

# **Table of Contents**

**Color Gallery** 

**Table of Contents Page** 

**Copyrights and Credits** 

**Title Page** 

**Chapter One: 11:14:36 a.m.** 

**Chapter Two: The Seikan Tunnel** 

**Chapter Three: Rain, Fever** 

**Chapter Four: A World Without Lies or Pain** 

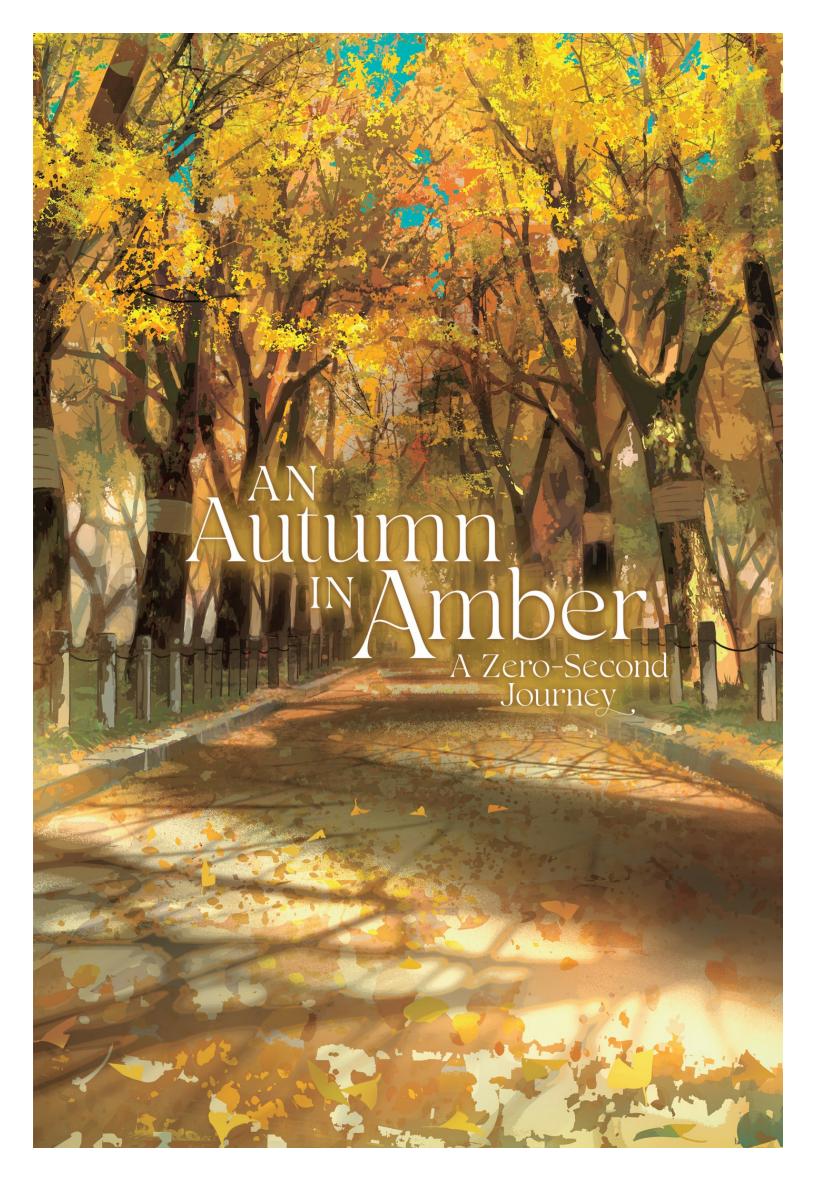
**Chapter Five: No Tomorrow for Us** 

**Final Chapter** 

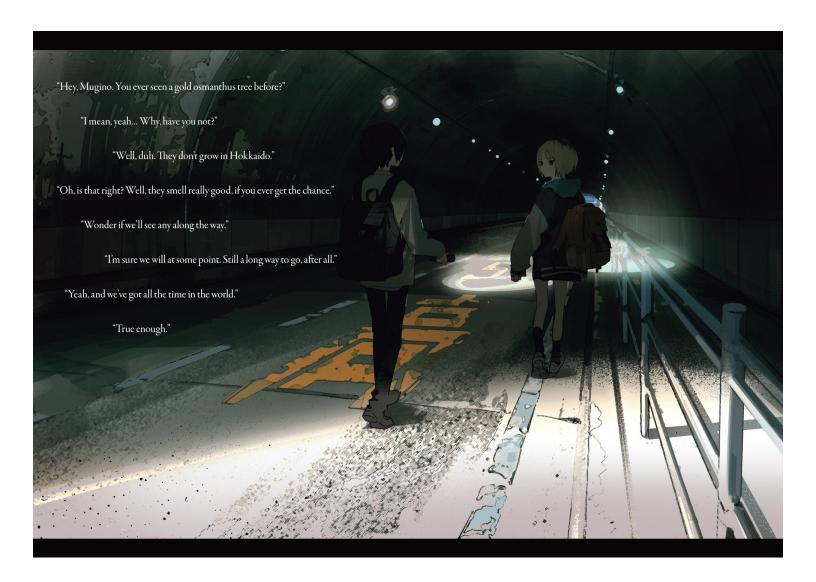
**Afterword** 

**About the Creators** 

**Newsletter** 









KOHAKU NO AKI, 0BYO NO TABI
by Mei HACHIMOKU
© 2022 Mei HACHIMOKU
Illustrations by KUKKA
All rights reserved.
Original Japanese edition published by SHOGAKUKAN.
English translation rights in the United States of America, Canada, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand arranged with SHOGAKUKAN through Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc.

No portion of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form without written permission from the copyright holders. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. Any information or opinions expressed by the creators of this book belong to those individual creators and do not necessarily reflect the views of Seven Seas Entertainment or its employees.

Seven Seas press and purchase enquiries can be sent to Marketing Manager Lauren Hill at press@gomanga.com. Information regarding the distribution and purchase of digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell at digital@gomanga.com.

Seven Seas and the Seven Seas logo are trademarks of Seven Seas Entertainment. All rights reserved.

Follow Seven Seas Entertainment online at sevenseasentertainment.com.

TRANSLATION: Evan Ward COVER DESIGN: H. Qi

INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN: Clay Gardner

COPY EDITOR: Jack Hamm PROOFREADER: Jade Gardner

EDITOR: T. Anne

PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Melanie Ujimori, Jules Valera

MANAGING EDITOR: Alyssa Scavetta
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis
PUBLISHER: Lianne Sentar
VICE PRESIDENT: Adam Arnold
PRESIDENT: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 979-8-89160-318-9 Printed in Canada

First Printing: September 2024

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# Autumn IN Amber A Zero-Second Journey

WRITTEN BY

# Mei Hachimoku

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
KUKKA

translation by Evan Ward



Seven Seas Entertainment

### CHARACTERS

### KAYATO MUGINO

The protagonist. A Tokyo teenager visiting Hakodate on a school field trip.

## AKIRA IGUMA

A delinquent high school girl from Hakodate.



# **Chapter One:**

11:14:36 a.m.

**G** OD, THIS SUCKS. Man, I wish I were dead.

Such were my thoughts as I moped my way down the boulevard, wondering why the hell I'd ever agreed to this in the first place. I should have just stayed in Tokyo. Up here in Hakodate, the only thing stretched thinner than the sharp - autumn air was my patience. Though the sun was high, any time we rounded a corner and entered into the shadow of the city's stunted skyline, the biting chill set in so suddenly that it felt like stepping into a walk-in freezer. It was a cold so keen I couldn't believe it was only late October—yet I could feel the sweat trickling down my sides as my armpits refused to be outdone by the perpetual perspiration on my palms. But this was less a testament to my duffle coat's heat retention than a symptom of my extreme social anxiety.

Just ahead of me, four boys walked shoulder to shoulder, taking up almost the entire sidewalk as they laughed and jostled each other. Beneath their various overcoats and down jackets, they wore the same high school uniform as I did. These were the students I'd been grouped up with for our class field trip—but you wouldn't know that just by listening in, as I hadn't said a single word to any of them in almost a full half hour now.

At first, I'd made a paltry effort to walk closer behind them and contribute to the conversation with passive one-word answers and nods of agreement. I knew I wasn't actually engaging with them, though—just trying to pretend I was a part of the club. But after a while, I realized just how pathetically futile the whole exercise was, and I slowed my pace until I'd lengthened the distance between us from a single stride to about two meters. I should have known better than to think I could even perform the role of listener.

The four of them were already an established friend group—close enough that you'd often see them hanging out between classes and eating lunch together every day. There was no room for a guy like me to insert himself into their little clique. Not when I'd hardly ever spoken a word to any of them, let

alone gone out and actually *done* something with them as a group until now. Anyone with eyes could see that I was the odd man out here—the one guy in the frame who clearly didn't belong.

I knew I never should have come on this trip. I knew it all too well.

"Don't you think so too, Mugino-kun?"

"Whuh?!"

I lifted my gaze from the sidewalk to see that one of the members of my group—a boy named Nagai—was looking back at me over his shoulder. Flustered by this sudden address, I scrambled to close the gap between me and the rest of the group.

"Er... M-my bad," I said. "What were you guys talking about?"

"Ha ha. 'My bad,' he says. Chill out, man. We're not gonna bite your head off," Nagai said with a chuckle, and the other members of the group laughed along. I knew from his tone that this teasing was all in good fun, but it still made my face go beet red. "We were just saying how it feels like kind of a waste, coming to Hokkaido in the *fall*, y'know what I mean? Like, we won't even get to see any snow this time of year. Would've been *way* cooler to come during the winter, don't you agree?"

"I mean, I dunno... Maybe."

"What, not a fan of cold weather or something?"

"N-no, it's not that... Think I'm mostly indifferent to it."

"Gotcha... Well, fair enough!"

Nagai flashed me a slightly awkward smile, apparently realizing that attempting to include me in the conversation had been a fruitless endeavor. I felt bad for letting his consideration go to waste. He was a pretty cool guy, all things considered.

It was Nagai who'd welcomed me into the group when I was the only one left unaccounted for and the teacher asked if anyone wouldn't mind letting me join them for the class trip. He didn't even so much as flinch at the idea, and there was no opposition from any of the other group members either. I really was

lucky to have such good-natured classmates; it was a far cry from what I'd put up with in junior high. Though, in all honesty, there was also something about being treated so kindly and accepted so warmly that only made my self-imposed reclusiveness sting that much worse.

From up ahead, a man in a stuffy-looking business suit came walking down the sidewalk, so Nagai and his friends cleared a path. The closer we got to Hakodate Station, the more people we saw bustling about in their heavy jackets, scarves, and sweaters. For whatever reason, I'd assumed people from Hokkaido were conditioned to the cold, but most of the passersby were dressed much the same as we were.

"Yo, Nagai," said one of the other boys in the group. "We should totally hit up the local Animate after we grab some lunch, don'tcha think?"

"Oh, come on, man," said Nagai. "We come all the way out to Hokkaido, and all you wanna do is look at anime merch?"

"I mean, there's gotta be at least some regional differences, right?"

"You think? I dunno... Actually, where even is the Animate here in Hakodate?"

"Just over on the opposite side of Goryokaku Park."

"Okay, maybe we can swing by after we check out the fort, then," Nagai mused, then turned back to me. "Anything you feel like checking out while we're here, Mugino-kun?"

"Oh, uh... No, not really," I said.

"Ah. Got it."

He abandoned this attempt at communication far quicker than the last.

All of a sudden, I felt starkly ashamed of my inability to even reach out and accept the olive branch being offered to me. Maybe I should have just suggested some random tourist trap, even if I didn't really want to go there. He'd gone out of his way to engage me in the conversation; I should have at least made an effort to be more talkative. Right now, I was nothing but dead weight dragging down the rest of the group.

I really, really had a hard time conversing with other people. But I still felt

compelled to find *something* to say here. As I walked behind them, I racked my brain for a topic I could bring to the table—but the more I tried to hone my internal focus, the more all of the external sounds and stimuli distracted me. Cars honking. People talking. Crows cawing. Streetcars passing. The wind blowing and the damp leaves it plucked loose crunching as they slipped under every footfall. It was only eleven in the morning on a weekday, yet Hakodate was alive with all manner of sounds. Each was small and easily tuned out when heard independently, yet together they formed a distracting cacophony that robbed my brain of all its processing faculties and resources. And once I'd opened my ears and started to listen, I couldn't unhear it. Like there was a tiny praying mantis sharpening its scythes on my last nerve.

Ugh, I just can't think straight right now...

As I struggled, I started fidgeting with my hair as a sort of nervous tic—an ineffective outlet for my frustration. My bangs were so long now that they covered my eyes, and I could feel them brush against my lashes whenever I turned my head. It got pretty irksome sometimes, having to deal with this constant vision impairment, but I so loathed getting my hair cut that I'd just let it grow out anyway.

We continued on our way to the station but eventually hit a red light. We had to stop and wait until the automated signal informed us it was safe to cross the street.

"Y'know, Mugino-kun...I gotta admit," said Nagai, turning to face me. I looked back at him, determined to give a sociable reply this time, only for him to finish with, "I kinda can't believe you came on the class trip at all."

My disparate thoughts scattered to the wind. I could practically feel the blood draining from my head as Nagai's words echoed through my vacant skull: "I kinda can't believe you came on the class trip at all."

"Oh, uh... Yeah, sorry... Ah ha ha..."

Unable to form a more coherent response, I fumbled out a dry, half-hearted chuckle. Nagai looked at me curiously, puzzled as to why I was laughing and apologizing at the same time. It only took a few more seconds for his furrowed brow to stretch back out into a mortified expression as he realized his mistake.

"Wait, no! I didn't mean that in a bad way or anything!" he said. "I just meant that it must've taken some real courage for someone like you to sign up for the trip, especially with how little you actually come in to class and everything. Pretty sure I wouldn't have the nerve to do that if I were in your shoes, so, um... Yeah, definitely could've phrased that better! Sorry about that!"

This attempt at reassuring me was not a very effective one; if anything, it only made me feel like even *more* of a social misfit. But I knew Nagai meant no offense. And in all fairness, I couldn't really believe it either. I'd been asking myself over and over why in the world I'd agreed to this ever since we arrived in Hakodate—and on the plane ride before that, and the shuttle to the airport before that.

"Wait, wait. What are we apologizing for?" asked one of the other group members, turning to look at Nagai.

"What's up?" said another. "Did something happen?"

I could feel a slight tension building in the air. This wasn't right; regardless of his verbal blunder, Nagai had only been trying to include me in the conversation. The onus now fell on me to clear this up—and I had to do it fast, before the signal changed to green.

"Actually, um... Nagai didn't do anything wrong. He just...worded something a little bit poorly, and I misunderstood. It's really no big deal... So yeah."

As soon as I finished speaking, I felt like letting out a cartoonishly heavy sigh. Just stringing three sentences together aloud was enough to make me feel exhausted. But when I saw a wave of relief wash over Nagai's face, I knew it had been worth the effort. The other boys slackened their expressions in turn, apparently glad to know it hadn't been anything more serious. Good—this was exactly the reaction I'd been hoping for.

"Well, that's Nagai for ya," said one of the boys. "Guy's always runnin' his mouth and sayin' rude stuff without even realizing."

"Yeah, he can be brutally honest sometimes," said another.

"Feel free to give him a piece of your mind too, Mugino-kun," said the third. "Lord knows he could use a taste of his own medicine every once in a while."

The three boys started snickering among themselves.

"Aw, knock it off, you guys!" Nagai said crabbily, before playfully elbowing one of the guys in the ribs as if to show me it was all in good fun.

"Hey, don't shoot the messenger!" said the other boy, raising both hands with a dramatic jerk backward.

And then all four of them were in on the joke, laughing and horsing around in such a carefree manner that you could probably use it as stock footage in a video explaining the concept of friendship. *Man, these guys are really close,* I found myself thinking. I was genuinely moved by the sight—but only in the same way one might be from watching a colony of penguins huddled together to conserve body heat out on the Antarctic ice. It was a heartwarming thing to behold, but so far removed from me and the world I knew that I could never even imagine inserting myself into that equation and laughing along as a member of the group. Normally, this wouldn't have bothered me so much, but right now it filled me with an uncharacteristic sense of melancholy. And so I asked myself yet again: *Why the hell did I come all the way out here?* 

"Man, you guys just *love* roasting me, don't you?" said Nagai. "That's fine. I can just hang out with my new friend Mugino-kun here if that's how you're gonna be."

Nagai reached an arm out to clasp my shoulder.

But the moment his fingers found their mark.

I shoved him away from me with both hands.

And he fell back on his ass into the pavement.

Immediately, the frigid air around us froze completely, as the *bing-bong*, *bing-bong* from the traffic signal overhead at last bade us cross. A few passing pedestrians cast suspicious glances in our direction, but all kept on walking without a word.

"Yeowch..." Nagai groaned.

One of the other guys glared at me. "Hey! What do you think you're doin'?!" he demanded.

This finally snapped me back to my senses, and a wave of immense guilt washed over me as I realized what I'd just done. My heart dropped, and my mind went blank as I began to panic, unsure how I could possibly salvage the situation I'd just caused. All my neurons could focus on right now was the lingering sensation of raw human touch on my hands, on my shoulder. After one of the other boys reached a hand down and helped Nagai back up to his feet, he turned to offer me an apologetic smile.

"Sorry," he said. "Guess I got a little too buddy-buddy there, huh? My bad—people are always telling me I'm weird when it comes to boundaries... I'll try to be more careful from now on."

"Wha...? No, I... I just—"

There were so many things I wanted to say. I owed him an apology and an explanation and a reassurance that it was nothing personal against him. But I couldn't give him any of those things. My words just kept getting caught in my throat—and before I could find my voice, Nagai turned to his friends and suggested they cross the street. The one boy was still glaring at me, but he finally turned around in a huff and walked off while muttering an old classic: "What the hell is *that* guy's problem?" It was a barbed sentiment I'd heard countless times over the years, whose thorns only pricked deeper with age, as it was a question I still didn't know the answer to myself.

The walk signal began to blink. I shut my worthless mouth and followed the other boys across the street, resuming my rightful spot two meters behind the rest of the group.

Since as far back as I could remember, I'd lived my life at arm's length.

I couldn't handle being touched. By other people, specifically.

There was no reason for it—it was just an instinctive, physiological response. It was viscerally unpleasant to me in the same way that nails on a chalkboard or two pieces of Styrofoam scraping together might be to someone else. Because of this, I had to be careful to avoid large crowds, and I couldn't even go to a barbershop. I was seventeen years old, and I still could only handle getting haircuts from my mother. Just trying to live my life like a normal human being

felt like an exercise in futility and shame.

I'd only agreed to come on this class trip after being persuaded by my homeroom teacher that if I let this opportunity pass me by, I'd definitely come to regret it someday. Clearly that was a mistake, as the trip had only just begun and I was *already* regretting it. This was one once-in-a-lifetime experience I could do without. They should have just called the whole thing off, in all honesty. Who needed a stupid class trip, anyway?

But deep down, I knew this had nothing to do with the trip itself. It had everything to do with me. I should have just stayed home.

### "...Sorry."

This pathetic one-word apology was all I could muster as I trailed Nagai and the others at a safe distance behind. And I knew even this wouldn't reach his ears, as I hadn't said it loud enough for him to hear in the first place. It was nothing more than a selfish attempt to make *myself* feel a little bit better through the act of saying I was sorry—but of course I didn't have the courage to apologize to him directly.

Nothing scared me more than interacting with other people.

All of a sudden, I felt a heat welling up in my eyes, so I pressed my thumb and forefinger into the bridge of my nose and turned my gaze up to the sky, where a lone airplane carved its way across the pale-blue expanse, leaving vapor trails in its wake. Maybe I should just fly back home, I caught myself thinking. Surely they'd let me go home early if I told the teacher I was feeling really unwell or something, right? But I knew this was wishful thinking, as they'd already booked our return flights. At most, they'd probably let me hole up in my hotel room for the duration of our stay—which was still preferable to being a fifth wheel, I supposed. All I was doing right now was dragging my group down and making it harder for them to relax and enjoy the trip. In which case, I should just come up with some illness I could believably fake and get the hell out of— Ugh. There I go again, just trying to figure out my next escape plan.

I knew these avoidance tactics wouldn't serve me well in the long run. It was

just like my teacher had said—I couldn't keep running away from my problems forever. Wasn't that the whole point of pushing myself to go on this trip to begin with?

I shook my head to break free from my misgivings and looked up at the road ahead. I needed to stop thinking so much and just go with the flow—keep my emotions in check, do my best to stay invisible, and try to power through. This was still only the first stop on our itinerary, after all; I couldn't get cold feet already. From here, we'd be making our way north to Noboribetsu, then Sapporo, and then finally over to Otaru. If I was going to make it through this whole trip, I'd just have to learn how to grin and bear it.

So that was that. I'd made up my mind and hardened my resolve.

But then all at once, and not a moment later...

A deafening silence rang out.

Immediately, I stopped dead in my tracks.

"Huh?" I said, then jerked back in fright.

I was startled by the sound of my own voice.

Why was I talking so *loud* all of a sudden?

But no—it wasn't my voice that was loud.

It was everything else that was too quiet.

I looked all around me. And sure enough:

The whole world seemed frozen in place.

The whole world, that is, except for me.

My groupmates, the other pedestrians, and even the cars on the road had all suddenly gone stiff, as if time itself had ground to a halt. And on top of that, it was impossibly quiet. All the hustle and bustle of the city that had filled the air with sound mere moments ago had fallen silent in the span of a single instant.

"...Wait, wha ...? What?"

It was so eerily silent that even my baffled whispers echoed loud and clear down the street. And it wasn't just my voice either. Every breath I took, every little rustle my clothes made each time I moved a muscle, every scuff of my sneakers against the pavement—all of these noises that would normally be almost imperceptible were crisp and vivid now.

Just what the hell was this? What was even happening right now? Was I being pranked? Was this one of those "flash mob" things or whatever they were called? Had I somehow gotten myself mixed up in some citywide surprise party without even realizing? No, this felt far too elaborate and all-encompassing to be something like that... There was a limit to what human hands could accomplish all on their own, and this clearly exceeded it.

"Uh... H-hello?" I said, swallowing my inhibitions as I called up ahead to see if I could get Nagai's attention—this time loudly enough that he was *sure* to hear me. But Nagai didn't respond, nor did any of the other members of my group. I circled around to get a look at him from the front.

It was like staring at an exquisite wax replica. Nagai's face was frozen midlaugh—but a closer look revealed the slightest hint of dejection hidden beneath his immutable smile. I felt a pang of guilt at the thought that I was the one responsible for casting this shadow over his expression. Hesitantly, I reached out and waved my hand in front of his face, but to no avail. His eyeballs remained firmly locked in place; he didn't so much as blink.

Randomly, my gaze happened to settle on the wristwatch Nagai was wearing on his right arm. Upon taking a closer look, I noticed that even the second hand had stopped ticking entirely, leaving the timepiece stuck at precisely 11:14:36 a.m. This was no longer merely a metaphor—time had *literally* frozen.

I looked around the vicinity for any sign of movement whatsoever, but it seemed everything else but me really had been rendered inanimate. The streetcar in the middle of the road, the electric signboards outside the nearby storefronts, and even the clouds overhead were all— "Oh, wow..."

Just then, I spotted a crow floating directly above me—frozen in flight, wings stretched against the sky. And higher still, the plane I'd seen cutting confidently

through the air a few minutes ago was similarly suspended mid-flight. I just stood there stock-still a moment, mouth hanging open with awe as my brain tried to process whether this was an optical illusion or a genuine violation of all the laws of physics.

### ...Or was it a dream?

Was it possible I wasn't even awake right now? I tried pinching my cheek to make sure. Never in my life had I imagined myself emulating one of the most tired tropes in all of fiction, yet just like in every story I'd ever read, it proved a futile effort.

### "W-wait! I know!"

I reached into my right coat pocket and pulled out my smartphone. I pressed the home button, and the screen lit right up. I let out a sigh of relief, mildly reassured to know that there were still *some* things capable of moving in this world aside from me... Or responding to my touch, at the very least. Yet, strangely, I had no service despite being right in the middle of a major city—and without internet access, there wasn't a whole lot my phone could do to help me right now. After grasping at straws and fiddling around with it some more, I tried moving around a bit to see if I could find any pockets of service nearby. When even that failed to produce a single bar, I gave up and shoved my phone back into my coat pocket for the time being.

Eventually, I noticed a slight ringing in my ears that I couldn't unhear. It was so quiet right now that I could genuinely see it driving a person mad. It was so easy to forget just how inundated we were by a constant influx of sound in our day-to-day lives—from the blare of rush-hour traffic in the morning to the soft swaying of leaves outside the window at night—that it almost felt suffocating when you took all the noise away. There was something weirdly deafening about true, unadulterated silence. Perhaps it was a bit like that feeling you get after a boat ride, where it still feels like the whole world is undulating beneath you even though you're safely back ashore. Even for a guy like me who loved his peace and quiet, this silence was too unsettling for me to bear. And the fact that I had no earthly idea what was happening or why only made it that much worse.

But what possible explanation could there be? I stood there perplexed for a good long while, just trying to get my thoughts in order—when all of a sudden, I heard a sound coming from somewhere far away. Immediately, my ears perked up.

Someone's there.

It was a voice—a girl's voice.

"Hey... Hey, over here!" I shouted back as loud as I possibly could, then took off running toward the voice. It sounded like it was coming from over by the station. I hurried down the sidewalk as fast as I could, weaving my way around the other pedestrians I encountered along the way, the rhythm of my footsteps reverberating through the silent streets. At one point, I came to a red light and reflexively stopped to wait for the signal to change—then realized it probably wasn't going to turn green any time soon, shook my head at my own foolishness, and started running once again. There was a car stopped mid-turn right over the crosswalk, so just to be safe, I ran around the back so I wouldn't get run over if time suddenly began moving again.

Finally, Hakodate Station came into view. The giant clock embedded in the wall of the building displayed the same time as Nagai's watch: 11:14 a.m. I scanned the plaza full of still-life marionettes in front of the station for any breathing bodies, but I only spotted one: a young girl in the middle of the crowd, looking nervously around the vicinity.

Yes! Another person! I cried out internally. So I wasn't the only one trapped in this world out of time after all. Relieved, I slowed my jog to a walk as I made my way over, and she heard my footsteps approaching before long. As she whirled around to face me, the pleats of her short skirt fluttered rhythmically in time.

The girl looked to be about the same age as me. She wore a hooded baseball jacket, and although her hair was dyed a golden hue, the roots had grown out so much by this point that a large patch around her scalp had fully resumed its natural shade of black. This lent her a rebellious, punkish vibe you never saw at a school like mine. The moment the girl noticed me, she immediately went on

her guard, assuming a slightly lower posture while raising both arms defensively, as if bracing herself for something. I could sense this was her way of telling me not to come any closer, so I came to a stop a good three or four meters from where she stood.

"And just who the hell are *you*, kid?" the girl said in a threatening tone of voice.

Did this random stranger just call me "kid"? I shrank back at her coarse demeanor.

"Oh, uh... S-sorry, didn't mean to sneak up on you. My name's Kayato. Kayato Mugino."

After I introduced myself, she sized me up suspiciously from top to bottom. There was an almost feral alertness to her gaze—her eyes wide open and quivering nervously, as though she were strung out from an all-nighter.

"You from around here?" she asked.

"No, I'm from Tokyo... Just here on a class trip."

"Really, now?" The girl remained wary, but she finally allowed herself to take her eyes off of me and scanned the vicinity once more. "So what is this, anyway?"

"Wh-what do you mean?"

"Why'd everything stop?"

"Don't ask me... I'm as clueless as you are."

"...Tch."

She clicked her tongue as though my entire existence was a disappointment to her, and I winced. Not that I couldn't understand being frustrated, given the circumstances, but it was still enough to make me wilt a bit. Suddenly feeling a lot more self-conscious, I was left with nothing to do but stare awkwardly at her as she looked restlessly around the open plaza.

Upon closer inspection, I noticed that she was wearing a uniform under her baseball jacket, which I assumed was from one of the local high schools. It was a fairly standard button-up affair, minus the expected ribbon or necktie. And

when she turned her head to the side, I saw multiple piercings high along the curve of one ear.

And just like that, I could feel my nerves standing on edge. I knew full well that a guy like me had no business interacting with a flashy, irreverent girl like her—especially if she was also some ill-mannered local delinquent. Something told me she probably felt the same aversion toward socially awkward losers like me. If we hadn't gotten stuck together in this strange, time-stopping state of affairs, we likely never would have spoken a single word to one another.

Though I supposed that raised the question:

Why were we the only ones left in motion?

Or could there be others out there, but just not around here?

"Uh... You got a problem or something?" said the girl, glaring at me.

Whoops. Apparently, she'd caught me staring; I apologized in a fluster and quickly averted my gaze. But it seemed this reaction was peculiar enough to inspire a hint of curiosity in the girl, as this time she walked over to take a better look at me.

"Hey, kid," she said. "How old are you?"

"S-seventeen," I replied.

"Damn, same as me? No way... You look like you're still in junior high."

"I... Huh?"

This was as damning a dismissal as her previous click of the tongue. Did she just think I had a baby face, or was it because she could tell I had the backbone of a wet paper towel? Perhaps it was time to stop being so needlessly polite with her, especially now that I knew we were the same age. Not that I didn't still find her intimidating, mind you—but there were some questions I wanted answers to as well.

"S-so listen, uh..."

"Yeah? Spit it out already," she snapped, making no attempt to conceal her displeasure. Yeah, no. I can't deal with people like this.

"Well, I was just wondering if maybe I could get your name too...?" I asked, immediately losing my nerve and going submissive all over again.

The girl showed just a moment's hesitation before answering. "It's Akira," she said brusquely. "Akira Iguma."

"Okay, great. So tell me, um...Iguma-san, are you from Hakodate?"

"Yeah, and what if I am?"

"Well, uh... I guess I was just wondering if this sort of thing happens a lot around here, or..."

"What sort of thing?"

"You know, like...time stopping and all that."

Akira's eyebrows shot up in disbelief, then slanted back down in anger. "You stupid or somethin'? We're not talking about a five-minute train delay here. You really think people would just put up with this crap on a regular basis?"

"R-right, good point. Dumb question. My bad..."

"Don't play games with me, kid. I'll kick your ass."

I bowed my head and apologized profusely. *Man, this girl's scary.* I really didn't get why she had to be so combative about everything—but I sure as heck wasn't going to say that to her face. Meanwhile, Akira let out a heavy sigh and combed back her bangs.

"Ugh... This place is so damn quiet, it's giving me a headache... So you're tellin' me you *really* don't have a clue what's goin' on here, huh?"

"Afraid not, sorry... I was just walking down the street, and all of a sudden, everything froze in place... Wh-what about you? Any idea what might have caused this?"

"How the heck should I know?"

Despite the harsh and callous words she'd been spewing thus far, this last line of Akira's sounded almost like a cry for help. I couldn't help but wonder if perhaps her menacing exterior was all just a bunch of bluster—a crude defense mechanism meant to cover up just how terrified she was on the inside.

"Wait a minute," I said as a sudden realization struck me. "Iguma-san, you live here in Hakodate, right?"

"Uh, yeah? Didn't I literally just tell you that?"

"Well, yes, but I mean... It's a weekday, isn't it? So what are you doing wandering around out here in the middle of downtown?"

It was a Tuesday morning—which didn't matter for me, since I was on a class field trip, but *she* should presumably have been in school right now. And she probably wouldn't be wearing her uniform if it was a day off, nor would she ever be simply heading home at this hour barring extremely unusual circumstances. In which case, the most likely explanation was that she was simply playing hooky.

"...None of your business, kid," she said tersely.

Somehow, I got the feeling I hadn't done much to win this girl over in the short time I'd known her. I wanted to believe this had little to do with anything I'd said or done and was more a testament to our innate incompatibility as individuals, but it was hard to say.

"So what're you gonna do now, huh?" she asked.

"Well..." I mulled it over for a moment. "I think our only real option here is to try to get to the bottom of what caused this."

"Yeah? And how are you gonna do that?"

"I...haven't quite figured that part out yet, sorry."

"Great, real useful..."

Sheesh... Again with the needless insults.

Without another word, Akira turned on her heel and started walking away.

"H-hey!" I called after her. "Where are you going?"

"Gonna see if I can find anyone else. I'll do my thing, you do yours."

"Huh? B-but..."

Common sense dictated that it was a very bad idea to split up in emergency situations like this—especially when there seemed to be some sort of

supernatural element at play, and there was no telling what might happen next. Plus, I felt like there was probably still more intel we could stand to share with one another.

But there was nothing I could do to stop her. Obviously, she had to have heard me stammering in protest of her sudden departure—yet she'd ignored me all the same and gone waltzing off into the city. I lost sight of her almost immediately, and before long her footsteps faded too—leaving me standing there in front of Hakodate Station, all alone in this eerie, otherworldly silence once more.

Granted, I probably could have chased after her and forced the issue if I really wanted to. The only reason I didn't was because I knew she and I would almost certainly never get along no matter how hard I tried. Our differences were simply far too great to reconcile, so I had no choice but to find my way through this all by myself. I'd never made a habit of counting on others in the first place, so that suited me just fine.

"Where do I even begin, though...?"

I'd said we needed to figure out what caused this—but the real question was how. I had no idea where to even begin looking for answers. After all, this strange time-stopping phenomenon—or "timefreeze," I supposed I could call it—had come on so suddenly and without warning that I couldn't even begin to fathom what might have prompted it. It was as if some unseen deity had pressed the pause button on reality, or I'd stumbled into an alternate dimension containing a perfectly preserved, one-to-one replica of the entire world, exactly as it stood at that precise moment.

Like getting trapped in a giant diorama, almost.

Just then, I finally found the words to pin down a strange sensation I'd been feeling on my skin for a while now—or one I realized I hadn't been feeling, rather. There was no wind blowing right now. Not even the slightest, gentlest of breezes. Could it be that the weather was just exceptionally calm? Surely not. Even on windless days, you could still feel the air shifting slightly around you. And I had a feeling that this lack of airflow had a lot to do with why I felt trapped—or even suffocated, almost—in this strange world out of time, despite

ostensibly being outdoors. There was definitely something extremely unusual going on here that defied all rational, scientific explanation. That raised the question: Was any of this actually happening, or was it all in my head?

What if my escapist tendencies had latched on to my desire to be set free from the class trip, causing me to dissociate into some sort of fugue state where I was seeing vivid hallucinations? It was a pretty unsettling thought, but no more ridiculous an explanation for this phenomenon than chalking it up to something supernatural. I remembered reading once about a neurological disorder called Alice in Wonderland syndrome, which apparently could cause drastic changes in a person's perception of size, their body, or their surroundings—or even disruptions in their sense of time. Of course, I was pretty sure "the perception of time having come to a complete stop" was not among the symptoms I'd seen listed, but the basic gist of the condition seemed in the right general ballpark for what I was experiencing right now. Though if this really was all just a hallucination, that still wouldn't explain how my brain had conjured up that local delinquent girl I'd encountered in front of the station.

"Hrmmm..."

It was no use; I wasn't getting anywhere just by thinking about this. And as I stood there at a loss for what to do next, I heard my stomach growl—which reminded me that I still hadn't eaten lunch yet.

"Maybe I should grab some food first..."

Something told me I wouldn't be having any epiphanies on an empty stomach, at the very least. And so I started making my way down the main drag, past quite a few food establishments that looked rather cozy and inviting. It was almost noon, so most restaurants were already open for the day—but unless I could find one where both the kitchen and the waitstaff had miraculously not been frozen solid, I couldn't so much as place an order. But where could I find myself some food, in that case?

"Whoa!"

I ground my heels to a halt just before punting a pigeon clean off the curb. Dang, that was close. Glad I saw it in time. The bird was standing stiff on the ground like some freshly taxidermied trophy animal. As a Tokyoite, I'd encountered a lot of pigeons in my life, but this was the first time I'd ever even come *close* to kicking one; normally, they knew to get the hell out of there whenever humans came walking through. But as long as the world remained stuck in stasis, I'd have to remember to avoid stepping on them—which was a bit novel in a quaint sort of way, I supposed. I made a mental note to watch where I walked going forward.

I paused for a moment, thinking, then crouched down in front of the pigeon to take a closer look. I noticed it looked a lot shorter and stouter than the ones we had back in Tokyo, perhaps due to the extra plumage it needed to keep itself warm up here in Hakodate. Idly, I reached down and rubbed the back of my index finger against its neck feathers. The bird felt soft to the touch—and although it didn't move a muscle, I could feel the slight warmth of its fragile life radiating from within its tiny frame.

Least I don't have any problem touching you, little guy.

I rose back to my feet, wiped my index finger off against my pants, and continued making my way down the sidewalk.

After walking a little while longer, I happened upon a convenience store with a dine-in seating area. I pushed open the manual entrance door and let myself into the cool, air-conditioned interior. Apparently, there were still temperature differentials, even though time had stopped. I grabbed myself a bottle of tea from the drink corner and a cup ramen from one of the aisles, then headed for the register. There, I placed exact change for the food I'd taken in front of the employee (who was frozen mid-yawn), then helped myself to a pair of wooden chopsticks before making my way over to the dining area.

I'd spent many an hour killing time at mini-marts like this on days when I skipped school. They were the perfect place for truants like me, as convenience store workers seemed almost contractually obligated to not give a damn about who their clientele were or what their circumstances might be. There'd been a period of time when I used to hide out in my local public library as well, but once the librarian started trying to converse with me like I was a regular, I never set foot in there again. I didn't want any human interaction whatsoever.

I pulled back the lid on my cup ramen and set it down in front of the hot water dispenser, directly under the nozzle. Then I pressed the Dispense button and waited.

"Huh?"

The water didn't come out, even though I could see from the fill line indicator that the inner tank was full. I pressed the button a few more times in disbelief, but to no avail. Changing tack, I tried opening the top of the dispenser directly—and a cloud of steam immediately came billowing out before freezing in the air just above the machine. Well, that's a new one. Clearly, I still had a lot to learn about the rules of this phenomenon. I felt weirdly compelled to reach out a finger and try poking the miniature cloud of static condensation, but the moment I did...

"Yeowch, that's hot!"

I jerked my hand back as fast as I could. A second longer, and I might have gotten burned—but at least I knew there was definitely hot water in there now. I awkwardly lifted up the entire hot water dispenser and poured some out directly into my cup of noodles. I did end up spilling a little bit, but I was glad I'd somehow managed to convince the laws of physics to briefly kick in for the sake of my lunch. I closed the lid on both my noodles and the dispenser, then had a seat. Never in my life had I had such a hard time just pouring out a little bit of hot water for a quick and easy lunch.

I pulled out my phone and checked the time. The display read 12:25 p.m., which I assumed I could take as an accurate representation of how much time had actually passed since the timefreeze began. The clock on the wall of the mini-mart, meanwhile, still showed 11:14 p.m. I still had no idea why one was moving and the other wasn't—but it seemed like a good idea to nail down the laws of this world in a more concrete manner. As soon as I was finished eating, that's what I would try to do.

I messed around on my phone as I waited three minutes for my noodles to cook. But since I didn't have internet access, this ultimately boiled down to me opening and closing various apps at random—until eventually, I tapped into my phone app, and my thumb froze when I saw the name *Uncle Kurehiko* listed

amid my recent call history.

The call was from two weeks prior, just three days before my uncle had died of acute heart failure at only the age of thirty-nine. Despite the sudden and tragic nature of his death, there were not many who mourned his passing. His eccentric personality and reclusive nature had left him with few friends and made him an outcast from the rest of our extended family.

"You might even have been the last person he ever talked to, Kayato," I remembered my mother saying at the funeral. But what had we even talked about during that final conversation? I closed my eyes and tried to trace back my memories as best I could.

"They're a bunch of idiots, I tell you."

Uncle Kurehiko was always angry at something or other—and the conversation we'd had two weeks prior had been no different. He'd called me up at around one in the morning and immediately launched into a drunken rant (this happened quite often) about a gathering he'd attended earlier that evening for some painters' collective he was a part of. But he'd seemed even more out of control that night than usual.

"Nothing but talentless hacks, every one of them. The only people more braindead than them are the uncultured philistines who actually spend money on the worthless shlock they churn out. And they'll probably never even realize that anyone with real taste looks down on their work with contempt until the day they die, the pathetic fools."

"Uh-huh..." I mumbled.

"And for a group of total amateurs who like to fancy themselves as introspective and avant-garde, they sure are lacking in basic human decency. You should see the way their eyes light up at the slightest whiff of any juicy gossip about one of their contemporaries. They're all bottom-feeders who love to feast on the fetid corpses of their fallen comrades—an invasive species of parasites to the art world that need to be exterminated before they infect every last painting circle with even a shred of ingenuity."

"Gotcha..."

There was no topic on which Uncle Kurehiko didn't have something negative to say. Be it politics, recent films, fine art, the weather, foreign celebrities, or his next-door neighbors, anything and everyone was subject to his indiscriminate scorn. Most of the time, there wasn't even any real substance to his criticism—he just seemed to bear a grudge against most things in life, even though I knew he'd never hurt a fly.

And yet...

"What's the matter with you, boy? Can't you muster anything more than a half-hearted one-word response? At least learn to act interested in what other people are saying to you. You'll never make it in the real world if you can't even do that."

"Look, I'm tired, okay...? I need to go to bed. I've got school in the morning..."

"Hmph. You don't 'need' to do anything. A high school education's not compulsory, you know. You'd be much better served spending your time sitting at home watching films by all the greatest directors in history. Familiarize yourself with some of the classics, for heaven's sake. See, this is what I mean when I say you young folks don't have—"

For whatever reason, Uncle Kurehiko seemed to have taken a liking to me—and there was something weirdly comforting about being accepted by someone who seemed otherwise so impartial in his hate. Another thing I found reassuring about my uncle was that, despite being a relatively well-respected artist, he was still a social outcast and a failure in society's eyes—just like me. And while I knew it was a fairly condescending thing to say, the thought that people like him could find their niche and get by in the world somehow gave me just a little bit of hope for my own future as well.

Even if he'd still died young and alone in the end.

"Besides, do you even want to go to school?"

"Huh?"

"Pay attention, boy. I asked if you actually want to go to school or not."

Through the tiny speaker, I could hear the sound of my uncle glugging down some sort of beverage. Alcoholic, presumably. This was a regular occurrence.

"Well...it's not like I really have a choice in the matter. Especially when my parents are the ones paying my tuition. Plus, you only get one chance to go to high school, and it's good life experience, so..."

"But is that what you want for yourself?"

"I mean..." I trailed off, unable to give him an answer.

"Hmph. You really do need to grow a backbone, boy. Learn to speak your mind. Being a man of few words will only get you taken advantage of by everyone else around you. Take it from me: In this day and age, all of our political and social systems have been explicitly designed to form one giant monster of a bureaucracy that'll gladly gobble up anyone who can't run away fast enough. And if it ever gets you in its sights, all you'll have to rely on are your own words and actions to stand against it."

"...Can I please go to bed soon?"

"No. Not yet."

"Uncle, it's already one in the morning."

"Oh, what a farce. Don't let yourself be a slave to the hands of time. It's just an illusion, you know. The past, present, and future—nothing more than momentary freeze frames in the ever-changing picture we call fate: a multi-layered, multi-dimensional work of art we can only ever see from a single angle at any given time."

I could tell that my uncle was completely hammered by this point, but I still stayed up a bit longer listening to his semi-coherent drunken musings. Once it got to be past two o'clock in the morning, I officially gave up on waking up at my usual time the next day. This was, in truth, the only reason I hadn't already hung up the phone. It was not out of the goodness of my heart but because I wanted an excuse to sleep in and stay home. While I'd held back on saying so earlier, I definitely did *not* want to go to school.

I didn't remember much of our conversation from that point onward. I was getting pretty tired and his ramblings were becoming more and more

incoherent, so most of what he was trying to tell me went in one ear and out the other.

Aside from the very last part of the call, that is.

"I call it 'The World in Amber,'" my uncle had said. I didn't remember the context leading up to that point, but that lone phrase stood out to me as so vivid and distinct that it piqued my curiosity and brought my mind right back into the conversation.

"Amber?"

"Correct. It's a type of fossilized tree resin in which you can often find tiny organisms frozen in time, beautifully preserved for tens of thousands of years. And I am telling you I have witnessed this entire world preserved in amber, as though it were plucked out of time."

"Is this your vision for a new painting or something?"

"Pah. So even you doubt me, eh? But fine, so be it. I know it's preposterous. But I've seen it with my own eyes. I know what I experienced, and it was not some faulty product of a delusional, drug-addled mind. There was...a starkness to it. An undeniable realism."

"To what? I don't even know what you're talking about anymore..."

"It won't be long now. I should be able to unravel the laws that govern it soon enough. I can sense it. Next time, I'll find a way to leave irrefutable evidence behind. Then they'll all have no choice but to believe me. You'll understand it too someday, Kayato—I know you will. Surely a sharp, untainted boy like you would be able to grasp just how magnificent, how...how..."

Silence.

"Uncle?" I said. "You there?"

The only response I received was a snore. He'd finally passed out. I hung up the phone and buried my head in my pillow.

Three days later, Uncle Kurehiko was found dead in front of a train station near his home. A random passerby called an ambulance after finding him collapsed on the ground, but his heart had already stopped by that point. When

I saw him at his wake, his face looked far older and more haggard than it had the last time I'd seen him. The deep wrinkles carved into his furrowed brow seemed to bear an even greater indignance toward the world in death than they ever had when he was alive.

"A world preserved in amber, huh...?" I whispered to myself.

Something about this conspicuous phrase—along with the words "plucked out of time"—made me feel like it had to be some sort of hint. Could it really be just a coincidence, or was there some correlation between my uncle's drunken ravings and the strange phenomenon I was currently experiencing? He'd said he was close to unraveling the laws that governed it, but what had he meant by that? If I'd known something like this was going to happen, I would have paid closer attention to what he was saying.

Uncle Kurehiko had lived in an apartment building down in Tokyo. Perhaps if I went there and searched through his things, I might find some sort of clue as to the meaning behind these mysterious words. But given that the local streetcars had stopped, I assumed all other forms of public transit were a no go as well. In which case, actually making it back to Tokyo would be no mean feat—and there wasn't any guarantee I'd find some handy, clearly written solution among my uncle's effects even if I did make it there.

"Hrmmm..."

So then, what was I to do?

As I sat there ruminating with my arms folded, I suddenly recalled the existence of my waiting cup ramen. *Shoot—I totally forgot*. The noodles were probably soggier than I would have liked them by now, but oh well. I pulled back the adhesive lid and poked my wooden chopsticks down into the container.

...Wait, huh?

The noodles were still hard. But it had *definitely* been more than three minutes by now, so why weren't they cooked? Had the water been too lukewarm? Surely not, given that I'd nearly burned myself with the steam alone.

I picked up the container with one hand, and it was definitely hot to the touch. So then why...?

## Oh! Hang on!

Could it be that the noodles *themselves* were frozen in time, in some way? And no matter how long I waited, they wouldn't absorb any of the liquid until the clock started moving again? Now *that* was a terrifying thought: a world in which I couldn't even cook myself a simple cup ramen. Not that I was a big fan of instant noodles or anything—but if I couldn't even make things that only required adding *water* in this world, that meant my food choices here were going to be even more limited than I already thought. Chances were, I'd only be able to eat meals that were already fully prepared, or whole foods like fruits and vegetables that were safe to eat raw.

And something told me it wasn't just my diet that would be getting new restrictions now that the usual laws of physics didn't apply. I'd no doubt find plenty of other things I'd always taken for granted that were no longer possible here. It seemed like a good idea to do a little investigating, first and foremost, to see what I could gather about the laws of this world. I'd still have plenty of time to try to figure out what caused the timefreeze after that—all the time in the world, even.

My next course of action was settled.

Five hours after I left the mini-mart, my phone died.

It happened while I was wandering through a little souvenir shop by the bay, and as soon as it did, I stopped what I was doing and made a beeline for the hotel we'd made reservations to stay at that night. I specifically recalled the head chaperone for the trip mentioning that all of our luggage had already been delivered from the airport, so I knew that was where I was likely to find my suitcase and backpack containing all my daily necessities—my phone charger chief among them.

The October sky overhead should by rights have been dyed a deep scarlet by now, but it was maintaining its placid blue. I didn't even have a way of checking what the *actual* time was anymore—my world was stopped forever at 11:14. It

was a little unsettling to think that no matter how much time passed, it would still be light outside. I needed to get myself access to a working clock again soon, or this was bound to throw off my body's internal sense of time.

This reminded me of a film I'd rented on DVD once, set in a rural town situated far to the north beneath the midnight sun. The protagonist, having moved there for work, quickly developed a bad case of insomnia due to the stress of his new job and this unfamiliar environment in which night never came, and his life only continued falling apart from there. I definitely didn't want the same thing happening to me. While I obviously had no idea how long the timefreeze would last, I wanted to at least retain my normal circadian rhythm if at all possible. And in order to do that, I needed to charge my phone.

I arrived at the hotel and walked into the lobby. If I remembered right, our luggage was being stored at the coat check...which I could only assume was located somewhere behind the front desk.

"Pardon me..." I said politely to the perpetually smiling receptionist as I let myself behind the counter and into the employee area. After walking through the back rooms for a while, I found my mark: a huge collection of luggage all stowed away in one place. It took almost no time to pick my backpack out from the pile. Relieved, I headed back out into the lobby and unzipped the front pocket to retrieve my charging cable and wall adapter.

"Okay, now I just need to find an outlet..."

I looked around and spotted what appeared to be a rudimentary workspace in a corner of the lobby for guests staying at the hotel on business. Upon closer inspection, I saw that there were indeed electrical outlets here, so I quickly plugged in my phone and hoped against hope that it might power back on... But no matter how long I waited, the screen stayed dead and black. I'd known it was a long shot, but it was a downer all the same.

"No dice, huh...? Figures."

Having spent several hours now investigating the limitations of this frozen world, I'd come to understand a few basic principles. For one thing, virtually all electronic or mechanical devices—or at least the ones that did anything without direct physical manipulation—could not be used. Automatic sliding doors had to

be pried open by force, ATMs would not respond to any touch, elevator call buttons refused to summon their cabs, and bathroom water faucet sensors detected no hands in need of washing. This was all extremely inconvenient, of course—though perhaps the worst part was being unable to properly use the toilet. You could press down the handle and hear the promising sound of the flush valve opening for a moment, but there was next to no resulting water flow, so in practice you could only use each stall a single time. Unless you were depraved enough to not mind going several times in the same bowl without flushing, I supposed.

But if my smartphone was refusing to charge, then it probably meant I couldn't make use of anything that relied on wall power either. Although my phone had worked while it still had an internal charge, there didn't seem to be any power coming into my charger from the outlet, which seemed to imply that the current flowing through the electrical wiring in the walls was frozen as well.

I shoved my phone and charger in my coat pocket and exited the building, leaving my backpack on the floor of the lobby. I figured I might as well use the hotel as a de facto home base for the time being—at least until I'd exhausted all of the leads I could find here in Hakodate. As I walked down the sidewalk, I did a quick mental review of everything I'd managed to glean from my investigating thus far.

In general, I couldn't use anything that functioned without direct physical manipulation. But there were also exceptions. Things like smartphones or tablets or even cheap little 100-yen lighters—little handheld things that came equipped with batteries or their own sources of fuel seemed to work just fine. This size principle seemed to apply to living organisms as well; at one point, I'd scraped a little spider onto my hand from a nearby shrub, only to fling it away in shock as it suddenly started scurrying around on my palm. When I found it where it had fallen on the ground, it was frozen solid again—and when I scooped it back up, it sprang to life once more. But just like with larger electronic devices, this didn't work with animals as large as, say, a pigeon for instance.

Some things could move or be moved in this world, while others couldn't. I felt like I'd more or less grasped the difference between the two.

Just then, I noticed an empty can lying on the sidewalk only a few meters away from a nearby disposal bin. I rolled my eyes at the laziness of whatever litterer had left it there, but since this was a perfect opportunity to do another trial of a little experiment I'd been conducting throughout the day, I leaned down and picked up the can like a good, respectable citizen. Then I took a few more steps, stopped, and threw the empty can up into the air, aiming for the trash can. As soon as I let it slip from my fingertips, it began to carve a perfect parabola through the air, and I knew right away that the shot would surely hit its mark—that is, if the can didn't freeze in the middle of its arc only a fraction of a second later.

"Oh well. Maybe next time."

I grabbed the can from the spot where it hung suspended in midair, then walked over and placed it directly in the trash can.

The best way I could think to describe it was that I seemed to have some sort of "interactive aura" around my body that allowed things to move and work normally as long as they were within a certain radius of me. This was obviously just a rough, gut-feeling hypothesis I'd come up with, of course. But whether there was actually an invisible, intangible field or not, I'd already proven that things became possible to manipulate when I brought them closer to me and turned static again when farther away. I'd managed to use complex devices like phones and tablets just fine when they were in the palm of my hand, but the moment I released things from my grasp, even rudimentary objects—like the aluminum can—became frozen in midair. I'd also managed to get even larger tools and equipment to function, so long as they were more or less wearable on my body.

There were still plenty of things I was unclear on. But with enough time and effort, I was sure I could figure out even more. For now, I just needed to keep on investigating the way I already had been—and I already had several other experiments in mind. But before I did anything else, I needed to find myself a working clock, or at least—

Scrrritch.

I spun around.

What was that noise just now?

It sounded like the scuff of someone's shoe scraping against the pavement. I stopped dead in my tracks and scanned my surroundings. There were several other people on the sidewalk with me, but none of them were in motion.

"I-Is someone there?" I asked, but there was no response.

I was *fairly* certain I wasn't just hearing things. In a world where even the wind had ceased to blow, the sound of anything moving aside from me stuck out like a sour note in a symphony. Could it be that Akira girl I'd met in front of the station? Thinking perhaps she just happened to be exploring nearby, I tried calling out "Iguma-san?" this time but still received no reply. My voice dissipated into the ether.

All of a sudden, a shiver ran down my spine. Here in this cold, unfeeling world in which anything and everything had ground to a halt, I felt a chill. Not from the temperature but from something more akin to fear. It went without saying that these were highly unusual circumstances. If the whole universe itself could stop on a dime, then nothing was beyond the realm of possibility. There was no telling what might happen next. For all I knew, I could end up getting stalked through the streets of this city by some faceless creature straight out of a horror game. Hell, even if it was just another person and *not* a cryptid, it wasn't like I had any real means of defending myself. There was no one I could call on for help here, nor could I even dial an ambulance if I somehow got severely injured. I didn't even have the slightest idea how long the world might be stuck like this—assuming it ever went back to normal at all.

An adrenaline rush coursed through me as the true terror of my situation finally dawned on me. I couldn't keep calm any longer. But what else could I even do right now? Hoping to distract myself from this sudden uneasiness, I tried to walk it off for a while. I figured that putting some distance between myself and the place where I'd heard the inexplicable sound might help relax my nerves so that I could think more clearly about how I was actually going to get myself out of this mess. But as I continued down the street, I happened

upon a set of silhouettes I recognized.

"Oh, hey... Look at that."

There were four boys standing shoulder to shoulder on the sidewalk: Nagai and the other classmates I'd been grouped up with. My aimless, meandering course through the city had led me right back to the spot I'd been standing when time had frozen in the first place. It had only been a few short hours since then, yet something about seeing my groupmates again after wandering alone through these unfamiliar streets and circumstances made me feel powerfully nostalgic for that stupid class trip I'd so loathed. I circled around in front of Nagai to look at him head-on once more. In truth, there was still one test I'd been thinking of trying but had kept putting off.

What would happen if I touched someone here in this frozen world?

I swallowed hard. Touching another person... The mere thought was enough to make me feel like I'd break out in hives. It was something I'd been hoping I wouldn't have to do except as an absolute last resort. The only reason I was considering it now was because—after everything else I'd learned about what I could and couldn't interact with, and assuming that other people could have "auras" as well—it seemed like there was a decent chance that doing so could cause something major to happen. I didn't have any substantial basis for thinking this; it was just an inkling.

I took a deep breath and did some light stretches as I psyched myself up.

"...Okay. Let's do this."

My mind was made up. I slowly reached out a hand toward Nagai, and—

Wait. Where was I even supposed to touch? Tapping him on the shoulder seemed like a safe option, but something told me it would be better to touch his actual skin than just his clothes for the avoidance of doubt if I really wanted to test this. Obviously, that only made things more difficult for me, but I supposed they did say that good medicine was the hardest to swallow. And while there was no guarantee it would work either way, I wanted to listen to

what my gut was telling me right now.

So it was settled, then. I'd touch his skin directly. Which I was extremely reluctant to do, but I knew I would have ultimately felt compelled to test either way if touching his shoulder had proven ineffective. But there were only two places on Nagai's body where he had skin exposed at the moment: his face and his hands. I was *not* going to be touching the former, so the latter it was.

I crouched down on the spot and reached my fingers out. My heart hammered against the walls of my chest. I tried to tell myself it was going to be okay—that this was nothing compared to going to the doctor for a physical exam—but I could feel a nervous sweat trickling down my sides regardless.

"Oh, wait..."

What if the moment I touched him, he sprang back to life? He'd been frozen mid-stride, so if I stood right in front of him like this, he'd immediately crash into me. That could have been bad; thank goodness I realized beforehand. I repositioned myself behind Nagai and crouched down once again.

"Okay... Third time's the charm... Ngh!"

I reached out a trembling hand and touched my fingertips to Nagai's. I instinctively recoiled, yanking my hand away as I jumped backward. But even after waiting a few seconds, there came no change in Nagai. He remained stiff as a board.

I let out a sigh as a sudden wave of exhaustion came over me, and I fell cross-legged on the spot. I gripped the fingers I'd used to touch Nagai with my other hand, squeezing them tight to erase the sensation. There'd been no point in touching another human being after all. The only thing I'd accomplished in doing so was wearing my waning sanity that much thinner. What was I even expecting to happen? For me to have some magic touch that could shatter this otherworldly phenomenon with no trouble at all? No, that was ridiculous.

Thinking more calmly about it in retrospect, I was pretty sure I knew what I'd actually been trying to test through this experiment. It was a tiny, more personal sliver of hope—one that only took advantage of the timefreeze but had nothing to do with getting to the bottom of it. Because right now, Nagai was at a standstill like everything else—not dead, but not exactly alive in the

I was probably wondering if maybe, just maybe, I could handle touching another human being while they were in that state, maybe even slowly make some progress toward overcoming my condition while I was here as a result. But it was hopeless, it turned out; the moment I laid a finger on him, it was like every cell in my entire body cried out in protest.

I rose to my feet, wiped the dirt from the seat of my pants, and gently turned my face up toward the sky. I was going to have to live with this illness my entire life. This wasn't a thought that filled me with any immense dread or sadness at this point—just a sort of vague, creeping anxiety about the rest of my life and the kinds of struggles I'd encounter... Not that it would do me any good to think about all of that now. I needed to get my head back on straight and focus on my current predicament.

"Hey," said a voice.

"Bwagh?!"

My heart nearly jumped out of my throat. I whirled around to see a girl with golden hair standing directly behind me. With both hands shoved into the pockets of her baseball jacket, she stared back at me with an intimidating posture and an indignant look on her face. It was Akira.

"Wh-what the hell, Iguma-san...? D-don't sneak up on me like that..." I said breathlessly. When did she even *get* here? I hadn't heard her approaching at all.

"Oh yeah? And why shouldn't I?" she said, grumpily folding her arms as she walked closer to me. "Assuming you're not up to no good, that is."

"O-of course not. I just don't like being startled, that's all... Anyway, what are you even doing here?"

"I've been keeping an eye on you."

This made me do a double take. Hadn't she told me she was heading off to see if she could find any other unfrozen people?

"Me?" I said. "How come?"

"To make sure you don't do anything sketchy, duh."

"Like what?"

"Like... Like... Ugh! D-don't make me say it out loud, dumbass!"

I did not understand why I was being yelled at. But judging from the word "sketchy"...was she worried I would run rampant around town on a crime spree or something? If so, then maybe this girl had a stronger moral code than her delinquent appearance suggested.

"Tch. Well, whatever," said Akira, turning away from me. "Doesn't seem like I've got anything to worry about there with you, kid."

"O-oh yeah...?" I said.

The implications of her words were flip-flopping so rapidly that I couldn't tell if I'd earned her trust or not. How long *had* she been monitoring me, in any case? One would think I'd have at least heard her footsteps if she were following me around, but... *Oh, wait.* 

"Was it you who made that noise, then?" I asked.

"What noise?" said Akira.

"When I called out asking if someone was there...?"

"Ah, yeah. That was me," she admitted readily. I slumped my shoulders.

"You could have at least said something, you know..."

"Meh. Didn't feel like it."

"Oh, come on..."

What was this girl's problem, anyway? Why did she have to be so obstinate about the weirdest things? And for that matter, it had been *several hours* since we first met in front of Hakodate Station. Was I to believe she'd been tailing me that entire time? Maybe she was lonelier than I thought. Either that, or just bored. Or both.

"Wait, that reminds me," I said. "Do you have the time?"

"Uh, yeah, one sec." She rolled back her sleeve to reveal an analog watch on her slender, pale wrist. "It's just past six o'clock. Why?"

"Damn, already...?" And here I'd thought it was closer to five. This wasn't a

good sign; I was already starting to lose my internal sense of time.

"You're a weird kid, y'know that? Who *cares* what time it is when the whole world's stopped?"

"Yeah, I mean, fair point... I guess I just get anxious when I lose track of time."

"Maybe you should take a chill pill."

Urk. She had me there.

"Anyway," she went on, "I saw all those weird little experiments you were doing. Did you actually figure anything out like that, or no?"

"Right, yeah. So I think I've...mostly got a handle on how certain things work here now... Or at least I hope."

"Wow, you sound so confident," she said sarcastically, then took another 360-degree look around the area before turning back to me. "Anyway, I'm sick of standing around talking about this stuff. I'm gonna go find somewhere to sit down."

"Oh, uh... Okay."

With that, Akira walked off, and for a moment I assumed this meant we were going our separate ways again—but then she suddenly turned around and looked back at me with irritation written on her face.

"Whaddya waitin' for?" she asked. "Come on, already."

"Oh! Sorry!"

Evidently, I was expected to accompany her this time. I did as I was told and followed her in silence down the streets of Hakodate for a while. And here I'd been totally convinced that she wanted nothing to do with me; I wondered what had brought on this sudden change of heart. Perhaps she'd realized the importance of sharing intel with each other, given that we were the only two people left in motion here, and she was swallowing her pride to form an alliance with me.

Eventually, Akira walked into a restaurant along the roadside. I nearly followed her inside—but stopped out front for a moment to marvel at its gaudy, vibrant-yellow facade, which featured a giant image of a cartoon clown.

This was Lucky Pierrot: a local burger chain and fast-food joint that I'd seen featured on TV before. If I remembered right, it was even bigger than McDonald's here in Hakodate...

The interior was every bit as quirky as the exterior. The general layout wasn't all that different from your average diner or fast-food joint, but the whole restaurant was covered from top to bottom in all sorts of random posters and kitschy memorabilia. And the place was packed with people.

Akira pushed the lifeless waiting customers aside as if carving out a path through the jungle as she made her way over to an open table at the back of the dining area. I followed her lead, though I was much more careful not to touch any of the other customers. I awkwardly contorted my body to squeeze my way around them and into the opposite side of the booth, where I finally allowed myself to breathe easy. Navigating crowded restaurants had to be one of my worst nightmares, and it wasn't that much easier for me even when the other customers were all staying put.

"Wait, huh?"

I noticed there was a mug full of fries covered in a thick cheese sauce sitting on the table, alongside a large paper cup with no lid on it containing what appeared to be a milkshake. This led me to wonder if perhaps this table was, in fact, occupied, but whoever it belonged to had gotten up to get some napkins or something. I watched as Akira reached down, plucked a cheese fry from the container, and shoved it straight in her mouth. After chewing and swallowing, she then proceeded to curl her lips around the straw of the milkshake and take a big, long slurp. Once she'd drunk her fill, she set the cup back down and let her cheeks stretch into a satisfied grin.

"Mmmmm... Good stuff," she said.

"Whose food is that?" I asked.

"Dunno. Mine now."

"Where'd you get it?"

"Lady over there."

I looked over in the direction Akira indicated with her chin and saw a middle-

aged restaurant employee who'd been carrying a tray of food from the kitchen, presumably out to one of the tables. Though the only thing left on the tray now was a single wrapped hamburger. *Oh god. Don't tell me...* 

"Y-you stole someone else's food?" I said.

"Hey, hey, hey. Don't say it like that," said Akira. "I just helped myself to a little bit of it, that's all."

"Uh, pretty sure that still qualifies as theft..."

When did she even have the *time* to go and pilfer these illicit treats? I hadn't seen her grab them on our way over to the table, but maybe her sleight of hand was just that good. I'd been starting to think she might secretly be an upstanding person, but it seemed my evaluation of her was going to need further reassessment.

"I mean, whaddya expect me to do?" said Akira, reclining against the backrest with a self-righteous posture. "It's not like we can *buy* anything right now, so we've got no *choice* but to just yoink stuff."

"You can still leave money at the register, at least..."

"Yeah, and what about when we run *outta* cash, smart guy? What then? We just gonna eat raw pigeons off the street or something?"

"I mean, obviously not, but still..."

To be fair, the girl did have a point. Assuming the timefreeze wasn't going to let up in the near future, our wallets would be empty in no time if we kept paying full price for everything—but I felt we should at least leave payment behind for the things we'd taken while we still could. Also, I had a feeling the legal system might have something to say about capturing and eating pigeons off the street anyway.

As I sat there wondering if it was really my place to preach at her about the morality of stealing food under these circumstances, I felt my stomach growl. Thinking back, I never did end up getting those ramen noodles to cook back at the mini-mart, which meant I still hadn't eaten a single thing since this morning. I sighed, and Akira glowered at me.

"What is it now, huh? Got somethin' you wanna say?"

"No, sorry... Just felt my stomach growling, that's all..."

"Wait. Have you not eaten anything this whole time?"

"Nope, not yet."

"Oh reeeally, now...?"

A sadistic glint flashed across Akira's eyes.

"Here, I got you," she said, sliding the mug of cheese fries she'd been munching on across the table to me. "Knock yourself out."

"Huh?" I gawked. "But they're not even yours..."

"Don't worry about it. Just have some."

In what universe did she think these were *hers* to offer so benevolently?

Still, stolen goods or not, I felt reluctant to turn my nose up at this rare display of congeniality on Akira's part. As of right now, she may as well have been the only other person left on Earth (as far as I knew), so I wanted to maintain a positive relationship with her if at all possible. And it didn't seem like I was going to convince her to give the fries back at this point, so maybe I'd be better served just taking her up on the offer.

"Well, if you insist..." I said, slowly pulling a fry from the container. It was still hot to the touch, as though it had just come out of the fryer—and in a sense, it quite literally had. I supposed that was one minor perk of this situation: for as long as time remained frozen, any freshly cooked meals we encountered would never go cold or spoil.

I slid the fry into my mouth and was delighted to discover a savory Bolognese sauce hiding beneath the thick layer of melty cheese. It tasted a whole lot better than I was expecting—or was it just that I hadn't eaten anything in a while? Akira watched me chew and swallow her little offering with rapt attention from across the table.

"Great. Now we're partners in crime," she said with a devilish smirk. "Which means you have to do exactly as I say."

Her protruding canines poked out from beneath the corners of her upper lip. Heh. Now there's a smile, I couldn't help but think. It was so childishly innocent compared to her stereotypical troublemaker vibes that I was slightly taken aback. In this light, she looked just like any other girl her age, or even a bit younger... Wait. Back up for a minute.

"P-partners in crime?" I said. "H-how so? And why does that mean I have to do as you say?"

"Because you ate one of my forbidden fries, duh," said Akira. "Also, wow—delayed reaction much?"

"First off, they're not even *your* fries to begin with... And I literally only had one. Isn't that a pretty hefty price to pay for what I got?"

"Okay, fine. Then you only have to do as I say until you pay off your fry debt."

I didn't know what the current exchange rate was between french fries and slave labor, but I assumed it couldn't possibly take that much work to pay off a single fry's worth of fry debt, toppings or no. Plus, she seemed to be in a pretty agreeable mood right now, and I didn't want to sour it by protesting something as stupid as this. And so I reluctantly agreed to her terms, signing myself away into short-term indentured servitude.

"Well, as long as it's just one fry's worth..." I said.

"Great. Pleasure doin' business with ya," said Akira. "But you'd better not flake out on your end of the bargain, you got that?"

She dragged the container full of fries back over to her side of the table and started snacking on them again. Wait... That's all I get? What if I want to take out a two-fry loan?

"Anyway, back to what you were telling me earlier..." she went on. "You said you think you've got a handle on how some things work here now?"

"Oh, right," I said. "Yeah, so basically..."

Neither my stomach nor my sense of self-worth were fully satisfied with this arrangement, to be honest—but I supposed we had more important matters to attend to. I proceeded to tell her everything I'd gleaned from my investigations

into the phenomenon thus far, as clearly and concisely as I could.

"So you think we got some sorta 'aura,' huh?" said Akira, licking the salt from her fingers one by one as she considered my little theory. "Yeah, I guess it does kinda feel like that's how it works, now that you mention it. But that's pretty boring, not gonna lie. Don't you have anything *juicier* you can tell me?"

"Uhhh..." I racked my brain. "Did I already mention the part about how most things freeze in midair about a second after you let go of them?"

"Man, enough with the tiny little details already. I meant something big, like how to get a car running or hook up to the internet or whatever. Some way to hack the system, y'know?"

"Mmm, I don't think I've got anything useful like *that*, unfortunately... Though I'm pretty sure we're not gonna find a way to use a car or the internet no matter what we do. Plus, one of us would have to know how to drive in the first place."

"So you've got diddly squat, then. Great... Thanks for nothing, kid."

Akira leaned back in her chair and loudly slurped at the dwindling remains of her ill-gotten milkshake.

"So, uh... What about you, Iguma-san?" I asked. "Did you manage to find anyone else like us?"

"Heck no. Everyone's stiff as a friggin' board. Even tried looking down off the edge of a tall building but couldn't find a single thing movin' around. Aside from you, obviously."

"Ah. Gotcha..."

I was very tempted to throw in a little jab about how *her* investigations hadn't proven any more fruitful than mine, but I couldn't find the courage to say so out loud.

"So," said Akira. "I guess we still don't know anything about what caused all of this, then, huh?"

"Actually, about that..."

"Wait. So you did find something out?!"

Akira sat up and leaned across the table, a renewed spark of hope now glimmering in her eyes. She really wasn't the most subtle when it came to showing her emotions. For a moment, I'd been thinking I might as well tell her about my uncle Kurehiko—but then the usual litany of fears and anxieties started running through my brain, and I ultimately got cold feet about the idea.

"...Er, sorry," I said. "I got nothing."

"Oh, no. Don't you lie to me," said Akira. "You were totally about to say something."

"No, it's nothing worth mentioning—honest. I was thinking earlier that maybe it could be related, but it's such a long shot that I feel crazy for even entertaining the idea... And I don't wanna make you even more confused by bringing up random crackpot theories, so yeah, I think I'll just keep this one to myself."

"You're gonna tell me right now."

"Yes. ma'am."

I told her about Uncle Kurehiko. About the strange phone call I'd gotten from him just before he died, and the mysterious words he'd said to me during that conversation. And that he lived in Tokyo, and we might be able to learn something if we went and searched his apartment. But after summarizing all of this for Akira, her eyes only narrowed with even more perplexity, just as I'd feared they might.

"But if it was *your* uncle who caused this," she said, "then why the hell did *I* get wrapped up in it too?"

"I don't know. And I wasn't saying he's the one who caused it, necessarily."

"Sure, maybe not. But it totally sounds like a promising lead."

Urgh. Again, my words caught in my throat.

Her suspicions were valid. As difficult as I found it to believe that a lone individual could have brought about this phenomenon all on their own, I couldn't deny that my being exempt did seem to support the theory that he was connected to it in *some* way. But even so, that didn't help us much; my

uncle's words were like a tangled web of cryptic hints and unanswered questions—and there was no telling whether following any of its threads to their terminuses would lead us anywhere worthwhile. I didn't want to give Akira false hope based on absolutely nothing of substance. *That* was the main reason why I hadn't wanted to bring this up.

"Tokyo, huh...? The big city..." Akira muttered with a faraway look in her eyes, lost in thought. But just when I was about to attempt a change in subject before we dwelled on this any longer, she made a bold decree: "Okay, then I guess that settles it! Sounds like you and I are goin' to Tokyo, kid."

"Huh?!" She was skipping so far ahead I couldn't help but balk. "A-and how do you suggest we do that, exactly?"

"Uh, by walking? Duh? Not like we could take the train or bus."

"I'm not sure you realize just how far that is... I mean, I guess we could hypothetically bike our way there, but it'd still take several days."

"Bike? Oh, you haven't tried that yet, huh?"

"Sorry? Wh-what do you mean?"

"Hate to break it to you, but bikes don't work either. I mean, you can *sorta* ride 'em, but the pedals are so heavy that it takes, like, three times the effort of just walking."

"Wait, seriously?!"

Man, I had no idea... But it made sense, now that I thought about it. It was probably because our auras couldn't cover the full extent of the bike's mechanical system, so the tires wouldn't keep rotating through inertia alone. In which case, it sounded like our legs were going to be our only real means of transportation after all.

"That's even worse, then..." I said. "And even if we *did* manage to make it all the way to Tokyo, it's not like there's any guarantee we'll find a way out of this."

"So what? Same goes for if we just stay here in Hakodate. Besides, what if time's only stuck like this in Hokkaido?"

"Then we should just sit tight, and I'm sure help will come soon enough."

"Plus, you never know—we might even run into some other people like us along the way."

"Yeah, but—"

"Would you *stop* being such a wimp?! I'm going to Tokyo whether you like it or not, and there's nothing you can do to stop me!"

She was being awfully stubborn about this. It seemed she'd really latched on to this scant possibility I'd suggested for some reason. But how long would it even *take* to get to Tokyo from Hokkaido on foot? Like, a month or so? And was it even *possible* to cross the sea over to Honshu right now?

Oh, right. There was the Seikan Tunnel, which you could theoretically walk through on foot now that time had stopped. And you could probably find reasonably decent food and lodging for pretty much the entire way, even in the event that you ran out of money to pay for things. Hang on. Is it just me, or does this actually sound kind of doable? With no time or budget constraints to worry about, she could very well make it there so long as she had the perseverance. In which case, I guess it wasn't really my place to try to stop her.

"...Um, okay. Take care, then."

"Oh, no you don't. You're comin' with me, you little brat."

"Bwuh?!" I was flabbergasted. "Wh-why do I have to come?"

"What's the matter? You don't wanna?"

"Well, I mean...can't you just as easily go there alone?"

"And just how am I supposed to find your uncle's place on my own, huh? Besides, you still owe me for that french fry I gave you."

"Pretty sure one measly french fry does *not* entitle you to make me your personal tour guide, let alone drag me all across... Anyway, you get what I mean."

I could feel myself starting to lose my temper, but I didn't want to rile her up again, so I decided to pump the brakes. But much to my surprise, she didn't get frustrated with me this time—if anything, she seemed almost flustered by my

resistance.

"W-well, what are you gonna do instead, huh?" she asked. "Just stay here in Hokkaido forever? You *know* that's not gonna solve anything."

"I mean..."

I could feel my heart wavering.

Assuming there were no major changes in the situation anytime soon, I figured I'd probably want to make my own way down to Tokyo eventually. That was where my house was too, after all—and there was no reason for me to stay here in Hakodate when my class trip had, for all intents and purposes, been indefinitely postponed. And if I was going to head south sooner or later regardless, then maybe it made the most sense to travel with Akira. But that would *also* mean being in each other's company for quite some time, and that did give me reasonable cause for concern. How long would I be able to put up with her rough temperament and aggressive nature?

I peered at her cautiously through my bangs. Her expression was earnest, and she was clearly waiting on tenterhooks for my response. I could see a hint of desperation in her eyes as she looked at me imploringly—like she was at her wits' end and felt this was her only hope. This filled me with an inexplicable unease; the mere thought of turning down her invitation flicked a sliver of guilt lodged in my chest.

I resigned myself to my fate.

"...Okay. I'll go with you," I said. "To Tokyo."

As soon as these words left my lips, Akira's face lit up. "Sheesh! About time you stopped being such a downer! Make me sweat a little harder, why don'tcha!"

"S-sorry, didn't mean to."

"Welp, guess I should go home and get ready, then," she said. Her mood had done a complete 180; part of me felt like maybe she was just excited to go to Tokyo in general. "You'd better pack up your stuff too. We're leaving first thing tomorrow morning."

```
"Okay, got it... Wait. Tomorrow? I-Isn't that a little too soon?"
```

Akira gathered up her mess and headed over to the tray return area.

"Meet me outside Hakodate Station at nine o'clock sharp," she said, then threw away her trash before turning to leave the restaurant. "And don't be late!"

Things were progressing at a breakneck pace now. But apparently, come tomorrow, Akira and I were going to be setting off for Tokyo together. The idea still hadn't really sunk in for me, to be quite honest—but there was no turning back now.

Hang on. We're leaving...tomorrow?

"H-hey, wait a minute!" I shouted. Akira had already left the building, so I scrambled to my feet and chased after her, weaving my way through the frozen customers obstructing my path. As soon as I made it out the door, she turned around to face me.

"What is it now?" she asked.

"Well, I just realized I don't know what time it is," I said. "So, uh... When's tomorrow, exactly?"

"Excuse me?"

I couldn't blame her for this reaction; the sentence sounded every bit as stupid out loud as it had inside my head. But it was a valid question: How were we going to delineate "tomorrow" from "today" when time was at a complete standstill? At first, Akira looked at me like I was a madman, but then eventually she seemed to catch my meaning and scratched her head in frustration.

```
"You got a phone, kid?"
"Yeah, but it died."
"How 'bout a watch?"
"Afraid not..."
```

<sup>&</sup>quot;Hey, fortune favors the bold, right?"

I really wished she would stop clicking her tongue at me like that. It made me feel like simply interacting with me was the most annoying chore in the world for her, which was pretty hurtful.

Akira rolled her eyes, then unfastened her wristwatch and tossed it over to me. Panicking, I held out my hands to catch it—only for it to get suspended in midair halfway between us. It didn't feel great to have to walk over and take it manually after she'd cast it aside like a miser throwing alms to the poor, but I swallowed my pride and did it anyway.

"There," she said. "You can borrow that. Just don't break it."

"O-okay, thanks. But what are you gonna do now?"

"I've still got some charge left on my phone. Gonna have to waste my precious battery now thanks to you. You owe me big-time."

"Y-yes, ma'am... Thank you very much."

"Now, remember: tomorrow at 9:00 a.m. Don't be late, or I'll kick your ass!"

After this final parting threat, Akira trotted off down the street. I looked down at the watch she'd just lent me, which featured a surprisingly girly design, pink wrist strap and all—cutesier than I would have expected. I checked the time and saw that it was eight o'clock already. If time were passing normally, then the sun would've long since gone down by now, yet the skies were still bright overhead, which I knew was definitely going to mess with me even with an accurate clock to rely on. If I didn't get a move on, it'd be tomorrow before I knew it—and I had travel preparations I needed to make.

But before I did anything else...

"M-man, I gotta find something to eat..."

I was officially starving to the point that I couldn't focus on anything else. Hoping to find something with which to fill my stomach, I headed into a nearby department store complex. I couldn't make the ramen mistake again—I'd buy myself a ready-to-eat meal this time.

After finishing my very late supper, I headed back to the hotel where I'd left

my luggage, as my plan was to stay there for the night. We hadn't checked in to our rooms yet, so I'd kind of just be helping myself to whatever bed or couch I could find, but I didn't feel too bad given that the school had probably already paid for our reservations.

I walked into the lobby and collected my luggage. From there, I took the emergency stairwell up (since I couldn't use the elevator) and was pleased to find that room service was in the middle of doing housekeeping on the second floor, so a majority of the doors were propped wide open. I peeked into a few and quickly found one that appeared to have just been cleaned, so I decided to set up camp there for the evening.

"Now then..."

I needed to make travel preparations... Though, come to think of it, there wasn't actually all that much I needed to do. I was *already* traveling, since I was here in Hokkaido for my class field trip. Offhand, I couldn't think of much that I would need for the journey south that I hadn't already brought with me to Hakodate. I supposed an old-fashioned foldout map would be useful, given that I couldn't use my phone's GPS, but I could just swing by any bookstore and grab one later.

I sat down on the bed and let out a long sigh.

"Man, I wish I could take a shower."

I'd worked up a decent sweat today, and my muscles were feeling pretty exhausted too. But I couldn't even get running water right now, let alone take a shower. I'd just have to rough it for a while.

"Actually, hang on a minute."

I stood up and walked over to take a look at the guest pamphlet lying on the desk near the phone. I flipped it open to the hotel floor map, and sure enough, there was a large communal bath on the top floor.

I may not be able to take a shower, but a hot bath, on the other hand...

With a change of clothes, some toiletries, and a bath towel under one arm, I left my room and scampered up the stairs to the top floor. I passed under the hanging curtain labeled MEN, took off my socks in the changing room, and

headed into the bathing area. Luckily, it seemed the bath was filled to the brim with hot water, and I nearly jumped for joy as I rushed over and stuck my right hand in to check the temperature.

"Urk... Dang, it's a bit lukewarm..."

Maybe 11:00 a.m. didn't fall within the standard hours of operation; I should have thought to check that in the pamphlet before I came up here. But it wasn't so cold that I couldn't still take a bath in it, at least—and I didn't know how many bathing opportunities I would get on the way to Tokyo, so I figured I should just suck it up and deal with it this time around.

I headed back into the changing room and took off the rest of my clothes, then returned to the bathing area, placing the shampoo and body wash I'd taken from the amenities closet at the edge of the tub. Using a nearby washbasin, I scooped out some bathwater and dumped it directly over my head.

"Phew... Needed that."

Thankfully, gravity still applied within my aura, so the warm water trickled down my body with no trouble at all—but then it couldn't find its way down the drain, so it just stayed there pooled at my feet. It was a little uncomfortable wading around in my own wastewater after a few pours, but this method was still more than functional enough to get myself clean. After carefully scrubbing my entire body and washing my hair, I took a dip in the bathtub.

"Oh, man... This feels so weird..."

It was a little tough to describe—the water felt *hard*, almost. There was far more resistance than usual on my submerged limbs whenever I tried to move them around. But it wasn't a *bad* feeling, by any means; if anything, it was kind of comfy because it made my body feel steady and secured. As I sat there enjoying the sensation, I gazed absentmindedly up at the ceiling and thought back on the long day I'd just had.

"Man, feels like I haven't talked this much in forever..."

I hardly ever said a word at school, and even at home, I never really spoke to my parents except at the dinner table. My vocal cords might even be too sore for me to talk much at all tomorrow. I needed to take better care of my throat if I was going to have to contend with Akira's short temper while trying to theorize and problem-solve our way out of this situation for the foreseeable future.

"Sure hope the two of us can get along..."

I noticed I'd been talking to *myself* a lot more than usual too—though perhaps this was just to preserve my own sanity by filling the otherwise perfect silence. Feeling weary, and with a million and one thoughts running through my head, I immersed myself up to my eyes in the lukewarm bathwater. Then I let out a heavy sigh and watched as my pent-up exhaustion slowly bubbled up to the surface.



## Chapter Two: The Seikan Tunnel

## **"G**IVE."

That was Akira's one-word greeting as she walked up to me with an outstretched hand at Hakodate Station the next morning (if you could call it that). She had on the same baseball jacket she'd been wearing the day before; perhaps it was her favorite coat. Slung over her shoulder was a backpack, which I assumed contained everything she felt she would need for the journey ahead.

I looked down at her expectant hand and cocked my head to one side. "Uh... S-sorry, can I help you?"

"My watch," she said. "Give it."

"Oh, right." I quickly produced the watch from my coat pocket and handed it over. "Here you go. Still in one piece. Time's a bit off now, though..."

This was because I'd had to take it off along with the rest of my clothes before jumping in the bath last night. I couldn't afford to get it wet, especially since it wasn't mine, so it was a necessary evil. I did set it forward a bit after getting out to compensate, but since I didn't know exactly how long I'd been bathing, there was no way for me to ensure it was set to the correct time. It seemed Akira recognized this inevitability, though, as she just accepted the watch without a word—then reached into her own pocket and pulled out a second watch, which she held out to me.

"Here," she said. "You can have this one."

"Huh?!" I gaped, dumbfounded. This was a nice watch, with a sleek, mature design. Definitely far more valuable than the one she'd lent me for the night. Immediately, I sensed danger afoot. This was the same girl who'd conscripted me to accompany her all the way to Tokyo for a single french fry. I didn't even want to *think* about what I might owe her if I accepted this luxury watch.

"Hurry up and take it already."

"Y-you're sure I can have this? There's no catch this time?"

"Huh? Whaddya mean?"

"You're not gonna force me to do your evil bidding or anything like that...?"

Akira puffed out her cheeks in resentment. "Of course not, you moron! What do I look like, a supervillain?! Don't make me kick your ass."

"O-okay, okay! My bad! Sorry..."

I did not want my ass kicked, so I immediately backpedaled. Even I couldn't believe how spineless I was sometimes. I reached out and accepted the watch, taking care not to touch Akira's hand in the process, and she let out a self-righteous "hmph."

"It's fine, honestly," she said. "It's just my stupid older brother's, so it's no skin off my nose. Wouldn't have minded just breaking it and leaving it shattered all over his desk either, but figured I might as well let you get some use out of it instead."

Apparently, Akira and her brother did not have the best sibling relationship. I didn't know what the circumstances there were, but I was happy to take the free watch, given our current situation. It would certainly prove useful.

"Oh, right," I said. "We should sync up our watches..."

"Sync up?" said Akira.

"Yeah. Yours probably has a different time than mine..."

I knew the one I'd been borrowing from her was off after my bath last night, and I assumed she hadn't set the time on the one she'd just given me to match her smartphone or anything—which probably wouldn't have the correct time either anymore, unless she'd slept with it in her pocket or something. As such, we'd have to pick an arbitrary time to set both our watches to. (On a side note, I'd had to wait for her to arrive outside Hakodate Station for about thirty minutes. Even considering that I'd shown up early to compensate for not having the correct time, she'd been pretty darn late.) "Okay, so what should we set 'em to?" asked Akira.

"Let's just go with 9:30 for now."

"'Kay."

Akira set about adjusting her watch, and I attempted to do the same.

Let's see, I think you just have to pull out this little knob here, then turn it, and... Okay, cool. There we go.

After setting the time to 9:30 a.m. on the dot, I strapped the watch onto my wrist. Chances were, we'd have to make it a daily ritual to sync up our watches from now on—unless neither of us were planning to bathe or take them off for any reason going forward. It would be a nuisance for sure, but we couldn't afford to let our bodies' schedules go completely out of whack.

That being said, wearing this watch was making my wrist feel all weird and itchy already. I'd never been the type to wear accessories for this exact reason, but if it really started to bug me I could always just take it off and keep it in my coat pocket.

Just then, I noticed Akira staring at me.

"C-can I help you...?" I asked.

"Nah," she said. "Was just thinkin' that thing looks real dorky on you, that's all."

"Whaaa...?"

I didn't know what she expected me to say to this. It wasn't like I'd picked it out for myself or anything—hell, *she* was the one who gave it to me. But it definitely didn't suit me at all. It felt like the watch was too big and fancy for my shrimpy little wrist. I peeked through the gaps in my hair at Akira to compare; her ears glimmered with piercings, and a trendy necklace peeked out from her unbuttoned shirt. She was decked out in all of the quintessential style-savvy teenage girl accessories—and then there was me, a total scrub.

"All right, let's get a move on," Akira said, then started walking. I followed after her without a word. And so began our journey to Tokyo.

After departing from Hakodate Station, we made our way south along the shoreline. Our first destination was the Seikan Tunnel, which connected the

island of Hokkaido to the Honshu mainland. The farther we got from the station, the more sporadic the hotels and high-rises became. Before long, the distance between individual buildings of *any* kind grew wider too. I also couldn't believe just how *large* the parking lots for even small business establishments were compared to Tokyo. It really hammered home the sheer vastness of Hokkaido. The whole place felt kind of deserted to my sensibilities, in all honesty—especially after leaving Hakodate's city limits, whereupon the number of giant potholes in the middle of the road and run-down, permanently shuttered buildings increased exponentially. I wasn't sure if the timefreeze had anything to do with the mild sense of desolation that hung over the entire area—but I, for one, didn't mind it being deserted. This was serenity for me.

I'd gotten pretty used to living in a world on mute by this point. With everything quiet for miles around, I noticed my inner voice had gotten a lot more talkative. It was kind of exhilarating, in a weird way—how even this eeriest of silences could feel safe and comfortable once you had a chance to acclimate to it.

## Speaking of silent...

Akira had hardly said a word this entire time. She'd gladly taken the lead when we first set out, but now she was just trailing behind me with her eyes downcast like a sulking child. I wasn't sure if she was trying to preserve her energy or she simply couldn't think of anything she'd want to talk to me about, but it wasn't an uncomfortable silence, at the very least. And I wasn't exactly the greatest conversationalist myself, so I didn't see any need for us to try to force ourselves to chat it up if neither of us felt like it. Granted, she did still intimidate me a little bit—but this was already turning out to be a far more pleasant trip than traveling in a group with my classmates had been.

As we continued making our way along the coast, I lifted my gaze upward. The blue autumn sky almost seemed like it had been painted on a massive ceiling by this point; it hadn't changed one bit since 11:14 a.m. the day before. It really did feel like we'd stepped into some futuristic, three-dimensional photograph. Or, to use a more relatable analogy, like we were walking around inside an extremely high-resolution version of Google Street View. But for my money, the total lack of wind or any kind of airflow was still the strangest part. I

was glad the weather had been nice when time came to a stop, though. Imagine if it had been raining and we were forced to— "Ugh! Enough already!" Akira shouted.

I flinched in surprise at the unexpected noise and promptly whirled around. "Wh-wh-what's the matter?"

"It's too goddamn quiet! I feel like I'm gonna go insane!"

"O-oh... Is that it?" Of all the possible annoyances...

"Graaagh... Damn it, my head is killing me. Just wait till I get my hands on whoever started this stupid timefreeze... I'm gonna throttle 'em by the neck," she grumbled—then looked up at me and furrowed her brow. "How come you seem so unfazed by it, huh?"

"I mean, I don't know what to tell you... I actually find the lack of noise pretty relaxing, to be honest..."

Akira looked at me in wide-eyed disbelief. "Okay, you've gotta be some sorta freak. No way could any normal person feel relaxed in this situation. Or are you just messing with me, is that it?"

"N-no, I'm dead serious."

"Ugh... Great, so I'm the only one suffering, then...? So unfair. This blows."

For my part, I couldn't help but think it was a little unfair that she was taking her frustration out on *me*, but I kept that thought to myself. Akira let out an exaggerated sigh and walked right past me. Whether her complaints were justified or not, she really did seem to be struggling. Feeling a little concerned, I hurried to catch up with her.

"So, um... Are you gonna be all right?" I asked.

"Say something," she demanded, keeping her eyes fixed firmly on the road. "I don't care what. Just talk about literally anything. It's way too quiet, and it's making me anxious."

"Uh, okaaay..."

This was kind of a big ask for a guy like me. What *could* we even talk about, when the two of us had so little in common? *Oh, right. Speaking of which...* 

"Hey," I said. "Do you think we might be, like...distant relatives or something? Probably not, right?"

"Huh?" Akira gawked. "The hell're you talkin' about?"

"Well, I was just thinking about it yesterday, since it seems like you and I are the only ones exempt from the phenomenon... Like, surely we must have something in common, right? Maybe not, though..."

"Hm. I see what you're gettin' at..." Akira mused, holding her chin between her thumb and her forefinger as she thought this over. "Don't think my mom's ever mentioned us having relatives down in Tokyo, though."

"And I don't think we have any family here in Hokkaido either... So yeah, I dunno."

What else could there be? Did our mothers have the same maiden names? Were we born at the exact same time? Or in the same town? Had both our families moved away in early childhood? It felt like I was just grasping at straws now. At the very least, I could say with relative confidence that Akira and I were not blood-related. I let out a long hum as I pondered what other connections we might have.

"Yeah, I mean...I guess you do see that sorta thing in movies from time to time," I said. "Where the two main characters end up being secretly related or whatever. But it's pretty unrealistic."

"You a pretty big movie fan?" Akira asked.

"Huh? Oh, I don't know about *that*... Wouldn't say I've seen any more than the average person. But I do enjoy them, at least... How 'bout you?"

"Think I'm pretty average too. I hate horror movies, though."

"Oh yeah? What, too scary for you?"

"Uh, 'scuse me? You'd better not be calling me chicken, kid. I'll murder your ass."

Yeesh! Okay, then! I'd only asked out of genuine curiosity; I wasn't trying to imply anything, so the threat was totally uncalled for.

"No, it's 'cause my folks made me watch some Resident Evil movie when I was

little, and I got pretty traumatized by it," she said, kicking a pebble at her feet. "So now I can't do gore. Like, I literally can't. Not that I really understand the appeal even *without* the gross stuff, though. Why would anyone wanna spend their precious time getting jumpscared by some random monster or whatever? Horror fans are so dumb."

"Mmm... Well, I dunno," I said, thinking it over. "Maybe they're trying to overcome or at least overwrite those fears through exposure."

"Whaddya mean? Overwrite 'em how?"

"Well, just like that movie that traumatized you, really scary and unpleasant experiences tend to stick in our minds, right? Sometimes, when something really bad happens to you and you want to get your mind off of it, the best way to forget about those negative emotions is to go experience something else that's really scary, or super depressing, or leaves a really bad taste in your mouth... In that sense, even movies that inspire negative emotions could be the perfect medicine, at least for some people."

The very best form of escapism, after all, was immersing yourself in the world of a compelling story, be that a horror film that scared you half to death, or a manga with a depressingly bad ending, or a tragically beautiful novel that forever left a deep impression on your heart—whatever worked to drown out the pain. If some people could only wipe out one unpleasant memory with another one, then maybe they actively sought out feelings like fear or pain within the safer realm of fiction. I supposed it was something like the strange sense of security some people allegedly got through self-harm.

"That makes literally no sense," Akira said, utterly disregarding me. "Why would anyone choose to overwrite trauma with *negative* emotions instead of *positive* ones? Just go watch some comedy routine or something and yuk it up for a few hours until you forget, if you're that desperate."

"Uh... Not sure comedy would do the trick for everyone."

"Then go watch your favorite YouTuber or something. Whatever."

"Mmmmm..." I felt like she was missing the point a bit, but I wasn't sure exactly how to explain it.

"Whenever I wanna forget something negative, I just put on a playlist with all my favorite songs. Music's way more reliable than a movie you've never seen before. Can totally swing your mood around in the span of just a few minutes."

```
"F-fair enough. Guess that works too."

"What about you? Got any favorite bands or anything?"

"Not really, I guess."

"How 'bout genres? You know what alt rock is?"

"Uhhh... No, sorry. I don't really listen to music at all..."

"...Oh. Well then."
```

This was the most disappointed and judgmental "Well then" I'd ever heard. It was becoming more and more obvious to me just how incompatible our personalities and values were—and Akira was probably thinking the same exact thing. Our journey had only just begun, and already I could tell the road ahead would be a long one.

We arrived at an intersection. Even though time was stopped, we still reflexively ran across the street whenever the pedestrian crosswalk signal was red. As we passed by a nearby yakiniku restaurant, a tantalizing savory scent tickled my nose. We could still smell things during the timefreeze, funnily enough—which I supposed made sense if you considered scents as simply being tiny particles suspended in the air that we sucked up into our nostrils. Though that logic didn't explain how *light* still worked.

When I looked up at the sun, it was as bright as ever. Yet if time was stopped, then surely photons would be frozen as well. The natural conclusion, then, would be that the world should be shrouded in total darkness—so why was it still light out? And it wasn't just the sun either; light bulbs and other sources of artificial illumination were still shining like normal as well. Were things with wavelike properties unaffected by the timefreeze?

```
"What else you got?" said Akira.
```

<sup>&</sup>quot;Huh?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;Come up with another topic, already. I don't care what—just keep talking.

Don't clam up on me all of a sudden."

"S-sorry, didn't mean to."

In any case, the finer mechanics of the timefreeze would probably remain forever inscrutable to me. For now, my mental energy would likely be better used humoring Akira and trying to salvage her mood. I could tell from her tone that she was already getting pretty irritated again. But the real question was: What *could* we even talk about? Surely there was something—but the more I tried to rack my brain to find topics we might both be interested in, the more I realized that attempting to relate to her might be a futile effort to begin with. In the end, I decided to just start asking her whatever random questions popped into my mind, no matter how trite or mundane.

"Uh... What's your favorite food?" I asked.

"Sushi," she replied.

"Okay, then what's your favorite kind of sushi?"

"Sea urchin."

"What, um... What do you like best about sea urchin?"

Akira glared over at me like she was about to eat me alive. "Don't screw with me, dumbass! What the hell does that even *mean*?! Who *asks* questions like that?! How are you so bad at this?! I've met elementary schoolers with better socialization skills than you! God, you're such a dumbass!"

She rattled off insults in a voice loud enough to make my ears ring.

"O-o-okay, okay! I'm sorry, all right?!" I apologized profusely. Never in my life had I been subjected to such an unwarranted verbal assault. She'd even called me a dumbass *twice* in one breath. But I wasn't trying to mess with her at all; she'd said she didn't care what topic I proposed, but that open-endedness only made it harder for me to come up with anything remotely decent. Admittedly, I agreed with her that the sea urchin question was pathetic.

Akira let out a sigh as if to calm herself, then looked at me with frigid eyes. "You don't have a lot of friends, do you, kid?"

"Urgh..."

"You prolly got bullied a lot growing up, didn't you?"

"Urrrgh."

Her words cut deeply. She was right on the money.

"Can't say I'm surprised," she went on. "First time I saw you, I picked up the gloomy loner vibes right away. You do *not* seem like the type who'd ever fit in at school."

Now this *last* part stabbed me like a knife through the chest. I could handle cheap insults like "dumbass" and "loner," but implying I didn't belong somewhere that any normal person should hit a little too close to home. I stopped walking and just looked straight down at the ground. Akira took a few more steps before noticing and turning around. She folded her arms and leaned to one side, unimpressed.

"What, you gonna be all pissy now?"

"...No. I'm fine. Don't worry about it."

"See, there you go again. Could you stop with the whole 'I'm totally upset about something but just gonna keep my mouth shut' thing? It's *really* getting on my nerves."

I could feel the blood rushing to my head. I clenched my fists and looked up. "W-well, if you really wanna know...I guess I'm just curious why the hel—why the *heck* you insisted on me coming along, if I annoy you so much. Couldn't you have just as easily gone to Tokyo by yourself?"

I assumed she could tell how rarely I blew up on anyone from the way I faltered partway through this miniature rant. But right now, I didn't even need a mirror to know that I had to be getting pretty red in the face. Akira, meanwhile, was just looking at me with the same indifferent gaze as always.

"Whaddya mean, why? It's because these things are always easier with a traveling companion, duh. And besides," she said, averting her gaze, "you're only interested in guys, right?"

"...Pardon?"

"That guy you were trying to touch yesterday was one of the other boys from

your school, right? I mean, no judgment! You're allowed to like whoever or whatever you want. I guess I just figured if you had no interest in girls, maybe that'd make you a safe person to travel with too, y'know?"

It took me a few moments to digest what Akira was saying. By "that guy I was trying to touch," I assumed she meant Nagai. And it seemed she had seen that and jumped to a very hasty false conclusion about my sexual orientation.

"Y-you've gotta be kidding me..." I said, slumping my shoulders so low that my backpack straps nearly slipped off. It was such a ridiculous assertion that I couldn't even be mad anymore.

Akira looked at me blankly. "Wait. Am I wrong?"

"Yes. I'm not interested in guys, if that's what you're implying."

She was dumbstruck—completely flabbergasted by this revelation. "No way. Then... Th-then this *won't* work after all!"

I didn't know what exactly "wouldn't work" as a result of this minor correction, but she took a step backward and crouched a little. It was the same defensive posture she'd assumed when I first approached her at the station. Apparently, the simple fact that I wasn't gay reestablished me as someone to be wary of in her eyes. It felt pretty tiresome to be treated like a total stranger again after we'd already spent several hours in each other's company. But since I doubted we would move past this otherwise, I figured it was best to just come clean and explain a bit about my condition. Maybe that would help her accept that I wasn't a threat and lower her guard, at least.

"Oh, uh... That's not to say that I'm particularly interested in women either, just to be clear. You see, the truth is—"

Just then, a horrible recollection flashed into my mind.

All the countless hands.

The mocking laughter.

The teacher's smile.

That day in gym class.

The stomachache.

The rooftop.

It was an incoherent memory scrawled violently in jet-black crayon—one that always snuck up randomly from some dark corner of my mind to eat away at me, no matter how hard I tried to forget it. Those hellish days in junior high all started with me trying to openly discuss my condition with my teacher.

I bit down hard on the inside of my cheek.

No, this wasn't like that. We weren't in school right now, and Akira wasn't my teacher or my classmate. There was nothing I really stood to lose by her knowing about it. And even if I didn't tell her, she'd somehow find out sooner or later over the course of this trip.

"I can't handle being touched by other people," I said resolutely. Akira furrowed her brow, perplexed. "And it's not because I'm a germophobe or anything like that. It's just the physical act of touching someone else. I can touch insects and animals just fine... It's literally just other people that I can't do. So yeah, um... If your concern is getting physically assaulted or whatever, you've got nothing to worry about there."

I huffed a little sigh before continuing.

"And yes, you're right that I don't fit in at school. I've never been able to get very close to anyone else, thanks to this condition... Well, my 'gloomy loner' vibes might also have something to do with it, I guess."

I couldn't help but throw in a little self-deprecation at the end. But now that I'd said my piece, I started walking again. I'd given her the explanation; it was up to her whether she chose to believe me. If she wanted to call off the trip or travel separately from me, that was her choice to make—but with or without her, I'd rather keep heading south at this point than head back to Hakodate for no reason.

Within a few seconds, I heard footsteps trotting up from behind. Akira quickly jogged up to close the distance between us, falling in step with me. She cast a furtive glance in my direction before looking back at the road ahead.

"...So what's your favorite food?" she asked.

"What?! I'm just asking you the same question you asked me! It ain't fair if I'm the only one doing the answering. You gotta tell me more about yourself too."

"S-sure, okay."

Apparently, she'd decided to continue our journey together for the time being. I was mildly relieved to know she'd deemed me worthy of the benefit of the doubt, at least.

"My favorite food, huh...?" I pondered. "Probably karaage, I guess."

"Wow, talk about a boring-ass, run-of-the-mill answer..."

"You're the one who asked... Guess I just like fried chicken, sorry."

"I mean, me too, obviously... But I'd take zangi over plain old karaage any day."

"Zangi...? Is that, like...Hokkaido-style fried chicken?"

"What?! You've never heard of it?!"

"N-nope, sorry. I mean, I know Zangief from Street Fighter, but..."

"The heck is Street Fighter...?"

We continued making small talk for a while after that as we walked down along the coast. Any time I grew tired of speaking and went quiet, Akira would spur me into coming up with another conversation topic. Rinse and repeat, over and over.

My wristwatch showed the time as 8:00 p.m. Naturally, since time was stopped, the skies were still bright as midday overhead—but I was so tired at this point that I couldn't care less. Neither Akira nor I had said a word for the better part of an hour now. Even though we'd taken several breaks throughout, we'd been walking pretty much the entire day. My knees were killing me, and I could feel blisters growing on the bottoms of my feet with every step I took. I'd been thinking we should stop and get some sleep for a while now, but we hadn't seen any hotels or inns in quite some time. And so here we were, stopped at a little mom-and-pop shop, utterly at a loss as to what to do.

"So tired... D-don't think I can take another step..." Akira whined, sprawling herself out on a bench outside the store while I took a look inside.

The interior of the shop looked just like the sort of old-timey candy store I'd seen in shows like *Chibi Maruko-chan*. A wrinkly-faced old woman stood behind the counter, smiling and stalwart, as though she'd been enshrined there. And lo and behold, at the back of the storefront were a couple of old arcade cabinets—the mere sight of which stimulated my childhood sense of wonder. If time weren't frozen, I might even have taken a few minutes to play a game or two.

Nevertheless, I grabbed myself a half liter of water and some blocks of Calorie Mate, added up the total, and left my payment near the register. Bottled water was a vital asset to us right now, given that there was no running water we could make use of.

Upon exiting the shop, I was greeted by a gorgeous panoramic view of the Sea of Japan, close enough that one could surely be lulled to sleep by the sound of waves rolling in if the timefreeze hadn't frozen their ebb and flow. Admittedly, we'd been walking through nothing but gorgeous cliffs and shorelines for several hours now, so the wow factor of the scenery had mostly died down for me.

"So what are we gonna do now, huh?" asked Akira.

"Worst case, I guess we can just post up in one of these houses for the night..." I said as I sat down on the other side of the bench and stuffed my water and Calorie Mate into my backpack.

Akira looked at me like I'd suggested robbery. This was about the reaction I'd expected; I didn't want to have to stoop to that either, except as an absolute last resort. Even if time was stopped and there was basically no risk of us getting caught or apprehended, I felt an almost instinctual aversion to staying the night in a random stranger's home. We did technically have the option of just sleeping outside, but without sleeping in a real bed, our bodies would have a hard time holding up for the duration of this long and arduous trek. Plus, we were near the ocean, so it was too chilly to sleep outside without at least a blanket or something to keep us from catching cold.

"Yeah, not sure what to do..." I said. "I take it you're not too familiar with this

area, then?"

"Hell no," said Akira. "Maybe drove through it on a road trip once or twice when I was little... Don't think I know everything there is to know about Hokkaido just because I live here, kid."

"R-right, sorry..."

I leaned back hard against the bench and gazed down the coastline. There were some houses peeking up from behind a small hill. Perhaps we could find somewhere to stay around there if we pressed on just a little farther—even if it might not be a hotel or other lodging facility. Hell, I would have been fine sleeping in a public bathhouse at this point. At the same time, the thought of walking all the way over there and *still* finding nothing was so demotivating that it made my whole body feel like it was turning to lead. And so I just sat there, unable to lift myself up off the backrest—until all of a sudden, I noticed a telephone pole sticking up from the inclined road leading inland. And on that telephone pole, there was a small road sign.

```
Next left: 100 meters until...

"Oh," I muttered.

"What?"

"I think I might have found a place we could stay..."

"Really?! Where?!"

I responded diffidently to her bursting enthusiasm:

"An elementary school."
```

It was a snug, compact little two-story schoolhouse that looked less like a teaching facility and more like a community center. We couldn't see into the building from outside the main gate, but it was a weekday, so presumably classes were in session.

"...You sure you wanna spend the night here?" Akira asked hesitantly.

"I mean, I dunno. Figured there'd be some open beds in the nurse's office, at

the very least..."

Now that we were actually staring the school in the face, it seemed both of us were getting cold feet about the idea. It went without saying that schools were supposed to be places of learning, not lodging facilities, so it was a bit more degenerate than simply staying at a hotel without permission. Akira made a conflicted face and let out a groan—but she stepped forward onto the schoolyard.

"Well, we came all the way up here," she said. "No point in turning back now."

"...Yeah, true enough," I replied, following her through the main gate.

We let ourselves in through the main entrance and were immediately greeted by rows of cubbies filled with shoes. There was no sign of anyone in the hallway, but there were clearly students in attendance today.

We took off our shoes and stepped up into the corridor, borrowing some adult-sized indoor slippers the school had set aside for visitors. The nurse's office was probably somewhere on the first floor—and it wasn't a very big school building to begin with, so I assumed we'd find it in no time.

"Man, it feels like we're being such *rule-breakers* right now," Akira whispered, though there was a hint of mischievous glee in her voice.

After walking a little ways down the hall, we quickly spotted the placard labeled NURSE. Akira was leading the way, so she took the initiative and slowly creaked the door open. Not that there would have been any issues even if she had made a lot of noise, but I could understand her apprehension. After following her into the room, I breathed a sigh of relief to discover that there was no one else inside. There were exactly two beds at the far end of the room —both of which were unoccupied. Akira dropped her backpack on the floor and immediately face-planted onto one of them.

"Ughhhhh... I'm so ready to pass out..." she groaned, her limbs sprawled out languidly as she buried her face in the pillow. She then proceeded to remain face down in that position, as if her batteries had just died.

I grabbed my water bottle, towel, and toothbrush from my backpack and

headed back out into the corridor. On my way to the bathroom down the hall, I passed by a classroom labeled 2ND GRADE, CLASS 1. I peeked in through the window to see about twenty small children sitting obediently at their desks, listening to what appeared to be a math lesson. I quickly averted my gaze and faced forward once again.

I didn't have many fond memories of my time in elementary school—or school in general, for that matter. For someone like me, who couldn't handle being touched, having to go to school was like being thrown into a war zone. It was pandemonium, and dangerous, and there was no place for me to hide. Things had gotten a little better now that I was in high school, but I still felt suffocated any time I was in class.

I arrived at the boys' bathroom. Using a little bit of my bottled water, I washed my face and brushed my teeth. I really wished I could take a bath as well, but I'd just have to deal with it for tonight.

Upon returning to the nurse's office, I found Akira sitting up on the edge of her bed and gazing out the window. I looked over her shoulder to see a group of kids in short-sleeved T-shirts playing soccer in the field outside. Even frozen as they were, I could still tell from their body language that they were all fiercely invested in the match at hand.

"Looks like gym class, maybe?" I said as I sat down on my own bed, hearing the springs creak beneath my weight. Akira kicked off her slippers and turned around to face me, sitting cross-legged.

"Whaddya mean, 'maybe'? What else could it be but gym class?"

"Well, yeah. But they're not wearing their PE uniforms."

"PE...uniforms?" she repeated to herself, chewing on the words as though they were borrowed from some foreign language. Then her eyes suddenly lit up, and she let out a tedious sigh of realization. "Oh, yeah. We don't have those in Hokkaido."

"Wait, you're kidding. Seriously?"

"Yes, seriously. Why the heck would I lie about something like that? They just let us wear whatever we want."

Huh. I did not know this. It was a bit of a culture shock.

"Oh yeah, and we don't get those red leather backpacks either," she added.

"Damn, really?"

"Well, they might lend you one in *early* elementary school, but not the upper grades. It's colder up here, which means we have to bundle up in the winter, and we don't have the same range of motion around the shoulders and whatnot. So once we get into fourth, fifth, and sixth, and we're a little bit bigger, we usually have to wear something more loose-fitting like a regular backpack or knapsack."

"Dang, that's cool. Seems kinda progressive, actually."

"Ha. As if. They just don't wanna give us anything for free, that's all. We don't got diddly squat up here in Hokkaido, for how stupidly big everything is. Though I guess it does kinda depend on *where* you live, exactly."

Hakodate hadn't seemed very rural to me, but it sounded like Akira felt it was too small and lacking in modern amenities for her tastes. I envied that feeling a little bit.

"Oh yeah, so do you guys really get to go skiing in gym class too?" I asked.

"Nah, common misconception," she said. "Maybe in Sapporo or Asahikawa, but definitely not at my school."

"Huh. Interesting..."

"Oh, but we do usually make an ice-skating rink out in the school courtyard once it gets cold enough."

"Wait, seriously?!"

"Man, you sure are easy to impress, huh?" Akira shook her head.

"H-how exactly do you make a skating rink, though?"

"We got these water-sprinkler trucks that go around spraying water on the ground. Give it a couple hours to freeze, then rinse and repeat a few times, and boom. Donezo."

"Wow... That's crazy to me. Can't even imagine going ice skating at school...

Not that I've ever been."

It was pretty hard for me to picture this. Back in my elementary school days, getting even a tiny bit of snow was enough to make everyone lose their minds.

"Wait, for real?" said Akira. "People don't go ice skating down in Tokyo?"

"Nah, I'm sure the average person has gone at least once or twice. It's just me who hasn't tried it..."

Immediately, I realized that perhaps I shouldn't have said this, and I had regrets. It was a little embarrassing to readily admit just how uncultured and unworldly I was. But Akira didn't seem to pay it much heed.

"Damn, that sucks," she said. "I mean, what's the point of winter if you can't even skate? Just being cold and miserable?"

"Is it really that make-or-break?" I asked.

"Well, you can just try it for yourself whenever you get the chance. It's no biggie." She let out a big old yawn. "Man, I'm sleepy... Think I'm gonna have to crash."

I took a look at my watch. It was 9:00 p.m.—a little early to go to sleep by my standards, but we'd done so much walking today that I was just as tired and ready for bed as her. Akira stood up, gripped the partitioning curtain between our beds, and narrowed her eyes at me.

"No peeking, or I'll beat your ass," she said.

"Wasn't planning on it..." I replied, and she pulled the curtain shut.

I took off my wristwatch and slipped it into my pants pocket so that it would continue to keep time while I was sleeping. I hung my coat over the bedframe and eased myself down on the bed. The moment I lay flat, I was overcome by a sudden wave of sleepiness and fatigue from deep within. We'd walked more than thirty kilometers today alone, and already my legs felt like they were ready to snap. My bones and muscles ached. *Maybe I should try lightening the load in my backpack tomorrow*.

The overhead lights were a bit bright, but not enough to keep me from falling asleep—and I was too lazy to get back up again to turn them off. Also, it wasn't

as if leaving them on was going to rack up the school's energy bill in this situation... Actually, was it even *possible* to turn them off right now, assuming I did flip the switch?

...Meh. Right now, I really couldn't care less.

\*\*\*

I stared at the jagged, angular back of a man sitting on a stool, painting a picture. His shoulders were flecked with dandruff. With each stroke of his brush across the canvas, I could see it drift down like snow onto the floor as his back muscles shifted and squirmed to find just the perfect curve. I'd been sitting there for about two hours now, just hugging my knees to my chest and watching him paint.

From where I was seated on the floor behind him, the picture looked like little more than daubs of solid blue smeared across the canvas. Yet on closer inspection, I could see that there was a sort of deliberate gradient to it, a kind of regularity. His use of color was so fine and gentle, I felt strangely soothed just by looking at the background he was slowly constructing for whatever this piece would ultimately be.

He set his paintbrush down and pulled his cell phone out of his pocket. It was a flip phone—or a "dumb phone," as it were—from a few technological generations back. After flipping it open and staring at the screen awhile, he slipped it back into his pocket and turned to face me. His face was marred by stress and wrinkles that ill fit someone his age. His cheeks were gaunt, and there were dark circles beneath his eyes.

He was my uncle Kurehiko.

"They said they'll be here to pick you up in an hour or so," he told me. "Isn't that swell? You can finally go back home."

This was my uncle's place—a small one-bedroom apartment in Tokyo's Adachi ward. The whole room was filled to the rafters with oil-based paint fumes. Some might have wrinkled their nose at the strong chemical smell, but I'd always kind of liked it.

"I don't wanna go home," I said.

Uncle Kurehiko grimaced disapprovingly. "Now, now. Don't be like that. How old are you, again?"

"Ten..."

"Then you're already halfway to being a grown-up. And grown-ups don't whine and behave like spoiled little kids."

"But I am still a kid. I'm legally a minor."

"Oh really, now? Because no kid *I've* ever met would ever try to get me on a shrewd little technicality like that."

"Okay, now you're not even making sense anymore," I said with a sigh, then buried my face between my knees. "They're just gonna yell at me when I go home anyway."

"Then maybe you shouldn't have come running over here all by yourself in the first place. You're lucky I happened to be home... How *did* you get here, anyhow? I know you can't ride the train."

"I dunno..."

"You don't know...? Well, I suppose it's no matter."

My uncle cut the conversation short and went back to painting.

Time passed calmly and quietly. Eventually, the sun began to set and its rays came pouring in through the western window, dyeing the room in shades of honey gold. Suddenly, I heard the sound of footsteps rushing up the stairs and along the walkway outside, as whoever lived in the next apartment over unlocked the door and let themselves in. I assumed they were coming home from work; it was already six o'clock. Time for kids like me to be heading home. I lifted my head to look at my uncle again.

"So you really think I should just go home, then?"

"Why don't you want to be there is the real question."

"Well, my mom and dad are fighting right now because of me..."

"Pah. I suppose some people truly aren't cut out for parenthood."

"You're my mom's little brother, right? Can't you do something about it?"

"Afraid not, my boy. That woman despises me."

"...Then maybe the two of them would make up if I just stayed here forever."

"How on earth do you figure that? I imagine that'd only make matters worse."

It felt like he was just shrugging off anything I tried to say at this point. And now that I'd lost my only ally, I felt utterly despondent toward anything and everything.

"I don't wanna go anywhere anymore," I said. "I hate being at home, I hate being at school... Why does it feel like I'm under so much pressure all the time...?"

Uncle Kurehiko gently set down his paintbrush and turned toward me again. His haggard face wore an expression that I wasn't sure whether to call pity or amusement.

"You're no different from me, Kayato," he said, sliding down from his chair to kneel at eye level with me. "And because we're the same, I know exactly what you're going through. Pressure? No. You're simply afraid, my boy. Not of your parents, nor your school, but of something much greater."

"Something...greater?"

"Yes, that's right. For you see—"

*Ding-dong* rang the doorbell. And not a moment later, I heard the sound of the knob on the door to the apartment turning.

"I suppose we'll have to leave it at that for today," Uncle Kurehiko whispered as the door creaked open. I turned to see a slender, pale arm reveal itself through the crack. But even after the door was all the way open, all I could see was that arm.

Because the arm was all there was.

The arm stretched out in my direction, growing longer and larger as it slithered through the air toward me like an ivory snake. I froze up in fright, unable to move a muscle as the serpent set its sights on me and clamped down hard on my wrist—sinking its teeth in deep to deliver its venom.

I let out a muted, voiceless shriek as I shot up in bed. Panicking, I looked down at my injured wrist—only to see that it looked perfectly fine.

Of course it did. It had only been a dream, after all.

And yet, in the time it took for me to breathe a sigh of relief, I let out another startled gasp—this time fully audible. There was a person standing at my bedside, wearing a black sweatsuit. I slowly lifted my gaze to see that it was Akira, looking down at me in wide-eyed astonishment.

"Dang," she said. "You really weren't kidding about that stuff, huh?"

I pressed a hand over my racing heart through my clothes. I really wished she would stop startling me like that. And what did she mean by "that stuff"? Why was she looming over my bed, for that matter? Especially when *she'd* been the one to make a point of pulling the curtain closed between us. My sleep-addled brain was floating in an endless sea of question marks.

"Wh-what are you doing standing there?" I asked.

"Just wanted to test something real quick," said Akira.

"Test what?"

I titled my head in suspicious confusion, and Akira defensively drew her right arm in to her chest. Her sleeve rolled back slightly to reveal her slender, pale wrist. For a split second, my mind flashed back to my dream just now. There was no doubt about it—the arm that had reached out to grab me from the doorway and Akira's arm were one and the same. *Don't tell me... She* better *not have*.

"D-did you just touch me while I was asleep...?"

"Well, I just figured what if you were making all that stuff up, y'know?"

My blood ran cold, and my consciousness started to drift away—but I somehow managed to keep it together. Only now, my chest was filled with a mixture of boiling rage and disillusionment. I was utterly disgusted with Akira for having done such a thing after I'd *explicitly* explained my condition to her. I stood up from my bed and looked her square in the eye.

"If you ever do that again, this trip is over," I said, in the firmest tone of voice I

could muster. "I'm not going to travel with you anymore if you can't respect my boundaries."

"O-okay, okay!" said Akira, looking genuinely shocked by this uncharacteristic forcefulness from me. "You don't have to make such a big deal out of it, sheesh!"

"How would *you* feel if someone started, I don't know...groping you in your sleep or whatever, huh?"

"Gr-groping?!" Akira wrapped her arms around herself in revulsion.

"That's how big a deal it is to me. I'm dead serious. If you can't promise me you won't do it again, I'll just go back without you."

"Go back where, huh?"

"That doesn't—"

I had to admit, this gave me pause. Where would I even go back to? Tokyo? Or Hakodate? I wasn't sure. I'd just said the words on the spur of the moment, so I hadn't really thought them through. But now she was making me second-guess myself.

"L-Look, that's not important," I said. "The point is, I need you to listen when I tell you not to do something!"

"Y-yeah, I get it already! I won't do it again, so just calm down, jeez..." Akira stepped out into the hallway, clearly too uncomfortable to be around me right now.

I felt suddenly overcome by a sense of severe self-loathing, and I plopped down onto my bed. How utterly pathetic was I, as a seventeen-year-old boy, to lose my composure and blow up at a girl my age just because she laid her fingers on me for half a second? I wished I were dead. Especially since, when I put myself in Akira's shoes, I could totally understand her concerns. I probably wouldn't have believed me either when I said I had a phobia of touching and being touched by other people. And on the off chance that I was just lying to get her to lower her guard, and she felt like she was in danger as a result, she probably wouldn't be able to sleep soundly at night around me.

Well, at least Akira seemed pretty hardheaded and thick-skinned (for better or worse), so maybe I didn't have to worry about it so much. I could feel a slight headache coming on; it was far too early to be having these kinds of thoughts. I decided to hold off on the introspection and gathered my toiletries to go wash up in the bathroom.

Upon walking out into the hallway, my retinas were immediately seared by the glare of sunlight pouring in through the window of the corridor. *Man, what time is it right now...? Oh, right. It's 11:14, duh.* I supposed the real question was how long I had slept.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out my wristwatch. The hour hand was pointing directly to six o'clock, which meant I'd slept for close to nine hours. My legs and shoulders were still a bit sore from yesterday, but my fatigue had mostly gone away. The bed here in the nurse's office had actually been *more* comfortable than the one at the hotel the night before, believe it or not.

Man, what a weirdly nostalgic dream, though, I thought to myself. I wondered if maybe staying the night in an elementary school had something to do with why my brain had chosen to make me dream about being that age again. But just what had Uncle Kurehiko been trying to tell me at the end there? Meh. Guess I'll never know.

After that, Akira and I ate breakfast together in the nurse's office. I had the Calorie Mate I'd bought from the little mom-and-pop shop the day before, while Akira had some sort of sweet pastry bread that I didn't know how she'd procured and wasn't sure I wanted to. We ate together in silence. Then, once we had a little food in our bellies, we left the elementary school behind. After heading down the hill, we made it back out onto the long coastal highway we'd taken all the way from Hakodate.

Akira stretched out her back and gazed lethargically down the shoreline. "Man, I'm so sick of this stupid road..."

"Wanna try taking a different one, then?"

"Wait, are there any?"

I pulled out the map of southern Hokkaido I had folded inside my inner coat pocket and opened it up. Akira shuffled over to look at it with me—though I did notice that she stopped short of getting too close to me. She just stood on her tiptoes and craned her neck to peek over at it from a few steps away.

"Well, we're on the old Matsumae Highway right now..." I said. "Oh, but it looks like there is another road farther inland, if we wanted to take that instead."

"Yeah, but that'd be a *huge* detour, wouldn't it?" said Akira. "Plus, it goes way up through the mountains. Gonna get eaten alive by bugs."

"No we won't. They're all gonna be frozen."

"Could you maybe not be so anal about every little detail?"

And there she went, right on cue. I was so used to her telling me off at this point that it hardly even fazed me anymore. I waited silently for an actual response.

"Okay, fiiine," Akira finally relented. "Guess we can just stick to this road."

"Looks like there's a slightly larger town coming up in another twenty kilometers, though," I noted.

"Ugh... Why does everything have to be so far? Friggin' Hokkaido... It's way too damn big."

After grumbling out this idle complaint toward her native island, Akira set off walking down the road. I folded up my map, slipped it back into my pocket, and followed after her.

"Oh yeah, so I just had this realization yesterday..." Akira said in a sluggish voice as she walked along.

"Yeah? What's that?"

"How the hell are we gonna do laundry, anyway?"

"Right... Think we're probably just gonna have to wash stuff by hand, as annoying as that is."

"Well, yeah, but I mean—we can't even dry our clothes after washing 'em,

can we?"

"Huh? Why not?"

"Have you even been paying attention these past couple of days, kid? We can hang 'em out to dry all we want, but they'll never actually *get* dry."

It took about three seconds for what Akira was saying to sink in.

"O-oh, shoot! You're right! What are we gonna do, then ...?"

"Yeah, that's what I was just saying, genius."

It was the same problem I'd encountered with my cup ramen, but in reverse. Due to the effects of the timefreeze, our clothes would stay wet after being washed no matter how long we hung them out to dry. This was quite the predicament indeed.

"Well, we can't use a drying machine... Or a hair dryer, for that matter..." I said. "Oh, hey! I know! What if we just got one of those laundry poles or something and hung our clothes on it, then held it by hand or used it like a walking stick to dry things out as we walked?"

Obviously, there was no way to know if this method would actually work until we tried it—but it seemed like a pretty good suggestion for something I came up with on the spot, if I did say so myself.

"No way," said Akira. "I don't wanna walk around with my panties on full display."

Welp. So much for that idea.

"O-okay, fair enough... Hmmm, let's see here..."

I could definitely understand not being comfortable walking around with your underwear hanging from a pole. That said, I wasn't sure what other options we really had available to us. I mulled it over a bit longer, but eventually Akira gave up hope.

"It's fine," she said. "It's not like we have to wash 'em anyway."

"Huh? Isn't that a little unhygienic, though?"

"Don't be stupid, dumbass. Obviously I'm not saying we just wear the same

clothes forever. We could just change 'em out as we go."

"What, you mean, like...cycle through a few different outfits periodically? I don't think that's going to make them any less dirty, though..."

"No, you idiot. I'm saying we could just switch 'em out for new ones."

"Oh. So you're suggesting we just buy new clothes any time they get dirty?"

"Somethin' like that, yeah."

*Hm, interesting.* I could sort of see the logic here, but it took me all of three seconds to see the critical flaw in her plan.

"I mean, if we had infinite money, maybe that'd work," I said. "But clothes are pricey, so we'd run out of funds in no time... Heck, my wallet's already looking pretty empty."

"Yeah, but I mean...we could always just help ourselves, if ya know what I mean."

"Help ourselves...? N-no way! We can't do that. You mean we should just throw our old ones away after a single wear, or what? I mean, I can understand stealing food if we have to, since we literally need that to survive, but we'll just be straight-up looters if we start robbing department stores too..."

"Well, what's *your* bright idea, then? Because I'm not about to wear the same dirty clothes this whole trip, just FYI."

"Mmmmm..."

It was a pretty tough conundrum, to be fair. But even in the event that we *did* have to resort to what Akira was suggesting, I at least wanted to hold off until we had no other choice. Or rather, we *had* to hold off. We may have been caught up in some supernatural phenomenon right now, but we still had to conduct ourselves like civilized human beings, or we'd be no better than criminals. But Akira's moral compass seemed to be somewhat lacking in that regard, so it fell to me to come up with something.

I racked my brain as hard as I could, until suddenly an idea occurred to me.

"Could we just spray them down with Febreze or something?"

"You really think that'd work?"

"Maybe a little...?"

Akira looked at me like I was the biggest moron alive. But it was okay—we still had time. And I was sure I could think of something before we *really* started to stink.

Akira and I continued trading counter-proposals back and forth as we made our way south, devoting ourselves single-mindedly to solving the laundry issue. After nearly half a day of derailments and repeatedly wandering off topic, we finally came up with a solution that seemed relatively promising. Or, to be more accurate, it wasn't so much a solution as it was Akira making concessions and agreeing not to do any thievery.

The basic gist was this: We would take our dirty clothes off and just partially wash them, focusing only on the places that got the dirtiest or stinkiest like around the neck and underarms. Then we would decidedly *not* dry them and just put them back on while those parts were still damp. That was it. That was the whole plan. Since the clothes on our bodies were close enough to not be subject to the effects of the timefreeze, they would naturally dry out as we walked. And if the dampness was really too uncomfortable to bear, we could shove a washcloth in between the wet portions and our skin or wear another layer underneath.

That being said, we couldn't just "partially" wash our underwear in the same way, so I'd suggested we just wrap those up in washcloths after soaking them fully and then hang them off of our bodies somehow, while still close enough to be within our auras. I figured that as long as it was somewhere that didn't stick out or get in the way—like dangling off the edges of our backpacks, or from a belt loop on the back of our pants—it wouldn't be a problem...but apparently I was alone in that regard.

"What? No way..." said Akira, looking utterly mortified as she denied this proposal. And so, since we couldn't come to an agreement on the underwear issue, I figured I'd just let her handle that herself in whatever way she wanted. It was none of my business.

Just when we'd finally finished our deliberations about the laundry issue, we came upon a modestly sized traditional Japanese inn. The comforting sight of a hot spring symbol on the exterior wall made my heart soar. And even better: I could see a signboard for a full-blown convenience store just down the street.

"Oh, hell yeah! Now that's what I'm talkin' about!" said Akira, her eyes aglow, and I nodded profusely in agreement. We hadn't walked quite as much today as we had yesterday, but it had still been quite the trek. I was more than ready to call it a night.

Upon entering the building, I immediately spotted the hanging curtains denoting the bathing area. At first glance, the place almost gave off more of a traditional bathhouse vibe than that of a ryokan-style inn. Apparently, the guest rooms were up on the second floor. There was practically no one else in the entire place, which made sense given that it was only mid-morning on a weekday.

Akira and I left our things in a lounge area on the first floor, promptly took out the toiletries we wanted to bring into the bath, then headed through the hanging curtains denoting our respective gendered bathing areas. You could tell that we were both *very* excited to take our first real bath in two days.

After enjoying my fill of the hot springs for about an hour, I made my way back out to the lounge, and Akira was soon to follow. She was wearing the same black sweatsuit she'd worn to bed when we stayed at the elementary school last night. Evidently, these were her usual pajamas.

"Man, it sucks that we can't even use a hair dryer..." she grumbled moodily as she combed back her wet bangs. Her exposed forehead was smooth and flushed with heat.

"I know. Too bad," I said. "Just gotta let it air dry naturally."

"Yeah, I realize that, thanks."

Akira reached down to pick her backpack up off the floor but then froze in place as she looked toward the reception desk in a hunched-over position. I followed her gaze to see a refrigerator with glass on all sides. Akira walked over to it and proceeded to pull out a glass bottle of coffee milk as if she owned the place. She lifted the bottle up and pressed it against her cheek.

```
"Ahh, man," she said in delight. "Feels good. Nice and shakkoi..."

"Is that a regional term?" I asked.
```

"Huh? Is what a regional term?"

"Shakkoi."

"Oh, yeah... Do they not say that in Kanto? It just means cold, like cold to the touch. But why the hell do you care, anyway? Don't nitpick my word choice, loser."

"S-sorry..."

I wasn't trying to grill her on it or anything like that, but I couldn't stop myself from apologizing regardless. I *would* feel slightly bad if it made her feel weird or self-conscious anytime I pointed out her simply using a normal word from her local Hokkaido dialect.

Akira popped open the lid of her drink and started guzzling it down vigorously. I could see her throat bobbing up and down with each glug as beads of sweat ran down her temples. I couldn't help but marvel at her shameless lack of reserve. Finally, she released the rim of the bottle from her lips with a loud, satisfied exhalation.

"Ahhhh... Now that hit the spot."

"Wait," I said, suddenly remembering. "I hope you're planning to pay for that."

"How 'bout you pay for it, if you care so much?"

"Oh, come on... Not again..."

I was starting to get the impression that this girl thought of me as little more than a glorified cash dispenser, with sentience as an added bonus. In fact, I'd been the one paying for most of her purchases thus far (mainly because I knew she'd just pilfer them otherwise). Maybe I was being a little too soft with her.

"What? You can afford to treat me sometimes, can'tcha?" said Akira. "Heck, why don't you get something to drink too, while you're at it?"

"No, you need to stop with these impulse purchases," I said. "We're running

low on funds as it is, so we've gotta be as economical as possible..."

"Ugh, you and your stupid morals... It's not like we aren't gonna be broke here sooner or later, so you might as well just indulge yourself a little bit. Besides, your brain needs sugar to function properly, y'know."

With that, Akira took another big gulp of her coffee milk. I had to admit, it looked pretty damn good right now, which was making her argument a lot more convincing. A nice cold bottle of coffee milk right after a hot bath sounded *heavenly*.

And so my better judgment caved to temptation.

I got up and placed the exact payment for both our drinks on the counter of the reception desk, then grabbed another coffee milk from the fridge. The chilled bottle quickly cooled my flushed palm. I opened the lid and took a sip of its creamy contents. I could feel the sweet liquid cascading down my throat and slowly cooling my warm body from the inside out. *Damn... This is even better than I expected.* This one little drink was doing just as much to soothe my weary bones as a dip in the hot springs had.

"See? Bet you're glad you took my advice now, huh?" said Akira, a triumphant grin plastered across her face. Her arrogance made me feel all itchy and grumpy inside, but I took another sip of my coffee milk regardless.

It was now day three of our journey. Yes, technically, it was still the same day, same time as the moment we departed—but we'd slept twice since then, so I felt it was fair to call this our third day.

We continued south down the highway, slowly making our way closer to our first waypoint: the Seikan Tunnel. About two hours after we left the inn, the road—which had been hugging the coast the entire way thus far—began curving inland. The farther we got from the ocean, the straighter our route became. We pressed on through fields and farmlands down the old country road. My map, along with the occasional road sign, helped us ensure we were on the right track.

Once we got a little higher up into the hills, it started getting cloudy, and the

temperature dropped significantly. Not that there'd been any *progressive* change in the weather, of course—just that we'd walked from an area where it was sunny to an area where the skies were overcast.

"So how long is the Seikan Tunnel, anyway?" I asked idly as we walked. Since I knew how much Akira hated absolute silence by this point, I'd already made a habit of just voicing whatever random thoughts came to mind over the course of our journey.

"What, you mean you don't know?" said Akira.

"Nope. I mean, I know it's the longest tunnel in Japan...and that you can't drive cars through it, if I remember right?"

"Hell no. It's for bullet trains only. You mean to tell me that you're going to school in Tokyo, and you don't even know *that* much?"

"I don't think me living in Tokyo has anything to do with it..."

I'd gathered that Akira had some pretty idealistic misconceptions of Tokyo being some perfect, high-class utopia. It almost felt as if she believed literally everyone who lived there was filthy rich, going to some expensive private school of high renown. And something told me that even if I were to explain to her that we had poor people, and more rural areas too, she'd just shrug it off and act like I was trying to pull a fast one on her. I didn't know if she'd just been conditioned to think this by TV and social media, or what.

"Do you know how long the tunnel is, then, Iguma-san?" I asked.

"Course I do," she said. "Anyone who lives up here knows."

"Okay, not sure I believe that."

She was totally pulling my leg. "Yeah, it's like twenty kilometers long, give or take?"

"Give or take...?" I said. "Sounds like you don't really know either."

"I mean, what do you expect? It's not like they teach us that in school."

Then why the hell did you try to dunk on me for not knowing it...?

To be fair, it did look like it was probably about twenty kilometers or so, just

judging by how far apart the islands were on the map. Maybe slightly longer if the respective entrances were a bit farther inland.

"Oh, hey. Check it out," said Akira, pointing down the road. There was a road marker up ahead. I squinted my eyes and managed to make out the words THIS WAY: SEIKAN TUNNEL, NORTHERN EXIT INSCRIBED ON it.

"Wait, already?" I said in disbelief.

I'd been all but certain it'd be much, much farther down the coast. Akira looked pretty surprised by this too. We decided to follow the sign, and a little way down the path, we came to a small wooden observation tower. After climbing up the stairs, we were presented with a panoramic view overlooking the train tracks as they ran straight into a large tunnel farther down. This was apparently the northern exit of the Seikan Tunnel.

"Dang... So that's it, huh?" Akira mumbled half-heartedly.

We went back down the way we came, then continued down the road in the direction of the tunnel. As we walked along in silence, I got a bad feeling in my stomach. If the entrance was really this much closer than we'd expected, then the tunnel itself was probably far longer than either of us thought. Akira was being pretty uncharacteristically quiet as well, so I assumed she was probably thinking the same thing. Because the total length of the tunnel would *absolutely* determine just how prepared we needed to be.

We agreed to take a quick detour to stop by a nearby roadside station. There, we would both take the opportunity to use the restrooms and hopefully gather up some rations as well. When we arrived and walked into the spacious onestory building, we were greeted by a large display of fresh, locally sourced produce. The storefront also sold a wide variety of snacks, premade meals, and beverages.

As Akira made a beeline for the candy aisle in my peripheral vision, I headed to the drinks section to stock up on water bottles. Along the way, I noticed a rack full of brochures and travel pamphlets further in. I spotted one that read SEIKAN TUNNEL on the front, which piqued my interest enough to make me go over and grab it. I flipped it open to the first page, which was full of basic information and trivia about the tunnel itself. Apparently, it was even a bit of a tourist

attraction for people living in these parts.

"Wait, huh?!" I gasped as my eyes fell upon one particular data point.

Akira hurried over, startled by my reaction. "Hey, what's up?"

"I think you should take a look at this."

She grabbed another copy of the same pamphlet I was holding and gave it a quick scan. I watched and waited for her eyes to go wide with shock.

"Oh, no way!" she finally said. "There's more hot springs up ahead!"

"No, read the right-hand page."

"What, all the boring stuff?"

She rolled her eyes and looked back down at the pamphlet—but it wasn't long before she let out a little gasp of her own as she caught my meaning.

"Wait," she said. "The tunnel's actually fifty-three kilometers long...?"

Yes, that was the tunnel's true length: 53.8 kilometers, to be precise. Over twice as long as we'd imagined. I could only assume that Akira's initial guesstimate of twenty kilometers had been purely based on the undersea distance between the two islands, which was the basic mistake I'd made as well. But in actuality, the tunnel entrances on both the Hokkaido *and* the Honshu side were situated pretty far inland.

"Dang, that's a lot... How long would it take us to walk that far?" Akira asked.

"Well, we managed to cover about thirty kilometers day before yesterday, so...about two days, maybe?"

"You kidding me?"

Akira was practically trembling in fear. I couldn't blame her—the thought of walking for two full days through a dark tunnel was pretty intimidating. Even if it was technically doable, it would take a whole lot of energy and fortitude. Akira had now gone completely silent. I could see a hint of anguish beginning to color her expression.

"...You wanna just call the whole thing off?" I asked. It wasn't as though we needed to go to Tokyo or anything; we could always just stay here in Hokkaido.

"No way," she said immediately. "We've come this far already, so we can't turn back now. We'll just have to power through."

"Okay, what are we gonna do about going to the bathroom, though? Don't think there'll be anywhere to relieve ourselves along the way..."

"...We'll just hold it in."

"I think that'd be pretty tough for two whole days..."

Akira went silent again and looked down at the ground. She may not have had a concrete plan in mind, but I could tell her mind was made up and she was totally determined to do this. Just judging from what I already knew of her personality, I didn't get the impression she'd be one to turn back after she'd set her mind on something.

I took a moment to think things over, then folded up the pamphlet and shoved it into my coat pocket. "There was a hardware store along the road that we passed about an hour ago. Let's go back there first to gear up before we go. Pretty sure those places sell emergency kits and portable toilets and whatnot... Oh yeah, and we'll probably need some flashlights too."

Akira lifted her head back up to look at me and gave a firm nod of agreement. She was clearly more attached to the idea of going to Tokyo than I was, but I wanted to at least be a source of support and encouragement for her if I could. Perhaps she was just using me to achieve her own ends, but honestly? It felt nice to be needed by someone for once.

By the time we finished making all of our preparations for the journey ahead, the two of us were both pretty sleepy and spent, so we decided to just stay the night in the hardware store. Luckily, it had a camping section with fully assembled tents on display. It was a pretty unique lodging experience, I had to admit—but it was so uncomfortable I hardly slept a wink.

After exiting the hardware store, we made our way back down toward the Seikan Tunnel along a winding valley road. Then we came to a stop beneath a large overpass. This was the elevated bullet train line that would lead us directly into the tunnel, so we followed the overpass and looked for a way to get up

onto it. After walking a few more minutes, we found a scaffolding meant for maintenance workers hanging directly off the edge of the overpass. We were in luck—this could take us right up onto the tracks. We quickly hopped over the DO NOT ENTER fence and climbed the stairs leading up the scaffolding. There was a metal ladder at the very top, but once we climbed up and over that, we finally made it onto the elevated railway.

"Dang. Guess we finally made it, huh...?" I mumbled to myself.

I felt like I was standing on a rickety bridge over troubled waters—even if it was actually a sturdy overpass over solid ground. If time were flowing normally right now, and a railway worker spotted us doing this, we *definitely* wouldn't get off with just a slap on the wrist. We might even get arrested. At the same time, this was a once-in-a-lifetime experience we never would have gotten if it hadn't been for the timefreeze—so it was definitely a weirdly conflicting yet exhilarating sensation, to be sure.

"Hey, this doesn't look hard to walk on at all," said Akira, stamping one foot lightly against the ground. The overpass was paved with concrete as a foundation, with two sets of railway tracks running across it—enough for one train going each way. There were three rails on both lanes; according to the pamphlet, this was to accommodate both freight cars and bullet trains, as they each had different wheel spans.

I looked down the tracks and saw the gaping maw of the Seikan Tunnel. Akira and I both took our flashlights out of our backpacks. They were the ones we found at the hardware store where we'd stayed the night before.

Akira took a deep breath as if to steel her nerves.

"All right," she said. "Let's do this."

It was pitch black inside the tunnel proper.

We inched our way along, with me taking the lead. There was no illumination to rely on other than what little our flashlights provided. The distance between the rails was pretty narrow, so we had to take care while we walked to avoid accidentally tripping over the large bolts in the fasteners holding them in place.

It wasn't that much colder in the tunnel than it had been outside—though the air was a bit more humid. The tunnel's atmosphere felt pretty much exactly like I expected it would. When I shined my light upward, I could see tiny gleaming objects aligned like animal eyes spaced evenly all along the circumference of the tunnel. These were small, circular reflector plates that had been installed along the walls.

"How far do you think we've walked?" Akira asked. Her voice was soft but surprisingly loud here in the tunnel—though the echo from it only lasted about a second before being suddenly cut short. I assumed this was due to the effects of the timefreeze.

"Probably still not even a kilometer, honestly."

"Wait, seriously? Ugh, I'm so ready to be out of here already..."

Despite her complaints, Akira just kept on walking—apparently well aware that our only option now was to keep pressing forward.

"Don't you have anything interesting you can talk about?" she demanded, for what had to be at least the fifth time since our journey began.

"Nope, sorry. Already exhausted all my interesting trivia..."

"Liar. None of that stuff was interesting at all."

"To me, it was. But to each their own, I guess."

"And just how is cicada bioecology remotely interesting, huh?"

"I mean, it just really makes you ponder the mysteries of life, y'know...? Like, how insects are almost closer to machines than organisms and stuff."

"Ughhh... How can one person possibly be so boring? I don't wanna hear about bugs. Just tell me literally anything else you haven't already said, I don't care what."

"Hmmm... Something I haven't told you yet, huh...?"

Admittedly, one thing did come to mind—but it wasn't a particularly "fun" topic. Still, I figured it was probably better than nothing, so I might as well bring it up.

"Well, I did read one interesting little tidbit about this tunnel in that pamphlet," I said. "Apparently, back in the day when they were first constructing it, worker conditions were extremely harsh."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. This was back in the '70s, so obviously they didn't have access to the same technologies we have today. There were a lot of accidents—cave-ins, water leaks, and even false detonations of explosives and whatnot. And on top of it already being a dangerous gig, the workers were treated horribly to boot. Like slaves, said many of the survivors."

Akira listened in silence as I went on.

"The biggest thing was that the actual work environment was just awful for basically all aspects of the project, which took more than a decade to complete. There were even some times when the laborers were expected to live on the job 24/7, and they were crammed into these cheap little temporary shacks any time they weren't working. Kind of a holdover from general tunnel digging procedure at the time, which is typically done in more mountainous regions way out in the middle of nowhere. Probably a lot of illegal treatment went on, just by virtue of it being a little remote working community set apart from the rest of society."

I could tell that Akira was hooked by this point. For someone so easily bored, it said a lot that she hadn't chimed in to say a single word up to this point.

"Things were so brutal, in fact, that plenty of people worked their bodies to a literal breaking point. And if you think they got medical treatment, you're wrong—they were just forced to get right back to work under threat of violence... And if they died on the job, they'd get buried right there on the spot. Apparently, some were even sealed inside the walls of this very tunnel."

"Hey," said Akira.

Aw, crap. There was venom in her voice, and I could tell that she was angry without even turning around to look at her. Maybe I'd been barking up the wrong tree with this particular choice of subject.

"Y-yeah, what's up?" I asked.

"I know I said 'literally anything,' but I wasn't lookin' for lame-ass, bargain bin scary stories like that, all right?"

"G-got it. My bad..."

"Pull that again, and I'll beat you with this flashlight."

Her voice was trembling ever so slightly. There was a kind of earnestness to it, hidden behind her usual frustration. It seemed this story had actually been somewhat distressing to Akira. I felt bad all of a sudden.

"Sorry," I said, and the conversation died there.

Some time passed before Akira hesitantly reopened it.

"So hey, um... That stuff about there being d-dead bodies in the walls here... You just made that all up, r-right?"

"Huh? Oh, uh... Yeah, that's right."

It was actually true, but I could tell now was not the time to be honest about that. I couldn't tell if Akira bought my answer or not, but either way, she went totally quiet for a good while after that. Come to think of it, she *had* said she hated horror movies, hadn't she? Maybe she really did scare easily, despite how adamantly she'd denied it earlier.

We were both silent for a time. Here in the tunnel, even the tiniest of sounds rang clearly in my ears, so I could hear Akira's breathing growing slightly more erratic. Maybe she *was* pretty scared after all. This made me feel even worse than I already did.

"...H-hey, I've got an idea," I said.

"Yeah, what's that?"

"Um, would you want to play, like...I don't know, word chain or something?"

I knew this wasn't exactly the greatest way to atone for my thoughtlessness, but it was the only way I could think of to help get Akira's mind off of things at the moment.

"Word chain? What are we, in kindergarten?" said Akira, unamused.

She was right, to be fair—it was just a simple game in which you had to come

up with words that started with the last letter of the word the other person said. I didn't imagine there were many kids our age who would suggest it as a legitimate time-killer just because they were fresh out of other conversation topics. Now I felt a little embarrassed.

"I mean, I guess I'm down, though," said Akira.

"Wait, really?" I said. I hadn't expected this response—not that I was complaining, if it meant I didn't have to rack my brain to come up with another conversation topic.

"Sheesh, no need to sound so surprised. Did you not actually want to or something? Not sure why you suggested it, then."

```
"No, no—I do. Okay, then I'll start with the 'N' in 'word chain.' Noodle."
"Earwax."
"Xylophone."
"Equinox."
"Xenophobia."
"Apex."
"Er... Xanthic acid?"
"Detox."
"What, X again...? Um... Uhhh... Xylograph!"
"Hex."
"Okay, can we please agree to not use words that end in X...?"
About five hours passed.
"Monochrome."
"Easel."
"Lucid."
"Dementia."
```

"Anthropomorphic."

And we were still playing word chain.

Not that we'd been playing it that *entire* time, mind you. We'd taken breaks to make small talk or go off on random tangents, but whenever we ran out of things to chat about, we'd always go right back to playing word chain. This was now our fourth match. To be honest, I was already sick and tired of it after the first ten minutes—but it was a necessary evil for the sake of preserving our sanity.

I had to admit, I'd underestimated just how anxiety-inducing it would be to walk in total darkness for such an extended period of time. Without some sort of distraction, the silence and eeriness were enough to drive a person mad. Even for a guy like me, who was normally so averse to so many of the various day-to-day stimuli of the outside world, this was a bit much—so I assumed Akira's anxiety had to be off the charts.

We were *physically* exhausted too. Just walking normally was taking up far more energy than usual due to the limited visibility, which forced us to watch our step and adjust to the uneven footing much more carefully. And I could tell this awkward gait was also causing some nasty new blisters to form on the bottoms of my feet.

```
"Alpaca," I said.

"Autograph," said Akira.

"Hedgehog."

"Gothic."

"Chipmunk."

Silence.
```

She was really having to think this one through, apparently. But just when I thought I might have stumped her, I heard a little sniffle. And then a stifled *hic*.

Akira was sobbing. I was so confounded by this that I nearly tripped and fell. The thought of a brash, tough-girl type like her losing her composure in this situation was almost unthinkable to me. Or was I just hearing things? I strained

my ears and listened close—but no, this was definitely crying. She seemed to be reaching her breaking point.

Wh-what should I do? Should I call out to her? Suggest we take a break? Or just pretend I didn't notice? I didn't know the first thing about how to console people in these situations. Yet still, I fumbled internally for something—anything—I could do to help.

"Y-yeah, not a whole lot of words that start with 'K,' are there...? And I feel like we've said most of the obvious ones already," I said, just to fill the silence. "Let's see... What else is there? K... K... Katydid, maybe? You know what those are? They're a type of cricket. Usually camouflaged to look like a leaf... The name comes from their three-pulsed song, actually. *Ka-ty-did*. What else? Uh... They're nocturnal, polygamous... Oh, wait. Sorry, that's right. You don't really care for insects, do you?"

This elicited no response from Akira whatsoever. I was increasingly at a loss as to what to do. My mind was working so hard to come up with a solution now that I'd forgotten all about my physical exhaustion.

Just then, I saw a light at the end of the tunnel—and not in a metaphorical sense. Obviously, I knew we couldn't possibly have reached the exit yet. But there was some source of illumination up ahead that was neither our flashlights nor natural light from outside. Which could only mean one thing.

"...Is this the seafloor station?" Akira said softly.

These were my thoughts exactly. I'd only learned of the station's existence after reading about it in the pamphlet yesterday, but I was all but certain it had to be.

We picked up the pace and soon arrived at a small segment of the tunnel bathed in dim, artificial lighting. It looked just like an ordinary subway station—though it was hard to see it too well at first, as my eyes adjusted to the light for the first time in several hours.

There were two seafloor stations, actually: one on the Hokkaido side and one on the Aomori side—each located right on the edge of where the land met the sea, more than a hundred meters below the ocean floor. According to the pamphlet, there was even a long stretch of time when some trains would

actually stop at them.

"A-all right, let's stop here and take a breather," I said, hoping that spending some time out of the darkness would help calm Akira down a bit.

We hoisted ourselves up onto the narrow platform, then walked a little way into what appeared to be a side tunnel and hunkered down on the ground. I stretched out my legs and, now that I finally had some time on my hands, massaged my aching thighs. My eyes had adjusted to the light by now, thankfully.

I cast a furtive glance over at Akira to gauge her expression—but I couldn't, as she was sitting with her legs hugged to her chest, face buried between her knees. She didn't move a muscle, nor had she said a word since we got here. She wasn't sobbing anymore, at least, but I could still hear a tiny sniffle from time to time. I felt pretty bad for her, all things considered. I checked my watch. It was just past noon.

"Might be a good time to have some lunch..." I mused aloud, hoping Akira would take the cue so I wouldn't just be stuffing my face alone while she wept. I pulled a melon bun out from my backpack, tore open the wrapper, and bit into it—only to find that it didn't taste like much of anything. Idly, I remembered reading an article once about how one's senses could be dulled when trapped in an enclosed space for too long.

After I'd eaten about half of my modest lunch, Akira finally lifted her head. She took one look at my melon bread, then pulled a fruit-and-whipped-cream sandwich out of her own backpack and started eating it as well. The two of us just sat there, chewing in silence for a time.

"You like sweets, I'm guessing?" I asked, trying to lighten the mood a bit.

"So what if I do?" she said in a nasal voice. It seemed the answer was yes.

"Nothing. I was just thinking how a sandwich that's nothing but white bread, sugary fruit, and whipped cream is more like dessert than lunch, y'know what I mean?"

"I can eat whatever I want."

"True," I said, unable to argue with that. "Oh, but you know what? I just

realized something. You're eating a fruit sandwich, and I'm eating a melon bun... Guess that means we're both having sweet, fruity lunches, huh? Even if mine's not actually melon—*flavored*, per se."

Akira did not dignify this observation with a response.

Damn, totally ignored...

Maybe it was better to just leave her be rather than try to awkwardly force a conversation. I shut my trap and just focused on chewing my melon bun instead. Once I'd swallowed the last bite, I washed it down with some mineral water—but as I leaned my head back to take a sip, I noticed a large, circular pipeline running along the ceiling that seemed to lead farther down the passageway. I wondered if this contained the electrical line that provided power throughout the tunnel. Or maybe it was for transporting some sort of liquid? Either way, I felt a sudden urge to pee, so I grabbed my backpack and stood up.

"Gonna go take a quick bathroom break," I said. "Be right back."

After walking down the side tunnel a bit, I came to another, much wider passageway. The path here was even and flat, as though it had been designed with foot traffic in mind. As I shined my light down the corridor, I noticed what appeared to be a map posted along the wall. Upon approaching it, I saw that it was labeled with an engraved metal plate that read CROSS-SECTION MAP.

"Let's see here..."

According to the map, I was now in what was known as the "Service Tunnel"—a long, separate passageway that ran parallel to the main tunnel all the way from this seafloor station to the one on the Aomori side.

If both tunnels led to the same destination, we might as well take the less treacherous route. I figured I'd float the idea to Akira and see what she thought. But first, I had to go to the bathroom. By force of habit, I looked both ways to make sure the coast was clear, then opened my backpack and pulled out my portable toilet.

After resting for another ten minutes or so, we set off once again.

The service tunnel was infinitely more pleasant than walking directly on the tracks. There was also plenty of space, so Akira and I could walk side by side and talk to one another without having to watch our footing. That being said, it seemed some small amount of seawater was managing to seep its way in; the floor was ever so slightly slick, like pavement after the rain.

According to the pamphlet, the seafloor stations had been well-known tourist attractions up until just a few years ago, but now they only served as emergency stopping points for trains passing through the tunnel in the event of unexpected technical issues. I'd already seen a handful of bicycles and wheelchairs leaned up against the walls here, which I assumed were from the era when this service tunnel was open to the public.

"Whoa!" Akira suddenly cried out.

Curious what it was, I shined my flashlight down the tunnel.

"Bwagh!" I suddenly cried out too.

There was a person standing on the side of the corridor—but on further inspection, I saw that it was really just a mannequin wearing worker's clothes, carrying a large steel bar of some sort. This was probably meant to be a depiction of what the laborers had looked like during the tunnel's construction. There was also a large power tool lying on the floor next to him that looked like some sort of stone crusher. I'd had my flashlight pointed straight down at the floor in front of me this entire time, so I hadn't noticed any of this.

"God, that scared the hell outta me..." Akira said, placing one hand over her chest as she continued forward with an unsteady gait. She looked like she was nervously making her way through a haunted house, so I thought it best I take the lead again.

Judging from the vestigial objects on display like this—the mannequins, the dioramas, the historical photos—it was clear to me that the service tunnel had been repurposed to serve as a sort of museum back when the seafloor station was open to the public. The thought that all of these exhibits had just been left here, waiting eternally for tourists who would likely never come again, filled me with a strange sense of melancholy.

"Dang, it's kinda crazy to me that all this stuff was just hiding down here," I

said. "Did you know about this place?"

"No way..." said Akira. "I've never even gone through the Seikan Tunnel."

"Wait, really? So then, is this your first time leaving Hokkaido too?"

"Uh, hell no...? Don't make me punch you, kid."

I immediately apologized—but honestly, I was relieved to see that her mood had recovered enough for her to sound like her usual bratty self again.

"There ain't a lot of folks up in Hokkaido who've *never* left the island, especially by the time they get to high school," she explained. "It's just that usually, when you wanna go to Honshu, you either fly or take the ferry."

"Ohhh, gotcha..." This made sense.

After walking a bit further, we hit a dead end at a wall-to-wall iron fence with a gate, though I could see that the tunnel continued on for quite a way past this point. The doors only had a simple latch on them, as far as I could tell, so we could definitely make our way through, but the AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY Sign *did* give me pause.

"Hey. You sure this is the right way?" said Akira.

"Yeah, definitely," I said. "We can just follow this all the way to the seafloor station on the Aomori side, if I'm not mistaken."

"And if you are?"

Akira seemed to have some concerns. I couldn't blame her; if we got lost down here and ran out of food or supplies, we could easily end up dead. I wasn't just going to feed her a line unless I was pretty damn sure.

"It'll be fine," I said. "I mean, that's literally what it said on the map back there. Unless you'd prefer to walk along the tracks, which I guess is a bit more certain."

Akira went quiet for a while. I assumed she was deliberating with herself internally. But she knew as well as I did just how much more physically and mentally taxing walking down the main tunnel would be.

"...Okay, fine," she eventually said. "Let's go."

Sure enough, she chose the service tunnel.

"Besides," I said as I unlatched the gate, "even if we do hit a dead end at some point, we can just double back and exit out onto the railway through the nearest side tunnel. It shouldn't be that much of a time loss—don't worry."

The door let out a metallic shriek as I swung it wide open, and the two of us walked right through. The faint *splish-splash* of our footsteps against the wet floor echoed briefly down the corridor. The water leakage seemed to have increased as soon as we walked past the gate. When I shined my light up above, I could even see stalactites hanging from the ceiling. This was now less a tunnel than a cave. Starting from partway down, there were even gutters dug along the edges of the corridor, filled with standing water—or at least it looked that way, given that time had stopped. In reality, I assumed it was probably leakage runoff that was flowing somewhere. I made a mental note that it would probably be better to just use these instead of my portable toilet next time I had to use the bathroom.

"So this really doesn't faze you at all, huh?" asked Akira.

"Huh?" I replied, a little caught off guard.

"Like, how the hell can you be so chill right now? Just walkin' down a creepy, pitch-black tunnel for hours on end..."

From her tone, it almost sounded like she was criticizing me for this. Either that, or she found my behavior particularly unsettling or something.

"I wouldn't say I'm 'chill,' per se," I said. "My legs are killing me, and I've been feeling weirdly claustrophobic this whole time... But it's still better than being on my class field trip, so I can't complain."

"How the hell do you figure that? Do you guys do hardcore wilderness survival exercises on your field trips, or what?"

"No, just the normal stuff. Walking around town with your classmates, sightseeing, buying souvenirs, going out to eat—you know the drill."

"And what's so bad about any of that, huh?"

I paused for a moment before responding. "Well, I just don't really have any

friends, is the thing. So I always feel kind of like the outcast of the group... Not that I mind being on my own, typically. But whenever I'm forced to try to enjoy myself with other people, it's a really bad time for me."

"Huh. Ya don't say."

This was a pretty blunt, coldhearted response to something that (I felt) took a fair bit of courage to openly admit. Though, come to think of it, Akira had already sussed out that I probably didn't have many friends—pretty much right off the bat too. So maybe this added context wasn't anything she hadn't already suspected.

"Think I sorta get that," she said softly.

"Yeah, no—I figured as much," I said with an awkward smile, unsure how else to respond. "What with the 'gloomy loner vibes,' and all."

"Uh, 'scuse you? You wanna go, kid?"

"Huh?"

"What?"

There was a brief, confused silence, and then Akira's face lit up like she'd just had some sort of epiphany.

"Oh!" she said. "No, no. I wasn't talkin' about you just now. I only meant that, uh...I can kinda relate to the feeling... I don't usually like hangin' out with a buncha other people either, trying to pretend like any of us are actually having fun. It's just stupid."

"Ah, okay," I said. "Gotcha. My mistake."

She was trying to sympathize with me. This I did not expect. For someone like Akira, who was the polar opposite of me in just about every way, to be able to commiserate with me about one of my biggest social anxieties was pretty unbelievable.

"But don't think this means I'm the same as you, kid," Akira added. "I'm not a loser. I'm just a lone wolf, that's all."

"Ooh, yeah... That does sound cooler, doesn't it?"

"Hmph. Okay, now you're just being a dick..."

"No I'm not! I always wanted to be more like that myself—the sort of person who can stand tall all on their own without any shame whatsoever. Takes a lot of courage, if you ask me."

There was another brief silence before Akira acknowledged this with an "Mm." To be honest, Akira struck me less as a lone wolf and more like a hyperalert stray cat who was always on her guard. She wouldn't let anyone lay a finger on her, and the moment she felt even slightly attacked by something, she'd lash out without remorse.

"You said your name's Mugino, right?" she asked me all of a sudden.

"Yeah...?" I said with a confused nod.

"Got kind of a nice ring to it, far as last names go."

"Y-you think? Always thought it was kinda ordinary..."

"Just figured I might as well call you that instead of 'kid' from now on, is all. It's just, uh...easier, y'know? Rolls off the tongue better."

She was still trying to act tough, but there was a kind of sunlit warmth to her voice this time around that I couldn't help but pick up on. It seemed to me that maybe, just maybe, Akira was just as terrible a communicator as I was—only in a completely different way. There were times when I honestly wondered if all her belligerent bluster was really just her way of covering up her *own* brand of social awkwardness. So for her to try to get a little bit closer to me, in her own bumbling way, made me genuinely happy.

"Yeah, I think I'd prefer Mugino to 'kid' as well," I said.

Akira gave a little nod. "...Cool."

We did our best to keep the conversation going after that, just chatting about whatever we could think of as we walked. It seemed Akira was starting to get used to being in the dark as well, since her emotions seemed to have stabilized quite a bit. From a physical standpoint, though, we were both feeling pretty damn exhausted. It had been over twelve hours since we first entered the tunnel, which meant it would have normally been about time to find

somewhere to sleep for the night by now. But not only were there no beds to be found down here, there wasn't even anywhere we could lie down without getting soaked and being miserably uncomfortable. For now, we had no choice but to press on.

"...Hm? What's this?" I said, shining my light at a metal plate on the wall.

←18.0 km 6.1km→

I'd seen a few signs like this since we first entered the service tunnel, each with one arrow pointing to the Hokkaido side and another to the Aomori side. The first one I'd seen had read " $\leftarrow$ 0 km" and "24.1 km $\rightarrow$ ," which led me to believe that this was supposed to represent the distance from each of the two seafloor stations. This meant we'd walked eighteen kilometers out from the Hokkaido-side station, and we had about six kilometers left to go to reach the Aomori-side station. We were now more than halfway through the tunnel, in that case. Excited to share, I looked back over my shoulder.

Akira was still trudging forward, albeit several meters behind me. We'd been walking side by side up until about an hour ago, at which point she started trailing behind a bit. I'd initially assumed this was due to fatigue, but now she was so far back that I stopped and waited for her to catch up.

She panted as her languid footsteps drew closer. There was no doubt about it —she was pretty tuckered out.

"You okay?" I asked. "Wanna take a quick break?"

"No... I'm fine," she said, then walked right past me. It was only then that I noticed there was a strangeness to her gait that suggested maybe exhaustion wasn't the only thing making her feel unwell.

"Hey, you sure you're—"

I stopped short as a realization struck me. Hang on a minute.

"...Um, Iguma-san? Do you need to go to the bathroom?"

For a split second, Akira stopped dead in her tracks, before trudging forward

again. This was all the confirmation I needed. As far as I knew, she hadn't done the deed a single time since we entered the tunnel. In which case, she probably couldn't hold it in much longer. I hurried forward and started walking alongside her.

"Look, I know it's really none of my business..." I said. "But if you need to go, you should just go. It's not healthy..."

"...Whatever, creep."

"I-I'm not trying to be a creep. Just say the word, and I promise I'll go on ahead to give you some privacy..."

I knew Akira had her own portable toilet as well—I specifically remembered seeing her shove it into her backpack with a disgusted look on her face. Though if she really wanted to, she could just go directly into the gutter water instead.

"Ugh... This *sucks*," she said, scratching her head roughly in frustration before turning around—and nearly blinding me with her flashlight in the process. "Fine, but you've gotta close your eyes and cover your ears until I say when. You try anything funny, and I *swear* I will literally beat you to death with this flashlight."

I nodded profusely, then immediately set my flashlight down on the ground and covered my ears. Then I closed my eyes and waited. After what couldn't have been more than a few minutes, I felt a light tug on my backpack.

"Hey," said Akira. "I'm done."

I lowered my hands and opened my eyes to see that she'd already resumed walking down the tunnel without me. I picked my flashlight up off the floor and chased after her. We still had a long way to go.

After about fifteen straight hours of walking, we finally arrived at the seafloor station on the Aomori side, the first decently lit area in over twenty kilometers. At long last, we were out of the service tunnel—but now we'd be forced to walk uphill along the tracks again for the final leg of the journey. It was definitely going to suck, but at least it meant the exit was finally within reach.

Akira and I found a bench attached to a nearby wall and sat down. The station on this end of the tunnel was pretty reminiscent of the one on the Hokkaido side. You could definitely tell that it had still been in use as a tourist attraction until a few years back.

I set my backpack on the floor and lay flat on the bench. I was pretty beat. As the urge to drift off to sleep crept up on me, I found myself unable to think straight anymore. I checked my watch and saw that it was now almost exactly 11:00 p.m.

"You wanna just sleep here tonight?" I asked Akira. She was sitting with an awkward posture that couldn't have been good for her back.

"Nope," she said. "I wanna get the hell outta here ASAP."

This response came immediately, and I could tell from the tone of her voice—and the way she was glaring fiercely at the opposite wall—that her mind was made up before I even asked the question.

"Then I take it...you don't wanna sleep at all until then?" I asked.

"Nope."

There were still a good ten kilometers left before we reached the exit. It wasn't *impossible* for us to get there without sleeping, but I just wasn't sure it was *that* imperative that we push our bodies so hard—harder than was probably advisable.

"I dunno... Feel like that might be pretty rough..."

"Of course it's gonna be rough," said Akira, scooting back on the bench to lean fully against the backrest. "But pushing yourself through something rough is better than just sitting around and suffering without doing anything about it. And I don't wanna spend one more second than I have to in this stupid place."

"...All right. Let's keep going, then."

We rested for about twenty minutes, then jumped down onto the tracks.

If there was one thing I'd learned since we set foot in the tunnel, it was that your legs typically gave out before your energy did. It wasn't exhaustion that

made you want to stop—it was the cramping. And the chafing. Not to mention the muscle pain.

...Okay, maybe it's not fair to compare three to one like that. But hey, same difference!

All of that to say: My knees had been screaming in agony for a long, long time now. And not *just* my knees either—my soles, my calves, and my thighs were killing me as well. It felt like every joint in both my legs had gone stiff and was creaking like rusty hardware.

I was also so tired now, I thought I might pass out on the spot. My eyes were bleary, and I'd nearly tripped and fallen several times already—but each time, I got a sudden, icy jolt of adrenaline as my body instinctively jerked me upright again.

There was no small talk happening at this point. Both Akira and I had expended all of our excess energy reserves and were now focused single-mindedly on one thing and one thing alone: putting one foot in front of the other. This was, without question, the most I'd ever walked in a single day in my entire life.

Every once in a while, I'd look back over my shoulder to make sure Akira was still following me. With how exhausted we both were, I wouldn't be too surprised if she collapsed at some point and my weary mind was too dazed to even hear her fall. But as of right now, she was still following behind me—even if her manner of walking had now devolved all the way into "hobbling zombie" territory.

I wanted to believe that we were getting close to the exit by now. I had to believe it, or else I knew my legs would refuse to take another step. And unlike the service tunnel, there were no metal plates on the wall here to let us know exactly how far we were from the next landmark. I had only my gut to rely on—but my gut was telling me we were getting pretty damn close. And yet, I could feel my consciousness rapidly growing hazier due to fatigue and exhaustion.

Which reminded me: I often had a recurring nightmare that was a bit like this. One in which I just kept walking and walking through a dark, spooky cave until I inevitably collapsed of exhaustion without even coming close to the exit—and

then I'd wake up.

I couldn't help but wonder sometimes if maybe *this* was all just a bad dream too. Not just walking through the Seikan Tunnel but also staying the night in the elementary school, and the whole timefreeze situation in general. Maybe I'd suddenly wake up at some point to find myself back in the middle of my class field trip.

That last thought probably scared me most of all.

Yes, living in a world where time had stopped was inconvenient. We couldn't use our phones, let alone a computer. Hell, we couldn't even watch a movie to keep ourselves entertained. So many of the little luxuries we'd taken for granted in our daily lives were either no longer available to us or were so much more difficult that they might as well have been. And yet, for as long as time stayed frozen, I wouldn't have to suffer through my stupid class trip again, let alone go back to school. I wouldn't have to be a bother or a nuisance to any of my other classmates. For a social misfit like me, not *all* of the timefreeze's effects were completely detrimental or undesirable.

But for Akira, it was different. She was obviously struggling pretty hard to cope with the situation. I assumed she would do whatever it took, no matter how hard, if it meant time would move forward again. If not, she probably wouldn't have even *considered* trying to traverse the Seikan Tunnel like this. My selfish comfort in escapism was far, far less valid and noble than her desire to keep pressing onward no matter the odds. The least I could do for her was reject this reality too—and if this really *was* a dream, then I had a responsibility to put an end to it as soon as possible.

Yet in my heart of hearts, I did kind of hope that time would remain frozen at least until we made it to Tokyo. That was my one, petty little wish—ashamed as I was to admit it.

"Hm?" I mumbled.

Just up ahead, I could see a source of light that looked almost like a tiny star. It grew bigger and bigger the closer we got. And this was *not* just artificial light, like from one of the seafloor stations. It was a soft, white light carved out in an elliptical shape.

That was it. That was the exit.

"Hey, look at that!" said Akira, apparently having noticed it too. Her voice was dripping with elation.

We picked up the pace for this final stretch, spurring our battered bodies forward like our lives depended on it. As the light grew brighter and brighter, it wasn't long before we no longer needed our flashlights at all. I could feel the dank humidity in the air begin to dissipate, until finally...

"We made it!"

At long last, Akira and I were now gazing upon a pale blue sky for the first time in a whole entire day. I took a deep, gasping breath like a diver breaching the surface after a long, long time underwater. *God*, the fresh air tasted so good. I felt liberated, like a heavy weight had just been lifted from my shoulders. I couldn't even be mad about the harsh glare of the sun in my eyes right now.

The tunnel let out into a wide, open area—but if you looked far enough, you could see some distant woods and even the sea. I spotted a small collection of homes lining the coast; it seemed it shouldn't be too far to the nearest town.

"God, that took *forever*..." Akira groaned, then plopped flat on her butt and threw her head back, looking straight up at the sky. I took another deep breath to fill my lungs with the delicious taste of fresh, outside air once more. And as I did, I noticed that one particular patch of trees in the distant woods was dyed a deep shade of crimson.

Right, how could I forget?

Our journey began in Hokkaido's bitter chill, so it had nearly slipped my mind.

We were right in the heart of autumn.

CHAPTER 3

Rain, Fever



## Chapter Three: Rain, Fever

That teacher of yours sure does say the word 'customary' a lot."

These were my mother's first words after a long period of silence as she drove me home from school. I was sitting listlessly in the passenger seat, watching the rain droplets trickle down the windshield like shooting stars in the blustery wind.

"Oh, it's customary for students to be involved in extracurricular activities," she went on, doing a mocking impression of his voice. "It's customary to treat these things as unexcused absences. It's customary for all students to be in their seats at least five minutes before class begins. It got to be so ridiculous that after a certain point, I actually started counting how many times he said it. Go on—take a wild guess."

"...Mom, I really don't care," I said.

"It was definitely more than eight. Minimum. Honestly, I was so focused on keeping an accurate tally that I was hardly even paying attention to any of the actual stuff he was saying. But I mean, can you blame me? These things are always so boring."

My mother chuckled to herself. She'd always been a very chatty person—more than happy to talk someone's ear off if they ever lent her a listening pair, be it a total stranger or even a stray cat. Hell, she'd done the same thing today; we were just now coming home from my eighth-grade parent-teacher conference, yet my mother had dominated the entire conversation throughout.

"Also, what 'customs' are we even talking about here?" she continued. "I mean, I understand that there are rules about unexcused absences and everything, but if you're going to insist on kids being in their seats five minutes before morning homeroom starts, what's the point of having a late bell? I know he said that it's to prevent kids from rushing in the door at the last minute, but who *cares* if people cut it close as long as they're not actually late? Seems like a

pretty pointless 'custom,' if you ask me."

"...It's because a kid got hurt," I said.

"Sorry?"

"Someone was running down the hallway, trying to make it to class before the bell, and crashed into another student... The kid had to get stitches and everything. So when it came time to talk about how to prevent this from happening again, that's when the school made the five-minute rule a thing."

"Well, aren't you well-informed."

"It was in the school newsletter."

"But that doesn't do much to solve the fundamental problem, does it? I mean, if you're going to tell everyone they have to be there five minutes early, you're just going to get the same situation with people rushing to meet some arbitrary deadline."

"Yeah, hence 'customary.' It's not a mandate or anything, duh."

"Ooh! Someone's feisty today, I see. Don't think I've ever heard you say 'duh' like that before. Are we entering our little rebellious teen phase, by any chance? Or is it just Kurehiko's bad attitude that's rubbing off on you? Trust me when I say that acting all grumpy and jaded about everything won't do you any favors in life."

"...I'm not."

God, just leave me alone. I really didn't need her grilling me on my word choice. It was about the most frustrating thing imaginable.

"Oh yeah, speaking of injuries—you were pretty good friends with that Mishima boy, weren't you, Kayato?"

The streaks of rain on the windshield grew more tempestuous, and the automated wiper blades dutifully upped their tempo to compensate.

"I was pretty surprised when your teacher brought that up," said my mother. "He came in first place during your elementary school sports festival, didn't he? Things must be pretty rough for him right about now, I'll bet." "...I wouldn't know. We don't talk anymore," I said.

"It was Mishima-kun, and... What did he say the other boy's name was? Matsuse-kun? I forget, honestly. Must be pretty rough, though—having two of your students get injured on the same day. Didn't he say Mishima-kun was still in the hospital? If you two were close, then maybe you should go and pay him a visit."

"I told you, we don't talk anymore!"

We hit a red light. My mother slammed the brakes, making me lurch forward a little. Some pedestrians carrying umbrellas shambled along the crosswalk, passing directly in front of the vehicle.

"Who even cares, honestly?" I said. "Not like it matters to me."

I rested my elbow on the window frame and leaned my head against the door, my breath quickly fogging up the glass. If we were close? Don't make me laugh. I didn't even want to think about the two of them. As far as I was concerned, they got exactly what was coming to them. When I first heard that they got injured in the announcements during homeroom, it was almost enough to make me believe there really was a god after all. At the same time, it was also a little bit eerie—to have two of the people I most wished would just up and vanish from this earth get wounded on the same exact day, like some sort of premeditated hit. Apparently, they both suffered leg injuries during sports practice—one of them even broke a bone, while the other was just covered in bruises. Their wounds suggested they'd both been beaten with some sort of blunt object.

Given my "closeness" to the two of them, my classmates were quick to size me up like I was the primary suspect. But I hadn't done a thing—nor could I have, even if I wanted to. Everyone in class knew about my condition, not to mention my skittish disposition. So of course, no one tried to pin the blame on me. But as a result, I went from being the laughingstock of the class to being treated like some sort of horrible freak of nature who'd curse anyone who dared to mess with him. I supposed that was a slight improvement, if it meant people would stay out of my business, but it was still a pretty brutal way to be treated.

"You're right. I guess maybe it doesn't matter to you all that much, at the end of the day," my mother said nonchalantly as the light turned green and she gently stepped on the gas. "But you really shouldn't take good friends for granted either, you know."

I didn't acknowledge this statement with a denial or an agreement.

Good friends, huh? I didn't have any of those—nor anybody I could possibly take for granted, even if I wanted to. I really didn't give a damn what happened to anyone else. They could all drop dead, for all I cared.

"Look, we're almost home," my mother said. She flicked the turn signal and the blinker went on.

Click-clock. Click-clock.

\*\*\*

I awoke from another strangely vivid dream of the distant past. Maybe three years ago wasn't all that "distant," but still.

"Owww..."

Great. My head was killing me too.

It certainly hadn't been a pleasant dream, but I didn't have many pleasant memories of my days in junior high to begin with. Especially around that time, in the eighth grade—easily the most dismal and depressive period of my life thus far. I could still taste the loathing and frustration I'd felt within the dream just now. Hoping to wash the foul taste out of my mouth, I jerked upright in bed and set my bare feet down on the carpet to get up and go rinse my face off.

We'd stayed in a hotel the night before, and Akira was in the room directly adjacent to mine. I pulled out my wristwatch and checked the time; it was 8:00 a.m. She should be waking up anytime now. I walked over to the window and opened the curtains. As light flooded into the room, I was greeted by the contours of Aomori's humble skyline.

It had been three days now since we emerged from the Seikan Tunnel. After making our way southbound through northern Honshu, sleeping at random gas stations and post offices as we went, we'd finally arrived in downtown Aomori

—our first major city since leaving Hakodate.

I grabbed the bottled water I'd left at my bedside and headed into the bathroom. With my clothes still on, I unscrewed the lid and held the bottle aloft —then tipped it diagonally over the bathtub. Due to the effects of the timefreeze, the water spilled out for a moment, then froze in midair at about waist height. I scooped some of this levitating water into my hands and splashed it against my face. This was the easiest way I'd found to wash up, though figuring out the ideal distance and technique to keep most of the water frozen outside my aura had taken a little bit of trial and error.

After taking the opportunity to brush my teeth as well, I exited the bathroom and soon heard a knock at the door. I combed my fingers through my hair to fix my bedhead, then opened it to see that Akira had come to get me.

"C'mon, Mugino," she said. "Let's go get breakfast."

We'd been eating all of our meals together ever since the journey began. More often than not, it was Akira who invited me to do so. Personally, I usually preferred eating alone, but it wasn't as if the company bothered me or anything.

"Sure, just give me one sec," I said.

I slipped on my tennis shoes and exited the room, leaving the door hanging wide open so as not to lock myself out. Neither of us had room keys, and it was a card reader entry system, so we probably couldn't get back in even if we wanted to. As before, we'd simply helped ourselves to some rooms that happened to be left open just after being cleaned by the housekeeping staff.

We made our way down to the first floor via the exterior emergency stairwell, then out through the hotel lobby. We walked aimlessly through the streets for a little while, keeping an eye out for any decent-looking food options. It was a bit of a nuisance having to weave our way around pedestrians again now that we were in a more populated area, so we'd made a habit of walking down the middle of the roadway, given that there was no chance of being hit by any cars at the moment. This felt less like a clever adaptation to the conditions of the world and more like our deep-seated sensibilities were slowly growing numb to the absurdity. It made me a little worried as to how well we'd be able to adjust

to normal life if and when time did start moving again.

For now, we made our way through this suspended world with our footsteps as the only sound. It was honestly kind of exhilarating to think that we alone had full control over this world—like we were its rulers, free to do whatever we wanted.

As we walked along, Akira let out a great big yawn.

"Still tired?" I asked.

"Yeah, maybe a little," she said, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

"You could've slept in, you know. Not like we're in a huge rush."

"Trust me, I would've. But it just wasn't happening last night."

"Really? It's so nice and quiet, though."

"Yeah, which is exactly why I couldn't sleep."

"Oh, right... Guess you did say you get anxious when it's too quiet."

"Exactly, so now I'm totally sleep-deprived." Akira swiped at her eyes again, this time with her palms. "Ugh, I miss white noise so bad..."

As much as I was glad that wasn't me right now, I couldn't help but feel a little bad for enjoying the silence so much when I knew it was such agony for Akira. At the same time, it only rubbed in what a misfit I truly was in normal society. I wished there were more I could do to help her cope with the situation, but I was pretty sure the only way to actually solve the problem was to stop the timefreeze altogether.

We spotted a nationwide coffeehouse chain and agreed to have breakfast there. Upon walking into the storefront, we were greeted by a tantalizing display of sweet and savory treats. I grabbed myself a toasted sandwich and made my way over to an open table. As I walked past the employee working the counter, I lowered my head in shame.

Shortly after we made it out of the Seikan Tunnel, our funds ran dry. And unless we could somehow withdraw money via an ATM or debit card, that meant we were going to be penniless for the whole remainder of our journey. Guilty as I felt for stealing, we had to eat to survive, so there was little I could do

about it.

Not long after I found a table, Akira came over and sat down across from me. She'd brought with her a fully loaded tray of food, featuring not only a Milano sandwich but a slice of cheesecake and a hot cocoa as well. I couldn't help but stare at this impressive spread—a testament to both her shamelessness and her appetite.

"...You got somethin' to say?" said Akira, glaring at me.

I did, in fact, have quite a few things I wanted to say. Yet my sympathy toward her from this morning—not to mention my usual cowardice—made me chicken out of scolding her for being so brazen.

"Just surprised you can eat so much first thing in the morning," I said.

"Aw, put a sock in it."

Akira took a big bite of her sandwich. I watched the crumbs fall from her mouth out of the corner of my eye as I ripped open the packaging of mine as well.

After we finished eating, we made some preparations for the next leg of our journey. Then we departed from Aomori to continue south through the Tohoku region, setting our sights on the city of Morioka in Iwate prefecture as our next destination.

We were now walking along the expressway—not the sort of path one could usually tread, barring extraordinary circumstances like the ones we now found ourselves in. It would make for a bit of a roundabout journey to Morioka this way, but I could tell from the map that this would be by far the less strenuous route when you took elevation change into account. And yet...

"H-how much farther does this stupid hill go on for, anyway?" Akira grumbled, sweat dripping down onto the asphalt from the tip of her chin.

It had been a gentle but steady incline ever since we stepped onto the expressway. It was such a slight upward angle that you might not even notice if you were standing still—but when you walked up it for several hours, it

definitely made its presence known. My legs felt like they were ready to give out.

"Eugh..." I groaned. I was pretty damn sweaty myself; the back of my shirt was soaked through, which would've been super uncomfortable even without a heavy backpack on. And with no breeze blowing by, it felt a whole lot hotter than it actually was. I was ready to stop and take a breather anytime now, but I didn't see a good spot to rest. In fact, I hadn't seen anything but unending pavement for over an hour now.

"Th-that's it, I gotta take a break..." said Akira, plunking herself down on the median. Her shoulders heaved as she panted to collect her breath. This was not my ideal place to stop and rest, but it seemed Akira was making the decision for us. I hunkered down on the ground and pulled out a water bottle, twisted the cap, and glugged down some of its lukewarm contents.

"Phew..." I pulled the bottle away from my lips—only to see Akira glancing over at me with an imploring look in her eyes. "Wh-what's up?"

"... Nothing," she said, turning away in a huff. "Don't worry about it."

For someone who'd given me such a hard time for not speaking my mind, she sure was being evasive when it came to speaking to her own. I assumed she was just trying to act tough, but with how plainly she wore her emotions on her face, it was pretty easy for me to tell something was up. I took another sip as a test. Sure enough, I caught her glancing over at me again, and our eyes locked. She looked stunned for a moment, then averted her gaze. Just what in the hell was she doing, staring at me like this? *She* was the one who'd wanted to take a break—you'd think she'd at least want to take a drink of water as well. Assuming she hadn't emptied all of hers already.

"Sure you don't wanna hydrate?" I asked.

"...I'm all outta water."

"Wait, really?" I hadn't expected her to have *actually* drunk it all—especially since I was pretty sure I'd only seen her go through one bottle so far.

"Water's way too heavy to lug around. Been trying to pack light."

"Ah, I see..."

She wasn't wrong there. Water was heavy, and it took up a lot of backpack space, to boot. I'd thought about lightening my load in that regard several times now. I could understand exactly how she felt—and why she was now looking at me the way she was.

"Sorry, but this is my last bottle too..." I said.

"I never asked you for any!" Akira said, pouting. "Like I'd ever want your nasty water... Get real... I can go without drinking for a bit. I'm sure we'll find a rest stop soon enough."

"I dunno about that..."

Something told me we probably wouldn't see another one of those for a while yet. I couldn't see anything but trees for miles around, and there hadn't been any road signs indicating how far it was to the nearest rest area. And no matter what she said, I couldn't have her fainting due to dehydration. I pulled the cleanest towel I had out of my backpack and used it to wipe off the mouth of my water bottle.

"You sure you don't want a drink?" I asked, holding it out to her.

"Huh?!" she sputtered. "N-no way! I don't need your filthy water... Prolly full of backwash and everything..."

"It's fine. I wiped it off and everything," I said, pretty unsurprised that she was one to care about such things.

"You mean you don't mind me drinking your water, Mugino?"

"Nah, it's fine. As long as you don't down the whole thing."

"...Okay, then. I'll have some," she said brusquely, taking the bottle.

She cast one last furtive glance in my direction before hesitantly raising the bottle to her lips and taking a big, long chug. She must have been *really* parched. After drinking about half the bottle in one gulp, she let out a satisfied breath. Then she turned to face me and her expression immediately did a 180 back to embarrassed.

"Don't just stare at me while I'm drinking, creep."

"Oh, sorry... My bad."

Akira twisted the cap back on and practically shoved the bottle into my chest. "And you better wipe it off again too... Don't you dare go licking the rim or anything, or I swear I'll smack you upside the head."

"I wasn't planning to, sheesh..."

For someone who'd just been given a free drink in her time of need, she sure wasn't acting all that grateful. I swallowed my pride and didn't say another word as I stowed the water bottle into my backpack.

Just when I thought I couldn't drag my tired body another step without collapsing, we finally found a road sign announcing that there was a rest stop just up ahead. If we only made it there, we could have all the drinking water we wanted. Akira and I celebrated this discovery as though we'd just found an oasis in the middle of a desert. And so we wrung the very last of our strength from our muscles and powered through until we reached the rest stop. Cutting a beeline across the wide-open parking lot, we made our way inside to the on-site convenience store, which had a food court in the back that included taiyaki and ice cream stands.

"Oh my god, I'm so thirsty. I need a cola ASAP..." said Akira as she headed straight for the beverages corner. I needed to restock on water too, so I followed after her, grabbed a couple bottles of the cheapest brand of mineral water from the fridge, and stuffed them into my backpack. Now that I no longer had to worry about keeping my thirst quenched, I was free to focus on just how famished I felt.

"We should rest here for a while," I suggested.

Akira nodded as she chugged her soda. "Mm-hmm." She had shown literally zero hesitation in walking over to the fridge and downing a big bottle of cola on the spot. Not that this was anything new, but it really hammered home that she didn't feel any guilt whatsoever about not paying for things. It was enough to make me question her upbringing, honestly.

To be fair, this was all a matter of perspective. She and I were *both* stealing right now, so as far as the convenience store's bottom line was concerned, I was no better than her simply because I felt guilty about it. At the same time, I

didn't want to give up all my morals just because I knew we wouldn't get caught.

"Sorry, sir..." I said to the clerk with the permanent smile as I grabbed myself a freshly packed set of salmon onigiri, a sandwich, and a fish sausage from a nearby shelf. This would be more than enough for a filling lunch.

Akira and I headed into the food court. We were both feeling hungry and exhausted, so we didn't have the capacity to talk while we ate; we consumed our respective meals in silence. Once my stomach was filled to the brim, I leaned back languidly in my chair and let out a great big yawn. I was so full I could feel a food coma coming on. I rested on my elbow with my head propped on my hand, thinking I could maybe catch a few winks while we were here. The moment I closed my eyes, sleep crept up on me like a thief in the night, and—

"Mngah?!"

I jolted awake. My head felt hazy, and I wasn't sure what time it was—but it seemed I had indeed passed out right there on the spot. I lifted my head up off the table and massaged my stiff neck. Just how long had I been asleep?

"Wait, huh?"

I didn't see Akira anywhere; maybe she'd gone to the bathroom. I kind of had to go too now, what with all the water I'd drunk before falling asleep. I rose from my chair and headed for the outdoor restrooms. On my way to the door, I spotted Akira crouched down in one of the aisles in the convenience store area. I could only see her face in profile, but her expression looked a bit stiff. I assumed she'd simply remembered something she needed and was searching for it—but just then, I saw her reach out and snatch something off the shelf, then tuck it swiftly into her pocket.

It was a movement so quick and nimble that I only caught a momentary glimpse of what she'd grabbed—but I was *pretty* sure it was a pack of batteries. Uncertain how to respond in the moment, I pretended not to have seen her and headed out toward the restrooms. Akira didn't seem to notice me even as I walked out the door. As I did my business, I couldn't help but think that her sleight of hand had been that of a seasoned shoplifter.

When I came back inside from the restrooms, Akira was sitting at our table in

the food court again. Wanting to check if the item she'd stolen was actually a pack of batteries or not, I took a moment to casually walk down the aisle she'd been crouched in front of. On the shelves were a selection of lighters, souvenir pens, and—sure enough—batteries. My eyes had not deceived me. I could begrudgingly condone stealing things like food and toiletries we needed to live with dignity, given we had no other choice, but nothing more. Batteries were by no means a necessity, especially in our current situation. I needed to give her a firm warning about this.

"Hey."

I jumped at the sound of Akira's voice, then whirled around to see her staring at me suspiciously from the food court.

"Y-yeah, what's up?" I asked.

"Where the hell'd you go?"

"Just to the bathroom."

"Oh yeah? Sure took you a while."

"N-not sure what to tell you..."

I tried to laugh off the awkwardness with a forced smile. Akira slung her

backpack over her shoulders and stood up from her chair.

"We've rested here long enough," she said. "Let's get back on the road."

"R-right. Okay."

So much for giving her a firm warning, I guess. She hadn't given me any time to muster up the courage to do so. I supposed it didn't have to be right now; I could just find a good time to bring it up while we walked.

Even after we left the rest stop, I just kept putting it off and putting it off. Every time I almost broached the subject, my words caught in my throat. I *really* wasn't good at having tough conversations with people. I'd been chided for my behavior many times in my life, but I had virtually no experience being the one on the other side of the table.

The one silver lining to my crippling indecisiveness was that it made the time go by an awful lot faster. Before I knew it, it was just past seven o'clock, and we

were making our way down off the expressway at an interchange to head into a little downtown area. We'd spotted a decent fast-food joint from up above and agreed to stay there for the night. Had we any extra energy to spare at all, we might have taken some time to find a public bathhouse or traditional inn or something, but both of us were far too exhausted for that today. We entered the restaurant, and I set my backpack down on an empty table. Thankfully, there weren't many customers in the building, so there was more than enough room for me to lie flat on one of the long sofa-style seats lining the walls.

"Mugino," Akira called out with her mouth full. I turned to see that she had already helped herself to a box of chicken nuggets. "There was a conveyer belt sushi place just up the street. Let's go eat there."

"Sushi...?" I said, somewhat in disbelief.

"Yeah. I mean, I've been kinda craving it, and I guess I realized that hitting up a conveyer belt place might be our best bet—since there'll always be a bunch of fresh plates comin' down the pipeline, y'know? I mean, I know the quality's gonna be a lot cheaper than a legit sushi place, but still."

Looking smug, she puffed out her chest and popped another nugget into her mouth. A conflicting slurry of anxiety and aggravation filled my chest. Akira was starting to treat thievery as if it were nothing at all. Before long, she might even set her sights on far more valuable commodities than batteries and fast-food items. I knew if I let this go unchecked, there was a chance it might be too late to stop her. I had to say something now, before her kleptomaniac streak got any worse.

"Listen, um... Iguma-san?"

"Mm?" Akira mumbled, tilting her head as she licked the grease off her fingers. Immediately, I could feel myself getting nervous. But now that our rapport had improved to the point that we were calling each other by our last names, I knew she probably saw us more like equals and would respect what I had to say. I couldn't get cold feet now; I'd just have to try to act natural and chide her as softly as I could.

"I really don't think we should be doing that sort of thing so much..."

Akira stopped licking her fingers and looked at me, almost shocked. "Sorry,

what sort of thing?"

"Well, like... It just feels a bit wrongfully indulgent, you know? Pigging out on sushi and stuff when it's a bit more of a luxury."

"Luxury?" Her face went stone-cold for a moment, and then she furrowed her brow defensively. "Then what do *you* suggest, huh? That we just eat cheap-ass bentos from convenience stores and supermarkets for every single meal? I really don't see why we should have to be so strict about stuff like that—especially under *these* circumstances. We're struggling enough to get by as it is."

"Yes, but we don't have the money to pay for it... Just because time's stopped doesn't mean we can do whatever the heck we like. We've gotta show a little restraint. All things in moderation, y'know?"

"I really don't think anyone with half a brain would blame us for eating something a little nicer every once in a while."

"Oh yeah? And how about what you stole from the rest stop, huh? You don't think anyone would take issue with that either?"

"Huh? Whaddya talkin' about?"

"You've got some batteries in your pocket, don't you?" I asked cautiously.

Akira's eyes went wide, then she averted them and clicked her tongue in disgust. "So you were spyin' on me, huh?" she said sourly.

"Just happened to be walking by."

It seemed she did recognize that it was something to feel guilty about after all. She scrubbed her fingers roughly through her hair in frustration.

"Man, you're a pain in the ass," she said. "Stop tryin' to preach at me about every little thing I do. You're not my mom, okay?"

"Sorry, but it's kinda hard to ignore when you literally shoplift right in front of me," I said—and Akira did a double take as soon as I uttered the word "shoplift."

"Hey, don't you talk about me like I'm some sorta criminal! That doesn't even count as...as...shoplifting..." she said, her voice trailing off as she apparently

realized her argument didn't hold water.

"What do you even need batteries for, anyway?" I asked. "I mean, it's not like we need our flashlights anymore..."

"To charge my phone," she said with a scowl. "Got a portable charger that runs on batteries, and it's small enough to fit in my pocket, so it works even in the timefreeze."

Interesting. I did not know this. But even with a working phone, she still couldn't get service right now, so I wondered what the hell she'd been using her phone for. But it wasn't important right now—that was not the issue here.

"You really shouldn't be taking things you don't need."

"Aw, who cares? It's only a few batteries."

"That's no excuse," I said firmly—and Akira bit her lip, faltering.

I wasn't even the type of person with a particularly strong moral compass. For most of my life, my conflict resolution strategy had been one of pure avoidance. But I couldn't turn a blind eye to this when Akira clearly didn't recognize just how dangerous this path she was heading down could end up being.

"...There used to be this little old bookstore in my neighborhood," I said, waxing nostalgic. "Run by this little old man with a bit of a hunchback, the owner and sole proprietor. Used to go there all the time in elementary school. The selection wasn't the greatest, but I loved the smell of old paper that filled the place and the calming atmosphere."

"The hell is this coming from...?" asked Akira.

"The old man ended up having to shut the place down. Lost too much money on stolen inventory," I said—and Akira's cheek twitched. "Apparently, some kids at the local junior high made a habit of going there whenever they wanted free stuff... They knew the old man had a bad leg, and he couldn't afford to hire any part-timers to help out. So there was nothing he could really do to stop it whenever they came rushing in."

I watched as Akira slowly grew more uncomfortable.

"And since it was an independent bookstore, the cost of even a single stolen

volume of manga came right out of the old man's pocket. Not that convenience stores and supermarkets don't have to pay to stock their shelves too, obviously —even if bigger corporations can handle a little bit of shrink. But I hear even those end up shutting down a lot of the time due to theft, especially in areas where there's less regular business to make up for the loss... So what I'm saying is, even if we need to steal food and water to survive, we should really keep it to the bare necessities since we can't—"

"Oh, just shut up already!" Akira shouted, glaring daggers at me. She'd finally lost her temper. "What gives *you* the right to lecture me about this stuff, huh?! Besides, you're talkin' an awful lot about how much harm and trouble me stealing is gonna cause for people, but that's only *if* time decides to start moving again! If things stay frozen like this forever, then who the hell *cares* what I do?! It won't be any loss to the people I'm taking from, or to you!"

"I mean...yes, technically, that would be a different story."

If time stayed frozen like this forever... This was a thought I'd been having for a while now, but I was deliberately trying not to voice it for fear that it might sap away my willpower to do much of anything, let alone complete this journey. Although I was enjoying the silence and isolation, it was a distressing worst-case scenario that I was loath to even imagine. And one I most certainly hadn't imagined Akira casually tossing out for no other reason than to justify her own thievery.

I went quiet, unable to think of anything I could say to persuade her otherwise. Akira didn't look as though she felt she'd won the argument either; she bit her lip and looked down at the ground. I assumed she was enduring the recoil of the foreboding words she'd resorted to just now.

"...Just leave me alone, all right?" she said, then walked out of the restaurant.

I didn't feel like I'd said anything harsh or out of line. And yet, I still felt bad—like the sort of guilty feeling you got when you had to lay out to a child exactly what it was they did wrong. I couldn't help but wonder in hindsight if there'd been a better way I could have worded things.

It was another three hours before Akira came back to the restaurant. I wasn't

entirely sure she would, to be honest, even though she'd left her belongings there.

"So hey, um..." I started, knowing full well that we needed to talk this out.

I still had no intention of condoning her actions, but I also knew I could have handled the situation a bit more tactfully myself. And she did have a point in that it would be awfully tiresome—not to mention unhealthy—to just eat cheap processed foods from mini-marts for every single meal, which couldn't be good for our morale. Which was why my current plan was to suggest that we treat ourselves to a slightly more luxurious meal once every few days. I hoped this could be an agreeable compromise because it felt like the most constructive policy for us both.

"Go to hell."

Unfortunately, she didn't seem willing to even meet me at the negotiation table. In fact, she didn't even look at me as she walked over to lie down on the bench seats along the opposite wall, using her backpack as a makeshift pillow. Something told me she wasn't in the mood to listen to anything I could possibly have to say right now, so I figured I'd best just give up for the night and try to talk to her again when her mood improved.

But after we awoke, and even after we left the fast-food restaurant, Akira remained completely closed off to me. Whenever I tried to talk to her, she'd either ignore me outright or give some callous, uninterested one-word answer. She also stopped her usual demands for me to come up with topics of conversation, which meant that neither of us were saying much of anything.

I may have loved my peace and quiet, but I hated awkward silences as much as the next person. And right now, Akira's cold demeanor toward me was so suffocating it felt like a vise squeezing all of the air from my lungs. My anxiety slowly hardened to resentment. What had I really done, at the end of the day, to deserve the cold shoulder? *She* was the one who'd been in the wrong. Everything I'd said was true, and I hadn't even been all that harsh with her. If this was how she was going to act any time we had a minor disagreement, then I didn't want anything to do with her.

And so I gave up trying to work things out with Akira, and I just put one foot in

front of the other in silence. The southern skies looked overcast—as if they'd predicted this strife between us and dressed themselves in shades of gray to match.

Two days had now passed since Akira and I stopped talking.

"Man, it's cold."

We departed from a drive-in where we'd spent the night and entered a mountain pass that cut straight through the woods. Shortly after, I felt a sudden wetness on my face. I reached up and wiped it off—only to find that there were actual water droplets on my hand.

"Is it raining?" I wondered aloud. The sky was dark with cloud cover—almost too dark for it to feel like it was really 11:00 a.m. As a test, I held out my hand and waited to see if any raindrops would land on my palm.

...Wait, what am I doing? Rain wouldn't fall in the timefreeze, would it?

"Huh?" Akira mumbled. Then, as if she were doing an impression of me, she lifted her own hand to touch her face before looking at it as well.

Hang on a minute.

I looked down at the ground; it was a little bit damp, though I hadn't noticed since the asphalt was black. And when I looked far ahead, everything was shrouded in a haze of mist. I could also make out little puddles of condensation along the roadside.

"Watch out," I told Akira. "It's raining."

"Uh, what?" she said, looking at me like I was crazy. And while this was, admittedly, a questionable way to phrase it, her gaze felt even more feral and unforgiving than it had been before—though perhaps the faint dark circles under her eyes had something to do with it. Maybe she hadn't been sleeping all that well again. If so, I wondered if it was simply due to stress related to the timefreeze, or if it was because of me... For all I knew, it could be both.

"Er, sorry," I said. "How do I explain this...? So it's not *raining*-raining right now, but the rain that *was* falling here when time stopped is still frozen in

midair. So if we continue this way, we're probably gonna have to deal with that for a while."

"...Right," said Akira. It seemed she understood.

But what exactly were we supposed to do now? Neither of us had umbrellas. And would an umbrella even work to ward off a billion tiny little raindrops suspended in space? Maybe a poncho or something would help, but even so... As I stood there considering our options, Akira just started walking down the road, completely undeterred.

"Wait, you're just going in there? You're gonna get drenched."

"Psh. A little rain never killed anyone."

"I don't think it'll just be a little..."

I thought things over for a moment. We hadn't even seen a single *house* in over an hour; if we were to turn back now, it'd cost us quite a bit of time, not to mention energy. And there was always a chance this rain was simply a passing shower that we could break through in no time, so maybe the best course of action here would be to press on like Akira seemed to want. I jogged ahead to catch up with her, and the two of us walked side by side directly into the static storm.

Unfortunately, my forecast proved to be overly optimistic.

As we walked farther down the road, the rainfall—or rain density, rather—only grew heavier. And with no way of avoiding it or warding it off, we had no choice but to just take it. Our clothes quickly became soaked through, which sapped both our body heat and our stamina. There was even water sloshing around inside my shoes, which was a singularly unpleasant feeling I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy. Every single step I took felt like setting my bare feet in a thick puddle of mud.

"Ugh, damn it..."

Frustrated, Akira swiped the raindrops out of her face as if she were batting away flies. As she tucked her wet bangs back behind her ears, I could see that her lips had gone pale, which didn't surprise me. We were already in the chilly part of the year, and when you added rain into the mix, it just made things that

much colder.

"...You okay?" I asked.

"Why the hell wouldn't I b—ACHOO!" Akira let out a great big sneeze with almost perfect comedic timing. Her whole body shivered, and then she sniffled a watery trail of snot back up into her nostril. She was definitely feeling the chill.

"There's no need to act tough if you're struggling, you know."

"Wh-who the hell said I was?"

"Me. Because it's obvious. I mean, just look at you—you're shaking like a leaf. And I really can't have you going and getting sick or injured on me."

"Ngh..."

If looks could kill, then the daggers Akira shot me with her eyes most certainly would have. Normally, I would have shrunk back in the face of an intimidating scowl like that—but in this moment, I felt nothing but pity for her. Seeing her soaking wet, to the point that her teeth were chattering, made it abundantly clear just how much she was pushing herself to put on a brave face. Her sheer level of obstinance was honestly a little depressing sometimes.

"You can't just power through this," I said. "You're only gonna hurt yourself."

"...Well, what do *you* suggest we do, wise guy?" Akira snapped, her voice shaking from what I assumed was a mixture of fury and frigidity. She glared at me and continued, "It's not like this rain's gonna let up even *if* we turn back. And there's no telling how much of a detour it'd be to go around it... What other choice do we have but to push on through? Or, what—do you have some big-brain idea for how to keep ourselves dry?"

"Sort of, yeah," I responded without missing a beat. "I'll stand in front and act as a rain shield, and you just follow directly behind me. That way, you won't have to bear the full brunt of the rain."

Akira's face kind of seized up, her mouth hanging slightly open. Had she *really* not considered this option until now? And here I'd assumed she was just too proud to ask me to take the lead. I let out a sigh.

"All right, I'll take point," I said. "Follow whenever you're ready."

I knew trying to talk this out further wasn't going to get us anywhere. I was sure Akira would have more than a few choice words for me if I gave her the chance to say them, but we needed to keep on walking first and foremost. I wanted to get the hell out of this squall as soon as possible.

A few moments after I started walking, I heard the trudging sound of unhappy footsteps behind me. Akira was following my lead without a word. Then, for whatever reason, she picked up the pace. I wondered to myself why she was in such a rush to catch up.

Through my backpack, I felt a powerful impact push me from behind, and I pitched forward—falling flat onto the asphalt. A stinging pain shot through my knees and palms. For a brief moment, I thought a wild animal must have charged me or something. But when I turned to look back over my shoulder, still on my hands and knees, all I saw behind me was Akira. Which could only mean one thing: She'd shoved me herself.

But why?

"Wh-what the hell are you—"

"Don't treat me like a goddamn kid!"

Her voice struck my ears like a thunderclap from on high. I lifted my gaze to see that her face, so pale from the cold a minute ago, was now flushed red from ear to ear. It seemed as though all of the blood had rushed to her head—both literally and figuratively.

"You just think I'm some total idiot who can't even take care of herself, don't you?!" Akira shouted.

"What? No, I—"

"You totally do! I can see it in your eyes!"

I very nearly turned my gaze away on reflex. Mind you, I never had any intention of looking down on Akira—but it was true that I had only offered to take the lead because I was starting to feel bad for her, which could definitely be interpreted as me belittling her or treating her as a kid.

"You just think you've got it all figured out, don't you?" she went on. "Don't

get all cocky just because someone started treating you like a human being instead of a total freak for once. Rest assured that I still wouldn't spend a single second with a gloomy-ass, pansy-ass loner like you if we weren't trapped in this situation together right now."

Her venom spewed, Akira suddenly reached up and pressed a hand to her forehead as though she were feeling faint.

"Ugh, damn it," she said. "My head is killing me..."

"Y-you gonna be okay?" I said, rising to my feet.

"No, back off!" said Akira, holding her free hand out as if to push me away. "All you're doing is acting like you care, but really you just think you're so much better and smarter than me, don't you? I can see right through you, kid. God, you piss me off so bad... Just what the hell is your problem, anyway?" Akira ground her teeth in frustration, then wiped her rain-slicked face roughly with the sleeve of her jacket. "Out here acting like this isn't all your fault to begin with..."

"Wait, huh ...?"

"You said it yourself—all that stuff he told you before he went and died and everything. He totally passed the 'curse' or whatever it is on to you, as a member of his bloodline, I'll bet. You can't tell me it doesn't make the most sense for *you* to be the one who caused this. Go ahead—just *try* to tell me I'm wrong."

All my fault. I hadn't even thought about it like that before; it was a possibility my subconscious had been completely ruling out. After all, it wasn't as if I held the power to deliberately stop time or anything like that. Yet for whatever reason, Akira's words struck a chord somewhere deep within my chest. Was it because they reminded me of something else, perhaps? No, that couldn't be it. This was my first timefreeze. I'd never once experienced anything like this before... Or had I?

Could I really say for certain that this was the first time?

"Well?" Akira demanded. "Say something, already."

I lifted my head up with a start. Her face was right up next to mine.

"Wh-whoa, stay back...!" I said, recoiling in a fluster at her unexpected proximity. Akira, meanwhile, just let out a haughty snort.

"Ha," she said. "What a little scaredy-cat. You're pathetic."

Now this I could not take sitting down. She'd been running her mouth for quite a while now, completely making light of me and my condition just because she thought I wasn't capable of fighting back. I considered myself a pretty calm and rational guy, but I wasn't so mild-mannered as to take such flagrant verbal abuse.

"Would you just knock it off with the tough-girl act, already?"

"Uh, excuse me? It's not an 'act,' kid. That's just who I am."

"No, you're full of it. The truth is, you're the one who's scared."

Akira's eyes nearly popped out of her head. "The *hell* did you just say to me?!"

"Because if I remember right..." I said, swallowing hard, "it was you who broke down and cried in the tunnel, not me. Isn't that right?"

A glint of fury and betrayal flashed across her irises—and then came a loud *SMACK* as a shimmering shower of tiny sparks scattered on the backs of my eyelids. It took me a few seconds to realize that Akira had just slapped me across the face. It was so sudden that my surprise outweighed both the pain and the force the impact applied to my cheekbone. I just stood there, mind totally blank, with my mouth hanging halfway open like an idiot. Akira glared at me with misty eyes and trembling lips.

"Fine then," she said. "I'll go to Tokyo by myself. Don't follow me."

I just stood there in a daze as she walked right past me and barged down the road with a long, indignant stride.

"Ah..."

I tried to call out to her, but my voice wouldn't come. Regret pooled in the pit of my stomach, then welled up into my diaphragm and pressed against my lungs, squeezing them silent. I was powerless to do anything but watch her silhouette slowly disappear over the next hill—at which point I let out a great

big sigh as though someone had finally pulled the cork from my mouth.

"...Damn it."

What the hell was I even doing? I knew better than anyone just how humiliating it was to be ridiculed for a fear you had a complex about, so why had I done that to her? I needed to chase after her and apologize right now—but I couldn't. My legs felt rooted to the spot. My mind knew exactly what it was I needed to do, yet my heart still wavered with the fickle uncertainty of emotion. Obviously, I knew Akira had to be livid right now. Who knew if she would forgive me, no matter how hard I apologized...

At a loss, I hung my head and did nothing but watch the rain drip down from my dangling, matted bangs. It was colder than cold—yet I assumed Akira intended to stubbornly make her way south to Tokyo on trembling legs. Come to think of it, what was she planning to do when she got there? I'd never told her my uncle's address, so even if she *did* manage the whole trip alone, she was destined to hit a roadblock in that regard eventually. I wasn't sure if she was just hoping things would work out somehow or simply hadn't thought that far ahead. Regardless, she was clearly acting more on impulse and emotion than out of rationality. And I was partly to blame for that. I needed to try to clear the air, even if she wasn't in the mood to listen.

I combed back my wet bangs with one hand, as if to symbolize my renewed resolve, then set off down the road at a brisk jog. Luckily, it was a straight shot at a downward incline after the crest of the hill, so I was able to catch up with Akira in no time. I didn't quite have the courage to look her in the eye, so I stopped a few feet behind her.

"Hey, um... My bad," I said. "I really shouldn't have gone there." Silence.

"That was totally uncalled for," I continued. "It was extremely immature of me to make light of your feelings in a vulnerable moment. And I'm really sorry."

Still nothing.

"Anyway, uh... At least let me block the rain for you, all right?"

With that, I circled around Akira and started forging a path ahead through the

rain. Akira still didn't say a word, and she simply sidestepped out of the lane I'd just cleared for her. The message was clear: Don't waste your time. I don't want your pity. For a moment, I considered insisting on it, or at least agreeing to switch off every once in a while, but I knew arguing with her would only waste both our energy. So I swallowed my disappointed sigh and just kept on walking —trying my very best to convince myself that at least this cold shoulder treatment was preferable to getting pushed down onto the pavement again.

The air felt heavier than ever, and the rain chilled me to the bone.

It was a far more grueling trek than even the Seikan Tunnel.

I tried striking up a conversation with Akira a few more times after that, but she refused to even acknowledge my existence. The state of affairs between us hadn't improved one bit, and the rain showed no sign of letting up. If anything, the downpour had only gotten *worse* as we went on. Yet still we trudged on without rest, our minds and bodies both utterly exhausted and drenched to the core.

I'd hoped we could make it out of this rainy patch before the end of the day, but that was looking less and less likely by the minute. If we didn't find somewhere to take shelter soon, we'd only end up making the rest of the journey even harder for ourselves.

I took a look around the vicinity. We'd long since made it over the pass, and we were now cutting across a wide-open plain. To the right, there were only more mountains. To the left, acres upon acres of newly harvested rice fields, with no buildings to speak of aside from the occasional plastic greenhouse or barn. But we were in no condition to be choosy, so for the time being, maybe it would be a good idea to try breaking into one of these barns and see if we could find ourselves some umbrellas or waterproof raincoats or something.

Just then, I realized that things had gotten awfully quiet. Not that this wasn't par for the course here in the timefreeze, mind you—but there was one particular sound I'd been listening for that was decidedly absent: footsteps.

I spun around. Sure enough, Akira was no longer walking close behind me. She was sitting slumped over in a heap on the pavement quite a way down the road. *Oh, shoot.* I hadn't even noticed. I rushed back over to the place where she sat and leaned down beside her.

"H-hey, are you all right?" I asked. "What's wrong?"

Akira lifted her head up slightly, her body still hunched over—but as soon as I caught a glimpse of her face, I recoiled at the sight. Her eyes were completely unfocused, and her lips were dyed a faint shade of purple. Chances were, they weren't getting enough blood flow; I knew this was a common symptom of poor circulation known as cyanosis.

"I'm fine..." she said. "Don't worry about me..."

These were the first words she'd spoken to me in several hours, but I wasn't buying them for a minute. She sure as hell didn't look fine to me, so when I saw her attempt to get back up to her feet on unsteady legs, I tried to stop her—but there was no need. She soon fell flat onto the pavement of her own accord as her legs gave out, and her body went limp like a ragdoll—her sopping hair draping itself over the pitchy asphalt like a golden mop.

"I-Iguma-san!" I cried out.

No response. I could tell from her expression that she had completely passed out. *Damn it.* This was *not* good. But what could I possibly do to help? It wasn't like I could just call an ambulance. And hell, even if I took her to the hospital myself, just who exactly was going to see her? There was no one else I could entrust her treatment to. I'd just have to figure something out myself.

I knew I couldn't leave her lying out on the cold, wet pavement like this, for one thing. That would only drain her of what little body heat she had remaining. I needed to somehow get her dried off and into a warm, clean bed so that her immune system could start recovering. But she was in no condition to move on her own right now, with or without assistance. Which meant there was only one thing to do.

There was no time to waste—and so I didn't hesitate for a moment. I twisted my backpack around to wear it over my chest, then crouched down next to Akira. I knew if I let myself stop to think about what I was about to do, it'd only make my heart palpitate even worse than it already was, and I could feel a cold sweat dripping down my scalp. I felt that familiar wave of visceral discomfort

creeping up my spine like a billion little spiders crawling up my back—but I shook off the intrusive thoughts.

Don't even think about it. Just go, already!

"Hrnnngh...!"

In the span of a single breath, I hoisted Akira up onto my back, then pulled her arms over my shoulders as I rose to my feet. I gritted my teeth, doing everything I could to keep from dissociating as I hobbled down the road in search of shelter.

Damn it... Goddamn it...

It was even more brutal than I ever could have imagined. My very humanity was tested as every fiber of my being screamed at me to just drop her and leave her to die. It wasn't anything against Akira; I would've had the same reaction no matter who I carried on my back. But recognizing that it was involuntary didn't make it any easier to resist the urge, especially when it felt like my leg muscles were about ready to snap like rubber bands as well. This much was to be expected, though, considering I was carrying the full weight of another human being, plus two heavy backpacks, on my shoulders.

So yes—in a word, it was brutal.

"What's so bad about being touched? I don't see what the big deal is."

As I struggled under the weight of both Akira and my own mental anguish, I heard a voice inside my head, confronting me with the same question I'd been asked so very many times throughout my life. But there was no simple answer I could give that made my condition any easier to understand. Some things were just triggering for certain people but not for others—there was no deeper reasoning to it than that. Surely everyone had at least one or two things that they felt extremely uncomfortable with, things they would never consent to under any circumstances. Anyone who said otherwise probably just didn't know what those things were, likely because they simply hadn't experienced them yet. And if they were really lucky, they might even go their whole lives without ever finding out. Those were the ones I envied most of all.

"Aw, don't be such a baby. It's not gonna kill you or anything."

Yes, this was a sentiment I'd heard many times before as well.

Imagine, if you will, having a big fuzzy caterpillar in the palm of your hand. For me, touching another human being brought forth the same visceral discomfort and emotional distress you might feel if you were to clench your fist and crush that little insect to death. Or if you preferred an example that did not involve snuffing out a tiny life by your own hands, then replace the caterpillar with a dead rodent carcass or something. Either way, the point was that it was a purely involuntary response, not one based in reason or logic.

"Huff...huff..."

A large bead of sweat dripped from my brow. I could feel Akira slipping down my back, so I jostled her upward to readjust my grip—but the kickback from shifting her weight caused me to twist my ankle and fall forward to the ground.

"Owww... Ugh, goddamn it..."

Luckily, I managed to brace myself in advance, so I only suffered a few scrapes on my knees and elbows. Akira was still safely secured on my back as well. Even so, it took everything I had to force myself back up to my feet and keep moving forward, rather than succumbing then and there to the pain and exhaustion.

My mind was a total haze. I had no idea how long I'd even been walking—it might have only been a few minutes, for all I knew. If we couldn't find somewhere to rest soon, I didn't know what the hell we were going to do. We should have been more prepared for the rain before we came this way. Or, at the very least, we should have taken ample breaks to dry ourselves off. Though thinking back on it now, Akira had already seemed a little under the weather even before she charged headfirst into the rain. Man, we really should have talked things out in advance... And while I knew hindsight was always twenty-twenty, I couldn't help but think about all the things we could have done differently.

"Oh, hey."

Just down the road, I spotted an old wooden house—still in use, by the looks of it. This was a sight for sore eyes, to be sure, yet it also filled me with a strange sense of trepidation. Not once on our journey thus far had we ever resorted to staying the night in a stranger's home. Mainly because it felt

unethical, but also because there was basically no way to hide an intrusive stayover in someone else's private domain unless you were *very* meticulous in covering your tracks. But this was an emergency, so we had no other choice. I summoned forth whatever strength I had remaining in my rickety, wobbling legs and made one final push in the direction of the house.

After trespassing onto the property, I said a little prayer to myself as I reached for the sliding front door—which thankfully rattled right open with a single tug. *Phew, thank goodness.* In the lowered entryway, I spotted some women's shoes as well as an old pair of those therapeutic massage slippers with the little bumps all along the insoles.

The place had that distinctively foreign lived-in smell that you only ever seemed to find in strangers' homes. I set Akira and our backpacks down in the entryway, then took my wet coat and socks off before heading inside to look for somewhere we could rest. With every wet footprint my bare feet left on the floor, I felt a fresh pang of guilt surge through me, but all I could do was promise myself that I would clean them up later.

When I walked into the living area, I found that the TV had been left on and there was a newspaper spread open on the low dining table. Farther in, I could see an elderly woman with gray hair standing with her back to me in the kitchen, apparently in the middle of cooking herself something for lunch. While we could certainly rest out here if we had to, it would probably feel a bit unsettling to do so right under the nose of one of the people we were intruding on. I decided to check out some of the other rooms.

As I searched through the rest of the house, I eventually passed by a traditional Japanese-style sitting room. I caught a glimpse of a little shrine to the deceased through the open screen door, so I stopped and took a peek inside. In the center of the altar was a portrait of an old man, whom I could only assume had been the husband of the elderly woman in the kitchen. If so, then it stood to reason that the widowed old lady was probably living here alone, which meant there had to be at least *one* room somewhere in this house that wasn't currently being used for anything.

Sure enough, my intuition proved to be on point. Right at the top of the stairs to the second floor, I found what appeared to have once been a child's

bedroom. There were bookshelves filled with shojo manga and various paperback novels, with several framed achievement awards hanging on the walls. It was a bit dim due to the lack of natural light, but it seemed the old woman had kept the room looking spick-and-span. I opened the built-in closet and found a futon and blanket, which I immediately set out on the floor to make a bed for Akira. *Perfect, this should do just fine.* 

When I walked back downstairs to the entryway, I found that Akira had already woken up. She had curled up into a ball and was quivering slightly. When she heard me approach, she looked up at me with torpid, half-lidded eyes.

```
"Where...are we?" she asked, in a voice almost too fragile to hear.

"Safe," I said. "I found us a, uh...random old lady's house."

"Your arms..."

"Huh?"

"What...happened to your arms?"
```

Confused, I held out both my forearms—then let out a little gasp of surprise. They were covered in big red hives all the way to the insides of my elbows.

"Oh, dang. I was wondering why I felt so itchy earlier... Yeah, sorry. This just kinda happens when I touch another person for too long," I explained. "It'll go away pretty quickly, don't worry. Not your fault. How are you feeling, though? Think you can stand up? I've got a futon laid out for you upstairs. You should go lie down and warm up."

Apparently too weak to even muster a response, Akira rose to her feet without a word, leaning her back against the wall for support. I grabbed our backpacks and took the lead to show her the way, and she hobbled after me with slow, unsteady footsteps—her dripping clothes leaving a trail of puddles along the floor. When we made it up to the bedroom at the top of the stairs, I showed her inside, set our backpacks down on the floor, and turned to face her from the doorway.

"You should definitely change into something dry first," I said. "Wipe yourself down, then curl up in bed and take it easy. If you don't have any clean towels,

feel free to take one out of my backpack."

Akira just stood there looking dazed for a moment, then nodded.

"I'm gonna go try to find us some food," I said. "Be right back."

I stepped out of the bedroom, then shut the door behind me. Instantly, all of the fight-or-flight tension that had been keeping me high-strung and alert went slack, and the strength drained from my limbs as I collapsed right there on the spot.

Ugh... I'm so tired...

Unable to even muster the strength to sit up against the wall, I laid myself out flat on the floor of the hallway. I was so drained and despondent that it was a Herculean effort just to remember to breathe. I honestly felt as though these past couple ofe hours had taken a solid five years off my life span. As much as I wished I could just pass out right here on the floor, I knew I should probably wipe myself down too, lest I catch a cold.

I wrung the strength from my weary bones and pushed myself upright. I needed a towel... But wait. *Crap, I left all my stuff in the bedroom*. And I couldn't go in there, since Akira was probably still changing. Left with no other choice, I slowly made my way downstairs to borrow one of the bath towels from the linen closet I'd seen earlier. After wiping my face off, I headed out into the living area, then over to the kitchen, where I caught a whiff of a tantalizing aroma. Peeking over the counter, I saw that there was a pot of pork miso soup sitting on the stovetop. A cloud of steam hung frozen in the air over the simmering liquid, suggesting it was freshly made.

I caught myself salivating and swallowed hard.

No, we can't just take this poor woman's home cooking without asking... Then again, I guess we have been through hell and back today. And we can't afford to get sick, so we need to preserve our strength. Let's just call it a necessary evil.

"Sorry, miss," I said. "Hope you don't mind..."

I grabbed a bowl from a nearby cupboard, then used the ladle that was already sitting in the pot to scoop out some soup, making sure to take as many hunks of meat as possible. Then I grabbed a tray and the first pair of chopsticks I

could find and headed back up to the bedroom where Akira was resting. I knocked on the door.

"Come in," she responded weakly. "I'm decent."

Wh-whoa... For whatever reason, this uncharacteristic politeness from Akira struck me as more concerning than any of the other symptoms she'd shown thus far. Upon entering the room, I found Akira rolled up like a burrito under the covers, all the way up to her forehead. I knelt down and placed the tray at her bedside.

"Hey, I found some pork miso soup downstairs, so I brought some up for you in case you get hungry," I said. "Seems like the lady who lives here just happened to be cooking some up for lunch, but yeah..."

"Okay... Thanks," said Akira—again being surprisingly polite as she slowly slid her head out from beneath the covers. I could now see that she'd changed into her usual black sweatsuit. "...I'll try to eat some later."

"Cool. I'll leave it here, then. It won't get cold, so you can just have it whenever you feel like it." I resisted the urge to make an untimely quip about the timefreeze having its perks every once in a while as Akira buried her face under the covers again.

Granted, I knew one bowl of soup wasn't going to do much to help her regain her strength, so I stood up to go and look for any other food I could find. But before that, I needed to get changed myself; even indoors, I was getting pretty damn cold in this short-sleeved undershirt and wet pants. I walked over to my backpack and noticed Akira's wet clothes balled up and discarded on the ground. I assumed they probably wouldn't get terribly wrinkled or anything even if left like that overnight, but I figured I might as well fold them up for her. I reached down to pick them up and started unraveling the messy ball of sodden clothes—but then my fingers froze.

Her underwear was tangled up in there too.

I immediately abandoned this course of action and gently placed the wad of clothes back down on the floor in approximately the same state that I'd originally found it. Then I snatched some dry clothes of my own and quietly excused myself from the room. Once out in the hallway, I got changed, then

headed down to the living area.

I needed to find us some food—something with actual nutritional value, if at all possible. But I didn't feel right continuing to steal things from this old woman's house, so maybe it would be best for me to head back out into the rain to find a grocery store or something nearby. I was pretty sure I'd seen an umbrella in the entryway too, so it shouldn't be nearly as treacherous to challenge the storm this time around.

It was settled, then—but I needed to rest a little while before I left, because I was still feeling totally spent. I grabbed some floor cushions from a stack in the corner of the room and laid them out in a line to form a very sorry-looking makeshift bed. I checked my watch; it was 6:30 now, so I decided I'd take a little catnap until 7:00 and then head out.

I awoke with a start and immediately knew I'd overslept.

Shoot, I completely dozed off again. How does this keep happening?

I let out a great big yawn as I reached down to pull out my wristwatch—then felt a chill run down my spine when I saw what time it was. *Holy crap*. I'd been sleeping for well over two hours. I sure hoped that Akira was still doing all right.

I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes and headed out into the hallway. With my brain still foggy, I took a needlessly circuitous route to reach the stairway. I headed up to the second floor and knocked on the door of the room where Akira was resting. But there was no response.

"Iguma-san?" I asked. "You okay in there?"

Perhaps she'd already passed out. I creaked open the door as slowly as I could to take a peek inside. Sure enough, Akira was fast asleep, and I could see the empty soup bowl lying by her bedside as well. I breathed a momentary sigh of relief—but then noticed that something seemed decidedly off. Her breathing was haggard and irregular, and the crest of her futon fluctuated erratically up and down with every inhalation. Her strained face was flushed red and caked in sweat. From her symptoms, I assumed it was probably just a cold, but it sure seemed like a pretty nasty one to me.

Noticing my presence, Akira opened her eyes a crack. "Why is it so cold in here...?" she whined, then pulled the covers up over her head.

If she was complaining about the cold despite being wrapped up in layers of blankets, then it seemed my inkling was right. But if left unchecked, even the common cold could compound into something far worse. I headed back downstairs and started turning the whole place inside out in search of any cold or fever medication. I didn't even care that I was behaving like a common burglar anymore. If I had to completely ransack each room to find Akira the medicine she needed, then so be it.

"Aha! Gotcha!"

After much trial and error, I found some over-the-counter cold medicine and a thermometer in one of the drawers below the TV stand. I scooped them both up and hurried back upstairs. When I took Akira's temperature, she had a fever of over 38°C, so I immediately prescribed her a glass of water and some cold medicine, which she obediently took before falling languidly back into bed.

"Anything I can get for you?" I asked. "Any particular food you're craving, or anything like that...?"

Akira shook her head on her pillow. Apparently, she wasn't feeling all that hungry, despite having nothing to eat aside from a single bowl of soup. She definitely needed more nutrients if she wanted to get well anytime soon, though. And we were going to run out of water here pretty soon too. I emptied out the contents of my backpack and slung it over my shoulder.

"Okay," I said. "I think I'm gonna head out for a bit. Gotta try to find a supermarket or something."

"...Sorry about all of this," said Akira, her voice weak and weary.

I stood there a moment.

Akira and I had been traveling together for quite a while now, and this was the first time she'd ever apologized to me for anything. Part of me felt like I'd been waiting to hear these words from her for a long, long time now. Yet they didn't make me feel any better at all. If anything, they just made my heart ache even more.

"Nothing to apologize for," I told her, then turned to leave the room.

"And thank you," she added softly.

Those words, however, were enough to make my weary legs feel light again. God, I felt like such an easy mark for letting one little show of appreciation raise my spirits to such an immense degree—but boy, did it ever feel good to hear.

"Don't mention it," I said on my way out the door.

Wielding my plastic umbrella like a massive greatshield, I charged through the frozen downpour. With the rain suspended in midair, there was no need for any overhead protection—I just had to repel the droplets that hung directly in my path. That being said, there was only so much surface area I could cover with a single umbrella, so the bottoms of my pant legs were still getting soaked. I did consider just taking them off completely, but even in a world plucked out of time, I was nowhere near ballsy enough to go running around town in my underwear. *Especially* not while holding an old lady's umbrella out in front of me like a weapon. I owed the poor woman a life debt as it was; the least I could do was not traumatize her local community after all she'd done for me.

Not that she had much choice in the matter, I guess.

I picked up the pace. Even though I'd gotten a couple hours of sleep, I was still feeling pretty exhausted, and my legs were as sore as ever. I wanted to hurry up and find a grocery store or mini-mart as soon as possible so I could get back to the house and rest. The number of single-family homes I was seeing had definitely started to increase, though, so I figured I couldn't be *too* far away from one or the other... Worst-case scenario, I'd just have to go around pilfering tiny bits of food from all the nearby houses one by one. Not like it made much of a difference when we were going to steal regardless—and right now, I had to prioritize Akira's health over my own personal moral code.

After walking down the road for another hour or so, I noticed retail establishments starting to pop up here and there. These were only small local businesses, of course—but I figured if I followed these signs of civilization like a trail of breadcrumbs, they'd surely lead me to some sort of grocery store sooner or later.

And sure enough, after walking a bit farther, I found one. It was a pretty rundown little establishment, with the dull, flaking paint on its antiquated billboard clearly signaling its age. I hurried inside and quickly set about cramming my backpack full of anything and everything I could think of that might help someone recover from a cold. Let's get some bananas, some yogurt, some canned peaches, a couple of sports drinks, a few snacks...

"Damn... This is getting kinda heavy."

The straps of my backpack were now digging deep into my shoulders. Maybe I'd crammed it a little *too* full. But I definitely didn't want to run out of food and have to come all the way back here, so I decided to just try to haul everything home with me as best I could. As always, I bowed apologetically to the cashier on my way out the door, even though I knew it was a pointless gesture.

Upon stepping outside, I had to stop to catch my breath as I beheld the strange and astounding sight that lay before me. There was now a clear and obvious path leading back the way I came. Or, no—it was less of a path and more of a tunnel through the storm. With time stopped, the wall of raindrops I'd bored my way through with the umbrella had remained politely swept aside. This meant that the exact route I'd taken to get here would be perfectly preserved until the timefreeze ended. I could follow it safely back home without having to worry about awkwardly clearing a path again.

I grabbed the old woman's umbrella from the rack outside the store, leaving its canopy collapsed as I gripped it tightly around the middle and marched triumphantly down the path my earlier efforts had carved out for me. It was a funny feeling, even though I understood the mechanics—as if the world itself was laying out the red carpet for me in apology for the back-breaking ordeal it had put me through. This brief reprieve was almost enough to make my pack feel light on my shoulders, and for me to forget the toll of exhaustion this whole pilgrimage had taken on me, if only for a moment.

But it was still an arduous, hour-long walk to get back home with my heavy load of food. By the time I made it to the old woman's house, I was utterly spent yet again. After tottering through the front door, I yanked my shoes and socks off, then crawled up the stairs to the bedroom where Akira was sleeping. She jerked awake at the sound of me opening the door, twisting her neck to

look. As soon as she saw that it was only me, she relaxed and let her head sink back into her pillow.

```
"...Knock first next time," she said.

"Oh, m-my bad. Totally forgot..."

"It's fine."
```

This was the sort of thing she normally would have completely blown a gasket over, but it seemed she didn't have the extra energy to chew me out right now. I let my heavy backpack fall to the floor with a *thud*, then sat cross-legged beside her.

```
"How are you feeling?" I asked.

"A little better, I think."

"Glad to hear it."
```

Her face still looked pretty feverish to me, but it sounded like her condition had stabilized, at the very least. Her breathing had gotten a lot steadier too. I reached over and dragged my backpack across the floor to her bedside.

"I went to the store," I said. "Picked up some fresh fruit, some of those Weider energy gels—got a whole bunch of stuff."

```
"...Did you have to go far?"

"Yeah, a little. 'Bout an hour's walk from here, maybe."

"Oh..."
```

After Akira breathed this despondent syllable, tears suddenly welled up in her vacant eyes, streaming sideways down her cheeks and onto the pillowcase.

"Wh-what's the matter?" I asked, panicking a bit.

"Nothing..." she said, rubbing her nose into her pillow to wipe her face before turning her back as if to shut me out.

I pulled my wristwatch out of my pants pocket. It was 12:00 a.m.—far later than when we usually went to bed. Tonight of all nights, I definitely needed the sleep; I'd worn my poor muscles down to the bone. And yet, the thought of getting up and walking out of the room didn't sit right with me, so I just leaned

my back up against the bedroom wall and closed my eyes.

"Why are you being so nice to me?" Akira murmured softly against her pillow. "I was so horrible to you..."

"...It's fine. We were both tired and stressed out. And I mean, we're in this thing together, aren't we? So of course we've gotta look out for each other. Not like anyone else is going to."

"When have I ever looked out for you? Feels like I've just been dragging you down this whole entire time."

"Come on. That's not true at all."

"Yes it is. Besides, none of this ever would've happened if I hadn't insisted on going to Tokyo in the first place," she said, voice laced with self-loathing. "You were totally right about me... About everything. I didn't know what I was signing up for, thinking I could actually make it there. I didn't know how hard it would be. And... And this whole time, I...I was just acting tough to cover it up, like you said..."

I didn't say a word. I just listened quietly.

"Ugh, what am I even *doing* here...?" she groaned—then curled up into a ball and buried herself within the safety of the covers.

Neither of us said anything for a good long while after that. We just stayed there together, sharing in a sort of tranquil, mutually understood silence. From time to time, I could hear the reassuring rustle of fleece rubbing against linen as she shifted beneath the bedsheets.

"I ran away from home, you know."

She said this in a muffled voice from under the covers, just when I thought she might have finally fallen asleep. I waited patiently for her to feel ready to say more.

"Our family's so dysfunctional," she began. "Literally your stereotypical 'Dad's a toxic prick, Mom's a total enabler' type of household. Any time that asswipe barks out an order, my mom'll drop everything to bring him a drink or the paper or whatever."

Just judging from the way she was describing this "asswipe," I could already tell that I probably wouldn't care much for Akira's father either.

"He's like an actual child half the time," she went on. "A real spoiled brat. He'll throw a huge fit the moment he doesn't get his way, and he'll stay out late doing god knows what without letting *any* of us know he's not coming home... Then slam the door like he's trying to break it off the hinges when he finally does... God, I can't stand the men in my family. My stupid brother's the same way—just a worthless stay-at-home loser who can't go five minutes without jacking off. I'm so sick and tired of both of them."

I couldn't help but wince at these harsh descriptions of her own flesh and blood. But deep in my gut, I felt the truth in her words; I wasn't just getting a one-sided account here. And something told me it was only going to get worse from this point on.

"I feel so bad for my mom, always having to put up with their bullcrap," said Akira. "She's way too nice for her own good—never complains, never has a bad word to say about anybody. Which is why I always tried to do whatever I could to support her... Help with chores around the house and stuff, since I knew nobody else would. I really, really wanted to be the one who always had her back. But then..."

Akira paused for a moment and sniffled softly.

"That night... The night before I met you...that stupid prick had the *nerve* to make fun of my mom's cooking, just because it didn't turn out all that well... Like, he was *really* laughing about it too. Saying it tasted like ass... Trying to make her feel like a total idiot. So I stood up, right... And I said 'Hey, if you don't like it, you can go eat somewhere else'... But then my mom, she...she slapped me...and started yelling at me... Like, 'How dare you speak to your father that way?!' I couldn't believe it. I mean, why would she do that to me when I was only trying to stick up for her, you know...? It felt like she was saying 'I don't want your help,' and that hurt so bad... And then I looked at my dad and my brother, and they were both staring at me and shaking their heads like *I* was the one out of line or whatever... And then I was just like, 'Wow. Guess I really don't belong here after all'..."

I could hear her getting closer to breaking down with every word.

"So I ran out of the house... Didn't have any idea where to go... So I just went and wandered around near the station by myself for a while, but then... But then I...I..."

Yet try as she might, it seemed Akira just couldn't choke out the words. All I could hear was the sound of inconsolable sobbing leaking out from beneath the covers, interspersed by the occasional convulsive gasp. In fact, the only words she said that I could make out for the entire rest of the night were simply, "It hurts..."

I wanted nothing more than to make her feel better somehow. I just didn't know what I could possibly say to reassure her. And so as I sat there, fumbling for some convenient turn of phrase that might lift her spirits even a little, my mind wandered back to the day she and I first met. I could still remember the arrogant way in which she'd carried herself and talked down to me, even though we'd only just met. Even back then, I'd had a hunch that this was only a defense mechanism meant to conceal just how terrified she was by the timefreeze. After a series of stressful and traumatic events the night before, followed by a supernatural phenomenon the very next morning, she had probably just been putting up a tough front to keep herself from falling apart.

I felt pretty bad for Akira, and I wished there was more I could do to help. I really did want to keep her happy and safe from harm. If I'd had the power to solve all her problems with a snap of my fingers, then in that moment, I totally would have.

But I knew that saying so wouldn't make her feel any better.

Feelings like pity and protectiveness, or a desire to solve someone else's problems for them—while generally noble on paper—were often selfish and condescending at their core. When these sorts of heroic instincts kicked in, it could even be seen as a tacit admission that you didn't believe the other party was strong or capable enough to fend for themselves, whether they actually needed your help or not. While not the worst thing in the world, it was definitely not a sentiment born of genuine mutual respect. At least, I was pretty sure Akira would interpret it that way.

So instead of offering empty reassurances that she'd only take offense to, I simply kept my mouth shut and sat by her side. I wanted to force myself to stay up with her, at least until she'd cried out all her tears. This was, at least in my opinion, the single most considerate and respectful thing I could do for her right now.

Akira wept for about two more hours, then finally fell asleep.

We'd been squatting in the old woman's house for three days now.

Thankfully, Akira had made a full recovery; it seemed it really was just the common cold. She had no remaining symptoms, her temperature was back to normal, and her appetite had returned as well. Still, we decided to play it safe and rest for one more day before heading back out on the road. Akira insisted she was good to go, but considering we'd be heading right back into the heart of the storm, I wanted us to be in tip-top shape.

At the moment, I was keeping myself busy wiping up the wet footprints we'd left all over the hallway with one of my personal towels. I wanted to leave as little trace of us having been here as possible, lest the old woman have a heart attack once time started moving forward again. But since it was impossible for us to get *everything* good as new again—like the towels we'd borrowed, which I'd just had to throw in the washing machine—I figured I'd still leave a note or something for the old woman on our way out. Maybe this would only freak her out even worse, but if she was going to notice all the little differences anyway, I'd rather she not feel like she was going crazy.

"Phew," I said. "Think that about does it."

Having finished wiping down the floors, I headed up to the bedroom—this time making sure to knock before opening the door. Inside, I found Akira leafing through a volume of shojo manga she'd borrowed from the bookshelf nearby. But as soon as I stepped into the room, she closed the book and lifted her head.

"Hey," she said. "All done cleaning up?"

"Yeah, more or less."

"Cool. Thanks for doing that. And sorry for not helping."

Ever since her fever had gone down, I'd noticed that Akira had started saying thank you and apologizing a lot more often—about as frequently as any other person would. This was truly a momentous change, in my view. I was trying my best to act natural and not make a big deal out of it so as not to make her self-conscious, but at the same time, it made me so giddy that I couldn't help but want to crack a smile each time it happened.

"Nah, don't mention it," I said. "You're still recovering, so I want you to take it easy."

I wrapped the towel I'd used to wipe down the floors in a plastic bag, along with all of my clothes that were still wet from the rain. Akira reached over to slide the volume of manga she'd been reading back into its slot on the bookshelf, then turned to face me.

"H-hey, um... So I've been thinking..." she said.

"Hm? Yeah, what's up?"

Akira reached into her pocket and pulled out a sealed pack of batteries—the same one she'd nicked from the rest stop several days prior.

"I kinda wanna go back and return these," she said. "I think you were right; it's not good to just take stuff we don't need, y'know...?"

She was scratching her cheek with one finger as she spoke, clearly feeling a little bit sheepish about the whole fiasco—and probably ashamed for having taken them in the first place. It genuinely warmed my heart to see her making an effort to mend her ways and show that she understood my point of view. At the same time, this would mean trekking all the way back the way through the rain to that rest stop, then coming all the way back here before we could make any more forward progress. Frankly, it was a pretty demotivating prospect. Still, if that was what Akira felt was the right thing to do, then I wanted to support her in it—especially since I was the one who'd pushed her into having this change of heart.

"Sounds like a plan," I said. "Let's go put them back together."

"Yeah... Sorry for the massive detour," said Akira.

"Don't worry about it. But can I ask what you were planning to use them for? I

know you said you've got some portable phone charger thing, but what have you even been doing on your phone?"

"Oh, right." Akira reached into her other pocket to show me. "I've been listening to music on it, yeah. I've got a bunch of stuff downloaded, so I don't need service or anything to listen to it. Whenever it's too quiet or I can't sleep, I'll just pop in some earbuds and put something on to fill the silence for a while. Keeps my mind off of things."

"Ah. Gotcha..."

Come to think of it, she'd mentioned having trouble sleeping a few times now over the course of the trip, hadn't she? It was easy to forget sometimes that *I* was the abnormal one here for finding this state of affairs so relaxing. I had to remember that for most people, being tossed into a frozen world completely devoid of sound would be eerie to the point of deeply unsettling. Maybe even enough to drive a person mad.

And when that clicked, I felt overcome by so many different regrets all at once.

I never once considered that for Akira, those batteries were a basic necessity.

"...On second thought," I said, "maybe we'd better not."

"Huh?" said Akira, dumbstruck.

"Sorry, I know I'm flip-flopping on you a lot here... But if music's what you need to help calm yourself down, then I wouldn't say those batteries are a needless luxury at all. They're as vital to you as sugar, or carbohydrates, or what have you."

"So then...you think it's okay for me to keep 'em?"

"Yeah. Just make good use of them, all right? Er, not that they're mine to give away or anything... But you know what I mean."

As soon as I finished speaking, I could feel my whole body tense up a bit as I braced myself for her to yell at me for having made such a big deal about it in the first place. But yet again, Akira defied my preconceptions of her, as her lips stretched not into a scowl but into perhaps the broadest smile I'd ever seen—

one of pure, unfiltered joy and relief.

"Oh, thank god..." she said with an exasperated sigh, as though she'd been literally holding her breath as she waited to hear my verdict.

Seeing her relieved was more than enough to make me feel the same way. I could tell that her influence was definitely starting to have an effect on my moral compass, making me reconsider my own inner thoughts and values in ways I'd never been forced to before. If my influence was having even a little bit of the same effect on her, and we could both grow in our own separate ways from this experience...then that would make me pretty darn happy, to be honest.

"Hey, Mugino," said Akira. "I forget—did you say you don't really listen to a whole lot of music?"

"Oh, right," I said. "Yeaaah, not really."

"Well, you're in luck, my friend, because I've got a ton of bangers right here on my phone! If you don't like any of this stuff, then we'll know you've got no taste! Here, lemme give you a little sampler. I'll find something up your alley, just you wait!"

"Yeah? All right, if you say so..."

Akira and I sat down next to each other against the wall, and I watched as she quickly flicked through the playlists on her phone.

"Okay, now let's see... Man, what even *genres* would a guy like you be into...? Maybe you'd like something a little more experimental like Tokyo Jihen... Or maybe something kinda retro and psychedelic like Glim Spanky would be more your speed? Both super good bands, by the way, and great starting points for sure—though I *definitely* wanna show you some Ellegarden stuff too... Aw, man. Too many choices! I can't decide!"

As Akira went back and forth between this song and that, trying to decide which to play for me first (while also stopping to gush about each and every one of her personal favorites), I couldn't help but get swept up a little by her infectious excitement. I had no idea what sort of music she had in store for me. All I knew was that regardless of what artist or genre it might be, I really, truly

hoped that I could learn to love it.



## Chapter Four: A World Without Lies or Pain

JUST AS WE WERE COMING UP On the city of Sendai, we finally made it out of the rain. Words could not express the liberation I felt upon gazing up at a clear blue sky for the first time in several days; it might even have been a more emotional moment for me than making it out of the Seikan Tunnel, to be honest.

The urban sprawl that was now cropping up along the highway made the past week or so of trudging through the less populated lowlands from Morioka feel like some sort of fever dream. No longer were we constantly on pins and needles, wondering when we might come across another grocery store or minimart. Both food and shelter were now in ample supply. These reliable creature comforts gave us much more physical and mental leeway to stop and smell the roses a bit—taking detours to check out nearby sightseeing attractions or stay the night at fancier, more expensive-looking resorts.

At the moment, we were taking some time off from our travels to check out a lovely riverside park not too far from Sendai Station: West Park, it was called. The whole place was dyed a brilliant, luminous yellow by the fragrant ginkgo trees that had scattered their autumn leaves across the ground. It was truly a sight to behold.

"Hey, Mugino!" Akira called out to me excitedly. "Check it out!"

I turned to see her gathering a pile of fallen ginkgo leaves with her feet. She drew her leg back and kicked them up off the ground—but just as they started fluttering back down to earth, they froze in place, suspended in midair. Akira looked at me giddily, her eyes aglow, waiting for some sort of reaction.

"Very pretty, yeah," I agreed.

"Yikes, tough crowd... Here, why don't you try?"

This did not, admittedly, seem very much like my kind of fun, but I figured I might as well give it a shot if she insisted. I gathered up some leaves with my

feet, just as Akira had. I knew I'd need to really get them high into the air for the best effect, so I reared my right leg back as if winding up for a penalty kick, then slammed my foot down and drove it through the base of the pile.

"Bwagh!"

The momentum from the follow-through made my left leg slip, reminding me—as I lost all contact with the ground and watched my life flash before my eyes—that yes, fallen leaves were typically a bit slippery. I crashed down in predictably comedic fashion. As I gazed up into a pale-blue sky garnished with golden ginkgo trees in what may very well have been my final moments, I couldn't help but be taken in by the picturesque beauty of it all for a short while. Also, my back hurt, so I couldn't get up right away.

"H-hey! Are you all right...?" Akira cried, rushing over in a panic. I felt bad for worrying her, so I finally sat upright.

"Ah ha ha... Yeah, sorry. Guess you know I'm not much of an athlete now," I said, playing it off with a lighthearted joke. Relief washed over Akira's expression for a moment—but then she angrily placed her hands on her hips like a chiding mother.

"Gee, ya think?!" she said. "I mean, come on, big guy! Don't go giving yourself a hernia now, for cryin' out loud... Pfft! Ah ha ha ha!"

Akira hunched over and burst out laughing like a little kid, clutching her sides as though she literally couldn't contain herself. Watching her expression go from worried to angry to hysterical before my eyes was so amusing that I couldn't help but chuckle along. In a silent park in a world on mute, we laughed like idiots for no one to hear.

After taking our time walking around the perimeter of the park, Akira and I headed into a nearby dining hall. For the first several legs of our journey, we'd made an effort to only eat premade lunches and side dishes from supermarkets and convenience stores as far as actual meals went. But once Akira recovered from her cold, we talked things over and agreed to treat ourselves to a slightly more indulgent meal at a restaurant or dining hall once every few days. This establishment was a sort of buffet-style eatery in which you could just grab

whatever foods you wanted and scoop them onto your plate, which was a bit of an easier format for my morals to stomach. Not that we weren't still dining and dashing either way, obviously—but it *felt* less terrible, at least, considering we weren't swiping food out from under the noses of other customers or the waitstaff. It was the first time I'd gotten to enjoy a nice, hot, filling meal since our journey began.

Once we were finished eating, we made our way over to a public bathhouse downtown, which we'd learned of thanks to a foldout tourist map we'd picked up from a brochure rack at the station. As soon as we made it to our destination, Akira and I wasted no time splitting up and heading into our respective gendered baths. After soaking my weary muscles for a bit, I took some time to wash the few days' worth of clothes I'd hauled into the bathing area with me. Not in the bathtub itself, obviously—just borrowing the bathwater, and even that felt pretty taboo—but there weren't many other options for doing a full load of laundry all at once in this world, so whatever.

"All right, think that should do it."

Washing phase, complete. All that was left now was to wrap them up inside a bath towel, wring the moisture out, and keep them on my person as we walked around town for a while—otherwise, they wouldn't actually dry out. It typically didn't take more than five hours if I just dangled them in a bundle from my backpack or tied them around myself like a cape or waistcoat.

Up until recently, I'd just been washing the areas around the pits, cuffs, and collars that were most prone to collecting sweat, then wearing the clothes like normal with those areas still damp. But that had turned out to be a far more unpleasant experience than I ever imagined, and the wetness only made it feel colder, so I'd recently swapped over to this new laundering method. It was definitely a chore to lug around wet clothes with me all the time, but at least they got cleaner with this method.

I dressed myself and headed back out to the lobby. After passing by some elderly men who'd been frozen mid-conversation in the hallway, I spotted Akira sitting on a sofa with her hair wrapped up in a towel like a turban, leafing through some sort of pamphlet.

"Hey, sorry for the wait," I said.

"All good," Akira mumbled, not even lifting her head.

"So, did you pick out a place for us to stay tonight?" I asked, placing my laundry on top of my backpack as I sat down in the chair beside her.

"Mm-hmm. Was thinking maybe we could do something a little different for a change, actually."

"Oh yeah? What's that?"

"Heh. That's for me to know, and you to find out," she said, snapping the pamphlet shut as she leaned forward and pushed herself to her feet.

We gathered our things and left the bathhouse. My wristwatch showed that it was 10:00 p.m.—about time for us to hit the hay. We walked right past a row of hotels as Akira led me down the street toward the station. As I wondered with anticipation where on earth she intended for us to sleep tonight, I was baffled to see her suddenly take a sharp left into a massive department store.

"Uh, you sure this is the right way?" I asked.

"Oh, I'm sure, all right," Akira said, a sort of prideful confidence in her voice as she started walking up the frozen escalator. She led me all the way up to the back of the fourth floor, then spun around and triumphantly declared, "Okay, here we are!"

She'd come to a stop right before the bedding department of a major home furniture retail chain. I couldn't help but crack a smile as it finally dawned on me what she meant by trying something "a little different for a change."

"Hey. What's so funny, huh?" Akira demanded.

"Nothing," I said. "Just find it amusing the way your brain works sometimes. Never would have thought to come here myself. Pretty cute idea, though, I have to say."

"Aw, shut it. I've been wanting to do this ever since I was a little kid," said Akira, as she dropped her backpack on the floor and *fwumped* onto a nearby bed. "I remember watching this old movie once forever ago where they stay the night in a department store like this. Don't really remember much else about it,

but that one scene always stuck with me, for whatever random reason."

Wait. An old movie where they sleep in a department store...?

"Was it Modern Times?" I asked.

"Huh? The hell's that? Nah, it was some Crayon Shin-chan movie."

"Ohhh, gotcha... Yeah, I think I know which one you mean."

I felt a little embarrassed; I should have known right off the bat it was that one she was referring to—not some ancient 1930s film I'd only seen because my uncle Kurehiko exposed me to it back in elementary school. There was definitely something to those old black-and-white comedies, though. Even as a distractible little kid, I remembered being utterly enthralled from start to finish thanks to Charlie Chaplin's great physical comedy.

"How 'bout you quit standing around and sit down already?" said Akira.

"Oh, right," I said, snapping myself back to reality before I indulged too deeply in my reminiscence. I searched the showroom floor for another comfy-looking bed. Not that I was all that picky—I didn't mind sleeping on a couch if I had to. There weren't very many customers in the area either, so there were plenty of places I could crash. But as I scanned the vicinity from end to end, Akira looked at me with puzzlement.

"What are you doing?" she asked. "Just come take the bed next to mine."

"Huh?" I said. "But...i-isn't that a little too close? I mean, there's no partition or anything..."

"Oh, I see how it is. You don't want to sleep next to me—is that it?"

"No, that's not what I meant..." Granted, yes, I wasn't sure how comfortable I'd be having her watch me snore or vice versa, and the thought was obviously nerve-racking for a variety of other reasons, but most importantly: "I guess I just assumed that *you* wouldn't want to sleep too close to *me*..."

"Nah, c'mon. I know you better than that by *now*. What's there to worry about?"

Akira smiled and shook her head as though I was being totally ridiculous, then kicked off her shoes and let herself fall backward onto the bed. Thinking there

was no harm in it so long as she was comfortable and not wanting to insinuate anything rude by refusing, I took her up on her offer and helped myself to the next bed over. I set my things down, took off my shoes, and slipped my legs under the covers. The mattress felt very nice—but the high ceiling and overhead lights made it a bit hard to truly relax.

"Man, this is so weird..." I said. "Well, Iguma-san? How does it feel to have one of your lifelong dreams granted at last?"

"Hey, I never said it was a *dream* or anything. But yeah, I mean...it's pretty cool, I guess. Wish it wasn't so friggin' bright in here, though."

"Yeah, you and me both."

As the two of us tossed and turned, trying to get comfortable, we happened to roll over to face one another. Akira's eyes went wide like those of a deer in headlights, and she quickly turned her gaze back up to the ceiling.

"F-feels kinda weird just lying here like this, huh?" said Akira.

"I thought we were trying to go to bed," I replied.

"Well, yeah—but don't you usually have to mess around on your phone a little bit before you can actually fall asleep? 'Cause I totally do."

"I mean, can't you still do that? You've got those batteries, don't you?"

"Yeah... Guess I'm just not really in the mood right now."

I could see that this conversation was going nowhere fast.

"Well, sorry, Iguma-san," I said, stifling a yawn. "But I think I'm probably gonna pass out pretty quick here. Hope you find something to keep your mind occupied, though."

"...Y'know, I've actually been meaning to bring this up for a while now, but..."

My ears perked up as Akira's tone suddenly turned solemn. I assumed whatever this was had to be pretty important, so I mentally braced myself for the worst.

"I kinda hate my last name, to be honest," she said.

"...What, you mean Iguma?"

"Yeah, isn't it ugly? I mean, it's literally got the kanji for 'bear' in it."

Oh, is that all? Phew. I was relieved to hear that it was something ultimately trivial—no offense—and not anything actually heavy.

"Really? I think it's pretty cool," I said. "It's unique, at the very least."

"Nah, it's way too clunky and masculine. I mean, not that I love my first name either. It's pretty tomboyish too... But at least it's better than *Iguma*!"

"Right, yeah... No, I hear you."

I was so tired at this point that I was struggling to respond with anything of actual substance, so I just agreed with her by default. Still, I reached up and rubbed my eyes, hoping I could at least stave off sleep until she was finished making her point.

"So, like, I guess what I'm saying is..."

When I pulled my hands back down from my face, I saw that Akira had turned her whole body in bed to face me. Her comforter was pulled all the way up to her chin, and she had a slightly pensive look on her face. *Oh boy... What is it this time?* 

"If you just wanted to call me Akira instead, I'd be cool with that."

I didn't know what to say. This casual, offhand suggestion was so unexpected—and, at least for me, unprecedented—that I was genuinely at a loss for how to respond. Surely she knew as well as I did that kids our age didn't typically call each other by their first names unless they were *very* well acquainted with one another, especially when it came to members of the opposite sex. Which would imply that Akira already considered us to be much closer than I realized—and thought of me as someone she could truly trust.

I felt a strange rumbling feeling deep in my chest, but I knew right away this wasn't the usual one. This wasn't the bad one. Not suffocating or arrhythmic, but a warm and reassuring emotion slowly rippling out in waves from the center of my heart until it had wrapped up my entire body in a blanket more comforting than even these fancy linens—and softer too. I couldn't help but squeeze my toes together under the covers.

"Oh... Okay," I said. "Then... I guess I'll try calling you that from now on?"

Akira let out a playful giggle at this. Every time I got to see those protruding canines peek out from beneath her upper lip, my mood soared like I'd just won a prize. I figured I should ride this momentum and try calling her by her first name aloud right away. I felt a little bit anxious but wet the inside of my mouth with my tongue and said:

"Akira."

Immediately, I heard a gulp run down Akira's throat. Then came some indistinct, guttural mumbling I couldn't quite make out as she turned her head away—but I could still see her ears poking out through the gaps in her hair, and they were flushed bright red. She was definitely having *some* sort of reaction to me saying her name, though I couldn't for the life of me say whether it was good or bad.

"Wh-what's up?" I asked cautiously.

"...san," she said.

"Sorry?"

"That's Akira—SAN to you!" she shouted, then pulled the covers up over her head completely. "N-never mind, I take it back! Just call me by my last name! I'm going to bed!"

Well, so much for that. Sheesh. Not that I minded—I was pretty used to addressing her as "Iguma-san" by this point anyway. If she was more comfortable with that too, then it just meant less work for me. I pulled the covers up over my eyes as well to block out the bright lights overhead, then fell asleep to the drumming of my own heart.

After passing through Sendai, we continued following the Tohoku Line due south, stopping along the way in cities like Natori, Iwanuma, Shibata, and other midsize towns I was fairly certain I'd heard the names of at least once or twice before. All of these were definitely small enough to be classified as rural, though they still had all the amenities we needed. This allowed us to make it all the way down to Fukushima without any of the trials and tribulations we'd

faced during the first few legs of our trip.

We'd been on this journey together for probably over a month now. I'd lost track of the exact number of days ever since Akira passed out in the rain, which had definitely messed with my sense of time a bit—but I knew it had to have been more than three weeks at the very least. I'd gotten pretty used to this nomadic lifestyle by this point; I'd even begun to feel a strange sense of fulfillment with each new city we came to, explored, and then promptly left behind. It still wasn't a pleasure cruise, by any means, but I'd grown accustomed to the rhythm and rapport of this adventure with Akira by now.

Which did make me pause and wonder sometimes: What about *after* we made it to Tokyo? What if we found a way to make time start moving again? Alternatively, what if we didn't? What would our next objective be, in that case? Whenever I started thinking that far ahead, I couldn't help but feel a little bit anxious.

"What are you lookin' all angsty and apprehensive about?" Akira asked as we walked down the street. She had a steamed meat bun in one hand, which she'd procured from a nearby mini-mart and was now munching on as we made our way through town.

"Nothing," I said. "Don't worry about it."

"Wait, I get it... You wish you got a meat bun too, don'tcha? Well, too bad, 'cause you're not getting any of mine!"

"Didn't want any."

"Oh yeah? And why not, huh? Think you're too good to eat my leftovers, is that it? Now that's just plain rude."

"I never said anything like that..."

Akira flashed a teasing grin at me as she took another big bite of her bun. She was clearly just trying to get a rise out of me, which was a bit annoying, but it was enough to derail my negative train of thought, so I was grateful to her for that, at least.

It was a bit wild just how much she and I had opened up to each other over time, especially given that our first impressions had been...less than positive, to put it lightly. That stilted awkwardness that had hung over our every conversation back then felt so far away now, like some trivial argument we'd had forever ago. In fact, I'd even go so far as to say that of all the people I'd gotten to know in my life, she was probably my single closest friend.

Friend. Yes, that felt like the right word to describe it. Obviously, I didn't know if Akira considered me her friend as well, but I got the sense that she probably did... Once time started moving forward again, would she still interact with and treat me the same way that she did now?

But just as I was contemplating this, Akira suddenly stopped dead in her tracks. I watched the meat bun slip and fall from her grasp—freezing in midair just a few inches before it hit the pavement.

"Hey, butterfingers," I said. "You dropped your bun."

"...Look." Her voice sounded stunned and hollow as she lifted a trembling finger toward the sky. I turned my gaze in the direction she was pointing, and my eyes immediately went just as wide as hers.

There was a person floating high above the street, just over the edge of one of the nearby rooftops. It was a woman in a business suit, her body suspended weightlessly against the autumn sky as though she were lying face down in a pool of water. Almost as if time had frozen at the exact moment she jumped off the building to—

Almost as if? No, that was exactly what we were witnessing here. It was the only explanation that made sense. We'd just stumbled onto the scene of an attempted suicide.

"H-holy crap, we've gotta go save her!" said Akira, snapping back to her senses and dashing off to the office building the woman was jumping from. I followed her into the lobby, and we climbed the narrow stairwell all the way to the top floor, then swung open the door leading out onto the roof. Immediately, I spotted the woman's long, fluttering ponytail over the edge of the protective railing, reaching upward as though her hair had a will of its own and was trying to save her.

We rushed over to the edge. Even knowing that there was no risk of her falling any further than she already had, it was hard not to feel like time was of

the essence. The woman looked close enough that we could probably reach her if we jumped the railing.

"Here, I'll pull her back up!" Akira said frantically.

"Wait, no!" I shouted. "Let me do it."

"Nah, I got this! You can't touch other people, right?"

"Yeah, but this is super dangerous..."

"I'll be fine, trust me. I'm not as helpless as you think I am."

I ground my teeth together in vexation. Realistically, I should be the one doing this, since I had more upper body strength than her. But Akira also had a point that I might have some involuntary negative reaction and lose my grip, so I should really just leave this to her. I'd just have to find some other way to help out.

"Okay," I said. "I'll hold you by your backpack so you don't fall."

"Cool, sounds good," said Akira, climbing up over the railing.

Once she was on the other side, I grabbed her backpack with both hands. The street looked pretty far down from up here; one false move and she'd tumble to an almost certain death. I held on as tightly as I possibly could as Akira leaned out over the edge and gripped the woman by the back of her suit collar.

"Hnnngh...!"

She pulled as hard she could, and the woman's body *slowly* came drifting back toward the building. It may have *looked* as though she was floating weightlessly, but in actuality, all of her weight—or inertia, or what have you—was still in play, so it took considerable force to drag her back in. I could hear the snap of one of the buttons on the woman's jacket popping off as beads of sweat ran down Akira's neck. I felt pretty worthless for not being able to do anything to help but support her from behind. But after much effort spent pulling on the woman in this awkward, unstable manner, Akira finally managed to get her entire upper body back up over the protective railing. From there, Akira jumped over the railing herself, then hauled the woman the rest of the way by her underarms to lay her out flat on the rooftop.

"Phew... Man, I'm beat," said Akira, plunking her butt down on the concrete.

"Yeah, good work," I said. "Take a load off."

Now that I had the chance, I took a closer look at the woman. She looked to be in her late twenties, maybe. Her eyes were tightly shut, and her hands were clasped before her chest as if in prayer.

"...Actually, sorry, Iguma-san," I said. "Would you mind checking her pockets for me too, really quick?"

"I mean, I don't mind... But why?"

"Guess I'm just curious to know what made her want to die."

Akira didn't seem all that convinced, but she did as I asked. She rifled through the woman's jacket and skirt pockets and removed everything she found: a phone, some cough drops, a pen, a handkerchief, and some medicine tablets. That was it. Nothing to even help us identify who she was, let alone a reason she might have attempted suicide.

"Yeah, nope. Can't even check her phone, look—it's got a passcode," said Akira, showing me the ten-key entry display on the lock screen. "Now can we please just leave it at that and go? Hate to say it, but there's nothing else we can do for this lady."

"...Doesn't that feel a bit irresponsible, though?" I said.

"Whaddya mean?"

"Well, like... We don't know the first thing about this person, or what she was going through... And yet, we still stepped in to stop her, despite not being able to do anything to make her life any better going forward... So I guess I'm just wondering if we really did the right thing here. Like, for all we know, this could have been her very last resort to escape the pain, you know what I mean? What if all we did was make things even worse for her? I don't know. I guess I'm just feeling unsure."

"So, what—you're saying we shouldn't have saved her, then? Just left her there to plummet to her death? You think *that* was the right thing to do?" Akira asked, her tone getting sharper as she glared at me with a hint of umbrage in

her eyes.

"No, that's not what I'm trying to say... It's just..."

"Just what?"

Whatever words I'd been trying to say next, I couldn't find them. Instead, I just lowered my head. "...Sorry. Forget I said anything. Guess I wasn't thinking straight."

"Yeah, no kidding. I mean, just look at her," said Akira, gazing down at the woman. "She obviously had to be at work or something, right? I mean, she's wearing a suit. Probably had something really terrible happen to her early in the day, and she just ran up onto the roof and jumped off in the heat of the moment. No way she was thinking straight, I guarantee it. Just look at the random junk she had in her pockets. If she was really suffering and we could tell she'd obviously planned it all out way in advance, maybe that'd be one thing... But if it was just some spur-of-the-moment impulse, then we *absolutely* did her a huge favor by stopping her. I mean, hell—we just saved her life."

"...You're totally right, yeah."

She hadn't left me any room to even attempt a counterargument. I was a little taken aback, honestly; I hadn't known she was capable of rationally rebuking me so thoroughly when it came to moral dilemmas like this, as rude as that might sound.

"Now c'mon, let's go," she said, heading over to the rooftop door. As she walked off, I took one last glance down at the woman. Even I didn't know why I'd been so determined to learn more about her, nor why she inspired such a jumbled haze of conflicted emotions deep in my chest. But it was time to go now, so I supposed I'd never know the real answer there.

Just as I was about to turn to leave, I noticed something.

"Hey, wait up!" I shouted.

"Ugh, what is it this time?" said Akira.

As my companion begrudgingly turned around, I knelt down by the woman's side to take a closer look. Sure enough, there was a small piece of paper poking

out from between her clasped hands.

"She's holding something," I said.

"...And you want me to take a look?" said Akira.

"Oh. Well, I mean, uh... Yes, if you wouldn't mind."

Akira let out a heavy sigh of disappointment, then walked back over.

"Fine," she said. "But after this, we're leaving for real, you got that?"

She grabbed the woman by her hands—which seemed to be clasped quite tightly, judging from the amount of effort it seemed to take to pry them apart. Eventually, Akira managed to pry them open, revealing a torn scrap of notebook paper that bore only a single sentence scrawled in pen:

"Take me to a world without lies or pain."

This was the woman's prayer: to be allowed into some safe haven, some sanctuary she was no doubt envisioning as she leapt, painted in soft-hued shades on the backs of her tightly shuttered eyelids. It was neither despair nor hope that had pushed her to take the leap—just a tiny, humble wish for somewhere slightly better than here.

"Hmph." Akira scoffed with contempt, then ripped the paper to pieces.

"Hey, what the—?!" I gawked in disbelief.

"Keep dreaming, lady. Ain't no such thing."

Akira tossed the shreds aside, then walked down the stairs. Reluctantly, I chased after her—leaving the woman lying out on the rooftop, her prayers unanswered.

We ultimately settled on a little hole-in-the-wall café to sleep in that night. It met all three of our main lodging criteria: not too many people inside; something we could lie down on (sofa-style seating, in this case); and best of all, dimly lit.

Akira set down her things and promptly crashed onto the nearest sofa, letting out a great big yawn as she grabbed one of the decorative seat cushions to use as a pillow. I sat down in a nearby armchair and began leafing through the café menu. Not that I was looking for something to eat or feeling particularly parched. I just wanted something to do to kill time until I felt more ready to fall asleep. According to my wristwatch, it was already 10:00 p.m.—pretty close to the time when I usually started nodding off. Yet for whatever reason, sleep was being strangely elusive to me tonight.

"You're not still thinkin' about that lady from earlier, are you?" said Akira, still lying flat on her sofa. I could tell from her tone that she was trying to be considerate, despite the undercurrent of impatience implied by her phrasing. Who knows—maybe she was genuinely feeling a little concerned about me from the way I was acting. In which case, I figured I should just come clean and not try to hide it.

"Yeah, kinda," I said. "Feeling a little shaken up, to be honest."

"Doesn't that sorta thing happen, like, every single day down in Tokyo? Heard they're always having to stop the trains and stuff because of it."

"It's probably a lot more common there than in other prefectures, yeah. But I wouldn't say it's an everyday thing or a constant inconvenience or whatever. Not that I would really know, since I don't ride the train myself, but still..."

"Right, yeah. Don't you guys usually just walk unless it's more than a couple stations away or something crazy like that?"

"Well, a lot of people do, yeah. But in my case, it's just because, well... Lots of people on the train, you know."

"Oh. Gotcha..."

There was perhaps nothing more terrifying to me in the entire world than the thought of being trapped in a rush hour train, packed together with like a bunch of sardines with all the other commuters. I was one hundred percent sure that if I ever took the train and saw a group of students or businesspeople walk aboard, I'd have a panic attack.

"Man, that's gotta be rough," said Akira.

"Believe me, it is," I said with a sigh. "Really wish there was some miracle cure so I could get the hell over it, already..."

I felt bad for letting the conversation take this somewhat depressing turn, especially since Akira had clearly only been checking in to see how I was holding up in the first place. I needed to just shut up and stop talking before I made things even worse, so I rose from my chair and moved to one of the nearby sofas.

"Sorry, I think I should probably get some sleep," I said.

"...'Kay," said Akira. "G'night."

She'd said this last part in a voice so soft it was almost imperceptible, but I knew I hadn't misheard her. This was the first time she'd ever wished me a good night—and it felt pretty damn good to hear, honestly. I returned the sentiment as I lay down and closed my eyes, now all but certain that sleep would find me soon enough.

\*\*\*

"Just order whatever you like, my boy."

For the first time in quite a while, my uncle Kurehiko had invited me out to get dinner with him at a chain izakaya. It was still fairly early in the evening, yet the restaurant was already teeming with people. As soon as we were seated, we ordered ourselves some drinks—an oolong tea for me and a beer for my uncle—as well as some appetizers to start things off. Shortly thereafter, the waitress brought out two frosted mugs, and we each started sipping our respective drinks without even clinking our mugs.

"You still haven't told me what the occasion is," I said. The only times I'd gone out to eat with my uncle in the past were on my birthday or when my parents were out of town. But today wasn't anybody's birthday, as far as I knew, and both my parents were home.

"Why, to celebrate you entering high school, of course," said my uncle.

"But that was months ago."

"I quit my lecturing job," he said, then took a drink of his beer. "Think of it as

my send-off party."

"Aren't you normally supposed to have those with your coworkers?"

"I want to enjoy my food, thank you very much."

This one little quip was enough to give me a pretty good sense of the kinds of workplace relationships my uncle had fostered at his job.

"So you're unemployed now, huh...?" I said.

"Watch your tongue," my uncle snapped. "I'm a professional painter."

"But you can't actually pay the bills with that, can you?"

"Income isn't everything, lad. It's all a matter of lifestyle."

"Whatever you say..."

The waitress brought out our appetizers on a tray and arranged them on the table: some edamame, rolled omelettes with dashi, and a plate of grilled shishamo smelt.

"And in any event, I only need to make enough to keep the lights on while I paint," my uncle said, taking another hearty swig. "That's how Gauguin did it."

My uncle, a nearly forty-year-old single man, was officially swearing off being gainfully employed. This seemed like it should have been a death knell for his overall prospects in life, yet Uncle Kurehiko seemed rather optimistic about this lifestyle change. Refreshed, even. Maybe he really *had* made the right decision by quitting.

"There's no virtue in simply having a job, I tell you—it's just suicide of the soul. And everyone knows it, deep down. How did we ever let working five days a week become the status quo? Isn't it a bit absurd when you really sit down and think about it? What good is financial gain when you have so little life left to enjoy it? It makes no sense. Those labor-loving fools who glorify a hard day's work above all else need to realize that they're defending the very slavery that dehumanizes them."

His rant started off strong...

"Getting involved with other human beings is just a recipe for trouble after

trouble after trouble. So why does everyone seem so *desperate* to connect with others? Are they so incapable of seeing their own worth without having another person to validate it for them? I'll never be like that. Never, I tell you. I'll live alone until the day I die."

...until his fervor ebbed away...

"It's been quite nice, really. I can sleep whenever I want, wake up whenever I want, head to the convenience store whenever I get peckish, and just paint whatever my heart desires when the fancy strikes me. That, to me, is true bliss. As long as I can make enough to support this lifestyle, I'll never want for anything more."

...and the despair finally claimed him, not even an hour later.

"Oh, damn it all—what a waste. What a pathetic, miserable waste. Everything I've ever done, all the lofty ideals I've fought for... It was all for nothing. Completely and utterly pointless. The apocalypse can't come soon enough for this godforsaken world, I tell you. There's no light at the end of the tunnel here, no bright future waiting for any of us. The population's just going to keep on decreasing as our beggarly government grows more and more decrepit, and calamities both natural and man-made destroy what little infrastructure we've built up. Children will be left to fend for themselves, crushed beneath the weight of all the absurd expectations and responsibilities our dysfunctional society has placed upon their shoulders, as the elderly die off one by one. *That* is the world in which we live, my boy. I'm not sure how *anyone* can stay sane while living in it."

My uncle's newfound zest for life was just his usual jaded vanity in sheep's clothing.

He really is still the same old Uncle Kurehiko after all, I thought with a shake of my head. At the same time, there was a kind of comfort in that knowledge. This was how I always wanted him to stay—my curmudgeonly uncle with the extremely pessimistic worldview. I wanted to hear more and more of his stubborn, eccentric little rants. I never, ever wanted him to turn into a normal, respectable human being and leave me behind.

"Tell me, Kayato," he said, addressing me directly all of a sudden as I quietly

sipped my oolong tea. "You're disillusioned with this world, aren't you?"

"Not sure I'd go that far," I said.

"Don't lie to me, boy. I know you feel it too."

"No, really. I've been...enjoying myself a lot more lately."

"Do you really mean that?" my uncle asked, staring at me with bloodshot eyes.

"...Well," I said, hanging my head, "I guess the biggest thing is that my high school's a combined junior and senior high. So for every kid like me who tested in, there's at least two more who've been there for several years already and got a free ride up through the escalator system. Which wouldn't bother me so much if it didn't feel like they'd already formed these little well-established cliques and stuff... So closed-off from the rest of us..."

"Oh? And why does that bother you?"

"...I guess it just feels a little unfair to the people like me, who actually put in the effort to study their way into the school only to be treated like outcasts."

"Ah, I see! Yes, nepotism at its finest—and from such an early age!"

"It's like, great, way to make me feel like I don't belong before I even have a chance to put myself out there... God forbid any of them ever have to go out of their comfort zones. I'd love to see what would happen if they ever had to get by without their little social circles and friend groups to rely on..."

"That's it, boy! You tell them!"

"Almost wish a meteorite would come crashing down directly on top of my school. Just turn the whole thing into a massive crater."

"A meteorite! Ha! Now that would show those ingrates what for!"

Uncle Kurehiko cackled out an amused guffaw. I could feel my mood growing lighter as I vented my frustrations as well. But before we even had a chance to choose what topic we wanted to complain about next, a young man who appeared to be approximately college-aged walked over from one of the nearby tables.

"Um, would you mind lowering your voices a bit?" he said. "There are other people here trying to enjoy themselves too, you know."

Uncle Kurehiko did a double take—then quickly lifted one corner of his mouth into a sheepish smile as he hunched over apologetically. "Ah, yes... Beg your pardon. We'll try to keep it down..."

As my uncle mumbled out this apology, I found myself strangely taken aback; this was the first time I'd ever seen him go soft and submissive to another person like this. The young man returned to his table and rejoined his three other seemingly college-age friends, all of whom had similar hairstyles and wore a similar style of clothes.

"God," said one of them. "Who the hell brings their kid to the bar, anyway?"

"Toxic parents, that's who," said another one. "Feel bad for *anyone* who has to sit around listening to their deadbeat dad gripe and moan like that."

"No kidding," said the third. "If I ever end up like that, I hope one of you guys'll just beat me over the head with a shovel when I'm not looking and put me out of my misery."

A peal of laughter broke out at the other table as the young men made merry at our expense. I pretended not to have heard it, and so did Uncle Kurehiko. But I could tell from his expression and some subtle shifts in his manner that he was feeling rather uncomfortable now. From that point on, he lowered his speaking voice about two full measures and awkwardly rambled on about utterly harmless, inoffensive subjects for the remainder of the evening. I knew deep down that this was not at all the sort of stuff he wanted to talk with me about, but I nodded along regardless.

After we paid our bill and stepped outside, I could see the first stars of the evening had poked their heads out from behind the clouds. Businesspeople on their way home from work bustled to and fro across the pedestrian thoroughfare. Uncle Kurehiko and I walked together back to the station—me to retrieve my bike from the bike rack and him to take the train back home. All the while, an uneasy silence hung over us.

"...Sucks that those college kids kinda killed the mood," I said.

"Hmph," my uncle grunted. "Just unruly teenagers out drinking on their parents' dime, no doubt. That's how spoiled brats from well-to-do families always turn out as they grow older—so quick to poke fun at others because they've never experienced it themselves. They're about the least compassionate people on the face of the planet."

"You could've stood up and said something, you know."

I said this as though I was chastising him—and I was, but not because I was upset with him. I was just sad to see my uncle lie down and take it like that. Yes, it was natural to apologize when someone asked you politely not to do something, and yes, it was simply good manners to keep your voice down in a public setting. But that wasn't the sort of person I wanted my uncle to be—it wasn't his social etiquette that I liked him for.

"No, boy. I really couldn't have," said Uncle Kurehiko.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because I recognized it was a fight I couldn't win. Not with words, and not with my fists either, if it really came down to it. And so I simply ran away."

"...Coward."

"Yes, I suppose I am."

Hearing him so readily admit it left me at a bit of a loss for words—and made me feel surprisingly indignant, to be totally honest. Perhaps a part of me had been hoping he would deny it, since I knew deep down just how alike we truly were.

"...Then I guess I'll just have to get stronger if I don't want to end up a weak little coward like you," I said mockingly, trying as hard as I could to get a rise out of him at this point. But much to my dismay, even this failed to elicit the repudiation I sought.

"Now you're getting it, my boy," said Uncle Kurehiko. "Yes, no amount of sympathy or commiseration between the weak can ever defeat the irrefutable argument of 'might makes right'... But listen to me, Kayato."

We arrived at the station and stood there facing each other for a moment.

"If there is no place in this world for anyone but the strong to survive," he said, "then that is not indicative of any fault within me, but a sign that something is rotten in the world itself. I may be a weakling—but that alone does not make me wrong."

And with that, Uncle Kurehiko turned on his heel and headed through the ticket gate, his crooked frame quickly vanishing into the sea of straight-backed office workers.

\*\*\*

This was the third time now since the timefreeze began that I'd dreamt of the past. Which felt like a lot, at least to me—especially when they were these vivid, borderline one-to-one recreations of actual events exactly as I remembered them rather than your usual, more jumbled and incoherent types of dreams. I wondered if it had something to do with the sorts of beds I'd been sleeping on, like the one in the elementary school nurse's office or this café sofa, for example. I'd heard it was more common to have lucid dreams in the shallower stages of sleep, after all. Or could there be some other explanation for it? I had no idea, but it sure didn't seem like just a plain old coincidence—if anything, it almost felt like my subconscious was trying to tell me something. Something vital.

"...Nngh..."

As I lay there lost in thought for a while, I eventually heard Akira moaning in her sleep. I sat up and looked over to the sofa where she lay tossing and turning. Her eyes were tightly shut and wincing, and she had a hand pressed against her chest as though she was struggling to breathe. Beads of sweat dotted her forehead too. Something was clearly not right with her.

"Iguma-san?"

Unable to touch her to shake her awake, I could only call her name. When she didn't visibly respond, I tried again, but in a slightly louder voice. Finally, after a few more attempts at this, her eyes shot wide open in terror.

"A-are you all right?" I asked.

Akira's eyes slid over to me. Then she heaved a sigh, slowly releasing all the

tension in her body.

"Oh, it's just you, Mugino... Yeah, I'm fine. Was just having kind of a bad dream, that's all."

"You sure?" I asked. "It looked like you were in a lot of pain..."

"Nah, it's cool. I'm used to it by now. Not the first time or anything."

This did not do much to reassure me. But at least she didn't seem to be feeling physically unwell or in any actual pain, so I took her at her word.

"Well, okay," I said. "I'm gonna go back to sleep, then."

"Wait, um—Mugino?" said Akira, calling after me.

She'd sat up to stop me right as I was about to walk back to my own sofa, so I turned to look at her. She was staring at me with her lips parted and trembling —as though she'd been right on the verge of telling me something but got cold feet at the last minute.

"...You wanna talk for a bit?" I asked, attempting to meet her halfway.

I assumed she was probably just still feeling a little unnerved by her nightmare, and I didn't think she'd be able to get back to sleep. But apparently I was wrong, as she hung her head in resignation and shook it.

"Actually, no. It's fine," she said. "Don't think I'm ready to talk about it yet."

"You...don't think you're ready?" I said, confused.

"Oh, I mean, uh—not that it's a huge deal or anything!"

She was being unusually evasive now, backpedaling away from whatever it was she'd thought about telling me. I had to admit this only made me more curious.

"Anyway, sorry," she said. "I should probably sleep too. I'll tell you some other time."

"Er, yeah, okay... Sounds good."

Akira pressed a hand to her brow and laid herself flat again.

It didn't feel great going to bed with a giant question mark hanging over my

head, but I wasn't going to press her on it. Prying into each other's business wouldn't do either of us any good, and I was feeling too tired to have any deeper discussions right now anyway. So I returned to my own sofa and laid myself back down to sleep.

After making it through central Fukushima, we took the bypass road south (still on foot, obviously). We'd been walking along National Route 4 all the way from Morioka now. According to a travel guidebook I'd perused at a bookstore a ways back, it was the longest highway in Japan, running from Aomori to Tokyo. This meant that as long as we kept on following the highway, we'd be sure to reach our final destination eventually, with no risk of getting lost.

That being said, it could also get quite boring being on the same road for so long. We took little detours whenever we needed a break or a change of scenery. That was exactly what we were doing right now: After quickly tiring of the dull, monotonous view along the bypass road, we'd stopped to check out a little park along the highway. It was directly adjacent to a stately old temple, and—perhaps to play into this connection—there were a number of old-fashioned buildings littered across the park grounds, including a five-story pagoda and recreations of both peasant and samurai residences. The whole park seemed to have a theme of getting in touch with local history.

"Wanna take a peek inside some of these?" I asked.

Akira shook her head. "Nah, I don't really care about history and all that junk. I mean, I don't mind checking 'em out if you want to, but yeah."

"Mmm... Nah, I think I'm good for now. My feet are kinda tired anyway."

"Let's go find somewhere to sit down, then," said Akira, walking ahead.

After passing by some of the park's facilities, we came out into a large clearing with a wide-open lawn, some playground equipment, and a pond. We made our way over to the edge of the water and agreed to take a rest there. I hunkered down cross-legged on the grass, then opened my backpack and pulled out a red bean bun I'd picked up earlier. Massaging my calves with my free hand, I started munching away. I'd put on a bit of muscle from walking every day—and I felt like my abs had grown more defined too.

While I was busy filling my stomach, Akira was off skipping rocks across the pond—or trying to, at least, as each pebble she threw froze in midair long before it hit the surface of the water. But then she would throw another pebble at that pebble, and then another one, until eventually she'd formed a tiny cluster of floating rocks like a miniature planet in midair. This was a little game Akira liked to play with herself on occasion; it didn't seem all that fun to me, but it was decent enough for a time waster, I supposed.

"You've got good aim," I said.

"Eh, not really," said Akira. "Pretty average, I'd say."

Incidentally, the rock she chucked right as she said this was the one and only pebble that missed its mark. I felt bad for distracting her and ruining her streak.

"You ever try any sports or anything?" I asked.

"Yeah," she said. "Played basketball for a while."

"Oh, dang! That's cool."

This surprised me, for whatever reason. Maybe I just had a hard time imagining Akira taking part in *any* team-based activities.

"Yeah, I was pretty into it back in junior high," she explained. "Quit after the first month once I got into high school, though."

"How come?" I asked.

"...Couldn't really tell you, honestly. Guess maybe I just cooled off on it all of a sudden. Wasn't like my teammates or coaches were bad or anything like that. Not really sure what happened..."

Akira reared her arm back and hurled another rock—which then collided with the others in her creation, causing a clattering sound to ripple through the volleyball-sized mass of pebbles.

"Who knows," she said. "Maybe I'd be enjoying high school a lot more right now if I'd kept at it a little longer."

Akira stopped throwing rocks at this point and came over to sit down next to me. Her lingering sadness was evident in profile.

"Well, I've never done any sports..." I said. "But I can totally relate to being really obsessed with something one minute, then completely cooling off on it the next. Can't tell you how many times I've suddenly lost interest in keeping up with a manga I'd been following and looking forward to every single week..."

"Isn't that usually the story's fault, though?" said Akira. "Like the plot got stale, or things were moving too slow for you or whatever?"

"No, I don't think it's that, per se... Or wait. Is it?"

"Don't ask me. I don't know your life."

Now I wasn't so sure. But I was fairly certain I could think of other examples of me suddenly losing all enthusiasm for something without any particular reason, even if none were coming to mind right now. For every time you fell in love with something so hard that it felt like it stoked the very fires of your being, there would be another time when that fervor would simply fizzle away for the tiniest of reasons, related or otherwise. People could not control the things they loved.

"Well, it happens. Sometimes you just burn out on something," I said. "Just gotta find something else you're passionate about to take its place."

"Yeah, if only it were that easy," Akira said offhandedly, then fell backward onto the grass.

We spent about twenty minutes resting there after that, then left the park and got back on the highway heading south. We seemed to be nearing a metropolitan area, so the number of tall buildings and businesses along the road had increased yet again.

"How much longer until we get to Tokyo, again?" Akira asked as we walked.

I quickly ran some numbers in my head to give a rough estimate.

"Think we should be able to make it in another two weeks or so," I said.

"Dang," said Akira. "Still farther out than I thought."

"But it probably won't *feel* that long, since we'll be in civilization the entire time. No more long country roads or fifty-kilometer tunnels like the first leg of our trip."

"That stupid tunnel, man... Felt like we spent a whole week trudging through that thing. Don't ever wanna go through there again."

"Yeah, that was pretty rough," I said with a strained laugh, trying to at least somewhat relate to the look of bitter reminiscence that now adorned her face. In all honesty, though, I still hadn't forgotten the rush of exhilaration I got upon first arriving at the seafloor station—that feeling like you've glitched out of bounds in a video game and into an area the developers never intended you to see. I knew I'd treasure that moment for the rest of my life. I mean, how many people would get to experience that?

"So what are *you* gonna do when time starts moving again, Mugino?" Akira asked me nonchalantly, as though she was simply asking my plans for the weekend.

In truth, we had no guarantee that time would *ever* start moving forward again. This whole odyssey of ours could be completely in vain, and Akira knew it too—but I figured she was just floating the question casually to make conversation, so there was no need for me to overthink it. Still, I struggled to come up with an answer.

The funny thing was, I'd given a lot of thought to certain things in this regard—like how the workers and patrons at the various hotels, restaurants, and convenience stores we'd stolen from would react to or be affected by our actions once the timefreeze was over. But as for what I myself would do after this, I hadn't given it any thought whatsoever. I had no plans, nor was there anything I was looking forward to doing again. If I had to guess, there'd probably be a bit of drama related to me bailing on the class trip without permission, but then I'd go right back to my same old boring life as always.

"...Nothing much, probably," I said. "Haven't really given it much thought."

"Same," said Akira. "I got zero plans. Dunno what the hell I'm gonna do."

I felt oddly relieved to know that she and I were in the same boat—like I'd shown up unprepared to class on the day of a big test, only to discover that I wasn't the only person who hadn't studied for it. It was that sort of feeling of camaraderie.

"But I will say...I kinda don't wanna go back to Hokkaido."

"Ah... Yeah, I hear you."

Given what little she'd shared about her family situation, I could understand why she felt this way. But what would she even do in that case? Where would she live, and what high school would she go to? Was she just planning to stay down south and try to find a part-time job or whatever? Maybe she didn't realize just how much it cost to live in Tokyo. It wasn't the sort of place where a teenager could support themselves all on their own with no safety net. Not that the same couldn't be said about any major city.

"Man, this sucks. How come I can't just find a hundred million yen lyin' around on the ground somewhere, y'know?" Akira jokingly lamented, but I could hear a note of sincerity in this outlandish appeal as well.

After all, it wasn't as if ending the timefreeze was going to solve any of Akira's problems. If anything, it would only force her to finally confront them. And there was no guarantee that talking things out with her family would make the situation any better. Hell, it might even make it worse. No matter how things played out, the harsh reality of it was that the only things awaiting her once time started moving again were more stress and strife. In which case, maybe it really *would* be better if the world just—

"So hey, whaddya think's gonna happen with all the toilets we've been using and whatnot?" Akira suddenly asked, cutting off my inner monologue.

"Wh-what do you mean?"

"Well, I've just been wondering about it for a while, y'know? Because I'm guessing you've also been pulling the handles once you're done, right? So do you think that means all these toilets in all these different places are just gonna flush all at once as soon as this is over, or what?"

"Ohhh, I see what you're saying..."

I felt a little discombobulated to be discussing toilet logic all of a sudden, but I was glad to hear that Akira's voice had regained its usual carefree timbre. Maybe I really *did* need to just stop overthinking things—it wasn't as if me stressing out about her problems was going to do anything to solve them. I relaxed my shoulders a bit.

"Yeah, you're probably right," I said. "Guessing they'll all start flushing at the exact same instant the timefreeze ends."

"Dang, I bet that'll scare the crap out of anyone else who was using those bathrooms. Imagine randomly hearing a flush from an empty stall when you thought you were the only one in there."

"Ha ha, yeah, that'd definitely be pretty—"

Spooky, I was about to say, but the word caught in my throat.

Something felt weirdly off to me all of a sudden. I couldn't say what. It was a feeling not too far off from déjà vu—almost like I'd had this same conversation before. About toilets, though? No, surely not. I was fairly certain the subject matter had nothing to do with it. Upon further reflection, I realized that it was two phrases in particular which stuck out to me: "in all these different places," and "at the exact same instant." For whatever reason, these specific words ate away at me like a bit of gravel in my shoe I couldn't ignore, and they refused to be dislodged until I managed to grasp whatever latent memory I was trying to recollect.

"Speaking of scaring the crap out of people," Akira went on as I racked my brain, "I bet those other guys in your group are gonna be pretty freaked out that you just up and vanished all of a sudden too, huh?"

"Nah, I highly doubt it," I said. "I was walking pretty far behind them from the start, so I don't think they'll notice me being gone for a while. And it's not like I was ever really there to begin with, for all they care..."

"Hey. No being so down on yourself. Nobody likes dealing with people who won't shut up about how much everyone hates them." Akira turned to glare at me in disapproval. But I hadn't been fishing for sympathy—it was just the simple fact of the matter.

"Sorry, I wasn't complaining," I said. "It's kind of nice being treated like you don't even exist, honestly. You won't cause any problems for them, and they won't feel obligated to try to include you when you just want to be left alone either."

Harder to get bullied when you're invisible too, I added internally.

But immediately after I made this little unvoiced addendum, an epiphany crashed down on me like a lightning bolt, and I finally managed to grasp the true nature of that funny feeling I'd been groping at. God—how in the *hell* had I not realized this sooner?

"Uh, Mugino?" said Akira. "What gives?"

It was only then that I realized I'd stopped dead in my tracks. Akira walked back over and sized me up with a puzzled look on her face.

"You wanna take five real quick?" she asked.

"No, I'm not tired or anything," I said. "I just...had a bit of a realization, that's all."

"Uh-oh. Sounds like something pretty important."

I nodded, and Akira's expression went stern. "Well, whaddya waiting for? Just tell me, already."

"...Yeah, okay."

To be honest, I really wasn't looking forward to unearthing these old memories again. But if it was related to our current predicament, like I suspected, then she had a right to know. As I tried to put my thoughts in order, I started moving forward again, and Akira followed suit—matching my pace as we walked side by side down the road.

"So the thing is...this might not be my first timefreeze."

The story I'm about to tell you happened back when I was in eighth grade—and apologies in advance if some of the details are a little fuzzy. I don't have many fond memories of my time in junior high, to be honest, so I think I sort of blocked that whole period out. Which might be why it took me so long to realize this, but yeah.

Basically, there were these two classmates I had back then who I just really, genuinely wished would either die or disappear. Even now, I can't look back on that part of my life without feeling pretty damn salty toward those two, and it drives home that I'm still not over the whole situation, deep down. You ever

notice that? How positive emotions always feel so fleeting, but things like anger or depression or embarrassment or regret seem to linger vividly in your mind for a really long time? And no matter how hard you try, you just can't seem to forget or move on from them? Kind of how I feel about it.

Anyway, there was this one day after school when those two shoved me into the classroom broom closet and then closed the door. Warned me not to come out until they gave me permission to, so like an idiot, I just did as they said and waited there in the dark. Didn't even think of trying to break my way out, because I knew from past experience with them that they'd only do even worse if I disobeyed. So I just completely dissociated for a while and tried to wait it out —but obviously, everyone has their limits. And eventually, I couldn't bear to be trapped in the dark any longer, so I creaked open the door.

There was no one left in the classroom. It was just me and the light of the setting sun pouring in through the window. I remember the evening glow that night very clearly; it was probably the most bloodred sun I'd ever seen. And I also remember that the very first thing I did was let out a sigh of relief. I was just so glad to see that they hadn't been sitting there waiting for me to emerge the entire time. But just as I walked back to my desk to gather my things and go home, I felt a sudden pain in my chest. One that hurt so bad, I couldn't even remain standing, so I just fell right to my knees on the classroom floor.

...And no, I wasn't physically ill or anything like that.

I was livid. Completely in distress. Not even because of them—this wasn't anything compared to the worst stuff they'd done to me. No, above all else, I was just furious with myself for feeling relieved. Like I got off easy by being left to cower in fear in the broom closet for over an hour, and I hadn't been tortured any worse than that.

Don't get me wrong, I still detested those two. Cursed their names and wished they'd never been born. But as I slowly began to realize what a pathetic, worthless wretch I was by comparison, my self-loathing grew to outweigh my hatred. I started wishing that I could be the one to disappear—because what good would getting rid of them do, when I was the one who lacked the strength or even the courage to try to change my reality? I felt broken, crushed beneath the weight of my own worthlessness.

But then the next thing I knew.

I was back in my bedroom, clutching a metal bat in one hand.

And the bloodred sun out the window had still only just begun to set.

"Huh?" Akira turned to face me as though she was certain she must've misheard this last part. But my story wasn't quite over yet.

"So yeah," I continued. "As you can probably imagine, I totally freaked out. I mean, I was at school one minute, then back in my bedroom the next. And I didn't know where the hell I'd gotten the metal bat either. I started feeling pretty scared, so I ran outside and threw the bat away in a nearby dumpster, then hurried back to my house. During homeroom the next day, the teacher announced that the two boys had both suffered pretty serious leg injuries—both at the same exact time, but in two completely different places. Apparently there were signs that they'd both been beaten repeatedly with a blunt object, with one of them actually having suffered multiple fractures... Well, according to the rumors I heard going around class, at least."

"So, what you're saying is..." Akira began, then swallowed hard.

I kept my eyes trained firmly on the road ahead and said, "Yeah. I'm pretty sure I was the one who did it."

For a time, silence reigned.

"But... But, like..." Akira stuttered, seemingly unwilling to accept this explanation. "You're not *positive* or anything, right?"

"...I mean, yeah, I can't remember," I said. "I don't have any recollection of what happened between me falling to my knees in the classroom and me suddenly being back at my house again."

The only reason I could speculate so calmly about the possibility that I'd bashed my classmates' legs in was because I had no memory of it, and it was pretty hard to feel guilty about something you didn't actually remember doing. But just thinking about the situation logically, I was about 80 to 90 percent sure I'd been the one swinging the bat.

"Well, then there's no definitive proof that it was you!" Akira asserted.

"If you can think of another explanation aside from a timefreeze that makes sense, I'm all ears. It always took me more than thirty minutes to get back to my place from that school. No way the sun wouldn't have gone down even a little bit in that time."

"Mmmmm... Well, it's definitely weird, I'll give you that... But I don't think we can say for sure one way or the other based on that alone."

She still wasn't satisfied with my hypothesis. What other supporting evidence could I give her? Was it possible I'd been through yet *another* timefreeze, or was it only this one and the one in junior high? What about back in elementary school? Had I had any similarly inexplicable experiences then? Moments where I felt as though I'd suddenly teleported from one location to another, or—

"...Oh. Hang on," I said.

Could that have been one too?

"What's up?" said Akira. "You remember something else?"

"Y-yeah, I do. I think there might've actually been another one even before that, back when I was in elementary school..."

As Akira and I walked beneath a highway overpass, I could feel the slightest hint of winter's premonition in its shadow.

"I think I must've only been in third or fourth grade, probably... But yeah, I specifically remember my parents having a fight this one particular day," I said, trying to recall the specific order of events as I recounted them. "It was a pretty brutal one, and I didn't want to hear it, so I was just cooped up in my room, feeling a little rattled. But then the next thing I knew, I was standing right outside the door of my uncle Kurehiko's apartment. Almost like I'd just warped there in the blink of an eye..."

At the time, I was still pretty young, so I remembered feeling more relieved just to be away from my parents' fighting than terrified and confused as to how I'd gotten there. Which was probably why I'd never really gone back and questioned it until now.

"And how does that have anything to do with the timefreeze?" asked Akira.

"Well, it's pretty similar to what happened when I was in junior high, in that it's another case of me being in one place one minute, then somewhere completely different the next. So I mean, who knows—maybe I just made my way over to my uncle's place on foot while time was frozen. Kinda like you and I are doing right now."

Interestingly, I'd had dreams that corresponded to both of these experiences recently as well, just over the course of our trip. I wasn't sure if that was merely a coincidence or if the timefreeze was somehow drawing out these memories from me, but it wouldn't have surprised me at all if there were some strange - powers at work deep within my psyche as a result of this supernatural experience.

Akira still didn't seem very convinced. "I dunno, man. If what you're saying is true, then how come in both of these cases, you don't remember a single thing that happened *during* the actual timefreeze itself? Like, that's the most important part."

"Yeah, I know... It doesn't make much sense to me either."

"Also, how come you never mentioned any of this before? Really not sure how I feel about you concealing that kind of information from me."

"Look, I wasn't concealing anything, okay? I just didn't make the connection until now because I wasn't hyper-analyzing any of this stuff. In case you didn't notice, I really don't like thinking about the past all that much, if I can help it..."

"...Oh. Got it."

Akira's dubious expression had now turned outright uncomfortable. Perhaps I'd done a poor job of explaining things; I felt bad for bombarding her with all of this information at once. Either that, or it just didn't feel like a very credible argument to her in the first place. She was right that it would probably be a lot more convincing if I could remember a single thing that happened during the actual phenomena themselves.

"...My bad," said Akira. "Sorry."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Huh? Wait, for what?" I asked.

"I dunno... Just for making you dredge up old memories and stuff."

"Oh... No, it's fine. I mean, we had to talk about it eventually."

She had nothing to apologize for. If anything, I felt grateful to *her* for being concerned about me. In fact, I'd noticed her becoming a *lot* more considerate of my feelings lately. When I reflected on how far our rapport had come compared to when we first met, it was almost enough to make me start getting emotional.

"But if you're right about all of this," said Akira, "then that means *our* timefreeze has to come to an end sooner or later too, yeah?"

"Yeah, exactly," I replied. "That's basically all I was trying to say."

More than any of the theorizing about the mechanics of timefreezes or what caused them, *this* was the key takeaway here: that they did—or at least could—come to an end. Granted, we still didn't know how to make things start moving again, but the simple knowledge that we wouldn't have to be trapped in a world out of time forever was enough to make me feel as if a heavy burden had been lifted off my shoulders. I assumed this revelation would come as a huge relief to Akira as well—but perhaps I was wrong.

"Gotcha..." she said. "Guess it was only a matter of time, huh...?"

She didn't seem all that happy about it.

This was not the reaction I'd been expecting. Hell, I'd figured she might literally jump for joy, or at the very least breathe a heavy sigh of relief. But come to think of it, she'd prefaced her previous question with "if" I was right about all of this, hadn't she? So maybe she just wasn't fully convinced. Which might be the more responsible way of going about this, to be quite honest. Better for her to stay skeptical in case my theory ended up being wrong rather than get her hopes up only for them to be dashed even harder in the long run. I could understand wanting to be emotionally cautious in that regard. And yet, judging from the grave look on her face, it sure seemed like there was more to it than just that...

"So...you went for the legs, huh?" she muttered, her gaze fixed on the ground. She slowed her walking pace just a bit. "You didn't go for the head, or the chest... You purposely chose to hit 'em in the legs, huh?"

"W-well, yeah, I mean...assuming it really was me, that is," I answered hesitantly, unsure how to interpret her tone of voice.

Akira didn't say another word. Her face just went cold and expressionless, though in a way clearly different from apathy or resentment. I wasn't sure what exactly she'd been trying to confirm by asking me this—maybe she was just curious to know the reason why, plain and simple. In which case, I could probably hazard a guess, even if I obviously had no recollection of actually doing the deed.

"But, uh... Yeah, I don't know," I said. "Guess I probably was just looking for a way to deal some damage without going *too* far, as bad as that sounds. Because no matter how much I hated those two, I'd never actually want to kill another person. And obviously hitting them in the chest or the ribs could easily be fatal... So yeah, I'm guessing that's probably why I went for the legs."

I tried to approach it from the angle that I was still thinking somewhat rationally back then. A pretty big assumption, admittedly. I figured I'd probably broken bones with the first guy, then held back with the second. That, or I got cold feet the first time, but then my anger won out the next. Either way, it was still an indefensible act. The mere thought that I possessed the ferocity and malice to beat two unarmed classmates with a metal bat sent a chill of terror down my spine. And yet, there was still a part of me that wanted to believe they'd simply gotten what was coming to them after how ruthlessly they'd tortured me.

"Yeah, figured as much," Akira said brusquely, then scoffed. I had no idea what was going through her head right now; I wondered if maybe I'd said something to set her off or offended her by accident. She stretched out her back as she walked, gazing off into the distance. "Oh, hey! Check it out—there's a mini-mart over there. How 'bout we go grab ourselves some lunch?"

"Oh, uh. Sure. Sounds good to me."

Akira trotted off at a brisk jog. There was no longer any sullenness in her tone or her gait. She seemed completely back to normal again—but I couldn't help feeling like I'd been bamboozled. What was that unsettled feeling I'd sensed from her just now? And why did it feel like she'd completely shrugged off

everything we'd just discussed regarding the timefreeze? She'd left me with quite a few questions and concerns on my mind, and I didn't feel great about it.

After traveling through Fukushima, we pressed on into Tochigi. At last, we were in Kanto—the final leg of our journey was now upon us. We were now making our way through the town of Nasu, right along the border with Fukushima. An endless road through fields and farmlands stretched beyond our sight.

Three days had passed since our conversation about the timefreeze, and in that time, I'd been trying to mentally organize everything we knew (or thought we knew) about the phenomenon. So far, I had it boiled down to three main points.

Point #1: I'd most likely experienced at least two other timefreezes in the past—the first when I was in elementary school and the second when I was in junior high.

Point #2: I had no recollection of what happened while time was stopped during either of these instances. I was quite certain I hadn't simply blocked everything out.

Point #3: In all likelihood, this timefreeze would eventually come to an end. This was predicated on the assumption that I was right about Point #1. Obviously, I didn't know how long the previous two had lasted, or if it varied, and there was certainly no guarantee this one would end just because the other two had, but it *shouldn't* go on forever.

And from these three points, I could draw a single conclusion.

Whenever a timefreeze ended, I lost all memory of it happening.

This would explain why it felt like my mind simply jumped from one location to another after both of the previous two instances. Though to be honest, even I still wasn't fully convinced by this theory. It was entirely possible that I was

completely off the mark here. But if I had it right, and I did always lose my memories from the period in which time was frozen, then that meant I'd forget all about Akira and our journey together.

When I told her this, her eyes went wide in astonishment. "Wait, you're just gonna forget *everything*?!"

"Assuming the pattern holds true, yeah."

"Man, seriously...? But that's so—" Akira started, but then held back. She swallowed whatever word had been poised on the tip of her tongue, then let out a pensive sigh. "Guess that means I'm probably gonna forget all about you too, then, huh...?"

"I mean, we don't know that for sure. Like, if it's a phenomenon that's specifically centered around me and you just got sucked into it somehow, then it *could* be different for you, hypothetically. Hard to say, since this is your first timefreeze and all."

"Well, as far as I remember, yeah."

"Right—I guess it's possible you just forgot them, same as I did. Do you remember having any strange experiences like what I described when *you* were younger, Iguma-san?"

"I did think about that, yeah. But I'm pretty sure the answer's no. Like, I can think of a couple of weird or spooky experiences, maybe, but definitely nothing that would make you think there were any time shenanigans involved."

"Gotcha..."

I gently bit my lip as we ignored a stop signal and strode over the crosswalk. When we weaved behind a large semitruck, the pungent smell of exhaust fumes filled my nostrils. I'd begun exercising a bit more caution when crossing the street now that I was concerned the timefreeze could end at any moment.

"I think maybe I really did drag you into this somehow, then," I said.

"Huh? What makes you say that?" said Akira.

"I mean, it just makes sense. I've been through at least three of these things already, and I don't think it's a coincidence that you just happened to have your

first on the exact same day that I was visiting your hometown. There's no doubt in my mind that this is all my fault." My nails dug into my palms as I lowered my head in guilt. "I'm really sorry, Iguma-san. If only I hadn't agreed to go on that stupid class trip, none of this ever would have happened..."

"H-hey, knock it off. I already told you I can't deal with all the mopey crap..." Akira fidgeted uncomfortably with her bangs. "Look, I don't care whose fault it is, okay? What's done is done. We've just gotta keep moving forward."

"...You're very sweet, thanks."

"Nah. That ain't got nothin' to do with it."

Akira turned her head away, trying to play it cool.

"...I'll tell you one thing, though," she said in a quiet voice as she lowered her gaze. "You're not the only one to blame here. Pretty sure I'm partly responsible too."

I couldn't tell if she was just saying this to make me feel better or there was something more to it than that. But I didn't have the nerve to ask her in the moment, so we both just let the conversation die there.

After walking a bit farther, we found a little karaoke parlor standing all by itself on the side of the road. This was right after we'd begun keeping an eye out for somewhere to sleep, so we talked it over and agreed to just call it there for the night. We probably could have found a traditional inn or business hotel if we'd kept going, but neither Akira nor I felt like hoofing it any longer today.

We walked into the building and quickly set about searching for an unoccupied room. Despite being quite a ways from any built-up urban areas, the place was filled to the brim with customers—though all of them were pretty elderly. I wondered if they were having some sort of event for the local senior society. Unfortunately, this meant we were only able to find a single empty room—even if there was, technically, still enough space for the two of us to lie down separately.

"Ah, well. Guess it'll have to do," said Akira. She stepped right into the room, not even hesitating at the thought of sleeping in such a tiny, enclosed space

with me. I had to admit her boldness in this regard still felt a bit jarring to me at times. Not that she had anything to worry about with me, obviously, but I didn't think most girls my age would be so willing. Perhaps it was just a testament to how much she trusted me in particular.

I set my bag on the floor and took a seat on one of the worn leather couches.

"Gonna go use the bathroom real quick," Akira said, then walked out the door.

I looked around the room. This was actually my first time ever being inside a karaoke parlor. I felt pretty self-conscious about singing in front of other people, and I wasn't very big on music to begin with. When it came to the few opportunities for me to attend in the past (like for an end-of-the-year class party, for instance), I'd always refused.

A little while later, Akira came back into the room carrying a whole cornucopia of sweets in her arms, which she proceeded to lay out excitedly on the table.

"Went ahead and nabbed a few things from each of the other rooms," she said. "Feel free to help yourself."

And here I was wondering what might be taking her so long... I considered chewing her out a bit, but it was honestly hard to bring myself to when I saw the giddy, childlike glee on her face. Well, as long as she only took a little bit from each one, I guess.

"Man, I haven't done karaoke in *forever*," said Akira, sitting down on the other long leather seat. "Feel like singing anything?"

"Huh?!" I said. "Oh, no. No, no, no—I'm fine. I don't like singing in front of people."

"Damn, you sure shot that down fast. Whatever. I'm not really in the mood either, so it's cool. Not like the machine would work right now anyway."

With that, she grabbed a box of Pocky off the table. I caved to my hunger and tore into a bag of spicy peanut cracker mix. As I munched, the familiar tingly spices tickled my taste buds.

"Gotta say, I don't have many fond memories of doing karaoke myself," said Akira, biting into a stick of Pocky.

"Oh yeah? Have some bad experiences before or something?" I asked.

"Just the one, really," said Akira, her expression somber. "Got invited out to a karaoke party by a friend back in junior high, but when we got there, it was nothing but high schoolers. Trashiest kids you've ever seen too. All of 'em stank like cigarettes."

"Oof, yeah. I can see why that would be a bad time."

"I knew right away that they were super sketchy, so I pretended I had to go to the bathroom and just bailed right then and there. Always say no anytime I get invited out to karaoke ever since."

I was relieved to hear that the story didn't go any further than that, and that she'd made it out of there safe and sound.

"Well, thanks for not bailing on me just now," I said jokingly.

"Oh, please," said Akira. "You could clone yourself a hundred times, and I still wouldn't be afraid of you."

She snickered, then ripped open a fresh bag of chocolates. She'd already gone through her entire box of Pocky—and it wasn't like we'd skipped dinner or anything. Maybe she just had a second stomach for sweets.

"You ever think about dyeing your hair and getting your ears pierced, Mugino? You know—get a little waya with it? Think that'd totally change up your vibe."

Waya? Oh, hey—that's Hokkaido slang for "messy" or "wild" or something, isn't it?

Anytime I heard Akira use her regional dialect, I couldn't help but feel a little warm and fuzzy inside—same as whenever I got to see her canines poke out when she smiled. It was just one of those things that made me feel like I was getting to know the *real* Akira a bit more intimately... Okay, maybe that made it sound kind of lewd, but basically, I was just glad she felt comfortable enough to let her guard down around me now. I honestly kind of wished she'd speak her

local dialect more, but I got the impression that she was self-conscious about it, so I'd been deliberately refraining from pointing it out. Hopefully, she'd just naturally start using it more often as we spent more time around each other. That'd be pretty nice, I thought.

"I really don't think that'd be a good look on me," I said. "Besides, doesn't getting your ears pierced hurt like hell?"

"Well, I mean, duh." Akira popped a handful of chocolates into her mouth. "You're literally stabbing a hole in your ear."

"Why did you get your ears pierced, Iguma-san? Just think it looks cool?"

"I mean, what other reason is there?"

"I dunno. To scare people off so they don't mess with you?"

"Ohhh, yeah, I guess that's part of it. Or if I had to give another one, mmm..."

She mulled it over for a moment. "Maybe to increase my defense a little bit?"

"Your defense?"

"Yeah, like...it makes me feel more confident in my self-image, I guess? Like I can handle whatever life throws at me. Every time I get a new piercing, I'm like, 'Yeah, okay. I still got this.' Y'know? ...Well, not that I have *that* many piercings to begin with, obviously."

"Interesting... Okay."

Increasing your defense by equipping more accessories, eh? It almost sounded like we were discussing *Dragon Quest* here or something. But perhaps the underlying rationale was the same, come to think of it. Like, maybe it wasn't that the accessories themselves offered any tangible protection or stat boosts to your party members, but that how the characters felt while wearing them raised their HP or Attack... That was kind of an interesting way of looking at it, actually.

As we sat there making idle chitchat and gorging ourselves on snacks for a while, I felt the urge to sleep creep up on me. I could see that Akira was beginning to nod off as well, so the two of us settled down and got ready for bed in the karaoke parlor, having sung exactly zero songs between the both of

us.

Once I brushed my teeth and got changed, I quickly fell asleep on the leather couch. Problem was, it was so narrow and slippery that anytime I turned over in my sleep, I nearly rolled off the seat cushions. This meant I had to sleep with one eye open, more or less, and spent a good part of the night having a series of shallow catnaps without ever truly falling soundly asleep.

Just when I was about to give up and try lying on the floor instead, I heard Akira groaning in her sleep. She sounded like she was struggling; perhaps she was having another one of those "bad dreams" she'd mentioned the other day. If so, then I couldn't help but wonder what these recurring nightmares were about.

\*\*\*

"Akira! Where do you think you're going?!"

I blew off my mom as she tried to stop me and just barged right out the front door. My footsteps thumped against the metal steps as I ran down the external staircase of our apartment building. I was totally pissed. Ready to *never* come back again, or better yet—do something stupid and reckless, just because I knew it would piss *them* off.

It was eight o'clock at night. Already dark outside. When I made it down onto the pavement, I just turned and started heading down the sidewalk. I didn't care where I was going. All I knew was that if I didn't keep walking right now, I'd probably break down.

God, I can't stand them.

I wouldn't even care about my mom yelling at me usually. And I could put up with my stupid-ass dad treating me like crap. But the one thing I just couldn't handle was my mom taking his side when I'd only been trying to stick up for her. Why the hell would she get mad at me for blowing up at him? He was the one always treating her like a goddamn slave. How dare she slap *me* over it. Wasn't she sick and tired of that stupid prick walking all over her too? Did she really care more about that dickwad than me?

What the hell, man...? What's her problem?

As I walked down the road, I rubbed my cheek. My skin was still stinging slightly where my mother had slapped it. Everything still felt so raw, and the more I thought about it, the more I could feel simmering heat welling up from behind my eyes.

No. Don't you dare cry right now. If you cry, they win. Be angry, damn it. "Stupid assholes..."

I kicked a nearby lamppost as hard as I could, but it didn't make me feel better one bit. If anything, it only made me feel embarrassed when passersby started rubbernecking like I was some sort of crazy person. And then I realized that I was still wearing my school uniform. I'd crashed hard and taken a nap the moment I got home this afternoon. Then I got woken up for dinner, and I was planning to take a bath after—but then all the family drama went down, and I ran out of the house without ever changing clothes. Luckily, I was still sane enough to throw my baseball jacket on before I left, but I didn't think to grab my wallet. The only thing I had on me right now was my phone.

I didn't know what to do now.

I had no place to go, no friends who'd let me stay at their place for the night. But the one thing I knew I *definitely* didn't want to do was go back home with my tail between my legs and have to deal with that whole situation, so I started walking in the direction of Hakodate Station. Right now, I just wanted to be someplace where there'd be a lot of people around. Maybe that would help distract me from all these negative emotions.

A sudden gust of wind from the bay came whistling in, throwing my hair into a disheveled mess. *Ugh*. This was exactly why I hated living near the ocean. The salt in the air made your skin all sticky, and if I never had to smell the scent of seawater again for the rest of my life, it would still be too soon. I hated *everything* about this place, though, to be fair—acting like it was some big, important city when it was really just a backwater hick town in disguise, way out in the middle of nowhere. And not only that, but since it was right at the southern tip of Hokkaido, it was just far enough away from legit cities like Aomori and Sapporo that it still cost a bunch of time and money to go to either. Sure, we had some foods and other stuff we were famous for, but I didn't even

like squid all that much.

I just wanted to get the hell out of here—go somewhere far, far away.

The big city would be nice. Somewhere with actual stuff to do and see, to help fill the void of angst and emptiness I knew I'd never escape as long as I was stuck living in a place like this. But even though Sapporo seemed nice and all, I'd rather pick somewhere that would let me get off this island altogether. Like Tokyo, for example. Someplace warmer, where there'd always be a lot more going on.

With all these thoughts of the big city's hustle and bustle running through my head, I wandered around the general vicinity of Hakodate Station for a while, where there was nothing going on and nothing to do. But of course there wasn't—what was I expecting?

Eventually, I got tired of walking and took a seat on a bench in the station plaza. I didn't have any money on me, so I couldn't go anywhere to actually do or buy anything. Once again, I *really* wished I'd had the foresight to bring my wallet with me.

I shoved my hands in my coat pockets and tried to figure out where the hell my life was gonna go from here. But thinking about it realistically only made me feel more and more depressed as my anger slowly gave way to anxiety. It felt like my mind was just trapped in a pessimistic spiral, and I had no idea where to go or what to do.

Thankfully, it wasn't all that cold out tonight, at least for late October. But my heart still felt pretty frozen over as I checked my phone for the zillionth time and saw that it was past ten o'clock. Late enough that a high schooler like me would probably get escorted home if she were caught walking around town by anyone with authority. And there were a lot of people passing through the plaza still. Maybe it would be smart to find a more secluded spot to post up for a while. Not that I had anywhere else in mind, but—

"Hey, you," a voice called out. "What are you doing over there?"

I looked up to see a middle-aged man in a tattered old suit gazing over at me. For a split second, I thought he might be a teacher from my high school, and my defensive instincts kicked in. But after a moment's thought, I realized I'd never

seen his face before, and his tone didn't sound hostile, so I assumed he wasn't trying to get me in trouble.

"Nothing much..." I said dismissively.

"You waiting to meet up with someone, or what?" said the man. "Been sitting there for a while now."

Oh, great. So this guy's been watching me, huh?

"Yeah, so what? It's none of your business."

"You're still in high school, aren't you? You shouldn't be out wandering around this late. Better head home soon. Or is there a reason you don't want to head home?"

He hit the nail on the head, but I didn't respond. Didn't want to give this guy any room to keep prying further. So instead, all I did was sharpen my gaze and keep staring at him in an unconcerned but threatening way as if to say: Don't mess with me, pal.

"Hey, hey. Come on, now—no need to glare at me like that. It's not like I'm gonna bite you or anything," he said with an awkward laugh. "Say, I know—I was just on my way to grab myself a bite for dinner. Why don't you come with me?"

"...Not hungry," I said tersely.

"Well, how about a little treat, then? I know an izakaya nearby that makes some great desserts. If you don't have anywhere else to go, you might as well join me for some free food and conversation. I don't mind listening, assuming you want to talk about it."

This dude was being *awfully* pushy—but he didn't strike me as a bad guy, at least. Seemed to have a reasonable head on his shoulders, especially since all he'd said at first was that I should probably head on home. And it wasn't like he was inviting me back to his house or anything weird like that. If all he wanted to do was hear me out and give me some free food because he felt weirdly sorry for me or whatever, I supposed I didn't mind taking him up on the offer. Gave me an excuse to stay out a little longer too.

And so I nodded.

"Great, then let's go," said the man. "It's just right up around the corner here."

I followed him. I wasn't even looking for petty sympathy or anything like that. I just wanted something—anything—to distract me from how utterly hopeless I felt right now, if only for a little while. I could think about what to do next while we ate.

After walking down the sidewalk for about ten minutes, we arrived at an izakaya right in the heart of downtown, where we were quickly seated at a table way in the back of the restaurant. As the host led us back there, I caught a few of the other customers casting curious and judgmental glances in my direction, but no one actually said anything.

The man ordered a beer along with some sashimi and tempura, and I asked for this castella sponge cake kinda deal topped with fresh whipped cream. When they brought our food out to the table, and the man reached up to take his from the waitress, I noticed a wedding ring on his left hand. After the waitress left, he noticed me staring at it.

"Oh, yeah," he said, twisting the ring around his finger. "So the thing is, my wife and I had a pretty big disagreement the other day. Now things just feel awkward whenever I'm at home—like I can't do anything right—so I've been staying out as late as possible."

"...You don't say," I replied, uninterested but amused by the coincidence.

"What about you? Get into a fight with your folks or something?"

"Wouldn't call it a fight, necessarily..."

"Mind telling me a little bit about it? Might help you to talk through it with someone. You can call it repayment for the food, if that makes it easier."

It was hard to say no when he put it like that. And I wasn't trying to get on his bad side while stuck at the dinner table with him either. The thought of showing any sign of weakness to this random dude I'd just met really didn't sit well with me, but I figured for now I should just do as he said and open up a little bit. So I briefly gave him the rundown of everything that had happened that night up

until I sat down outside the station. He listened pretty attentively to everything I had to say, nodding along and whatnot.

"I see, I see," he said when I was finally done. "Yeah, that sounds pretty rough, all right. Nothing worse than a parent who uses violence against their own children."

Now this rubbed me the wrong way. This guy didn't know the first thing about my mom. Not that I didn't feel like that was a pretty horrible thing for her to do, obviously—but our relationship was more complicated than that. I didn't want some rando's sympathy.

"I used to fight with my parents all the time too, when I was your age," said the man. "Think it turned me into a bit of a delinquent for a while there. I'd be out spending the night at friends' houses for days... Bought myself a motorbike and started riding it around town all the time just to grind their gears. Looking back on it now, it was probably just a plain old teenage rebellious phase, but man, those were some of the best years of my life. We'd all go down to the beach in the summer and light off a ton of bottle rockets, or—"

I let pretty much all of this go in one ear and out the other as I dug my spoon into the dessert sitting on the table in front of me. At this rate, it'd probably be after midnight by the time we left the restaurant. Worst-case scenario, I needed to be mentally prepared to sleep outside somewhere tonight. Thankfully, it wasn't so cold that I couldn't handle it, though. And then tomorrow, I'd just have to...

...What was I going to do tomorrow, actually?

Obviously, I needed money if I wanted to do literally anything. Could I try to find a quick job someplace where they hired by the day, maybe? But I didn't really have any skills or work experience that would make anyone want to hire me, I didn't think...

In the end, I wasn't able to come up with anything that remotely resembled a more concrete plan of action while we ate. And just as I predicted, it was already after midnight by the time I walked out of the izakaya. Once the man finished paying our bill, he came out of the restaurant and stood right before me with a brown-nosing smile on his face.

"How 'bout I get you someplace to stay for the night, hm?" he asked.

There was a sickening, underhanded sweetness in his voice.

Immediately, my stranger danger senses shot through the roof. He was definitely *not* just suggesting he'd book me a room at a hotel and then leave. He knew exactly what he was suggesting, and so did I as I stood there watching him stare down at my legs. So he really *was* just a total creep after all. *Pfft. Figures.* I wanted nothing more than to start shouting at the top of my lungs and completely verbally eviscerate him, then run away as fast as I could. And on literally any other day, I totally would have. But what was me running away going to accomplish right now? It'd just leave me right where I was earlier this evening—back on the streets with nowhere to go and no money to my name. In which case, I figured I might as well go all in. Not like this night could possibly get any worse.

"Works for me," I said. "Lead the way."

The man's lips curled up even further the moment these words left mine. If he was trying to conceal his excitement, then he was doing a piss-poor job of it.

But as I followed him down a dingy alleyway, I started hatching a plan inside my head.

Sure enough, he led me right to the sort of hotel people typically used for one thing and one thing only. He bought us a room, and we headed up to it together. It was all I could do to try to hide how badly I was shaking; I'd never been in *any* sort of sex establishment before. *Ever.* I immediately parked myself on the room's loveseat, and he sat down right beside me. My heart felt like it was about to burst right out of my chest. But just when he reached out a hand and tried to set it on my knee—

"Shouldn't you go take a shower first?" I said, using every remaining ounce of my rationality to try to play it cool.

"Oh, right," said the man. "Good point, sorry."

He got up and obediently shuffled off into the changing room.

And as soon as I heard the door click shut, I put my plan into action.

I started looking around for the guy's wallet. The second I had that—or at

least whatever money was in it—I'd sneak out of the room and make a break for it. I knew I'd be committing a crime, obviously. But so was *he* by trying to get in my pants, so I really didn't feel bad about it one bit. I needed the money more than he did anyway.

I turned his entire briefcase inside out, and I checked both pockets of the jacket he'd hung on the door. But I couldn't find his wallet anywhere. I felt a cold sweat run down my temples as I started to panic. But I wasn't about to just go home empty-handed either. I'd come this far already—and I needed money, no matter what.

Come on, Akira. Think, you idiot. Where else could it be?

And then it hit me—his pants pocket.

Creeping as quietly as I could, I snuck into the little changing room attached to the bathroom and dug around inside his pants. *Aha! Found you!* Just as I hoped, he'd left his wallet in the back pocket of his slacks. *Sweet, now I just need to get out of here before*—

The water suddenly shut off.

And then a tiny click, before the bathroom door opened wide.

"Hey," said the man. "What are you doing in here?"

I almost had a heart attack. My whole body instantly seized up.

Oh god. I've gotta get out of here. Right now.

"Is that my wallet you've got there?" he asked. "You weren't just going to steal it and sneak off on me, were you?"

What are you waiting for, stupid?! Run! Just go, already!

I dashed out of the room, slamming against the opposite wall as I made my way toward the door. I reached out and gripped the handle, then yanked as hard as I could.

Damn it! That rat bastard deadbolted the door!

"Come on, now," said the man. "Where do you think you're going, huh? We've come this far, haven't we? Don't be like that."

He grabbed me forcefully by the arm and dragged me back to the far end of the room. *Oh god. No, no, no!* I thrashed around, struggling as hard as I could, but I couldn't wrest myself free from his grasp. He was just that much stronger than me. This was bad—at this rate, I'd...I'd... *No! How did this happen?! Why me, goddamn it?! Let go, already!* 

Dread, fear, and helplessness just kept swirling through my head as I fell deeper into despair—until at last I reached my breaking point. And then I exploded with rage.

"Rrrgh... Don't *touch* me, you scumbag!" I shouted. "How 'bout you keep your grubby little fingers off girls less than half your age, huh?!"

Mustering every last bit of strength in my body, I shoved the guy back as hard as I could and finally managed to break free from his grasp. He let out a startled yell as he lost his balance and fell backward. His head crashed right down into the corner of the giant coffee table. And then the man went stiff like a corpse.

"Huff...huff..."

Thick, red fluid started dribbling down the leg of the coffee table as blood drained from the back of the man's head. And then the terrifying realization set in that maybe he hadn't just gone stiff *like* a corpse—maybe he already was one.

The man looked dead. I might have literally just killed him.

Oh god.

A sort of primal fear came over me, and I ran off as fast as I could—not even caring to grab the wallet on my way out. Desperate, I fumbled to unbolt the door and burst out into the hallway and onto the elevator, where I mashed the CLOSE DOORS and 1F buttons repeatedly like I was an actress in some old horror movie. Even after I'd escaped from the hotel, I just kept running as fast as I could. All I wanted was to just leave this town behind and go somewhere far away. Somewhere where nobody would know my name.

Where did I even go wrong?

I didn't know.

I wished I could start this whole messed-up day all over from the beginning. Either that, or I wanted the whole world to just come to an end, right here and now. As long as tomorrow never came and I never had to deal with any of this again.

I ran for what felt like hours and hours.

Until I hit a red light at an intersection.

But stopping was not an option.

I could never stop. I cut through.

Headlights flashed before my eyes.

A car horn blared from only inches away.

And then a searing pain shot through my entire body.

\*\*\*

"Blegh..."

This was the sound that escaped from Akira's lips as she slipped off the leather couch and fell face-first onto the floor. I probably should have woken her up when I saw her tossing and turning in her sleep, but alas. I watched as she tried to sit up only to hit her head against the table. Sheesh. Talk about kicking herself while she's down.

"Ouch, damn it..." she grumbled, clicking her tongue as she lifted herself up off the floor like an old woman with back problems. "Ugh... That stupid dream again..."

"You okay?" I asked, more than a little worried about her—and her shoulders jerked upward in shock. But then she calmed down and let out a long sigh.

"Oh, so you're up too, huh...?"

"Yeah, couldn't really get comfortable..."

"Same. Feel like maybe sleeping at a karaoke place was a bad call."

Akira sat herself back up on the leather seat. She almost looked even more exhausted now than when we'd gone to bed.

"Another nightmare?" I asked.

"...Yeah, you could say that," Akira replied as she pulled a bottle of mineral water from her backpack and started glugging it down. She let out a short, satiated breath as she pulled the mouth of the bottle away from her lips. "Been having the same one pretty much all the time lately, where it starts with me running out of the house, and then... Well, it never ends very pleasantly, let's put it that way."

Running out of the house. This seemed to align with the tense family situation she'd described to me previously—the one that went down the day before the timefreeze.

Akira folded her arms, practically hugging herself. Her hands trembled a bit as she looked over at me, pale-faced and nervous.

"Do you...mind if I talk about it?" she asked.

"Not at all," I said. "I'm more than happy to listen."

Akira lowered her gaze and stared down at the table between us. Then she started recounting her dream to me in vivid detail.

"And then literally the exact moment I was about to get run over by the car, I woke up," Akira said. "It always ends differently every time. But yeah, everything other than that actually happened."

"Damn... That's, uh...pretty heavy..."

I felt bad for not knowing what else to say. It was jarring to know that she'd had a traumatizing experience like that the day before we met. Akira let out a long, almost performative sigh, then leaned back in her seat.

"If only it could all be just a dream, y'know?" she said.

I felt like I finally understood now why she'd been so eager to set out for Tokyo. It wasn't a desire to find a way to end the timefreeze that was spurring her on—it was that she wanted to get away from Hakodate as soon as humanly possible. Hell, she probably would have done the exact same thing even if my uncle had lived in Nagoya or Osaka.

"So, uh... What happened to that guy, anyway?" I asked hesitantly.

"Dunno. Tried going back to scope out the scene after time stopped and I first met up with you, but the door was locked... Guessing they either took him to the emergency room or he somehow got up and left on his own." Akira shook her head and scoffed. "Not that it makes much of a difference, I guess. Still committed a pretty major crime, whether he's alive or dead."

"H-hey, no you didn't. You were only acting in self-defense. That's one hundred percent justified."

"Okay, well, even if I got cleared on *those* charges, hypothetically, I still tried to steal the guy's wallet when I could have just left and none of that ever would have happened. Not really any way I can paper over that part."

I really wished she would stop being so down on herself about the whole situation. I tried to reassure her in every way I could think of—telling her it wasn't her fault, that the guy was to blame, that she'd been pushed up against the wall and just got a little desperate in the heat of the moment—but it felt like none of my words were getting through to her. Like she'd already sentenced herself in her own mind.

"I know you said before that you think it was all your fault that time stopped and everything," said Akira. "But like I told you back then, I'm pretty sure at least part of the blame lies with me too."

"How come ...?"

"I mean, weren't you listening? I was literally running around town thinking to myself that I hoped tomorrow never came. So even if it *is* you that the timefreeze always centers around, I don't think you dragged me into it. I'm pretty sure I must've unconsciously thrown myself in." Akira furrowed her brow apologetically. "Anyway, yeah. My bad. I should've told you all this stuff a lot sooner."

"Nah, you're fine. Though I've gotta say...I am feeling pretty concerned about how you're holding up through all of this."

"And why's that, huh? I'm really not all that stressed about it anymore, just FYI. I mean, it happened, like, over a month ago now."

I was pretty sure she was just putting on a brave face here. No way would she be tossing and turning and groaning in her sleep like that if she was really over the whole situation. It had to still be bothering her a *little* bit, at least.

"And besides!" said Akira, her voice rising in pitch and volume in what I could only assume was a forced attempt at sounding cheerful. "I actually got a LINE message from my mom right before time stopped, just to say that she was sorry and everything. So I'm pretty sure she feels bad about what she did to me, and she would take my side if I went home and things got awkward again. So don't worry about me. I'll be fine."

"Gotcha... Well, okay then."

If that was how she truly felt, then it really wasn't my place to argue with her. I'd definitely grown to prefer the strong, grins-in-the-face-of-adversity version of Akira to the gloomy and despondent one (even if the former could get a *bit* intimidating at times). Still, her pained expression belied the optimism in her tone—and unfortunately, that was the image that stuck with me at the end of this conversation.

"Man, sorry. Didn't mean to bring down the mood and get all heavy tonight. Think I'd better just go back to bed," Akira said before lying flat on the leather couch again without even giving me a chance to respond.

I followed her example and did the same. Yet even after I closed my eyes, I couldn't fall back asleep. My mind was racing—mainly with thoughts of Akira and ways I could potentially eliminate the anxieties that plagued her. I knew that realistically there wasn't much I could do for her. I couldn't erase the things she'd done, nor could I help her patch things up with her family. But maybe there was one thing I could do, at least.

After sleeping for another four or five hours, we got dressed and left the karaoke parlor. When Akira twisted her back and leaned from side to side, as if doing warm-up exercises for the long day of walking ahead of us, I could hear the joints in her spine pop.

"Ugh, I hate it when my back cracks," she said. "Makes me feel like an old grandma."

"Nah, c'mon," I replied. "Just means you're fit and healthy, I say."

"Like hell it does." She twisted her wrists and ankles in slow circles to finish up her stretches. "All right. Let's hit the road."

"Actually, wait a second," I said, stopping her right as she took her first intrepid steps out onto the pavement.

She turned around. "What's the holdup?"

"There's an idea I wanted to float past you."

I tried to say this in the most serious voice I could muster. Akira seemed to pick up on this, judging from the way her expression stiffened as if bracing for a tough conversation.

"Yeah? What is it?"

I swallowed nervously, knowing full well that it was a bit of a gamble for me to even suggest this. I wasn't sure if she'd be relieved to hear it or completely offended. I figured this was probably pretty close to how it felt to ask someone out while having no clue whether they were going to reject you. But I steeled my conviction and said the words:

"So I was thinking... What if we just...let time stay frozen?"



## **Chapter Five: No Tomorrow for Us**

I'M TELLING YOU, that boy needs to get over whatever this thing is as soon as possible. He'll never make any real friends at school like this."

"There's no need to rush him, dear. We just have to be understanding and let Kayato deal with this at whatever pace is comfortable for him."

As I stirred through short and shallow bouts of slumber, a memory suddenly flashed into my mind—of my parents having an argument back when I was in junior high, if I remembered right. I could hear them shouting at each other in the living room all the way from my bedroom.

"He can't even ride a train, for heaven's sake! What's he going to do when he has to go out into the real world and get a job?"

"We really don't have to think that far ahead right now, do we? Plus, it's not like there aren't plenty of places that'll let you work from home nowadays!"

"Please! That's only for part-time entrepreneurial work, or a very, very small subset of privileged positions. Let's try to be a bit more realistic here, can we?"

"I think you need to be more considerate of Kayato! He's doing his best, dear."

What a horrible memory to recollect. There was nothing that depressed me more than hearing my parents fight—especially when it was about me. They were arguing over me and my future prospects. Yes, "future"—a word that had always left a sour taste on my tongue whenever it left my lips. At times, I even felt like I might be crushed beneath the weight of all the implications encompassed by that one loathsome word. I'd never liked thinking about the future. Not one bit. I was under way too much pressure already, just trying to

keep my head above water and go on living here in the present.

"Pressure? No. You're simply afraid, my boy. Not of your parents, nor your school, but of something much greater."

I recalled Uncle Kurehiko's words.

Afraid? Yes, I remembered now—exactly what it was my uncle had been about to tell me in my dream back then. Even back when I was a young boy, his answer surprisingly struck a chord deep within me. And my thoughts hadn't changed since—I knew what it was I truly feared. It was the same thing that scared Uncle Kurehiko into living the life of a recluse, and probably what Akira was feeling so afraid of as well.

The future.

I was afraid of the passage of time. Of what tomorrow might bring.

Of losing loved ones. Of illnesses worsening. Of going to college. Of finding a job. Of natural disasters, and accidents, and farewells, and growing old, and the inevitability of death, and losing all the happiness I fought for in life—everything I once held dear.

Everything that anyone and everyone had to be afraid of lay lurking up ahead, perhaps even lying in wait, right on tomorrow's doorstep. And yet, people always spoke of the future with such starry eyes, in such fond and whimsical tones. Probably because it was the only way they knew how to go on living. The future had to be bright and beautiful—filled to the brim with everything they'd ever dared to hope for. Only by truly believing in this could anyone ever find the happiness they dreamed of, or so it was said. Yet in actuality, the future's true form was opaque and uncertain—something no one could truly know, except that it was sure to leave misfortunes untold in its wake.

But so long as time remained stopped, we were free from that uncertainty.

We could go on without ever having to think of what I'd do for the rest of my life or Akira being held accountable for her actions by the law. In which case, maybe this timefreeze was what we needed all along. Maybe this could be our salvation.

"You wanna just...leave it frozen?" said Akira as she furrowed her brow. I was relieved that at least she hadn't immediately blown up on me for simply suggesting it or rejected the idea outright. "I mean, it's not like we have a choice in the matter when we don't even know how to make the world start moving again, do we?"

"Actually, I think I might have a pretty good guess on that front," I said.

"What?! Then why the hell didn't you say so until now, dumbass?!" Akira yelled as she came over and got all up in my face. *Well, shoot.* It seemed *this* was the part I should have worried she might blow up about.

"L-Look, I'm sorry, okay?! But I swear it's something I only realized a few hours ago, and you were asleep, so yeah..."

I took a few steps back as I offered this excuse. Akira, who'd been glaring at me from point-blank range, backed off as well, though she kept her eyes decidedly narrowed.

"Well, let's hear it, then," she said.

I let out a sigh of relief, then began to explain.

"Okay, so we know I've been through at least three timefreezes, right? One when I was in third or fourth grade, one when I was in eighth, and now this one where I'm in eleventh. I tried as best I could to really think hard about what happened right before every one of these situations to see if I could find any correlation between the three, and I eventually realized that they all *did* have one thing in common. And it's something I'd wager *your* circumstances had in common with them as well."

Akira held her chin between her thumb and forefinger to contemplate all this —and then her face lit up as though she'd had a eureka moment.

"Feeling like you're at the end of your rope?" she said.

"Exactly," I replied. "All three times, I was right on the verge of despair."

The first time, it had been my parents fighting.

The second, it was my classmates bullying me.

And this time, it was feeling trapped and accidentally hurting one of the other kids in my group on my class trip.

When viewed on just a surface level, it felt pretty laughable to claim I felt true despair in any of these situations—especially compared to what happened to Akira. But for me, these had all been the types of unbearably stressful circumstances that made me feel like I didn't even want to go on living any longer.

"And if we know that despair is the trigger," I posited, "then it stands to reason that only the inverse can break us out of the phenomenon."

"What, you mean, like...hope or something?"

"Something like that, yeah. At least, that's my hunch."

"Your hunch...? Sounds pretty flimsy to me..."

Akira's shoulders slumped as though she'd lost all hope in me.

I was fairly certain that the timefreeze I'd experienced back in elementary school had ended when I arrived at the door to Uncle Kurehiko's apartment. In my more childish mind, I was probably praying he could rescue me from the unpleasant smorgasbord of emotions my parents' argument had left in me. Maybe when I reached the door to his apartment, it felt like I could see a light at the end of the tunnel, and that glimmer of hope caused time to start moving forward again.

The second time, I figured it was successfully exacting my revenge that had been the trigger. After beating them both with a metal bat, then fleeing the scene...I probably felt a certain sense of accomplishment, I supposed. Either that, or I felt like a weight had finally been lifted off my shoulders, and that emotion brought the timefreeze to an end.

"But whether it's hope or not, I'm guessing it's probably not a super strict set

of criteria," I said. "Especially if I was able to make it out of the timefreeze just fine, even back when I was in elementary school. So there's probably no special trick or technique to it or anything—unless it's just completely luck-based, which I also doubt."

Akira folded her arms and hummed as she mulled this over. She still wasn't entirely convinced. "But if it's just finding a little something to be hopeful about, I feel like we would've certainly ended the timefreeze by now, right? I mean, we've been on the road for a month, and we've definitely had some good times along the way."

"Yeah, which is why I'm kinda thinking we probably have to find a reason to be hopeful about something in particular."

"Oh yeah? Like what?"

"Like the future, for instance."

Akira's eyes went wide, as if my answer had caught her completely off guard.

"The future, huh...?" she repeated softly, her expression turning more and more conflicted as she scratched the back of her neck. "Damn it, I *really* hate that it sounds like you might be on to something here..."

Simply having a good time or being ready for the timefreeze to end was not the same thing as actually feeling hopeful about the future. And while Akira had made no secret of how much she hated the timefreeze and all its inconveniences, I hadn't heard her say anything remotely optimistic in terms of things she actually *wanted* to do when we got out of it. It seemed she and I really were on the same wavelength, at least in terms of what was most critical here.

That said, if the condition for ending the timefreeze really was what I suspected, then it definitely did feel like a pretty flimsy requirement, just as Akira had said. Even more than that, it felt too lax. Like, what if one of us had suddenly decided to turn over a new leaf while walking right in front of a frozen car? The thought of time suddenly jerking back into motion while we were on the highway gave me chills.

"Well, I think I get the gist of what you're saying," said Akira. "But... I still want

some time to think about it. Your suggestion, I mean."

I couldn't fault her for that. It definitely wasn't a decision to make lightly—whether to live in the future or stay here in this world out of time. Both options had pretty severe implications, and I assumed the scales wouldn't so easily tip one way or the other for her.

"Fair enough," I said. "Let's think about it while we walk, then."

And with that, I headed off down the road. Regardless of what choice she made, we'd be better served getting back into an actual city than just standing around here in front of this old karaoke parlor any longer. Akira didn't respond, but she followed me nonetheless. Once we'd walked without a word for quite a while, she broke the silence with a personal anecdote.

"So back when I was in elementary school, right," she began, "I didn't know how to swim at all. I was the only girl in our whole class who didn't, actually. And anytime I tried, I'd just start flailing around like I was about to drown, and I felt super self-conscious about being seen by anybody whenever I was in the water. So as you can imagine, I always hated pool days in gym class."

I listened attentively but didn't say anything.

"Then in fourth grade, we had this swim test thing. Had to swim all the way across this twenty-five-meter pool using crawl stroke in order to pass, but if our feet touched the ground once, we had to do extra swimming lessons over summer vacation. I was so depressed at the thought that I couldn't even sleep the night before the test—just lay there in my bed, wishing tomorrow would never come. Would've been a dream come true if time stopped for me back then. But obviously, the sun came up, and I had to take the test along with everyone else. And not only could I still not swim, but I was in even worse condition than usual from not sleeping a wink the night before."

Akira let out a little sigh before continuing.

"So in the end, I made a complete fool of myself in front of all my classmates, and I got signed up for summer swimming lessons. When I think about it now, though, I feel like all I really needed back then was a little more time. Time to practice on my own, without any prying eyes watching me. Time to make sure I got a good night's sleep beforehand. And time to really pump myself up and get

in the right mindset to take the test. But I didn't have time to do any of those things."

At this point, Akira stopped dead in her tracks.

I stopped walking too and turned to face her.

"And right now, that's exactly how I feel again. Like I just need more time. I know it might just be me delaying the inevitable...but I feel like if I can actually have some time to get mentally prepared, then maybe even a hopeless screwup like me can find the courage to face this cruel world full of lies and pain, y'know what I mean? So I guess what I'm trying to say is... Yeah. I think I can get behind this proposal of yours."

As soon as she said these words, a warm surge of elation bubbled up from my chest. I knew it was pretty wrong for me to actually be happy about giving the rest of the world the middle finger, but it definitely made me feel like Akira and I had just connected on an even deeper level. We were still in this together—and for the long haul too.

"Thanks," I said. "Really glad to hear you say that."

Akira gave a little smile in reply, then turned to face the road ahead. "So, what do we do now?"

"Uhhh, honestly, I hadn't really thought about it yet. But I figure we can still keep making our way in the general direction of my uncle's house for the hell of it—just that there's no need to be in such a rush about things anymore."

"So we can just take our sweet time now, huh?"

"Exactly," I said with an enthusiastic nod.

I felt both nervous and excited all of a sudden, like we'd finally been truly freed from the spell called time that bound us. From now on, we could screw around and laze about however we wanted, for as long as we wanted—and no one could ever judge or do anything to stop us. But most of all, we didn't have to think about the future anymore...and there was no better feeling in the world.

"Hey, in that case..." said Akira. "There's actually somewhere I'd like to go

check out, if it's cool with you."

"Oh yeah? Where's that?" I asked.

Akira blushed and sheepishly scratched her cheek. "Well... You like hot springs, right?"

And so we changed course and headed west, over to a famous hot spring resort at the base of the Nasu Highlands—the Nasu Onsen village. It took a full day of walking just to make it here for this little detour. It was a huge slog uphill at a steep incline the whole way, though, so we both worked up quite a sweat. But the higher up we got, the more the rough roads started to become beautifully paved again, with old wooden buildings lining them on either side. Eventually, we could see a little river running through the small mountain community, with old and elegant bridges running across it.

"Oh, hey. I'm pretty sure I've seen this place on TV before," I said, pointing to a large wooden hot spring hotel that looked quite a bit older than all the others. "Wanna just go in here for starters?"

Akira gave her seal of approval, so the two of us headed into the building.

To make a long story short: We made the right choice. I couldn't speak much to the water quality or the mineral efficacy or whatever, but the view from the open-air bath out back was definitely something to write home about. The incredible autumn scenery—miles of untouched nature with a spectrum of trees lush with reds, yellows, and greens—was enough to make the hike uphill feel worth it all on its own.

After taking a long, rejuvenating dip in the bath, I headed back out into the lounge. There, I found Akira sitting by the windowsill, gazing outside and cooling herself off with a traditional-style fan. I wasn't sure where the heck she'd gotten that from.

"Wow, you finished up fast," I said.

She stopped fanning herself to look over at me. "Yeah, wanted to stop before I had my fill. Figure since we came all the way out here, I wanna check out as many different places as I can."

"Heh. Sounds like you're really determined to get your money's worth here. Well...all zero yen, that is."

"Oh, please. Not like you're paying either, bub."

"Okay, fair point," I said, then took a seat next to her.

Akira set her fan down on the coffee table in front of us, then got up and walked over to a tourist who was leaning casually against the wall, perusing a travel guide. She snatched the book from his hands as though it were a free newspaper and started flipping through the pages, then let out a gasp of surprise.

"Wow, dang!" she said. "They've even got mixed bathing at this one up ahead!"

"Oh, interesting," I said. "Always got the impression they only did that way out in the boonies, but this place isn't even that far off the beaten path."

Akira turned to face me and flashed a provocative grin. "Well, we're here now. Wanna give it a shot?"

"Bwuh?!"

"Ha ha! Man, you started blushing real quick!"

Akira was now cackling like a hyena, and I could feel my face growing redder and redder. I hated that she always had such an easy time ruffling my feathers. I decided to try launching a counterattack for once.

"Wh-what do you mean?" I said. "I'm down if you are..."

"Nah, c'mon. Don't act tough. I know you're not that type."

"No, I think *you're* the one who's acting all smug. You know you'd never actually do it—you only suggested it because you thought I'd chicken out."

Akira scrunched up her face into an angry pout. She shoved the travel guide back into the innocent bystander's hands and stomped over to have a staredown with me.

"You know what?" she said. "You're on. Let's go, dude."

Wait... Did I just sign my own death warrant here?

I could feel myself getting cold feet already. But I knew if I backed out now, Akira would never let me live it down. So I just stood up and told her to lead the way, and the two of us left the building and headed for the inn with the mixed-gender baths.

It was a much longer walk to get there than I was expecting. We had to hoof it for quite a while through some long, narrow, winding mountain roads. It felt like we were now *literally* going on a hike in the middle of nowhere, enough to make me worry if we were actually heading the right way or not. But lo and behold, after over an hour of walking, we finally arrived at the traditional-style inn Akira had seen in the guidebook. The place looked so old, it probably had to have been built in the late 1800s. There was even a little hot spring right out in front of the building, kind of like an outdoor pool. There were no other customers, by the looks of it.

"Is this the mixed bath right here, then?" I asked.

"Well, if I remember right..." said Akira, rolling her head from side to side as she sifted through her memories. "I'm pretty sure the book said there were two types of mixed baths, actually. Main difference being that you have to wear a bathing suit in the outdoor one, but anything goes at the indoor one."

"Oh, gotcha..."

"W-well, what are we waiting for? Let's head on in."

Oh man... A-are we actually doing this?!

My heart felt like it was going to beat right out of my chest, but I took off my shoes and followed her into the building despite my better judgment. The interior definitely felt like a product of its era, filled with antique furniture and black-and-white photos that lined the walls. The exterior was one thing, but actually stepping inside made it feel like I'd been time-warped back to prewarera Japan.

We came to a changing room at the end of the hall, and apparently the bathing area was just beyond that. Akira and I just stood there stock-still, as though there was some invisible barrier preventing us from going any further.

Neither of us said a word.

I stole a furtive glance at Akira out of the corner of my eye, hoping to gauge her expression—and was a little bit startled to see a hint of trepidation there. This alone was enough to make me immediately call off this stupid game of chicken.

```
"Y'know what, maybe we'd better not," I said.

"...No," said Akira. "We're doing it."

"But—"

"Clothed," she said as she walked forward. "We'll go in clothed."

"Uhhh... Y-you sure you wanna do that?"
```

Where was *this* weird brand of obstinance coming from? Was she really suggesting we just get in the bath with our clothes on, like self-conscious kids at a public pool? Wasn't that a bit of a faux pas at a natural hot spring? And could you really even *call* it bathing together if we were both wearing all of our clothes?

Despite all of these question marks hovering over my head, I followed Akira into the changing room, whereupon she sat on the bench and started taking her socks off. My heart skipped a beat—but these were the only articles of clothing she removed. I went ahead and took my socks off too, then balled them up and shoved them into my pocket for now.

And then at last, we entered the bathing area. There wasn't a single other person in the bath, thankfully. It was pretty dim inside, and the floor and bathtub were both just made out of simple, undressed concrete. There was a large, angry tengu mask hanging on the wall for decoration. But as I stood there feeling a little overwhelmed by the oppressive atmosphere, Akira was already rolling up her pant legs. She grabbed a nearby wash bucket and used it to splash a bit of hot water on her feet to warm them up and rinse them off, then gently dipped her toes into the bathtub proper.

"Oh, nope. Not happening," she said. "Way too deep. Gonna get my pants wet."

She immediately pulled her foot out, then crouched down at the edge of the bath and simply stuck her hands in the water instead. *Man, really? You've gotta* 

be kidding me... What did we even come out here for?

"C'mon, Mugino," said Akira. "Get over here."

"Uh, o-okay."

I crouched down beside her, then dipped my hand in as if testing the water. It felt a little bit hotter than bathwater's usual temperature.

"Cool," said Akira. "Now we can technically say we've bathed together, huh?"

Not sure I'd go that far... But if she was determined to tell herself that, then I didn't mind humoring her.

"Yeah. Feels kinda nice, actually."

As soon as I said this, Akira's expression suddenly turned meek. "...Hey, Mugino. You were telling me the truth when you said you're not into guys, right?"

This was a question she'd asked me on the very first day of our journey. I wasn't sure why she felt the need to reconfirm it now, but I nodded.

"Gotta admit, I kinda start to forget that you're even a boy sometimes..." she said.

"Hm. Not really sure how to respond to that..."

"So hey... What do you think of me, anyway?"

I did a double take; now I was *really* bewildered. This was even more difficult to respond to than her last statement. It took Akira a few moments to notice the implications of this before her eyes went wide, and she let out a little gasp of realization.

"Oh, sorry!" she said. "I don't mean that in a weird way or anything! I guess I'm just, I dunno...kinda curious how you categorize me in your head, is all."

Heh. The classic flustered backpedal, I see. Her face was getting awfully flushed now too, despite her hand being the only part of her that was submerged. But I figured I should at least give her the courtesy of a genuine answer, so I thought it through.

Obviously, I felt like it was fair to call Akira my friend at this point—and I was

pretty sure she considered me one of hers as well. But if she was asking how I felt about her on *top* of that, then that was a different question. She was an attractive girl, and maybe there were even some budding romantic feelings there too. But I couldn't just say I thought of her as my girlfriend or something, and I was pretty sure there was a more apt word to describe our relationship anyway. Partners? That was pretty close, though also easily misinterpreted. So if I had to word it in a way that was a bit more specific than that, then...

"I guess I think of you as, like...my comrade-in-arms, if that makes sense?" I said.

"What, like a war comrade...?" Akira replied. "And what are we fighting against, huh?"

"Not sure... Reality, maybe?"

Akira's eyes went wide as though I'd caught her unawares—but she quickly collected herself and nodded in understanding.

"I see, I see... Interesting take, I suppose," she said. "But, hmmm... Yeah, sorry, no. Don't think I can give you more than, like, a D average for that one."

Ouch. She was a pretty harsh grader.

"Sorry, Teach. What was the answer you were looking for?"

"Figure it out for yourself, dumbass," she said, splashing me with bathwater.

We ended up spending about three days in the Nasu Onsen village, just taking our time wandering around and checking out all the various establishments. Once we'd had our fill of hot springs, though, we headed back out to the highway and continued south to the city of Utsunomiya—which I was visiting now for the first time in my life, despite it not being all that far from Tokyo. The whole city felt pretty laid-back and tranquil, perhaps owing to the large river that ran straight through the heart of town, dividing it in two. Just walking down the avenue and looking at all the fancy buildings and condominiums along the riverfront was pretty picturesque. But our quiet stroll was eventually interrupted when Akira noticed something of interest and let out a gasp of excitement.

"Hey, look!" she said. "There's a skating rink up ahead!"

I turned my gaze in the direction she was pointing, and sure enough, there was a large signboard that read UTSUNOMIYA ICE ARENA hanging off one of the buildings.

"Wanna go check it out?" Akira asked, despite already walking off in that direction. Seemed like she was really in the mood to go ice skating. Though, come to think of it, she'd told me before that they used to go ice skating during gym class, hadn't she? Maybe it was just her northern blood crying out for a little taste of home.

When we got to the skating rink, it didn't look any different from a normal gymnasium on the outside. Upon walking into the building, we were met with some ticket machines and a reception counter, behind which were some shelves full of ice skates that were apparently available to rent.

"Tell me what size you wear," said Akira. "I'll go grab you a pair."

I told her my shoe size, and she hopped over the counter and started perusing the shelves. In almost no time, she hopped back over with two pairs of ice skates in her hands. Either this was a testament to what an efficient thief she'd become over the course of this trip or it just went to show how excited she was to do this with me.

With our skates in hand, we headed out into the skating area—where we were immediately greeted by a bone-chilling wave of frigid air, like someone had opened the door to a massive refrigerator. I was a little surprised just how cold it was. Most of the other patrons in the skating rink this Tuesday morning were families, and most had very little kids. Akira sat down on a bench near the rink and started putting on her ice skates. I followed suit, watching her to see how to properly lace them up.

"They feel nice and tight?" she asked.

"Yeah, I think so," I said.

"Lemme see."

Akira leaned over from where she sat to examine my handiwork. I caught a fleeting glimpse of her bra as she did—though I quickly got flustered and

averted my gaze.

"Yeah, seems good enough to me," she said. "C'mon, let's go."

Akira stepped out onto the rink and immediately began effortlessly skating around. Meanwhile, I slowly hobbled my way out onto the ice on uncertain feet, gripping the low wall of the rink the entire time. But after getting out there, I realized that it felt surprisingly easy to stay upright on my own, so I tried letting go of the railing.

"Whoa, what the ...?!"

H-holy crap! It's, like, twice as slippery as I was expecting!

I scraped the blades of my skates against the ice as I clung to the wall again for dear life. I *definitely* needed more practice before I could do this on my own.

"Come over this way a little more, why don'tcha?" Akira called out from the center of the rink. She was standing perfectly still on the ice like it was the easiest thing ever.

"N-no way, I can't do it," I said. "It's way too slippery."

"Nah, you're just tensing up too much. Try letting your momentum do most of the work."

"I dunno if that's such a good idea, but okay..."

I figured I could give it another shot. I gently pushed off the wall, letting myself float light as a cloud over the ice, like Akira said. I definitely felt more stable standing up this way—except now I had no way of stopping myself.

"H-hey, wait!" I yelled. "I'm not even doing anything, but I'm still sliding forward! Is this place on an incline or something?!"

"Obviously not, you dork. You're always gonna move forward as long as your center of gravity is behind you."

"Wait, really? But how does that make any sense?"

"Or, hang on—was it the front? Dang, now I forget..."

As Akira tilted her head to ponder this, I lost my balance and fell flat on my ass. I crawled my way across the cold ice on my hands and knees back to the

edge of the rink. I'd officially decided I never wanted to let go of the wall again.

"Man, you're hopeless," said Akira. "Here, I'll show you how it's done."

With that, Akira kicked off and started circling the arena at high speed.

Damn, she's fast! And yet, her motions were so fluid and graceful that I found it almost hard to believe she was just a casual skater. Her body was slanted so far forward that I didn't understand how she wasn't falling over. She did one big semicircle around the rink before weaving through the other frozen skaters like a skier doing a slalom.

"Damn..." I mumbled in admiration—and for a moment, we made eye contact. She grinned at me, then picked up the pace and started skating backward this time. I didn't even realize that was *possible*. Then she lifted one leg up, brought it back down hard, and bounded up into the air with the force from the recoil. She did a little twirl in midair before landing gracefully back down on the ice, then skated back over to where I was. She put her hands on her waist and puffed out her chest.

"Heh heh heh... How do ya like that?!" she said boastfully.

"Wow, you're like a professional skater!" I exclaimed. "You're so good, I don't think I can learn a thing just from watching your example! Did you take lessons or something?"

"Nah, gym teacher taught us how back in elementary school. Most of what I know, I just learned from putting in some extra practice after school. Though I'm kinda surprised that I've still got it after all these years. Guess I'm just a natural, huh?"

"Yeah, no kidding..." I was so in awe that all I could do was validate her as she tooted her own horn. "With skills like those, you should honestly try to shoot for the Olympics or something, if you ask me."

"Nah, no way. There were already tons of kids way better than me back in elementary school. And it costs a *lot* of money if you wanna actually put in the work to try to become a professional skater."

"Really? Huh, I wouldn't have guessed..."

"I just wanna skate for fun, and that's good enough for me. But *you're* gonna have to start actually practicing if you ever wanna quit hugging that wall, my friend."

And on that note, Akira started idly skating around again.

Obviously, we had all the time in the world for me to practice—but I could already tell this wasn't going to be my cup of tea. I knew full well that my athletic reflexes were abysmal, but I wasn't expecting to be *this* much of a hopeless wreck at this. Though I supposed a more positive way of looking at it was that I'd learned my skill level now, and I hadn't embarrassed myself in front of anyone other than Akira. It was definitely hard to say I was having any fun myself, but getting to watch her skate around with childlike glee was enough to make me glad we came here.

I figured I would just try to do a little practice of my own without getting in her way. I slowly carved a path forward across the ice, pulling myself awkwardly along the wall, though it was clear that I was doing far more work with my hands than with my feet. I didn't feel like I was improving whatsoever. This was really tough, actually. Akira noticed me struggling like a toddler and skated over to greet me—though she was also carrying a camera tripod in her hands for some reason.

"Where'd you get that?" I asked.

"It was just lying on the bench over there. Here, grab on," she said, holding out the leg end of the folded-up tripod. She didn't have to tell me twice; I grabbed on. "Figured I'd take you for a little ride, free of charge. Just don't let go, now."

"Whoa!" I said as Akira skated backward—and since I was holding on to the tripod, I got dragged right along with her. My body stiffened as I held on for dear life in a crouched position, and she rapidly picked up the pace. The cold air brushed against my cheeks, which were already feeling flushed after my previous series of tumbles. It felt pretty nice, actually—so nice that my body naturally untensed after a while. When I lifted my head, I could see Akira staring back at me with a triumphant grin. Occasionally, she'd look over her shoulder in the direction we were going, turning as necessary while still accelerating so as

not to lose speed.

All of a sudden, a strangely specific fantasy flashed through my mind—of her and me holding hands, spinning around and around in a big field full of flowers. It felt like something straight out of a fairy tale, and I couldn't help but crack a smile at the image.

"Having fun?" Akira asked.

"Yeah. At least, I think so."

She smiled. "Cool. Once you get a little better, I swear you'll learn to love skating too. You've just gotta put in the work and practice."

"Okay," I replied, nodding. "I believe you, yeah."

I clutched the tripod tightly with both hands. It was a stupid thought, but I swore I could almost feel just a hint of Akira's body heat through the sturdy plastic legs.

After skating around for several hours, we were both feeling pretty tuckered out. By the time we left the skating rink, my wristwatch said it was already seven at night. Akira and I agreed to stay at a slightly nicer hotel tonight, so we did some searching and eventually found one that happened to have a buffet-style restaurant attached. Fortunately for us, it was open all day, so there was plenty of food for us to choose from even at this hour.

Our appetites got the better of us, so we cast aside all pretense and greedily ate our fill. I had a steak, some soup, a steamed egg custard with chicken, some pizza, some macaroni au gratin, and plenty of desserts to top it all off. By the end of our feast, we were both stuffed to the gills.

Akira leaned back in her chair and rubbed her belly with satisfaction. "Aw man, I'm so full. Haven't eaten that much in a *long* time..."

"Yeah, same," I said. "Ugh... Feeling pretty bloated, actually..."

We headed upstairs to find ourselves a couple of rooms to stay in for the night, both of us hunched forward in pain a little bit as though we might keel over at any minute. Luckily, we found two guest rooms right next to each other

that were both open. I headed into mine and promptly collapsed onto the bed, going into a food coma for a little while. Painful as it was, it felt good to be alive with a full belly.

Once my stomach settled down a bit, I sat up and pulled out a notebook I'd stolen from a convenience store the other day. I walked over to the desk in a corner of the room, grabbed the hotel-branded pen, and started scribbling words across the page. But a few minutes in, I heard a knock on the door, so I set my pen down and got up from my chair to go answer it. When I opened the door, I was greeted by the sight of Akira standing in the hallway with a deck of cards in one hand.

"Hey!" she said. "So I found these down at the front desk... Figured we could play some games with 'em, maybe? Heh heh..."

This bashful laugh of hers—along with all of her other cutesy, innocent mannerisms that she showed little hints of from time to time—was so endearing, it was enough to gouge my heart right out of my chest. I was *very* weak to stuff like this.

"S-sure thing," I said. "Come on in."

"Cool, thanks." It only took Akira a few steps into my room to notice the notebook I'd left open on the desk. "Oh, were you writing something?"

"Yeah, kinda." I sat back down in my chair as Akira took a seat on the bed.

"Figured since we might lose our memories once the timefreeze ends, it'd be a good idea to leave a written record of our trip so that we can at least know what happened, even if we can't remember any of it."

"Oh yeah, you mentioned you wanted to do that, didn't you?" said Akira as she slid the playing cards out of the box and shuffled them. "Man, it's kind of depressing to think we're just gonna forget about all of this, isn't it?"

"...Yeah. It is."

An awkward silence fell over the room.

*Crap.* I didn't mean to kill the mood. Nor was I trying to have a real downer of a conversation right now. I had to salvage this somehow.

"Well, it's not like we know for *sure* we'll forget," I said. "Just think of it as a little extra insurance. You could try writing one for yourself too, you know. It's pretty fun, actually."

"Hrm. Yeah, maybe I'll give it a shot."

"Do it."

She leaned over my shoulder to peek at my notebook. "You'd better be making me sound cool in here, or else."

"I'm just writing things as they happened, honestly. Right now I'm up to the part where we spent the night at the elementary school, and you touched my arm."

"Wait, what? You're including that? You're gonna make me seem like a horrible person to your future memory-wiped self."

"Nah, don't worry. I've written plenty of good stuff about you too already."

"Y-you have? Well, all right. Just keep doing what you're doing, then..."

I closed my notebook and sat on the bed with her. The room was a single, so this was the only flat surface with enough room for us to play cards together. We could have moved down to the lobby or somewhere else, but Akira didn't seem to mind.

We dealt the cards out on the bed and started by playing a few rounds of Speed. Then we played Blackjack, Cheat, Concentration, Poker—pretty much every card game we could remember the rules to, we played at least once.

"Nice, looks like yours truly wins again!" Akira boasted after a round of President in which she truly decimated me. As loser, it was now my job to shuffle the deck. As I cut and riffled the cards with a technique that had become all too familiar for me over the past hour or so, I happened to look up and noticed that Akira was staring at me.

"Wh-what is it?" I asked.

"Nothing, just noticing that your hair's gotten *really* long," she said. "Not that it wasn't pretty long already when we first met, obviously."

"Oh, yeah... I guess it has, huh? Kinda just let it grow out most of the time." I

set the deck of cards down and started fiddling with my bangs. They had already been hanging over my eyes when our journey began, but now they were long enough to brush the tip of my nose. Which made sense—obviously, hair was going to keep growing if you didn't cut it, and it had been about a month since we left Hakodate at this point.

"Speaking of, does that mean you don't mind people touching your hair, then?"

"Mmmm... I'd say it's a little bit of a gray area, maybe. Definitely don't like it being stroked or anything, but if it's just brushing the tips or whatever, it's not so bad."

"You don't say... Dang, I feel kinda bad for your hairstylist."

"Oh, I don't go to the salon."

"Huh? Ohhh, sorry. Barbershop, I guess?"

"Er, no... I don't have a barber either."

Akira tilted her head curiously. "Wait, what? Then how do you get it cut?"

Part of me wanted to be open about this so that she could know more about me, yet that feeling was currently at odds with my fear of her being totally put off by it. It was a pretty close race, but the former just *barely* managed to eke out a win in this case.

"Um, okay..." I began. "So I'd really appreciate it if you could promise not to overreact or be weirded out by this or anything."

"Wh-what are you getting all serious for?" asked Akira, sitting upright. "Is it really that big of a deal?"

My heart was racing way faster than it should have been. My mouth had gone dry, and my hands were trembling. I felt even more nervous about sharing this than I had when I suggested we just let time stay frozen. But she had me cornered now, so I had no choice but to tell her. I braced myself for the worst.

"So the truth is, um... I only let my mom cut my hair," I confessed.

"Oh yeah...?" said Akira—and then she went silent for a while. "...Wait, that's it?"

"Th-that's it, yeah."

"Man, what the hell did you make such a big deal about that for?" She let her rigid posture deflate as if this were the biggest anticlimax in the world. "Who even *cares* if your mom cuts your hair? Plus, it's economical, right? Doesn't cost any money."

I was a little bewildered. I hadn't expected this reaction at all. "Yeah, but I mean, I'm in *high school*. No one still lets their mom cut their hair at our age... Unless you're a total loser, that is."

"You think? I mean, yeah, it might not be the norm, but I really don't see what the big deal is. Heck, most of the guys on my school's baseball team still let their parents shave their heads too."

"Okay, but I feel like that's a little different."

"How so?"

"I'm...not really sure how to explain it. But it just is."

As I dug in my heels but refused to offer any rationale, Akira scrunched up her face like she was fed up with me being so difficult.

"I'm telling you, it's really nothing to be ashamed of," she said. "Way better than having a horrible relationship with your folks, that's for sure."

I wouldn't say I had a particularly *great* relationship with my parents either... But regardless, I wasn't sure how to respond to this. Neither agreement nor disagreement felt quite right. But I was still glad that I told her—I really was. And glad that she had been the one I took this journey with. I was lucky to have found someone who wouldn't give a damn who cut my hair, much less judge me for it.

"...So it's all right when it's your mom, huh...?" Akira mumbled, and then her eyes lit up with hope. "You think...maybe I could touch your hair too, then?"

"What, like ... right now?"

"I mean, yeah! No better time than the present, right?" Akira said excitedly.

I had to admit, I felt like she was putting me in a bit of an awkward position here. My condition didn't pick and choose who could and couldn't touch me. It

was still an extremely unpleasant experience when my mom cut my hair, but it was something I knew I just had to put up with every once in a while. It wasn't as if I didn't mind it at all.

But if it were Akira, maybe...

On the off chance that I felt little to no resistance to her touching my hair, it might even be able to serve as the impetus I needed to slowly start getting over my condition with the help of someone I felt comfortable with.

I swallowed hard and nodded. "...All right, yeah. You can give it a shot."

"Sweet. Guess I'll just go for it, then?"

Akira leaned forward, and I heard the bedsprings creak beneath us as my body stiffened up like a statue.

"Okay, uhhh... Lemme see here..." said Akira, apparently unable to decide where or how to go about touching my hair without it being too uncomfortable for me.

Figuring this might not be the optimal position for her to avoid touching my skin, I leaned my head forward as if bowing to greet her, and my bangs drooped down away from my forehead. Akira slowly reached out a hand—and before she even touched me, my brow grew extremely hot. It was only a few seconds of nervous anticipation, yet it felt like minutes. Eventually, her fingertips came close enough to touch my hair...and she gently stroked my bangs.

O-oh man... This is making my arms feel super itchy already! It was like she was quite literally fingering the line between tickly and viscerally uncomfortable for me. I felt like I was on pins and needles, just praying it would be over soon.

"Dang, your hair is silkier than mine, even," said Akira. "Kinda pisses me off a little."

She started playing with my bangs a bit more boldly now—matting them together, twisting them around her finger, tugging on them a bit. And then, slowly, she started touching more than just my bangs, and I could feel my tactile receptors tingling like never before as I clung to my very last nerve and tried to endure it.

Then, all of a sudden, Akira's fingers touched my scalp.

On reflex, I jerked back and slapped her hand away.

The sharp thwack echoed through the hotel room.

Akira's eyes shot wide open in shock, and mine did too.

She left her hand hanging raised in midair where the impact had left it.

We both went completely silent. She stared at me, and I stared back at her.

For once, it felt like time had frozen us in place along with the rest of the world.

There was a good few-second delay before I finally came back to my senses.

"Oh god! I'm so sorry!" I shouted, apologizing emphatically enough that I might as well have been on my hands and knees. "I-It's not your fault! It was just a reflex, I swear!"

"No, that was definitely my bad. Guess I got a little too carried away. Sorry about that..."

She lowered her hand back into her lap, trying her best to seem calm and collected despite the dark clouds of melancholy I could see gathering like a storm in her eyes. The guilt and self-loathing I felt at the sight was so crushing to me that I thought my ribs might cave in and puncture my lungs. But even worse than how terrible I felt for slapping Akira's hand away was the realization that even *this* person—the one I'd let in and opened my heart to more than anyone else I'd ever known—still couldn't break this curse for me. And that was a harsh reality so cruel, it felt like a punch right in the gut.

"I really thought it might be okay if it was you..." I said.

Despair enveloped my entire body. I was going to be like this until the day I died, wasn't I? I'd never know the warmth of another human being, let alone take them by the hand and share this life together with them. I was doomed to die alone.

"I genuinely hate myself for this, you know... Like, what did I ever do to deserve having to live a life like this?"

"Mugino..."

I bit my lip. I should have known better—hell, thought I'd already given up on getting better years ago. But now, whatever wretched little scraps of hope I'd clung to deep in my heart had turned to sharp, tiny needles that spread throughout my chest.

"I'm sorry, Iguma-san. I didn't mean to hurt you..." These were the last words I could manage before I sank into a pit of self-loathing.

"Don't worry about me. I'm not taking it personally, I promise," said Akira.

Her words felt like a soft blanket being gently laid over my entire body.

"I know you call it a condition, like it's some sort of horrible disease," she went on. "But if it weren't for me knowing you couldn't touch other people, I never would've felt comfortable going on this trip together with you, right after what happened to me. And I know that's probably a pretty inconsiderate thing for me to say, given that it's obviously a huge insecurity of yours, and something that's caused you a lot of pain. But I guess I just wanted to say that you just being you isn't *always* a bad thing, at least in my case."

Akira smiled at me.

"So don't feel like you have to change. Some things we've just got to live with, y'know? You're fine just the way you are. But if you really do want to try to get over it...I'd be more than happy to help you work on that whenever you want. I don't mind if it's hard at first, or if you react in ways you don't mean to. Just say the word, and I'm all yours."

Her smile was all-encompassing. All-accepting. All-forgiving.

It felt warm. And gentle. But most of all, painfully bittersweet.

"...Thanks, Iguma-san."

"Nah, don't mention it," Akira replied. Then her smile broadened into a beam of sunlight so bright it could turn this frozen fall back to summer again. "So tell me—whaddya wanna do tomorrow?"

We went on with our journey at a leisurely pace. We stopped by the zoo and

broke into the giraffe exhibit to pose next to them. We checked out a local theme park and completely crashed the stage show they were in the middle of performing. We went through factories, airports, military bases, police stations, power plants, and all sorts of other places normal civilians would never be allowed to enter. We enjoyed this frozen world to our hearts' content, in each and every way we could think to. Countless detours and side trips later, we finally arrived at Tokyo's Adachi ward, where my uncle's apartment was located, after another—

"Uh, how long has it been since we left Nasu, again?" I asked.

"Heck if I know," said Akira. "Like a month, maybe?"

"Okay, yeah. Guess that works..."

I scribbled down "another month or so" in my journal.

It felt like I was definitely abridging things quite a bit at this point, but ah well. All we'd really done in the interim there was take our sweet time enjoying ourselves, so as long as I got that part across, I figured it was probably good enough.

I closed my notebook and slid it back into my bag. We were currently taking a break outside a mini-mart, sitting on a pair of guard rails shaped like upsidedown letter U's. Beside me, Akira was happily stuffing her face with a piece of fried chicken.

Now that we were in Tokyo proper, the sparse scenery we'd enjoyed in some of the northern prefectures had given way to an all-out concrete jungle, and there were people literally everywhere you looked. This town had always been much too crowded and stifling for my tastes. And yet, for whatever reason—be it a fond sense of homecoming or simply the fact that time was currently stopped—I didn't loathe it all that much at the moment.

"Man, that was good," said Akira, throwing her chicken wrapper into a nearby garbage can. "So you said your uncle's apartment was somewhere around here, yeah?"

"Yeah," I said. "Just another thirty-minute walk or so, maybe."

"Gotcha. Dang, I'm getting kinda nervous all of a sudden..."

I was right there with her. Though we'd certainly gone the long way around and changed our perspective on the timefreeze along the way, we'd still walked all the way from Hokkaido to reach my uncle's apartment. If we didn't find anything there after all that effort, it'd feel like quite the letdown. But we'd cross that bridge when we came to it. Plus, ending the phenomenon wasn't even our goal anymore.

We left the mini-mart parking lot, and I led the way to my uncle's apartment to the best of my ability, using the streets and buildings I recognized along the way as my guide.

"Oh, hey. Here's the U of I," I said. "Really pretty in the springtime with all the cherry blossom trees. And if you go straight down this road, it'll lead you right to the main headquarters of the Yutosha publishing company."

"Dang... You almost sound like a local," said Akira.

"Well, yeah. Probably because I am," I replied, smiling sheepishly.

"Is your parents' place somewhere around here too, then?"

"Nah, my house is pretty far away, actually. But the school I go to is nearby, if you wanna check *that* out."

"Wait, you serious?! Hell yeah, I do!"

And so we decided to take one last detour and made our way over to my high school—not that taking the scenic route was anything to be ashamed of when time was frozen anyway. Plus, it was only another two intersections away, so we made it there in no time. Akira and I stood there on the sidewalk, gazing up at the large school crest emblazoned on the outer wall of the main building.

"Wow... So *this* is where you go to school, huh?" said Akira, sounding mildly impressed as she yanked at the closed school gates. I assisted her in wrenching them open, and the two of us let ourselves onto campus.

"Can't remember a single time when I didn't feel depressed walking through here," I said as we walked in the main entrance, and all the gloomy, unpleasant feelings I'd encountered within these walls came rushing back to me.

Akira tilted her head. "What, because you didn't like school?"

"Yeah, guess that about sums it up. Hell, I even used to wish that a meteorite would come crashing down and level this whole place to the ground."

"Wanna break all the windows on our way out, then?"

"No, you freaking delinquent. We're not rioting, for god's sake."

We stepped up into the main corridor without stopping to change footwear; we were allowed to just wear our street shoes at my school. Although all of the eleventh-graders were off on the class trip to Hakodate, the other students were still in attendance, so there were people in the building with us.

"As much as I might hate this school, I know there are plenty of people who love it," I continued. "I'd never want to needlessly deface any sort of property that means a lot to someone out there."

"A-all right, I get it already!" said Akira. "It was just a joke, sheesh... You're the one who started talkin' about meteorites and all that crap!"

"Okay, we're here."

After heading up to the third floor and down the hall, we arrived at my classroom. I tried to rattle the door open, only to discover that it was locked. Akira insisted, though, so I went down to the staff room and grabbed the key, then hurried back up and unlocked the door to let us inside.

"This is my seat, right here," I said as I walked over and sat down at my desk, which was right in the middle of the classroom. Akira promptly came over and took a seat at the desk next to mine.

"Wow. Almost feels like we're classmates when we're sitting together like this, huh?" she said, smiling as though she found the thought rather entertaining.

I tried to imagine a world in which she and I were in the same grade, the same school. Me, an antisocial truant, and her, a total miscreant. Chances were, we'd never interact even if we *did* end up in the same class. Barring getting stuck together in a supernatural phenomenon like this, we'd probably go all the way to graduation without exchanging a single word. Thinking about it like that really hammered home just how fantastical the circumstances of our chance encounter had been.

"Yo, Mugino! Go buy me a yakisoba bun, ya damn twerp!" said Akira, spontaneously imagining a scenario in which I was her obedient little lackey. I immediately took back all of the sentimental stuff I'd just been thinking in my head.

"No way," I said. "You can go buy it yourself."

"Tch. Cheapskate."

"Not even. Just don't like people bossing me around."

"Well, aren't you just a big ol' stick in the mud? You're never gonna be popular with the ladies if you keep acting like that, y'know."

"Like I care about that. Besides, you're the only girl left in the whole world now, so it's not like it matters anyway."

"Oh yeah, guess not... Well, fair enough, then. No skin off my nose if you never find a girlfriend."

"Okay, when you put it like that, it feels way more insulting..."

Akira stood up and walked over to the window. When she looked outside, she cocked her head and let out a curious noise as though she'd spotted something.

"Hey, your schoolyard looks weird," she said. "The colors are all wonky."

Weird? How so? I got up and joined her at the window. Directly below us was the sports field, which was made from artificial grass encircled by a bright-blue track. Definitely different from the all-dirt schoolyard or pavement your average school had.

"Yeah, it's painted over with a waterproof coating for better drainage," I explained. "You see it a lot at high schools around these parts."

"Oh, huh. You don't say... Sounds like it'd be pretty hard to make an ice rink on that, then..." She sounded a little disappointed.

"Pretty sure there aren't any schools anywhere near Tokyo that do that, honestly. Doesn't get nearly as cold as Hakodate down here. Hardly ever snows too... Oh, but that reminds me—there was this one time back when I was in elementary school when it snowed, and we got to spend all of first period playing in it. It was great."

"Wait, but when did you do your classwork, then?"

"We didn't. We literally just got to play in the snow that day."

This was a pretty fond memory of mine, all things considered. Even though I ended up making a snowman by myself off in a secluded corner of campus, it was still a good time.

"Guessing that'd never happen up in Hokkaido, though, huh?" I said.

"You kidding me? Of course not," Akira replied. "Snow is like an everyday thing up there. Man, now you're just making me jealous... Sure wish I was born down in Tokyo too."

"Aw, come on. There are good things about living in Hakodate too, right? Like being able to go skating at school and all the tasty seafood and stuff."

"I guess, but there's way more stuff to do here in Tokyo."

"Yeah, too much, if you ask me. And trust me—when there's too many different options to choose from, you just end up getting decision paralysis most of the time."

"Hmmm... Seems a little weird to me, but okay. Maybe it's just one of those 'grass is always greener' things, I guess."

We spent a little more time in the classroom after that, just making small talk about random school-related subjects—sharing anecdotes about specific kids in our class, discussing differences between how school events were handled here in Tokyo compared to Hokkaido, and whatnot. But after chatting for a while, I got the sense that we were running out of things to talk about.

I looked over at the door. "Should we get going soon?"

"Yeah, probably."

We got up and walked out of the classroom.

At long last, we arrived at my uncle Kurehiko's apartment building. I wondered just how long it had been, exactly, since we first set out from Hakodate. It felt kind of surreal to have finally reached our destination after all

this time. We wasted no time making our way up the external staircase and then seeking out the door to his unit: Room 202. With bated breath, I placed my hand on the doorknob.

"...It's locked," I said.

Yeah, no duh, I thought to myself. What were you expecting, idiot?

"Where can we find the key?" asked Akira.

"Mmm... We've probably got a spare back at my place, but..."

It would be a pretty lengthy detour to walk all the way to my house and back. Even with the whole world at a standstill, that would feel like quite the waste of time. I racked my brain for any possible alternatives, but then Akira piped up.

"Hey, I've got an idea. This is the second floor, right? Why don't we just climb up onto the balcony and break in through the window?"

If I didn't know any better, I'd think this girl was on a mission to break some windows today. At the same time, I couldn't think of any other realistic options available to us. Plus, since it was a pretty old building, I knew it probably didn't have state-of-the-art crime prevention measures in place, so it shouldn't be that hard to break in from the second floor. I knew we'd only be creating a mess for the landlord to clean up later, but sometimes you had to break a few eggs to make an omelette.

"Okay, I'll head up onto the balcony," I said. "You just wait here."

"M'kay, roger that."

I left Akira at the front door, then circled around to the back of the apartment building. Once there, I hoisted myself up onto the railing of the first-floor veranda, gripped the rain gutter alongside it with my legs, and managed to climb my way up to my uncle's balcony with surprising ease. Luckily, his sliding door was unlocked, so we wouldn't have to break any glass today. I took off my shoes, then headed inside.

Apparently, the estate had yet to be liquidated, as the place had been left entirely untouched. The scent of oil-based paint fumes ingrained in the walls and floorboards was deeply nostalgic to me. I passed through the living area

and unlocked the front door.

"S-so this is it, huh?" Akira said uncomfortably as she took off her shoes and stepped inside. There was a restlessness in her footsteps as she slowly walked into the living area, looking nervously from side to side.

The room was spotless and tidy, a testament to Uncle Kurehiko's obsessively meticulous nature. There didn't seem to be anything that might serve as a clue in here—which left only the adjacent Western-style room that my uncle had used as his atelier, and that felt far more promising to me anyhow. I slid open the thin paper door separating it from the main living area.

"Oh, damn," said Akira, marveling at the sight.

The walls were covered from top to bottom with oil paintings, all of which had presumably been painted by my uncle. There were definitely a lot more of them now than the last time I was here. In the very back of the room was a single canvas—more than twice as large as any of the others—covered by a sheet of cloth. This lone painting had been wrapped up nice and neat and left sitting out of sight, as if it were too sacred to be profaned by mortal eyes. Akira and I looked at one another, then back at the canvas. I walked over and pulled the sheet right off.

It was a painting of a gigantic wasp—so massive and imposing that it felt as if it might burst forth from the canvas and devour us whole. I could almost hear its thrumming wingbeats. It seemed to be drawn as though it were being viewed in twilight, with its whole body cast in a sunset-orange hue. Upon closer inspection, I could see that it was not depicting an actual wasp. It was more like a collage comprised of countless pieces of discarded furniture and refuse—among them a broken TV, an electric fan, a billboard, a desk chair—all of which coalesced to form the shape of a wasp. It was a strikingly realistic painting, yet it wasn't photorealistic either. It was hard to convey in words. It was more like it was just a stunningly intricate recreation of some fearsome presence the artist had actually laid eyes on. All in all, it was an overwhelmingly awe-inspiring work of art.

But also, for whatever reason...the longer I looked at it, the more I was filled with an odd sense of déjà vu. Like it was trying to evoke some strange sensation

deep within me or call forth a latent memory. It almost felt like I was looking at

"The World in Amber..." my lips uttered without my consent.

These were the words my uncle had said during our last phone call.

Could this have been The World in Amber to him? This painting?

"Hey, Mugino," said Akira. "You're gonna want to take a look at this."

I turned around to see her pointing down at a small leatherbound notebook lying open on a desk in a corner of the room. I walked over and looked down at it to see my uncle's distinctively sharp, angular handwriting scrawled all across the pages. Akira and I sat down cross-legged on the floor together and read it through.

I've decided to write an account of these events to set my thoughts in order.

It all began three days ago. I only know this from my wristwatch; all other clocks seem to have stopped, just like time itself did that fateful day. That is the only way I can think to describe it: time, the world, and everything in it—all frozen in the blink of an eye, at just past five in the afternoon. And then all was quiet.

I tried walking around the neighborhood for a bit, but I was unable to find a single breathing body aside from myself. People, objects, animals—they'd all gone stiff as marble. For a moment, I thought I must have died and gone to purgatory. Been hit by a car veering off onto the sidewalk, perhaps, and killed before I knew it. Though if this is limbo, then it operates by strange rules indeed, as I notice myself growing tired after a few hours of wandering about, and I am visited by a familiar hollowness in my stomach should I neglect to eat. So no, I am relatively certain I'm still alive. Though not entirely.

"The same thing happened to Uncle Kurehiko..."

So there was at least one other person who'd experienced the timefreeze aside from Akira and myself—and someone I was related to, no less. The next

several pages of the notebook were a record of the time he spent in this frozen world, written in the form of a daily journal. He made hypotheses, investigated them, and formed conclusions about the rules by which the phenomenon worked, including how far you could throw things before they'd freeze in midair. What radius around his person was exempt from the timefreeze's effects. How the law of conservation of energy entered into things in this context. And even some conjectures as to what caused the timefreeze to occur and what might bring it to an end. The journal went on like this for several weeks' worth of entries, with virtually all of his logic aligning with what Akira and I had already surmised ourselves. This confirmation felt extremely validating; it seemed we may have been right about the triggers being despair and hope after all...

There is a piece in my workshop entitled "The World in Amber," painted on an F80 canvas. It simply appeared in the back of the room one day, yet I have no memory of ever having painted it. Nor do I have any idea how I ever managed to gather the necessary supplies or devote the hundreds of hours necessary to paint such an intricate piece.

I'd always found it strange and unsettling, but now I feel like I might know why.

Perhaps there was another instance of time having frozen around me once in the past, and I simply painted "The World in Amber" in that interim. A ludicrous thing to suggest, I know—and it does nothing to explain why I don't remember painting it. And yet, as an explanation, it feels strangely right to me. And assuming this is, in fact, the second time I've experienced this bizarre timestopping phenomenon, then it might also explain why I feel so oddly at ease within it, despite the circumstances.

So I was right about the wasp painting being *The World in Amber*, then. And although it was admittedly only a hypothesis of his, it seemed he'd *also* experienced multiple timefreezes in his life. And just like me, he'd lost all memory of the previous ones.

Perhaps the strangest thing to me, however, is that it's still light outside. The sun still looks just as bright, and when I hold my hand up to it, I can feel a gentle warmth. But shouldn't photons be affected by time stopping as well? And why am I still able to breathe normally, if air is presumably only flowing within a fewcentimeter radius of me? Should I not suffocate to death, then, when all the oxygen in my little air bubble runs out if I remain in one place for too long? And yet I feel just fine, even after a full eight hours of sleep. And I have many, many other questions aside from that. Are light waves the only form of electromagnetic wave immune to the phenomenon? Is the earth itself still rotating, and if not, what effects might that have? Would that not affect gravitational pull?

The one thing I can say for certain, however, is that I find this phenomenon quite favorable for my purposes. Obviously, there are a number of inconveniences that come along with it as well, but I have everything I need to live my life comfortably and focus on my work. It's almost as if someone designed it with me specifically in mind.

Perhaps this is a gift, then—a brief respite from the woes of everyday life, bestowed upon me by the heavens. Or a sort of grace period meant to give me enough time to prepare to face the cruel future that awaits me, so that I might live to tell the tale when at last I do.

With that in mind, I've decided to dub this phenomenon the "Moratorium Effect."

"The Moratorium Effect, huh...?"

It was a name only a jaded cynic like my uncle could think of. And yet, considering that Akira and I were also hiding away in the timefreeze and biding our time for fear of what the future might bring, it felt oddly fitting.

After a certain point, the journal entries abruptly ended. I could only assume the last one had been from the night before he had his heart attack. There was no way a man his age could have possibly seen *that* coming, after all.

I wondered what Uncle Kurehiko had been thinking in his final moments. Or perhaps he'd been in too much pain to think of anything at all. He'd probably just died suffering in solitude, all by his lonesome and with no hope for the future whatsoever.

"...This is too much, man," I said, hanging my head as my chest felt like it might cave in from the sheer weight of my lament. To think the life of a man I once looked up to had ultimately amounted to almost nothing at all, having been cut so tragically short. I should have talked to him more—should have actually listened to what he had to say.

"Mugino," said Akira. "Look at this."

I lifted my head.

Akira had turned the notebook to its very last page, where a single sentence had been scrawled in massive letters from margin to margin. I wasn't sure how to interpret these words—or even whether they were meant to be taken optimistically or pessimistically. But they resonated somewhere deep within me nonetheless.

#### LET THE CLOCKS STAY BROKEN

After staying the night in my uncle's apartment, we stopped by a nearby park in the Adachi ward. Despite being right in the middle of the city, the place was vast and full of nature. Akira and I stopped to sit down for a while on a bench by a large pond.

It was nice and warm out, surprisingly—the perfect weather to make me want to lie down in the grass and take a long nap. But instead, I just sat there a while, gazing listlessly out over the pond as I let the tranquility of its waters slowly fill my heart and mind.

"So. What do you wanna do now?" asked Akira.

"Good question..." I said, rubbing my chin. "Wanna go break into the Imperial Palace or something?"

"Sheesh, kid!" she blurted out. "Now that would be pretty damn ballsy, even with time stopped. You don't actually mean that, do you?"

"Sure, why not? We're here now, aren't we? Might as well give it a shot at least, if this is the best opportunity we're ever gonna get."

Akira grinned playfully. "I mean, I can appreciate the audacity, but the *Imperial Palace*? You're more of a rulebreaker than I gave you credit for, Mugino."

We'd stolen far more than our fair share of food at this point and done a whole lot of trespassing. There were probably plenty of other laws we'd broken without realizing it too—and would continue breaking for as long as time remained static.

"Feels like we're Bonnie and Clyde, almost," I said.

"Who's that?" asked Akira, tilting her head.

"This super famous pair of criminals who went all around America robbing banks and stuff back in the 1930s or something. There's been a few movies about 'em. Always on the lam, trying to stay one step ahead of the law."

"Dang, that's cool... Did they get away with it?"

"No, actually, they—"

I stopped short.

In retrospect, maybe it wasn't the best idea to compare us to this particular couple of criminals, given the grisly way in which they met their end. But now that Akira seemed genuinely interested to hear more, I was in way too deep to not finish the story—and I didn't feel like lying or glossing over it right now either.

"...In the end, the police caught up with them, and they both got gunned down in the streets," I said. "They were pretty much the most wanted criminals in the country at that point, so the cops didn't take any chances trying to bring them in alive."

"Oh, huh. Well, that sucks."

She said this completely nonchalantly, like it was neither expected nor

unexpected. Like it wasn't anything at all. I heard a creaking sound as she leaned back against the bench, narrowed her eyes, and gazed up into the sky.

"Can't just go around doing whatever the hell you want forever, I guess," she said. "Reality's gonna catch up with you eventually."

This last line of hers was so brutally on the nose, I could feel my stomach drop. Yet at the same time, Akira had a point—she knew as well as I did that this journey of ours couldn't go on forever. It didn't take a rocket scientist to see that our current way of living just wasn't sustainable. The way we'd been eating our meals, finding places to stay the night—all of the things we had to do on a daily basis in order to survive inherently required that we continue breaking the law, and probably cause a fair bit of trouble for whoever we were stealing from or imposing ourselves on.

If we knew for certain that the world would stay like this forever, or this were a post-apocalyptic sci-fi novel where time here on Earth had been frozen by some malevolent outside force, then maybe we could justify stealing food from stores and restaurants and sleeping wherever the hell we wanted in perpetuity.

But that simply wasn't the case.

We already knew how to make the clocks start moving again.

All we had to do was find hope for the future. Not that we knew for *absolute* certain that this was the exact method, when neither of us had even tried to find said hope as of yet. Far from it, in fact—we were trying to cling to this frozen world for as long as we possibly could, even if it meant we had to inconvenience hundreds or thousands more people in order to support our current lifestyle.

We knew this was wrong, of course.

But that did nothing to make the future more appealing.

Why would we ever want to give up this fantasy? And for what?

Just to return to the flavorless monotony of our boring day-to-day existence?

Once time started moving, I'd have to go back to school again. Talk to people again. Put up with uncomfortable situations again. Be a nervous wreck again,

masquerade as a functional member of society again. I'd have to think about my future prospects and my career path whether I wanted to or not. I'd have to either learn to overcome my condition or find some weird alternate lifestyle that didn't involve being touched by other people.

I had to get stronger, or I couldn't go on living. Or rather: If I wanted to go on living, then I would need to be stronger. No amount of motivational posters or empty reassurances were ever going to change that simple fact. Not in a million years.

In which case, I already knew what my preference was. And yet...

"Hey. Mugino."

I lifted my head from where I'd unintentionally let it hang. When I looked over at Akira, she was pointing a finger straight at my brow.

"You've got some mad forehead wrinkles goin' on right now."

"Oh, yeah..." I said, trying to massage them away. "Sorry, guess I got kinda lost in thought."

"Yeah, was about to say... You were lookin' pretty pensive for a minute there. What's up?"

Akira scooted a bit closer and inclined her head, causing her golden locks to dangle loosely in the still autumn air. The black patch on the top of her head had expanded quite a bit since our journey began as her roots grew out. I was fondly reminded of the way she'd grimaced at the sight of it upon catching a random glimpse of herself in the mirror the other day, before grumpily insisting for the umpteenth time that she'd dye it again soon.

"You know," I said, "I've been having a really great time with you, Iguma-san."

Akira blinked at me in wide-eyed, bashful bewilderment. "Y-yeah? C-cool, glad to hear it."

"But as much as I'm enjoying myself right now," I continued, "I can't help but feel a little bit anxious when I think about the long term. Just all of the inevitable stuff that'll happen when time starts moving forward again, you know... Having to go back to my boring everyday life again, and probably falling

out of touch with you eventually, and all the fun memories we made together starting to feel like something out of a fever dream or another lifetime...

Assuming they don't get wiped away entirely, that is. Whenever I start thinking about stuff like that, it just... It just hurts, yeah."

"Mugino..."

She said my name so gently and softly, as if handling it with the utmost care, that I could feel the genuine concern in her voice—or so I thought, at least.

"You're being emo again!" she flatly declared.

"Whaaa...?"

"Don't you 'whaaa' me. See, this is exactly what I've been telling you—you're too sensitive. You've gotta stop getting so caught up on each and every little thing."

Akira hopped up from the bench and stood just a few feet in front of my knees, then placed her hands on her hips and looked down at me. I felt like I was in for a lecture.

"You think too much, my friend. So from now on, no more thinking allowed."

"H-how the hell am I supposed to do that?"

"Not my problem. Oh, and no more angsty little monologues either!"

"Oh, come on. You've gotta leave me with something here."

I couldn't help but chuckle a bit at this ridiculous exchange. Seeing this, Akira softened up her expression too, and she lowered one hand from her waist to her side.

"I mean, don't get me wrong," she said. "It's not like I don't think about this stuff too sometimes—about the future and all that jazz. But all it ever does is make me feel more hopeless about things than I already am. And once you start getting all up in your head about that sorta thing, there's just no stopping it. Like, in my case, I dunno how the hell I'm gonna work things out with my folks, or stop feeling so depressed about school, or figure out what I wanna do with my life after graduation... And even if I did manage to find the perfect solutions to all of my current problems, I know I'd probably just come up with a ton of

new things to stress myself out about anyway."

I listened closely and carefully to Akira's words—her voice the only sound in the entire world.

"If you ask me, I think pretty much everyone's got their own baggage they're dealing with. But they still pull themselves outta bed every morning and try to carry that weight with them, 'cause they know the only way things'll ever get any better is if they fake it till they make it. That's what I'm gonna do. And I think you should too."

"...So, what, you're saying I should just turn my brain off completely and pretend like everything's gonna be okay?"

"No, ya dink. All I'm saying is: Don't let tomorrow stop you from living today."

This was effectively the same sentiment, in my view—just rephrased to give it a more optimistic spin. And yet, there was something in the way she said it that seemed to cut right through the thorns of anxiety that had suffocated me for so long, coiling their vines tightly around my every limb. Now, at last, I was free. I knew this liberation was likely only temporary; fears such as these were like stubborn, cancerous weeds that rooted themselves deep in your mind and could never be fully exterminated. They were ready to flare up and eat away at you again when fed even the slightest validation. But just this once, I decided I would cross that bridge when I came to it.

"You're really strong, Iguma-san," I said.

"Heh. Yeah, I know." Akira chuckled boastfully as she puffed out her chest. "But go on—feel free to keep telling me how great I am."

"I mean, you're cool and clever too... Not to mention cute."

"Wh—" Akira let out a flustered squeal, then promptly pouted and turned away. "Shut the hell up. I ain't cute, and you know it..."

"Sure you are. What with the way your canines peek out whenever you smile, or how your hair looks like you draped a big ol' sunflower over your head, or how you get all pouty over certain things... Oh yeah, and the way you get this little glint of innocent, childlike wonder in your eyes from time to time, like whenever we—"

"Gaaaah! Okay, okay, I get it! Enough, already!" she interjected, waving her hands frantically. She was bright red from ear to ear. "Man, you really don't have any problem at all just comin' right out and saying stuff like that, do you...? I'm gonna have to watch myself around you, or I'll be in deep trouble..."

Akira sat back down on the bench beside me, shaking her head as she fanned her face with her hand. I pulled out a bottle of water from my backpack and drank the last few swigs. After taking some time to cool off a bit, Akira reopened the conversation.

"Anyway, as I was *about* to say before that whole tangent..." she began. "So, um... Believe it or not, I've never actually been any farther west than Tokyo."

"Wait, huh?" I said, sounding more surprised by this than I intended.

"I never brought it up before because I didn't wanna seem like an uncultured hick or anything," she continued, apparently rather ashamed to admit this. "But yeah, pretty much all of my friends have been to Osaka or Nagoya or something at least *once* in their lives. But we never had a lot of extra money, so I could never really afford to go with them, and my folks never took us on family vacations either... So I guess I was just thinking..."

Akira turned to face me.

"If you don't mind, maybe we could head over to Kansai?"

I almost thought I felt the wind blow.

Already, I was picturing it in my head.

A new adventure, just waiting to begin.

Exhilaration coursed through my chest.

I'd never wanted anything more in my life.

"Let's do it," I said. "I'll go to Kansai, or Kyushu, or anywhere at all—anywhere our feet can take us."

"You mean it?" said Akira.

"Yeah. Hell, we could go all the way around Japan, if we wanted to."

Akira's face lit up like the first ray of sunlight after a month of snow. "Now

that would be pretty cool, yeah."

Even with all of our many detours, it had taken us nearly two full months just to make it from Hakodate down to Tokyo. How long would a tour of the entirety of mainland Japan take us, in that case? Over a year, maybe? Not that it really mattered when time was stopped; we could enjoy ourselves or just laze however we liked. We could indulge in this eternal instant of happiness—this timeless paradise for us, and us alone—for as long as we wanted to, and there was nothing anyone else could do to stop us.

So forget the future. All we needed was now.

"Mmmnnngh..."

Akira took a deep breath and held it in a while as she stretched out her back and all of her limbs—then let them fall limp again when she finally exhaled.

"Man, I'm feeling *really* tired all of a sudden," she said, doing her best to stifle a yawn. Perhaps her exhaustion was finally catching up with her now that the rush of adrenaline from achieving our initial objective yesterday had worn off.

"Wanna look for someplace to stay?" I asked.

"Mmm, nah. Think I'll just take a quick nap for now. Weather's nice enough, and I kinda wanna just lie down right here on the grass. Plus, I don't even have to worry about any bugs crawling all over me for once. Perks of living in a frozen world, I guess, heh."

There was a dense patch of grass just behind our bench, where the ground slanted upward at a very gentle incline. It looked pretty comfy right about now, honestly.

"You gonna take a nap too, Mugino?" asked Akira.

"Yeah, I think I will... Oh, but before I forget," I said, then reached into my backpack and pulled out my notebook and a pen. "Let me just jot down the gist of what happened at my uncle's place real quick. I'll come join you as soon as I'm done."

"Roger that, chief."

Akira carried her backpack over to the patch of grass, then laid it flat to use as

a pillow before lying down herself. Meanwhile, I set my notebook on my lap and got to writing. Regardless of how long our journey might continue, I still wanted to make an effort to keep writing journal entries on a daily basis. It would be good insurance to have in the event that something unexpected happened.

As I scribbled down a quick summary of the previous day, I noticed my ink starting to run dry. My characters grew fainter, and each stroke became a struggle. It seemed it was about time to retire this old pen.

"Hey, Iguma-san?" I said. "You still awake over there?"

"Mmwha?" Akira responded, still lying flat on the ground with her eyes closed.

"My pen ran out of ink, so I'm gonna go find myself a new one."

"Mmmnnyeah, okay... Oh, wait," she added sleepily, sitting halfway up. "Could you get me some water, actually? I literally just ran out."

"Yeah, sure thing. I'll grab a few."

"Cool, thanks. See you in a bit," she said, flopping back down.

Okay, one ballpoint pen and a few bottles of water... Maybe I should pick us up some snacks or something while I'm at it.

I wasn't sure how much I was going to end up getting, so I closed my notebook and set it on the bench, then emptied out a few things from my backpack to make room for this little impromptu shopping trip. I stood up, walked out of the park, and looked for any nearby convenience stores. I was fairly certain there had to be one *somewhere* around here... *Aha. There we go. Right on the corner.* 

I crossed the street at the intersection, then wrenched open the automatic doors to let myself into the store. I started making my way over to the beverage area—when all of a sudden, my eye was caught by the cover of a particular periodical on the magazine rack. It was a weekly serial manga publication—one I had set eyes on countless times over the course of our journey. I was always mildly intrigued by it, though never quite enough to actually pick it up and leaf through. But now that I actually had a little bit of alone time, I figured I might as well take a quick look. I didn't want to keep Akira waiting too long, so I certainly

wasn't going to stand there and read the whole thing.

I picked the magazine up off the shelf and was immediately thrust into the full-color first chapter of an all-new series featured on this week's cover. I was only planning to skim it, but the frontispiece was so breathtaking, I couldn't help but get engrossed. And as soon as I finished the chapter, I returned the volume to the magazine rack and just stood there in awe a while.

...Damn. That was good. Really good.

If I had to give it a genre, I'd say it was probably closest to fantasy. It was about a pair of young boys—soldiers on opposite sides of a conflict between two warring countries—who happen to wash ashore on the same uninhabited island. They agreed to set aside their national allegiances and work together in order to survive, at least for as long as it took to get rescued. At first, they struggled to get along due to some pretty major cultural differences, but as they started to get to know one another a little bit better, their bond slowly began to deepen. Eventually, they managed to make it off the island, only to discover that the war beyond its shores had just taken a turn for the worse while they were away... And that was where the first chapter ended. Although it certainly wasn't the most action-packed manga of all time, nor the most original plot concept, I found myself extremely captivated by it. The art style was gorgeous, and the characters felt so vivid and real. I couldn't even begin to guess where the story might go from here.

I kind of wanted to get Akira to read it too. Then we could share our thoughts on it—talk about our favorite scenes and characters or which lines might be foreshadowing for future plot developments. I just wanted to be able to rant and rave about it with someone I knew, really. To gush and theorize with one another the way you often saw people doing all over social media, scrutinizing every little thing about their favorite series right down to the tiniest of details.

This might even have been the first time I'd ever felt this way. Up until now, I generally let my thoughts on any given piece of media be "complete" as soon as I was done consuming it, with no need for additional analysis or conversation. And I'd *certainly* never felt the urge to recommend a story to someone else before. What a wonderful thing it was, having a friend to share your passion and excitement for something with. I'd never really understood it before, but

now it all made sense: It wasn't even really about the work itself, at the end of the day. It was mostly just an excuse to share something special with someone who really meant a lot to you. I'd just never had anyone like that until now.

But man, what an opening. Can't wait to see what happens next...

Although I guess...

I'll have to wait until next week to find out, won't !?

It happened in an instant.

The earth shook and the air quaked as a low, booming, resonant *gong* rang out like the tolling of a monumental bell. It was so sudden and startling that my stomach nearly turned itself inside out, and the contents of the manga I'd been reading left my mind in a flash.

What is that? What's that sound?

The ringing didn't stop. I started panicking.

What's going on? Is that a bell? But how? Who rang it? Who could have rung it? Akira? But there wasn't a big temple bell or anything over in the park, was there? And even if there was, it wouldn't be this loud. It wouldn't sound like it was ringing directly into my ear, surely.

But then, what other explanation was there?

Oh god. Don't tell me.

Intuition shot from synapse to synapse, slowly turning from suspicion to certainty, before the harrowing conclusion was fired off to every nerve in my body.

The bell was tolling. This was a signal.

Time was about to resume its march.

Which could only mean one thing.

Did I just...inadvertently wish to live in the future...?

Over what? A stupid manga series?

You've gotta be kidding me, right?!

It couldn't have been THAT good!

That's not something to live for! That's...that's ridiculous!

I burst out of the convenience store. This was bad—really bad.

I've gotta hurry! I need to make it back to Akira, and fast, or else—

A cold wind howled.

The autumn leaves rustled in the roadside trees.

A pigeon perched on a nearby branch took flight. I looked overhead and heard the roaring engine of an ascending aircraft as it carved its way higher into the sky. Behind me, I heard the muffled voice of the convenience store clerk giving their corporate-issued thank-you, followed shortly thereafter by the little jingle that announced each opening of the automatic sliding doors. A grown man in a business suit sidled his way out around me, clearly less than enthused that I was blocking the entrance.

A campaign van came slowly driving by, the earnest voice of a woman insisting "We need your support!" blaring from its megaphones. An impatient biker with a delivery box on the back of his motorcycle loudly revved his engine as he overtook the van and sped on down the avenue, the hum from his exhaust echoing the whole way.

And meanwhile, I just stood there in a daze.

"What the ...? Where am I?"



## **Final Chapter**

Apparently, I'd snuck off in the middle of my class trip.

And then run all the way back to Tokyo without telling a soul.

...Or at least, that's what seemed to have happened, anyway.

But I didn't actually remember doing anything of the sort. All I knew was that I'd been in Hakodate one moment, then in Tokyo the next. I knew it sounded crazy—but it was the truth. All of my spending money was gone, and my phone was dead too. Luckily, I still had my ATM card, so I went and withdrew some cash, then headed into a nearby fast-food restaurant to charge my phone so I could call my mom to come pick me up.

"So you think you just, what—teleported back here or something?" she asked on the drive home as soon as I finished telling her what happened.

"...Yeah, I guess so," I said. "Not sure how else to explain it."

"Well, hey, that's pretty cool," she said, humoring me. "Kinda like Goku."

I could tell she wasn't actually buying it, though I didn't blame her. I was finding it pretty damn hard to believe myself.

"Though I've gotta say," she went on, "it does seem like you've grown up a bit since the last time I saw you. Which is funny, since that was only, what—a few hours ago, right? Guess you're getting to be about that age, though... I swear, if you cut your hair short right now, you'd look just like a younger version of your father. Speaking of which, wow—that hair of yours has gotten long again, hasn't it? Maybe I should trim it when we get home."

I just sat there in silence, gazing out the passenger-side window.

In the end, I didn't tell anyone but my mother what really happened. I knew they wouldn't believe me even if I tried, so all that would accomplish would be making people think I was either insane or a delusional edgelord—and I didn't know which was worse. So when I had to explain myself to my teacher over the phone, I just told them I'd bought a flight back to Tokyo using my own money.

They told me they were very disappointed with my behavior, but I didn't get in any major trouble, at least.

All that being said, it was still an extremely unsettling experience for me, not to mention inexplicable. Given that my wallet was empty, could that mean I really had used my spending money to pay for a flight back home? But even then, shouldn't I at least have a ticket stub or a receipt? There were also a few articles of clothing and a couple of towels in my backpack that I didn't remember buying, and I found a random wristwatch in my pocket that definitely wasn't my style—not that I'd ever been a watch guy to begin with. There was no way I could just shrug this all off as some weird, trippy phenomenon.

And so I decided to try to get to the bottom of it.

First order of business: I needed to retrace my steps and ask around to find out if anyone in my group might have seen me walk off or noticed anything out of the ordinary around the time that I supposedly disappeared. Nagai seemed like the obvious choice.

With that sole purpose in mind, I set foot on campus for the first time since the occurrence. This took an awful lot of courage for me; not only was I a known truant even at the best of times, but I knew by now that word of me having run away in the middle of our class trip had surely spread among my fellow classmates. I was fully prepared to be the laughingstock of the day.

But these fears proved to be unfounded.

No one pointed and teased me as I walked into class—in fact, I didn't even get so much as a curious glance. No one seemed to have any interest in me at all. It was honestly a little bit anticlimactic, given what I'd been bracing myself for, but I was relieved to know that my classmates paid just as little attention to me as I hoped they did.

"H-hey, uh...Nagai-kun? Could I talk to you for a sec?"

I wanted a chance to speak with him alone if possible, so I'd been waiting in the hallway for him to emerge after he went to use the restroom during lunch hour. "Oh, hey there, Mugino-kun," said Nagai, turning to face me as he wiped his hands off with a handkerchief. "Sure, what's up?"

"Well, um... I was just, uh..." I stammered.

Damn. I'd rehearsed what I was planning to say and everything, but now that I was actually standing here facing him, the words just weren't coming to me. I racked my brain as hard as I could for something, anything I could say, then suddenly blurted out:

"I'm really sorry for shoving you the other day!"

This wasn't at all what I'd come here to say, but it was still a decent start, I figured. Nagai looked at me like a deer caught in the headlights for a moment—but then his face suddenly lit up, and he smiled as though I'd just reminded him of an amusing inside joke.

"Oh, that?" he said, laughing it off. "Yeah, don't worry about it. You've got some condition or something, don't you? I should've totally known better."

"No, I mean it. That definitely wasn't cool of me," I said. "Especially when you were already going out of your way to include me..."

"Nah, it's fine, I swear. Though if you really feel that bad about it, then maybe you can just buy me a soda sometime, and we'll call it even."

"S-sure, yeah... That works for me."

Thank goodness he was such a laid-back guy.

"Was that all you needed, then?" asked Nagai.

"Oh, uh... No, there was one other thing, actually..."

I proceeded to ask Nagai if he'd noticed anything strange at all when we were walking down the street as a group that first day of the class trip—the last thing I remembered doing before my memories abruptly cut off.

"Mmmmm, yeah, I dunno... You kinda just up and vanished all of a sudden. Only thing I remember aside from that is when you pushed me down."

"Gotcha..."

"I can try asking the other guys if you want, though."

"Wait, really? Are you sure?"

"Heck yeah, man. Just leave it to me. We'll talk more later, all right? See ya."

And with that, Nagai headed back to the classroom.

...Man, what a great guy. Goddamn.

From that day forward, we started talking to each other at school on a regular basis. Before long, it felt like I'd finally made my first real friend since I started high school. It was surprisingly easy developing a rapport with him, actually—like maybe my communication skills and social awareness weren't quite as underdeveloped as I thought. By the time December rolled around, we were even eating lunch together every day.

"So," he said as we opened our respective bento boxes in the classroom one day. "Still trying to figure out what the heck happened to you on the class trip, I take it?"

"Yeah," I said. "Just can't seem to let it go, I guess..."

Perhaps the weirdest part of all, though, was that as I continued looking into it, I'd remembered two other instances in which I'd had similar experiences in the past: once in elementary school and once in junior high. Sadly, those leads hadn't proven to be of any use to me thus far.

"Man, you're really taking this seriously... But anyway—so I was gonna ask you..." Nagai said, then turned his cell phone to show me something. "Have you seen this before? Guess it's some viral video that was making the rounds on Twitter about a month ago."

I looked down at his screen and saw what appeared to be a reposted TikTok video of some high school girls horsing around at a kitschy diner. They seemed to be playing charades or something. A few seconds into the video, one of the salads that had been sitting on their table just instantly vanished without a trace. This was followed by a second or two of the girls all freaking out about it, and then the video promptly cut off.

"...Yeah, what about it?" I said. "It's just faked, isn't it?"

"I thought the same thing at first, but I guess there were actually a bunch of

these kinds of videos going around. Apparently, *all* of them were recorded at the exact same time, if you can believe that. Folks in a few of the occult communities I follow were saying there must've been some kind of rift in the space-time continuum. Maybe you were just unlucky enough to get caught up in that somehow?"

"What, like an interdimensional traffic jam or something? Get real."

"I'm telling you, man—there's all sorts of urban legends out there about stuff just like this. Like a tunnel that rapidly ages you the moment you walk inside, or an island that turns back time, or even—"

Nagai was a pretty big fan of the paranormal. Once he got started talking about stuff like this, there was no stopping him. Not that it didn't usually make for pretty entertaining lunchtime conversation fodder, to be fair.

Eventually, classes ended for the day and it was time to head home. I packed up my things and walked out into the hallway. Today was the day the next issue of my favorite weekly manga magazine came out. I already had a subscription to it via the official app, so I was planning to curl up in bed and read it on my phone as soon as I got back home. But as I walked eagerly down the corridor, a couple of boys came running up from behind me. When one of them bumped shoulders with me, I gasped in fright. The boys both immediately stopped and spun around, startled by my reaction.

"The hell's that guy's problem?" said one of them.

"Yeah, no need to be such a drama queen, jeez," said the other.

The boys ran off again—but now everyone in the vicinity was staring at me. *God, this is so embarrassing... Ugh. Wish I could just crawl into a hole and die.* How depressing was it that one little momentary accident like that could completely kill my good mood? Why did I need to come here and subject myself to this torture every day?

"You don't 'need' to do anything. A high school education's not compulsory, you know."

All of a sudden, I could hear Uncle Kurehiko's words echo through my mind. Come to think of it, his 49th day memorial service was coming up here pretty soon; I almost couldn't believe it had already been that long since he passed. He'd been an awfully stubborn, jaded old man for a guy who'd only made it to age thirty-nine, but I had to admit that it felt pretty lonely to have lost the only person I knew who could relate to my more negative feelings about life and the world at large. I missed him pretty bad sometimes.

At the same time, I also felt like I'd become a bit more of an optimist lately—if only because I'd found a lot more to look forward to. Even just the little things, like a new chapter of my favorite manga, or the next episode of a really good anime, or an upcoming game release I was looking forward to. All pretty minor events in the grand scheme of things, but I'd begun to feel like when you took those little sources of happiness and gathered them together, that alone could almost make tomorrow feel worth living for. Not that I didn't still catch myself wishing I were dead every once in a while—but it was something, at least. Enough to keep me going.

I walked out the main entrance of the school building.

"Brrrr... God, it's cold out..."

It was already wintertime, and the skies were overcast with dark gray clouds. As an icy breeze blew past, the bitter chill crept down the nape of my neck, and I shivered convulsively. I pulled my bike out from the bike lot and wheeled it off campus. But just as I passed through the main gate and lifted one leg to straddle the seat...

"Mugino!"

Somebody called my name.

I turned around to see a girl in a baseball jacket standing there, just a little way down the sidewalk. With her shaggy, shoulder-length black hair, she gave off slightly tomboyish vibes. As she ran over to greet me, a relieved smile spread across her face.

"Phew, there you are..." she said. "Thank god."

I just kind of blinked at the girl, unsure what to say—not that she gave me much of a chance, as she immediately launched into a breathless monologue.

"Man, you would not believe what a crazy month I've had. Feels like it's just

been one headache after another... But I think things are finally starting to calm down a little bit. Oh yeah—so that guy I injured? He totally lived. Said he doesn't wanna escalate the situation, so he's not gonna press charges. And I mean, he knows what he did, so I think I'll probably get off scot-free on that front. Though, boy, lemme tell ya, my mom was *pissed*."

She let out a little chuckle as she rubbed the reddened tip of her nose.

"Had to work my butt off to afford a plane ticket so I could come back down here to Tokyo, by the way—got a part-time job and everything. Oh, and I'm not skipping class either, FYI! It's just our school's anniversary holiday or whatever. Requested time off from work too, even though I've been going in almost every single day. Not that there was a huge rush or anything, I just, I dunno... Wanted to see you as soon as possible, I guess."

As the girl bashfully averted her gaze, I just stood there confounded.

It didn't *seem* like she had the wrong person—yet I had no idea who she was. At first, I wondered if maybe she was a relative I'd met at my uncle's wake or something, but no such connection came to mind. And now she was alluding to a potential lawsuit from someone she'd injured, apparently? I couldn't help but feel a little unnerved, given some of the words that were coming out of her mouth. Just who *was* this girl?

"Oh yeah, so I dyed my hair black. What do you think?" she asked, her expression still irrepressibly ecstatic as she twisted a finger through her bangs. "Figured it was about time I tried something a bit more mature, y'know? Um... D-do you like it? Think I'm still having a little trouble getting used to it, honestly."

"S-sorry, but..." I cut in nervously. "Do I...know you from somewhere?"

The girl looked at me the way you might look at someone who'd just pushed you off the edge of a cliff—completely astonished.

"Wh-what are you talking about?" she asked. "We went on a whole adventure together, remember?"

"We... We did?"

"Yeah, you and me! We went through the Seikan Tunnel together, and then

you took care of me when I got sick... We slept in that department store, and went ice skating, and all sorts of other stuff... C-come on, you can't expect me to believe you don't remember *any* of that! So just...quit messing with me, already..."

"S-sorry... I don't know what to tell you."

The girl's face dropped, and the last sliver of hope drained from her expression.

"...No, that's okay. It's not your fault," she said, gently lowering her gaze. "Sounds like you really *did* lose all your memories, then... Heh. Not sure what I was expecting... Was gonna ask you why the heck you left your notebook behind, but I guess you wouldn't remember that either, huh? Ha ha, man... That's so messed up, though... How come I remember everything just fine? It doesn't make any sense..."

I could only watch as the girl stared fixedly at the pavement.

"Damn it..." she said with a sniffle. "Told myself I wasn't gonna cry..."

I didn't know who this girl was or what in the world she was talking about. But I could still tell that she was in distress—and that whatever it was she was going through, it had to be pretty rough. I wished there was something I could do to reassure her, but I didn't know what that might be. And so I just looked at her.

The two of us stood there in silence like that for a while, letting the other students pass us by as they walked out the main gate to begin their homeward commutes. With her eyes still glued to the pavement and her lips tightly pursed, the girl looked to be trying her very best to hold back some particular emotion —or waiting in vain for me to respond in some way we both knew I never could. Eventually, she looked up and emphatically shook her head as if to break free from this depressive spiral.

"Well, I guess that's all I really wanted to say," she said. "Think I'd better go now."

"Wait, but—"

"It's fine. Just means you found your hope, right? And that's all that matters to me. See you around, Mugino," she said, forcing a pained smile as she turned

her back and started walking off down the sidewalk.

I stood there watching her go, still feeling awfully bewildered by the whole encounter—when all of a sudden, I felt a warm surge of emotion boil up from somewhere deep within me. You can't just let her leave like this, said a voice inside my head. And then out of the corner of my mind's eye, I caught a glimpse of something hazy and indistinct—no more than a tattered fragment of a memory, now faded and worn.

I cried out.

"Akira!"

The girl turned and looked at me.

And for a moment, time stood still.

She looked stunned. And I was too.

Akira? Was that this girl's name?

I had no clue. I'd never met her before.

All I knew was that I couldn't just let her go.

Every fiber of my being was telling me I had to make her stay.

"Listen, um... I don't know who you are," I said. "Or at least, I don't think I do, but... Ugh. Man, this is so weird... I'm not sure how to explain it, sorry... I just got this strange feeling all of a sudden, like I really need to talk to you—and I don't even care about what."

The girl's eyes went wide.

"So I guess all I'm trying to say here is...if you're not too busy right now... would you mind if we just went somewhere and...talked, for a little while?"

She looked me straight in the eye—and I watched as tears started streaming down her cheeks.

Flustered, I ran over to her. "Are...are you gonna be okay?"

"...Yeah. Yeah, I think I am," she said, smiling through the tears. "There's just... a lot that I wanna tell you too, is all. Not even sure where to begin..."

I reached into my pocket and offered her my handkerchief—but as she held out her hand to take it, a shimmering speck of moisture fluttered right between our noses, and we both gazed up into the cold December sky. Far above us, I could see that the dark clouds overhead had begun to lay a blanket of soft white powder across the earth.

We just stood there for a while, watching the falling snow.

#### **Afterword**

As someone who always dreaded things like class field trips and culture festivals (and also just found school to be a pretty miserable experience in general), I can't help but wonder whether I would have (selfishly) seen the COVID-19 pandemic as a blessing in disguise if it had happened while I was going through puberty. Not to imply that I think there's anything remotely positive about a global health crisis, of course—and I sincerely hope that we'll all be back to traveling, going to concerts, and throwing parties again before long. I realize that I'm coming from a place of privilege when I speculate about things like this, as someone who did get to experience all of the usual events and outings that come to mind when you picture an average high school career.

But I do think there must be some people out there who feel like they "lucked out" with the current state of the world. Kids who felt secretly (or not so secretly) relieved when they first heard the announcement that schools would be closing until further notice or found out that their class trips had been canceled. I wouldn't dare to suggest that these students' self-centered feelings in this regard are as urgently important as the present-tense suffering and grief the virus is still causing people to this day, but I do find it interesting to think about how different types of people see and deal with tragedies. I don't think it'd be quite right to say that I actively sympathize, per se, but I figured that maybe by writing this book, I could at least express that I understand those kinds of perspectives without tacitly condoning everything about them. I tried to write it in a way that could be enjoyed by anyone, of course, but if this story provides any measure of solace to even one person who feels like they're in a pretty dark place right now, I think that would mean more to me, as an author, than anything else.

Now for some words of appreciation.

To my faithful editor, Mr. Hamada: It's been about three years now since we put out our first book together, but I think it's only recently that I've realized just how much our constant back-and-forths full of tangent upon tangent have

become such an integral part of the creative process for me. I hope we can work together for many years to come.

To my incredible artist, KUKKA: Thank you for blessing these humble pages with yet another set of jaw-dropping illustrations. You've also stuck with me from the very start, and I still feel the same huge burst of motivation anytime you send me your work as I did when we worked together on my debut novel, so I'd be very happy if I could continue to request your services going forward. I'm also just a really big fan, to be quite honest.

Finally, to my loyal readers: This book would never have been possible without your continued support. Nor would we be right on the cusp of a feature film adaptation of my very first novel, *The Tunnel to Summer, the Exit of Goodbyes*, which is coming out in theaters this September. There are no words to express how grateful I am to each and every one of you. I intend to keep writing for as long as I draw breath, so I hope you'll continue to support me no matter where my career takes me next.

And on that note, dear reader, I leave you. Until we meet again.

MEI HACHIMOKU

2022

# **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

### Mei Hachimoku

Born in 1994. Favorite kind of sushi: shrimp.

You know that drifty, floaty feeling you get in your head when you wake up in the evening after taking a nap in the afternoon, and for a moment, you're not sure if it's still the same day or you slept through to the next morning? Can't get enough of that.

### **ABOUT THE ARTIST**

#### **KUKKA**

Recently had my first child and became a mom. Going to have to work hard to balance motherhood with my career, but I think I'm up for the challenge! Stoked for *Splatoon 3*...

TWITTER: @hamukukka



# Thank you for reading!

Get the latest news about your favorite Seven Seas books and brand-new licenses delivered to your inbox every week:

Sign up for our newsletter!

Or visit us online:

gomanga.com/newsletter