ditch, and put a popsicle stick in place of a headstone. Problem was, judging from the look in her eyes, Adachi wanted to grab the

brat's hand and rescue her.

"Adachi, seriously, do you *really* want to hear about that?"

"I'm torn... Part of me wants to know, but part of me is scared that once I find out, I'll feel bad that I wasn't there for you." She pressed a hand to her chest as she confessed to this contradiction. I could understand the feeling, but...

"You don't need to know about it, and frankly, I'm *glad* you weren't there. I wasn't a nice person by any stretch of the imagination." If we'd met back then, we probably would have given each other bad vibes and a wide berth.

"Oh? So now you're a nice person?" Senpai cut in.

I pursed my lips slightly, giving it some thought. "Well, I'm making an effort."

"Hey, that's awesome!" Her face lit up like it was exactly what she was hoping to hear. "And yet the pretty lady's got *struggle* written all over her."

"Excuse me?" The impolite observation turned Adachi's blank expression to ice.

Ooh, is this the rumored Frigid Adachi? Should have known Senpai would have the power to lure her out. I'm definitely not that brave.

"I love people like you."

"*Excuse me?*" Adachi repeated, her voice growing barbed.

But Senpai kept on smiling like she wasn't worried. At the same time, her cheeks were stiff from summoning the strength to pull the rickshaw. Her face was multitasking. Still, I was grateful to her for changing the subject away from junior high.

"Based on age, you and this pretty lady would be...in your fourth year of college now, right? Is this your graduation trip?"

"Something like that." Technically it was more of a warm-up to that, but I wasn't confident I could explain it to her.

"Are you friends from college?"

She was just making small talk, but truth be told, I was a teensy bit unsure how to answer. While I was hesitating, however...

“We’re dating,” Adachi replied firmly, before I could.

Senpai came to a stop three steps before the intersection and looked back at us. When our eyes met, I raised our held hands in place of a response. Yes, *we’re dating*.

Adachi was now at the point where she could say it without stumbling. I peered at her face in profile, and though perhaps it was weirdly patronizing, I admired her for being such a hard worker.

“Oh *ho*,” Senpai smirked.

“And what exactly is ‘oh *ho*’ supposed to mean?”

“I’m just surprised you’d ever love someone,” she said point-blank to my face—quite possibly her rudest comment yet. “I mean, you never had any crushes in junior high.”

“Sure I did... Well, something akin to a first love, anyway...”

“What?!” It was Adachi, not Senpai, who reacted with shock, and I quietly regretted letting it slip. “Sh-Shimamura...you had a crush on someone?”

“Wow, not you too! You guys make me sound like some unfeeling monster!”

In my case, I was pretty sure it was different from a crush. Something about that woman just...appealed to me. But if that was what it meant to like someone, then sure, perhaps it was romantic.

“The fact that I love you is proof that I’m capable of loving another person, so... Wait, why are you looking at me like that?”

Adachi was biting her lip with her face all scrunched toward the center, the way my little sister looked when she ate sour candy. But she didn’t need to explain it out loud when the word *UNACCEPTABLE* was written all over her face like a neon billboard.

“Adachi, you look like you’re about to take a bite out of the first hamster that comes along.”

“What does that even mean...?”

I couldn’t think of an explanation, so I went to take a picture of her face to

show her, but then she grabbed my phone to stop me. I tried playing tug-of-war with her for a bit, but it was so unproductive that I gave up. “Anyway, why are you looking at me like that?”

“I don’t know,” she replied, her expression still posing a threat to hamsters nationwide. “I mean...”

I hadn’t seen Sulky Adachi for so long that it actually warmed my heart.

“I wanted your first love to...be me.”

“Sure, that would be great and all, but... Oh, but you’re still the first person I’ve ever dated, though!” I offered, hoping to reach a compromise. She nodded, but solely as a gesture of goodwill, because she only looked half-convinced.

“Interesting. So the misanthropic little girl I knew was a pure-hearted maiden on the inside,” Senpai remarked.

“Let’s not talk about it anymore. But for the record, my ‘first love’ was just someone I thought was interesting, that’s all,” I told her.

“And what a mild first love it must have been.”

Her tone was pregnant with implication. Was she suggesting *her* first love was spicy? What would a “spicy romance” even look like? Like a burn you couldn’t get rid of?

“Junior high, huh... So who was it? Kidou-kun? Shinkawa?”

“*Whomst?*”

“Oh, c’mon. How should I know? Tee hee hee!” She laughed like a kid half her age. “But if it was a girl, then it might have been someone on the team with us. Oh, duh! It was totally me, wasn’t it?”

“As if!”

Not to be rude, but this chick used to be a lot more *normal*, or at least, she took things fairly seriously. Her personality was so different now, I wondered if maybe she’d hit her head at some point. When I tried to pinpoint what had changed, I glanced to the side—and realized there was *another* radically different girl sitting right next to me.

I guess people change.

Then Adachi noticed me looking at her. No clue how she interpreted my gaze, but her eyes began to fill with fear.

“Seriously, it wasn’t her!” I pressed, just in case.

“Yeah, I figured. I was pretty boring back then.”

“I wouldn’t say *boring*. You just seemed to have a lot going on.”

Senpai chewed on my opinion for a moment. Then her lips spread into a smile. “These days I’m trying to focus on having fun, but now I’m so busy that I don’t have time for romance. Life sucks, am I right?”

“Busy with work?”

“I’m a rare breed, y’know, and I’ve got a pretty face to boot. Thank god I was born beautiful.”

“And with such modesty, too.” She wasn’t wrong, though.

“Though I will say customers by and large prefer someone who looks like a local. Someone well-educated who knows the town—and it certainly doesn’t hurt if they already have a baseline of fame from... Well, let’s not get into it. My point is, good looks pay off. I mean, that’s how you hooked Shimamura, right, pretty lady?”

Senpai directed the conversation to Adachi. The two beautiful women stared at each other, blinking, and then...

“Is it?”

Adachi turned to me to ask for confirmation. Was I in some capacity hooked by her pretty face? She always did have a hint of melancholy peeking through, which was what caught my attention to begin with, and it was probably a factor that kept me going back to the gym loft to see her.

“Well, I thought you were pretty from day one,” I admitted.

The end of my sentence painted red across her cheeks like a brush, an effect that was especially bewitching under the purple shadow of the paper parasol.

“I see...”

Her voice rippled like a stone had been skipped across the surface of her heart. And those small ripples rocked me gently in turn.

“Oh, um, same here. I’ve always...thought you were beautiful, Shimamura.”

“Third-prettiest in our class?”

“Number-one prettiest in the whole world.”

When I gave her a little verbal prod, she responded with the equivalent of a shove, feet rooted firmly to the ground like she wasn’t about to give a single inch.

“Th-thanks.”

To me it was an exaggeration, but to Adachi, it was a universal truth. When I contemplated this difference of viewpoint, it filled me with relief at the reminder that she was still here.

“See? Won’t this be a nice memory to look back on later?”

“Just like the memory of the respect I used to have for you.”

“And over here we have a very famous *torii* gate! Everybody passes through it, from couples to newlyweds to little grade schoolers on field trips! Follow that path straight down and you’ll find a shrine!”

Suddenly, she started reciting canned lines like a proper tour guide. Sure enough, in the direction she indicated was a large *torii* gate standing tall in the center of the street, with large stone-carved guardian dogs flanking it on either side. And she wasn’t kidding about its popularity, either; a group of women, ostensibly tourists, were currently posing under it for a photo.

As I glanced around, taking in the sights, I spotted an entrance to the train station on the other side of a mini-mart. It wasn’t the same one we departed from, but it was an indication that we were looping back around to the station square.

“It’s a classic photo op location. Each time I pass by, I wonder what would happen if I crashed my whole rickshaw straight through them like a bowling ball.”

“Um, I think you would lose your job.”

“Life is hard...”

In the rickshaw, we crossed the street in front of the *torii* gate, and as I watched the flow of the crowd on the other side from my high vantage point, the lights seemed to blur my vision. It was surreal and entrancing, like seeing night festival lanterns during the day. Because we were up high, the sound of the wind rushing down the street was loud in my ears, but if I focused on the scent, I could faintly pick up what might have been the sea breeze.

Once we finished crossing the street, Senpai suddenly looked up. “Sooo, that’s the mini-mart,” she explained lazily, pointing at the building on the corner. Almost all of the paid parking spots were filled.

“Yes, we have those back home, thank you.”

“Seriously? That town’s getting too gentrified! By the way, ladies, your fifteen minutes is nearly up. Can I interest you in an extension?”

“We’ll be getting out.”

“Exit’s on your right! Make sure you have all your belongings, blah blah blah!”

Senpai pulled over to the edge of the sidewalk and came to a stop, then ran around to the back to help us get out, still dripping sweat from head to toe. This time Adachi got out first, pulling me by the hand. Once we were back on solid ground, I closed the parasol and returned it.

“Did you enjoy the ride, madam?”

“Considering all I did was sit in one spot the whole time, there was a lot going on.”

“Great! Now if you could just circle all 5s on the survey...”

“What survey?”

“All jokes aside, Shimamura, I gotta talk to you real quick. And you gotta pay.”

“Oh, okay.”

If she wanted to speak in private, then I would need Adachi to wait here, and yet...

“And yet...”

The pretty lady showed no signs of relinquishing her continued grip on my hand.

“Look, I gotta go pay for the ride, and apparently, she wants to talk to me about something. Is that agreeable, my dear Adachi-san?”

“Talk about what?”

“Well, that’s the thing. I won’t know what it’s about until I talk to her.”

Her fingers poked at mine like she was scolding them. Even when it was just an old acquaintance we’d bumped into by chance, Adachi never let her guard down. Perhaps the secret to her hard work was that she didn’t allow herself to grow complacent.

“I’m telling you, it’ll be fine. Okay?”

“Okay...”

I knew she wasn’t doing this puppy dog act on purpose, but it was still so evil.

After I somehow managed to get Adachi to wait out in front of a nearby second-hand clothing store, I walked over to Senpai.

“Like I said earlier, it’s 3000 yen.”

“Yeah, yeah.” While she was getting her wallet out, I noticed Adachi looking at us and offered her a smile.

“What’s *her* problem, anyway? She’s not worried I’m gonna put my paws on you, is she?”

“More or less. Let’s just say she can be a little jealous gremlin.”

“Right, right.” As we spoke, Senpai held her palm out in my direction. I paid the full 3000 yen, no friends-and-family discount in sight. “Y’know, she’s really something. Let me have her.”

“Ha ha ha...”

“No, seriously. With your blessing, I’ll make my move on her ASAP,” she pressed with a straight face as she pocketed the cash.

“Senpai...?”

“Real talk, I’m super into girls, too. She’d be perfect if only she was a little shorter.”

There was no indication that she was joking, either. *You, too?* I looked up at her. There seemed to be an awful lot of sapphics in my life. Maybe there was something about me that drew them in. But I digress.

Could I relinquish Adachi to someone else?

My current life, minus Adachi, would equal...a version of me on the verge of collapse.

Yeah, that’s not happening.

“Well, you don’t have my blessing.”

In this world, we could only give permission on our own behalf and no one else’s. With that understanding, I rejected the concept of another person touching Adachi. For my own benefit.

Senpai heard the edge in my voice and nodded in satisfaction. “Then I guess I’ll make my move without it. In a world without permission, the ultimate seductress reigns supreme. Her name—”

“Hey!”

“I’m just messing with you. While I do enjoy stealing people’s girlfriends, I can tell that one’s a challenge I can’t handle,” she muttered with a self-deprecating sigh. “Loyal girls like her are never interested in me.”

“Well, duh. They wouldn’t be loyal if they cheated,” I answered a bit too seriously.

Then she pulled out a towel and started wiping her sweat. “All right, I’m gonna say something selfish.”

“What? Uh...okay...?”

“Never take your girlfriend for granted, Shimamura,” she warned me as she mopped up the product of her labor. It reminded me of the times she’d casually strike up a conversation with me after basketball practice. “Not that I’d ever take my own advice, of course.”

“What?”

“I can’t be that kind of person anymore. But *you* need to be, got it?”

“Senpai...”

Was it somehow connected to the faint scar on her forehead? Selfish indeed, to demand of me what she couldn’t do herself. But the fact that she warned me ahead of time was itself a vestige of her past self.

“It appears that this is where our paths must diverge.”

“I didn’t pay for an extension, so yeah.”

Was it me, or did she just roll her eyes? “From here on, the two of you can go anywhere! As far as you like!”

“Sheesh, quit shouting!”

“And if you get tired along the way, don’t hesitate to grab a rickshaw, all right?” As she grasped the shafts, her wrists bent like she was gripping a steering wheel. “Ideally at least four more times before your vacation’s over.”

“Do you only get paid commission, or...?”

“I’m just saying, it can get boring to walk alone. Now, time to find my next rider.”

She began to pull the rickshaw, and judging from the direction, I could tell she was headed back to the station square. As I gazed at her hair, shining brighter than the light absorbed by the big, silver wheels...

“Take care, Senpai.”

I withdrew my usual goodbye in favor of another. She had only carried us fifteen minutes forward, and perhaps that was apt for a connection as tenuous as ours. But when she looked back over her shoulder, I saw a hint of junior high in her smile.

“Thanks for the ride! Have a good trip!”

In the end, she played the role of driver to perfection, ending the moment on a high note. With a pretty face, it was easy to cut things short; this was something I’d learned through my relationship with Adachi. And as I watched

her walk off into the brilliant blue sky, I finally remembered her name.

“That’s right. I’d only ever seen her name on paper, so I said it wrong the first time. She gave me such a dirty look...”

But today, I could look back on that memory with a smile.

When I walked over to Adachi, she glanced at the retreating figure in the distance. “She sure was weird.”

“Yeah, I guess.” I already had two family members a lot weirder than her, so it didn’t really resonate. “I’m just happy she’s doing well for herself.”

This time I *didn’t* say “have a good life,” and yet it felt like a permanent goodbye. But on the off chance I saw her again, I’d probably recognize that blonde hair anywhere.

“Now, where to first? Souvenirs...? Eh, that can wait until we’re headed home.”

For once, we were actually tasked with bringing gifts home. Before we left, a tanuki came running through the house to smugly offer me a 500 yen coin. Naturally, she wanted junk food. As with any money accepted from a tanuki, I kept checking to see if it had transformed back into a leaf, but so far it hadn’t.

“Where do you wanna go, Adachi?”

“Wherever you are, Shimamura,” she answered without a moment’s hesitation, and once again I found myself admiring her conviction.

“But I’m already here.”



When I offered her my hand, she took it gently, like it was a prized treasure. As usual, we both started walking at nearly the same time, each hoping to guide the other.

“I’m kind of disappointed that there’s fifteen whole years of Shimamura I’ll never get to meet.”

This was apparently her review of the rickshaw ride. It felt like she was more or less saying she was too busy looking at me to care about the scenery, and it made summer’s color gather in my cheeks.

“Even though you’ll have all the decades ahead?”

“Two separate things.”

“Typical Adachi.”

She was so greedy, she wouldn’t be satisfied until she tasted every last bite of me. And since all it evoked from me was a smile, it was clear that I was a terminal case. Be it a familiar town or brand-new territory, she was right there by my side every step of the way. She was my Polaris, my guiding light, making my whole world sparkle... No, she *was* my whole world.

“Lately, I’ve started to wonder if maybe I love you a lot more than I realize.”

As I spoke, without looking at her face, I made a decision. I started walking quickly, bent forward slightly so her voice wouldn’t reach my ears. Obviously our joined hands wouldn’t allow this, but nonetheless, I tried my hardest to escape.

Roasting in the summer sun, my limbs felt so light. Where would we go? What would we see, and what would we remember? As we walked, it all began to pile up. Simply being with Adachi was enough to bury me in memories.

Praying that these memories would one day resurface, like bubbles filled with joy, I raced with her through a string of summers, each of them finite, yet seemingly boundless.

Because I’d decided the two of us could go anywhere—as far as we liked.

Afterword

***T**HIS STORY has not finished yet. It is an...infinity loop?*

So there you have it: *Adachi and Shimamura*, Volume 11. Finally, this has become my longest-running series. To be quite frank, I never dreamed it would last as long as it has. Who knew a little one-shot from an old magazine could grow up this big and strong? Needs more protein!

The next volume will be the last—at least, that's the plan at the moment. Yes, the touching finale! But it won't contain the epilogue! WTF! As for the story, or the setting, I'm thinking it'll probably be their high school's Culture Festival? At this stage, anyway. Once I start writing, however, it might change into something else entirely.

That said, the next *Adachi and Shimamura* release might not be Volume 12, but more of a side-something...possibly. I don't know. I *may or may not* have been instructed not to comment on future plans, so depending on what I write here, an agent from a shadowy organization *may or may not* suddenly appear directly behind me.

I can't go into specifics, but the content will be, personally speaking, some of my best in recent years, and you'll all be convinced that I'm a genius. If you've already read it, well, at least you'll have it all bundled together in one convenient place! And if you haven't read it, then I hope you will.

It'll release sometime next year—at least, that's the plan at the moment. I wonder what I'll title it. Also, it'll most likely get some new illustrations, which I'm really looking forward to. That's about it.

While you're at it, please consider checking out my other current series, *Watashi no Hatsukoi Aite ga Kiss Shiteta* (*I Caught My First Love Kissing Someone Else*).

That's all from me this year. Hope to see you again next year. Have a good one!



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