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Unwanted

Sleepover from Hell

Following the Flower's Scent

Distant Starry Sky

She-Devil

My First Love's Kiss

Hitoma Iruma
Illustration by Fly



Copyright

My First Love's Kiss, Vol. 2

Hitoma Iruma

Translation by Kiki Piatkowska Cover art by Fly

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WATASHI NO HATUKOI AITE GA KISS SHITETA Vol. 2

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Edited by Dengeki Bunko

First published in Japan in 2022 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo, through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

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New York, NY 10001

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First Yen On Edition: December 2024

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Anna Powers, Rachel Mimms Designed by Yen Press Design: Liz Parlett Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Iruma, Hitoma, 1986-author. | Fly, 1963-illustrator. | Piatkowska, Kiki, translator.

Title: My first love's kiss / Hitoma Iruma; illustration by Fly; translated by Kiki Piatkowska.

Other titles: Watashi no hatsukoi ga kiss shiteta. English Description: First Yen On edition. | New York: Yen On, 2024-Identifiers: LCCN 2024022110 | ISBN 9781975389468 (v. 1; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975389482 (v. 2; trade paperback) | ISBN 9798855407372 (v. 3; trade paperback) Subjects: LCGFT: Light novels.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.I77 My 2024 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024022110

ISBNs: 978-1-97538948-2 (paperback) 978-1-9753-8949-9 (ebook)

E3-20241116-JV-NF-ORI

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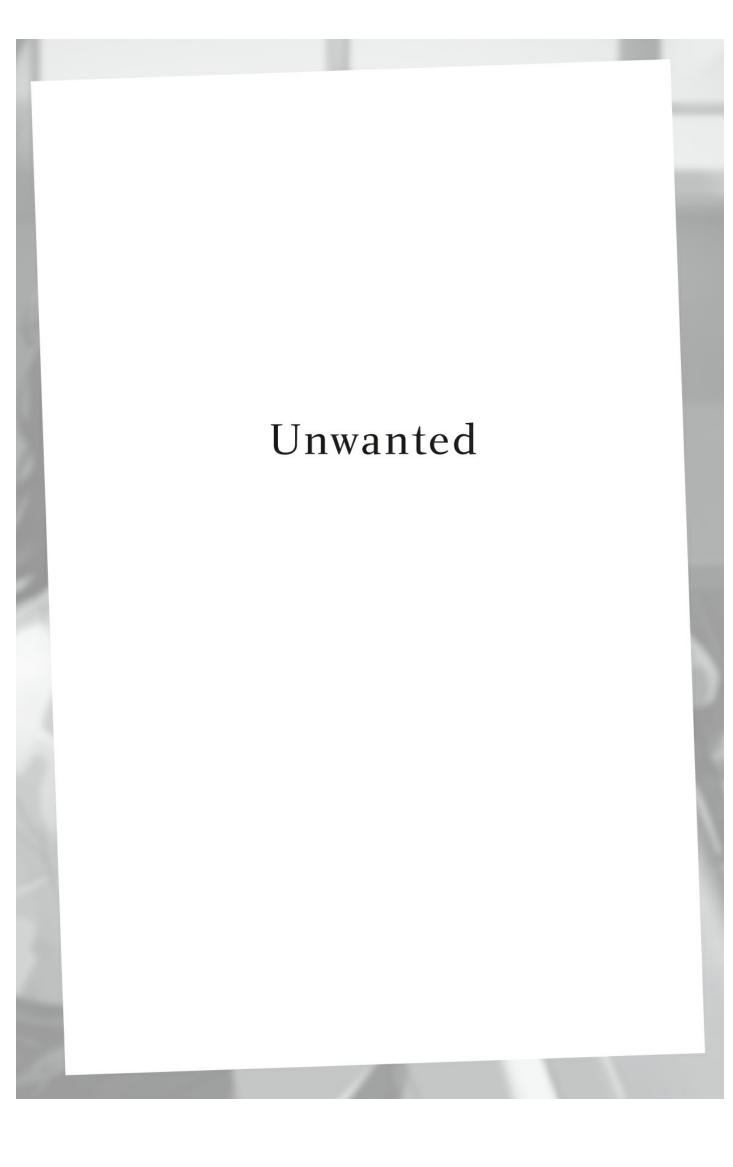
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I left the room before the blood had stopped flowing from the wound on my forehead. I was sobbing, too, and quickly managed to attract the attention of the grown-ups. I was an inconvenient member of the family, but they couldn't turn a blind eye to me in that state. Humans can't ignore blood.

When enough people were gathered around, I wailed that it was one of the grown-ups who'd hurt me. I didn't say who, because they would immediately have jumped to the accused's defense, denying everything. No, accusing the one who was guilty would be pointless. Even if the right person did get punished, someone else would start picking on me later.

What I needed was someone to give me permanent shelter.

The grown-ups were standing a little distance away from me and staring in shock. I unabashedly scrutinized their faces while I sobbed. And I didn't have to fake the tears; I was in enough pain.

My dad reluctantly trotted over to my side, eyeing me with resentment. He didn't like being in the same room with everyone; he was self-conscious of his current status in the family.

I watched him, thinking about what to do. He wasn't someone I could rely on. Like the other grown-ups, he'd been pretending not to notice when I needed help.

The stalemate was broken when the tallest member of the family, my grandfather, came to see what the commotion was all about. Like an idly curious onlooker who'd come to watch a house on fire. As soon as he arrived, the others made themselves scarce.

My grandfather, dressed in a kimono, crouched to inspect the wound on my forehead. I quietly waited for him to say something. I was struggling to keep my head straight; I felt as if I might fall over if I stopped concentrating for a moment.

"Did it hurt so much you thought you might die?" Grandfather asked, looking deep into my eyes.

I gaped a little, surprised. My reaction must've been just what my grandfather had been expecting, though. He stood up and beckoned me to follow.

"All right, you come with me."

That was more than I'd been hoping for. I obediently followed, making sure I was still crying.

"You don't want her, do you?" Grandfather asked my dad. "If you don't, I'll take her."

Dad was flustered, but he withheld his reply—it was obviously true that he didn't want me.

"I've grown tired of spending every day on walks with my old missus. The girl will be a welcome distraction."

Grandfather was the tallest of my family, and he had the most commanding presence, too.

He told me to follow him down the hallway encircling our spacious inner garden. When there was nobody around, he spoke to me again.

"You must've whacked your head damn hard, girl. You didn't break the wall or pillar or whatever it was, did you?"

Blood was running down my nose and making me feel icky.

"You did it to yourself, didn't you?"

"I did."

He'd seen through me, so I replied truthfully. He nodded, satisfied, and walked ahead, his arms swinging—a sign he was in a good mood.

"Neither myself nor your grandmother will be your parents, mind. We'll provide you with an appropriate environment, but you will have to do the growing-up yourself."

"I understand."

Grandfather seemed pleased by my obedience. "Excellent, excellent," he muttered, his spirits lifting even higher.

Maybe he had a fondness for obedient children. I was glad I was so good at lying.

"You smash your own head without hesitation; you lie without batting an

eye."
"..."

I wanted to reply, but my consciousness and my body were slipping away from each other, and I wasn't sure that I wouldn't pass out completely.

"I wonder what an oddball child like you might grow up to be. Or perhaps, once you're older, you'll grow soft. Either way, I'm interested to find out, so don't go dying on me so quickly."

A sick feeling rose from my left side, stopping me dead in my tracks. I fell to my knees and rolled onto my side. As I lay on the floor, retching, my grandfather just watched with no intention of helping.

"I'm looking forward to this."

He smiled, like a gardener who'd just sprinkled fertilizer on a prized little seedling.

Sleepover from Hell Why had I followed her? I didn't even have the time to think that, because the woman in the kimono, a complete stranger to me whom I'd just watched...kiss Umi Mizuike, broke the kiss and sprinted to the park entrance, which was where I was standing. I couldn't process what was happening, so I just stared blankly as she zoomed toward me, as if kicking the distance between us with her bony knees and sweeping it away with arms that seemed too big for a person so elegant.

"Good evening!" she said cheerfully, after sliding to a stop right in front of me.

Her sudden arrival was accompanied by a floral fragrance I knew only too well.

Mizuike stood riveted to her spot in the park, astonished by her companion's sudden actions. I'd followed her to this park in an unfamiliar city only to witness a scene out of my nightmares. And the worst nightmare of all gave me a little wave, smiling.

"Evening!"

Shut up.

When I'd thought she was watching me earlier, it hadn't been my imagination. The only conclusion I could come to felt like a cold stone in my stomach—aware that I was following them, this woman had kissed Mizuike to rub it in my face that Mizuike was hers.

Hot anger welled up in my stomach, making my cheeks burn.

Mizuike ran over to join us, and her eyes widened when she saw me.

"Oh..."

Of course, she'd never expected me to do something so stupid as tail her to the meetup with her date. Inside, I was squirming. It had never crossed my mind that she would know. Even if I had taken that into account, I probably wouldn't have been able to come up with a good cover story anyway.

My brain cells refused to cooperate, and I drew a blank.

"Why...?" Mizuike began, but then her eyes narrowed suspiciously, and she

changed her question. "You followed me?"

Not wanting to admit the obvious, I stared at my feet in silence.

"What did you want? Just...what the hell...?"

Mizuike didn't seem sure what to say, distrustful of and confused by my motivations. The last thing I wanted was to have to explain myself to her. I had a reason for following her, a reason I didn't want to disclose.

That was when the kimono lady decided to stick her nose in. "You're Umi's roomie," she said.

So Mizuike had told her about me.

Mizuike glared at me angrily, but just as she started to snarl at me like an aggressive dog, the kimono lady shushed her, putting her hands on Mizuike's face and pulling her lips into a smile. Mizuike's words came out as "Hihi."

"Let's not spoil the mood on the day Umi's dream came true."

Mizuike was struggling against the forced smile, but the lady's calming tone did have an effect on her. She eventually settled, making a cute little noise that might've been an attempt to say "okay." Satisfied, the kimono lady released Mizuike.

"You followed Umi because you were worried about her, didn't you?" the lady asked with a smile, looking into my eyes.

I couldn't decide if I should feel angry with her. She was smiling so easily at me, even though she didn't know me—or maybe she did, from whatever Mizuike had told her about me? I just couldn't make sense of her behavior or guess how I should respond.

"See, Umi? No need to be mad at her," she added in the sort of tone a mother might take with a child.

And now she was throwing me a bone. I felt so weak and pathetic.

"I'm...not mad at her."

"Hmm, no, I think you are. Isn't she?" the lady asked me in a chummy tone which just made everything worse.

This whole damn time, she'd been all smiles. Did she think this was funny? Was she enjoying it?

I'd known her only for a few minutes, but I could already tell that despite her gentle manner, she was a piece of work.

"Well, what shall we do now?" she asked, gazing at the city lights in the distance.

What was there to do? I had argued with my roommate and then secretly followed her to her meetup without any semblance of a plan. There wasn't anything I wanted to do... No, I wanted to do *something*. I had to, or I'd go insane. Problem was, I had no idea what to do.

Mizuike was short to begin with, but the way she was hunching next to the kimono lady, she appeared especially small. She turned her face away from me and was studying the ground, determined to avoid my eyes. Somehow, that annoyed me. Not that she had done anything wrong—she hadn't—but the hostility was getting on my nerves. Like, yes, from her perspective, I was a rude intruder who'd ruined her date. But still.

I wondered what someone might think if they saw the three of us hanging around outside the park entrance so late. What if someone peeled off from the shadows and came up to us?

"I was planning to take Umi to a hotel."

"Uh... Huh? Um..."

I really didn't know what to say to that.

"Oh, we're not doing anything naughty tonight—I promise."

"Don't tell her stuff like that..."

Mizuike covered her eyes with her hand. I noticed the corners of her lips were trembling.

I wanted to hide my face in my hands, too, but I felt it was my duty to keep glaring at the woman.

"Or would you like to go home with your friend?" the lady asked Mizuike, who glared at me and shook her head. She was definitely annoyed.

"Sorry," the kimono lady said to me. She was still smiling, but not in a gloating way.

I knew Mizuike wouldn't have chosen to go back with me, but my heart was throbbing painfully as if Mizuike had punched it.

"Money... You're paying her for it..." was what I coughed up incoherently, as if in delirium.

The kimono lady knew immediately what I meant. She nodded. "I am indeed."

"But...we're a couple now...," Mizuike added quietly.

"Ah, right!"

The kimono lady seemed almost surprised, and Mizuike looked up at her reproachfully.

"You already forgot what we talked about a minute ago?"

"Of course not! I was just a little embarrassed to admit our relationship to your friend."

"Embarrassed? You?"

"Hey, even I get embarrassed sometimes. For example, when you tell me how you're passionately in love with me."

"I've never said that... Or wait, did I? I'm not so sure now... I don't even know what I say these days..."

Mizuike covered her face with her hands and rubbed it with her fingertips. Her ears had gotten so red, I could see them even in the dark.

"Argh... I did say somethin' to that effect..."

"Is it coming back to you now?"

"I sure wish it wouldn't..."

The kimono lady's laughter was like pretty little bells ringing.

"..."

Listening to their little back-and-forth, I realized Mizuike had forgotten I was there. I felt painfully redundant. I felt like I was unraveling. Starting from the

fingers on my left hand, I felt like I was turning to threads that were coming apart until nothing of me remained.

But even as I felt like I was disappearing, the kimono lady turned to speak to me as if it were the most natural thing.

"It's very late now. If you'd like to, you could stay with us. What do you say?"

Stay? Where?

"What?"

Both me and Mizuike were stunned by this crazy proposal.

If common sense was like a major road, this lady was a person who kept to the back alleys.

"You're Umi's roomie, so I'd like to get to know you better. Why don't you stay for a sleepover?"

She smiled, as if oblivious to how outlandish what she was saying was. Seriously, would anyone in her shoes invite me to stay with her and her girlfriend? And where? At a hotel? The three of us, together? What on earth made her think I'd want to come along? Even if I did want that, who'd invite a nosy third wheel to a night with their date?

"Ms. Chiki... What the hell are you saying?"

Mizuike couldn't make head or tail of it, either.

"You wouldn't want your friend to return home, only to stew in the not-sonice experience she'd had, would you? She came all this way to check in on you, after all. Why don't we see to it that her little journey ends on a good note?"

Was this lady unhinged or cruelly shameless? In any case, she wasn't normal. Why on earth had Mizuike chosen to fall in love with this person? It wasn't that I was jealous, or that I wanted Mizuike for myself. This woman was one big red flag. I had to be on guard around her.

"You're makin' even less sense to me than usual," Mizuike complained.

"Oh? Less than usual? Do I usually not make sense to you?"

"I mean that...it's hard to understand you."

"I consider myself to be pretty straightforward. What you see is what you get."

The kimono lady patted Mizuike on the head and turned to me. The choice was mine.

"Would you be okay going back by yourself?" she asked, as if she was worried I might get lost on the way home.

"I'll be fine..."

This woman was odd. She said and did the most ridiculous things. But she made me question myself. What was waiting for me back home?

I could let her take Mizuike away and disappear into the night. I'd turn around and retrace my steps to the station by myself, slump onto a train seat, so exhausted I'd feel like I was fusing with it, and let the train carry me back to my town. I'd amble home in the darkness, sweating from the summer heat that didn't let up even at night. My mother would probably yell at me for having gone out so late without telling her. I'd have no energy left after that, so I'd just go to my room without even taking a shower, lie down in the middle of the floor, and sleep like the dead.

In the morning, Mizuike would return, smelling even more strongly of that floral scent.

Every single moment, from turning away here until the morning, would be absolutely miserable. I'd rather be dead. It would be over. I probably wouldn't ever find the strength to try reaching out toward Mizuike again. Or take any action whatsoever in relation to her.

The attraction that had managed to sprout in my heart was doomed to wither without having ever basked in the light of hope. And I would have no one to blame but myself.



...I didn't want it to end like that. I didn't want it to end at all, not yet. I wanted my heart to keep throbbing a little longer, no matter how painful, how unbearable it became.

I couldn't just turn back and go home, even though the alternative sounded crazy. This woman was testing me. The invitation was a shameless attempt at provocation. She was waiting for me to turn it down, to acknowledge my defeat. What else might she have in mind? Maybe just seeing things play out was entertaining enough for her.

If I turned down her invitation, that was the end.

Come to think of it, I'd already stepped out of the boundaries of what was normal. The kimono lady wasn't normal, that was for sure, but neither was Umi Mizuike. Leaving common sense at home seemed to be a requirement for me, too, if I wanted to make any progress. I'd be going off the rails, but at least I'd be moving forward.

"All right, then. I'll stay the night with you."

"What?!"

Mizuike's voice cracked with shock, but her companion smiled with satisfaction.

"Perfect! Just be sure to let your parents know."

I made a point of ignoring Mizuike and shot the kimono lady a defiant stare. I had to look up; she was really damn tall. How old was she? Two, three years older than me? Why was she all dressed up anyhow? She was beautiful, no argument there, but I found her annoying. It must've been her self-assured attitude that ticked me off.

The annoying woman saw fit to introduce herself to me.

"I'm Chiki Rikunaka. And you are...?"

She left her lips slightly parted, awaiting my answer. I stared at her for a while, wondering whether to tell her my name.

"Takasora Hoshi."

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"Nice to meet you, Little Miss Takasora."
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"'Little Miss'...?"
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Whatever, she could call me that if she wanted—she was older than me, after all. I didn't really care. In my head, I'd get back at her by not calling her "Ms."

What bothered me more was that she'd asked me to let my mother know I wouldn't be coming home that night. That might be a problem. How could I get her to give me permission?

"What's wrong with you...?" Mizuike huffed at me. She sighed dramatically and added, "I don't need to let anyone know I'm stayin' over. I go out when I want to."

She stepped away from me to Kimono Lady's side and took her hand. It was dark, but I clearly saw their fingers interlace.

A puddle of discomfort was forming at the bottom of my heart, and it was growing second by second.

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"Ms. Chiki...," Mizuike said.
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"Hmm?"

"Why?" She sounded like a child with a grown-up, putting all her questions in a few words.

"Well, isn't she your friend?"

"Yeah, but..."

Huh. So she does consider me a friend. Who knew? Whatever.

"I'd like you to learn to be kinder, Umi, and treat your friends with more respect."

"And this is a way of showing respect...?"

Oh, for crying out loud.

"…"

I had been labeled a friend, and the bar for jumping into a different category had been set too high for me.

Finally, my regret spilled over, filling every nook and cranny of my being.

Going back home right away would've been the smarter choice, but I wasn't smart, and I was developing a knack for making the wrong choices.

"A sleepover? Where?"

"A friend's house."

"Which friend? Where are you?"

I was on the phone with my mother, who was talking to me the way she always did, in a calm, but authoritative voice.

"It's not too far on the train..."

I turned, feeling an unfamiliar tapping on my shoulder. Kimono Lady was standing behind me, still smiling, her hand extended. That was as clear a request for my phone as any.

I hesitantly gave her my phone. Anything to get out of having to convince my mother to let me stay out all night.

"Hello, Ms. Hoshi, this is Takasora's friend speaking..."

Kimono Lady started walking as she spoke to my mother. I could hear only snippets of their conversation.

"Could I speak with her, too? Thank you... Yes..."

She circled around a lamppost and came back to hand me the phone cheerfully. I saw that she hadn't hung up, so I put the phone to my ear.

"Mom?"

"Your friend explained everything. I'll see you tomorrow morning, then?"

"Yeah..."

"She told me Umi's there, too. Next time, tell me you're going out beforehand, okay?"

"Sorry about that... Bye, Mom."

I hadn't told her because I hadn't been planning to stay out. Regardless, I ended the conversation, glad that was done and dusted. Before putting my

phone away, I noticed Kimono Lady was staring at me intently.

"You're quite cute yourself, aren't you?" she said with a giggle that reached her eyes as she looked me over.

"Stop that," Mizuike cut in, suddenly on high alert, yanking Chiki by her sleeve. "She's a high schooler. Leave her alone."

"I wasn't doing anything!"

I couldn't believe my ears. The woman was attracted to high school girls? She was paying to do stuff with teenagers? That was illegal! Although maybe I shouldn't jump to conclusions—I had no proof she was paying anyone to prostitute themselves.

"Don't even joke about bein' interested in her. I don't like it..."

Mizuike kept tugging at the woman's sleeve like a helpless child. I'd never seen her so vulnerable before, and I had been watching her closely in the short time we'd been living together. This Chiki lady was bringing out all sorts of new emotions from her. The contrast between how Mizuike acted when she was only with me and how she behaved around this person made it painfully obvious how little I mattered to her. More and more pinprick wounds were opening up in my heart.

"Maybe I wasn't joking?"

"That's even worse!"

"You know me!"

Chiki pinched Mizuike's cheeks and played with her face, squishing it, as Mizuike protested. Mizuike seemed upset at first, but her eyes gradually softened as she looked at Chiki. God, she was gullible. The woman was playing her for a fool; I had no doubt about it.

"Well, shall we go to a hotel?"

Chiki said this so nonchalantly, I was taken aback. Was I really going to spend a night in a hotel with someone I hardly knew anything about? Mizuike was going to be there, too—but on second thought, that made it even worse. I wasn't stupid; I knew I'd be third-wheeling, and that the night together might

leave me scarred forever.

I was still battling these new doubts and regrets when Chiki started walking briskly. I didn't want to be left behind in an unfamiliar town at night, so I hurried after her, feeling suddenly light on my feet.

Mizuike stood next to me and shot me a sideways glance.

"Why did you follow me?" she asked.

"I honestly don't know..."

I spoke from my heart. I had acted on impulse, and what had I gained? A load of emotional damage. My heart felt lighter, but it wasn't a positive feeling—it was a strange high from floating in the void.

"Why are you comin' with us anyway?" Mizuike groaned, before leaving my side to join Chiki.

I walked on, feeling increasingly like I was making a mistake. After Mizuike went on ahead, Chiki slowed down to walk beside me. Again, I couldn't help noticing how tall she was. Her height made her relationship with Mizuike seem even more illicit.

I was going to ask Chiki what she wanted, but before I could open my mouth, she leaned toward me and whispered in my ear knowingly.

"You've got a crush on Umi, don't you?"

We'd barely exchanged a few words, and she had already seen through me. I was going to protest, "What are you saying? We're both girls!" but I immediately noticed how stupid that would be, all things considered. I clenched my hands into fists, even though I wasn't going to punch anyone. They just swung by my sides as I walked, suspended in the air.

The woman spoke with utter nonchalance and unshakable confidence, leaving me exposed. She got the upper hand over me with practiced ease.

I found her obnoxious. I rarely had to deal with people who pushed my buttons—I was always quick to distance myself from anyone I didn't get along with. Chiki, though, was stubbornly engaging with me, invading my space before I could build a wall between us, rendering me defenseless.

"So what if I do?" I told her.

Rudeness was the only shield I could think of that might protect me as the third corner of this love triangle.

Chiki smiled pleasantly, as if my answer was to her liking. "Don't give up. We'll split up sooner or later," she said in a lighthearted tone before returning to Mizuike, leaving me lost for words.

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"…"
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"What were you talkin' about?" Mizuike asked Chiki.

"If there was someone she had a crush on!"

"What ...?"

"Isn't that the sort of thing girls talk about?"

Chiki smiled with the same glee I'd seen on her face when she'd spoken to me earlier. Where was her cheerfulness coming from? The prospect of breaking up with Umi at some point? Was that something to look forward to? Not for a normal person, surely. How messed up in the head did you have to be to happily announce you were planning on breaking up with your girlfriend in the future?

What the hell was wrong with this woman? She kept doing things that made me want to bang my head against a wall.

I wondered if I should shout at the top of my lungs, "She just told me she's going to break up with you sooner or later!" But Mizuike wouldn't believe me. She'd assume I was just being mean, and it would only ruin our relationship further. So I didn't scream.

I followed Chiki and Mizuike with my head hung low, not listening to their conversation. I just alternated moving my feet, one in front of the other. I felt as though any hope I had for the future, or any sense of meaning I had in my life, was draining with every step.

I wasn't paying any attention to which roads we took, so I looked up to see where we were only when the others stopped.

"Whuh...?" I let out a gasp.

We were in front of a large building complex in the shape of the letter *L*. The entrance was ritzier than anything I'd ever seen before, and the whole place was illuminated brightly against the night. From the side, I could see a bit of the inner courtyard, which was even brighter, with trees decorated with lights as if they were doing Christmas all year around.

When Chiki said we'd be going to a hotel, I'd pictured a posh building based on the little I knew about what hotels were like, but the place she'd led us to was nothing like I'd imagined. I followed Chiki and Mizuike into the lobby. The brightness melted into my soul, and I felt like I was observing everything from some high point, scattered in the air, mesmerized by glittering glass sculptures which probably cost a fortune.

Mizuike seemed used to being brought along to places like this. She went to sit on a large sofa in the lobby.

"Wait here. I'm going to check us in," Chiki instructed me, noticing I was just standing there, disoriented.

After a moment's hesitation, I hurried to join Mizuike on the sofa, where I sat bolt upright and anxiously rigid. I wasn't sure what was making me anxious, though—the hotel, or the proximity of Mizuike?

"Where did she bring us...?"

I'd never even dreamed of a place like this, seemingly constructed from coalesced light and stretched vertically. I was floating inside this light-space like an alien particle. The atmosphere, which others might have described as grand, was making me sweat.

"To a super expensive hotel," Mizuike replied flatly.

"I'm not blind."

"I don't know more than you anyway."

Other people passing through the lobby probably weren't paying us much attention, but still, I was terrified of accidentally making eye contact, so I didn't look around. Mizuike was also statue-still, gazing straight ahead—maybe for the same reason. I followed her example and sat quiet as a mouse, watching Chiki in her kimono talk to the receptionist. I could barely move; my incredulity at

finding myself in this posh hotel was pinning me down.

Chiki returned, perfectly at home in all the glitz and glamor.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. I got us a room!"

She made it sound like she hadn't booked in advance... Or maybe she'd had to change her reservation on account of me having come along? I'd never stayed in a hotel, so I wasn't sure how all this worked.

"Let's go."

Chiki motioned for us to follow, and Mizuike stood up at once. I got up off the sofa and gazed at the ceiling; it was so high I thought you'd need an airplane to reach it. Maybe it was too late to ask myself this question, but was I really ready to spend the night here? With a homeless girl who was my temporary roommate, and a woman I'd only met that night? I was losing my way in the blink of an eye.

The elevators were on one side of the lobby. One had just arrived when we got there, so we got on together with a few other guests.

"…"

The elevator, at least, was ordinary, with a well-polished mirror reflecting the inside. Everyone's reflections seemed almost radiant, except for mine and Mizuike's.

The elevator kept going up. I didn't know which floor we were going to end up on. Money is what brings you up—to the top floor of a hotel, to airplane height, to outer space. It occurred to me that I'd be sleeping on bare ground if it weren't for my mother's job.

We finally stopped, and the door opened to a hallway with a lush carpet. It muffled the sound of our footsteps. I couldn't hear any noises from the rooms we were passing by, either. The silence reminded me of walking through a snow-covered landscape.

"It's going to be a girls' night in!" said Chiki.

"A...girls' night in?" Mizuike parroted, as if she didn't understand the words.

Maybe she wasn't familiar with the concept. Having shared my room with her

for a while, I knew that she could be as naive as a child. Although at the same time, she had been exposed to a world beyond my dreams. Thinking about that made my head hurt. My mind was trying to go to places as far away as possible from the reality I was in at that moment. My body felt mangled, with all the pain that entails.

"We'll talk late into the night. We'll confide all our secrets! Leave no question unanswered!" said the smiling woman who paid for the girls' bodies as she unlocked the door to our room.

"Whoa..." I gasped when the lights automatically clicked on.

I wasn't so much impressed as dumbfounded. The room was so long. Not big, just long. It stretched far from the door for an unreasonable distance. If I had to clean it every day, from the door all the way to the windows, I'd hate it.

Out the windows, I could see city lights glimmering prettily, as if they were part of a display set up specifically for the guests staying in that room.

The floor was wooden, smooth, and polished to a high shine that left me speechless. It was like it belonged in some rich person's mansion—at least from my point of view. Not what I'd have expected to see in a hotel more than ten stories high. Lamps next to the bed and sofa provided just the right amount of illumination to suit the aesthetic of the room without being too bright. By the windows was a massive table with chairs. It seemed like quite a trip to reach it.

That bed, though... It was wider than it was long, so much that I wondered if the hotel staff had placed the pillows on the wrong side. How many people were supposed to sleep on that? It was bigger than my whole room.

It took only one step through the door for me to find myself in a different world. I had to put my hand on the wall near the entrance for support as I waited for the dizzy feeling to pass. Never mind Chiki, the damn hotel room was overwhelming me.

Chiki and Mizuike, meanwhile, were completely unfazed. They went to sit on the sofa as if that was what they usually did. As soon as Mizuike had sat down, she abruptly stood back up, dusted off her butt, and settled down next to Chiki again. The way they were cuddled up on one end of the sofa reminded me of the park bench earlier. Remembering that gave me a headache. "There's enough space for you, too," Chiki said to me, patting the sofa.

"No, there isn't," Mizuike snapped.

I felt myself starting to scowl.

"Let's not be like this," Chiki chided Mizuike.

It annoyed me that Chiki was taking my side.

Mizuike hung her head, sulking like a kid after a scolding. I couldn't help thinking it was cute and that the sulky expression suited her. Actually, seeing any sort of emotion on Mizuike's face was new to me, and I was bewitched. I felt powerless. I couldn't win against Mizuike, ever. She had an advantage over me—trite as it sounded, I had a weakness for her.

"Umi, do you need me to tell you how to make up?" Chiki asked, putting a cushion on her knees.

Mizuike raised her head, as if Chiki's light had broken through her dark mood.

"Apologizing is key," Chiki said quietly, with a faint smile. "It doesn't matter who's in the wrong, even if no one is—apologize first. If you were the one at fault, it's the right thing to do. If you weren't, the other person will likely accept your apology, since it'll play to their advantage. It really is so simple."

This advice sounded more like a recited precept than a kind suggestion.

"Well, that's one way to make peace," she finished, getting up. "I'll go buy snacks and something to drink."

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"Snacks, now?"

"For our girls' night in."

"Oh..."

"Takasora, dear, what do you want to drink?"

"Doesn't matter. Anything's fine."

"Okay, then. I'll pick something extra random for you."
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Being spoken to only made me more anxious. After Chiki left, I was alone in the room with Mizuike and an air of unresolved conflict. Even in this enormous room, the tension was suffocating. I furtively glanced at Mizuike and caught her gaze. We both recoiled slightly.

"Do you come here often?" I asked tentatively.

"No. Never been in this hotel before...I think."

Not in this one, but others like it, huh? That Chiki woman must be rich. A rich woman with an unsavory hobby...

"I'm sorry about earlier," Mizuike said, bending her head down low. "I get it now that you were just worried about me."

Was she apologizing because Chiki had told her to? The suspicion bugged me, but my anger subsided nevertheless. The apology, sincere or not, had precisely the effect Chiki had predicted. *Damn her and her annoying teachings*.

"No need to apologize for that... I'm sorry I followed you."

"Um... Okay..."

I thought she'd say it was no big deal, the way I had, but apparently it was a big deal. I was glad Chiki had left us alone for this talk, so we could forgive each other or not, on our own terms. Reason and feelings had turned their backs on each other, each speaking their ideals out into the void.

I glanced at the sofa and relocated to the floor. This was more familiar for me, so maybe it would make me less anxious. I looked up at Mizuike; she was still on the sofa with her knees pulled up to her chin. We were still alone in the room, and we'd finished with the apologies. The air in the room felt calmer, as if a storm had passed, but this calm was somehow triggering alarm bells in my head.

"Mizuike... When you were...going out at night, you..."

"I was meetin' her, yeah."

Well, now my suspicions were confirmed. That Chiki woman was...my enemy, then? An enemy or...a love rival?

Love. My first crush. I couldn't describe my feelings any other way, so I had to admit to myself that that's what it was.

I was smitten with her childlike face and its shadows and glow; her darkly gleaming eyes; her hair, browning at the tips and probably lacking nutrients; the curves of her chest. Not because it was big—size was irrelevant.

Watching Mizuike from down low, I thought she looked even more petite than usual. Her frame was so slight, I kept forgetting we were the same age. If I told someone she was in junior high, they'd buy it.

Why did that woman do that stuff with this girl?

I couldn't really picture what they were doing, and yet I couldn't stop my thoughts from drifting toward it.

"She's been payin' meow..."

"Meow?"

"I bit my tongue."

Mizuike's pouty wince made me smile a little at last. Not for long, though—it wasn't a cheerful conversation we were having.

"Long story short, it's prostitution," she said, not beating around the bush. "I don't even know how many times we've done it now. That's how I'm payin' your mom."

She was coming clean even though I didn't want to hear about this.

Mizuike tucked a strand of her long hair behind her ear. "Are you disgusted with me?"

"No... Not really."

My feelings toward Mizuike weren't based on her moral virtues. It wasn't the ethics of what she was doing that bothered me.

"Hmm... You're different," she said.

Maybe I was different. Since meeting Mizuike, my idea of myself had changed. I was morphing into some new kind of creature.

"Wait... Did you say that just to be nice, 'cause we're friends?"

"Um..."

Now that was quite a leap of logic.

"I appreciate that. I don't have other friends besides you, y'know."

She flashed me a shy little smile, for the first time ever. Great, except that I was still friend-zoned. My surge of optimism was balanced out by a sinking heart. The refreshing novelty of Mizuike smiling at me felt empty.

I'm not a friend, I thought.

"Huh?"

Had I spoken my thought out loud without realizing? Mizuike was giving me a quizzical look. "Nothing," I muttered, just in case, registering that this time my voice did find its way out of my mouth.

It took me a little while to become focused again.

"Anyway," I began, "I don't think it's okay for you to be doing this. What if school found out? You'd be in trouble—you'd get *expelled*."

"You're right," she agreed without much concern.

"Weren't you worried...that I might tell on you?"

What if I threatened to rat her out unless she did anything I asked? What if I turned out to be a horrible, conniving person? I hadn't practiced my evil laugh yet, though.

Mizuike watched me from behind her bent knees for a while.

"I don't know if you're a good or a bad person..."

"I won't tell anyone; I was just saying..."

"Then you're good."

How could she be so trusting? It wasn't even funny.

"Maybe it's a good moment to pull out of this? I really think you should stop."

"Sure. I already did."

"What?"

"We're gonna date like normal people from now on... She promised."

Shyly, she drew her knees even closer to her chin.

They were going to date like normal people? And Chiki had agreed to that? I had my doubts.

"Wait, does that really work for you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Weren't you seeing her because you needed money? I thought you were only doing this because she was paying you?"

Had she really not thought about the financial effects of her decision? Was she too drunk on love to worry about the practicalities? Not that I wanted her to keep all this up, but if their relationship was built on financial dependence, then surely, wouldn't ending one end the other?

"You're right, but...she's paid me so much, and I don't like the idea of her payin' me anymore."

"And that's it...?"

Not that I could do anything about it, but I was actually worried about her. She lived in the present, and her future was uncertain and precarious. I didn't think she was stupid—she probably did a lot of thinking—but she just lacked any context for this. Yeah, that was it. She'd been living under a rock even more than I had.

"So what's she like?"

My own impression of Chiki was that she was a good-looking but totally shady lady.

"Hmm..." Mizuike rubbed her big toes together. "She's a good person. She's beautiful, she smells like flowers, she's smart and kind and caring and helps me relax and... Never mind."

Nothing but virtues, floating up into the air like soap bubbles. So Chiki was supposedly walking perfection? People like that didn't exist.

"She sure smells like flowers, at least."

The smell on Mizuike whenever she came back from her nights out was Chiki's

perfume. Next time I woke up to that scent, I'd know exactly what it entailed.

"Everythin' about her is good. That's why I fell in love with her so soon after we met. I'm sure she's hiding some things, but she must be a genius to do it so well. And if I never see her bad side, then that just means she doesn't have one as far as I'm concerned."

"Hmm."

I doubted Chiki would manage to conceal her true self forever, but whatever. She was doing her best to appear nice in front of the girl who adored her. It was just a normal thing people did in order to get along.

"And does she...reciprocate your feelings?"

"She said she loves me."

Hmph! Really?

Never would I have imagined that one day I'd find the concept of love so revolting.

"I don't actually believe her. Not because I don't trust Ms. Chiki, but because I don't believe in myself. I trust her completely... Although, I don't even know her real name."

"And you think you can have a real relationship with someone like that?"

I knew I couldn't ask that without risking hurting Mizuike's feelings. But seriously, how could she hope for a wholesome relationship in that situation?

I was one to talk, stalking my own crush, sniffing around her like a dog.

"You ever become a baby in front of someone?"

"Sorry, what?"

I'd thought she was going to ask something else, and I had been ready to tell her it wasn't a basis for a relationship, but now we were talking about babies somehow? What...?

"Because I have. That's the sort of relationship we've got."

What did that mean?!

What was Mizuike thinking, gazing up at the ceiling and smiling shyly, her arms wrapped around her legs?

I didn't understand her at all!

Was the conversation just going over my head? No, if anything, it was rock-bottom low. And why was Mizuike's complexion glowing? Was it the light? The bright illumination? Or was it because she was basking in the superiority of talking about something I couldn't even grasp?

I wanted to ask her for clarification, but despite my curiosity, I also had the urge to cover my ears, fearful of what she might say.

Her weird metaphor had the power to shut me up and close that topic immediately.

"I feel like maybe I shouldn't have told you that," Mizuike confessed slowly without taking her eyes off the ceiling.

I would have to agree.

Mizuike's reaction to the knock on the door made me think of a dog or cat waiting for their owner to come back. I realized Chiki had left her key card inside. If I stop Mizuike from opening the door, I could keep Chiki out, I thought, watching idly from my spot.

"I'm back!"

Chiki walked inside carrying two bags. Mizuike closed the door and excitedly trotted after her.

"Welcome back."

"Criminal...," I muttered under my breath instead of a greeting, sure Chiki wouldn't hear me, but she was too sharp...or at least sharp of hearing?

Anyway, she turned to me and smiled.

"Guilty as charged! I gather Umi told you everything about us?"

She was looking at me over Mizuike's shoulder.

"She told me enough. You're a degenerate who buys sex from high school girls."

My barbed accusation was aimed at Chiki, but it was Mizuike who glared furiously at me. I almost flinched. Chiki set the bags on the table.

"An apt description!" she said. "I'm so glad you're a sensible girl, Takasora."

"You're glad?"

"I wouldn't want Umi to have someone with strange ideas for a friend!"

She sounded as if she were Umi's parent or guardian rather than her girlfriend.

"If you know what you're doing is a crime, why don't you stop?"

"Because Umi needs the money."

Outwardly she seemed calm, but there was a sharp undertone in her reply. She wasn't plagued by self-doubt. She firmly believed she was in the right.

"It doesn't bother you it's dirty money?"

"Money is money. If you insist on attaching a moral value to it, then it's definitely good. Money gives people the option to be kind to others."

She smiled, as if to say, "Just like what I'm doing."

I thought about it. Maybe there was some truth to her perspective. I'd never been rich, so I could only theorize, but Chiki was kinder than me and that seemed to be what Mizuike was attracted to. People have a weakness for kindness. Kindness is an asset, a weapon.

Enough about that—Chiki had probably steered the conversation away from what I was really getting at so she could be in control again.

"Is there something we can spread on the floor? I'd love for us to sit down like we're having a picnic."

Honestly. A picnic?

Mizuike looked around and diligently set about finding something that'd work.

"We already had ramen a little while ago..."

"It's not a feast. Just some nibbles."

"Well, I haven't eaten," I grumbled, upset even though nobody had asked me to follow Chiki and Mizuike around and spy on them while they had ramen.

"Then don't be shy and eat as much as you want, Takasora."

Chiki took out a can of juice from one of the bags and handed it to me. I begrudgingly accepted it. It was a brand of soda with a picture of the local bear mascot character. I'd seen it before.

"I couldn't find a tablecloth, so I used tissues instead," Mizuike reported.

"Thanks!"

Chiki opened the bags of snacks and sweets she'd bought and shook them out on top of the tissues. A delicious smell wafted from the colorful pile, which somehow hadn't spilled all over the floor.

Chiki sat down first and gestured for us to join her.

I couldn't shake off the uneasy sensation of everything being out of place. Maybe because I was the most out of place here, like a bit of food stuck between my teeth. Or an interloper who'd crashed someone else's date night in a hotel.

Only the crazy woman who'd cheerfully invited me along seemed in her element.

Mizuike half-crouched with one bent knee pointing up. So that was two out of the three points of our triangle. The empty space beckoned me, the outsider who shouldn't have been there. I thought it was weird to sit on the floor with a bunch of food when the room featured that massive table and extravagant sofa, but sitting on the floor suited both me and Mizuike better than perching on fancy furniture, and Chiki in her kimono looked very pretty sitting formally with her legs folded beneath her.

I didn't make for a pretty picture like Chiki, but I sat down as I'd been told anyway. I gazed briefly at the ceiling, my anxiety stirring again.

"Shall we begin with a toast?" Chiki raised her can of apple juice.

"I have nothing to toast," I objected.

"Woke up on the wrong side of the bed today, hmm?"

I wanted to shout that of course I was angry, but that would only have confused Mizuike. She was oblivious to the reason I was upset, wasn't she? That was a relief, but at the same time, it bugged the hell out of me that she was so ignorant.

"That'll soon change. Bad moods and sweet treats are mutually exclusive. Cheers!" Chiki overrode my objection.

She raised her can of juice again. Mizuike picked up an unopened can of chilled green tea with her dainty hand and held it close to Chiki's drink. They turned and looked at me expectantly—one sharply, the other softly.

It's hard not to join in when others are waiting with their hands raised. You can't keep ignoring them forever. In the end, I gave up and danced along to the crazy woman's tune. We clinked our cans together even though, as far as I was concerned, there was no occasion to toast to.

"Cheers!"

"Cheers."

I bonked Chiki's can hard—a little protest I could get away with.

That done, I picked up a bite-size pie and shoved it into my mouth. The satisfying crunch and hit of sugar did lift my mood a little. I'd had nothing to eat or drink since dinner, and the events I'd witnessed that evening had left a bitter taste in my mouth. The sugar worked like an antidote. The dry crumbs scratched my parched throat, so I took a gulp of soda to rinse them down. A very unhealthy sweetness spread through my body, dehydrated from the summer night. My tongue caressed the superficial source of mild, transient happiness.

"Snacks like this can be so delicious when you're not used to having them," Chiki said. She had not yet tried the curry-flavor rice cracker, instead turning it over and inspecting it.

Mizuike had said she was still full from the ramen earlier, but she was working her way through a packet of chips at a steady pace. A hint of a smile played on her face as she ate. Just watching her made the tension inside me lessen a little. I glanced over at Chiki—she was also watching Mizuike with a similar expression

on her face. She immediately sensed my attention and turned to me. I was startled by her swift reflexes. In the park, she had also been quick to notice me for some reason. Despite her calm manner, she must have been highly sensitive to any changes around her. Probably because she was up to no good.

"Takasora, dear, mind if I ask you something?"

"What?"

"What do you like about Umi?"

I should've flat-out refused to be questioned about anything. I felt my eyes drying up. She'd attacked me with no warning, and her opening move was a skull-splitting ax swing. The atmosphere around me was sizzling and dry.

"What? About me? Or did you mean *umi* as in 'ocean'? The big ocean nearest to us?"

Mizuike spread her arms wide as if to illustrate the vastness of the ocean, but she began to look increasingly uneasy. She turned to me, and I broke out in a cold sweat, not wanting to be seen, afraid of what she could read in my face. Were my emotions showing, or was I still safe?

"A calm ocean...can be pretty to look at." I spoke as if I were pedaling a bike, only to discover the pedals had come off and my feet were in the air.

Mizuike wouldn't take her eyes off me. My head was burning around the temples. I managed to meet Mizuike's gaze.

I felt like my heart was being crushed against a wall.

"We're just talking about the ocean, not you."

I spoke too fast, my words rushing out in a desperate attempt to save myself.

"Ah, okay..."

Mizuike didn't seem convinced. I wanted to hide, to put my duvet over my head, shut out all light, and just lie there like a subterranean creature.

My poor, raspy attempt at saving face was met with laughter from Chiki. She was absolutely in stitches, laughing heartily, her voice ringing in the air and in my ears.

"What's. So. Funny?" I coughed out, angry at myself that I couldn't speak normally.

"Oh, I just love girls' nights in! So much fun!"

"For you, maybe..."

"These rice crackers are so good. You should try one!"

She gave me one of her crackers, and I crunched it aggressively between my teeth, not even tasting it. It did have a strong aftertaste of some sort, but I quickly rinsed it down with my soda. My face was burning, but I had calmed down somewhat. Disaster averted.

Chiki resurrected the conversation, grinning. "I like the ocean, too, although I've never been to see it."

She made no attempt to hide the fact she knew damn well I wanted to move on to a different subject. This was the person Mizuike had described as kind?

"That was confusing. Thought you were talkin' about me at first," said Mizuike.

"Hmm." Chiki thought for a moment. "The *ocean*'s *nice*," she said in a mixture of Japanese and English.

That made the conversation sound even more fake.

"So what do you do at the seaside?" she mused, giving up the English vocab.

She picked up one of the pies in front of me and took a bite so small I couldn't even register movement in her throat when she swallowed it. I was discovering that she was different from us in every manner. Maybe sophistication was made apparent through calmness and control.

"Never seen the ocean, either. Pretty sure I never seen a river, either," Mizuike said in between bites of chips.

Chiki gently wiped crumbs from Mizuike's lips with her fingertips. She gazed at them for a moment, then licked the crumbs off them. Agitated, Mizuike quickly rubbed any remaining crumbs off her mouth herself.

"Summer's the best time to visit the seaside."

Chiki's comment just sounded like a way to close the topic before moving to another one, but Mizuike replied earnestly.

"There's somethin' I been thinkin' of doin' if I ever went to the coast."

"Oh yes? What's that?"

It was rare for Mizuike to express any desires, so Chiki's interest was instantly piqued. She leaned forward expectantly.

"Put on goggles and see underwater."

"So you wanna go fish watching?"

"Not specifically." Mizuike shook her head firmly like a child, which I thought suited her. "Just to see what the ocean's like under the surface."

That's all? So mundane.

"Let's go together someday," Chiki suggested, wrapping up that topic.

Mizuike gave a slight nod and smiled faintly. Smiling seemed to come naturally to her when she was with Chiki—a fact which I had to pretend didn't bother me.

Chiki chose sugarcoated rice crackers as her next snack. She seemed to like rice crackers. I was littering my brain with useless trivia about a woman I hated.

"Why don't you talk about something now, Takasora?"

"And why should I?"

"Because my mouth is getting dry from doing all the talking."

Was it my responsibility to keep her mouth from drying out? Just drink some water or something.

"I don't know what to talk about..."

I meant that. While there was a lot I wanted to ask about, it was too overwhelming for me, and I didn't know where to start. I had so many questions. While I sat there groaning under my breath, Mizuike stole a march on me.

"You said we could talk about anythin'," she started. All her attention was

focused on Chiki.

Of course she only cares about Chiki; what did I expect? I told myself, pretending to be too disillusioned for Mizuike to wreck my heart even more.

"That's right. Go on, then."

"Can you tell me...what it is you like about me?"

How insensitive to talk about that with me present. But I had to remind myself that Mizuike was oblivious to my feelings for her. Chiki, meanwhile, knew how I felt about Mizuike, and that didn't affect her at all.

"Well, your pretty face," Chiki replied without hesitation.

I assumed she was telling the truth, but it didn't seem right to admit one's attraction was so superficial. Not that mine wasn't.

"So if...I swapped heads with Hoshi, would you love Hoshi and not me anymore?"

"You have a morbid imagination."

I hated to agree, but the same thought crossed my mind.

Chiki made a motion as if she were unscrewing Mizuike's head and throwing it to me.

"Catch."

So dumb.

"You only like me from my neck up... That's kinda sad. What about the rest of me? My upper body, my legs..."

Mizuike sounded very pitiful, but what she was saying made me want to scratch my head. Were girls in love so sensitive about their upper bodies and legs? I'd caught the love bug, too, but it hadn't crossed my mind.

"I love your legs, too!"

Wow, how romantic, I thought testily, biting into a candy.

"And especially your big toes!"

"Why big toes...?"

"Oh, I think you know!"

Mizuike started blushing, and I was left in the dark. Again, despite my curiosity, I was too scared to ask for an explanation. This sleepover was hell for me. Chiki, on the other hand, was having a great time. Even Mizuike seemed relatively relaxed.

Even the sweets couldn't neutralize the bitterness growing inside me. That's what I had to endure for tagging along despite common sense. But wasn't it too cruel a punishment? Was developing a crush on a roommate such a sin?

"Why don't we have a bath before going to bed?"

Chiki stood up and stretched her arms up high. I couldn't believe my eyes when she started taking off her kimono right in front of us. Mizuike seemed used to this, as she barely reacted. Chiki removed the kimono, let her hair down, and slipped off her underwear. Unashamedly naked, she grinned at me. My vision was flickering as my eyes darted this way and that, unsure where to look.

"Let's all go in together."

"What?" Mizuike said. She seemed to object.

"Together?" I asked disapprovingly.

Together—meaning all three of us. I was unwilling to accept the simple reality of Chiki's proposal.

"It's perfectly acceptable for girls to bathe together."

"Acceptable? But...aren't we, y'know, together?"

"Of course we are! And today's a date to remember, our very first day as a couple."

Chiki wrapped her middle finger around Mizuike's. I'd seen couples wrap their little fingers together, but not the middle ones...

"I'm cool havin' a bath with you, but...I dunno about havin' Hoshi in there with us."

"Why? Bathing together is the best shortcut to becoming close friends. Come,

let's go."

She led Mizuike to the bathroom by the hand.

...No way. I had to join them? Could I, really? It wouldn't be just me and Chiki, after all; Mizuike would be in there, too. I'd get to see her naked.

"...Seriously?"

I'd been sharing a room with Mizuike for some time, but obviously, I had never seen her in the nude. Still, I balked at the idea of going into the bath with her just because Chiki said I could. But...if I didn't go in, Chiki would have Mizuike all to herself.

Whatever I did, it was going to be hell for me. So if both options were equally bad...

"…"

I might as well play along.

Even though I felt sick with myself for playing that woman's games as soon as there was a slight benefit to me.

Worst-case scenarios filled my head, but I stood up, stepped over Chiki's clothes on the floor, and strode off to the bathroom. Willing myself not to chicken out at the last moment, I almost slammed the door open.

If the door had swung back and hit me in the face, it wouldn't have stunned me as much as the sight in front of me.

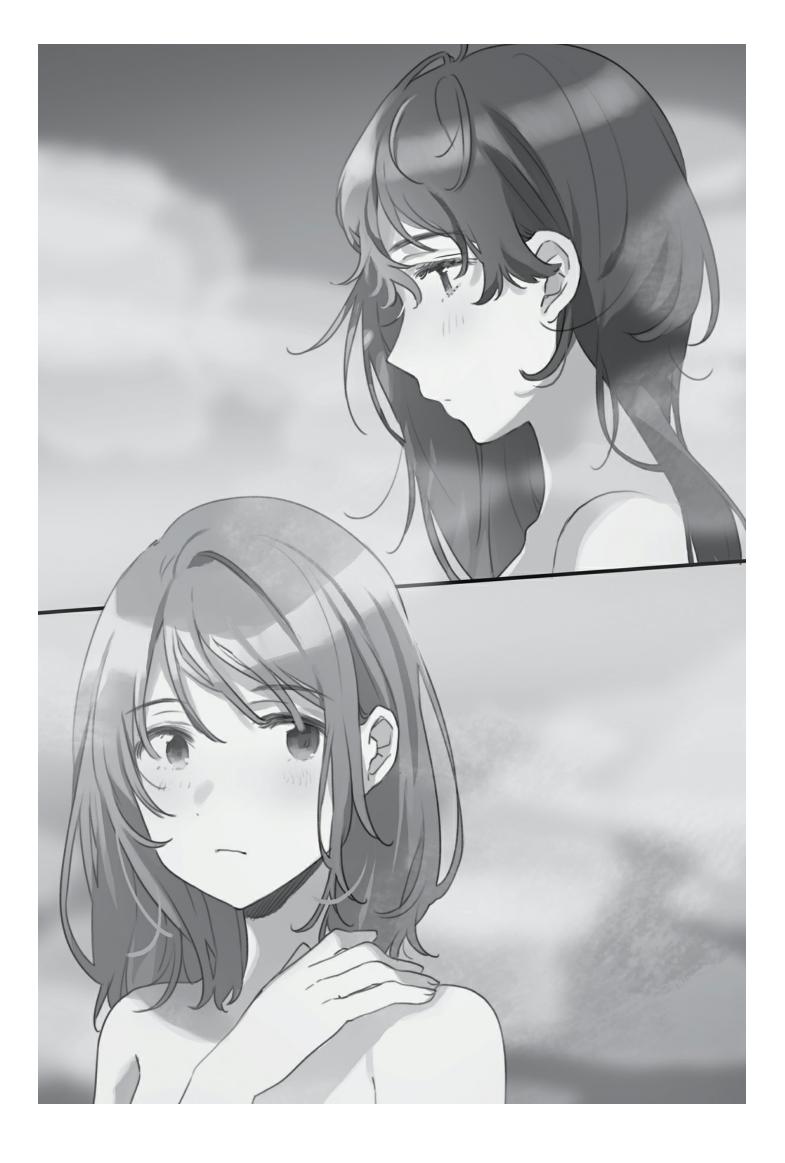
My eyes met Mizuike's. She was stark naked. I almost heard the crackling of my brain freezing.

"Hoshi...?"

"Don't mind me," I heard a voice say, one that sounded mysteriously like my own.

Everything was a blur, as if my head was bobbing up and down on some wild ride. I mechanically removed my clothes. The ringing in my ears had started even before I'd entered the bathroom and was getting progressively worse. My consciousness seemed to float somewhere above my body as I walked, my bare

feet pitter-patting on the floor. I wasn't myself anymore.



"Welcome." Chiki greeted me with a smile, having finished showering before the bath.

Remembering that I was her type, I self-consciously covered my chest. She laughed with delight at my sudden shyness, as if she'd been expecting it.

The bathroom had marble-colored walls and ceiling, and big windows offering a sweeping view of the city. Floor lights made the water in the round bathtub—big enough for the three of us to fit inside easily—look vivid blue. Chiki got in first.

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"Hurry up, you two!"
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She started rinsing off. Next to her, I turned on the shower and directed it at my head, but even the pounding stream of water couldn't wash away this feeling.

I gazed up while washing myself, using an obscene amount of water. In its comforting warmth, I enjoyed the illusion that everything was okay.

After the shower, I stepped into the bath and submerged myself in more warm water. Since we only had a shower in our apartment, it had been a while since I had last been in a bath. Even with circumstances being what they were, I felt the tension that had built up in my body begin to dissolve. I let out a long breath, shuddering a little as I melted into the warm bath. This was like being reborn. For some reason, I started tearing up at the thought that if I'd never left my apartment, I wouldn't be experiencing this simple pleasure.

I was in a bath with Chiki and Mizuike, all three of us submerged to our shoulders. How had it come to this? Was I dreaming? Because that's how it had felt all evening. Had the train I'd gotten on earlier taken me to dreamland instead?

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"Let's talk about love! Have you got the hots for anyone?"
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"What?!"

Chiki's crudeness took me aback.

"Let's start with Umi."

[&]quot;Okay," replied Mizuike.

"Um... I love you, Ms. Chiki."

"And I love you, Umi!"

Their "love talk" was over in a second. Next, they turned their attention to me. I glared at Chiki. Her eyes were serene, but the grin on her lips was downright evil.

"And you? You like anyone?" Mizuike asked me without any particular interest.

She hadn't been acknowledging my presence before, so why now? Did I like anyone? I mean, yeah—the naked girl sitting in the tub in front of me.

What would her reaction be if I told her that? I couldn't hope for her to reciprocate my interest as long as that other woman stood—figuratively speaking—between us. Would I keep my secret for the rest of my life, then, living with these muddled feelings until I died?

My lips slowly unstuck from each other.

"[..."

With both of us naked, it was as if my feelings were being laid bare, too. My blush was barely detectable thanks to the heat of the bath, but it was there.

"I... Umi Mizuike."

I finally confessed. It felt like I was screaming internally from the rooftops.

My head was above water, but I felt as if I was blowing bubbles like a crab, the sounds muffled as if I were diving.

The little crab glanced furtively at its crush. Mizuike shifted closer to Chiki, her eyes wide.

"No, your name's Hoshi."

"You know what I meant."

I pulled my knees up to my chin and glared at Mizuike from behind them. No, I wasn't glaring at her. I wasn't transfixed, anxiously awaiting an answer. She just happened to be in my line of sight.

Mizuike sat in the same position that I was in.

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"You mean...you like...me? Like-like me?"
"Yeah."
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This was ridiculous, confessing my feelings to my crush with my crush's crush between the two of us. What did I do to deserve this?

"I followed you because I have a crush on you. Why else?"

Once I'd let the cat out of the bag, I was no longer tongue-tied. I could see Chiki's breasts out of the corner of my eye as I talked with Mizuike, but I didn't care. No, I did dislike it. *Ugh*. My ears felt hot. Something was splashing loudly, disturbing the surface of the water. Mizuike's face and ears had color in them, but that was probably just from the hot bath.

"Had no idea..."

With those three uneasy words, she drowned my hopes in the bath. What had I been expecting? My back felt cold despite the hot water, and the skin just below my eyes began to dry into parchment.

"Aren't you popular, Umi!"

"Um... But why?"

"Because you're so cute!"

Chiki's hand emerged from the water and lovingly stroked Mizuike's cheek. It pissed me off that Chiki had hijacked the conversation, but she wasn't wrong. Mizuike was cute. Her face was pretty, and—god, her chest. *Her chest!*

Giving in to despair, I was finding it hard to control my emotions. It hurt to keep the lid on them. It was making me feel sick.

"But I love Ms. Chiki..."

And there was the rejection. Mizuike poked Chiki as if trying to elicit an acknowledgment, pushing her slightly so that her shoulder bumped into mine.

"You heard her," Chiki said.

"I knew that already."

I wanted to put my head underwater, blow a bunch of bubbles, and never come back up.

But then I realized I was out of the bath, slumped in a chair. I couldn't remember getting there, as if I'd time traveled to the future for absolutely no reason. My limbs were hot and heavy, like molten metal. I couldn't move.

"Why don't we sleep together?"

"No. We can't do that."

Another one of Chiki's absurd ideas met with Mizuike's objection. She was getting good at quickly erecting thin walls between me and Chiki.

"I can't explain it well, but...it'd be too weird for you to sleep in the same bed as Hoshi." Mizuike made herself as tall as possible and stepped closer to Chiki. "I don't think it's normal to do that."

She was pleading like a child, unable to substantiate her opinion. With the height difference between them, she really did look like a child instead of a girl my age. Her back was so frail. Thinking that she'd been showing off her childlike body to a grown woman made my head hurt. It was so wrong.

My eyes and my consciousness drifted up to the ceiling.

"Okay, then. I'll sleep on the sofa, and you two sleep on the bed," Chiki happily offered.

How did that make sense in her head?

Anyway, she quickly headed to the sofa, Mizuike following her like a chick behind the hen.

"No, that's not what I want... If you're sleepin' on the sofa, I'm sleepin' on the sofa with you."

Chiki abruptly stopped, and Mizuike bumped into her. Chiki wrapped an arm around her, turning to me.

"Is that okay with you?"

She cocked her head and smiled, stroking Mizuike's back. I hated her for asking my opinion now.

"Whatever. Sleep where you want."

She'd already wrung out all my energy, and I couldn't be bothered to deal

with her shit anymore. I'd given up, like someone out in the rain without an umbrella who just accepts the fact they're getting soaked. I fell onto the bed. Chiki bent down close to peer at me, still grinning.

"Sweet dreams!"

"...Night."

It sucked that the last thing I would see before drifting off to sleep was the warm smile of the woman I despised.

She switched the lights off. In the darkness, the air seemed to settle and solidify. I breathed out and out until my lungs were empty, and I let my body sink into the unfamiliar softness of the bed. A gentle breeze cooled the room slightly. I could stretch out without touching the walls; the soft, quality sheets seemingly endless. It was the total opposite of my oppressively hot room. But I couldn't enjoy it. From somewhere beyond my toes came two voices.

"Let me know if you feel squished."

"I'm fine... Not like you could make any more space for me anyway."

"I'd just roll onto my back and put you on top of me...like this."

"And you could sleep with me on you?"

"Sure. A bit of weight on top is quite comforting."

"Not for me. You're too warm, and so soft."

"Oh? Are you getting horny?"

"What?"

"Because I am."

"...Don't forget Hoshi's in the room."

"Ah, I see. If she weren't here, you'd be in the mood. You're so honest, Umi."

"Shhh! She'll hear us... I don't wanna talk about this anymore... Anyway, am I not too heavy?"

"No high-school-girl connoisseur would complain about that."

"Well, I want to get heavier."

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"And why would you wish for the opposite of what any other girl would
want?"
  "Because I'm too light to stop you if you try to get away..."
  "A little disturbing, but okay. So you want to be able to weigh me down?"
  "I...I guess that's it? I'm not so sure anymore..."
  "I think you can already do that, though."
  "How so?"
  "Well, imagine I cheated on you. What would you do if you found out?"
  "The fuck...?!"
  "Ooh, now that wasn't very ladylike."
  "Sorry, I...got angry? I'd be angry in that situation."
  "I'm sure you would. But would you do anything?"
  "I'd be angry and...I'd want to...grab you, like, really tight..."
  "Grab me where? By my neck?"
  "Dunno. But I'd want to dig my fingernails in, and...I think I'd cry."
  "...You're not good at hurting people, are you?"
  "...I've grown up afraid of adults who were good at that."
  "If someone scares you, you should learn to fight back."
  "I don't know how to talk about what-if like that... You're so kind, but I worry
you'll lose patience with me for being so stupid. I'm not gettin' any smarter. I
dunno the right way to think about things."
  "You know, Umi, I'm not really doing much thinking, either. Right now, I'm
just feeling you."
  "I'm like that, too, just feelin'... I used to worry about my future; that's why I
tried studyin' hard..."
  "It's good, living in the moment."
  "You think?"
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"You don't?"

"Right now...I'm just warm and...I dunno. Now and the future aren't all that different. Today, or in the distant future, every day I get twenty-four hours to exist. I don't see the point in treatin' what's to come like it's so important... I mean, it is important, but not more than today, in my opinion."

"Hmm... It's not good to lose one's ambition just because you're fulfilled in the moment... Or does it matter, I wonder?"

"Don't ask me."

"Well, moving on... Let's focus on living until your eighteenth birthday."

"Um... Okay."

"I'm older than you, so I'll die first. I'm twenty-one, by the way. Four years older than you."

"Are you in college?"

"Not telling!"

"Tch!"

"I don't really need to hide so much about me, but having secrets makes a person seem more interesting, wouldn't you say?"

"You have too many. It makes me anxious."

"You'll be alive after I die. Thinking about the future can be explained as... having a desire for things to get better throughout your lifetime. The future is what's left after you're gone. In simple terms, wanting to make the world a better place for your family, for your children—that's caring about the future. Then, on the other hand, if you live only for yourself, the future doesn't matter."

"You sayin'...I'm selfish, livin' only for myself?"

"It's a way of life as good as any other. You're a gentle spirit, Umi. You're a good girl."

"Um... Can you pet my head instead...?"

"Oh, so sorry. I couldn't see in the dark."

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"You're good at finding other parts..."

"You're so gentle, Umi. Timidly tender when you touch me."

"What? Um... Er... Hoshi's here, remember?"

"Hmm? I was talking about how you hold my hand, not anything naughty."

"Yeah, right. Lies."
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Their banter continued into the night, like a talk show I couldn't switch off. I had never felt so alone, even when there was no one else around. Exclusion is the worst form of loneliness. I wanted to jump out of my skin and escape. My body wasn't responding to me anymore, each part sectioning itself off from the rest. My will couldn't reach anything below my neck.

I was in hell—a beautiful, soft hell. It was pure torment.

My eyelids had dropped like a curtain over my consciousness. I was powered off. The room I was sleeping in was spacious, but I was trapped in its darkness, unable to move. It was like being dead.

I was shaken from my deathlike slumber by an unfamiliar hand.

"Morning," came a whisper, right into my ear.

I sat bolt upright, a chill running down my spine. My neck felt clammy from night sweat. The thought of someone watching me while I was asleep, defenseless, immediately put me on guard. But while my heart was racing anxiously, the person who had woken me up looked at me with a sweet smile. I recognized that twinkle in her eyes, but I still wasn't used to it. She was infuriatingly beautiful.

"Morning," Chiki repeated quietly.

She was crouching at my bedside. *My bedside?* I looked around at the room, which wasn't mine, my memories from last night slowly reloading. I'd never woken up in a place other than my own room before, so my brain was unusually slow, confused.

[&]quot;Why are you always like this?"

I supported myself against the mattress with my right hand and felt it sinking into the softness. *It must be morning*, I thought, noticing light shining through a gap in the closed curtains.

"Let's talk a bit before you go home."

"About what?"

My bangs were plastered to my forehead. I brushed them off with my fingers and shot Ms. Chiki a suspicious stare. She'd already changed from her bathrobe back into the kimono.

"Yes. While Umi's still sleeping."

".....Fine."

This woman was my enemy. Maybe there was a better word, actually, but I'd only just woken up. Anyway, not knowing anything about your enemy puts you at a disadvantage. You can't come up with a strategy to use against them. Which was why I agreed to talk with this woman who'd given me hell last night. We left the room together, passing by Mizuike who was curled up like a baby on the sofa.

"She sleeps like a log," remarked Chiki.

Of course she'd be sound asleep after rambling on and on with this woman until it was late.

"Isn't starting your day in a hotel nice? Even just walking down the hall is a little exciting."

"...Don't know about that."

Her friendly chatter annoyed me. Who did she think I was? Was I too inconsequential to be considered a rival by her? Was that why she kept acting like we were friends instead of enemies? I couldn't pick up any hint of negativity toward me. It was weird. Chiki was a different beast. Or an alien. The most puzzling thing about her behavior was that she displayed the exact same demeanor toward me as she did to her lover, Mizuike.

She led me to a...waiting area? Or whatever you'd call it, near the elevators. There was a table with two chairs by the window. Ridiculously, it might've been

placed there for people waiting for the elevator. So we sat down on those chairs for lazy people. The view from the window was of high-rise rooftops.

"I thought we might have some questions for each other," Chiki explained.

She was sitting so properly, even I, with my lack of world knowledge, could recognize she was someone with good upbringing. It'd showed in slight differences like her perfectly straight posture and the placement of her feet under the table. To think this high-class lady was buying sex from high school girls.

The world was rotten, wasn't it?

"Wasn't the sleepover fun?"

"Um, no?"

"I enjoyed having a real heart-to-heart with both of you."

I'd hated every moment of exposure. What was worse, I'd gained nothing by opening up. Mizuike still had absolutely no interest in me, and this cursed woman found it funny.

"It was so refreshingly new to have a sleepover with two girls... Well, it wasn't new for me, but let's pretend it was."

"What?" I thought for a moment about what she was trying to tell me between the lines. "Let me guess... You've paid two high school girls before to stay with you at a hotel at the same time?"

"Bingo."

She raised her eyebrows as if surprised I'd figured it out. I wished I'd been wrong...

"I accidentally ended up double-booking but went ahead with it anyway. The girls started fighting, unfortunately, and it was quite a headache calming them down. I haven't tried a threesome since."

The corners of her lips briefly turned down as she recounted her regrettable experience.

I wanted to go back into the hotel room, shake Mizuike awake, and ask her

how she could love this woman. She'd probably say "I just do."

"You're really cute, too, but I've been trying to ignore your prettiness. Don't want to make Umi cry."

"...You're a piece of work."

Would she chase after any high school girl's ass?

"You have a pretty name. Takasora."

"Huh?"

"Just saying it has a lovely ring to it. Uplifting, melodic, blue-sky vibes."

She smiled, turning to look out the window at the tall buildings and, far in the distance, the eastern sky just turning blue. She narrowed her eyes as if in reverie, her thoughts racing through the out-of-reach sky.

In this brighter light, I noticed that her irises had an unusual color—or a blend, like one from a multiracial household. The first gentle rays of sun emphasized Chiki's elegant features and, despite myself, I felt strongly attracted to her. Disconcerted, I moved my legs under the table, shifting in my seat, and got a grip on myself.

I thought about what she'd said about my name. People would often note that it was unusual, but I didn't think anyone had ever complimented it that way.

Chiki suddenly stood up and started walking toward our room.

"I'll be right back," she said.

I stayed at the table, lost in my thoughts. Ever since meeting Chiki the previous evening, I'd been doing what she wanted for the most part. She was good at making people dance to her tune.

I idly gazed at the empty chair opposite me. I'd never have guessed I'd be sitting alone in a luxury hotel like this one day.

Chiki returned before long, carrying two bottles of chilled tea.

"One for you."

"...Thanks."

I took one bottle. She must've gotten it from a vending machine. It was just a little act of kindness, but those aren't as easy as they seem. Randomly doing something nice for another person when you're in the right headspace isn't that hard, but doing it consistently is another story.

The chair across from me was no longer empty. I swore at myself for feeling relief.

"Let's say each of us answers three questions. We promise to answer them truthfully."

She smiled softly, awaiting my response. Three questions were all I got? A hundred wouldn't be enough to dispel the mystery around that woman. I'd have to pick my questions carefully. And she was going to ask me questions, too. What could she want to know about me? Three questions each didn't seem fair.

I was fully awake, and my brain had kicked into high gear, even though all that thinking was probably just going to wear me out.

"Fine. Who asks first?"

"You go."

Three questions weren't much, but it was better than nothing, so I had to take her up on her offer. Again, I was playing into her hand. She always made it seem like I had a choice when she was giving me none. But then again, maybe my whole life was a series of illusory choices.

"All right, question one: What's your real name?"

"Why do you want to know that?"

"So that...I can find out more about you if I need to."

I was demanding personal information, but I was fully aware I had no justifiable reason to be snooping on her.

Chiki twisted the cap of her bottle, her eyes glazing over. "Just my current name is fine, yes?"

"Wait, what -?"

"I'm Shiho," she said, speaking over me. "Shiho Chitaira."

The premise was that we'd answer truthfully, but I was surprised that she'd given me her name without a fight. Chiki... No, Shiho Chitaira took a sip of her tea and let out a little sigh of satisfaction. She then looked into my eyes.

I'd peeled one layer of mystery off this sketchy woman. She was beginning to take a firmer form, like sand when you pour water over it. Was that a good thing or not? I wasn't sure, but at least I knew for certain that the name she'd given Mizuike was fake. What did Mizuike actually know about this woman? What had made her fall in love with her?

"Feel free to call me by any name you like."

"Okay... You're going to be Ms. Chitaira to me from now on."

"That's too long. Why not use my first name for short?" Her eyes darted to the side and she laughed. "But not around Umi!"

She held her index finger in front of her mouth.

"I've never told her my real name. Let's keep it a secret." She giggled, pleased with her little mischief.

She kept her name secret from her girlfriend, but told it to someone she'd only just met. Was I even capable of comprehending her values?

"Ask your second question."

"Um... Give me a moment..."

"Of course—but question time is over when Umi wakes up."

There was a time limit, but the exact length of time I had was unknown. Was that why she was letting me ask my questions first? No way; I shouldn't naively assume she was doing me any favors. I had to think of the next question, and why I had wanted to question her to begin with.

What was it I was hoping for? To find out about this woman's weaknesses? Was that it? Really? No, it wasn't this woman I was curious about, with her shady nature concealed by superficial friendliness and obscured by her beauty. What I wanted was Mizuike... I wanted her to fall hopelessly in love with *me*. Discovering this woman's weaknesses wasn't going to help me with that.

So then, what could I get out of questioning Chitaira? What useful answers could she offer me?

"My second question is...about something you said before."

"What's that?"

I clutched the tea bottle for comfort.

"Last night...you said you were going to eventually break up with Mizuike. Why did you say that?"

"Isn't that self-explanatory? Our relationship's going to come to an end at some point."

I couldn't detect any change in her tone. It was as if she was calmly foretelling the future without a hint of sorrow. Did it really make sense to call her and Mizuike a couple if, to Chitaira, the relationship was destined to end? And she wasn't bothered by that at all?

"You mean...you're planning to break up with Mizuike?"

"I'm not, but the result will be the same, I suppose."

Chitaira smiled thinly, as if displeased with me putting words in her mouth. I was just trying to get clarification. I wanted to bang my head against the wall yet again—I'd no idea how many times I'd had that impulse now. What was up with Chitaira? I couldn't make sense of her. She made me unhappy, this graceful, gentle woman. I stared at her from this and that angle without restraint, puzzled by what I was seeing.

"Umi's a good girl, so I'm pretty sure that's what's going to happen."

"Wait, how's her being a good girl going to—"

"Third question, please."

"Huh? The second question's over?"

"I gave you an honest answer," she said with a decisiveness I couldn't deny.

I glared at her in frustration, which she seemed to enjoy.

Dating someone like that would probably drive anyone to insanity after a while, so it'd make sense to expect her girlfriend to break up with her at some

point... Was that her reasoning? But from what I had seen last night, I couldn't picture Mizuike wanting to let go of Chitaira now that she'd latched on to her. How would she react if Chitaira said they were over? I would hate her if she cruelly discarded Mizuike like a piece of trash.

"Hurry up!"

"My third question is... No, can I have more time? Um, why don't you ask me your questions while I think of my last one?"

I couldn't come up with anything right off the bat, but I thought something might come to mind later.

"As you wish," Chitaira easily agreed.

I'd noticed she never flat-out refused when I asked something of her. Was that how she'd won over Mizuike...? *Probably.* Mizuike likely had no immunity to people who seemed eager to please her. She wanted someone to spoil her. Everyone craves that, don't they?

"My first question is, what's your phone number?"

"What sort of question is that?"

"I'm asking about something I don't know. It's as good a question as any."

I couldn't dispute that. I'd agreed to answer truthfully without it crossing my mind that she might ask for something as concrete as my phone number. Now I was starting to sweat. I shouldn't have consented to this.

"I'll give you my number, too."

"I don't want it."

We exchanged numbers; giving out your number without getting the other person's would be weird, even though I had absolutely no intention of ever contacting Chitaira.

...I wouldn't contact her, right? I had no reason to, at least.

I looked at her for confirmation that she'd saved my number correctly, and she showed me her screen with a smile. She'd saved me as "Takasora." She wasn't using any honorifics for me anymore. I decided to save her as "Ms.

Chitaira." She'd get the "Ms." on account of her being older than me, if nothing else.

"Don't call me."

"Ha-ha-ha!"

She seemed to find my objections funny.

My hair was getting in my face. I tucked it behind my ear and drank more of the tea. It was more fragrant than I was used to, and the taste harmonized with Chitaira's delicately sweet floral fragrance, which seemed to fill not only my lungs but my whole body. She always had that scent on her—as if it wasn't perfume, but her natural smell.

"Second question. Let's see... What did you think when you saw Umi naked?" "Hwargh?"

An incomprehensible noise came out of my mouth, as if my lungs had been turned inside out.

"Whuh... What? The hell? The hell are you asking me?"

"I'd like an honest answer from your mouth, not just from your ears."

My ears felt like they were burning as blood rushed to them. When she pointed this out, the redness spread to my cheeks, too. She was asking me this in public? The sweat on my back was forming hot rivulets, as if my skin was melting, while blood pulsed in my head to the frantic rhythm of my racing heart. Hot and cold at the same time, I got goose bumps.

"Why would you...? Why would you ask that?"

"For fun," she replied briefly with another smile.

I saw in her expression that this was just fun for her. There was no other emotion hiding there. Having fun at other people's expense was what she lived for.

"I thought...she looked pretty."

"Honest answers only, remember? Be honest with me."

She started tapping the table with her fingertips. I was honest, I thought, but

the tapping continued on and on. Tap-tap-tap. Or pat-pat-pat? It was getting on my nerves.

I reached with my hand to stop her, but she swiftly evaded me and carried on tapping. I was overcome with the cruel desire to grab her hand and break her fingers so she'd cut it out for good.



Except I could totally imagine this crazy woman just tapping with her other hand.

What did I think when I saw Mizuike naked? Lights flashed in my eyes when I recalled the memory. I couldn't review it while turning my mind's eye away. I shut my eyes, hoping to erase those images, but my brain refused to. They were burned into the backs of my eyelids.

I scratched my itching, flushed cheeks again and again. When I started speaking, each word felt like a drop of blood dripping straight from my wounded psyche.

"......I thought she had really big boobs."

Drop dead, I thought, not sure who I was aiming that wish at. Maybe myself.

"Yes, and...?"

If only the woman sitting in front of me, listening with anticipation, would disappear off the face of the earth.

"Did you want to touch them?"

"...Fuck off."

"Did you?"

"I did, so what? Get off my back. Fuck off."

My true thoughts had begun to spill out. Especially thoughts directed at that woman.

"I feel you! Umi has really nice boobs."

"I don't want to discuss them with you."

"And let me tell you, Takasora, they don't just look good."

"The hell are you saying? I don't know what you're getting at, but shut up."

"They taste fantastic."

"...Sorry, but this shit is giving me a headache. I'd really appreciate it if you shut your filthy mouth already and jump off a bridge or something."

The crazy woman ignored me.

"I've licked so many girls all over, so I can tell you Umi is extraordinarily delicious."

"You're a piece of shit."

Was she some new brand of demon come to torment people?

"Smell affects how we perceive taste, and everyone has a different natural smell. No breasts taste the same." She talked about this stuff as if it was human nature. I was becoming increasingly homicidal. "The taste of Umi's boobs is delicate and subtle."

"Shut the fuck up!"

This bitch. This bitch. She'd had me sit with her in that waiting area, planning from the start to bring up lewd topics. I grabbed my tea bottle and was about to fling it at her—and I was so enraged, I felt like my whole arm might come off and fly at her—but I somehow managed to stop myself in time. When the wave of fury subsided, I saw white, as if after an explosion.

Shiho Chitaira stood up and leisurely walked over to me. She leaned down, bringing her face close to mine.

"Don't shout; we don't want to cause a scene. You're welcome to swear at me all you want, but only if you do so quietly."

She took my face in her hands and turned it so that my lips were next to her ear. I detested how she'd just touch me without permission. The softness of her fingers sent a chill down my spine. I felt the warmth of her body. It turned my rage solid, petrifying me. With my limbs betraying me, all I could do was accept the offer.

"Fuck off and die." I was trying to be quiet, which turned my voice into a low growl. "Fuck you, bitch."

"Uh-huh."

She had my mouth to her ear, listening to me as if to a seashell. Nothing I said had any effect. I was at a loss as to what to do with my naked rage. It was as if I had something icky on my hands with no way to wash them clean. A sickening feeling.

Shiho Chitaira noticed the change in me.

"As soon as you calm down, you begin to regret your outburst," she whispered in her controlled, grown-up voice. "You're a good person."

Did she mean it, or was she being sarcastic? I couldn't tell.

Chitaira walked back to her chair, sat down, drank some tea, and soon enough a big smile lit up her face. I had not smiled at her once.

"Aaah, it's wonderful to talk to you. I can't have these conversations with anyone else."

Yeah, I bet, I thought. I wasn't happy about it.

"I don't want to talk to you."

Would I ever be released from this? The demons torturing people in the afterlife were probably more tactful than this woman.

The smiling vortex of my personal hell spoke to me. When I wasn't being deafened by my emotions, I found her voice smooth and clear.

"My final question: Could you still be Umi's friend?"

"What?"

Her questions were so wildly different, I couldn't react at all. And that didn't sound like a question, but a request.

"I'd like Umi to have a happier life, and you'd make such a good friend to her, Takasora."

I didn't know why, but having her call me by my first name didn't make me angry, just uneasy. She was playing the piano of my heart like a virtuoso, making something tingle inside me, not unpleasantly. My mother was the only person who addressed me as just "Takasora," but it felt different to hear it from Chitaira.

"I don't know if I can be her friend..."

Honestly, I couldn't imagine things not being awkward between me and Mizuike after that night. I'd be the one making things awkward, and Chitaira knew why. Was that why she was asking me to make an effort? Attraction was

stronger than friendship. The only way to stay friends would be for me to give up on Mizuike, wouldn't it?

"It depends on if she wants me as a friend."

"Don't worry about that. I hope you two will get close!"

"I just...don't get you..."

That was a factual statement, not a criticism. Everything Chitaira said was filled with emotions you'd normally assume were positive, like warmth and joy. I couldn't comprehend the frame of mind that lent her such positivity, considering everything. She had to have something wrong with her to confidently talk to me as if she were a friend. The image Mizuike had of her—as someone good, beautiful, smelling of flowers, smart, kind, caring, and reassuring—wasn't wrong, as long as you turned a blind eye to the alarming contradictions I was seeing.

"Oh, but I'm just...an ordinary lady who happens to be into high school girls."

"That alone disqualifies you from being ordinary."

"Hmm. You might want to have more of an open mind."

"So there you were," a third, dry voice said, joining ours.

Mizuike had found us. She was still wearing the shirt she'd slept in, and her hair was sticking out in weird directions. She must've left the room in a rush, since she wasn't even wearing shoes. Her cute toes were sinking into the lush carpet.

"Good morning, Umi."

"Why are you sittin' out here?"

She scowled at us, and it wasn't just her resting bitch face this time. Why was she staring like that? Like she was suspicious? Of me? *Come on, I would never go after Chitaira*.

Previously, I'd been under the impression that Mizuike was incapable of any strong feelings, but I was discovering that she was fiercely jealous. She'd possibly chosen the worst person in the world to love with such jealousy.

"I wanted to find out what the girl you've been living with was like. Fortunately, Takasora seems very nice."

Chitaira lied without batting an eye.

Okay, maybe it wasn't a complete lie, but no matter how you looked at it, Chitaira's interest in me was plainly sexual. I was so embarrassed by the things she'd made me tell her that I honestly wanted to die. Thinking about it was making me seriously depressed.

"Thought you might be hittin' on Hoshi. Bet it's hard passing up a new girl."

"Goodness! Do you think I'm that fickle?"

I thought Chitaira's act with her exaggerated surprise was a dead giveaway.

"It's just that...Hoshi's cute, too..."

Mizuike's sudden praise struck my cheeks like a whip. I'd had no idea she thought I was cute. Me, cute... Did she really think that?! I calmed my heart before it tried to jump out of my chest. So she thought I was cute, okay, but it wasn't me she was into.

"Come here, Umi."

Chitaira beckoned, and Mizuike obediently walked over to her, running her fingers through her messy morning hair. Chitaira opened her arms and embraced her. She patted Mizuike's back comfortingly. I saw Mizuike gradually melt into that embrace, and the dark haze in my heart started to rise again.

"Morning, sweetie," Chitaira said again.

"Good morning," Mizuike replied, with more energy than I thought she was capable of.

Chitaira had managed to change the vibe in the air to something nice and fluffy, but she hadn't actually refuted Mizuike's accusation. The show was probably meant to spite me.

Having shut down the conversation with that showy embrace, Chitaira energetically stood up. On cue, I stood up in a rush as well, nearly losing my balance and falling over.

"Let me treat you girls to breakfast."

She put one hand on Mizuike's shoulder and one on mine. I didn't even have the energy to protest at this overfamiliarity. She gently steered us, and we walked like a cheery group of girlfriends, even though we were anything but.

Everything was always happening the way she wanted.

I remembered I'd never gotten to ask my third question. I looked up at Chitaira and she mouthed at me amusedly, "Time's up." Her sexy lips opened again and silently formed a directive for me: *Get along*.

But could I...?

"Morning," I said to Mizuike quietly, without looking at her.

She replied shortly before we reached our room.

The hotel breakfast, with a mind-boggling price which made me wonder if I'd misheard at first, was so delicious that every bite was a taste of heaven. It made me forget all my worries and taught me a valuable lesson about the world—money was everything. I could see why people said money could change a person. The little I'd seen of the world proved that having it or not drastically affected your life.

I wondered, though, how the three of us looked to the other hotel guests as we were eating our breakfast. Did we look like sisters? Friends? Even God wouldn't have been able to tell at a glance that we were a girl prostituting herself, a woman paying that girl, and another girl fostering an unrequited love for the first one. The triangle of connections between us wasn't solid—the faint threads would unravel at the gentlest of pulls.

After breakfast, Chitaira checked us out of the hotel, and we walked to the station together, me trailing behind the other two. Chitaira had combed Mizuike's hair; even though Mizuke was almost expressionless, I could tell she was in a good mood. She was carrying a bag with the snacks we couldn't finish last night as if it were the most precious gift.

That horrible night had ended, but my hell continued. Maybe there was no escaping it as long as Mizuike was staying in my room.

"This is as far as I can walk with you."

Chitaira looked from me to Mizuike, smiling pleasantly.

What was she even thinking, acting like we were all besties? It kept catching me off guard.

"Takasora, be good to Umi."

"Uh, right..."

What, was she pretending to be my mother now?

She kept smiling nicely at me. It was drawing the venom from my thoughts—was she absorbing it into herself?

Anyway, she was about to leave us at the train station when Mizuike stopped her.

"Ms. Chiki, wait..."

It was going to be annoying having to remember which name to use for Chitaira. I might slip up one day and use her real name in front of Mizuike. Not that it would cause me any problems. Plus, I probably would never see her again anyway. Probably.

Chitaira turned on her heel. "What is it, sweetie?" she asked in a soft, sugary voice.

Hmph, I thought, she uses that voice to charm Mizuike. She'd never try that on me. I'm wise to her tactics.

"Until...until next time? See you... Um... I dunno what I want to say..."

I watched from the sidelines as Mizuike haltingly said her farewell, and I could tell she was trying something new. Chitaira walked back to her and placed her hands on Mizuike's cheeks, hiding her behind the long sleeves of her kimono. She leaned in, and although I couldn't see what she was doing, it was perfectly obvious. It felt hot below my eyes, like I'd been scratching at them.

When Chitaira stepped back, Mizuike's cheeks had a slightly rosy tinge.

"Until next time, Umi."

Chitaira, all smiles as usual, understood exactly what it was Mizuike had been

longing for.

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"B-bye!"
```

I couldn't bear seeing the happy sparkle in Mizuike's eyes. I had to turn away and pretend to look at something in a side alley.

Morning was in full swing with everyone busily starting their day. The sunlight that reached me through the gaps between buildings was scorching my skin and making my depression worse.

"I want to go home," I quietly muttered.

I sleepwalked through the turnstiles, and before I knew it, I was sitting on a train. The crazy night was over, but it had left me worn out. The exhaustion soaked me through my clothes and drenched my skin, killing my hopes and dreams. My bones creaked under the weight of my melancholy.

I was spaced out; not because I was drowsy, but simply because I didn't want to face reality. At least, until I became aware of a sound other than the rumbling of the train car.

"Your phone just buzzed," Mizuike said to me.

```
"Ah, yeah."
```

The thick curtain of mind fog was blocking me from taking action. I somehow pushed past it and took my phone out to check who was bothering me. I didn't try to hide the screen, since I never would have expected to get a message from Chitaira, especially right after we'd parted ways.

Let's have fun again \approx , the message said.

Over my dead body. Keep dreaming, bitch. Instead of answering, I mentally cursed at her.

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"A friend?"
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"Er... Yeah."
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Right—Mizuike didn't know Chitaira's real name, so she didn't realize who the message was from. How messed up was it that I knew the name of Mizuike's girlfriend, but she didn't?

I was thrown, as if I'd mentally stumbled over a tiny unevenness in a sidewalk, and I let out an uneasy laugh.

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"What's so funny?"
"Nah, never mind."
"'Kay..."
```

Both of us were avoiding each other's eyes. My hand holding the phone dropped limply to my lap. My awareness seemed to be flowing downward, forming a muddy puddle on the floor.

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"I'm so tired..."
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I could kind of understand the desire to close your eyes, to dissolve into light, to fall into eternal sleep on a train that never reached its destination.

I never wanted to feel this way ever again.

Following the Flower's Scent

Getting up during summer holidays was hard. I felt like the sun was right above my head, pushing me down. I'd been lying on the futon wrapped in a thin blanket, tossing and turning all night. Not being able to sleep wasn't new to me. I'd spent plenty of nights wide awake in someone's house, scared I'd hear the door open in the darkness. In my memories, the darkness of those nights was white.

But the reason I couldn't sleep that night was different. It was...sickness. Love sickness. Even just saying that in my mind made me so embarrassed I drew the blanket over my face. No one was even looking at me.

I wanted to see Ms. Chiki. I wanted to see her. I wanted to see her, I wanted to see her, I wanted to see her. The wish was repeating itself over and over like an earworm. Maybe I had some kind of mental illness. After all, it had only been five days since I'd last been with Ms. Chiki. I hadn't gone out anywhere on any of those days, though, and that had made them feel longer. It was like trying to walk to the end of the shadow cast by a sundial, but the shadow kept stretching farther and farther and wouldn't stop until I reached the ends of the earth. Whenever I looked up at the wall clock, only ten minutes had passed since the last time I'd checked. Maybe it was good, since I did a lot of studying and helping with house chores...but sooner or later, I'd run out of things to do to kill time and I'd just lie down. Not sleeping, but enduring the boredom.

Should I reach out to her again? I didn't want Ms. Chiki to think I was pestering her, though, and I didn't know what to write in a message anyway. The more I thought about it, the more hesitant it made me. I preferred Ms. Chiki to be the one doing all the talking. She used to do that, but I no longer had the excuse of just being a purchased product. I had to get off my ass and make a move, even if it was just a little one. I didn't want my relationship with Ms. Chiki to be like a one-way street.

I sat up and anxiously procrastinated for a while, but in the end, I reached for my phone and started typing eagerly.

I'd like to see you, please, I wrote, then tapped send without looking at the screen. I got a reply immediately: Sure! When's good for you?

My first emotion was great relief that Ms. Chiki hadn't said no, even though

she'd never done that to me before.

...Maybe that was what I loved about Ms. Chiki the most—the way she indulged me. Which made me a horrible person. I'd always hated myself, and realizing I was so selfish brought my opinion of myself down even lower.

Is today okay? I asked her.

Not that I'd be busy the next day, or the day after that, but meeting Ms. Chiki sooner would make me the happiest.

Surel

If she'd written an apology—Sorry, I'm busy—I probably wouldn't have dared ask to meet her again. But she never said no to me, so my love for her kept me afloat.

We agreed on a time and place. I left the room to get ready and saw Hoshi from behind. She was about to clean the living room.

"I'm goin' out today," I told her uneasily. I should've asked Ms. Chiki to meet me later, so that I'd have time to help with the chores first.

"Are you?" she said sharply. It felt like she'd thrown a rock at me. "Do you need to tell me every time?"

I thought it was the right thing to do. She didn't need to be so huffy about it.

"Won't tell you again, I guess."

"Good," she snapped, staring at the floor.

She really was in a mood, but I wasn't going to waste time arguing with her.

Hoshi ran her fingers through her hair. Then she came up to me as I was heading to the bathroom.

"Will you be here for dinner?"

"Um... Dunno. Dunno how long it'll take, but I can try to be back early."

"Really."

Hoshi sounded even more pissed at me. Had I done something wrong? I wasn't good at telling who was to blame, so I tried not to think about it.

"Sorry," I said, even though I was annoyed by Hoshi's attitude.

Ms. Chiki had told me apologizing was the quickest way toward resolving conflict, and I didn't want any conflict with Hoshi. She was a friend.

If getting out of an argument was as easy as bowing and saying sorry, I wished my head could stay totally empty, so I could bow it anytime without any effort. But at the same time, I wanted to be smart. The two might have been mutually exclusive.

"I'm sorry, too," Hoshi said, averting her gaze.

She quickly walked away.

We were friends, but we had a hard time getting along. Did it have something to do with Hoshi having a crush on me?

I could understand her feelings. I wouldn't be happy if Ms. Chiki was hanging out with other girls. Actually, that was an understatement. I'd be crazy jealous. I'd already *been* crazy jealous, and when Ms. Chiki had pointed it out to me, I'd almost cried. I had no idea how to stop that helplessness and anger.

Maybe Hoshi was going through something similar. Even if she was, though, I couldn't help her. I was the only person who could make her feel better, but I wouldn't. I wasn't in love with her. She was a friend, nothing more.

I did see her as a friend, but that wasn't what I was to her. If we couldn't treat each other in the same way, maybe our relationship was doomed from the beginning.

Were my feelings toward Ms. Chiki and her feelings for me the same? I didn't have to think hard to know the answer.

There seemed to be fewer people around than usual on the way to the train station. The train was also practically empty. I got a seat and didn't have to push through crowds—going out in the morning on a weekday during summer vacation was a different experience than what I was used to.

On the train I gazed out the window, thinking about Hoshi. Living with her was getting difficult. It was going to be stressful if she made a scene every time I went out. When were we going to move on to someplace else? My mom

seemed to like living with the Hoshi family, though, and it didn't look like Hoshi's mom wanted to kick us out anytime soon, either.

We couldn't stay there forever, though. I wasn't able to imagine what it'd be like not to be nomads anymore. We'd never stayed at one address for long.

And what about my relationship with Ms. Chiki? There was no guarantee of that continuing, either.

For me, every day was filled with uncertainty, from morning until night. I didn't feel like anything in my life would last very long.

Five or six stops later, it was my stop. I got off the train and walked from the station, which was prettier than the ones where I lived. Outside, I found a shaded spot and waited there, next to a small stall with a green roof and a signboard saying they were selling "panda bakes." Were pandas even edible? I looked on curiously, keeping my distance so the seller wouldn't mistake me for a customer.

It turned out they were selling small cakes in the shape of pandas. A sweet smell was coming from the stall. Burnt sugar, maybe. I retreated to stand with my back against the wall.

Guess you *could* eat pandas, in a way.

On the right-hand side outside the station was a small clock tower. It didn't even give much shade, but there were lots of people waiting next to it. There were also lots of pigeons. They walked around between the people, unafraid of getting stepped on. Something startled them, and they all took to the air at once. I watched the flock fly into the distance, leaving only the smell of their feathers behind at the plaza.

I'd never had a morning meetup with Ms. Chiki before. Was this...a date? Maybe it was weird to have our first date after all we'd done in the bedroom. But our relationship had been different before, and I...wasn't that much in love with Ms. Chiki yet? Or was I? When I'd first laid eyes on her, I thought she was gorgeous... Was that when I had fallen in love with her? No, couldn't be—I didn't trust her back then... But had I ever really learned to trust her?

Maybe I had fallen in love with her... Love at first sight. I had no idea a person

could make your world seem perfect just with how they looked, and before Ms. Chiki, I'd never expected anything good from another person. I used to be scared of everyone. Although, to be frank, Ms. Chiki scared me in many ways, too.

"A date with Ms. Chiki..."

I was filled with anticipation, but not like when we were going to a hotel. Before a hotel meetup, I had this hard sensation in the pit of my stomach, but when I was expecting to go on a date, I was restless, and my skin tingled.

The wait was dragging on, although it was probably as short as the gap between the arrivals of two trains going in the same direction. Then Ms. Chiki appeared, wearing a simple, casual outfit. She gave me a little wave.

"Ah..." I gasped, my breath feeling ticklish on my tongue.

It was a response coming straight from the heart. Or from the bottom of my heart? When I saw Ms. Chiki, something that had been lodged inside my chest began to melt, spreading slowly through my body, like sticky chocolate fondue, leaving behind trails of joy and anxiety.

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"You're early, Umin!"
"'U-Umin'?!"
"Let's go."
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She took my hand, wrapping her silky fingers around mine. Apparently she wasn't going to explain why she'd come up with a nickname for me. Not only was she taller than me, but her hands were bigger. The warmth of her hand pressed against mine felt different from the summer heat. I looked up at the wide-brimmed hat she was wearing, thinking that she could pull off any aesthetic. She used sunlight for makeup, and the shade the hat cast on her face amplified her beauty. I was swept off my feet, spellbound, but somehow, Ms. Chiki's unreal beauty only made me feel farther away from her.

"Lately, you've been the one asking me out, Umi, not the other way around."

"Um, y-yeah."

I had only half heard her, still thinking about that nickname. Had she already

reverted to plain old Umi?

"Sorry for making you feel lonely. We should speak on the phone more often."

My hackles rose, and I forgot about the whole Umin thing.

"I wasn't...lonely..."

"You don't need to hide your feelings from me. Aren't we a couple now?"

Ms. Chiki raised her big hand, holding my small one, and squeezed a few times in a gesture of excitement. Each squeeze brought our hands closer together, then they separated slightly again. Air would flow into that space and then get pushed out with another squeeze. It was like breathing.

"You mean it?"

"Sorry?"

"Do you mean it, about us bein' a couple?"

Was I no longer a paid-for sex partner? We'd never talked about that in detail, so I wasn't sure what was going to happen with that, and me and Ms. Chiki being together didn't seem real.

"It actually doesn't feel like we're a couple to me at all," I confessed.

Nothing had changed—I was as thirsty to see Ms. Chiki as before, and meeting her made me both happy and anxious.

"I, on the other hand, am very conscious of it," she said to my surprise. "I wouldn't have come out to meet you during the day if you weren't my girlfriend."

""

"Well, since you're my girlfriend, I could take you to a hotel right now, too. But first..." She paused and looked around, pondering where to go. "Are you hungry?"

"Um... Yeah..."

I realized I'd left Hoshi's house without eating breakfast.

"Let's go and get something to eat, then."

Ms. Chiki gestured widely with her arms, and we resumed our date. I was a little relieved that she seemed to be having fun. I wondered if we shouldn't be splitting the check in half, though, since it was a date. Granted, all my money had originated from Ms. Chiki anyway.

"Ha-ha-ha!"

"Huh? What happened?"

I had no idea why Ms. Chiki had laughed out of the blue.

"Oh, I'm just happy! We're going to have a meal together. It's so much fun to think about what we're going to do next, where I could take you."

She pushed my shoulders gently to make me stand to the side. When I looked up at her questioningly, she raised her hand to stroke my cheeks, then my hair, and my ears.

"You're special to me, Umi."

Her voice and smile were like the summer sun, baking my face red. I couldn't cover it, because Ms. Chiki's hands were in the way.

"No other girl matters to me as much as you do."

She spoke so calmly, so coolly, while my throat was closing up. I opened my lips as if drowning, gasping for air.

"No, it's not a lie," Ms. Chiki said, reading the words on my trembling lips.

She took my hand again, and we began walking. I trailed silently behind her, watching her hair sway beneath her sun hat. My cheeks were warm, but not from the sun.

If she wasn't lying, maybe I could afford to feel happy. If she was, I'd never want to find out.

Not far from the station, we arrived at a building with a narrow staircase lined with store signs. There was a kimono rental store, a beautician, a Japanese restaurant, a rickshaw tours office, and lastly, a barbecue restaurant. Were people supposed to visit the stores in that order?

The second-floor walls were a sooty black, both from dirt and from lack of sunlight. I reached to touch the wall with my finger to check if it really was that grimy, but I changed my mind for my own cleanliness. I was with Ms. Chiki, I reminded myself, so I shouldn't do anything weird that might make her ashamed of me.

The barbecue place had only just opened. There were no other customers yet, and the staff were chatting among themselves. One of them led us to a table by the window, which I thought was a poor choice, since in summer it was hottest by the windows. I was right—the chairs were burning hot. At least they had the air-conditioning on and blowing air that was actually cold, so the top half of me was cooling down.

"You like meat, so I thought I'd bring you here."

"I do, yeah... But I've never been to a place like this."

There was a hot plate in the middle of the table, and I guessed we'd be doing the grilling ourselves, but I had no clue how to grill meat.

Ms. Chiki called the server and ordered a lot of different cuts of meat. Koreanstyle marinated ribs were the only bit I'd heard of. She seemed to be ordering so much, I started worrying we might not be able to eat it all.

"Eat as much as you like."

"...Thanks."

"Is something the matter?"

Ms. Chiki had picked up on my uneasiness. I hesitated for a moment, but decided to tell her the truth.

"I...don't really like eatin' in front of you."

"Why?"

"I eat like an animal."

No one had ever taught me table manners, so I'd had to learn how to feed myself. That's why I was a total barbarian at the table. No one had sown the seeds of culture in me. Ms. Chiki, on the other hand, was always infinitely graceful. It looked that way to me, at least. Since I'd never been shown how to

eat properly, I had nothing to compare Ms. Chiki to. I couldn't tell if she was really so perfect, or if she seemed perfect because she was beautiful. In any case, I was uncivilized, and that made me ashamed.

"Sometimes, I feel like crying because I'm so pathetic."

Why had a good-for-nothing like me fallen in love with someone who had everything?

...Was it *because* she had everything? Yeah, that was probably it. Nobody could love a person who had nothing to offer. Someone who didn't know how to make others love them.

"Hmm..."

Ms. Chiki closed her eyes for a moment. Then she briskly stood up and walked to my side to sit next to me. The other side of the table was empty. Ms. Chiki put chopsticks in my hand.

"Today we'll learn how to properly hold the chopsticks and the rice bowl," she said, like a TV personality from an educational show.

Wait, what? I was also extremely conscious of the warmth of her fingertips on my hand.

"I don't think we should do this."

"Why not?"

"I may cry. I don't want to. Not here, in a restaurant..."

"You don't need to worry what others think, hon," Ms. Chiki whispered into my ear. For some reason, that brought tears to my eyes.

I'd done that already—cried before I'd even caught up with my emotions. Ms. Chiki was filling the gaps in me. She was making me complete, like she was all I'd been missing. She made me overflow with happiness. I couldn't help thinking what it'd be like if I lost her.

My eyes had quickly filled with tears. I couldn't clearly see the server who'd brought us the meat Ms. Chiki had ordered.

"Don't worry, we're eating. Keep them coming!"

"Yes, ma'am," the server replied, carefully avoiding looking at us.

It was weird to have a crying customer. I felt embarrassed. I had to put up with it, though, to keep Ms. Chiki close to me.

"Why does this keep happenin'...? Every time you're nice to me, I cry."

Hoshi would do nice things for me sometimes, but it never made me tear up. Were there different types of kindness? What was the secret ingredient in Ms. Chiki's kindness? Would I ever develop a resistance to it and stop crying over everything?

"Because you wear your heart on your sleeve," Ms. Chiki said tenderly, stroking my back.

It wouldn't be until some time later that I would understand what she meant.

"Are you full?"

"Yes... The food was delicious."

"Good. Very good. What shall we do now ...? Hmm ... "

We'd left the restaurant and walked down the stairs to street level, where the sun shone on us again. Ms. Chiki looked me up and down. I thought maybe I'd spilled some sauce on myself. I held my shirt out to check, but I couldn't see any stains.

"Let's go shopping for clothes."

"Clothes...for me?"

"Yes, sweetie! I have some ideas for what I'd like to see you wear."

Ms. Chiki hadn't really eaten much at the restaurant, but she happily took my hand again and we started walking together.

"It must be the change of perspective. I used to be only interested in seeing you naked, but now I'm also thrilled at the thought of dressing you up all cute. I'm truly venturing into new territory."

"Um... Hmm..."

Her cheerful confidence almost distracted me from how what she'd said wasn't actually nice.

"Being together with you is changing me, Umi. It's absolutely wonderful."

Her exaggerated praise put me on guard. Not against Ms. Chiki, but against myself. I didn't want to misunderstand and think she really did want me and love me. Because it couldn't be true. I wanted both of those things, but I couldn't let myself believe I'd achieved them.

"Don't lie to me...," I said. It was insurance against disappointment.

But...that was a mistake.

Ms. Chiki stopped walking and let go of my hand. She slowly turned toward me. I saw that she wasn't smiling.

"Let's split up."

"What?"

"I can't do anything without you accusing me of lying," she said coldly.

She was angry. At me. I'd made Ms. Chiki angry.

Wait, what?

Split up? What?

No...

No way...

She wasn't...breaking up with me, right?

My knees were the first to react. My legs buckled under me, and I dropped down to the ground. It was hot from the summer sun. It didn't hurt, but my legs seemed to melt into a hot lump. My upper body began to shake, and my face ached more and more, like it was breaking open. I couldn't breathe and I felt cold. Was it the end?

"Ms. Chi...?" I mumbled. My body was coming apart.

Nothing felt real except the sensation of warmth draining from my body with each hot tear.

Ms. Chiki put her hands under my arms.

"Change of plans. Come on, back on your feet." She helped me up. My knees were burning, but with effort, I managed to stand. "Let's go and buy you what you need most right now, Umi."

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"I'm sorry... I'm...I'm so sorry..."
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"I'm sorry... I don't want this... I'm sorry for everything. I don't want to break up. I don't want to... I'm sorry..."

"If you don't stop apologizing and listen to what I'm saying to you..." Ms. Chiki glared at me for the first time ever. My throat closed up, and I even stopped breathing. "If you don't stop, I'm going to... Hmm, what should I do? I know! I'm going to play 'find the nipple' with you right here on the street."

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"What ...?"
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"The rules are, if I find your nipple five times in a row, I win."

"I— I know the rules..."

I'd been hoping she'd never play that game with me again, though.

Ms. Chiki grinned good-naturedly, and I awkwardly giggled, too, relaxing a little. Then Ms. Chiki held my hand, pressing her fingers more forcefully than usual, like she was trying to tell me something through them, and she started leading me somewhere.

Once I was no longer panicking, I could stop the stream of apologies, and I just walked silently with my head down. I was still scared. I thought I'd just die on the spot when Ms. Chiki said she wanted to break up. Death was closer than I'd imagined. I wanted to keep on living, though, so I held on to Ms. Chiki's hand with desperation. The sun was so strong, the white markings on the asphalt seemed to mark the boundary between life and death.

It wasn't a clothes store Ms. Chiki took me to. It was a jewelry store. The writing on the store sign used the English-derived term instead of the more familiar Japanese word. Inside, there were so many display cases with shiny objects, it would've been a paradise for magpies.

I'd never been to a jeweler before. I'd never even peeked through the

[&]quot;I'm not angry."

window, afraid the staff would get angry at someone like me hanging out near their store. Was what I needed the most sold in a place like this? Did Ms. Chiki mean...a dog collar?

The floor and walls were in black and white with lots of lights that made the store glitter like diamonds. I had to walk carefully not to slip. A weird thought crossed my mind: If you lived in a place like that, all those lights would never let you get to sleep.

"Excuse me," Ms. Chiki called to a staff member and put one hand on my shoulder. "I'm looking for a gift for this young lady. Her name's Umi, so I'd like something that brings to mind the ocean."

The store lady nodded in acknowledgment and took a look at me. I got the impression she was only paying attention to my face, maybe because what I was wearing wasn't worth her consideration. It was like when people turned their eyes away from signs of disability.

"Wait here a moment, Umi."

Ms. Chiki and the store lady went browsing while I was left like a child waiting for her mom to finish shopping. I watched Ms. Chiki talk with the staff while she checked out gemstones on display.

The store was very overwhelming for me. I wanted Ms. Chiki to come back. Without her, I was reverting to the pitiful girl I really was. I was even more nervous than usual after she'd almost dumped me earlier.

Was that how our relationship was going to be? I had to fight the urge to break down sobbing then and there.

"Hmm, I don't see anything that would be 'it."

"We have more in the back. Please wait a moment."

The clerk went off, and Ms. Chiki walked back to me. She smiled without saying anything. There was no deep emotion hiding behind that smile, but it made me relieved all the same. She didn't have to hold my hand while we waited for the shop lady to come back, but she did, and she even stroked my hair. It didn't matter if she was being nice to me or not; my eyes seemed ready to overflow with tears at the drop of a hat.

"I found a ring that might have that ocean image you're looking for. Here," the clerk said.

She placed a fabric-lined box with a blue ring in front of us. The ring was rough at the front, with an engraving like waves breaking against a rocky shore. The color changed to another shade toward the back. What was that called... gradation? The colors of the ring made me think of white-crested waves on a blue ocean that turned greener the farther you got from shore.

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"Try it on."

"Okay..."
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I didn't know which finger to put the ring on, so I randomly selected the middle finger. The ring was a bit big. I had never worn a ring before, and I was very tense trying it on. I stared at my finger with the faintly gleaming ring on it. It was out of place on my small hand, and the weight felt alien.

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"Do you like it?"

"It's... It's very pretty..."
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I especially liked the blue on the inside, but you couldn't see it when the ring was on. I raised my hand to see it reflect the ceiling lights when I heard Ms. Chiki ask the store clerk how much it cost.

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"It's priced at five million yen."

"Oh my! It's quite an expensive one, isn't it?"

"...Huh? How much...?"
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The price bounced off my ears and out the store door. My back got sweaty, and I wanted to put some distance between myself and the ring, but of course I couldn't walk away from my own hand. The ring chased after me, so I stopped trying. I looked past it, at Ms. Chiki, who was smiling. The store lady was smiling, too. *No way*, I thought, reeling from shock. Five million yen? Surely not *Japanese* yen, it had to be some foreign currency of much lower value...

I had slid it on to my finger so easily, but the ring suddenly felt heavy. My whole middle finger felt so heavy, I thought it might fall off.

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"Um... Uh..."
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"I'll take it."

"What?!" I couldn't help shouting, even though it was the sort of store where it was rude to raise your voice.

I couldn't believe it. Not that Ms. Chiki was buying me a ring for a present, but...

"Y-you have that much money?"

"Of course. I'd like to pay by card, please."

Ms. Chiki took a small plastic rectangle from her wallet, with "five million yen" on it... I knew what bank cards were, of course, but I was in shock. She was ready to just fork out a fortune.

"No... Ms. Chiki, no... You can't buy me that ring! It's five million...!"

"Spending five million yen on you isn't something I'd regret, Umi. And I won't mind if you sell it or get angry if you throw it away. I feel like giving this ring to you, so I'm going to do just that."

She didn't even look at me as she paid for the ring.

I was only watching the transaction, but it felt like someone had punched my chest. Ms. Chiki was buying me this ring to give me confidence. I was rattled at first, but when it sank in, I became euphoric. I was a sand creature, and she was giving me the water I needed to stick the grains together and stand on my own. To put it in nice terms only, the water I needed was caring and kindness.

I looked at the ring again. I was no expert, but it seemed ridiculous that it cost so much money, but if Ms. Chiki wanted me to have it, I'd take it. Someone else had decided the ring's price, but I decided its worth. Both were exorbitant.

Five million yen, though...

It was such a weight on my finger.

"Get home safe."

"Sure..."

We were back by the panda bake stall and our date was over. I wondered where Ms. Chiki's home was. I knew what she looked like without clothes, but I

knew nothing else about her. It was messed up.

"Did you have fun?"

"...Yes."

To be honest, the date had filled me with fear more than anything, but Ms. Chiki was happy with my reply. She patted my head.

"I'm not a child," I protested.

"Oh, but you are!"

She stopped patting me, smiled a meltingly warm smile at me, and...

"M'boy!" she said, giving me a big pat on the back before locking me in an embrace.

Call me "my girl" or something, at least, I thought.

"Jokes aside, from my point of view, you're still a child, Umi...," she said gently. "If only it could stay that way."

I thought about what she meant.

"You wish I could stay a high schooler forever, is that it?"

"Don't be silly, sweetie."

She laughed it off. I made laughing noises, but I wasn't amused.

Ms. Chiki released me and said, "If you miss me, don't hesitate to call," and then walked away.

Give her a call? On the phone? Had I ever actually called anyone?

Before I got lost in my thoughts again, I followed Ms. Chiki with my eyes.

"Ms. Chiki...," I said, not sure she'd hear me.

She stopped before the ticket gates and turned toward me. I clenched my hands into fists.

"I love you," I said breathlessly. My lungs felt empty.

Ms. Chiki beamed at me and waved enthusiastically. Her manner was so uninhibitedly childlike that I waved back like an idiot. My heart ached with love

with every wave.

When I put my arm down, I knew I wasn't getting enough oxygen. My veins throbbed painfully with every breath, and I had a hot sensation inside my arm, like I was bleeding out. If just saying good-bye was this hard on my body, I had a tough life ahead, I thought in self-deprecation. I'd probably be remembering this feeling all the way back home, staring at the ground and not taking anything in.

My love was revealing new flavors with every bite, like a complex dish.

"..."

Anyway, I didn't want the good-bye to be over yet; I was waiting for her to say "Good-bye, Umin," so that I could respond with "Bye, Little Miss Chi," but she didn't say anything.

I wanted to learn more about her, and to see her more, and...what else?

I was taking a hot shower, sitting on the bathroom floor, thinking about what I wanted from this relationship.

Wanting to learn more about her was my own greed. Wanting to see her was also greed. There was a third greedy feeling in me, too; I could see its outline, but I didn't know its name. I'd been puzzling over it on the way back to Hoshi's place, and after, but the right word wasn't coming to me. If after all that thinking I still couldn't name the feeling, it must've been new to me. There was no end to things I didn't know, even when they were important to my life. For every single new thing I learned about the world, there were nine things I didn't know about.

I finished showering and returned to Hoshi's room without drying my hair. Hoshi wasn't there—she was still tidying up after dinner. I'd offered to help, but she'd told me there was no need. There was a rift between us now, and it might never close up again. We'd become friends for nothing.

I sat in the corner, picked up the ring I'd taken off before my shower, and admired it. Five million yen, I thought, tracing the wave engravings with my finger. Was it really so pricey? I had no idea about rings, so I couldn't see why it'd cost so much...but Ms. Chiki had confirmed it, so it had to be right. I wanted

to believe I wasn't being lied to. She'd given it to me as a mark of trust.

"What have you got there? A ring?"

"Eep!" I yelped, startled.

My mom had whispered right next to me. She moved without making a sound, soft as a tissue. I hadn't even registered her approach.

She crouched next to me, looking at the ring.

"Did you buy that?"

"No. How could I afford a thing like this?"

I'd probably never be able to afford this kind of ring.

"Okay, so you didn't buy it," she said calmly, in that non-confrontational mother voice. "Who bought it for you?"

"Just somebody..."

How much did Mom know about what I'd been up to? We rarely spoke, so I didn't even know where to start. Something was telling me Mom wouldn't be shocked, no matter what I told her, but I didn't see the point of sharing anything with her. She wasn't the sort of person I'd want to confide in. I couldn't just ignore her, though. I steeled myself and gave her an answer.

"S-somebody I love bought it for me."

I was telling the truth, but it was awkward saying this to my mother.

"Ah, so you have someone you're sweet on. Good for you!"

I even got congratulated.

"Uh-huh," I muttered vaguely.

Mom was smiling, but she wasn't going away. She wanted to talk more, which was unusual. I guessed she wanted to hear more about who I was in love with, so I changed the subject before she started asking more probing questions. Should've done that earlier.

"How much do you think it cost?"

We were still talking about the ring, but at least we weren't talking about the

person who had given it to me.

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"Can I see?"
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"Sure..."

I handed her the ring. Mom scratched it, peered at the inside, and spun it slowly between her fingers like she was doing a proper appraisal. She closed one eye and squinted at the ring with the other. I wondered how that helped her see.

"Thanks," she said, giving me the ring back. She nodded and announced, "I have no idea."

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"Oh."
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"I haven't seen many rings in my life, so it was nice to see yours up close."

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"Um, cool."
```

It didn't take much to excite my mom. After all, she got a kick out of just hanging out in a supermarket.

"You should store it in a bag. Give it a bit of a wipe after wearing it."

"What? In a bag?"

"You heard that right."

Mom walked out of the room, but was back in a moment. I barely noticed her footsteps. She brought me a soft-looking cloth and a small transparent bag.

"Use this to wipe it... Sweat will tarnish it."

```
"Um, okay..."
```

That was new—Mom was teaching me something. I was late to realize it, but it was a miracle I had grown up more or less all right without any real parenting. My mom's life was tough; she could barely take care of herself, not to mention me. At least that was how I preferred to see it. If she now had the time to spare to teach me something, that was great. I had to stick with that line of thinking for my own sanity.

I had to make an effort to be optimistic. There was no alternative. I never wanted to experience total despair, like when I had thought it was over with

Ms. Chiki.

"Now put it in the bag."

"O...kay."

It was weird having my mom give me any sort of instruction, and I was even more tense since it had to do with the ring. I did as she told me. Satisfied, Mom rose from her crouching position, like origami unfolding.

"Umi." She turned to me again before leaving, a gentle smile on her delicate face. "Treasure it."

"...Will do."

Her voice normally seemed like cotton fluff, drifting whichever way the wind blew, but it finally felt directed at me.

"Good night," she said, even though it wasn't yet late.

"Treasure...what?"

The ring, or my first love? Both?

Just after Mom left the room, Hoshi walked in. She must've been waiting outside. She cast one look at the ring in the bag before sitting down.

"What's the deal with the ring?"

"It's just a gift from my girlfriend."

"Oh, wow," she said, and her voice was like thorns. "How much did she pay for it?"

"Five million yen."

"Well, shit!"

I could tell she didn't believe it, and I didn't blame her. But personally, I would choose to believe Ms. Chiki even if she had told me the price was a hundred million.

"Incredible that you believe the stuff that woman tells you."

She phrased it so rudely, it was like a punch to my shoulder.

"Don't you dare say that about her."

She could talk shit about me and it'd be a drop in the ocean, but I couldn't stand her bad-mouthing Ms. Chiki. There was a storm in my heart when she did. I was hypocritical, I knew, getting mad when someone else distrusted Ms. Chiki while I had to forgive myself for doing it all the time.

Hoshi wasn't saying anything. No apology, no comeback. She just pulled her knees closer to her chin and faced away from me. I had no reason to talk to her anyway. She claimed to have a crush on me, but I was starting to wonder about that. I was too shy to ask her, so I didn't have any idea about what was going on in her head.

"Hnnngh?"

My phone made a sound I'd never heard before, startling me. It took me a moment to realize it was an incoming call. From Ms. Chiki, of course. She was calling me. I jumped to my feet and carried the phone out of the room, holding it like an overfilled mug.

Mom was in the living room, lying on the floor with her head in the lap of Hoshi's mom. They had opened up the snacks I'd brought from the last sleepover.

"Clefairy called me earlier."

"Are you kidding?! What did she need, a Moon Stone?"

I had no idea what they were talking about, but they sure seemed excited. I left the apartment without saying a word, ignoring them. After closing the door behind me, I ran down the stairs and only answered the call when I was safely hidden among the nighttime shadows.

"Good evening!"

"Um... Hey, Ms. Chiki."

My stupid brain made it feel like the phone was warmer against my ear just because Ms. Chiki's voice was coming out of it.

"What happened? You've never called me before."

"Nothing happened—I simply felt like calling you. I won't take a minute of your time."

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"Not even a minute—?"
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"I wouldn't want you to get eaten up by mosquitoes!"

How did she know I was outside? Was she watching the house? I felt nervous.

"Bye, then. Let's have another date soon!"

"What, that was it? You hangin' up?"

"Hmm, actually, one more thing, Umi."

"Yes?"

"Is there something you'd like me to tell you?"

I could put in a request, like callers on a radio show asking for a song? There were so many things I wanted Ms. Chiki to tell me, but one stood out to me immediately.

"Tell me you love me. Say it over and over," I replied in a split second.

"I love you, I love you."

"Uh... My bad... It sounds weird that many times..."

"But I wasn't finished!"

She was being silly. We laughed, and she hung up. The call was very brief, but it was nice to end my day talking to Ms. Chiki.

I went back inside before the mosquitoes got me. Mom and Hoshi's mom had switched places. When I was passing through, Mom waved her index finger at me, but I didn't know what she meant, so I cocked my head at her and went to Hoshi's room. Hoshi was there, sitting in a weird way—with her legs folded under her, hands stuck under her legs, hunched over so that her forehead touched the floor. Her torso and butt were shaking a little every now and again. What was up with that?

"Why're you sittin' like that?"

"Because I can't face the world after almost saying something totally gross to you."

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"Oh... Okay..."

"Sorry."

"It's fine..."
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Was she teasing me? What gross thing would make her end up like that? I was burning with curiosity. It must have been something really nasty, but I couldn't imagine what. I never thought about that stuff myself. It was going to drive me up the wall.

"You can say it. I won't be mad, I promise."

"No, I can't. It's not okay."

She was doing it again, egging me on to ask her. I wanted to shake her and make her spit it out already, but that might only make her squirm more. Like a snake, and I didn't like snakes. So I left it at that. But she kept squirming, unable to hold the words in.

"I'm into you."

I turned around to make sure it was just us in the room. But she meant me.

"I appreciate that... But I love Ms. Chiki."

"I know you do. You told me before." Hoshi untangled herself and sat upright at last. "I know you're not going to just start loving me instead."

I heard something in her voice that made me suspect she wanted to add a "but..." She looked like she might cry.

"What should I do?" she asked.

I didn't say anything, because the only answer I could give her would be too cruel to say.

Every day was so boring, I wished I could fast-forward to my next date with Ms. Chiki. On the days I couldn't see her, I fantasized about what she might be doing, what she was like when we weren't together. I felt like a stranded survivor on an uninhabited island. It wasn't healthy.

That day, I was even more out of sorts because of the jarring contrast between the sunny weather and my dark, gloomy mood. Hoshi had gone out somewhere to meet her friends. She had made lunch for me before leaving. I had forgotten to thank her—I made a mental note to do that when she got back.

I took out the phone Ms. Chiki had given me. I'd had it for more than half a year and I only used it for contacting her. That was the best application for it, as far as I was concerned, but maybe I could also use it to kill time. I had learned the basics of how smartphones worked. I started tapping on the screen uncertainly. It should have a web browser... There, found it. Just to try things out, I looked up "Ms. Chiki," but all the results were about other people. Of course—it wasn't her real name. Even though I knew it was pointless, I added her surname to the search, too. No hits.

"What else ...?"

Ms. Chiki was keeping her life private. I couldn't think of any terms I could look up that might lead me to her. "Ms. Chiki pretty." "Ms. Chiki beauty." "Ms. Chiki girlfriend." I kept typing uselessly into the search bar, which weirdly felt a little satisfying.

Was there really nothing else I knew about her...?

She'd mentioned a...sanctuary? Decorative jars? No, there was something else she'd let slip that day.

"She mentioned someone's name that one time..."

It was the day she was dressed in a kimono. I was surprised when she'd accidentally said the name of someone she'd visited, and she'd quickly changed the subject. What was the name? Hida? Higa? No... Oh, right. It was Hino. She said she visited someone called Hino.

How was it spelled, though? The characters for "sun" and "field"? I tried that, and got results about a car manufacturer. That probably wasn't it. How could I modify the search...? "Hino rich"? Nothing. "Hino Ms. Chiki"? Zero results, predictably.

"Not gettin' anywhere with this."

I put the phone down. I didn't even know the full name of that person, so I had no hope of finding out anything that might lead me to Ms. Chiki. And even

if I managed to find out where Ms. Chiki lived, what would I do? Go to her house? She wouldn't want someone pitiful like me showing up at her big, fancy house.

I heard the TV was on. I stuck my head out the door and looked into the living room where my mom was sitting watching a show. Her back was so slender—frail, even. Hmm... I'd never felt like I could count on my mom for anything, but she'd sometimes know things you'd never suspect. It might make more sense to ask her instead of throwing my random queries out into the vast internet.

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"Hey, Mom."
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"Have you come to speak with me? How peculiar."

She turned away from her cooking show and looked at me. She was speaking funny, imitating the way the old lady on the cooking show talked. Not that it bothered me.

"You know anyone called Hino?"

It was a shot in the dark, but it wasn't totally impossible she'd know. I didn't have my hopes up, though.

"Indeed, I do," Mom said in that fake grandma voice.

"Whuh?!"

"I'd imagine anyone living around here would've heard of Hino."

"I didn't."

"Well, you wouldn't."

What was she getting at?

I walked over and sat next to her. My mom had to divide her attention between the salad the old lady on TV was making and me, turning her head one way, then the other. She was always so chill.

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"Is Hino famous?"
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"Not so much Hino, but the house is."

"How so?"

"It's a sprawling residence. Everyone local knows it."

A big residence meant Hino was rich. Like Ms. Chiki. I didn't want to believe that I had the right person, but with this additional info, I should be able to find the address online. I went to get the phone from Hoshi's room. But what am I going to do with Hino's address? I thought, sitting back down next to Mom.

"And why would you be asking about Hino, deary?"

She wasn't giving up the old lady act yet.

"Just curious."

"Is that so?"

She let it go, just like that. I was relieved to have a mom who never pressed me to tell her more than I wanted to.

I pulled my knees up to my chin and held the phone in front of me. Its only purpose used to be to notify me when Ms. Chiki wanted to see me, but now it might link me to her in another way. Not for sure, but I had a clue I could follow. Could still be a dead end, though.

Will I actually go to Hino's house if I find out where it was? I asked myself uneasily. I didn't know them; they didn't know me. I was a fool to think they'd tell me about Ms. Chiki if I asked them. And they were so wealthy they might just kick me out.

Even if they let me in, and Hino agreed to talk to me, was it okay for me to ask about Ms. Chiki? To snoop on her? No, definitely not. She'd be mad if she found out, and then she might break up with me for real. I might really regret it. That moment during our daytime date when she'd said she wanted to break up came back to me, wrenching my guts. The smart choice here was to give up on playing the detective.

I could stay in the dark, where Ms. Chiki wanted to keep me, and have her fawn over me as before. Keep living in ignorance. But did I have the smarts to not try to do something too clever?

I cocked my head to one side, feeling torn. I was on the fence.

"If you can't figure out what you want to do, it means one thing," my mom

said.

It meant I wanted to do something. So I should. Ms. Chiki's mysteries weren't going to solve themselves for me if all I did was meet her on her terms. I couldn't spend the rest of the time sitting on my butt. I might regret getting nosy, but I wanted to go out there and do something.

Next day at breakfast, Hoshi told me again she'd be going out to hang out with friends. That was probably what most girls our age did during summer vacation. I told her I'd be going out, too, and she asked me if I was also meeting friends. I couldn't tell her I was launching my very own investigation into Ms. Chiki, so I just muttered something vague in response.

A short time later, Hoshi put makeup on and hurried out of the apartment. Her mom had gone out earlier.

My mom must've been feeling like doing something useful for a change—she was cleaning the living room. Maybe she simply wanted the space where she spent most of her time to be clean.

"Mom, I'm gonna go out in a bit."

"Sure."

She was moving as slow as molasses, making little visible progress. I doubted she'd get much done while I was out.

I went back to the room. That day, I wouldn't need to wear makeup, but I took the ring out of the plastic bag. I'd wear that. Ms. Chiki had bought it for me to give me confidence, after all.

Holding the ring between my thumb and index finger, I raised it toward the dark, dusty ceiling.

"Which finger does it go on...?"

I was pretty clueless.

Using a smartphone for something other than communication was new to me. It really was handy to have a map in your palm. I had to stop and check the map quite a few times, but eventually I arrived at the right address without getting lost. That was the easy part. I had it in my head the whole time that

Hino probably didn't know Ms. Chiki, but I wouldn't turn back.

Ms. Chiki was my entire world, and I wanted to explore it end to end. Yeah, it was a tiny world, but my crazy dream was to have a big adventure there anyway.

When I looked up Hino with the additional information about a nearby mansion, I managed to locate it easily. I had no business visiting this place, but I could see Ms. Chiki being friends with someone living there. The house wasn't that far, but it was a long walk—by which I mean, even after getting to the location marked on the map, I couldn't see the actual house. Just a bamboo thicket. I'd never seen one before except in photos.

And it really was thick, with a paved path leading straight into it. The bamboo rustled in the wind, but there were no cicadas chirping nearby. Did they not like bamboo? Or did they just not live in that thicket for some reason? I could always hear them in summer, no matter where I was. Without their chirping, it was like being trapped in a liminal space between summer and fall.

I walked hesitantly down the paved path, unsure if I was allowed to be there. If all that land belonged to Hino, I was trespassing. The bamboo thicket was so pretty; maybe you had to pay to go inside and enjoy the view?

When Ms. Chiki was with me, holding my hand, I didn't feel so overwhelmed by fancy places, but when I was alone, each step felt like I was straying somewhere I shouldn't be.

My courage had run out; I was about to turn back when I saw a tall, imposing entrance gate. It was like something out of a samurai movie—a timeworn Japanese-style gate with the doors firmly shut. What now? Ring a bell? Not knock on that door, surely. The gate was as tall as a house. I couldn't climb over that.

I heard rustling behind me.

"And who're you?"

I jumped, startled. A shudder ran down my spine, and my arms froze. I turned around ungracefully and saw a girl come out of the thicket, moving the bamboo out of her way. She wore glasses with red frames and a big backpack, but what

stood out about her most was the size of her chest.

...Her boobs might be even bigger than Ms. Chiki's.

"I'm Nagafuji," she said.

"Um... Hi..."

She adjusted her glasses while I slowly processed that this person had just introduced herself to me.

"I don't think you live here."

"R-right..."

"I thought Hino didn't have any younger sisters... I've never asked, though, so maybe I made the wrong assumption. The house is so big; who knows what relatives might be hiding in there?"

She crossed her arms, taking me in. She had the word "Master" printed on her T-shirt. Whose master was she supposed to be?

"So?"

"I-I'm not Hino's sister..."

"Which proves my initial assumption correct! Terrific. Today I can make it look like I'm clever."

She seemed to be talking to me, but it felt like she was really talking to herself, leaving me flat-footed. Her way of thinking was hard for me to follow, in a different way from Ms. Chiki's. I also couldn't tell if she was closer to my age or an adult. I was so much smaller even than my classmates, so I couldn't tell if someone was older than me just from their height.

And who was she? Did she live in the big house? Why would she walk straight out of the thicket?

"Ah, are you here to see the lady?" came another voice.

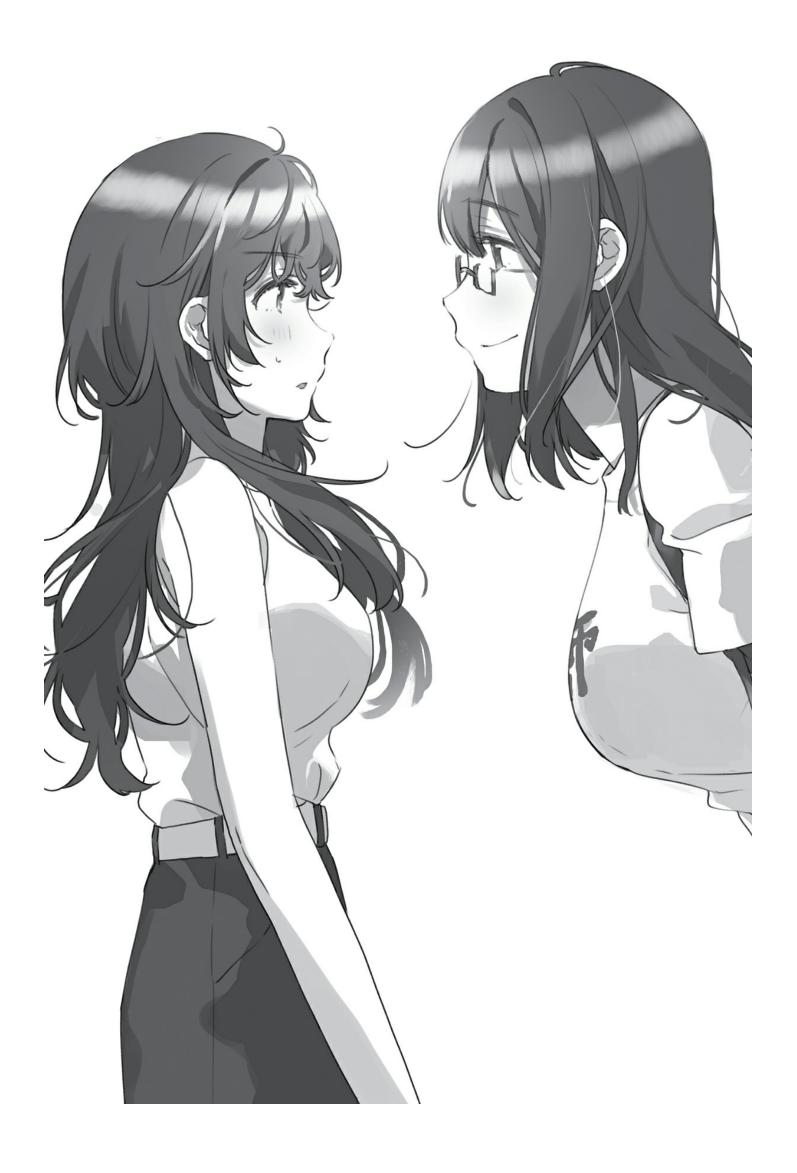
A middle-aged woman emerged from a side entrance. She must have been working at the big house; she was wearing a kimono under a...what was the term for that thing maids wear? A smock? Anyway, she was also carrying a metal bucket with three cleaning cloths folded over the rim.

"Hello!" said Nagafuji.

"Good morning. The lady isn't in at the moment, I'm afraid."

"Oh, bad timing."

"Would you like to wait inside?"



"That would be terrific, thank you!"

Nagafuji trotted over to the side entrance while the lady in the smock stared at me. She caught Nagafuji by the sleeve of her T-shirt and whispered something to her. Nagafuji looked puzzled at first, but then she turned toward me. Her mouth opened in surprise, as if she'd only just remembered I was here.

"Is she...one of the lady's classmates?"

"No, she's not a friend of Hino's. I just befriended her here by the gate."

"Pardon?"

I hadn't noticed when we'd become friends. What was this girl's idea of friendship?

"Excuse me, miss... What brings you here today?"

"I, um..."

I didn't know how to explain it. Someone called Hino lived in that house, but I didn't know them. I thought the whole family living there were the Hinos. But were they the Hinos I was looking for? Could I find out by talking to this lady?

"There's...somethin' I wanted to ask Hino," I said.

Based on what the girl and the lady had said earlier, there was someone called Hino in that house who was a similar age to me, so saying I had come to see her should sound natural... I was being optimistic there. I was as out of place as an iceberg, and just because it'd melted a little on the outside, it didn't any better.

"I don't think you're her school friend?"

"She can't be. I know all of Hino's friends!"

"I'm sure you do." The lady laughed, covering her mouth politely.

"But they could become friends. Let's give them the opportunity to meet."

"I'm not sure that's a good reason. Well, I understand that this young lady is here as a guest."

The lady kept her sharp eyes on me, still holding the bucket. Nagafuji took a

step back and tried to dash past her, but the lady grabbed her by the scruff of her neck and lifted her off the ground.

"Wheeee! I'm flying!"

"You're too heavy for this."

The lady let go and Nagafuji dropped to the ground with a big, satisfied smile.

"She does not seem like a wrongdoer, at least."

"Wrongdoer...?"

What did wrongdoers look like? A few faces came to my mind; some grownups I'd met, and some classmates. To me, evil was denying me the right to just be.

"I'm afraid I alone cannot make the decision to let you into the house, miss. But I see no problem with letting you wait here if you want?"

Here, as in infront of the gate? I looked around. The deep green of the bamboo thicket was pleasant to look at.

"Yes, that's okay," I replied. Then an idea popped into my head. "Is your 'lady' a high schooler?"

"Yes, she is."

"Thought so... Okay, I'll be waitin' here, then."

The lady shot me a strange look. My question was weird—I knew that—but I had to confirm my suspicion. If Ms. Chiki had been visiting this house, she wouldn't have missed that a high school girl lived here. *That pervert*. Anyway, the girl would remember Ms. Chiki in that case. That gave me some hope.

The maid stared at me for a long time before finally cracking a little smile.

"She has such a lonely, forlorn look in her eyes," she said to Nagafuji.

"Oh yeah?"

"Miss, may I inspect your bag?"

"Um... Sure..."

Wealthy people had their staff carry out proper security checks on visitors?

Wow. I didn't really have much on me—I'd only brought my phone, wallet, and the ring. The inspection was over in a second.

"Want to check my backpack, too?" asked Nagafuji.

"No, that won't be necessary."

I got the impression the lady couldn't be bothered. From what I could see, she was completely comfortable with Nagafuji, even outright dismissive of her. Despite that, I owed it to Nagafuji that the lady hadn't turned me away. If it turned out I'd been wrong and Ms. Chiki had never been to that house, I was going to die of shame.

"She should be back before long. I'll leave you here."

The maid went back through the side entrance, which was really fancy for a staff door. Passing through an imposing door like that was enough to put you in a formal mood, I felt. For the time being, I had to wait outside, though, so I moved to the side and crouched with my back to the straw fence.

"Whew!" Nagafuji crouched down next to me heavily.

"You're not goin' in?"

Unlike me, she hadn't been denied entry.

"Nah. Hino's not around anyway!"

"Ah."

It looked like she was choosing to keep me company. We'd only known each other for five minutes, but she was acting like she was serious about us being friends. Not that there's a specific amount of time it takes to become friends, like ten minutes minimum or something.

The shade of the bamboo kept the summer heat at bay even at midday. I looked up. The tall bamboo was swaying in a gentle breeze. I thought of a green wind weaving through the thicket.

"So you've got a question for Hino?"

"Yeah... I think so..."

"Before you talk to her, Detective Nagafuji shall solve the mystery!"

She made a finger gun at me. What was she going to solve?

"You are...Hino's fishing friend!"

"Sorry, wrong... Never gone fishin' in my life."

"The plot thickens..."

Nagafuji shook her head. I had no idea if she was just fooling around. When she was just sitting quietly next to me, she looked intelligent and composed, but maybe it was just the glasses.

"So Hino goes fishin'?"

"Yes, she's really into it. That's probably where she is today. It's a big event when she actually reels something in, though."

"Oh... She a beginner?"

"If only! No, it's because most of the time she just sits there spacing out with the line in the water."

"What's the point, then?"

"Don't ask me—she's a little weird!"

I hadn't met Hino yet, but I thought Nagafuji was one to talk.

Nagafuji started scribbling on the ground, scratching out a circle shape with her fingernail. The maid returned, carrying a tray this time. When I saw what was on it—two glasses of pale-brown barley tea and sweets—I started drooling.

"Please have some tea."

"Um... Thank you..."

For some reason, things had been like this ever since I'd first met Ms. Chiki. I'd been encountering a strange number of nice people. It had started with Ms. Chiki, then Hoshi, Hoshi's mom, this nice maid, and...Nagafuji, too?

"You're welcome!" Nagafuji replied instead of the maid.

The maid ignored her. She smiled at me and walked away. The tray looked expensive.

Nagafuji picked up a glass as if she did this all the time. I timidly took the

other. The chilled barley tea instantly cooled my hot hand. The coolness ran all the way from my fingertips to my shoulder, freeing me from the relentless heat. I felt lighter, like I'd been dehumidified.

I sipped the tea, soaking up the ambience of the bamboo thicket. It felt nice to have a little taste of luxury. My fingers tingled with excitement. I felt that way often with Ms. Chiki, and whenever I told her that, she would happily stroke my hair.

"Like I said before, I'm Nagafuji." Nagafuji was hinting that she wanted to learn my name, too.

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"I got that. Um... I'm Umi...Mizuike."
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"Umi Mizuike. Hmm..."

Nagafuji stared thoughtfully into the distance. Still staring, she speared the dessert the maid had brought with the wooden fork provided.

"This is really good."

"Oh yeah?"

I couldn't gauge how to talk to Nagafuji. She was right about the dessert, though—it was delicious. At first, I thought it was a regular *yokan* jelly, but when I bit into it, it had a filling inside. I scooped up a little with my finger and licked it. It tasted like sweet chestnuts. The light sweetness and the way it melted on my tongue were novel to me, but they also reminded me of Ms. Chiki—high-class, unostentatious refinement.

"You look like you're smaller than Hino, Umin."

"'Umin'?!"

"How old are you?"

"...Seventeen."

I was thrown to hear the same nickname Ms. Chiki had used before. Maybe like Ms. Chiki, she wouldn't keep it up, either, though.

"Seventeen? Gosh, you're older than me?"

"I'm in high school; year two."

I waited to hear how old she was, but Nagafuji was wringing her hands. Something else was on her mind.

"You're older. What should I call you?"

"...It's not a big deal."

"Then...Zuimi?"

"Umin" I could at least kind of understand. Where had she gotten that from?

We finished the desserts and the tea and then sat there, breathing in the refreshing scent of the bamboo thicket. That sort of thing was probably good for mental health.

Nagafuji sat quietly until she'd finished the tea. Then she got up and started walking around. She wasn't admiring the scenery, just being impatient. She approached the gate a few times, like she was going in after all, but each time she gave up just as she reached it. It was like watching a cicada move around at random. I followed her with my eyes, not sure whether this new oddball friend was something to be happy about.

"Hino's coming back!"

Nagafuji excitedly pointed to a small figure on the path with a fishing rod slung over her shoulder and a bucket hat. The girl saw her and started running toward us. I picked the tray up off the ground and went to stand next to Nagafuji. As the girl got closer, I saw she had tanned arms, wore her hair in two pigtails, and was about the same height as me.

"Welcome home!"

"Hi. Why didn't you tell me you were coming? I would've waited."

"Because I just decided to! I think it's important not to suppress spontaneous behavior."

"You do, don't you? Must be easy when you have so much spare time on your hands."

I guess the fish weren't biting—the girl's blue bucket only had water in it. Or it really was like Nagafuji had said, and Hino's "fishing" was just sitting by the water with the fishing rod.

Hino shifted the fishing rod to the side and turned to me. "And...who's this?"

"You don't know her?"

"Never seen her before."

"My hypothesis!" Nagafuji slapped her forehead.

Hino glanced sideways at her but didn't ask what that was about. "Anyway... Hello, stranger."

"H-hello..."

The girl was short, like me, but she had an aura of confidence. She was so small—funny coming from me, I know—but you felt her presence even when she wasn't doing anything, just standing there. In that way, she was similar to Ms. Chiki. Maybe your sense of presence grew with wealth?

"Her name's Zuimi!"

"What? Swimmy?"

"I'm Umi Mizuike," I replied. I suspected this girl was also younger than me.

"She came to ask you something."

"What? Why? Who is she anyway?"

"A new friend."

Nagafuji seemed to be doing the talking for me, which was actually helping. She'd taken her glasses off. Maybe she wore them just for fashion?

"A friend, huh? Fine. Let's go and talk inside."

Hino motioned with her chin for us to follow and started walking toward the side entrance with quick steps. I was thrown off by how she'd invited me in without any problems.

"I hope it's not weird to ask, but...you sure I can come in?"

"If we talk out here in this heat, I'll start hating you by association," she said, flashing me a smile for the first time. "If you're friends with Nagafuji, you're welcome to join us."

"Um..."

She was nothing if not easygoing.

"Yep, we're friends! Since about fifteen minutes ago, when I met her by the gate."

"Hah, so much for my trust... Eh, whatever. I saw someone even more suspicious earlier today. In comparison, she's perfectly ordinary."

Hino gave a little laugh.

"How so?" I asked.

"They'd give you a run for your money. They were fishing dressed in a space suit."

"Hmm... Not sure I could rival that..." I cocked my head, lost. I had no idea what a space suit was.

"You wait in my room, Nagafuji."

"Why?"

"Because whatever she came to ask me probably has nothing to do with you."

"Well, how can you know?"

"You're really asking me to kick you now," Hino said, planting her foot on Nagafuji's butt.

She didn't kick her for real, but Nagafuji still ran in circles screaming in pretend terror. The two girls seemed like close friends. I was honestly envious. That was what my relationship with Ms. Chiki was missing, I thought. This sort of teasing, friendly back-and-forth.

Everything past the gate belonged to a different world than mine. The ground was covered in pure-white gravel all the way to the sprawling residence. It looked like there was a private wood out back, but it was probably just a garden. I imagined my mom and me secretly living in that garden without anyone ever finding us out. If someone did glimpse her, they'd probably just assume she was a ghost.

I followed the girls, intimidated by the grandness of the residence. It figured that trying to follow Ms. Chiki's trail would take me to all sorts of ritzy places.

That was her world.

When I passed through the door to the main house, I smelled the woody scent of the pillars. The whole house had a distinctive smell. I took off my shoes and noticed they were visibly dirtier than all the others. I put them to the side, hoping they'd be less noticeable there. It hit me that I'd been wearing those shoes to all my meetups with Ms. Chiki, and I felt a wave of shame. Had she given me strange looks that I'd just missed? I'd have to buy new shoes before our next date. She might even compliment them. That was something I could look forward to.

The maid from earlier appeared at the other end of the long hallway.

"Welcome back," she said to Hino, taking the bucket and fishing rod from her.

"Thanks. I caught this burr on the way in. Can you take it away?"

"As you wish."

"Hello, it's me, the humble burr," said Nagafuji with a bow.

The middle-aged lady grabbed her by the scruff of her neck, like a cat, and dragged her off. It happened so quickly I didn't get the chance to return the tray.

Hino saw me standing there awkwardly and took the tray herself.

"I'll bring it to the kitchen. Meanwhile...why don't you wait in that room over there?"

"Okay."

I headed straight to the room Hino had pointed to. I wasn't used to walking through people's massive houses all on my own, so I was feeling very tense. What if someone suddenly talked to me? My heart was pounding in my chest... Compared to Hino's house, Hoshi's apartment did kind of feel like home.

I carefully opened the door a crack and peered in. There was nobody in the room, and the air was pleasantly cool. I opened the door a little wider and slid inside.

The house was in the traditional Japanese style, but the room had Western furniture. Plus, the lighting reminded me of the hotels I'd stayed at with Ms.

Chiki. I tilted my head and inhaled, absorbing the sophisticated atmosphere. There wasn't a hint of dust in the air. It felt good to be there.

There was a table the color of castella cake, two armchairs, and a sofa. I couldn't decide where to sit, but eventually I chose one of the armchairs. It was too big for me; the armrests were too far apart. I sat in it stiffly with my hands on my knees. I could have fit perfectly into a rectangle.

I stared at a picture on the wall, which had that precious-work-of-art vibe, but I couldn't tell what about it was good. I didn't even know what it was supposed to represent. There were overlapping lines in different colors, sort of like a spiderweb. To me, it looked like doodles, but the people from this house would probably be mad at me if I'd told them that.

The curtains were slightly parted, and the view out the window was onto a thick wood, like you'd see in the hills. Lots of cicadas must've been living there. I could hear their shrill buzzing from the room.

I wondered if Ms. Chiki had sat in that room, too, listening to cicadas.

Alone with my thoughts in that room, I started regretting the whole business. How could I justify nosing around after Ms. Chiki? Imagining what she'd do if she found out made my eyelids quiver. I was terrified she'd dump me. From my point of view, rejecting me made Ms. Chiki a bad person. How could I go on living if even Ms. Chiki was a bad person? I might be able to survive on what she'd given me, but I didn't think I could ever be happy again.

And despite all that, I had come here.

The door opened wide.

"Wow, you're waiting patiently, sitting in a chair. Nagafuji could never do that."

"Guess not..."

From the little I'd seen, I could already tell Nagafuji wasn't one for sitting still.

Hino, now without the fishing hat, sat cross-legged on the indigo sofa.

"Okay, Umin."

"'Umin'?!"

"You want to ask me something? I have to say, you got me curious. What could someone I've never met before want to ask me?"

"Well, it's about...," I began.

I was impressed with myself for having the courage. Normally, I sucked at talking to people. And what was up with rich people and nicknames? Did I have "Umin" written on my forehead in invisible ink only they could read?

"It's about somethin' that happened over a week ago..."

I silently counted the days on my fingers, remembering it was just before summer vacation started.

"I think it was ten days ago. Someone came to visit you here. I want to know who it was."

"Oh, people turn up at my house all the time. Like you."

She laughed.

I got her point—if she'd let in even someone like me, she must have been getting lots of visitors of all sorts.

"What's this person's name?"

"I dunno. That's what I came to ask you."

What if "Ms. Chiki" was Ms. Chiki's real name...? No, of course not.

"Hey, what? What are you, a private detective? Or a stalker?"

Hino looked at me suspiciously. The only answer I could give her was one Ms. Chiki had given to me. Gifted to me. It was up to me if I wanted to reveal it or not. Whether that'd satisfy Hino was another matter.

I held my head up so high my neck hurt, and I looked straight into Hino's eyes.

"I'm...I'm her girlfriend."

"Whoa..."

Hino reacted as if a pebble had hit her on the forehead. She was silent for a moment.

"Wait," she eventually said, cocking her head. "You don't know the name of

your own girlfriend?"

"She won't tell me..."

"Are you sure you have the right idea about your relationship...? Never mind. Who am I to preach? Okay, so no name. Can you describe her?"

"She was wearin' a kimono that day."

"Many of my guests do... Any other identifying characteristics?"

"She's very beautiful, and gentle, and...she's got really big boobs?"

I wasn't sure whether to say that last thing, but the more info, the more likely Hino might recall seeing Ms. Chiki.

Hino was nodding after each thing I said, but after those last words, she froze.

"Huh? She's beautiful, gentle, and big-breasted? Are you seriously describing your girlfriend to me?"

"I am...," I confirmed without thinking.

Only then did it hit me how what I'd said must sound to a stranger, and I went pale. Meeting Ms. Chiki had turned my world on its head; my crazy love for her had made me lose my common sense. I tensed up under Hino's curious gaze.

"Hmm... Hmm...," she muttered, clearly stunned. "Okay, if that's what you say... Hmm... Hmmm... Eh, who am I to judge?"

She brushed off her reservations surprisingly easily. Maybe she was more mature than she looked. Or she couldn't be bothered to dwell on things.

"So a very pretty girl, ten days ago... Hmm... Hmm? Hmm... Oh, I think I know who you mean. There was this one beautiful woman with really big boobs, yes."

"Really?"

The house did look like somewhere Ms. Chiki might visit, so I was pretty positive I was on the right track, but when my guesswork was proven correct, my stomach tightened painfully. I was madly curious to hear more, but at the same time, the guilt was eating me alive.

"I remember her well—she was weird. She came up to talk to me just before leaving, asked if I was a high schooler, and tried to hit on me."

"That's..."

That sounded 100 percent like Ms. Chiki. It had to be. It was scary to think there might be another pervert out there like her.

"That's definitely her."

"That was your girlfriend? She was really suspect. Too slick."

I didn't like her saying bad things about Ms. Chiki, but it would've been a lie if I said I had never thought the same.

"I could tell you about her, but...should I?" Hino crossed her arms, looking this way and that as she weighed the idea. "Look, I don't know what right you have to ask me about your girlfriend, but if I don't want to talk about something, I don't."

"Fair enough..."

Hino's stance was reasonable; mine wasn't. I was pretty sure what I was doing was wrong.

"But...it's killin' me to be in a relationship with someone I don't know anything about. I don't even know her real name."

I felt like I was the only person on earth who didn't know Ms. Chiki's real name. Only I had been given a pseudonym to use for her. But why? This nagging question was what fueled my sneaky investigation. Hino had no reason to care about that, though.

Still sitting cross-legged, she slouched so that she could rest her chin in her hand. She was tapping her fingers against her cheek rhythmically, watching me. Then she stopped.

"Actually, I can't remember her name. Hold on."

She jumped off the sofa and briskly walked out of the room. For all it looked like, she was going to tell me Ms. Chiki's name. My heart was pounding in my chest. I told myself to wait patiently and focused on keeping my legs still, but I kept fidgeting in the chair, turning this way and that, darting my eyes back and forth.

Out the window, I saw someone's head periscope up. My first thought was that rich people seemed to keep pet humans in their gardens, but then I recognized the red-rimmed glasses.

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"It's Nagafuji..."
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Our eyes met, but I was still startled and didn't know how to react. We looked at each other silently for a few moments, and then Nagafuji's head retreated out of view.

"What was that about ...?"

Nagafuji was as unpredictable as my mom, just in a different way.

Hino returned, scratching her sunburned skin. "I had a think about your request."

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"Y-yeah...?"
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"You've come all this way, so I'll tell you her name. You write it with *chi* for 'earth' and *taira* for 'flat.' Her family name is Chitaira."

"Chitaira...," I repeated, wondering if Ms. Chiki had based her nickname on the first part of her surname.

Unbelievably, I had managed to learn her real surname, and all it had taken was a little trip in the neighborhood.

"Is that everything you wanted to know?"

"Yeah... Thanks."

I wasn't sure I wouldn't regret it later, but I now knew Ms. Chiki's real name. Chitaira. A little part of her, no bigger than her thumbnail, had taken definite shape.

Why had it been such a quest just to get her surname, though?

"All right, then... Come out, I know you're there."

Hino walked over not to the door, but to the window, where Nagafuji's head popped up like before. I'd seen her earlier, so I knew she was there, but how had Hino realized?

Hino opened the window. I saw Nagafuji's hands emerge from below, like the

hands of a corpse from a grave.

"Tch! You found me!"

"You always go there to eavesdrop."

Hino laughed, batting Nagafuji's hands back down. While I didn't really know these girls, they seemed like the kind of friends who'd forgive each other anything. I'd like to get to that stage with Ms. Chiki someday, too.

Hino closed the window, and a couple minutes later, Nagafuji walked in through the door like a normal person. She sat in the armchair nearest to Hino and took off her glasses. She handed them to Hino, who for some reason put them on. She looked at my hand through the lenses.

"That must be important to you."

I followed her gaze to the marine-blue ring faintly gleaming on my finger.

"It stands out from the rest of your outfit," Hino added.

"Guess it does..."

The ring was probably too valuable for someone like me to wear it well.

"I get the sense someone wanted you to have it more than you wanted it," Nagafuji said mysteriously—just to sound cool, I guessed.

"I got it as a gift. Supposedly cost five million yen."

"Really? I'd have guessed five thousand."

"And my estimate of its market price was five hundred million dollars!"

"Get yourself new glasses before the next school term," Hino replied. She gave the red glasses back to Nagafuji and got off the sofa. "Will you be going now?" she asked me. "I'll see you off. Nagafuji, you come with us, too."

Hino prodded Nagafuji's shoulder, but Nagafuji pushed her back onto the sofa with a "Gotcha!"

"What's this supposed to be?"

"It's just me, Nagafuji!"

"I've had enough. Enome! Carry this creature, please. She refuses to walk."

The middle-aged lady in the maid smock came into the room at once and lifted Nagafuji off her feet.

"Wheeee!"

"You've grown so big, my girl," the maid remarked with a wry smile.

They must've had a long history together.

Hino, Nagafuji, and the maid walked with me to the front door. I'd turned up uninvited, but they were surprisingly hospitable.

"Get home safe, miss."

"Thank you. Um...and thank you for the tea and dessert."

I bowed my head low, and my hair flipped up, almost touching the lady's face. I smoothed it back in a panic. A haircut was in order... But first, I'd have to ask Ms. Chiki what sort of hairstyle to go for.

"Bye, then," said Hino.

"Safe travels!" Nagafuji chimed in. That wasn't a good-bye I heard every day.

So I left the house with all three of them seeing me off. They had been really nice to me. There were more nice people out there than I'd imagined, and more different kinds, too. Why was it that until recently, I'd only met nasty people? Was it my stupidity that attracted them, or how I always walked looking down at my feet? If how you lived decided who you met, I really should try adopting a more positive attitude.

"Oh..."

I looked at the part of the thicket where Nagafuji had suddenly appeared earlier, thinking it was kind of strange.

"Meh."

Nagafuji was just a weird person doing weird things, I figured. I would probably never see her again anyway.

I walked back through the bamboo thicket the way I'd come.

Had I made any progress at all? When Ms. Chiki agreed to be my girlfriend I'd been over the moon, but she still wouldn't talk about herself. I'd gone out to

find out things on my own, but when I got back, I started feeling really guilty about it. I deflated, and I hated myself. My chest hurt with every breath. Funny how feelings rule your entire body when you can't even see them. Why are humans so fragile?

I was sitting on the futon with my arms around my knees when Hoshi returned after taking a shower.

"Hey... Bad day?" she asked me.

"A day like any day."

"Ah. Cool," Hoshi said a little snappily.

She sat down angrily and used her foot to switch the fan to rotating mode. For some time, the only sound in the room was the whirring of the fan.

Hoshi was oozing even more depressive energy than me. Her wet hair amplified the impression that she had her own personal dark cloud raining on her. Her eyes were dark.

That look in her eyes reminded me of something. Right—my own face, in the train station mirror the day I met Ms. Chiki.

Hoshi suddenly looked up at me.

"Tell me what's wrong," she insisted.

That annoyed me a little at first, but she was probably trying to be nice. She was a good person, after all.

Despite being so keen to get me talking, she quickly looked away from me, like she couldn't bear to see me. I looked down at myself, wondering what that was about, what it was she'd seen that had put her off so much. My gaze fell on my chest. *Ah*.

Her head was higher than mine, so Hoshi must've glimpsed my boobs down the neck of my T-shirt. That was why she'd looked away. The T-shirt was loose, gaping at the top. No wonder she'd gotten a peek at the goods. It was too late now, but I adjusted my T-shirt nonetheless.

What should I do about this tension, though? Hoshi was acting embarrassed about seeing the top of my boobs even though she'd seen me fully naked

before. Different situation, maybe. Ms. Chiki had once talked to me about something like that. She'd been very heated about it, but I'd been too sleepy to take much in.

"Hoshi..."

"Ididn'tseeanything." She spoke so fast, the words came out garbled. Her earlobes were swelling, pink like pickled ginger.

"You the horny type?"

She jumped into the air as if someone had suddenly pushed the Eject button. Then she plopped down in exactly the same position as before.

"No," she said through her teeth.

"Really?"

"I'm about as horny as the next person. No more, no less."

"So you're average-horny."

Then she just liked my boobs a wholesome amount?

Hoshi must've realized there was no hiding the truth. "What can I do? I like you, so you have an effect on me," she grumbled.

"I get it."

I had a thing for Ms. Chiki's boobs. I loved them so much it was embarrassing.

"...I like you," Hoshi repeated softly, as if for confirmation.

She seemed relieved. I had no idea why. The subject of breasts, to put it delicately, did get me going. I got to thinking about how Ms. Chiki enjoyed my breasts, too... No, enough about that. It was a rabbit hole I didn't want to go down. It reminded me of that crazy night when Hoshi had stayed in the hotel with us. We'd come back by train together, and it was like we'd gone on a trip. I was dead tired on the ride back... *Hold up*.

The name I'd seen on Hoshi's screen when she got a message... It was Chitaira.

Chitaira? But that was Ms. Chiki's real family name. Back then it had meant nothing to me, but knowing what I did now... Why on earth would someone

with the exact same name be messaging Hoshi when we were on the way back from the meetup with Ms. Chiki?

"...No way," I said under my breath.

For better or for worse, Hoshi didn't seem to catch that. She wrapped a bath towel around her wet hair and left the room, maybe feeling awkward after I'd caught her staring. I was glad she left because I had the burning desire to check something. Was that fate at work?

After Hoshi left, I waited a few breaths before leaping over to her side of the room. She'd just showered, so any scents she'd had on her when she'd gotten home would be gone, but her bag might still have them on it. I sniffed it like a dog, my nose nearly touching the bag.

The shock was like a punch to the face. That was the floral scent I loved most in the world.

I jumped and backed away from the bag. I moved so fast that my brain was shaking, and my thinking was slow. I was grinding my teeth so much I was surprised they didn't shatter. I'd unconsciously started making circles with my right thumb, like it was an outlet for my nervous energy.

I wouldn't have suspected that a fit of jealousy could be this powerful. It was affecting my vision, making the walls spin. My hearing, too; a loud thrum in my ears was drowning out all other sounds.

Would discovering Ms. Chiki's real name bring disaster? A chain of dominoes that I had knocked over with my desire to know more about my girlfriend?

I had no proof, but Hoshi was a high schooler, and that perv Ms. Chiki was into high schoolers. Hoshi was quite cute, too, and Ms. Chiki seemed to like her. Add to that the fact Hoshi knew Ms. Chiki's real name, and her bag smelled of Ms. Chiki-like perfume.

Disturbing suspicions swirled inside me like a tornado, flinging me into a dark corner. I suddenly remembered finding Ms. Chiki and Hoshi talking without me in that hotel hallway. I'd managed to put down my suspicions then, but I couldn't anymore.

I sprawled out on the futon.

"Ms. Chitaira..."

I addressed my girlfriend by her real name for the first time, even though she wasn't there to hear it.

The only way Hoshi could've learned that name was directly from Ms. Chiki. Somehow, that upset and hurt me most of all.

I lay on the futon, unable to get to sleep. Was that also an effect of lovesickness? I couldn't sleep, but I was zoning out, losing sensation in my body, boiling in the unrelenting heat. It was driving me insane. It had to be a sickness of some sort.

Hoshi knew Ms. Chiki's real name. And she wouldn't tell me. I guessed she didn't have a reason to, but did she have a reason not to? Also, Ms. Chiki was messaging Hoshi on her phone. I'd only seen it once, but maybe they'd met lots of times since then. All those times Hoshi had said she was going out to see some friends, was she really meeting with Ms. Chiki?

Once doubt had taken root in my heart, I stopped believing anything. Why had I trusted Hoshi to begin with? I'd forgotten what had made me feel like I could. I was beginning to hate her. It was a bad frame of mind to be in, but I couldn't get out of it. It eventually got through to me that sitting in that room with my thoughts wasn't going to change anything, so I decided to do something crazy again.

"You doin' anythin' today?"

"Yeah... I'll be going out for a bit."

"Ah, okay... I wasn't gonna suggest we do somethin' together, was just askin'."

Our morning conversation was awkward. About five days since I'd made that shocking discovery, I started faking total indifference around Hoshi.

When she left, I waited a bit to make sure she wouldn't come back for anything she'd forgotten before getting ready to go out myself.

"Mom, I'm goin' out, too... Mom?"

She wasn't there, even though I could have sworn I'd heard her talking

moments ago. She must've left right after Hoshi. I was as offbeat as my mom, but that didn't mean I knew what was going on in her head. I'd noticed, though, that when I was just aimlessly walking through town, I'd run into Mom surprisingly often. Maybe we just happened to make the same choices at the forks in the road. In a way, we were alike.

Hoshi's mom was brushing her teeth at the bathroom sink. She poked her head out, the toothbrush sticking out from her mouth.

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"Ust goin' out."

"Oh, you too?"

"Um. Yeah."

"Okay. I hope someone comes back before lunch."

"I can try to be back before then."

"Mm-kay," Hoshi's mom replied, toothpaste froth around her mouth.

She went back to brushing.
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Hoshi's mom was counting on me to come back early, but what if I went really far following Hoshi? Well...I'd think about it later.

I left the apartment as quickly as I could so that I wouldn't lose sight of Hoshi. I had zero experience following anyone in secret, but I'd probably be fine. Hoshi probably wasn't experienced at being followed, either.

There she was. I made sure to keep the same distance the whole time. She was too far to hear my footsteps, but I walked quietly just in case. It was easy to hide in the crowd on the main street, but then Hoshi turned into less busy alleys. At least she was walking fast without looking around, so I wasn't too worried she'd spot me.

Where was she going? It was like she was in a trance.

She seemed to be heading to the train station. Meeting a friend in another town, maybe? No, she didn't go in. She stopped in the shade next to a cram school noticeboard.

She wiped sweat from her neck, looking up at the stairs leading toward the residential area. Apart from the morning rush hour, the train station was very quiet, without any staff milling around. It was even quieter during summer vacation. Some people left the station and went to stand under the roof of a small pavilion set up on the plaza. Hoshi was glancing at it every now and again.

There wasn't anywhere for me to hide, since it was just a single path connecting to the plaza. I had to stand pretty far away, with my back toward Hoshi and a hat on my head. I kept turning to check if she'd moved. There was no shade where I was, and the sun was burning the backs of my thighs. If Hoshi noticed me...I'd go over to her.

Nothing weird about walking up to a friend you saw in town. Right?

It was so hot and humid, it was like being in a sauna. My brain wasn't working the way it should. I didn't like summer. It was uncomfortably hot to be next to another warm body. The person who'd taught me that had become someone I couldn't live without.

How would I go on living?

I wasn't sure what it was that made me turn around. The sound of a train arriving at the station, a familiar presence nearby, or maybe a certain floral scent.

It was under a cheerfully bright sky, as it can only be in summer, that I was betrayed. The person my roommate was waiting for had arrived.

It was my girlfriend.

Distant Starry Sky

Let's meet up, she'd written.

"I can't believe this woman..."

Chitaira texted me soon after summer vacation had started. I read her short message, sitting on the floor in my room with my legs up, feet against the wall. I squinted at it, as if the screen was too bright.

Are you actually insane? I wrote back.

Is it insane to want to hang out with a new friend? she replied.

I didn't remember us being friends. Also, Mizuike was, like, right next to me? Maybe I should show her what her girlfriend was saying to me. On second thought, though, Mizuike might start hating both of us. I hadn't done anything to deserve it, but that probably wouldn't matter to her.

Life was unfair, I inwardly sighed, dying from the heat.

Do you have no consideration whatsoever for Mizuike?

What do you mean? Am I not allowed to see friends now that I have a girlfriend?

I. Wasn't. A. Friend.

You're not in love with me, are you? Chitaira asked.

Correct—I hate your guts.

Then there's no conflict of interest.

By what twisted logic had she arrived at the conclusion I'd want to meet up with her, even though she knew I hated her? *How stupid*, I thought, letting go of the phone. I stared at the ceiling. Mizuike had never asked me out, yet the person who was the reason for that felt it was okay to just randomly text me.

As for Mizuike, she was sitting with her knees bent, staring at her phone. I could easily tell she was feeling lonely from the way she was hanging her head and flexing her toes. She was probably agonizing over whether to text or call Chitaira. I was really tempted to show her my phone and say, "She's texting me instead of you!"

At that point, I couldn't even tell who I was annoyed with, Chitaira or Mizuike.

"Stop it!" my mother shouted from the living room.

I'd been kicking the wall without realizing. I pulled my knees up to my chest and wrapped my arms around my legs. My hair was wet after my shower, and it was soaking the futon. It felt steaming hot, like my head was still under the shower.

Mizuike started hesitantly typing on her phone. Her taps were so slow and awkward, it was obvious she wasn't used to texting. Once she finished, she stared at the screen. It wasn't hard to guess who she was texting. I was already sluggish from the hot shower, but knowing what Mizuike was doing made me feel 60 percent heavier. I wanted to sink through the thin futon into the hard floor.

It wasn't long before she got a reply. Her dark eyes lit up like little LEDs. She couldn't help smiling from happiness. It was as if Chitaira was pouring water over the desiccated heart of Mizuike until it reached the moisture level found in normal living humans. It was suffocating to witness. So I sought escape from that painful reality in real pain. I groaned, feeling like I was having a really bad muscle cramp, but it wasn't quite effective at distracting me from Mizuike.

"Going on a date, huh?" I said to her, barely glancing her way.

"How did you know?"

"I read it on your face."

"...It's not your business."

She's right about that, I thought, angry that I couldn't say anything back. My hands were tied...if I was going to be sensible. Not like I could do anything to make her love me anyway, I reminded myself masochistically.

"..."

My hand crept over the floor toward my phone. I picked it up.

I don't mind meeting up if it's just a one-off.

Amazing! How about the day after tomorrow?

One slick woman. She was quick to reply.

The day after your date with Mizuike? Sure.

I was glad she'd had that painful experience with the failed threesome. If it even was as painful as she'd claimed—it didn't seem to put her off chasing two asses at once. I was no psychology expert, but she gave the impression of a person who embraced everything in life, good or bad.

She took a bit longer to reply.



What? A star, an upward arrow, and the sky...? *Oh, I get it.* She'd spelled my name with pictograms.

But why?

Fooling around instead of giving me an answer, I thought peevishly. But it was a bit funny.

That's how it started—with a small act of rebellion.

It wasn't going to be a date—that was absolutely clear in my head. It was just a little mischief. An immature attempt to get even with Mizuike behind her back. I should've been ashamed of myself.

As soon as I was alone after leaving the house, my head cooled off, but my thinking was still far from clear. Like, if you tell me someone on the other side of the planet urgently needs my help, it doesn't matter how much I want to reach them. It's just not possible.

The residential area was built on a hill. I walked down the road, feeling like I was wearing a helmet made of cicadas—to give you an idea of how loud their chirping was. My gaze slid over stone walls, damaged through weathering, with weeds growing vigorously in the cracks, as if they were working together to break down the structures made by man. The straight road was bicycle-free—the tide of pedal-powered traffic had receded out of sight.

The sun was baking my hair and the back of my head. By the time beads of perspiration started to appear on my neck, I was already wishing I'd just stayed home.

We were going to meet outside the local train station. It shocked me at first

that Chitaira would choose to meet there. Under normal circumstances, it was a perfectly ordinary meetup spot, but what about Mizuike? She might randomly go out and see us. What then? I was only meeting up with Chitaira to hang out; she wasn't cheating on Mizuike with me, but Mizuike might jump to the wrong conclusion. She was very possessive of Chitaira, after all. I didn't want her to see us, but I wasn't sure if it was because I'd feel bad about hurting her feelings, or because she'd seriously hate me.

I stopped next to a noticeboard with a big poster advertising a cram school. There was at least some shade here, and I looked around to see if anyone was coming.

It wasn't a station I went to often—actually, I didn't really travel by train anywhere, ever—so I felt out of place. My high school was very close to the station—in fact, the station was named after my high school. If it weren't summer vacation, there'd be students around, but the station was empty, and cicadas were my only company on the plaza. The train schedule informed that there was a train every fifteen minutes. I watched the station exit, guessing that Chitaira would arrive by the next train.

There were a few chairs, yellowed from the sun, and a wooden bench with an uncomfortable-looking backrest. People would start their journeys shaded by this roof, watching the road and waiting for a train.

Journeys? What was I talking about? I was making it sound too dramatic. Granted, my first train trip out of town had been a journey for me. A great adventure, full of painful memories to bring back home.

"Hope you weren't waiting long."

"Eep!"

I was looking at the tracks when Chitaira suddenly tapped me on the shoulder. I recognized her voice and the overfamiliarity of her touch immediately. She was dressed in a kimono again, with her hair in an updo. The kimono was scarlet with a pattern like colorful fireworks.

Chitaira must've come from the stairs going toward the residential district. Did she actually live right around here?

"I was in the area on other business this morning. I'm finished now, though, so I have time for you, Takasora!"

"Ah... Um... I see..."

She must've read in my eyes what I'd been thinking.

Chitaira was bound to attract attention in that kimono, and by extension, she'd attract attention to me, too. If anyone from my school year saw me, I'd become a target for gossip just like Mizuike.

Also, the fact she called me by my first name gave me this uneasy feeling, like a bead of sweat rolling down my body.

"Shall we go?"

Chitaira extended her hand toward me. Did she think I'd hold her hand? What surprised me even more, though, was the beauty of the contrast between the scarlet fabric of her kimono and her lily-white hand.

"Oops!" she said, withdrawing with a smile.

Had she made that offer out of habit from her time with Mizuike? The thought made bile rise in my stomach.

"You should be hanging out with Mizuike, not me," I said.

I didn't want her to be seeing Mizuike, of course, but keeping them apart was out of my power anyway.

"Oh, but I did. We went on a date yesterday."

"I know."

"I wouldn't mind seeing her every day. She's so adorable."

Walking up the stairs next to her, I wondered what the hell I was doing with this woman. Being with Shiho Chitaira felt like walking on top of clouds. She looked like she didn't belong to this world, and somehow, by association, she changed the streets she walked on until they didn't seem like my neighborhood anymore. The fierce summer heat didn't help with that hallucinatory feeling.

When I glanced at her, our eyes met, and she smiled at me warmly. That probably worked on all the other girls she'd been with. She never let you see

her upset and made sure to smile often, which only made her beautiful face more attractive. Her charm stemmed partly from her good looks and partly from her attentiveness to the person she was with.

If it weren't for the fact that she fetishized high school girls and bribed them with money for sex, I would even have called her a socially savvy person.

"My goal for today is to make you smile, Takasora."

"Not going to happen."

"Nothing motivates me like a difficult challenge!"

I wasn't going to let her charm me. She could try to melt my defenses with those warm smiles all she wanted; I'd just keep putting new walls between us. I hate her guts, I'd think to myself, and voilà! A sturdy stone wall would appear around my heart.

"Gently prying open a tightly shut heart is a rare pleasure," Chitaira said to me.

"Oh yeah?"

"It's not good for everyone to be friendly without discretion."

She certainly was. She didn't want more people like herself, then?

"Even though that's the ideal," she added.

"'Ideal' as in unrealistic."

"You're absolutely correct. And it is in fact out of my reach—I'm afraid I've never been a peace-loving dove."

"...At least you're self-aware."

If only she acted on her shortcomings instead of preaching about some ideal she never tried to work toward.

We walked up the sloping residential road, past a railway crossing, and out onto the main road. I wasn't doing anything bad, but I was becoming increasingly anxious as we got nearer and nearer the parts of town which were my home turf. Mizuike only ever went out if she was meeting up with Chitaira, but if by some strange coincidence she had decided to go out for a walk that

day, it might end in disaster.

"Takasora."

My back stiffened whenever she said my name in that pretty voice of hers. It didn't sound the same as when my mother casually spoke it. I wondered what sort of emotion was coloring my name when it brushed against Chitaira's lips.

"A smile for you!"

She didn't have to announce it.

When people talked about smiling with their whole face, they must have meant what Chitaira was doing right then. I didn't know another person who smiled like that normally. The closest was probably Mizuike's mom. Other people had too much going on to devote their entire face to that expression.

"Are you trying to make some sort of point...?"

"Don't you find it hard to be hostile toward someone who only ever smiles at you?"

"...Not really."

She got me. She must've learned how to work girls with my kind of personality. I wasn't going to let her triumph over me, though.

"You remind me of Umi when you're like this."

"How so?"

"She was gloomy and distrustful at first, too. But also a little lonely."

She made it sound like she'd managed to turn all that around.

Were we really so similar? I didn't know about that. Chitaira was telling me I seemed lonely, and maybe there was something to that—but I was perfectly able to live on my own.

No, she was making a mistake comparing me to Mizuike. But I didn't care about explaining that to Chitaira.

"What's your plan, then? Make me as dependent on you as Mizuike?"

"No, that's never been my intention. I only ever wanted to bring a smile to

her face, but somehow, our relationship developed the way it did."

"Oh, is that why you bribed her to sleep with you? To bring a smile to her face?"

"Indeed."

She was so shamelessly confident in herself. If she'd wanted Mizuike to smile, couldn't she have found some other way?

Then again, I never managed to make Mizuike smile. That made me feel the most like a loser.

"You're going to get stabbed someday."

"Umi isn't a violent girl. I do worry about her, though."

She sounded like a mother talking about a problem child. How on earth did she see Mizuike? She did seem to be fond of her, but there was something else there, something grating like grains of sand. I wondered if Mizuike could feel them.

"And where are we going?"

We'd been walking for a while, but I had no idea if Chitaira had somewhere in mind for us to go.

"Do you mind if we grab lunch somewhere first?" she asked. "I haven't eaten yet."

"Sure, okay."

"Oh, and it's my treat."

"No thanks. I'll pay for my own food." If I ended up owing her a favor, that would mean I'd lost the game. I tried not to think that maybe I'd lost already by coming out to meet her. "I'm not here looking to score a free meal."

"I'm curious what prompted you to come today."

"Spite."

If she was seeing me, she couldn't see Mizuike.

"Brilliant. Let's go."

This woman... She took delight in my obvious distaste for her, but she'd probably have been equally delighted if I showed any signs of enjoying her company. There was no winning against her.

We went down the main road to a pedestrian plaza. Chitaira gave a little wave to a giant plushie of a kids' superhero character, an anthropomorphized sweet bun. I glared at her. She was trying to be cute, but I was immune. I kept staring at her more than I wanted, though. Her smile was pretty. She really was good at it.

We stopped in front of a building with a narrow entrance. It was a Chinese restaurant, based on the plastic replicas of the dishes in the window and the menu displayed outside. I'd only been to one Chinese restaurant before, decorated with garish yellow and red. Even that had been many years back.

On the first floor, they were selling food to take away. The showcases displayed dim sum, sweet-and-sour pork lunch boxes, and the like. I scanned the price tags and saw that a lunch box was nine hundred and fifty yen. *Little steep for a lunch box*, I thought. A box of caramelized walnuts was the same price, even though there weren't even that many walnuts in it. What the heck?

There was a poorly lit staircase next to the elevator, which was where Chitaira was headed. I glanced at the elevator, but I followed her. The staircase was probably meant only for emergency use. We went up to the second floor, where Chitaira opened a door with an "authorized personnel only" note stuck to it, and we came out into the restaurant reception area.

"...What was the point of that?" I asked.

We'd taken the long way for no apparent reason.

"For fun!"

"Not for me."

The reception area was a big lobby with a sofa. I started getting a bad feeling. This place looked expensive. I might've shot myself in the foot saying I'd pay for myself.

"Do you have a table for two?" Chitaira asked the receptionist.

A smartly dressed staff member promptly led us inside. I shuddered as the air-conditioned air chilled my arms and neck. I only used a fan at home, so this was a shock for my body.

The restaurant had separate seating areas along the wall with windows, with the middle area with rows of tables for two. The staff showed us to a table on the right side of that area. It was strangely reassuring for me to get a seat by the wall.

I pulled out the fairly heavy chair and sat down uneasily. I'd never been to a restaurant like this. The other customers were all older people. They were smartly dressed, though, unlike me. The woman who'd brought me there was the most elegant of all, even in a place this classy, which I felt made me stand out like a sore thumb.

The server brought us menus, tea, and hot towels, and then exchanged a few words of greeting with Chitaira. It sounded like they knew each other. Was Chitaira a regular? She told me she'd been in the area on some other business, so she probably didn't live in my town, but...what if she really was from my neighborhood? Wouldn't that be funny.

Chitaira passed me a menu. It felt heavy in my hands.

I opened it. The first pages had lunch options, starting at two thousand yen. I broke out into a sweat despite the air-conditioning. I turned the page. Four-thousand-yen meals. Next page. Seven-thousand-yen meals.

"Listen...," I started.

Couldn't Chitaira have chosen a restaurant that a normal high schooler could actually afford to eat at?

"Would you like to take me up on my offer?" she asked me.

"...No thanks."

I stifled the desire to let her buy me an expensive meal. I just had to find something cheap on the menu. I flipped through the pages, scanning the prices. There wasn't even a single appetizer below a thousand yen. Sweet-and-sour pork was three thousand, *karaage* chicken was two thousand three hundred, and scallop-and-prawn salad was two thousand three hundred. Where were

they getting these numbers?

I turned a few more pages and, at last, discovered corn soup at eight hundred yen. Eight hundred for some soup? I didn't even know what corn soup was.

The menu was heavy, and the prices were painful. Simple but filling meals like stir-fried rice or ramen cost a small fortune. I did have enough money in my wallet, but I didn't want to spend it all on lunch and be eaten up by regret after. I kept skimming.

"Takasora, dear..."

I shifted uneasily. She always said my name in a way that felt like she was stroking my cheek. I looked at her over the top of the menu. She was smiling.

Chitaira. This woman. Somehow, in my head she was two different entities.

"There's nothing wrong with letting the grown-up pay."

"...No. I'm not having you pay for me," I said, but I took a little too long to reject her again.

"Stop pushing me away so much, or I may end up falling in love with you," she warned me without batting an eye.



She was threatening me with love. Ridiculous. Chitaira herself found it funny—she covered her mouth, stifling a giggle.

"You hate me, don't you?" she asked me.

"I sure do."

I was showing my teeth. She stuck her tongue out in response. She was sitting at the other end of the table, but I shrank away from her.

"Then I'm sure you'd hate it even more if I fell for you, wouldn't you?"

"I see what you're doing..."

Those were leading questions. I saw a red flag in my head, and I refused to answer her, glaring instead. I was sending out the most hostile vibes I could summon, but they seemed to have the opposite effect.

"You're so cute. I'm already crushing on you."

She literally had a girlfriend. No wonder Mizuike was so insecure. She'd chosen the wrong woman to fall in love with. Then again, love isn't a choice; it just happens.

"It's an occasion to celebrate. Let's make the most of it."

"Celebrate what...?"

"Us meeting one-on-one."

Of course she'd say that. But I wasn't going to let her trick me into complying with anything she wanted. I just stared back at her like an exorcist glaring at an evil spirit.

"We're born in total solitude. Our existence is so tiny, and the world outside of us is so vast. That's why throughout our lives we seek to connect with other people, to leave a little part of ourselves with them. Little by little, we strive to lessen that unbearable solitude. This is what everyone is trying to do, even those who appear to be powerful and lacking nothing."

Chitaira spoke weightily, like she was reciting a poem. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, the movement attracting my eyes. It was a simple, unaffected gesture, but for some reason it drew my attention to how well-

formed her ears were.

"What?"

"It's just something from a book I read recently. My impression was also that it's just fancy words, but when said out loud, it does sound compelling, doesn't it? That's why it stuck in my mind."

"What ...?"

I almost laughed when she outright admitted it made no sense. But I couldn't allow myself to laugh. I had to turn my heart to stone and surround myself with an impenetrable icy aura. It was a phrase I'd read somewhere, too, but it was mine now. "Letting down your guard invites mistakes" was another motto I'd learned from someone else. *All right*, I thought, *I'm in control again*.

"Okay... I think I've decided."

Chitaira closed the menu and gestured to the server, who was busy carrying plates of something that looked like fried soba noodles with sauce to another table. The server deposited the noodles where they belonged and came over to our table without delay. Chitaira ordered some things I didn't recognize, and the server left again.

"Sorry, but I haven't ordered yet."

"I hope you'll forgive me, but I ordered for both of us. See what arrives and try it if you like."

"What if I don't like it?"

"More for me!" she said airily.

My resolve was weakening. She was like a stealthy flood building up one drop at a time. Her tactics began with a show of generosity. That's how she wormed her way into susceptible hearts. She was well-practiced at that, I could tell, but I could see through her. My heart was immune to her ways... Or at least, so I hoped.

But did it really make sense for me to sit with her in the restaurant, insisting on going hungry just to make a point? A weak little voice in my head suggested that since there was no way I'd ever develop feelings for that woman, there was

no danger in letting her buy me an expensive lunch. She'd paid for my stay at the hotel earlier, and the hotel breakfast, and I hadn't objected back then.

My reasoning was getting twisted.

I was pretty sure Chitaira was trying the exact same strategy on me as she had on Mizuike, but it wasn't going to work. Then again, what point was I even making by refusing free food?

Wait, wasn't that effectively...? No, I had to trust myself.

"You already ordered, and I'd hate to see food going to waste."

"Fantastic! I promise you it's going to be delicious."

On the surface, it was going the way she wanted, but she had no power over my mind. I still didn't think she was a good person. She was pretty, though, and ever since meeting Mizuike I'd discovered I had a weakness for beauty. I should probably avoid looking at Chitaira as much as possible.

"Do you eat here often?"

"Only when I'm in the area."

Her house must've been somewhere far, then. The fact I'd never seen her just out and about would corroborate that guess. But something was bothering me...

"Why does it feel like...?" I muttered.

"Hmm?"

I looked straight into her eyes. "This is only the second time we've met, but somehow, it feels like I've known you for a lot longer?"

Maybe it was because she was acting so chummy right off the bat. It was one of her tricks to win people over.

"Oh... You're perceptive."

"What do you mean?"

She made it sound like I'd hit on something, but she only smiled in response. Her eyes were still friendly, but there was a boundary there that I was not allowed to cross.

Had I really met her before somewhere? No, impossible. Even if it was many years back, I'd have remembered her, for better or for worse. Definitely for worse.

Chitaira wrapped her fingers around a teacup. "Well, Takasora, what would you like to do?"

"What, in life?"

"Today. If you don't tell me, I'll choose."

I couldn't think of a single thing I wanted to do together with this woman. Why was I even in a restaurant with her?

Suddenly, I thought about last evening.

"Will you take me to a jeweler, to get me a ring?" I asked sarcastically.

"Would you like one?"

"I just said that because of yesterday."

"Ah, you saw Umi's. I hope she likes it."

"She was staring at it all night long."

"Awww!" Chitaira gently clapped her hands in delight.

"She said it cost five million yen."

"That's what I told her. I paid five thousand, though."

"I knew it..."

I was sure a ring without gemstones couldn't be so expensive, but I would've given it fifty thousand yen, at least.

"I had to lie about the price to Umi for the sake of her self-confidence."

"What?"

"I wanted her to believe she's worth a five-million-yen gift. Her self-esteem is so low."

I pictured Mizuike sitting with her arms around her knees on the floor in my room, just spacing out. Whenever she spent hours staring at her textbooks because she thought she was stupid, it looked like self-torture to me. She seemed so pure and innocent, oblivious to her own attractiveness.

I had watched her so closely—not through my own choice—and seen how vulnerable she was. That vulnerability was one of the reasons I'd sunk so deep into the swamp of attraction for this girl with the watery name.

"I'd be happy to buy her a really expensive ring, but it might put her in danger. That's why I held off on that."

"Hmm..."

Strangely, it didn't sound like an excuse. Lying about something like that wouldn't be in line with Chitaira's personality. She wasn't one to tell a lie in defense. Only on the attack—for fun. At least that's how I read it.

I absentmindedly reached for my teacup and nearly dropped it when it burned my fingers. Embarrassed, I picked it up more carefully, blew on the steaming surface, and took a little sip. It was jasmine tea. I drank a little, careful not to burn my tongue, and placed the teacup back on the table.

"When you want to top up your tea, slightly open the lid of the teapot, like so..."

"I never thought to do that..."

While we were chatting, the server arrived with starters for two. Chitaira must have ordered lunch sets for us. I looked curiously at the food, trying to figure out which of the pricey sets she'd gone for, but I had no idea what those dishes were. The server did explain what was what, but she spoke so fast I could only make out about half of it. Some kind of mousse, something with shrimp, something with caramelized walnuts, and jellyfish something. I'd definitely never had any of those before. The only ingredient I recognized was chopped char siu pork, and even that took me a second.

"Bon appétit!" Chitaira said politely.

"Bon appétit," I repeated in a gravelly voice.

A stranger was treating me to strange foods that cost who-knows-how-much. I picked up the chopsticks, thinking that if Chitaira left without paying, I'd be broke.

I wondered if the starters were meant to be eaten in a particular order. They were arranged in a circle. Trying not to be conspicuous, I observed what Chitaira went for first. When she picked up a shrimp from the center of her plate, I did the same. The shrimp had such vivid red and white stripes, I suspected the cook had used food coloring to achieve that effect. I carried the plump shrimp to my mouth and took a bite. The explosion of flavor spread across my whole tongue.

"Ooh," I said despite myself.

It was that good. I looked at the starters with wonder. This was like a whole galaxy of new flavors. The shrimp was flavored with sweetened vinegar, which was a novel pairing for me. Every bite was incredible. The taste alone told me this was really expensive food. I wished there was more than one shrimp on my plate.

Anyway, I moved on to the next thing—a walnut. It was hard and crunchy, light and sweet like candy. It wasn't cloyingly sweet, but the sweetness lasted on the tongue. *So good*, I thought again. I shuddered to think I would have missed out on these if I'd stubbornly refused to let Chitaira treat me.

So this was what money could buy.

Every little starter had exquisite taste and went down smoothly, but the flavors stayed dancing on my tongue. There was nothing to dislike about any of it. I felt like if I kept eating them, they'd bleach me and dye me their own colors. Just like the woman sitting opposite me.

Chitaira had put down her chopsticks and was simply watching me.

"Takasora, dear," she said in that velvety voice. It was hard not to smile back at her.

She wrapped the solid sound of my name in a softness unlike anything I'd touched before.

"What is it?"

"Treating you is such a pleasure."

"What do you mean by that?"

She didn't reply, just watched me with affection. I could almost taste her

smile with each bite of the food.

That's how it started.

My one-of-a-kind summer with Shiho Chitaira.

I almost believed I could find remnants of the flavors in my mouth if I checked carefully with the tip of my tongue.

I was back in my room, and I'd already brushed my teeth. My thoughts kept circling around the events from that afternoon. After ascending the stairway to culinary heaven in that Chinese restaurant, Chitaira and I went to a bookstore. She wanted to buy a new book to read on the way home, and I agreed to keep her company. At the store, she recommended a few books to me, and I found it impossible to stop her from talking me into buying them. I told her I didn't really read novels, but she just brushed off my objection.

"Teach Umi how to read them someday."

What? You read books from right to left; what more was there to it? Nobody had taught me that, and I didn't know how to teach it to someone else. And if I didn't know how to teach it, did that mean I didn't know how to really read, either?

Anyway, I had three novels sitting next to me, all written by the same person. Kai-something. There was supposed to be a photo of the author on the back cover, but on every book, it was just a picture of a jellyfish. Maybe the writer was a fan. I'd eaten jellyfish for the first time that afternoon, and I had enjoyed the chewy texture.

This beautiful woman in a kimono had bought me an expensive meal, and then we'd gone to check out books together, and the whole time I'd gotten to check her out, too. More than I wanted, really. Whenever our eyes met, she'd smile at me and want to talk to me.

"Don't be an idiot..."

I had no right feeling fulfilled in any way, and I crushed that feeling viciously. The meetup hadn't been something to enjoy. That wasn't why I had gone out to see her.

"What did I do that for, then ...?"

My head dropped forward like a wilting flower. I was in danger of forgetting the true reason behind my actions. I did hate that woman; I remembered that, at least. If I curled up, bringing my knees to my chin and holding on to my toes, I should be able to return to my state of mind from earlier.

It wasn't working—even in that position, I couldn't get that voice out of my head, Chitaira calling my name. Her voice was so beautiful, I could fall in love with it. No, what the hell was I thinking?!

Mizuike came into the room as casually as she always did, but when she sat down near me, she leaned forward as if she'd noticed something of concern. What could it be?

She wouldn't know I'd spent the afternoon with her girlfriend, but I felt a pang of anxiety all the same.

"What?"

"Um, nothing..."

She looked away, evading my eyes. I didn't believe bullshit about a sixth sense, so what else could it be? Nothing too obvious, or she wouldn't have backed down... It was like she'd smelled guilt on me...

Wait, smell? The floral perfume! I had to fight back the urge to sniff my clothes to check if that was it. But if I did, she'd know exactly what I was doing, and why... But I hadn't done anything to feel guilty about, right?

I started feeling really bad, as if I'd been cheating on Mizuike with her girlfriend. But I hadn't actually done anything inappropriate. I rolled on the futon so that I'd face away from her, and then I discreetly sniffed the sleeve of my shirt. Was there a faint scent of flowers on it, or was my guilty conscience just making me imagine it? No, I wasn't imagining it. Mizuike had definitely reacted to that. I'd have to be more careful in the future.

No, hold on, I wasn't going to meet up with Chitaira again. I'd made just that one exception because... Ah, right. It had been an act of rebellion.

If Chitaira asked me out again, I'd just say no, and...and what would I gain by

that? If I didn't go to see her, she'd ask Mizuike out, and while they were together, I'd be going crazy from frustration at home. The depressing reality was waiting to welcome me back with open arms.

Nothing was changing in my life because I was just idling through every day. The one time I'd desperately tried to break out of that cycle, I'd followed Mizuike out of town, met her bizarre lover, and gotten flat-out rejected. But at least I had taken matters into my own hands for a change. The consequences of that move were still playing out. Taking initiative always brought results, although they might not be what was intended.

Being careful might look the same as being passive, but they were very different things.

I had to think about what was feasible for me. Could I steal Mizuike back from the clutches of that woman? How? I had no plan, but I knew what I wanted. Except that the glimmer of hope was like a star twinkling in the sky. It was real, but out of reach. I'd have to scale back my ambitions, maybe. Just as an idea almost formed in my head, it fell apart again. It was terribly exasperating.

Suddenly, I heard a message notification from my self-professed friend.

Wasn't it fun to meet up?

Pfft. No. Don't assume.

Wouldn't describe it as "fun." But thanks for the meal.

I decided to thank her, since that was the polite thing to do. I waited, staring at the phone, for a reply...which never came.

Oh, come on, I thought. I might've been a little disappointed. Somehow, I'd been expecting her to write something back, since I'd bothered to reply.

...I was being stupid. What did I care if she replied or not?

I put the phone down, hiding it from Mizuike with my body. I was worried about her glimpsing my screen—she wouldn't recognize Chitaira's name anyway—but I somehow wanted to keep it out of sight.

Only I knew Chitaira's real name. My apathetic roommate, who was totally obsessed with her girlfriend, didn't even know that. I caught myself sneering at

her, and I shook my head to stop it. We're in a really twisted situation, both of us, I told myself, trying to shut out more disturbing thoughts.

In any case, if I ever went to see Chitaira again, I'd have to shower first thing after coming back. To get rid of any evidence. To keep my secret.

...Why did it feel like I really was doing something wrong?

When she suggested we go to a shrine, my first thought was that she was religious, but I was wrong.

The top of the torii gate was visibly dirty, like it hadn't been properly maintained for a while. The signboard, or whatever you called it, was rusty, too. Judging from how tall the trees growing on both sides of the path to the shrine building were, they were pretty old, and together with the neglected torii, they made this place seem ancient. The style was very different from Buddhist temples, so I didn't really feel like I was in a sacred space. The sight of the leafy tree branches swaying in the breeze above me was strangely refreshing for my mind, though.

"Pigeons are sacred animals to this shrine."

"Really? Oh, that's why they've got these pigeon statues, huh?"

Instead of the customary lion-dogs guarding the entrance to the shrine, they had guardian pigeons there, one on each side of the torii. There was another... signboard? Plaque? The writing on it was so badly weathered, I couldn't read it. There was also something like one of those wooden tablets with notices from the shogun you saw in samurai movies, but again, the characters on it were too unclear to make out what it said. The stone lanterns farther back must've been repainted recently. They were a vivid red.

"I hope you're not bored, Takasora."

"...I'm fine..."

Chitaira was next to me again. It was the first day I'd seen her in something other than a kimono. She wore a three-quarter-sleeve blouse and a watch on her slender left wrist, which immediately made me think she was a student. When had I come to associate that look with students, though?

Chitaira had her hair down that day, falling in gentle waves, which tempered her beauty with cuteness. The blouse had slits on the sides, which swayed as Chitaira walked, somehow drawing my eyes.

Let's meet up.

I don't want to.

I'd turned her down, and yet there we were, our shadows next to each other. I was probably making a mistake again. But if the "correct" alternative was sitting in my room doing nothing, then doing the wrong thing at least felt more like living.

Had someone said something like that to me before?

"You going somewhere?"

"Yeah... Seeing some friends."

"Mm-kay."

"So anyway, I made lunch for you. It's in the fridge."

"Wow, really?"

It stuck in my mind how Mizuike had looked at me with her mouth agape, as if no one had ever made food just for her.

She was in my room, reading a manga with intense focus, when I told her I was going out. I concentrated on not looking at her, talking to her from the doorway. What was up with that? I couldn't bear to look at her, and it wasn't because I'd get horny or anything.

At the shrine, I started noticing pigeon motifs on everything—paper lanterns, stone lanterns, wooden prayer plaques. Maybe the deity this shrine had been built for was a pigeon. I imagined a pigeon god taking off into the sky, feathers drifting down.

There were actual pigeons at the shrine, too, walking on the gravel. There were maybe a dozen, or two dozen of them, and they all looked perfectly at home. They didn't flee when we walked by; in fact, they flocked to us. Chitaira seemed especially popular with the pigeons who followed her. Were even pigeons smitten with her beauty?

Chitaira smiled at her pigeon followers and went straight to a stand selling pigeon food at fifty yen per bag. She bought two and handed one to me. I opened it to check what was inside—dry beans. Okay, I was wrong about the pigeons being in love with Chitaira. They just wanted food.

The little store was also selling prayer plaques, amulets, and mochi rice cakes. The old lady behind the counter said "Thank you, as always" when Chitaira bought the pigeon food, so I guessed Chitaira visited the shrine often.

"Thank you for waiting!" Chitaira said to the pigeons, dropping some dried beans on the ground.

The pigeons flew over to her and jostled for the food as she looked on with a smile. Was it fun to feed pigeons? I looked at the beans inside my bag. The flock had completely surrounded us, so I had to be careful where I stepped. I picked up a handful of the food and scattered it on the ground. The pigeons started crowding at my feet, too, flapping their wings as they pushed each other out of the way. I could smell their feathers—or at least I thought that was what it was. Watching the birds gobbling up the food with such energy left me with less time to pursue my own dark thoughts. Did pigeons have a calming effect on humans...? Nah, there was nothing specifically about them that would do that, I concluded, glancing to the side...at Chitaira popping a dry bean into her mouth.

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"What ...?"
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"Hmm, it doesn't have much flavor."

I heard her crunching it. She sensed me looking and offered me a bean.

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"Try it."
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"What? No..." I didn't want to eat pigeon food.

"Try it," she insisted.

She wasn't giving up, so I reluctantly opened my mouth and let her place a dry bean on my tongue, like an offering. It was quite satisfyingly crunchy and tasted really dry. Kind of like eggshells, minus the unpleasant eggshell texture.

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"Doesn't taste like much," I said.
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[&]quot;Right?"

What was she grinning about? She was looking at me the same way she did at the pigeons.

We were the only visitors at the shrine. It wasn't local to me—this was pretty far by train. It was as if I had gone out of my way to see Chitaira. I'd thought about it grumpily while I was sitting on the train. I'd failed to memorize the way from the station to the shrine, so I wouldn't be able to get back on my own. I'd have to follow Chitaira just like the pigeons did.

Was I one of her flock now that she'd fed me? No. No, I wasn't.

Chitaira was still smiling at me. With me, she wore that peaceful smile at all times, but I bet she made a different face when she was alone with Mizuike at night. I started imagining it, but it made me uncomfortable, and I had to banish the thought. She was standing right there.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" I asked her.

"Oh, I was just admiring your hair. It looks so beautiful in the sun."

"..."

It wasn't the summer sun that burned my cheeks that time and forced me to look away.

For a while, we just fed the pigeons in silence. It wasn't that fun for me, but the rustling of wind in the trees overhead fixed my mood a bit. I had emptied the whole bag of pigeon food, but the pigeons were showing no sign of going away.

"I'm trapped."

A tall man might have been able to step over the pigeons, but I couldn't.

"Just do this."

Chitaira threw a handful of beans far away from her, and the pigeons rushed over to get them. It reminded me of people flooding out of a train at rush hour. So that was the trick. I wanted to do the same, but I had no more beans to throw. Noticing me staring awkwardly at my empty bag, Chitaira gave me some of hers, and I did the same thing she had. I vaguely remembered throwing beans for the *Setsubun* celebration when I was in nursery school.

Having escaped the pigeons, we went to sit on a Japanese-style bench, shaded by the shrine office. For reasons unknown, the pigeons didn't follow us there. Maybe the gravel area was their turf, and they didn't venture outside it.

I ran my fingers along the bench, feeling the texture of the surface as I breathed in relief. The heat that had been burning my hair was sliding down my back, dissolving into pleasant warmth.

"The pigeons have learned to recognize me."

"Looks like it."

That's why they had come right over to us—they knew the human who fed them.

"I love birds. I love watching them—and eating them."

That's very like her, I thought, talking about eating something that she was fond of. Ugh, I didn't want to know this woman, and I hated that I was discovering more and more about her personality.

Chitaira was swinging her legs, her hands braced against the bench. She was looking up at the sky, which was perfectly empty, without a single bird in sight.

"I think birds fly without understanding why it is that they can. It's the most amazing thing about them."

"Why's that amazing?"

"Because they enjoy complete freedom."

That's all she gave me in the way of an explanation. She must've gotten that line from some book. She kept doing and saying things just to throw me off.

Suddenly, her hand fell on top of mine. I felt another pulse gently throbbing against my hand. Chitaira's silky-smooth fingers stretched over mine and withdrew again in a caress, like waves licking the seashore. I couldn't let her touch me when she wanted; I had to pull my hand out from under hers, but somehow, I couldn't. I did the next best thing, which was to pretend I was completely unaware of what was happening.

"I really like this place."

"Uh... Y-yeah?"

I was struggling to respond like a normal person as thoughts and emotions bounced around inside me, looking for a way out. Chitaira's hand touching mine was somehow enough to make my heart pound in my chest. A fierce heat assaulted my cheeks, and it wasn't coming from the sun.

Was it normal to do that with a friend? Not that we were friends. If Mizuike saw us, with Chitaira's hand on mine, I'd be in big trouble. We should really avoid doing anything that might be easily misinterpreted. Like meeting in secret... Why the hell was I even here?

Was that an act of freedom, meeting someone without understanding the reason behind it? It didn't feel like freedom at all.

The cicadas chirped, the pigeons cooed, and I was sitting there on the bench, feeling the warmth of Chitaira's hand. Her hand was slightly bigger than mine, and although this may be a weird way to put it, it was like it was spooning mine. Unlike the relentless summer sunshine, the warmth radiating from Chitaira's hand brought me nothing but pleasure.

It was bizarre how I began to relax into that touch even though I hated her. And also how I felt like a different person when we were alone together. Was it a magic spell? Or a curse? She'd probably be capable of casting both.

I was melting into that relaxing warmth of her touch, my eyelids feeling heavier and heavier. I realized I was falling asleep and jerked my head back up.

"Are you sleepy?"

I'd only begun to nod off for a fraction of a second, but nothing got past her.

"Not really."

"No need to be embarrassed."

She was right. Normally, I'd stubbornly pretend she hadn't seen through me, but her hand on top of mine was eroding my defenses, melting the icy walls around my heart. This invading warmth was at once soothing and terrifying.

"It's because...I had to get up early to do housework."

My mother was going out to work as usual, so I knew she'd get nothing done.

The two freeloaders couldn't be counted on, either. Since I was going out that day, I'd had no choice but get up earlier than usual and do what needed to be done. When I was doing the laundry, it had occurred to me it was as if I was making this extra effort for the sake of meeting Chitaira, and I'd gotten angry with myself. Thinking about it started to spoil my mood again.

When I turned to shoot Chitaira a withering look, I was startled by sudden movement from her as she reached toward me. I shrank back, afraid she was going to hurt me, but what she did was put her arm around me and pull me over. My resistance crumbled like a sandcastle, and before I knew what was happening, Chitaira had me lying on the bench with my head resting in her lap.

"This should be more comfortable."

She patted my lower back. I finally snapped out of it and tried to sit back up again, but Chitaira preempted that by putting her hand on my head, gently holding me down. She began to run her fingers through my hair. Her meandering fingertips were a gentle but irresistible restraint. A shiver ran down my spine, to the backs of my thighs.

The chirping of cicadas didn't stop for a moment.

"You can stay like this as long as you like."

My cheek was sinking into Chitaira's soft thighs, separated from me only by the fabric of her jeans. My face was getting unbearably hot. My nose, eyes, and mouth felt like they were disappearing as my head seemed to inflate like a ball, becoming perfectly spherical.

"But...why...?"

My voice was so weak, I wasn't sure Chitaira would hear me over the cicadas.

"You have so much on your shoulders, Takasora—you're balancing school, housework, and even love."

She was playing with my hair, offering me cheap praise that could've come from anyone. And what did love have to do with anything?

Anyone could've said those words to me, but no one else had.

I'd gotten so used to my daily tasks, I did them without thinking. Having

someone finally recognize my efforts was so rewarding, I thought my heart would burst. Chitaira must've known it'd have that effect on me; otherwise she wouldn't have said it. That's how she wormed her way into hearts. She was an alien. She was a demon.

She didn't have good intentions. She wasn't being kind or supportive, but she did say the words I didn't even know I'd been longing to hear. Wasn't that an act of kindness? If it made me feel good, wasn't that good enough?

A little crack had opened in my heart. A little crack in a cistern is enough for what it holds to escape, drop by drop.

I was no different from a certain other high school girl.

"I don't want this...," I protested weakly.

I understood what this woman was. A fantasy. Always kind, always beautiful, always caring, always saying what you most wanted to hear. A person like that couldn't really exist, but there she was. She knew how to destroy you. Everything Mizuike had said about her was true.

"When you're with me, you can forget about everything else. About school, chores, your crush."

She was trying to manipulate me.

"I'd like to also befriend the ordinary Takasora, who's not being a superwoman."

Her words were like a spell reaching for my heart. I wanted to fight her back, but she kept extinguishing my will with the endless stream of gentle words.

I closed my eyes; they felt hot and watery. Tears rolled down my cheeks. That woman was throwing her sweetness and compassion at me like dry beans at pigeons, for simple enjoyment, and yet it made me tear up. I profoundly hated myself for it.

Despite myself, I was beginning to believe she might be a nice person. I was finding comfort in her warmth, breathing in her floral scent, and thinking I liked it. I felt fulfilled just by being close to this beautiful woman. I was turning into Mizuike, and it was driving me insane with despair.

I regretted ever getting involved with this woman. I never should've followed Mizuike that night.

An egg planted inside me broke open, and what hatched from it was trying to devour me from the inside. It was choking me, but I felt no pain. Only a sense of loss, slowly spilling through my entire body. Slowly, ever so slowly, I was letting death take me.

"Remember, you can always talk to me about your worries. You're a very dear friend to me, Takasora."

I had been starved for something as simple as human warmth. It stung me the most that this woman had uncovered my deepest need with such ease.

She claimed to be a friend. Both she and Mizuike called me their friend. That wasn't what I wanted to be to either of them, but friendship was the only thing they offered. They kept me like a pet animal, starving me to death by denying me the food I needed.

I fell asleep crying. Tears seemed to keep welling up and rolling down my face forever. I never wanted anyone to see me crying, and yet here I was with my head in Chitaira's lap, completely exposed and vulnerable, like a baby.

The sound of torrential rain filled my ears, but I knew it wasn't the kind of rain I could protect myself from with an umbrella.

After coming back home, I chucked my clothes into the laundry hamper and showered. Long after I'd finished washing my body, I continued to sit in the bathroom with the shower on me. I felt like I was still crying, except my tears were coming not from my eyes, but from the showerhead. I needed more time to get a grip on myself.

I dozed for a long time. Chitaira didn't complain that she was bored, or that her legs were going to sleep under the weight of my head. She simply indulged me.

"Do you want to sit up?" she'd asked in a motherly voice.

I curled my back and murmured, "Uh-huh."

Not "yes" or even "yeah." Why had I purred like a cat? It was distressing to

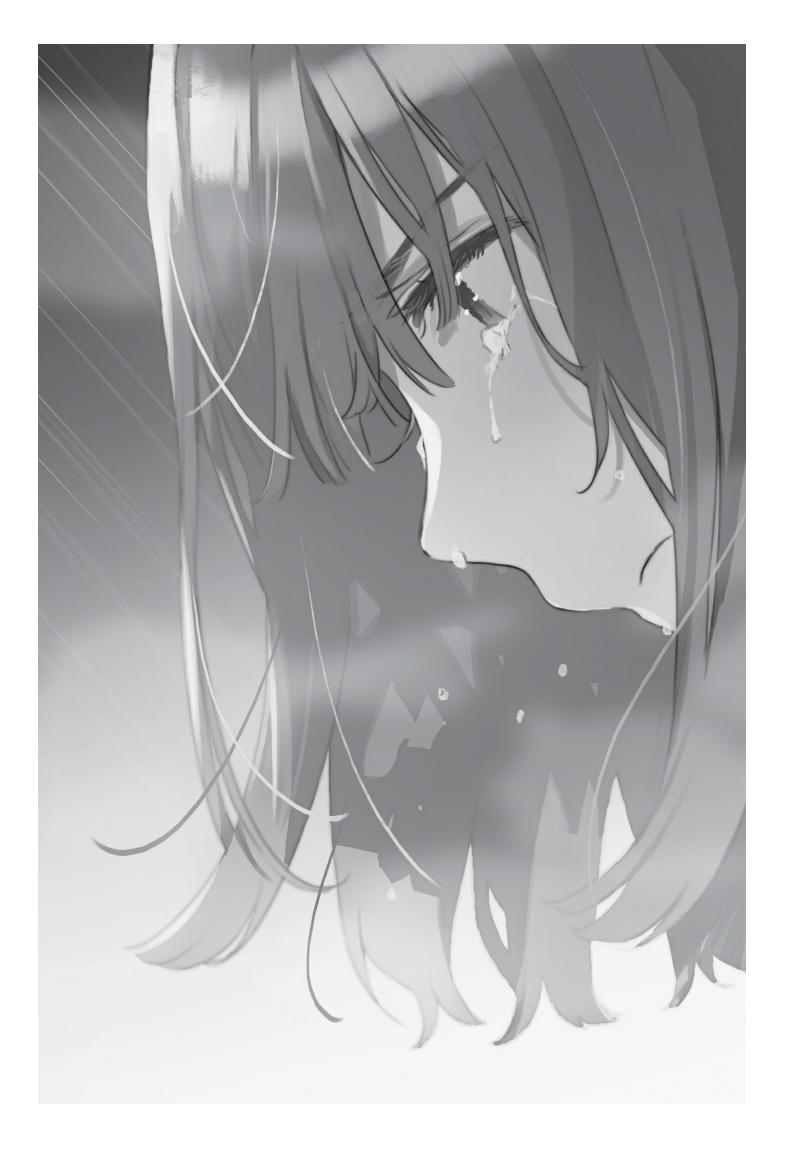
think about that. I was losing the sense of the distance I should maintain.

I raised my face so that the shower was hitting it directly, praying that I hadn't washed all that mattered to me down the drain.

But praying was useless.

Every time I met that woman, I felt her changing something in my heart and in my life. She was an escape from the ordinary, happily pulling me into her world. It was all too easy to lose sight of what was real when I was next to her. To start believing that she could remove the stopper blocking any progress in my life.

I saw the same light of hope that had dazzled Mizuike. The beguiling woman showed us distant mirages of paradise. She deceived us into thinking anything was possible.



I didn't want to start believing those lies.

"I don't want to crush on her..."

I wasn't just saying it—I honestly loathed the possibility, knowing full well that falling in love with that woman couldn't end well. Not to mention she was Mizuike's girlfriend...in name, at least. It was Mizuike I was attracted to anyway, so why was I getting my panties in a twist over this woman? Had I lost my mind? I really was so stupid!

I cradled my head in my hands, overwhelmed with despair. A show of pretend kindness had turned out to be deadly poison to me.

"I don't want this..."

The woman was changing me, and it was scary. I was getting fearful, my back slick with sweat. I was metamorphosing into someone else, and my current self was dying. I looked at my left hand—it was shaking slightly, fingers curving as if they wanted to clutch something. I slammed it against the floor with a silent scream. I howled like that until I wore myself out.

"What's wrong with me...?"

I felt like crying again, this time from helplessness. I decided not to fight the tears back. I was in the shower anyway. They might as well flow. As I cried, my head and my heart began to empty. I was calming down. Maybe I'd been feeling like shit every day because I'd been holding all that in.

"…"

I mentally took a step back from my unruly heart and examined it objectively. Most of the emotions contained there could be named and explained, but there was one area that remained unknown to me—the part where emotions implanted by Chitaira had lodged themselves. I couldn't figure them out. They felt familiar, as if they'd always been there, as if I should've known about them —but I had only met Chitaira recently. She was a mystery I couldn't solve. I'd never met anyone as evil as her.

In any case, I had to face the facts and admit to myself that I was a simpleton. A pretty face and some attention was all it took to make me dance like a

puppet.

I had to return to reality and finish the shower, or I'd get in trouble later for using up too much water. I sniffed my hair to make sure that there was nothing of her left on it—besides the lingering feel of her fingers.

I toweled myself off vigorously as that unbearable humid heat came back in force. It was worse than standing in full sunlight. Who knows how that works, I thought, putting a fresh change of clothes on. I wrapped the towel around my hair and went to the living room.

Every day, after everyone had showered, I cleaned the bathroom. I was so used to that routine, I did it without thinking, but now that an unusual factor had entered my life, it made me pause and reconsider what I'd been taking for granted.

"You have so much on your shoulders."

Selective memory—only the parts I wanted to hear were highlighted in my mind.

I slapped myself on the cheek. It was probably the first time I'd met someone who inspired so much hatred that I wanted to hurt myself.

Through the open door to my room, I could see that Mizuike was there, so I turned on my heel and sat down in front of the living room fan. I had the artificial breeze all to myself. Mizuike's mom was sitting with her legs folded under her, back straight as a pole, watching TV. I pretended she wasn't there.

Come to think of it, I'd never seen her using the fan. Was she worried we'd complain about her touching our stuff? I couldn't spot a single bead of sweat or dilated vein showing on her pale face, though.

I let my hair down in front of the fan to dry it. I'd gone from hiding among rain sounds to concealing myself in ceaselessly blowing wind. Wind may be invisible, but we have many other ways of sensing it through its interactions with other objects. Maybe the heart is the same—we only begin to understand our feelings once we start bouncing emotions off other people.

Suddenly, someone poked my back.

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"Hey, what's up?"
"Whoa!"
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I turned abruptly, the towel sliding off my shoulders and nearly knocking over the fan. Mizuike bent down to look into my eyes. She was holding her phone in one hand and a manga volume in the other.

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"Hey, what's going on?"
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"You looked at me earlier and walked away? What was that about?"

"Ah... Nothing. I just felt like sitting here."

I overcame the nagging urge to look at my left hand, but it left my neck uncomfortably tense. I was waiting for Mizuike to leave me alone, but she sat down next to me and opened the manga.

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"Um..."

"Huh? Don't want me here?"

"No, I don't mind..."
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It wasn't that I wanted her to go away, but I was puzzled as to why she chose to keep me company. She was like a cat, coming and going whenever she pleased with no consideration for others.

Where she was sitting, she wasn't getting much of the wind from the fan, but I didn't move, and neither did she.

Mizuike's mom turned to us with a smile, as if she'd only just noticed us.

"Nice to see you getting along!"

What sort of warped understanding of the world did she have?

As a side note, she was watching a rerun of some show with a masked hero, who appeared on-screen beating a drum.

Memories from the afternoon fresh in my mind, I turned timidly to look at Mizuike. To my secret relief, her graceful profile made my heart beat faster. I loved her still.

She had sent me to the hell of unrequited love, but even so, it was preferable

to the other hell in which I already had one foot. I wished Mizuike would pull me out of it, toward her.

Except it was as if the devil had overheard my thoughts. I heard buzzing from my room, but I continued to sit in front of the fan with its whirring caressing my neck.

"Wasn't that your phone?"

"Yeah..."

I couldn't pretend I hadn't heard it if she already had. I knew exactly who was messaging me.

I looked at Mizuike, as if asking her permission to leave. I was leaving her side for...for...

"Be right back."

I left Mizuike in the living room, affecting nonchalance as I walked to my room to get my phone. It was sticking out of my bag, which I had dropped on the floor before going to take a shower. I'd guessed right—the text was from Chitaira. When I looked down at the phone, the heat that had been sitting on my head began to slide down.

Are you okay?

Of course I was okay. Never mind that I'd been crying my eyes out in front of that woman.

Why wouldn't I be?

You were crying earlier, so I just wanted to check in on you.

I wasn't crying, I replied lightning-fast, without taking the time to select the kanji characters so it all came out in hiragana.

Ah, sorry. Of course you weren't crying. I'm glad you're okay.

She couldn't be serious, conveniently accepting my lie. But the way she wasn't pressing the point made me even more anxious. This woman weaponized kindness. She was trying to manipulate me.

Would you like to meet up tomorrow?

She must have been the devil, reading my mind, sensing my vulnerability.

Why?

I'd forgotten what your smile looks like! You were so sad today.

Hell no. I'm not meeting you.

The day before, I'd also told her I wouldn't meet her, but things had happened, and I'd been depressed over it all day. I wasn't going to make the same mistake again. I turned away from the phone, but it turned out to be a useless act of resistance. I heard another message arrive.

That emotion in your eyes at the end was a surprise. I was happy you let me see it.

What emotion? Me dying inside?!

Are you in a better mood now? Touching Umi always lifts my spirits. Why don't you try it, too?

"Oh, fuck off!"

I hit my phone as if it was to blame. Sitting still became impossible, so I stood up, threw the phone on the floor, and paced around my room. After a while, I slumped back down on the floor, groaning incomprehensibly. My left hand was shaking as if I was suffering from withdrawal, craving something that, until that morning, I hadn't known I wanted.

That thing at the end—I kept thinking about it. The thing she had done to me just before leaving.

She'd made me touch her breast.

She'd suddenly taken my hand and placed it on her chest. I couldn't recall that memory with much clarity; the chemicals in my brain must have corrupted it as a measure of self-protection. If I could remember every detail of that event, it'd probably kill me. Trying to forcefully unlock that memory made my ears burn painfully, as if they were being torn off my head.

So I couldn't remember how it felt. I couldn't remember if it was a light touch, even, or if she'd pressed my hand until it sank into her soft breast. What I could remember was that I stopped breathing, and maybe even my heartbeat

momentarily stopped. Before I could say anything in protest, Chitaira had walked away, unworried about the state she'd left me in.

After that, I'd unfrozen and started breathing again, but my heart had ached all the way home, as if it had split in half.

Chitaira was cheating on Mizuike with me. That had never been my intention. It was her, Chitaira, who'd made me touch her breast. That was sexual harassment! But who'd believe me, even if I shouted I was innocent at the top of my lungs? After all, I had agreed to meet Chitaira in secret.

I covered my face with my hands. I wanted to cry, even though I'd brought all this on myself. Between my fingers, I could glimpse my deepest thoughts I'd tried to suppress.

It was the first time I'd ever touched another girl's chest. I had my own boobs I saw every day, so why did touching someone else's send a shock through my nervous system? Why did my head feel like it was going to explode?

Fuck off, fuck off, fuck off!

I lay on the floor, twisting and turning, pressing my fingers into my eyes, crying at the excitement inside me. I wished I could stop thinking and follow my instincts without worrying about what was right and what was wrong.

"You goin' out again today?"

"Yeah... Meeting another friend."

"Cool. I'm goin' out, too."

"What?" I asked without thinking.

She couldn't be seeing Chitaira, I knew that for sure.

"You seeing a friend, too?"

It was only after I'd said it that it hit me how unnatural it sounded. I should've asked if she was seeing her girlfriend—that would've been the obvious assumption. She might question why I thought she was seeing a friend when I knew she didn't have any—and especially when I knew she had a girlfriend.

"Nah... Just...not sure what to call it..."

Not only did Mizuike not notice anything fishy about my question, she gave me a vague reply, looking like she wasn't really mentally present. I wondered if she was, in fact, planning to follow me in secret to my meetup. But why would she do that? She had no reason to suspect me.

"Anyway, um... I'll be back before dinner."

"Okay. Same here."

I had to make a conscious effort to act normal. It made me so stressed, breakfast seemed flavorless to me.

After breakfast, I stood in front of the bathroom mirror inspecting my face like I did before going to school, but during summer vacation, I normally didn't bother. The last two times I'd gone to meet Chitaira, I hadn't put on makeup and had just left the house as I was, but somehow, I felt different. The person in the mirror wasn't pouting angrily. She was calmly waiting to be beautified. Maybe I felt like doing makeup because I had some time to kill. Little changes like that attracted immediate attention, though. But why should I feel guilty if Mizuike noticed I'd dolled myself up for this "friend" I was going to see?

I put the makeup on and took longer than usual choosing what to wear, but I still left the apartment in good time. To an outsider, it might've looked like I was going on a date. I'd never been on one, in fact.

On the train, I chanted in my head *get a grip, get a grip,* searching my soul for an answer to the question of why I was on the way to see the woman I hated yet again. Since the day before, I could no longer understand my reasoning, and yet I had acted swiftly and decisively. I stared idly out the window at the changing landscape, while my blood churned and my thoughts whirled.

There was one corner of my brain where I'd banished thoughts I didn't want to acknowledge. I peered at them now. The woman was beautiful. Nice. Caring. She praised me. She was warm toward me. She smelled like flowers. She was nice. Nice to me. Nice to me!

I knew her niceness was fake, but I liked it anyway.

And she'd let me touch one of her boobs.

Argh, that last thing can go to hell!

So basically, I'd mentally become Mizuike. Should I cry, or laugh? For the time being, thinking about it still evoked a wry smile.

I was on the way to a station I'd never heard of before, in a town I'd never set foot in, with no guarantee Chitaira wouldn't stand me up. But when I got off the train, she was already waiting right outside ticket gates. There I was, on another tryst, just a day after the last. No, dammit, it wasn't a tryst.

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"Am I late?"
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"No, no. You're even a little early."

Chitaira, dazzling as always, blinked a few times and peered curiously at my face.

"...Something wrong?" I asked her.

There was that sweet smile.

"Not at all. Good to see you!"

"Um, hi..."

I felt sweat forming on my back. It was my makeup that had surprised her; I knew it. She watched people closely, noticing every little change. That was probably one way she got insight into their thinking.

Not wanting her to have an advantage over me, I decided to point out something that was different about her. I didn't have to think hard. It was more obvious than the "spot the difference" pictures they sometimes had at family restaurants to keep the kids occupied. Chitaira's pale-purple kimono stood out even in the shade.

"A different kimono again...?"

"You can never have enough for going out during the day!"

She laughed, as if a little embarrassed by her kimono habit, pinching the ends of the sleeves and opening them like the wings of a pretty butterfly.

Did she have some sort of job that required her to wear a kimono? Or was it a family custom? I knew she was rich, but I had no clue what her home environment might be like.

I followed the wisteria flower pattern on her kimono with my eyes, up to her...no, I stopped myself from looking at her chest. So much for trying to forget about it.

"…"

Did I really touch her there? My elbow started shaking and, as if on cue, so did Chitaira's bag.

"Oh, someone's calling me. Excuse me for a moment."

She walked a few steps away to take the call. *Could it be...Mizuike?* I literally shrank back, so much that I nearly fell over backward. Chitaira wasn't showing any signs of nervousness, though.

"Hello? Ah, I don't think I gave you my number? Are you asking me out? No? Aw. Ha-ha-ha... What, really? My, my! Tee-hee... Ha-ha! Sorry, it's just too funny... That's fine, if it's just the family name... Yes, eventually... Yes. Sure.... That will be terrific. Bye!"

The call was quickly over, and Chitaira walked back to me, laughing in exhilaration.

"Turns out Umi's a pretty clever girl."

"Oh yeah...?"

The mention of Mizuike gave me a twinge of guilt. I wasn't doing anything I should be ashamed of, though... No, that was a lie.

"I'm so happy! And proud of her!"

Her happiness was apparent; the smile on her face was even wider than usual. If I wasn't there, she'd probably have thrown her head back and chuckled to herself.

"And what did she do?"

"Ah, this and that. Never mind. Thank you for taking the trouble to come and meet me here today!" Her unrestrained grin faded back to her customary gentle smile.

"It's not a big deal... I had nothing else to do, that's all."

"Next time, I'll meet you in your town."

"Don't assume..."

I stopped myself before telling her not to assume there was going to be a next time, because that was what I had said the first time, and the second... It was getting embarrassing.

"Let's do something fun together!" She casually took my hand and gave it a squeeze.

"Um..."

My arm felt lighter, as if it had been lifted by a playful gust of wind.

"Sorry! I'm just so used to doing this with Umi. I keep forgetting."

She let go of my hand as naturally as she had taken it. I looked down at my hand now that it was free again.

It was normal for friends to keep a certain distance.

It was normal for friends.

All I had were "friends."

I couldn't move past that stage. It was too convenient for everyone except me, over here at arm's length.

I realized where that persistent unease had come from. It had planted itself in my heart when Umi Mizuike had entered my life. The ocean and land were connected, but the sky was forever separated from them both.

"Takasora?"

I could keep seeing this woman and living with the girl, but all I'd be to them would be a nice friend to have around when they felt like it, and that would drive me insane. I had nothing to look forward to. I could get on the train, but every station it could take me to was still in the friend zone. I was just a friend.

I didn't want that. I didn't want to end up as everybody's friend and nothing more. The wholesome boundaries of friendship were a trap worse than hell.

I had to break out.

"Tell me, what's that about becoming a baby?"

I remembered that I'd never gotten to ask Chitaira a third question, so I chose to ask about that weird thing I'd heard from Mizuike. Why not.

It had been stuck in my mind, not only because it was so bizarre, but also because Mizuike had looked so fulfilled when she'd said it. I'd never be able to figure this out on my own.

It was so random, I wasn't sure Chitaira would even know what I meant, but she smiled in recognition.

"Would you like to try being a baby, too?" she asked in that softly sweet, devilish voice.

She was offering to destroy me. Struggling to breathe like a drowning girl, I managed to get out an answer in the affirmative.



She-Devil

I walked fast, thinking furiously about which one of them I should yell at. My vision was swimming, as if my pupils had literally turned into spirals. Everything around me seemed to bob up and down; it was like they were on waves that hid the two of them every now and again even though they were right in front of me. It wasn't raining, but I was soaked with sweat. Even after I somehow got out of that hallucination and stepped from the shadows into the red-hot sun, I could still hear the hammering of torrential rain.

"Look who's here! Umi!"

Ms. Chiki greeted me with a smile, and I couldn't sense a hint of guilt. I felt so powerless and frustrated, I wanted to cry. Different emotions were surging inside me all at once, and eventually, I couldn't hold them in any longer. Teardrops rolled down my cheeks. It was hot out, but the loneliness left me cold.

Hoshi opened her eyes wide when she saw me, freezing in shock. Then she wrapped her arms around herself uncomfortably, her eyes swimming nervously. My stomach was like a furnace, as if I could breathe fire. I wanted to grab Hoshi and shake her violently.

"Why?"

"Why what?" she replied defiantly.

My fingers began shaking from the overwhelming resentment rising inside me.

"We became friends earlier, remember? We're just hanging out."

Ms. Chiki turned to Hoshi, waiting for her to say something that'd confirm her story. No, she wasn't waiting, she was pressuring her.

"Yeah," Hoshi replied without looking at me.

"You're lying."

She couldn't seriously believe I'd buy that. If it were true, they wouldn't need to be meeting in secret. And Ms. Chiki had told Hoshi her real name, but she didn't want me to know it.

I screwed up my face, and the tears spilled out of my eyes along a different

track. Ms. Chiki let out a little sigh.

"You never trusted me, Umi."

"Because you never acted like someone I can trust!"

It didn't matter that we were out in the open; I yelled at her with the full strength of my emotions. Ms. Chiki looked around. Apparently, I hadn't attracted any onlookers, because she seemed relieved and turned back to me with a smile.

"Takasora didn't tell you we were seeing each other in town? I didn't know, but I suppose it can be explained."

She was brushing off my accusations like they were stupid. I should've put my foot down and keep pressing the two of them, but Ms. Chiki was quick to steer the conversation the way she wanted.

"If seeing a friend counts as cheating in your eyes, then what should I say about you living with Takasora? Wouldn't that be cheating, too?"

She was calmly attacking me, looking gorgeous with a menacingly dark expression on her face. The station building behind her cast an ominous shadow.

"But I...don't have anywhere else to live."

"And I don't have any other friends besides Takasora to hang out with."

She was presenting it as if the two were no different from one another, and she had so much conviction. She was ready to break out the scales and break common sense to prove that me sharing a room with Hoshi and her secret outings with Hoshi somehow had the exact same gravity.

"You could've asked me to meet you. I'd come any day."

"You're not a friend to me, Umi. Hanging out with a friend is different from going on a date."

"But what you were doin' wasn't just hangin' out with a friend..."

"I was. Takasora is my friend. If we were anything else, do you think I'd be meeting up with her in your town? If I wanted to see her in secret, I'd have invited her somewhere far away."

"But—"

"I'm sorry. I didn't know you expected me to always tell you when I was meeting up with other people. I'll make sure to do that from now on, if that puts you at ease."

"No, that's not... Wait... Argh..."

Why was she making it sound like my objections were totally insignificant? Like there was no problem? There was absolutely something wrong with this, but I somehow couldn't point it out. It was driving me nuts, like having an itch somewhere on your head but you can't scratch it away. Or like seeing the tail of your prey right in front of you, all the time, but never getting close enough to grab it.

"It really is a case of the pot calling the kettle black. You two are not only living together, but you even sleep in the same bed, no?"

She said it with ease, but the shadow behind her seemed to be growing longer and longer. Every time I tried to make an objection, she turned everything around and put me on the defensive.

"Only joking, of course. I know you and Takasora are simply very good friends."

She turned to Hoshi for support again, but Hoshi didn't say anything. She only shot me a dark, pained look.

"You are only friends, aren't you? Because if I'm under the wrong impression here, I'm afraid I will get very angry with you, Umi."

"W-we are friends..."

My neck stiffened in fear as I gazed up at Ms. Chiki. I was seeing her in a different light—as an intimidating adult.

"Good. And I am friends with Takasora. Are you going to forbid me from meeting up with friends?"

I felt awful. It wasn't about whether it was right or not for her to see friends. I wanted to scream, but my thoughts were too tangled up, and my voice

wouldn't come out. My lips quivered, and my eyes darted from side to side.

"Umi, do you see what I'm saying? Do you disagree with my reasoning? I would love to hear more about your point of view."

Ms. Chiki looked up at the sky, squinting in the sunshine. The play of light and shadow on her face made it even more beautiful.

"Where should we have our next girls' day or night out...?"

Just like that, she shut the door on me with that confident voice of hers. I'd achieved nothing. I couldn't argue with her. That was exactly why I hated stupid people, and myself most of all. I knew Ms. Chiki had done something wrong—that awful feeling was eating me up from the inside—but I couldn't explain how exactly Ms. Chiki had hurt me. All I could do was cry while Ms. Chiki closed the topic with a smile. The problem wasn't solved, but I had no idea what to do about it.

"There's really no reason to cry, Umi."

Ms. Chiki put her hands on my shoulders, leaning down to look into my eyes with a reassuring smile, and I started calming down despite myself. It really terrified me that she could do that.

It made no sense to be comforted by my probably cheating girlfriend, but I couldn't even push her away. I just kept crying.

"It's hell," I overheard Hoshi saying under her breath. But it wasn't her that broke the impasse.

A soft, soothing voice cut through the ferocious summer heat.

"There you are, girls!"

The woman who came up to us was so delicate, the tiniest gust of wind might have blown her away—she was my mother.

"Mom..."

"I'm just a friendly neighborhood mom on her way to the supermarket. Hello," she said in her ethereal way. Her smile was so fragile it made you worry it might break if you looked at it the wrong way.

Suddenly, my mom's eyes widened. She wasn't looking at me, or at Hoshi. Her full attention was directed at Ms. Chiki, who lifted the hair casting a shadow across her face, and smiled.

"Good to see you, Izumi," Ms. Chiki said. "It was nice talking to you on the phone the other day."

What? My jaw dropped.

Had she just called my mom "Izumi"? That was my mom's name, but I'd never told it to Ms. Chiki.

"Oh gosh! It is you, Shiho! All grown up!"

My mom pressed her hands together, calling Ms. Chiki by a name I'd never heard before. It was like watching a robot suddenly reboot and start talking. I stood there watching like an outsider while they talked.

"It's been so long. I'm surprised you recognized me."

"But of course! Took me just one glance."

Mom pointed at her eyes, and Ms. Chiki—should I still be calling her that?—responded with a grin. Mom smiled back at her. She seemed unbothered by the way Hoshi and I were staring.

"So Clefairy was you. That's a relief!"

"Don't get too comfortable."

"Need a Moon Stone?"

"You haven't changed at all."

They laughed, and Ms. Chiki's laughter was pretty as ever. Meanwhile, I was being baked into the asphalt by the sun and sweating out my ability to think. My dehydrated blood was turning sticky.

"You know her?" I asked feebly.

The wind carried my question like a scrap of paper, rustling like dry yam leaves, to my mom.

"Wait, Umi... Have you been crying?"

"Don't worry about it, Mom..."

"Ah, well, you can tell me about it later. Shiho, haven't you told Umi anything?"

"Not yet. She never asked." Ms. Chiki shrugged. I heard amusement in her voice.

"Well, I suppose I should introduce you, then!"

Mom walked over theatrically to stand beside Ms. Chiki. She was smiling excitedly, while Ms. Chiki grinned like a mischievous kid who'd gotten caught trying to pull a prank. I heard Hoshi gasp.

And then my mom told me who Ms. Chiki really was.

"This young lady is Shiho Chitaira. As it happens, she's your older sister, Umi!"

"What ...?"

"Honestly, I'm not quite sure whether to use that family name for her, though."

My mom pointed at Ms. Chiki's eyes, as if that was supposed to mean something. So I looked, wondering what it was about her eyes. I'd seen them so many times, but maybe for the first time, I looked straight into them without quickly turning my gaze away. Ms. Chiki gazed back at me innocently. Then it hit me.

"No..."

No. No, no, no!

Her eyes were exactly the same color as mine.

"Hello, little sis!" she teased, giving me her usual warm smile.

My first love was a good person. She was beautiful, smelled like flowers, was smart, kind, caring, calming, big-breasted. She was more beautiful than anyone. And she was my sister.



Afterword

Here we are in Volume 2! We've made it to the middle of the story. Which means there's only a third left after this!

Anyway, hello! If you've already finished reading, how did you like the second volume? What do you think? Am I writing this love triangle correctly? I think I'm quite misunderstood as someone who writes only idyllic, feel-good stories. In fact, I really enjoy creating fiction featuring beautiful—but evil—heroines.

How is the story going to develop from here on? Sorry, can't tell you—I've only just started writing the next part. I wonder who I should consider the main protagonist. It might turn out it's the devilish lady...or not! This is what motivates me to keep writing—not knowing what my characters will do. Letting the work develop as I write might be a critical part of my creative process!

By the way, would you guess that this year I'm celebrating my fifteenth anniversary of becoming a writer? I've been doing this for fifteen years. Seriously! Even I can't believe it. Making a living for fifteen years from writing fiction. Fifteen years—that's the span of time it takes for a baby to become a high schooler. So considering only the part of my life I've lived as a writer, I'm a high schooler. Cool!

Probably very few of you have been reading my books since I started writing. Doesn't matter! I'm really, really glad for everyone who reads even just one of my books. If, dear reader, you just curiously picked up my book from the shelf to take a peek at the afterword—come on, give it a read! Or try any of my other novels. There are plenty to choose from by now!

Nothing makes me as happy as thinking that someone out there bought my book, liked it, put it on their shelf, and still thinks about it sometimes. I am aware of the boom in digital reading, but you know what I mean!

I'm planning to finish this series this year and move on to writing something else, and then something else after that, and so on. I hope you don't get tired of me!

Thank you for reading yet another of my books!

Hitoma Iruma

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