
12
NOVEL
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Adachi and Shimamura

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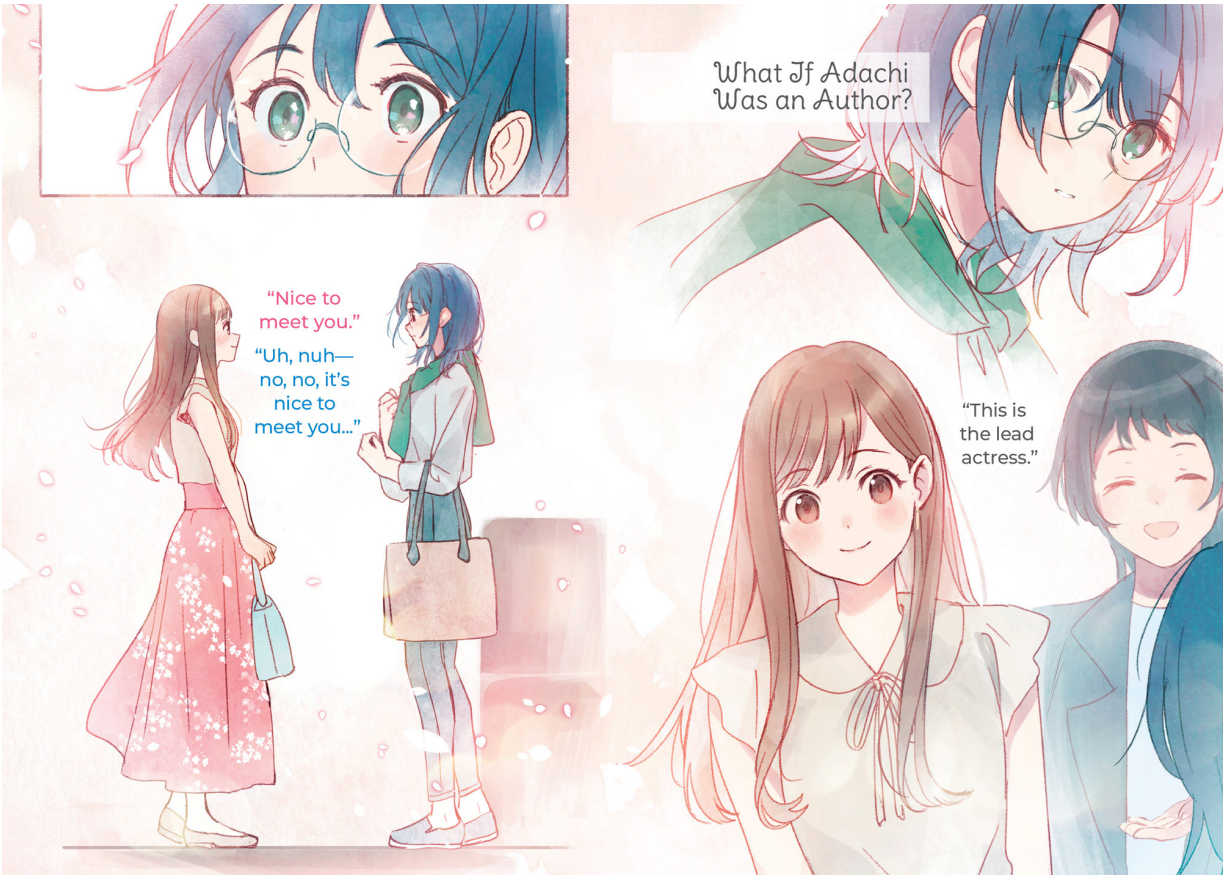
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Adachi and Shimamura
STORY BY Hitoma Iruma ART BY raemz
NOVEL
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What If Adachi Was a Teacher?
"We gotta go, Ada-chee!"
"Sorry, but Adachi-sensei still has work to do."
"Yeah, and I have homework, but I don't care!"
"Well, you should."


What If Adachi Was an Author?
"Nice to meet you."
"Uh, nuh— no, no, it's nice to meet you..."
"This is the lead actress."

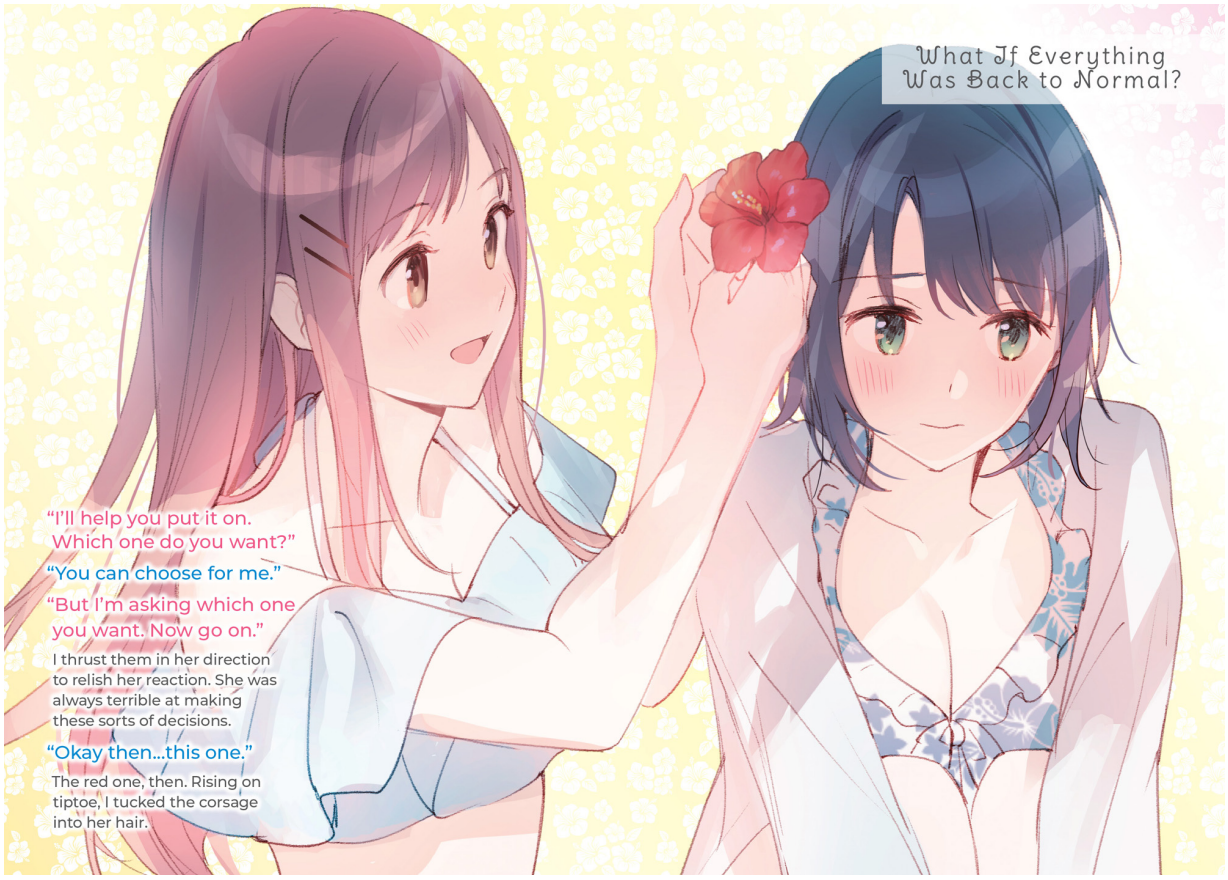

What If Everything Was Back to Normal?
"I'll help you put it on. Which one do you want?"
"You can choose for me."
"But I'm asking which one you want. Now go on."
I thrust them in her direction to relish her reaction. She was always terrible at making these sorts of decisions.
"Okay then...this one."
The red one, then. Rising on tiptoe, I tucked the corsage into her hair.

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ADACHI TO SHIMAMURA VOL. 12
© Hitoma Iruma 2024
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Illustrations by raemz
Character Design by Non

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Adachi and Shimamura

NOVEL

12

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Seven Seas Entertainment

Chapter 1:
What If Adachi Was a Teacher?

"BYE-BYE, ADA-CHEE!"

"Let's all try to call me Sensei, okay?" I called, waving to the children as they dashed out of the classroom. At present, this was my biggest struggle: getting more than a handful to address me as their teacher. I could frame it in a positive light by telling myself that the nickname was a sign of affection, but I was keenly aware that they likely didn't see me as a "real" adult. After two full years of working at this elementary school, however, the jitters I'd felt on my first day had long since faded from my fingertips. Maybe it was time I got around to working out how to present myself as an authority figure.

I oversaw a class of first-graders—tiny creatures that exuded innocence from head to toe. The work was far more hectic than merely babysitting, but thus far, I had managed to eke out a living. And though in truth I wasn't the biggest fan of children, there was something amusing about their energy, sincerity, and utter lack of inhibition.

"Ada-chee!" A little face peeked over the far side of the lectern, as if she was trying to climb it. In my opinion, she had the cheekiest voice of them all.

"What is it, Shimamura-san?"

Shima-chan, as her classmates called her, was the walking personification of naivete. For a teacher, it was both heartwarming

and a little worrying. She was brimming with so much energy, it felt as though she would dart away the moment I took my eyes off her. Her smile bloomed as vividly as the flower barrette in her hair, and her deep brown eyes twinkled with curiosity as she looked directly at me. Sometimes her gaze was so intense, I could see myself reflected in it.

Gripping the lectern, she beamed. "Just wanted to say hi."

"Yes, hello. And goodbye. Get home safe, okay?"

"Okey-dokey!"

And yet she made no move toward the door. Her eyes gleamed as she stared intently up at me. Smiling, I tilted my head in an unspoken question.

"I'm looking at your face," she explained without breaking eye contact.

"I see that."

"It's pretty!"

"Thank you." *Great, a first-grader's hitting on me.* If anything, hers was the prettier face by far. Her smile was made of pure sunshine, exuding the vitality of new life. "Do you think you could call me Sensei?"

She dodged the question with a giggle, and I got the sense I'd have to legally change my name to get anywhere with a girl like her. "Did you know the town's haunted by a ghoul?"

"A *ghoul*?"

"Or maybe a ghost?" She cocked her head in contemplation. "Every night, it stalks the streets. That's what they say."

"I haven't seen any ghouls or ghosts, personally." Granted, maybe I simply didn't have a sixth sense. But given that I wasn't especially eager to speak with the supernatural, I felt I could live with that.

"Well, they say its eyes glow in the dark."

"Like a cat?"

"No, it walks on two legs!"

"The cat walks on two legs?"

"It's not a cat! Why do you keep saying that?"

Because I liked cats more than I liked cryptids. That said, if this thing supposedly walked on two legs, then it was probably just an urban legend born of poor eyesight. No matter how far science progressed, it seemed people would always find entertainment in superstition. Impressive, really.

"Now let's go hunt it!"

"*Hunt* it? We should be nice to kitty cats."

"I'm telling you, it's not a cat…I think!" She walked around the lectern and grabbed my sleeve. "We gotta go, Ada-chee!"

"Sorry, but *Adachi-sensei* still has work to do."

"Yeah, and I have homework, but I don't care!"

"Well, you should."

Now she was asking me on a date. But as much as I would have loved to ditch my responsibilities and run wild with a grade-schooler, I didn't have the guts to actually go through with it. I had built up a

considerable amount of good sense over the years it had taken to reach adulthood, and I was liable to trip over it the moment I tried to bolt.

"Shima-chan, are you done yet?" the girl's close friend shouted impatiently from the doorway.

"It would appear that someone's calling you," I remarked.

"Grrr… I'll have to give up for tonight," Shimamura-san grumbled.

"It's still daytime, you know. Be safe on your way home, all right? And watch out for any…creatures," I finished uncertainly.

With that, she dashed over to her friend—always running indoors, the little scamp, even though it was against the rules. Suffice it to say that her boundless, restless energy had its downsides. But considering she went out of her way to speak to me more often than the other kids, I suspected she must have taken a liking to me.

I wasn't opposed to it, of course. Although she refused to address me as a teacher, "Ada-chee" wasn't far from my actual surname, and so I wanted to think of it as a term of endearment. If I remembered correctly, it was she who coined the nickname, and she was also the first to strike up a conversation with me after I was assigned to this class. Really, her friendliness was so overt that she felt less like my student and more like a neighbor kid. She talked to me so often, I had developed something of a bias toward her, wrong as I knew it was.

I scanned around for stragglers, then went to check the windows. Now that I was relieved of my young charges, I could finally

relax… When I walked through the empty, deflated classroom, it felt as though I was reliving my memories as a first-grade student all over again.

After ensuring each window was closed and locked, I took in the view. The sky had laid out its clouds like a quilt; at this time of year, rain was scarce and the afternoon sun was quite cozy. I was tempted to stand there and enjoy it for a while, but when I heard the sounds of students on cleaning duty in the hall behind me, I turned my back to the light. It wouldn't do to let them see a teacher slacking off.

Shrieks and footfalls raced through the building, the likes of which had long since faded from my life with age—a testament to how much I had grown, perhaps. Still, for the foreseeable future, my goal was to try to live each day with that same energy.

***

At the front door, I dusted my shoulders off and felt the night lift away. Strange how my weary body seemed to rattle with each breath. Briefly I considered ringing the doorbell, but decided I wasn't quite that dead and opted to dig out my house key. *Welcome home,* I comforted myself as the door swung open.

After stepping out of my shoes, I nearly kept walking but ultimately doubled back to put them away. The physical act of crouching was a major drain on what energy I had left. Thinking of bubbly little Shimamura-san, I forced my feet to march on.

"Hey, Mom, I'm home."

"Welcome back."

My mother glanced over her shoulder at me from the living room sofa. Her face and voice were always carefully controlled, making it hard to get on a read on her—unless, like me, you had years of practice.

"Go get changed."

"Okay."

She rose to her feet and crossed the room to the kitchen area, leaving her magazine behind. Its cover was decorated with blue skies over a brand-new theme park resort. But for as much as she loved to read these travel magazines, my mother never actually went anywhere. Once, when I asked her about it, she explained to me that no real-life vacation was ever as perfect as the ones she envisioned. And while I could see her point, it seemed needlessly cautious to me.

As instructed, I went off to my bedroom, where I changed into a ratty old shirt with an elephant design, then reached up to my shelf and gave my elephant plushie a quick pat. To an outside observer, I probably looked like an elephant fanatic. I liked them fine, of course, but my sentimentality was directed elsewhere—not at the animal, but the person who bought these things for me.

Stepping out into the hall, I quietly pulled the door shut behind me, then let out a sigh.

I had lived with my mother ever since she and my father divorced when I was a child, and our relationship was…decent enough. She was never the sociable type, but after years of surreptitiously studying her facial expressions, I'd learned to gauge her reactions through eye movements alone. She was inarticulate and

rarely smiled, but because I knew the person she was at heart, I chose to stick with her.

Back in the living room, I picked up my chopsticks and tucked into the dinner she'd heated up. She sat across from me, watching absently. To someone else, the silence might have felt like torture… Really, if it wasn't for that one pivotal moment, there was no telling how our relationship would have turned out.

"Is it good?"

"Yeah."

"Good."

Unlike the food, which was richly seasoned, the accompanying conversation was stale and bland. I tried to think of a topic, but all that came to mind was work. Perhaps it would suffice.

"Earlier today, at lunch…"

"Yes?"

Between bites, I relayed the day's events, curious how she would react. Meanwhile, she nodded along stoically to my mundane anecdote. It made me realize that in terms of eloquence, the apple didn't exactly fall far from the tree. When I finished, there was a brief lull before she spoke.

"It must be hard, looking after so many children."

"Yeah… All the screaming and running can be overwhelming." I could picture it clear as day: They'd be standing calmly at the window one minute, only to disappear down the hallway in the next.

"If it were me, I couldn't handle it," she scoffed in a low voice, shaking her head, and I smiled.

Yes, someone like my mother would throw in the towel at the first chance she got. That being said, I suspected my students would never treat her with the same disrespect they showed me. Her gaze had a piercing quality that afforded her an intimidating, unapproachable air.

"Yeah, you tend to hate it when people are loud."

"Is there anyone in the world who *doesn't*?"

Fair question, admittedly. While I didn't mind the kids' energy, it wasn't something I was inclined to join in on. But if children could find joy in noise, then surely there had to be a percentage of adults who found it energizing, too.

After dinner, I was debating whether to take a shower when I spotted it again: the travel magazine with the perfect vacation frozen in time on its cover. It was a glimpse of paradise seldom afforded to someone on a teacher's salary, and it stirred my heart.

"What if we actually went on a trip sometime, Mom?"

"A trip?" she repeated, leaning away from the sink full of dirty dishes to crane her neck toward the sofa. Interpreting the significance of her gaze, I lifted the magazine by the corner and dangled it for her to see.

"It'd be a nice change, don't you think?"

Why merely dream of these places when she could go and see them for herself? There was no telling how many chances we'd have

to travel together, so I wanted to make the most of the ones that came along.

Pensively, she stared down at the running faucet for a moment. "It does sound nice," she said finally, and I thought I caught her lips curl in the tiniest of smiles.

"And since you're so good at planning this stuff, *you* can decide where we go," I teased, unabashedly saddling her with the hard part.

"Fine," she replied brusquely, as usual. The tiny smile had vanished from sight, but by that point, I had already burned it into my memory.

At times, life with my mother was like a long walk through thick fog. Luckily, I'd gotten pretty good at feeling my way around.

***

"All right, everyone, class dismissed."

Once I'd made all the necessary announcements, I sent the students on their way, just as my teachers had done for me once upon a time. Why something so trivial induced such a powerful feeling of nostalgia for my childhood, I couldn't explain. The moment I was done, the kids burst into shrieks of excitement that threatened to blow the roof off, and I waited until I heard it come down.

It was nothing short of a relief to have survived another day of looking after my class. With all the energy in the room, there was always potential for conflict or injury, and as the adult in charge, it made me sick with worry right up until the final bell. I couldn't find it

in me to shrug it off like some of the other faculty. Maybe it was because I'd been an indoor kid growing up.

Once again, I was visited by a little girl who was my polar opposite. This time, however, she walked around the lectern to approach me directly.

"Ada-chee!"

It was Shimamura-san, of course, randoseru backpack over her shoulders, yellow safety hat on her head. For all the trouble she got into, she was still a good kid who always came to say goodbye when she was ready to leave.

"That's 'Sensei´to you," I protested nominally, knowing it would be fruitless.

"Ada-chee!"

I got the sense she was going to keep saying it until I acknowledged her. Relenting, I stooped forward slightly. "What's the matter?"

"Um…"

It wasn't like her to falter. Normally, she was the type to blurt out whatever was on her mind, so the hesitation drew my attention. Was she afraid to tell me? Was it…*serious*? My fingers tightened around my knees as I waited for her to continue.

"Les' go on a date."

"…What?"

Her naturally rosy cheeks burned all the brighter. "Date," she repeated, her eyes hidden beneath the brim of her hat.

Did she just…ask me out? "When you say 'date'…"

"Is…is that yes or no?!" she shouted, flailing from side to side as if to fight off her embarrassment. Her shyness was adorable.

"Well, the thing is, I still have work to do…"

"Just for a minute! Real quick!" she pleaded, shaking her backpack. But she wasn't just being silly. She seemed dead set on this for whatever reason, and I was reluctant to brush her off.

"Hmmm… Okay, but as long as we stay on school grounds." I could get away with a short walk around campus, and besides, I didn't want to reject her invitation outright.

As an introvert, it was quite possibly the first time anyone had ever asked me on a date. On second thought, no…there had been other instances, but I'd pushed them all away. In Shimamura-san's case, however, I knew she would keep chasing me no matter how far I tried to retreat. At her age, her purity and innocence made her invincible.

Just then, another girl stormed up impatiently. "Shima-chan, what are you doing with Sensei?"

"Heh!" Shimamura-san thrust out her chest proudly. "Today, we're going on a date!"

"Hey, don't say that!" *At least, not that loudly!*

Unsurprisingly, the other girl was less than pleased about this. "That's no fair," she grumbled.

My heart twinged with guilt. "Sorry."

"For what, Ada-chee?"

"Uh…I'm not sure," I said quickly, forcing a smile.

As the other girl trudged away, Shimamura-san waved and shouted after her, "Bye-bye! See you tomorrow!" Seeing as she was blithely oblivious, it fell to me to point out what had just happened.

"The reason I apologized is because I'm pretty sure she wanted to spend time with you today." It was painfully apparent, considering how inseparable the two of them generally were.

"Hmmm…" Lowering her hand to her side, Shimamura-san frowned awkwardly, and I felt bad for killing the mood right before our little date. But a moment later, she looked up again with renewed energy. "Sometimes life is complicated. Gotta let it go."

"How poetic."

She had a point, though. Nothing in life was ever promised to you, no matter how old you were. Harsh, but true.

Out in the hall, Shimamura-san gazed up at me with all of her cheerfulness restored. I was a little envious, really, of how quickly she moved on. Peering into those hopeful little eyes really did feel a lot like staring directly into the sun.

"Where should we go?" she asked.

"You want *me* to decide?"

"Pick wherever you want, girl!" she declared, her chin jutting out proudly. I poked her chin, then considered my options. In truth, there was no part of this school that struck me as ideal for a date.

"First of all, you shouldn't call a grown-up 'girl,' okay?"

"Okay, I'll stick to Ada-chee."

"…Right." I couldn't think of any way to get her to call me Sensei, so I conceded on that point and kept thinking.

My first move was to retrieve one of the loaner umbrellas. At the lockers, we changed into our outdoor shoes, then headed out onto the athletic field, going all the way to the pillar bearing our school flag. "Here we are," I announced.

"Hey, I know this place! This is where the principal likes to talk for a long time!"

"Let's not shout that at full volume." *You're not wrong, though.*

Dusting off the work platform, I gallantly invited her to have a seat. She plopped down eagerly, and when I sat beside her, she cheered. *This cheap date is already a good return on investment,* I thought, then kicked myself.

As for our activity, we decided we would sit and people-watch. In addition to her hat, I opened the umbrella and draped the shade over her as a form of sunburn prevention. In one corner of the field, a group of children had stayed behind after school, and we watched as they retrieved equipment from the storage shed.

"They're gonna play dodgeball!" Shimamura-san exclaimed. In her glee, she nearly rose to her feet. "But I'm on a date today… Oh well."

She looked so tickled about it, I nearly smiled myself. As her teacher, however, I needed to take this seriously. What could we talk about, and to what extent? It was hard to know where the line was.

But of course, that was precisely the sort of thing you were supposed to worry about on a real date.

"So…Shimamura-san…" I knew what I wanted to ask—*Why did you invite me on a date?*—but wasn't sure how to phrase it gently. As I waffled, however, she spoke up of her own accord.

"Y'know, Ada-chee, everybody says you're really pretty."

"Pretty?" I had hoped they might think of me as something a bit more teacherly, like *respectable* or *trustworthy*.

"Yeah, and…and I wubyoo!" Her eyes and lips were shut so tightly, it was a miracle she could get any words out at all.

"You what?" I repeated, genuinely confused.

She slowly opened her eyes, pursed her lips together as if to loosen them, and tried again: "I wuv you."

This time, I understood.

"Aww…how nice…" And it was cute, the way her lips puckered at the word *you*.

In a roundabout way, it seemed I had now discovered the answer to my question: She asked me out because she loved me. *Pretty normal,* I thought, desperately trying to stay calm despite my embarrassment. I had to fight to maintain a soft smile, because I knew the second it fell away, it would reveal my abject panic.

"Whabbout you?" she asked with upturned eyes.

Now this was a dangerous question. "Well, obviously, I love all of my students very much…"

"That's not what I mean!"

I know, I replied silently, averting my eyes with a stiff grin. As her teacher, I had no choice but to take evasive action; if I tackled this subject head-on, the potential for serious damage was extremely high. And yet…at the same time, I wasn't made of stone. I could feel my cheeks turning to rubber.

"I…I wuv you too, I guess."

"You do?" She snuck a few furtive glances as a grin began to spread across her face.

"To a reasonable extent, you understand. But when it comes down to it…yes."

Giggling, she scratched at her knees in sheer delight—and the more I watched her, the more I started to think that a little wuv never hurt anybody. Was I wrong to feel this way? Until this very moment, I hadn't realized just how precarious of a position teachers were in.

Once Shimamura-san finally descended from cloud nine, she sat up straight and looked at me intently. "May I ask your name?"

"Don't you know it already?"

"Just tell me!" she laughed, so I decided to play along.

"My name is Adachi Sakura."

"I'm Shimamura Hougetsu."

How very polite.

"Now, Ada-chee-san, what are your hobbies?"

Is this a date or a marriage interview? "Reading, I guess?"

"Me, too. People tell me I'm real good at it. Heh!" She looked ever so slightly proud of this fact.

"You *are* good at it," I agreed.

Shyly, she tugged the brim of her hat down. "I hear you work as a teacher."

"Indeed, I do."

"Why is that?"

Suddenly this marriage interview felt more like a *job* interview. Granted, it was a good question—the kind you might think lots of people would ask me, but in truth, no one ever did. Gazing up at the inside of the umbrella, I thought back to my past.

"When I was a little girl, my family took me to the zoo, and when we went inside the souvenir shop, I saw an elephant plushie. I was too scared to ask for it, but as it turned out, I didn't need to—because my mom could tell I wanted it and bought it for me anyway."

I could remember her icy voice and expressionless face as she offered it to me: *"Happy now?"* Yet it was through that plushie that I felt her love for me for the first time—or at the very least, I interpreted it that way.

"From then on, I decided that when I grew up, I wanted to be the kind of adult who could understand how it feels to be a kid. And the next thing I knew, I was a teacher."

If there was a world out there in which my mother hadn't bought me that toy, I probably would have lived an entirely different life. Sometimes, those what-if scenarios kept me up at night.

"And there you have it."

"Wow. You must really like elephants."

My love of elephants had nothing to do with why I'd become a teacher…or did it? "Maybe so."

"Then I'll get you something with an elephant on it! As a…a present!"

It was obvious that she wanted to flaunt her generosity, but even then, the gesture was a comforting one. "Sounds great. I look forward to it."

She met my friendly smile with pure, unadulterated glee, flashing her pearly whites as she beamed from ear to ear. "When you're happy, it makes me happy, too!" It was noble, really, the way she was able to share in my joy as if it were wholly her own.

"I have a plushie, too. It's a seal!"

"Oh yeah?"

"These days, he likes to play with my little sister."

Something about the way she phrased it gave me the warm fuzzies. *He sounds like a nice guy.* "So, you have a sister?"

"Uh huh! She's just a baby. Sometimes I hold her."

"Good on you, Big Sis."

"Ho ho ho!"

"Oh *ho*."

"…Oh?"

Suddenly, a third voice had joined the fray. Craning my neck, I spotted a fluffy tail swishing behind Shimamura-san.

A little girl was standing there, dressed in what I had to assume was a kitty onesie and carrying a rucksack even larger than she was. In terms of appearance, the only thing she had in common with Shimamura-san was her height. Everything else was freakishly bizarre, particularly the color of her hair—the bangs poking out from beneath her hood were, inexplicably, sky blue. Paired with her choice of attire, she looked like she'd walked out of a storybook.

"Whoa! What *are* you?!"

Shimamura-san reacted with undisguised shock. At first, she darted around behind me to hide in my shadow, but before long, her curiosity got the better of her and she ran back out again, completing the circuit. Meanwhile, the other girl merely stood there, her smile unflinching. Her cat tail almost seemed to move on its own, as if reflecting her mood.

"No matter where I go, it seems Shimamura-san is always full of vim and vigor."

"She knows your name…? Is this a friend of yours?" I asked Shimamura-san.

"I don't know her!" she shot back without missing a beat.

Even then, the odd girl kept on smiling. Her eyes shone with a kind of a light distinct from the sky blue of her hair, and when I looked closer, I saw the universe. Not in a metaphorical sense, either—I could

literally see galaxies contained in the inky depths of her pupils, full of beauty and mystery in equal measure.

"I have not seen you in some time, either, Adachi-san."

"Huh?"

Now the spotlight of suspicion was turned on me. How did this total stranger know both of our names? If we'd met at any point before now, surely I would remember, given her looks. There was absolutely zero chance this kid went to our school.

"Sorry, who are you?"

"Ho ho ho! Pay me no mind."

That was a tall order, unfortunately, but I could tell at a glance that this wasn't a mystery I could solve on my own. Where had she come from? And more importantly—

"Seeing as you have met, I suppose I should move on."

Where exactly was she planning to go? Without a word of explanation, she turned to leave.

"Hold it, intruder!"

Shimamura-san lunged to hug her. The kitty girl made no move to resist, and the two spun in circles, as if dancing. Considering she technically *was* intruding on our campus, I debated whether it was safe to let her horse around with one of our students…but I sensed no ill intent from her. Ultimately, I decided I would watch over them until they were done spinning. I couldn't lie—it was pretty cute.

After they'd had their fill, they pulled apart. Shimamura-san staggered around with her arms outstretched like an old drunk,

seemingly enjoying the resulting dizziness.

"It appears I am victorious," the other girl announced. With her sense of balance perfectly intact, she spun around one more time until she was facing the front gates. "Heh heh heh! Everything seems to be in order here. That is a relief."

She offered each of us a final smile before waving goodbye. What had she learned from all that spinning just now? As I watched her go, however, I suddenly remembered:

"Could *that* be the glow-in-the-dark creature you were talking about before?"

Watching her toddle along at top speed with her arms thrust out in front of her, extremely adorable though it was, gave me an odd sense of déjà vu. Then I realized: It was the same way Shimamura-san ran. Was she, too, in danger of smacking face-first into a wall otherwise? And how did she get her onesie tail to swish like that?

"A cat with glowing eyes that walks on two legs…"

"It checks all the boxes!"

"Yep."

Before long, the enigmatic kitty girl disappeared around the corner of the school building. Who was she, really? How did she know our names? She'd left without telling us a single thing, and I got the sense she wasn't coming back.

After recovering from her dizziness, Shimamura-san returned to the shade of the umbrella. "The weird part is, I think me and her would get along."

"Definitely." In terms of laid-back vibes, the two were very similar indeed. Surely they were both good girls at heart.

"If I had to guess, she's an alien!"

"Hmmm… Yeah, maybe." There were entire galaxies in her eyes, after all. Perhaps it represented all she'd seen of the universe.

"Oh well," Shimamura-san shrugged as she sat back down. After the world's most obviously fake *ahem*, she adjusted the angle of her hat, then put a hand to her chin and smirked.

Finished yet? I thought as I watched.

"Ada-chee!"

"Yeees?"

She started poking my elbow, her expression as twisted as it was when she first asked me for this date. Just like that, her confident smirk had vanished without a trace. As I waited curiously, I noticed her ears were burning as red as her cheeks. Then she whipped her face away as if struck, and after a moment of hesitation…

"Um…les' get married!"

"…What?"

She blurted it all so fast that her tongue couldn't quite keep up. The sudden proposal was so cute that I couldn't hold back my laughter. In fact, if I wasn't her teacher, I would have hugged her on the spot.

"It…it's not funny!"

She smacked my knee with her little hands. She was right, of course—no serious proposal deserved to be laughed off. Shame on

me. When I looked back at her, however, she buried her face behind her arms to hide from me. *So precious!*

For a while the two of us sat there under the umbrella, taking turns stealing glances and fleeing from the other's gaze as if it were a game we were playing.

It was the first marriage proposal I had ever received in my life. From a six-year-old, no less.

Her eyes rippled like lakes before something broke free and flowed forth, like tears flowing in reverse, and sharp. Was it her youth that fueled the light that now burned in her eyes? Was her hope all the stronger for having next to no knowledge of the world? Either way, she sparkled just as brightly as the girl who contained galaxies.

"Married, huh?" Again, I found myself facing a major problem. Proposals generally required a yes or no answer, after all. *Sheesh, kids these days can't even wait until after the first date?* "I'm, uh…not sure what to say."

"Oh no…"

Having evidently interpreted my response as a rejection, she froze in place. I hadn't actually turned her down, but for obvious reasons, I needed to. It was harsh, but also the right thing to do.

"I can't marry you right now because I'll go to jail, Shimamura-san."

"What?!"

Unfair, I know. "Besides, once you get married, you won't get to live with your family anymore."

"I won't?"

"Most people move in with their new spouse somewhere else."

"Oh… Hmm…" She seemed to be giving this serious consideration, so I wanted to do the same.

"Don't you think your mom, dad, and little sister will all miss you?" They sounded like a happy family. I wouldn't dare steal away their little ray of sunshine.

"Hmmmmm," Shimamura-san murmured, arms folded, as she sat in the shade of the umbrella. "Will we really have to live somewhere else?"

When she looked up at me with those puppy-dog eyes, I felt my resolve falter. "Well…technically, no, we don't *have* to…"

"Then you should just move in with us!"

"What?"

"The more, the merrier!" Confident in the brilliance of this plan, she held up two fingers in a peace sign.

"That's…an option, I guess…?" Would I be the one taking her surname, then? In that case…nope, it wasn't any less problematic. "I live with my mom, though…"

"She can come, too!"

"Nnngh…" At this point, I was running out of reasons to decline. There was no law requiring anyone to move out of their parents' house upon marriage; if our families were amenable, we could just merge our households. But that still didn't make it okay! "Bottom line: It can't happen right now, or the cops will arrest me."

This was one hurdle a first-grader simply couldn't overcome. Instead, she physically recoiled, as though she had crashed into it face-first.

"Life is so complicated…" Gripping her knees, she waxed poetic enough to put the moon to shame—although it wouldn't be in the sky for a few more hours.

"It really is," I agreed. But our ancestors had decided on these rules for good reason, and it would be disrespectful to run roughshod over them.

"Is there any way we can get married *without* going to jail?"

"Mmm…" Her questions were so very frightening, weren't they? I took stock of her height, then glanced upward. "Technically, yes."

"Oh yeah?!" Her face lit up with hope.

"You see, a lot of the world's problems can be solved with time."

That being said, time also had the tendency of eroding both pretty faces and hearts. There was no guarantee that what we felt today would last forever. Thus I decided I would speak only for my present self…and in so doing, saddle my future self with the aftermath.

"Tell you what. Once you've graduated from high school, you can marry me—*if* you still want to."

As I counted the years ahead on my fingers, it dawned on me how old I'd be. Surely a young woman in the prime of her beauty would lose all interest by then. If only I could stop aging while I waited for her to catch up… Alas, the passage of time affected all

living beings in equal measure. It was a bittersweet truth of the human condition.

"You mean it?!" From the way she lit up like fireworks, I could only assume she'd shrugged off all the nitty-gritty details in favor of the ultimate outcome.

"Yeah."

"And the cops won't get mad?"

"Right. But I'm warning you, I'll be an old grandma by then," I joked, exaggerating somewhat.

"I love grandmas. Mine plays with me every time I go to her house."

"She does? Aww. That sounds nice."

I had limited contact with my extended family, so it was hard for me to picture…but the brightness of Shimamura-san's smile suggested to me that it was something special indeed. Also, we were starting to veer off-topic.

"I'm sure you'll still be pretty, even when you're a granny."

"That'd be ideal." Hugging one knee to my chest, I let the lilting voice of a child speak my hopes for the future.

"How far away is high school?"

It was a more philosophical question than she perhaps realized. Beyond the cover of the umbrella, the sky had yet to dim.

"If you live a happy, fun life and do your homework every night, you'll get there before you know it." At least, that was how it felt to me when I was in her shoes.

As if to mimic me, she tried to count it out on her own fingers. But it must have seemed endless, because she gave up and looked back at me. "Then you better not marry anybody else in the meantime, Ada-chee!" she declared with a big, charming grin.

"Okay. Adachi-sensei will be waiting for you, Shimamura-san."

The gleam of her smile made my cheeks flush. A childhood promise was ephemeral by nature, but even if it went unkept, it would surely make for a fond memory…just like the way I felt when I looked at the elephant plushie on my shelf. My only wish was for the thought of it to bring her joy over the years to come.

***

Over the years until she graduated, Shimamura-san continued to come visit me at school, doggedly reminding me of our betrothal. At full volume, no less. My only option was to laugh it off and pray that no one who overheard her took it seriously. In turn, I reminded her that it would have to wait until she was an adult, though admittedly, I couldn't begin to imagine what she would even look like by then.

Once she had moved on to junior high, she stopped coming around. Unsurprising, of course, but still a little sad. Before long, I was transferred to a different school myself. Part of me wished I could let her know, but ultimately her "proposal" became little more than a silly anecdote of my own—one I hoped we could both look back on and laugh.

But though there was now a tiny hole in my heart, the world kept on idly turning, passing from sunrise to sunset to the serenity of night and back to dawn once more. Time moved steadily on,

unaffected by people's hopes or dreams or bonds or breakups. With each new year, I paused to think about that feisty first-grader with increasing frequency. But like Achilles and the tortoise, by the time she caught up to where I stood now, I would be leagues ahead of her all over again. This, too, was bittersweet.

***

How long had it taken for the title of sensei to feel as natural as breathing? Twelve years had passed since the marriage proposal, and at this point, I could no longer remember my life before I started teaching.

"Ada-chee!"

No student had called me by that nickname in years. As if pulled backward in time, I looked over my shoulder and saw someone walking down the hall toward me, her shadow bridging the gulf between us.

Twilight—the magic hour when worlds meet. Squinting, I put a hand to my chin, shielding myself from the unease kindled by those red rays of sun.

"Shimamura-san?"

For the first time in many years, I spoke the name aloud. The approaching figure took shape before me, casting off the shadow of obscurity.

What first surprised me was the guts she must have had to set foot inside our building while wearing another school's uniform. Then I saw how she'd grown. Her hair was longer now, her gait sprightly, the

blazer of her uniform adorned with an eye-catching ribbon at the collar—but she was still wearing that same flower barrette. When she recognized me, a dopey grin spread across her face.

This reunion didn't strike with blunt force but slowly seeped into my very core. All this time, I had believed I would never see her again—and yet here she was, hurrying toward me like she'd been waiting all her life for this very moment. She wasn't quite as tall as me, but our faces were closer than ever before. When she came to a stop in front of me, she smugly held up the tube she gripped in one hand.

"I graduated from high school today."

"Did you now? Is that your diploma? Congra…"

The words were swept away mid-sentence, along with my entire train of thought, when she grabbed my left hand and scrutinized each finger individually. After a thorough examination of my ring finger in particular, I heard her whisper, "Good."

Meanwhile, I was so flustered to suddenly be holding hands with her that I could scarcely breathe.

"Glad I made it in time." Turning my hand to point at the ceiling, she placed what was almost certainly her diploma into my open palm, as if to pass the baton. "I'm here to marry you, Sensei!"



Her smile bloomed like a field of flowers, no less vivid than it had been a decade ago. As my lips shaped the word *marry*, a burning heat tore through my cheeks. Yet despite the window-shaped backdrop of sunset framing us, I thought I glimpsed a tiny sparkle of sky blue.

Interlude:
What If Hino Was Taller?

"I WANNA TRY SOMETHING. Straighten up as tallas you can, okay?""You're an imbecile, just so we're clear."

The moment we made it to her place after school, Nagafuji flung off her bookbag and immediately started trying to stretch my neck out. "C'mon!"

"Don't yank my head around!"

I tried to smack her stupid hands away from my jaw and occipital bone, but she was so entangled with me that we tumbled to the floor together. She landed on top of me like a sack of potatoes, her tits smothering my entire face. Or was it the other way around? Was my face lodged in her tits? Either way, I was engulfed in her scent.

Just another day, really.

"What's gotten into you all of a sudden?" I asked through a mouthful of boob.

"In a world where what-if scenarios were suddenly really trendy…"

"Ugh, shut up."

"My other idea was: What if Hino was a gyaru?"

Is this the kind of crap you think about instead of paying attention in class? What's the point of those glasses if you're not going

to use them? Besides, you know my folks are too worried about keeping up appearances to let me wear whatever I want.

"But I realized it'd be too much effort to put together a full outfit, so I decided to stretch your neck out instead."

"Just my neck? What about the rest of me?" *Have you considered* not *turning me into a snake-headed monster?*

"I don't know… I don't think your legs will stretch."

"But my neck will?!"

"Just eat a Gum-Gum Fruit, and—"

"Shut *up*!"

When I tried to silence her, however, her chest muzzled me instead. After years of smacking these things around, I'd gotten very familiar with them, and it felt as though they'd gotten bigger lately. Why did *she* get to keep growing, but I didn't? How did we turn out so differently when we both ate more or less the same diet?

Sometimes I wondered if each person was sculpted at birth like a flower vase. No matter how much time was poured into us, it would never alter the shape of the glass.

"Don't force all your what-ifs on me! Go what-if yourself!"

Before she could turn me into a Rubber Human, I turned the spotlight around on her. But I didn't need an alternate universe—this sort of thing was an everyday occurrence. Her parents could have walked in on us and not even batted an eyelash.

Adjusting her position, Nagafuji clung to me all the harder, crushing me. "In that case…what if I never met you?"

"What? Oh…okay…what would have happened?" I had never given it any thought, personally. After all, we'd spent practically our whole lives together. But if nothing else, it was a more interesting hypothetical than trying to make me taller. "If you never met me… where would you be?" I pressed.

She answered quickly, without much thought. "Probably looking for you."

"Uhhh…" Her comprehension skills made me concerned for her grades. "How can you search for someone you've never met?"

"What, is that weird?"

Very, I thought, closing my eyes. "Knowing you, I guess it's possible."

If I lived in a world without Nagafuji—a world in which I never felt this crushing weight—then my own existence would probably sink into oblivion along with hers. That was what my gut told me.

"Lucky for me, I didn't need to look too hard."

"…Yeah…" Her remarks didn't make a ton of sense at face value, but somehow, I felt I could understand her more easily than usual. "Now get off me, would you? Your boobs are suffocating me."

After a pause, she pressed down onto me, crushing me harder… filling my sight with nothing but her.

Chapter 2:
What If Adachi Was an Author?

"*AT LAST, I see the light at the end of the world*."

I read the tagline aloud as I ran my fingertip over the poster. It was a meaningless phrase I had tossed in while writing, but now it was suddenly being used to represent the work itself. To my chagrin, the whole editing department was decorated with these huge advertisements. When I protested, they told me to take a hike. *Important for sales*, or whatever.

Now I sat and watched in real time as work stress consumed my editor's health before my eyes. In truth, I didn't *want* to wait for her to finish; I wanted to hurry home and either veg out or sleep. I had barely finished my latest manuscript, and sleeplessness all but dripped from my hair, weighing me down. Sure, it was my IP, but what did I care?

The department was furnished with obscene fluorescent lighting and a perpetual din of mid-meeting chatter, each desk piled with drafts and advance copies. I knew the cluttered work environment had to have a serious impact on their productivity, but when I saw people curled up in sleeping bags under their desks, I realized they quite literally had no time to tidy up.

In the early days before my big break, I would get so nervous whenever they asked me to come in. Now, though, I was all too happy to kick back and relax. Come to think of it, quite some time had

passed since I was brought to this meeting room and left with nothing but a cup of tea. If I wanted to, I could probably make a break for it. But I didn't dare try—my editor would kill me.

I'd never thought very highly of this particular work, but somehow it had been reviewed well enough to garner an adaptation on the big screen. Then I was told I ought to tour the film set. I'd tried several times to wriggle out of going, but my editor insisted. Now here I was, waiting to be dragged around on a leash. I was so bored, my only option was to lean back and stare up at the posters.

I'd written this self-contained novel years ago, and looking back at it now, it was terrible. There were so many better ways I could have structured it. But I couldn't very well go back and revise it now, so I was left to stew in my regrets. This was why I hated revisiting my old work.

Technically, the story was categorized as science fiction, though I was a bit iffy on that. It followed the lives of two sisters, the younger choosing to flee their decaying home planet while the elder stayed behind. I felt a detached sort of sympathy for the cast and crew because, to be frank, the possibility of an adaptation hadn't crossed my mind while I was writing it, and a lot of it was probably hard to translate into live action.

The poster next to mine featured the work of a different author. Its tagline read, "*Don't blame me if it doesn't work out. I wasn't trying to hurt anyone*." Now here was an actually intriguing hook.

"…Wait…"

Suddenly I realized why I was able to read the posters so clearly: I had forgotten to take my glasses off. *Eh, whatever.* With nothing better to do, I flicked them up and down, entertaining myself with my poor vision.

"Sorry I took so long."

The voice hit my jaw and made me straighten up in my seat. There stood my editor, carrying her briefcase and a large paper bag.

"Yeah, me too," I snarked.

"Well, then, let's get going," she replied, ignoring my sarcasm.

Rising to my feet, I slid my chair in, then followed her out of the room. On my way here, I had purchased a thank-you gift for the film crew: a box of jam-filled wafers called *okiagari monaka*, the local specialty. I had no particular interest in them myself—really, I'd just picked a confection at random.

"That's, uh, quite the bag you have there," I commented, dreading the worst, as it swung from her arm.

"I need you to sign some copies for the giveaway campaigns."

That was indeed the worst.

"Well, you could've brought them to me earlier while I was sitting around in there."

"Sorry. I was so busy with other tasks that it slipped my mind."

She didn't sound sorry in the least, but considering I was a week overdue in delivering my latest manuscript, I was in no position to complain. Ever since the adaptation was set in stone, I had been flinging my signature onto all kinds of things for promotional

purposes, and it seemed today would be no exception. By my estimation, I had signed approximately 150 books thus far. At this rate, they'd be worth less than the paper they were printed on.

My editor was a strong, broad-shouldered woman who spent her free time either at the gym or looking after her daughter. She was also a villain who would purposely wait until my deadline was looming to saddle me with busywork. Her defense was "If you actually *met* your deadlines, there wouldn't be a backlog of work in the first place."

Sometimes, the truth hurt.

"Incidentally, the director made a suggestion."

"Oh?"

"He'd love for you to make a cameo in the film."

"What? No!"

"All you have to do is sit in a wheelchair and let them push you."

"There's no wheelchair scene in my book!"

"Well, *you're* not in your book, either."

Not my point! She was a fast walker, so I had to move quickly just to keep up. "Look, I'm not an actress, okay?"

"And that's fine. Really, all you have to do is sit there."

"Anyone could do that!"

"And that 'anyone' includes you, correct?"

"…Yes…"

After putting up some semblance of resistance, I allowed her to cart me off. Just another part of marketing, I figured. And since they

were going to the trouble of adapting my book to film, some part of me felt I owed them that much.

Soon, we arrived at the station, and after we boarded the train, she handed me a copy of the film script. "If nothing else, try to memorize the names of the cast."

"…Good point." I'd gotten an email about it a while back, but I was so busy at the time that I barely skimmed through it and, consequently, retained next to none of it.

Today, they would only be filming scenes with the older sister. Chronologically, this made sense, considering the younger sister would have moved away—and, given the slightly sci-fi setting, I suspected no ordinary hospital would suffice. As for the actress playing the older sister…

"Let's see… Where's her pen name—er, stage name… Ah, Shimamura Hougetsu."

What, like the historical figure? Huh.

"I'm told that's her real name," my editor informed me.

"It has a…unique sort of ring to it."

"So does your pen name."

"That's my real name, too, you know."

For that matter, what part of *Sakura* was unique? Tons of people were named Sakura. I always wondered why I was named after cherry blossoms when I wasn't even born in the spring, but I'd never bothered to ask my mother why she chose it, and now we no longer lived together. We weren't exactly…*on bad terms*, but we were both

terrible at communicating, especially with each other. And since neither of us ever managed to find a solution, we went our separate ways, as was commonly the case with relationships like ours. To this day, I hadn't visited or spoken to her, so it was hard to say whether she even knew I was a published author now.

"Funny. I've never heard of this actress."

"Then you must live under a rock, because she's everywhere these days. Don't you dare say that to her face, got it?" my editor warned, elbowing me in the side.

Fair point. I'll be careful.

I was so sleep-deprived that the swaying of the train made me want to puke. Good thing we were already on our way to a hospital.

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After we deboarded the train, I was stuffed into what looked like a film production van.

"That's because it *is* a film production van."

"Wow."

Beside me, some kind of equipment lay sideways, the metal tip jutting out directly in front of my seat. Now it felt like we were going to a photo shoot. Leaning away from the pointy thing, I sat there and waited to arrive at our destination, no different from the rest of the equipment.

The hospital was so large, I half-wondered if it were a shopping mall. As we walked, our guide explained that between its patients and staff, several thousand people entered this building every day. It was

so packed, I suspected I could pass out on the floor and no one would even notice.

Because the place was massive, naturally, the walk to the second-floor lobby was a long one. Each hallway was nearly the width of a mall concourse, and I wondered if the bright, open space was in some way comforting to the patients.

Today, the plan was to borrow a corner of a hospital lobby for filming—one with, in my opinion, way too many pillars. *Oh, I get it,* I thought to myself as I sat on the far edge of the leather sofa. *They're probably going to stick me here and make me sign more copies.* I thought back to last year, when I stupidly said I'd be willing to pen a thousand autographs if it made people happy, and cursed myself for not choosing a more modest number.

I had met the film crew once before, when we all met up at the publishing office. To avoid any responsibility, I told them to take as many liberties as they liked, and it seemed that was indeed the route they'd taken. There was no hospital scene in my book.

Word must have gotten around that the author was here, because a fair few people approached me to say hello—mostly actors and PR representatives. At some point, I was told I'd be doing a magazine interview. It was all so much. My vision flickered. It wasn't just that I was bad at interviews—I was bad at answering questions, period. I could sit and listen as much as necessary, but the most I could contribute was "Yeah," or "I'm fine with anything," ad nauseam.

As I prayed desperately that they'd forget about me and focus on filming, I heard my editor call for me and looked up. When I saw

her striding swiftly in my direction, I suppressed the reflexive urge to kneel and beg for more time on my deadline. Behind her, two people followed in her wake.

Great, is she about to introduce me to the hospital staff next? I joked to myself.

But the moment I laid eyes on that face, the thin white walls shoved me back hard. Knocked loose from the impact, my consciousness rose out of my skull, hovering over my body like a balloon and affording me a bird's-eye view. My cheeks were burning, and the corners of my eyes were so hot, it was a miracle I wasn't crying. I thought I felt myself suck in a breath, and yet suddenly my lungs were painfully, suffocatingly empty.

I knew at once that she was an actress. She was a masterpiece, the very sight of which had nearly evaporated all the moisture from my widened eyes. *She…she's beautiful.* The compliment bubbled at the back of my dry, sticky throat, frozen in breathlessness.

"This is the lead actress."

My editor's introduction slipped over my ears and into the great beyond. Whoever she was, her smile reminded me of the field of sunflowers near my mother's house. The next thing I knew, I had risen from my seat on the sofa, standing rigidly at attention.

"Nice to meet you."

She was a bit shorter than I was, but her pale skin sparkled like a midsummer beach. She emitted an aura of soft golden waves that gently engulfed me, melting my voice into shapeless sludge.

"Uh, nuh—no, no, it's nice to meet *you*…"

My lips were quivering too hard to maintain a consistent shape, and I'd forgotten to blink for so long that my eyeballs stung with the intensity of an electric current that threatened to make my skull implode. I was terrified to imagine what I must have looked like to an outside observer.

"And this is Adachi Sakura, the author of the original novel," my editor continued, introducing me.

"It's great to speak with you," said the actress, bowing politely once more.

"Y-yeah, I… You, too."

I started to say a much longer sentence but quickly redirected myself to something shorter. I knew I must have seemed strange, so I forced a smile as if I were being silly on purpose. Likewise, she smiled back.

"Wow, talk about gorgeous."

My heart nearly stopped beating as she read my mind verbatim. I was so panicked, my vision began to warp, as if my eyes were somehow at two different heights. But when the rest of my thoughts remained private, I realized she wasn't actually psychic. Good thing, too, or else I would have had to smash my head against one of these pillars until no mind was left to read.

"You totally could have played the main character yourself!"

…The pretty lady was closer now, and clearly flattering me. Even the compliments felt like pressure against my face.

"No, yeah, no, no." I shook and nodded my head accordingly.

"And look at that great expression! You're definitely built for Hollywood."

Laughing, she continued to butter me up with honeyed words, knowing full well she could get away with it. Then, with our introductions thus concluded, she turned back toward her work. And yet…for some reason…it felt like a terrible waste to let the crushing impact of her presence slip away.

"Wait!"

Why did I stop her when I had no reason to? She turned back to face me across the lobby. *What now? Tell her to break a leg? Hurry! She's looking at me!*

Next to her, the talent manager fixed me with a sharp look—an unspoken warning.

"You're…Shimamura Hougetsu-san?"

What kind of stupid question is that? my rational side snarked while my mind went blank. But she was a cowardly critic who didn't try to help me whatsoever.

At first, the actress's eyes went wide, but then her pretty lips curled in recognition. "You're right—I'm sorry! I forgot to tell you."

She sped back over to me, the flutter of her skirt exposing a captivating glimpse of her slender ankles. My scalp was slick with sweat, and I could feel something stupid threatening to spill out of my mouth.

"My name is Shimamura Hougetsu. Pleased to be working with you today."

"M-me, too! Heh heh…"

I could feel my posture shrinking and straightening like a Slinky toy. Seemingly satisfied, she turned and glided away—like a spring breeze out of season.

"Th-these actresshesh shure are shomething."

"What?"

My tongue wasn't working right. "They've got a different…vibe to them, I guess." I couldn't remember if she'd smelled good—my senses were too overwhelmed to even think of it at the time. I started sniffing madly, but all I smelled now was hospital disinfectant. "You said she's super famous?" I asked, pointing meekly at the actress in question, Shimamura-san, as she chatted with her talent manager across the room.

"Is something the matter?"

"No, I just… Her looks are *stunning*."

The more I spoke, the sweatier I became. Despite my sleep deprivation headache, something had set my brain to firing on all cylinders, and my thoughts couldn't figure out where to fit in the resulting discordance.

"Whoa, your cheeks are shiny."

"Huh?"

This was something I hadn't noticed myself. How could my skin possibly look nice when I barely took care of myself? And yet, when I

reached up, I found it soft and smooth. Maybe the shine was from all the sweating? My complexion was surely as red as a tomato.

"I could be wrong, but…" My editor squinted at me uncertainly. "Is this love at first sight?"

Just like that, she had me pegged—wait, no! Surely that sort of fanciful expression was too lofty to be accurate! With a pen in hand, I could have drafted up the perfect prose, but when it came to speaking, I was hopeless.

"Ghckk—ghrkk—!"

We were only two stories up, but somehow, I was dying of altitude sickness. That actress had stolen the very breath from my lungs.

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"It's not quite love at first sight," I confessed.

There I knelt on the hospital floor, writing my signature. Every time I finished one, my editor took it and laid it next to the last, where it would remain until its ink had dried. This was our standard book-signing workflow.

"At the very least, *love* feels too strong for something so…single-faceted. Obviously, she's beautiful; I won't deny that was my first impression. But there's something more to it. The way my body reacted was so different from normal… You know how when you're sleeping, sometimes you jerk awake? It felt like that, but emotionally. So maybe I was just stunned. Then again…it also sort of felt like something invisible skipped all my neural pathways to stab my brain

directly… Ugh, how would I describe this if it was for a character I was writing…?"

Muttering to myself, I carried on signing and handing over books. Like a well-programmed automaton, my editor took each one without so much as a glance in my direction, nor did she offer any thoughts on the subject at hand.

"Are you listening?"

"Of course. Once we're done here, I'm told they'll be filming your scene, so you'll need to change into your costume."

"That sounds a lot like you weren't listening."

After a beat, she replied, "Well, just get her phone number or something."

"What?!" It was a flawless feint, and it caught me entirely off guard.

"Only thirty more copies to go."

"Could you pick a topic and stick to it?"

"Is it such a big deal? The two of you met on set, and one thing led to another."

"Happens all the time… Wait, no!" I blurted, then remembered we were at a film set in a hospital and lowered my voice. "It's…it's not like that. She's an *actress*. She'll think I'm a creep!"

Surely she was used to people drooling all over her. It probably got tiring, having to let them down gently all the time. *Well, I'm not one of those types,* I insisted silently, defending myself from an accusation no one had made.

"Will she? I suppose she might."

"Ugh, it's over for me…"

"But she did call you gorgeous."

"She was just being nice. Only a lunatic would take it seriously."

That being said, I couldn't pretend I was of sound mind myself. An actor's job was to perform beauty, so when one of them praised your own, it…it… I could feel the room starting to spin. At this rate, I'd never finish signing all these copies. Pressing my eyeballs through my eyelids, I forced myself to focus. I was acting like an anxious dog, barking at everything that moved, all because I happened to see a pretty face.

And so, the dog-woman finished autographing her books—enough to fill that entire paper bag. Rising from the floor, I staggered to the nearby sofa and collapsed onto it.

"You *are* gorgeous, you know. Despite the sickly complexion and bloodshot eyes from lack of sleep," my editor praised me, after carefully collecting all the copies. "My daughter says so, and she's never wrong."

"Uh…I'm honored…?"

Right after that, I changed into a hospital gown and sat in a wheelchair. Since I had no lines to recite, all I needed to do was let another character push me along. This was a relief, because if they had asked me to speak on camera, I would have fought them on it.

The actress in charge of pushing me introduced herself before we began, but while she was possessed of a refined, mature sort of

beauty, it didn't hit me half as hard. Clearly the leading actress—Shimamura-san—was in a league of her own. In my eyes, anyway. Though she was surrounded by a sea of other stars, she shone more brightly than any of them, like…like the sun! That would explain why my heart ignited in close proximity!

I could see it now. Article headlines reading: *Social Media Firestorm Erupts After Author Gets Wrong Idea, Flirts with Famous Celebrity.* It reminded me of a story idea I once outlined about piercing the sun, though I never did get around to actually writing the thing.

But when I glanced across the room at the leading actress in question, presently taking part in a meeting…our eyes met. My heart contracted so sharply, I wondered if I needed a checkup. Not only that, but instead of avoiding my gaze, she held it, as though intrigued… *No, don't lead me on more than you already have!* Something inside me swelled from below like a balloon, engulfing my face from the chin up. Then, as if she'd seen it for herself, she suddenly pressed a dainty hand to her mouth.

She was laughing at me! Reflexively, I put a hand up to shield my eyes, as though I'd just taken a ray of sunshine straight to the face. I didn't dare look at her anymore.

After that, I whiled away the time staring intently at the floor until at some point, I dozed off, and by the time I next awoke, my scene had already ended. Apparently, the other actress pushed me while I was asleep… Why didn't the director say anything?

"He was impressed, actually. Your fake sleeping looked very realistic."

"Great…" *You know what? I don't care anymore.*

As I changed back into my street clothes, I couldn't help but notice that this particular hospital room didn't appear to see much regular use. The bed looked to be on the older side, and there were no sheets on it. In fact, it kind of reminded me of my bedroom at my mother's house.

"Good work today. Oh, and we'll be doing that magazine interview next."

"Yeah, yeah…" *I wish I could sleep in a wheelchair for that, too.*

Availing ourselves of a table in a sunny corner of the hospital ward, we began the interview. It wasn't my first by any means, but the sight of the journalist turning on his recorder still made me a little nervous. After all, anything I let slip would be immortalized forever.

"Thank you for agreeing to this."

"No, no, thank you for inviting me."

"Then without further ado…could I get your opinion on the original work?"

This article was for a fairly serious publication—nothing I would normally read of my own volition. Really, I couldn't have predicted just how many facets of my life this adaptation would affect. Most of the - interview questions pertained to my thoughts and wishes regarding the upcoming film, and I made sure to give nothing but safe, boring answers. The journalist nodded along intently, jotting down each one.

"What else… I'd love to hear the story of how you started writing."

"Okay." I couldn't begin to count how many times I'd been asked this question. But unlike all the others, its answer would never change. "It all started in junior high, when I worked in the library."

"Oh?"

"Not by choice, mind you, but because I was assigned there. We all took turns manning the front desk—you know, loaning out books and accepting returns—but hardly anyone ever came in, so it was mind-numbingly dull. Then, one day, a girl working the same shift made a suggestion. 'If you're bored, why not read something? We're drowning in books here.' So that's exactly what I did from then on: pick a book at random and spend my whole shift reading it."

I had so much free time, I must have read half of the entire catalog. It was only a junior high school library, after all. But in my defense, the reading habit I developed was surely a net positive outcome for a student.

"So that's how you gained an appreciation for fiction?"

"Uhhh…well…not really?"

"What?" He blinked back at me, clearly confused by an answer he hadn't remotely anticipated. And to his credit, anyone would have expected me to say yes. However…

"The novels I read weren't very good, in my opinion."

No matter what genre I tried, it never hooked me to the point that I would let other things in my life fall to the wayside. For me,

reading was only ever preferable to doing nothing at all.

"But the more I read, the more I started to think even *I* could write one. And what I enjoyed more than anything was the process of mentally outlining exactly how I would go about finishing a draft."

I had more fun constructing the bones of a book than I did sculpting the contents. Making a living from it was merely a side perk.

"I see… What a story," the journalist concluded lazily.

"Yeah, I guess."

That was one of few instances in which that girl and I actually spoke to one another during our time in junior high. To this day, she probably had no clue that I was an author now. But it was kind of nice to think that, intentionally or not, the slightest of remarks could potentially have a serious butterfly effect. It wasn't every day that you could reflect on your life and actually see where the paths of fate diverged.

Once the interview had concluded, I had officially finished everything on my to-do list for the day. I hadn't actually worked all that hard—except for signing those copies—but nevertheless, I basked in a deep feeling of accomplishment. *It's over!* As I stretched my limbs out, however, I saw my editor headed my way, carrying something in one hand.

"Great work today. This is for you."

She handed me a packed lunch from the catering table. Only then did I remember that it was past noon and I still had yet to eat anything. Would I ever develop an interest in food the same way I

had with writing? If nothing else, I decided to savor the experience of eating catered food on a film set, since there was no guarantee it would happen again.

When I lifted the rectangular lid, I was greeted with boneless chicken wings, fried crab claws, cherry tomatoes on a bed of cabbage, slightly dry white rice, and brightly colored gelatin in a small plastic container that made me think of Jell-O shots. The rest of the space was packed with an assortment of other common vegetables, some of which were pickled.

"Yay, crab claws!"

Alas, they were mostly breading.

Evidently, my editor had decided to take her lunch break at the same time, because she sat next to me, stuffing her face. She was the type of fast eater who never bothered to match pace with others, even during special events at the publishing office, and today was no exception. As soon as she was done, she ran out of the room, cell phone in hand, and I could only assume she had scheduled a call with some other author.

Alone, I continued to graze on my food, all the while stealing glances at the lead actress. Once I was finished, I'd head home, and that would be the end of it. Disappointing, yes, but she was out of my league. I'd never have the courage—or even the chance—to talk to her again.

For that matter, what did I even want from her? Friendship? How would a loner like me know what that looked like? I could count the total number of human connections I'd made on one hand, and

that number included my estranged mother. Pinching the final crab claw between my thumb and forefinger, I stared blankly at it until my editor finally returned.

"Are we heading out?" I asked. There was no point in lingering here—I'd only be a distraction. I needed to go home, take a shower, have a nap, and get back to writing.

"About that—I have one more task for you today."

"Ugh, are you serious?"

"I made the arrangements just now!" Proud of a job well done, she thrust out her muscular chest. "Well done" was decidedly not how *I* felt about it.

"Uh, you know I have a deadline coming up, right?"

"And we both know you won't meet it anyway. It won't kill you to lose a day."

I couldn't tell if this was an indirect threat or merely her way of cutting me some slack. "What is it? You 'found' more books to sign?" I asked warily, massaging my sore wrist. It wouldn't be the first time, after all.

Incidentally, my personal record was four hundred copies, all of them signed at an overseas event. Originally, it was planned to be a small meet-and-greet for fifty people, but in a blink, it snowballed into hundreds.

My editor smirked at me as she collected my empty lunch container. "No, it's a joint interview with Shimamura Hougetsu-san. I told them we ought to capitalize on the opportunity."

"…What?"

At the sound of that name, I no longer had the mental capacity to rub my wrist.

"I've cooked up an excuse for the two of you to talk," she announced, giving me a thumbs-up and a bright smile.

On second thought…well done!!!

Now I would have another chance to be in her presence. To share space…and hear her voice…

"You…"

"Yes?"

"You might be a good person after all."

"*Might*? What kind of compliment is that?" She pushed me with her brawny arms.

"You *are* a good person after all."

"Quit struggling!"

"Also, I need a one-week extension on my deadline," I tossed out, pushing my luck.

"Ha ha! Good one!"

Yeah, I figured. In all likelihood, she had already extended it as much as she could. Speaking from experience, one extension was bad enough, but at three, I was on thin ice. This was information I probably would have been better off not knowing.

"Filming will be over soon, so sit tight."

"Okay…"

My shoulders and knees locked into place, creating perfect right angles. Suddenly, my throat and skin felt as dry as a desert—and instead of running cold, my blood was hot enough to boil. An *interview*! We'd be talking face-to-face! Granted, it wouldn't be private; some magazine journalist or whoever would be listening in. Still, this was unmistakably a chance to get to know her.

I had fully expected to never see her again, so my body struggled to recover from this 180-degree shift. My fingertips tingled restlessly. *Nothing's going to happen,* I told myself over and over like a mantra, willing myself to stop trembling with hope. *But I'll get to talk to her again,* my heart shot back, chasing after the hint of fate it had one-sidedly detected. For most people, this was simply how it felt to be a fan.

My body began to shake as I envisioned her enthusiasm as compared to mine.

"Do you have the hiccups or something?" my editor asked.

As it happened, I did. She handed me a paper cup filled with tea, and I drank it in seconds, staring down at the sharp angles of my knees as I waited. Long after it was gone, I continued to raise the empty cup to my lips for an indeterminate amount of time. Then, suddenly, I felt a ray of light shining in my direction—and when I turned to look, sure enough, our eyes met. No matter the distance between us, it seemed we were inextricably magnetized to one another.

In other words…I wasn't the only one who…

As I quivered in my seat, the ray approached. Contrary to popular belief, the "speed of light" was agonizingly slow indeed.

"My apologies for the wait," the actress called cheerfully, accompanied by someone I suspected was her talent manager.

"No, nooo, no!" Hastily, I set down my paper cup and bowed to her.

"…Could we have a minute?"

After a meaningful glance, the talent manager walked away—and for some reason started chatting with my editor. Now the two of us were alone… Well, not *literally*, since there were plenty of people in the vicinity, but it felt as though our personal bubbles had merged.

"I'm sorry for laughing at you earlier."

She was standing so close to me now, I nearly recoiled when she spoke. "Huhwha? Y-yeah, no, yeah!" I laughed weakly, my lips and cheeks sagging.

She must have been referring to that moment from earlier when our eyes met across the room. Granted, she didn't look all that sorry with that smile on her face, but she was pretty, so I was willing to forgive her.

"It's fine, really. I'm sure it must have been funny."

"I mean, you were cycling through a whole series of facial expressions!"

"Oh, yeah, uh…I'm looking to find work as a…stoplight." I wanted to lighten the mood with a joke, but instead I blurted out the first thing that came to mind. I was getting dumber by the second…or

maybe I was already past the point of no return. “So tell me, Ms. Actress…”

“Call me Shimamura.” Using her index finger, she traced an S in midair. “I can’t explain it, but it feels friendlier than my first name. Can you believe I *still* haven’t gotten any commercial gigs from the clothing company?” she joked.

Shimamura. Sure enough, it felt soft and familiar on my tongue.

“In that case, uh, you can…call me Adachi,” I offered timidly, the same way I’d hand over a business card.

“Adachi…” It sounded as though she were rolling it around on her tongue like a piece of candy. Nodding to herself, the actress… Shimamura-san…smiled. “Adachi-sensei.”

“No, no, you don’t have to call me Sensei.”

“You’re a professional in your field, aren’t you? I’ve read a few of your works.”

Counting on her fingers, she named a handful of books. Some of them were titles I still saw on store shelves, while others felt more like long-lost friends.

“But my all-time favorite would have to be…”

The title that followed was the story of a couple who licked each other’s eyeballs. She looked all too proud to tell me this, but internally, I was horrified.

“Uh…oh yeah, th-that one! My magnum opus… You sure have some…good taste…”

Instead of jokingly pretending to brag, I knew I would win more points by simply calming down, but I couldn't stop. *"You have good taste"? Too condescending! Get down off your high horse!* I shouted silently at myself. I had a bad habit of offending people on accident.

"So, um…it must be stressful for you to have this interview right after filming," I continued, changing the subject.

"I could say the same of you. I watched you film your scene, you know."

"What? You…you did? I…I don't remember seeing you…"

"Because you were asleep the whole time. Pretty ballsy," she grinned mischievously, as though it were a prank I had purposely pulled. The look on her face was so adorable that my soul threatened to vacate my body. While it was exploring the hospital grounds without me, I followed an assortment of other people down to the first floor. In a blink, we were prepping for the interview.

It was promptly decided that we would borrow a hospital room. As a journalist—a different one from my earlier interview—set up the voice recorder, Shimamura-san and I sat down across the table from each other, joined by my editor on my side and her talent manager on hers. It wasn't until I felt an elbow in my ribs that I snapped back to my senses.

"Thank you so much for accepting our last-minute request."

Following a brief introduction, the journalist powered on the recorder. Moments before the interview began, Shimamura-san

flashed me a smile, and I nearly returned it with a dopey grin of my own.

"Now, then, you two feel free to chat at length about whatever you like. We'll edit it down into an article later on."

Evidently, my humiliating mistakes would never see the light of day.

"Adachi-sensei, I notice your works always have some sort of unique setting or world-building. I'd love to learn how your mind works," Shimamura-san began, as if she'd done it a hundred times before.

"Th-that sounds good, sure."

"So, what are you thinking about right now?" she pressed, without missing a beat. If she was trying to flummox me, it was working. My every thought was wholly dependent upon the sight in front of me.

"Um…I shouldn't respond with the blunt truth, right?" I asked the room, smiling like an idiot. The talent manager smiled back politely, but my editor's grin suppressed a hint of a threat: *Speak carefully.*

"I want your honest answers. If they're dicey, we'll just cut them," Shimamura-san replied, pantomiming scissors with her fingers.

The journalist saw this and added nervously, "The article draft will be sent to both of you for proofreading before it's published."

But that wasn't actually what I meant. I was afraid of Shimamura-san finding out how I felt about her—and yet, with her

gaze on me, somehow I couldn't keep quiet. On the contrary, my lips were looser than ever.

"You're beautiful."

As my sincere feelings rocketed face-first into her, I felt something scorch my back and shoulders—the smoldering embers of shame. Why did I say something so *stupid*? Fighting the heaviness in my chest, I forced myself to look up and witness her reaction.

She was smiling…and unless I was deluding myself, she looked happy.

"Well, you certainly don't waste time, do you?"

"Heh…heh heh heh… I know it's unrelated, but it *is* what I'm thinking right now. Shut up and focus on work, am I right? Sorry."

"As I said before, you're really pretty yourself. Way more than me."

"N-no way!"

"Isn't she?" Shimamura-san asked her talent manager, who smiled stiffly, then leaned in to scrutinize my face. I averted my eyes, but couldn't escape the probing gaze, which was a little frightening.

"Shall I put in a referral?"

With who?! "I…I'm happy as an author, thank you."

"Alas," the talent manager replied with a smile. I couldn't tell if it was supposed to be a joke or not, so I just smiled back.

From there, the conversation returned to my work and the film adaptation—topics we had in common. I was asked to describe my feelings toward the story, my experience writing it, and my hopes for

the upcoming adaptation. But although it was more or less a retread of the previous interview, talking to Shimamura-san was so much fun that it felt completely different.

"So, um, how did you get your start as an actor?" I asked, like a little kid on a social studies trip. Really, I was just stealing the questions from my earlier interview. But she was clearly used to being asked this, because she had an answer ready.

"Well…it all started when someone took a photo of me with that glowy girl."

Every word was spoken carefully, like she was easing her way down the staircase of memories one step at a time. Likewise, I dutifully followed along: "Glowy *girl*…?"

Wait, no, "girl" isn't the weird part of that sentence.

"No joke, she literally glowed blue. Her hair, her nails—even her teeth! She was wearing a kitty onesie, boots, and a big backpack, and she fell out of the sky."

She recounted it with such clarity, I half wondered if she'd gotten it from a manga she was reading. Each new detail was more baffling than the last. "This is all very specific," I remarked, forgetting to hide my skepticism.

"Not gonna lie, I know how it sounds," she replied, dropping formality to match my tone. "I was walking down the street when she landed right in front of me. Naturally, we got to talking. Then someone posted a picture of us to social media, and it went viral, and one thing led to another, and here I am."

Frankly, it was quite the accomplishment to turn a viral photo into an entire career.

"Really, it's the glowy girl who deserves the credit, not me. But she disappeared, and I haven't seen her since."

"Wow."

Perhaps good fortune could take the form of a person. After all, if it wasn't for that little kid, I wouldn't have met Shimamura-san at all. *Thanks for the assist, girl from the sky!* (On some level, I had stopped questioning the "fell out of the sky" detail—probably because I was willing to believe every word that came out of this woman's mouth.)

"My family thought the whole story was hilarious. They still don't believe me when I tell them I'm on TV…though I guess sometimes I have trouble believing it myself." She gazed into my eyes, as if searching for something—so deeply, it gave me goosebumps. "Do you ever have moments where you look back at your life from an outside perspective and it feels too crazy to be real? Because I kinda don't understand how I got from who I was then to who I am now."

"Oh yeah, I can relate. You see, I'm not in contact with my family…"

For some reason, Shimamura-san took interest in this boring detail. "You're not? With any of them?"

She seemed curious, so I reluctantly explained my personal history: "I haven't been to see my mother since I moved out of her house. She probably doesn't even know I'm an author."

That was the long and short of it—barely worth repeating. But when Shimamura-san's face fell, I started to worry that my sob story had soured the mood in the room. From then on, although her tone remained as lighthearted as before, she didn't crack a smile.

We carried on chatting, my dopey grin a permanent fixture, until the interview came to an end and we both swiftly turned to leave. I didn't want to subject her to my stupid face and shaky voice for a moment longer.

"Don't you want her number?" my editor asked.

"Hush!" I hissed, steering her out of the hospital room like she was a recovering patient.

"Oh dear… You're really going to regret it, you know."

"I'm here in a professional capacity, not to…you know…pursue ulterior motives!"

"Wait here and I'll call a cab to take you home."

With an abrupt change of subject, she dumped me in the courtyard and took off. In her place, someone else walked out of the hospital and immediately broke into a run in my general direction—a pretty lady with slender ankles.

"Wh-what's going on?!" Standing there in broad daylight, I braced myself for the worst. When she spotted me, she made a beeline straight toward me.

"Adachi-sensei!"

"Yes…? Hello?"

The first was my natural reaction to her dramatic entrance—the next, after a beat, when it startled me all over again. She carried with her a pocket of pleasant air, her scent and overall vibe working in perfect tandem. Was this the aura of an actress? As I was waxing poetic, she thrust out her arm, gripping a smartphone with a teddy bear charm dangling from the case.

"Get your phone out."

"Hwhuh?!" My voice cracked as my heels lifted up off the ground. "Oh, g-gosh, you want to…trade numbers?"

"What? Oh, sure. That, too."

She agreed so readily that I achieved liftoff—not just my heels this time, but all the way to my toes. The thrill of it kept me suspended in zero gravity, numbing my limbs. Add in the heart palpitations, and I was halfway to passing out completely. Good thing we were at a hospital.

"I want you to call your mom and invite her to the movie."

"……What?" Half of me was still over the moon about getting her number, but now, suddenly, another part of me was frozen in confusion.

"I know we've only just met, so this may be rude, but I don't think it's right to turn a blind eye to your family."

I stared back at her, thinking to myself: *She must have been raised in a loving home*. I didn't mean it sarcastically, either—her sincerity was that powerful.

"Sorry for being a busybody."

"Oh, no, no…but…my mom?"

"Or your dad, if you want."

I don't know my dad.

"Uhhh…well…" Truthfully, it felt like too little, too late. But then she looked at me with those gleaming eyes, and I nearly said, "Okay, I'll do it."

No…wait…I *did* say it.

"Oh. You're a lot more willing than I thought you'd be."

Her eyes went as wide as saucers. In truth, I wasn't willing at all—but my heart was unable to fight the magnetic pull of her puppy-dog eyes. If, by some chance, a relationship blossomed from this, I could foresee myself agreeing to just about anything, provided she begged for it with those eyes. That…probably wasn't healthy.

"And once you're done, we can trade numbers, okay?"

"Okay!"

And so, I subjected myself to the stick, all for a taste of that sweet, sweet carrot. *I'm sorry that this was what it took to make me finally contact you,* I apologized silently to my mother as I listened to the ringing. Her contact entry in my phone may as well have been collecting cobwebs for all the use it ever saw.

She might not pick up if she's at work right now… That sure would be a shame…

With the phone to my ear, I could hear the pounding of my heart quicken in time with the throb of my skull.

"The glowy girl said something to me before she disappeared," Shimamura-san reminisced quietly, squinting at the glare of the hospital windows as we waited for the call to connect. "*You will find her*."

Find who? "Her" who?

But before I could ask, I heard my mother pick up on the other end of the line and instantly broke into a cold sweat. All at once, it felt like the columns of the passageway had closed in around me, crushing me; I wanted to curl into the fetal position, but instead I was forced upright, unable to escape the intense discomfort.

"…What is it?" the voice asked suspiciously, as if backed into a corner.

If nothing else, it reminded me of my childhood.

"Um…hello?"

"What is it?" she repeated more firmly. On reflex, I tugged at my hair, then clawed at my cheeks while I was at it.

Meanwhile, Shimamura-san sat beside me, offering no encouragement beyond a smile. It was my problem to solve, so she probably wanted me to figure it out on my own. Or maybe she hadn't thought about it that deeply at all, and I was just reading into it. That didn't seem healthy, either.

"Well, um…you may not know this, but I'm a novelist…"

What kind of opening line was that? I cursed my terrible communication skills. But then again, considering we'd barely interacted for our entire lives, perhaps it was foolish to expect

anything better. Which was ruder: to be cordial, or to be friendly? I didn't know how she felt about me or how much she even knew about me. I was utterly clueless.

"Excuse me?"

Her voice was sharp, but in person, her eyes were even sharper. Looking back, maybe that was what kept me at arm's length as a child. Even now, I felt like a little kid in trouble with no one to rescue me. As I hung my head, the earthy smell of the courtyard grew stronger, and then…

"Obviously, I know that. What are you talking about?"

"Oh…"

She spoke brusquely, without missing a beat. "Why would you think I wouldn't know that?"

"Because…I've never…told you…?"

My mind slowed to a halt as I tried to recalculate the gulf between us. Something between loneliness and restlessness goaded me forward as the head-on pressure gradually faded away—but in its absence, my face felt strangely naked.

"Your film…"

"Huh?"

"I hope it comes to the theater at the local mall."

If I had to guess, this was my mother's best attempt at continuing the conversation.

"You know about that?"

"Like I said, obviously! What's the matter with you?"

She seemed baffled, and I knew I needed to say something, so I forced myself into action. "Actually, um…I came to the film set today."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, and…I was in a scene, but…I was asleep…" *So much for an interesting story to tell. God, I'm stupid.*

"Your character was asleep in bed?"

"No, I was sitting in a wheelchair, and I just…fell asleep waiting for my scene."

"…Sounds like you need to get more rest at night."

"I'll try."

In the silence that followed, I heard her inhale. Sensing that the end of the call was quickly approaching, I flung out a hand to stop the curtain from falling.

"They're gonna do a…a screening soon. Would you wanna… come to it?"

My editor had told me that family members were welcome to attend. At the time, I'd breezily shrugged it off, but evidently it stayed in some distant corner of my mind, because I managed to remember at the perfect moment. Perhaps it was the familial connection that jogged my memory.

"A screening?"

"Yeah."

"I'll need to check my schedule for that day."

It reminded me of Bring Your Parents to School Day, when I was too scared to look over my shoulder at her and too scared to ask any questions afterward—yet she still made time to show up every year.

She knew about my career. She even knew about the film adaptation. But she never mentioned it—never tried to contact me at all.

"When I find out the…the date and time…I'll let you know."

The words came slowly, clumsily, like a child's. Whenever I was in her presence—well, not physically in this case, but still—I always seemed to mentally regress. Was that simply how mother-daughter relationships worked? Were we secretly pretty normal this whole time?

"Sounds good… Talk later." And so, without waiting for my response, she ended the call.

Judging purely from the sound of her voice, it could be interpreted as a rejection—a cold goodbye. That was certainly how I would have seen it in the past. But after working as a writer for a good few years and learning a bit about putting myself in other people's shoes, I now understood that my mother was probably just nervous, the same as I was.

My stiff shoulders refused to unhunch from around my ears. I sat frozen in place, tightly gripping the silent cell phone.

"See? Aren't you glad?"

Meanwhile, Shimamura-san had stayed at my side for the entire duration of the phone call, and she was ready to celebrate the

outcome before I could even announce it. Our eyes met at point-blank range, and I let out a bashful chuckle.

"Uh…yeah…I guess." I paused for a moment, then straightened my posture, raising my eye level slightly above hers, and corrected myself more firmly: "Yeah."

She looked up at me, smiling in satisfaction. "Okay, cool. Seeing as it went well, I have a confession to make."

"Wha?"

Out of nowhere, her tone relaxed sharply, and she leaned in until I could see the reflection of someone in her eyes. When I realized that someone was *me*, my mind went blank. And then—

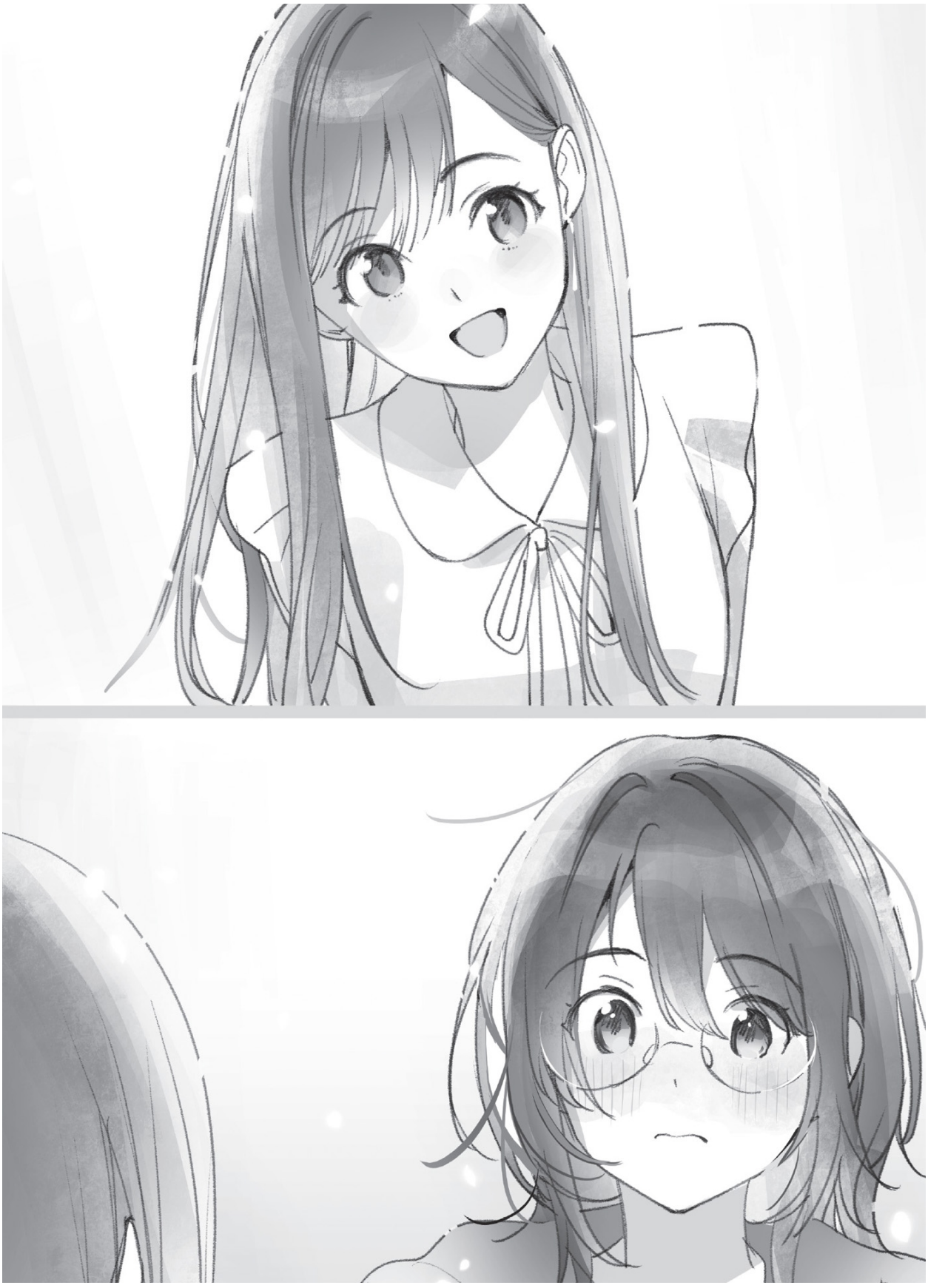
"The truth is, I was just looking for an excuse to get your number."

"……You…you were?"

I felt my palm grow slick with sweat against my phone. As she flashed me a toothy, mischievous grin, I couldn't help but laugh like an idiot.

She's a good actress, all right.

It was the best performance I'd seen from her all day.



Interlude:
What If I Just Kept Walking?

N*O, THANK YOU!*

I attempted to escape by simply racing past her.

"Hey, don't ignore me! Hey, hey! Heeey! HEEEEEEY!"

"Quiet!"

I clucked my tongue in frustration as she swiftly fell into step with me.

"Yoo-hooooo!"

She was shouting like we were on top of a mountain, and I began to seriously contemplate all the ways of shutting her up. *I could squeeze her lips together,* I thought to myself, glaring at her mouth. But she must have misinterpreted this, because she put a coquettish hand to her lips, and then her obnoxiously restless gaze fixed itself on me.

"What's the matter, Hana-chan? You want a kiss?" She puckered her lips in my direction, making disgusting kissy sounds.

"I was just thinking I'd like to wring your goddamned neck."

"Someone's got a potty mouth! You better not talk like that to other people."

"Don't worry, I won't have the opportunity."

None of my other acquaintances were the walking - personification of a loudspeaker. Furthermore, why was she now

tagging along with me on my way home? *I shouldn't have risked waiting at that red light outside the gym. I should have run into traffic,* I thought with a sigh.

"Weren't you going to the gym? Because I'm going home now. Goodbye forever."

"What if we stopped by here first?" She pointed at a café across the street with a black roof—a considerable distance away, despite her use of the word *here*.

"What for?"

"To grab coffee with a friend, obviously!"

"A *friend*? Ha!" I scoffed before I could stop myself.

Me, friends with this buffoon? Even if that were true, her behavior would make me want to deny it at every turn. She was rude, she was loud, she made me uncomfortable… Everything about her was so repugnant, and yet our relationship resembled friendship even when my inner metrics didn't agree. Perhaps that was what didn't sit right with me.

"Good point. We're not friends—we're *besties*."

"I would hate for other people to see us together and think I'm pals with a nuisance like you. Now, goodbye." But before I could escape, she grabbed me by the shoulder. *Don't pull me toward you!*

"All right, I get it. I'll stop my usual shtick for today."

"…You'll stop?" Standing side by side, I became conscious of the fact that she was slightly shorter than me.

"I'll behave, all right?"

"Sure you will. That'll only last for three seconds, tops."

"I'm serious! I'll start right now, so go ahead and count to three."

She took a deep breath, like she was about to plunge underwater, then began to count on her fingers. I watched blankly as each of them unfolded—index, middle, ring.

"See?"

"See what?"

"Now…let us be off."

Suddenly, everything about her had turned stiff and awkward—not just her voice, but the movement of her neck and hands, too. It was highly entertaining, so I decided to humor her for a while.

The exterior of the building was so aggressively Japanese, one might mistake it for a sushi shop. Its parking lot was nearly empty, with dead leaves forming patterns on the concrete; on a whim, I stepped around them as I made my way inside.

The walls, floors, and furnishings were all constructed in matching shades of cozy brown wood, with a stack of cushions below the display case at the center of the room—likely free for customer use during the winter months, if I had to guess. The moment they told us we were free to sit anywhere, I expected this gremlin to make a beeline straight for the outdoor seating, as she usually did. Sure enough, for a brief moment, her eyes sparkled in that direction…but then her head stiffly turned itself away, creaking like a well-worn

vacuum cleaner, and she marched to a table in the back. Not that it mattered either way.

The lighting here was slightly dimmer, deepening the colors of the chic little table and chairs. While it was clearly designed as a place to relax, knowing the normal her, she would have spent the entire time talking me to death. This time, however, she didn't say a word on the way to the table; she merely affixed a facsimile of a smile to her face, which was deeply unsettling. She was quiet, yes, but no more comfortable to be around.

When I ordered an iced coffee, she chimed in, "Make that two," in the flattest voice I'd ever heard. Normally, she would ramble on and on about each little thing on the menu, but today, the chatterbox had removed its batteries. Well, we couldn't keep sitting here and staring at each other in silence—the mere thought was torture. The problem was that I didn't have anything to discuss.

"Talk about something," I demanded, the same way she would usually make infuriatingly outrageous demands of me. Generally, she never needed to be asked, so it was refreshing to see her lips quivering timidly instead.

"The truth is…I do not especially enjoy coffee."

I had suspected as much from her overall vibe. She was too… childish? But not in a derogatory way, mind you. I simply got the sense that there was some intrinsic part of her that could never be tied down by a caffeine addiction.

"Then you should have picked something else." The menu had plenty of fruity, bubbly drinks on offer—the kind she probably

preferred.

"I am…being quiet…right now."

What does that have to do with ordering a drink? "Then why are you talking weird? Just be normal."

"I…will try."

At this point, it was starting to feel like she was mocking me. No matter what she did, she was seemingly destined to irritate me… Was *I* the one with the problem?

As we waited for our coffees to arrive, she kept her mouth firmly shut, barely even blinking. Evidently, her idea of "quiet" involved being as close to dead as possible. It was funny at first, but the longer she sat there in silence, the more it wore out its welcome.

There was no point in being around her if she wasn't going to talk. Granted, she never had much of value to say, either. But whenever she saw me, she'd come running up so gleefully, like she had nothing more important to do… Then again, I couldn't imagine she ever did.

"Enough already. Just go back to normal."

At long last, I ran out of patience. As if on cue, a stupid smirk promptly spread across her lips—the most obnoxious expression her face was capable of making. If we were at the pool, I would have splashed water at it.

"You won't…tell me to go to hell?"

"I won't. Really."

"You're…lying to me…aren't you?"

"Hurry the fuck up before I kill you."

"Eeep! See, I knew it!" she shrieked, clinging to the back of her chair in fear.

"Now that I'm used to your 'usual shtick,' I've determined that this is, in fact, worse."

"Glad you understand! Ha ha ha!" She rolled her shoulders like they'd gotten stiff. "Next time, I'll order a Calpis."

"You have fun with that. I won't be coming back."

"Oh, come onnn!" She had the audacity to flick me on the forehead, so I countered with two fingers of my own. "Hey, you almost poked my eyes out!"

"Better luck next time, I hope."

She slapped my hand away, then fixed me with a studying look. "Having fun?"

"Not in the slightest."

"Well, I am. Nothing feels better than being my normal self."

If only her idea of normal didn't completely invade mine, I thought with a sigh. Then our iced coffees arrived.

"Wow, looks yummy!" the gremlin lied as she took her drink and swirled the straw around pointlessly. After wasting some time playing with it, she cupped the glass between her palms and looked at me. "Y'know, I've always thought that if you and I had met back in high school or thereabouts…"

Normally, she would blurt out her entire train of thought in a single breath, but this time, she paused, as if glimpsing something

through her raised glass.

If I'd met this nuisance all those years ago… My memories of high school were little more than faded outlines at this point, but if she had been there with me beside that curtain as it billowed in the breeze…

It might have destroyed everything.

"Yes? What if?" I prompted.

She put the straw between her lips, as if drinking in something more than just the coffee. "Mm…I think we really would have been besties, Hana-chan."

"Ha!" I took a slow sip of coffee myself. "Not in a million years." *And don't call me Hana-chan.*

"Just like we are now!"

"Shut up."

Heaving yet another sigh, I wondered if this hopeless idiot would ever find a middle ground between insipid and irritating.

Chapter 3:
What If Shimamura Fixed the Timeline?

AND THEN A SINGLE TEAR fell from the sun.

At least, that was what it looked like. The blinding sparkle split into two, and one of them hurtled toward me, moving with such speed and precision that it had to be sentient. For a moment I forgot where I was and stared up blankly at it…and the next thing I knew, I was visited by a feeling of pressure against my body and a gust of lukewarm air.

As I zoned out at the street corner, I saw a car veer out of its lane in my direction. But before I realized what was happening, the fallen light wrapped itself around my head and pulled me up into the air.

Wait, what? I'm floating?

My feet roared in terror as the solid security of the pavement vanished beneath me. Flailing my arms, I scraped desperately at the ground with the soles of my shoes as I flew a considerable distance from the road. Meanwhile, the car came to a halt mere inches from the spot where I'd been standing, then quickly course-corrected.

After a beat, my eyes widened as I realized how lucky I was to be calmly watching this moment unfold from a safe distance. When I stomped down, this time the ground was indeed there to meet me… and in place of sweat, sparkles rolled down from my scalp.

"Oh dear. It appears you would have been just fine without my help."

The creature on my head hopped down to the ground. It was a cat—or, more accurately, a young girl wearing a cat onesie. She was carrying a large rucksack over her shoulders, and her hair was sky blue. Save for the fact that she could speak my language, everything about this fallen sun-sparkle screamed *suspicious*.

"Well, I suppose I should thank you anyway," I replied, glancing around. Her word choice implied that she was the one who had dragged me all the way over here; part of me wasn't sure how that was possible, but considering she had fallen out of the sky, perhaps there was no point in asking.

"Ha ha ha! It was nothing. What matters is that you are unharmed, Shimamura-san." This little cat was very magnanimous indeed. And shorter than my kid sister. And she spoke my name as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

"Hmmm…" One would think I'd remember meeting this girl before. But I didn't. Therefore, the only explanation was that she had learned of me some other way. But I wasn't exactly the talk of the town, so how? Still, the fact remained that she had rescued me. "Okay, I'm willing to overlook the mystery of how you know my name when I don't recognize you in the slightest…"

"That saves me some time."

"But you—actually, on second thought, I don't really care that you fell from the sky, either."

"Yaaay!"

She jubilantly raised both hands into the air. A beat later, I snatched her off the ground. But she was so unnaturally light that I accidentally lifted her a lot higher than I meant to. As I shook her from side to side, trying fruitlessly to knock free any memory of her, the sparkle of her hair eclipsed the sun—and when I looked up at her, for some reason my vision blurred, as if from a fine mist. It was a feeling I wasn't sure I'd ever felt before.

"Dazzling."

I tried to wipe away the odd sentiment, but my hands were full. When I moved to put the cat down, she spun gracefully in midair, brushed her tail over my face, and landed on my shoulders. It generally wasn't socially acceptable to give strange children piggyback rides within a minute of meeting them, but oddly enough, I wasn't opposed to it. Gripping her legs, I faced forward, wondering who the hell this kid truly was.

"So, what's your name?"

"Heh heh heh… You may call me Yashiro."

"Yashiro… Yashiro, huh?"

Twice, I attempted to crank the slot machine of my memories, but no jackpot—I didn't recognize it. I nearly said as much aloud, but upon further reflection, there was no need. And since I was originally on my way home, I decided to take the girl with me.

Why, then, did this conclusion feel so natural?

That was how I met her—the mysterious girl who projected a fine mist of pathos.

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This cryptid evidently had nothing better to do, because she dutifully accompanied me all the way to my house.

"Since you're here now, wanna come in?"

"Heh heh heh! That was my plan all along."

"Was it? You're more presumptuous than you look."

Nevertheless, I guided her inside. At the entryway, she kicked off her sandals and promptly lined them up next to my mother's, as if she had done so a thousand times before. Weirder still, some part of me was fairly certain she *had*.

"Would it kill you to say hi when you walk in the door? Anyway, welcome home… Wait, who's this kid?" asked my mother as she came walking down the hallway.

Yashiro looked up with a bright smile. "Oh, if it isn't Mama-san!"

"*Mama*? Cheeky little punk right out of the gate, arentcha?"

My thoughts exactly. But Yashiro's smile didn't waver in the slightest.

Pausing to scrutinize the strange sparkle, my mother folded her arms—not in suspicion but curious contemplation. Maybe she was feeling the same thing I'd felt. "If you want to call yourself my daughter, then let's see some proof," she barked, blocking the way forward.

But this demand was no less absurd than Yashiro's entire existence, and so the girl remained undaunted. "Heh heh heh… Your favorite treat is a gelatin fruit cup."

"Oh?"

"Ah, gelatin fruit cups… How very enticing," the girl continued in earnest with a dreamy smile, as if the very thought of the snack was enough to set her heart alight. For some reason, my own heart felt toasty warm just watching her. Despite her otherworldly appearance, it seemed her interests were rather mundane.

"Hmmm…" My mother looked over Yashiro's head and up at me. "You might have a new sister."

"Oh, come on!" Was she seriously willing to adopt someone just like that? I pinched one of the pointy ears on Yashiro's hood.

"How else could she guess my favorite food within five seconds of meeting me? There's gotta be an explanation."

"Well…I guess you've got me there…"

"And her being my daughter is a way simpler explanation than having supernatural powers or whatever."

"Is it, though…?"

Based on her looks alone, the latter was arguably more feasible. Meanwhile, the girl in question kept on smiling absently, with seemingly no intention of explaining herself. Was it a trick of the light, or was she looking at my mother with genuine affection?

"So, there you have it. From now on, you're my kid."

"No, Mama-san, I am not your daughter."

"Are too! Shut up! Now, how old are you?"

"My age? Let me think… A little over four million, as I recall."

"My new daughter's older than me? Well, that would explain why I don't remember giving birth to you."

Wouldn't it be a bigger problem if you did? I mean, she doesn't look like she's related to Dad…or you…so how would that work?

"A daughter who's older than her mother. How quirky."

"Not as quirky as you, Mama-san."

"I beg your pardon?!"

Personally, I was inclined to agree with Yashiro. As I started walking toward my bedroom, however, my mother scuttled sideways to block my path. "Now it's *your* turn to prove you're my daughter!"

"Pass. I'm not that desperate for the title."

"How dare you!"

Time to go. As I steered Yashiro by the shoulders, her tail swayed freely, smacking against my hand. Together, we climbed the stairs and walked into the glorified closet my family called the study room. Upon opening the door, we were greeted by stuffy, musty air and a seal plushie lying forgotten on the floor. In a way, it reminded me of the gym loft at school.

While I switched on the AC, Yashiro stared down at the floor and murmured, "It seems Little is downstairs."

"*Little*?"

Another name I didn't recognize. Was there a second foreign intruder in the house? Just as I was starting to feel mildly afraid for our safety, however, Yashiro seemed to sense that clarification was necessary. "I am referring to your younger sister."

"My sister? Oh, yeah, she's downstairs… *Little*?" Considering it sounded nothing like her actual name, I could only assume it was a nickname, but where did it come from? *Little…sister?*

Yashiro took off her rucksack and sat down next to the seal plushie. Then she picked up the remote and used it to turn on the electric fan—something she wouldn't have known to do unless she had been here before.

"Okay, who are you really?" I asked finally.

She smiled brightly at me, her kitty ears and tail twitching in the breeze. "I am everywhere, and everyone, and everything."

"I don't get it."

"Ha ha ha!" She seemed to find my confusion very funny. "I am also your friend."

"…Hmm."

That seemed like a comparatively bigger mystery, and yet on some level, I was willing to accept it as truth. As I sat down on the floor, a sigh escaped my lips, stealing away my pent-up fatigue. She was an odd creature, but her presence had made the long walk home a little shorter.

To tell the truth, school hadn't ended for the day—I had simply gotten bored and left. And if I had reached my destination without

incident, I might have decided to "extend" my summer vacation by never going back. Instead, I now had a healthy distraction from my malaise.

The moment I pushed myself up from the floor, as if on cue, a summer hallmark came wafting in from the window—the screech of the cicadas, letting me know the season wasn't over yet. As I was coasting on a wave I hadn't even created, my gaze met Yashiro's.

"So, are you getting along with Adachi-san?"

"Adachi-san?"

Who? The unfamiliar name threw me for a loop, and I glanced around, wishing there was someone else I could ask. It was so completely out of left field—*no, wait. Wasn't there an Adachi in my class?*

"I might recognize that name…I guess…" But I'd never talked to her, so my memory of her was fuzzy at best. What about her, anyway? "Friend of yours or something?"

"What?"

More baffling still, Yashiro now looked equally as confused as I was. We both tilted our heads so far, we toppled over.

"Could this be…?"

Later that evening, she sat at my family's dinner table, munching away with the same puzzled look on her face.

"Hmmm…"

Lost in contemplation, she nonetheless held out her bowl for a second helping. Despite her fairy-like appearance, it seemed she was

as entitled as any other child, and despite having received no real explanation as to her presence, neither my father nor my sister pressed the question.

After cleaning her plate with a gusto none of us could match, she hopped in the tub as if she lived here. My sister joined her, as the two of them had become fast friends, and they played together all the way until bedtime.

"Hrmmm…"

Now here we were, spending the night in the same room like we'd done it a hundred times before. Even in the darkness, her hair and eyes glowed faintly; if I tried to ask her how it worked, I knew I probably wouldn't understand the answer, so I acknowledged it as fact and moved on.

Yashiro had lost the kitty onesie at bathtime, when my mother had peeled it off. Now she was dressed in my sister's spare pajamas, lying on the floor near the wall. "Are you gonna climb into bed, or…?" Mine or my sister's, I didn't mind either way.

She turned to face me. "In that case, I shall join you."

With that, she started rolling in my direction until she slid right under my comforter and onto my futon, showering me in a cloud of sky-blue motes. When I tried to catch one on my finger, it dodged away, then vanished with a final sparkle into thin air. As I watched it go, a smile played at my lips, as if a hint of someone else's memories had mixed into my own.

"What is going on here…?"

"How do you explain this…?"

We each mumbled to ourselves, embroiled in our own personal mystery—right up until I pulled the comforter over her, at which point she fell asleep within five seconds. To join her, I envisioned the tension leaving my fingertips, and soon, I was gone as well.

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The next morning, heavy rains pounded against the windows.

"Hrrrmmmm," the cat murmured as she watched the downpour through the glass. She hadn't even been here a full twenty-four hours, and she had already made herself at home. Notably, no one in my family had objected to her presence, myself included. Her contemplative mood had yet to improve, but nevertheless, she put away two full portions at breakfast.

"Hmm… Wait and see, perhaps…"

She kept shooting looks at me for some reason, stars swirling in her eyes—*wait, swirling?* I blinked back in silent alarm. Were those real galaxies in there?

"Welp, gotta go." As intriguing as her gaze was, I didn't want to be late.

"Oh? Where are you going?"

"To school."

"Hmmm… School… That is a fine idea. I am proud of you!" she declared, standing on tiptoe with both hands raised in the air. Coming from this earnest little kitty cat, even shallow praise felt encouraging—so I decided maybe I would actually make an effort in class today.

For a moment, I debated whether it was safe to let this enigmatic creature basically move into our house… *Eh, it's fine. She's my new sister or whatever.* "You stay inside, okay? It's raining out there."

For some reason I couldn't explain, I felt certain that she bore no ill intent. This, and all the other ways in which she managed to completely sway my emotions, was a large part of what made her so inscrutable to me.

"Ugh."

The instant I stepped outside, a raindrop hit my leg. With the wind blowing this hard, I was starting to worry that my umbrella might not hold up. Clinging to the handle for dear life, I set off down the street, stomping through small puddles and wishing my newfound motivation toward school had waited for a day with better weather.

"Adachi… Adachi…"

Upon entering the classroom, I scanned around for the friend Yashiro had name-dropped, but there was no sign of her and no bookbag at her desk. Come to think of it, I couldn't recall seeing her at school yesterday, either. Maybe she was sick…or maybe she just didn't want to leave her house in this weather. If so, I didn't blame her. Either way, no amount of thinking about a random classmate would magically make her appear, so I decided not to worry about it.

That day, I sat through all my lessons like a goody-two-shoes. Due to inclement weather, gym class was changed from running laps on the track to playing basketball indoors. The mere act of bouncing

the ball made junior high Shima-chan threaten to rear her ugly head, so I passed it to another girl with a dopey grin on my face.

When I sat down on the raised platform on the far wall, I caught a glimpse of the second-floor gym loft across the room. Personally, I'd never dared to venture up there and had no idea what I might find. But while the thought of gazing down at the first floor from that vantage point was a tempting one, it would involve sneaking undetected all the way to the foot of the stairs near the exit, and at that point, it didn't seem worth the effort.

In the end, I spent the entire day playing it safe. The rain continued, unabated.

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"Uggghhh."

As I closed my umbrella, I flipped my rain-soaked hair over my shoulder, each drop unsullied by the bleach I'd used months before. Nobody in my family liked my blonde hair, but I didn't think it was all that bad. When I opened the door, a tiny figure came flying in my direction.

"Welcome home!"

A barefooted Yashiro came toddling out from the kitchen, carrying a mandarin orange (given to her by my mother, I assumed) and approaching at an alarming speed. Since she weighed practically nothing, I caught her by the scruff of the neck and hoisted her up. Like a real cat, she went limp.

"Hee hee hee! Did you learn many things today?"

"Eh, at least a few."

"I am proud of you."

Again with the shallow praise. Perhaps Yashiro was capable of pretending she liked my hair, too. "Glad to be back," I replied after a pause, then took off my shoes and lined them up next to her sandals. As I headed for the living room carrying our new pet cat, I heard sounds coming from the kitchen.

"Incidentally, are you now acquainted with Adachi-san?" Yashiro asked, circling back to the conversation from yesterday.

"No, I don't think she was at school today." That desk had remained empty all the way until the final bell.

"Oh dear."

"So, what's the story with this 'Adachi-san' person, anyway? I've never met her."

"Hrrmmm…I suspected as much. Then it is as I feared," the cat mused, kicking her feet.

"You know her, I take it?"

"Very well indeed."

"Huh." *Wish I could say the same, but I can't. She's a mystery to me.*

Inside the living room, I set the cat loose; she somersaulted gracefully through the air and landed on her feet, as if the rules of gravity didn't apply to her. I would have been more shocked if I wasn't keenly aware of my wet shoulders. *I should get changed soon.*

Then she sat down next to her rucksack and began to peel the mandarin. I'd heard that cats and citrus didn't mix, but this one looked all too eager to tuck in. What secrets were hiding in that big bag of hers, anyway? I couldn't help but wonder what sorts of things a cryptid like her would hold dear, so I walked up and asked for permission.

"Can I look inside?"

"I do not object, so long as you handle everything gently."

"Yeah, yeah…"

Were the contents fragile or something? Curiously, I opened it—and promptly made eye contact with a pair of button eyes that gleamed up at me from within. As it turned out, the rucksack was full of toys. *Given who it belongs to, I shouldn't have expected any different,* I thought to myself as I pulled each one out. There was a seal, a walrus, and an elephant…

"Wait, is this the same seal plushie I have?"

I thought I recognized those button eyes from somewhere! When I picked it up, sure enough, its tummy felt just as squishy. Granted, my plushie was by no means a one-of-a-kind item, so it was hardly a surprise that someone else would have one, but…frankly, it was so identical to mine, I probably wouldn't have been able to tell which was which.

"They may be the same, but make no mistake, they are different," Yashiro remarked with a smile as she raised a segment of

mandarin to her lips. It sounded like she was insinuating something… or perhaps she was just stating the obvious.

Meanwhile, I picked up the walrus and elephant. These I had never seen before, but they both had cute, comforting designs. The warmth I felt toward them was so clear, I could describe it easily in my mind.

"They are all gifts I received."

"I see…"

"There are more, you know."

"Wait, really?"

Did I miss some? When I peered back into the rucksack, I spotted a phone strap with the likeness of a popular teddy bear character tucked away in the corner, so I pulled it out and set it on my palm. When I closed my eyes, a face came to mind. Yes, for some reason, seeing these plushies all together made my nose sting. I felt the urge to pet their little heads. An overwhelming affection for toys I'd never seen before… A foreign wave from an ocean as blue as Yashiro's hair.

"Don't you think you should give them a bath?"

"Oh, that is a good idea. They have been waiting a long time since we got here." She nodded.

"Then I shall ask Mama-san later," I replied, mimicking her voice.

Knowing my mother, she might make a fuss, but in the end, she would still do it. She wasn't the kind of person who would make light

of this stuff—you know, stuff people put their hearts into. That was why we all stuck by her, even when she was irritating.

"You and Mama-san and Papa-san and Little… You are all truly kind."

"Ha ha ha! That's it, butter me up."

"Now, then, what to do…"

Ignoring me, Yashiro went right back to murmuring with a frown. I didn't know what she was so hung up on, but since she was completely distracted, I decided to try and steal her mandarin as a joke. In a split second, she leaped up and retreated to the corner of the room.

"Heh heh heh! I am always watching."

"Did you just move at the speed of light?"

She jumped, hit the wall, bounced off and hit the ceiling, then dropped straight to the floor…or so it appeared, anyway. It all happened in a fraction of a second, so my eyes weren't quite able to keep up.

"You were just seeing things."

"…Okay, whatever. Lemme have a piece."

"Here you are."

Upon request, she handed me half with no hesitation. Perhaps this was all the proof I needed to know that she was good at heart. As I stared down blankly at what remained of her portion, she must have mistaken my intent, because she swiftly stuffed it all into her mouth. Then she smirked at me with her cheeks puffed out, the little punk.

"I wasn't gonna steal it!" Except for earlier, when I totally was.

"Gyaaah!"

I grabbed her before she could escape, and we horsed around. Considering the feats of agility she'd been capable of earlier, she probably could have gotten away from me anytime she wanted, and yet I captured her with ease.

Her skin was cold to the touch—not icy, but refreshingly chilly.

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The next morning, it was still pouring outside—harder than yesterday, in fact, and now the wind was so strong that it threatened the trees and telephone poles. We were caught in a storm no forecast had predicted.

The cat stood at the window and watched it rage, her tail swaying as if blown by a gale…even though we were indoors. "It is unmistakable, I fear."

"You've got something on your face," my sister called out as she walked by.

"Oh dear." Yashiro reached up and wiped at her lips with her fingers, but all it did was spread the sauce thinly across her face.

"Good grief…" Annoyed, my sister fetched a tissue and used it to clean her up.

"Ho ho ho! Much obliged."

"You're so hopeless."

Hearing my baby sister try to act like a grown-up put a smile on

my face. Then I turned back to the TV screen.

The local news station had been reporting on the storm all through the night. In terms of severity, it was akin to a typhoon, but with one major difference: It was happening all over the world, all at once, like it was big enough to span the entire globe. And because it had essentially sprung up out of nowhere, none of the meteorologists had seen it coming.

"I hate to say it, but it is a result of my direct interference," Yashiro said, walking away from the window in my direction.

"What are you talking about?"

"If only I knew how to correct it."

I moved directly into her path to intercept her. "Could you please just explain what you mean for once?"

Her eyes darted to the timestamp in the corner of the TV screen. "What's this? Why, Shimamura-san, it is time you left for school! Heh heh heh!"

She looked very smug to be barking orders at me, so I pinched her cheek; it was oddly stretchy. "I'm not going to school today."

"Say what?!" Even with her cheek outstretched, her voice somehow wasn't muffled in the slightest.

"I *could* go, but in this storm? Why bother?" My mother had already given us permission to stay home, anyway.

"Does that mean you will be lounging around the house today?"

"Yep. You and me both."

"I do not always lounge! Sometimes I wander!" she shot back, as if I'd offended her. Indeed, I had seen her wandering into the kitchen—and getting thrown right back out again. But she seemed to find it fun, so maybe it was just a game she and my mother liked to play. "Have *you* any interest in wandering, Shimamura-san?"

"What, around the house?" I laughed. But just then, Yashiro's expression turned uncommonly serious.

Wait—how would I know how common it is? I barely know her… right?

"I believe it is time I told you everything. Come this way."

"We can't talk about it here?"

"I do not think it wise to let others overhear."

"Huh…"

Gee, that's not suspicious at all.

And so, the bipedal cat toddled off, leading me up the stairs, like something out of a fairy tale. Illuminated faintly by her glow, even our ordinary staircase looked celestial—and though I had shrugged it off at the time, she *did* fall out of the sky. Maybe she was a god, of sorts.

Upon entering the study room, Yashiro knelt down beside the seal plushie and gestured to the spot opposite her. "Join me, please." Once I was seated, she leaned forward like she was about to whisper, then continued at full volume. "What I am about to say must not be repeated to anyone."

"You don't have to worry about that." Even if I wanted to tell other people, I doubted anyone would believe me—not just about this

secret, but Yashiro's existence in general. As for me, however, bizarrely enough, I was inclined to take her at her word, though I couldn't for the life of me work out why.

She leaned back and pretended to clear her throat. "The truth is," she began, "you were supposed to meet Adachi-san, but it appears my meddling inadvertently prevented you from doing so."

"Huh…? Oh, when you saved me?"

I thought back to the sight of the car speeding in my direction. It was the only instance of "meddling" I could think of—but if she *hadn't*? Admittedly, it might not have been strictly necessary to move me from where I was standing that day, but I couldn't begin to imagine the psychological damage I might have suffered by being one step away from death.

In any case, why was it so important for me to "meet" this Adachi girl? It wasn't as though our paths had never crossed. Ostensibly, we were classmates; I had a vague recollection of her face.

"This weather is but one consequence of that."

"Wait…it's *my* fault?" How could I (or, well, Yashiro) have caused this storm? All because I didn't encounter Adachi that day? Why?

"With a single cog out of place, the entire world may fall into chaos," she explained, as if she had read my mind. "To create multiples of the same thing requires the same ingredients. In order for each batch of donuts to look and taste the same, the recipe must not be altered. Otherwise, the new batch will be different—or fail to be donuts at all."

"Hmmm…"

All this talk of donuts had put a dreamy smile on Yashiro's face. Clearly, they were her favorite food.

"Let me get this straight. You're saying that, in order to maintain this 'recipe,' I have to hunt Adachi down at all costs?"

"I am afraid so. At this rate, all that is shall cease to be."

"What do you mean?" Was someone—or something—going to disappear? On reflex, I lifted a hand to inspect it, but it was as solid as ever. I suspected I hadn't vanished from any photographs, either.

"Let us set aside the hypothetical. The fact is, I made a promise, and if this is my doing, Shimamura-san will be angry indeed."

"What? No, I won't." Why did she suddenly refer to me in the third person? Or was there some other Shimamura-san out there, on the other side of the sky?

"So, there you have it."

"Have *what*? If I find Adachi, it'll magically solve everything?" What was supposed to happen after that? I wasn't going to school today, and for that matter, Adachi didn't seem to attend school at all. This plan was riddled with holes, and I was skeptical.

"Ideally, you will meet her and have fun."

"How? We're not even friends." *Our personalities would clash anyway,* I decided, despite barely knowing anything about her.

"I daresay the two of you are on the same wavelength."

"We are?"

When I squinted, I thought I could see Yashiro emitting soft waves of her own…but it was just her sparkly blue motes flowing in my direction. Strange how they always seemed to evaporate the moment they were touched. At one point, I had tried asking their source what they were, but she had merely shrugged.

"I should have known it would not be easy. It is my responsibility to fix what I have broken." Glancing at the window, Yashiro folded her arms in a huff…and then her eyes flew open, alternate universes swirling within. "In that case, it appears I will need to make the arrangements myself…for a group date!"

"A *what*?" Coming from a child's mouth, I had to question whether she even knew what that was.

"Heh heh heh! Believe it or not, I am an experienced lady."

"You…you are?" *Even with those squishy baby cheeks?*

"I have eaten countless different meals across my lifetime."

"Oh, *that's* what you meant." *Definitely explains the squishiness,* I thought, as I carried on pinching them. The soft stretchiness was sublime.

"Therefore, we must first go and purchase donuts."

"What do you mean, 'therefore'?"

"Heh heh heh… Sweet treats are the perfect accompaniment for a lively chat."

"Are they…? Yeah, I guess so."

I couldn't argue with this, as I had no experience with group dates myself. Besides, to her credit, social functions *were* generally

better with food. I still didn't see why I had to buy donuts for a girl I'd never spoken to in my life, but if Yashiro was to be believed, the fate of the entire world was now hanging by a thread. Granted, I wasn't fully convinced of that, but seeing as she had saved my life, I felt obligated to humor her.

Adachi may have been a mystery to me, but Yashiro was a friend—yeah, something like that. We had only known her for two or three days now, but she fit right in with our family. And while I didn't know where this feeling came from, it had only gotten stronger after I discovered her matching seal plushie.

"Now, let us be off."

"What? Right now?" After all the time she'd spent staring out the window, did she somehow not understand what the weather was like outside?

"We must go and meet the donuts!"

"…You just want donuts, don't you?"

She must have started craving them after she brought them up earlier. Even with her little back turned, she radiated unconcealed excitement.

***

Here's a blast from the past, I thought to myself as I looked at Yashiro's feet.

When we told my mother we were going out, her first reaction was to call us crazy; it wasn't until we promised to travel safely and come straight home that she finally granted us permission to leave.

But Yashiro only had sandals, so she dug out my old rain boots for her to wear instead. "You don't mind if she borrows 'em, right?"

"Ah, so these belong to Shimamura-san?" Yashiro walked up and down the hall, amused at the feel of the oversized shoes.

Meanwhile, I smiled to myself. The fact that my mother still saw them as mine was proof that, in her eyes, I was as much of a kid as Yashiro. *That's Mom for you.*

And so, Puss in Boots was born.

"Couldn't it wait until after the storm is over?" My mother had asked this same question on our way out, and now I repeated it to Yashiro, equally unconvinced.

"As things stand, it will never be over. The storm will only worsen with time."

"Well, we can't have that." If it rained any harder, it felt like the whole world would be washed away.

It was obvious at a glance that something was wrong with the clouds. Instead of spreading across the sky like a blanket, they formed a perfect vortex, like something you'd see in a manga or an episode of *The World's Astonishing News*. The sight of it, particularly the murky gray color, filled my chest with a matching spiral of dread.

The moment I opened my umbrella, the drum of the rain intensified. It came in bursts, its trajectory occasionally swayed by strong gusts of wind, enabling it to evade the umbrella and strike my skin instead. I kept dabbing at my face, but it remained perpetually damp, like I was walking through a cloud of mist.

"Now, let us be off!"

Before Yashiro could take off running, however, I snatched her by the scruff of the neck. "It's not a race."

It was so trivial to lift her that I decided to simply carry her in one arm as I set off walking. This way, I wouldn't have to worry about her getting blown away in the wind.

"I sure hope the donut shop is even open today…"

Then again, the weather wasn't that bad—although if this heavy rain continued into tomorrow, it might be a different story. In that sense, perhaps it truly was now or never.

"Is it normal to hold a group date in a storm?"

Even schools had the good sense to shut down for inclement weather. Was a measly date really that enticing?

"Heh heh heh! Perhaps you are still a bit too young, Shimamura-san."

"Perhaps."

Did it even count as a group date if only three people were going to attend? For that matter, how were we going to find Adachi once we got our donuts? I couldn't exactly go to school dressed in my street clothes, although in all likelihood, Adachi wasn't even there. Did Yashiro really think this through? I sneaked a glance at her, but her gaze held only galaxies—their swirling reminiscent of the clouds above.

And so, we traipsed all the way to the station square. Whenever we hit a red light, I entertained myself by playing with the cat, so it

was a relatively breezy walk. But while I hadn't seen many other pedestrians on the street, the station square was fairly populated, and the interior was open for business. Drawn to the light of the sign out front, we entered the famous donut chain I sometimes visited with friends.

"Ooh! Ooooh! Ooh!"

The little cat made sea lion noises in her excitement, leaning so far forward that I had to refasten my grip on her to keep her from falling. The donuts in the display case were lined up in tidy rows, like a school assembly, and while I wasn't losing my mind like Yashiro, their sweet aroma was pleasantly enticing.

"What should we get?" I asked her.

"For me, that is life's hardest question."

Then your life must not be very hard, I thought enviously. Personally, I felt I was predisposed toward a relatively uncomplicated life myself, but high school Shima-chan had discovered that it was surprisingly difficult to actually achieve. And now here I was. We wandered up and down the display case, feasting our eyes on the treats, until at last I settled on my usual.

"Three, two, one…go!"

In unison, we pointed at the object of our desire. Yashiro's pretty blue fingernail had targeted the same flavor as mine: angel French.

"Whoa…"

"Quite the smart choice, Shimamura-san."

"I guess we have the same taste." Was that why I didn't object to palling around with this oddball?

"Rest assured, I love the other donuts just as much."

"Yeah, yeah…"

From there, we picked out a few more, including one for my sister. Naturally, I paid for Yashiro's along with my own. It was obvious from vibes alone that this little cat didn't have any money.

"Here you go. Don't drop them, okay?"

"You may count on me!" Gripping the donut bag with both hands, Yashiro looked pleased as punch.

"And don't eat them, either."

"Of…of course not." But the way her voice faltered didn't exactly instill confidence.

Outside the donut shop, we headed back the way we'd come, to the station entrance.

Now what?

"Shall we pay a visit to the Adachi household, perhaps?"

"Excuse me? You want me to drop in on her unannounced with nothing but some donuts in my hand?"

Had she mixed up "group date" with "girls' night"?

"Yes, and?" She blinked back at me.

Granted, someone like Yashiro would be delighted if she were in Adachi's shoes… Was she essentially having me follow the Golden Rule? In a way, it made sense.

"Right, I forgot you were the *experienced lady* here."

"Hee hee hee!"

Her face lit up with joy at what she perceived to be a compliment. *Guess I won't correct her.* "Well, I don't know where she lives."

"I shall guide you. Head that way," she declared, pointing with her little paw—er, hand.

If Yashiro had been to her house before, then maybe they *did* know each other… In truth, I was still a little skeptical on that point. After all, why wouldn't she choose to hang out with her buddy Adachi for the past three days instead of a family of total strangers? But then again, maybe it was wrong to rate friendships based solely on duration.

As I walked, I stomped on the puddles like I was trying to break them, splashing with wild abandon and soaking my legs. In retrospect, it seemed so obvious: *If you want to see someone, you go to their house.* I had fallen out of contact with my best friend from elementary school, but if I wanted to, I could visit her at any time. Perhaps Yashiro was trying to show me that even something as grand as destiny could be changed with a little willpower…and that choosing not to bother was itself a form of fate.

It had been a long time since I had visited a classmate's house, much less a friend's. Nagafuji was always talking about Hino's mansion, and I was hoping I'd be invited to visit at least once, but I got the sense that Hino herself didn't like having friends over.

Following Yashiro's directions, I walked a considerable distance—enough to make me wish we'd gone by bike instead—until at last, she pointed at one of the houses.

"We are here."

It was a normal-looking house with white paint and no notable features—certainly nothing that indicated it would prevent the world's imminent destruction. I gazed up at the second-floor windows. Was Adachi in there somewhere?

Yashiro hopped out of my arms and slowly handed me the bag of donuts. Her reluctance was palpable. "Now, then, have fun!" Smiling from ear to ear, she sent me off with a two-handed wave.

Now hang on a minute! "Uh, aren't you coming?"

"No. Why?" she asked, her eyes as round as saucers.

Give me a break. "Isn't she your friend? You should at least introduce us."

"We are friends, yes, but this Adachi-san has never met me."

"…Your definition of 'friends' is really confusing."

But to be fair, *my* definition of "friends" wasn't all that clear, either. If someone asked me to explain what set Hino and Nagafuji apart from my other classmates, I wouldn't have an answer.

"It is best for me to minimize my involvement as much as possible. Especially considering the damage I have already done."

"You sure don't 'minimize your involvement' at the dinner table."

"I said *minimize*, not *withhold*. Some amount is sadly inevitable!"

Evidently, she judged these things on a case-by-case basis. But if I was going by myself, then it was less of a group date and more of a…a regular date, right? I hadn't expected to be flung into the deep end at the last second, and as I gazed up at Casa Adachi, I couldn't help but feel annoyed at the hassle.

And yet…despite her hands-off approach, Yashiro had still gone to the trouble of rescuing me. It felt wrong to lose sight of that. If she wanted me to meet this girl so badly, then maybe I owed it to her.

"I shall await your return whilst taking shelter from the rain. Farewell!"

"Hold it."

"Hrm?" She stopped in her tracks, then turned and walked back to me.

When I opened the paper bag, the smell of sugar put a smile on my face. "Eat this while you wait," I said, offering her one of the extra donuts.

She peered through the hole in the center and giggled. "Why, thank you kindly."

"And be sure to stay out of the rain."

"Okaaay!" With that, she ran off, gleefully stomping into every puddle in her path.

So, there I was, standing alone outside the house of a classmate whose face I could barely remember. *There's no way this girl's going to let me inside,* I thought to myself with a sigh as I lifted a finger to

the intercom button. For a moment, I worried she might not answer, but on second thought, I hoped she wouldn't.

As the buzzer rang, I froze in place…and a beat later, a silent scream rose in the back of my throat as I heard the line connect.

"Hello?"

The voice was quiet and cold, like snow that had frozen over from the night before. Only then did I realize I should have planned out what I was going to say *before* I pressed the button.

"Hi, this is Shimamura…from school."

"…What?" The girl's confusion was so tangible, I could have grasped it in my hands. It was also entirely reasonable.

"Hi," I repeated, buying myself time to think. Despite the rain, my wide eyes and forced smile felt bone-dry.

"Uh…hi?"

Perhaps she was the doormat type. The problem was, I was generally disinclined to trample over people. Granted, the fate of not just our town, but the *entire world* was (allegedly) resting on our shoulders, but it just didn't feel real.

"Wait…oh…that's right! Shimamura. I remember you…I think."

Evidently she had filed me away in a small, dusty corner of her mind, the same as I had done for her. I felt a tiny connection there, as if the tips of our index fingers had pressed together.

"Hold on a sec."

She fell silent, and I heard her step away, which suggested she was possibly coming to the front door. Likewise, I edged away from

the intercom panel and gazed at the house, clutching the paper bag of donuts to my chest so it wouldn't get wet. As I stood there, I was alarmed to realize just how heavily it was raining. The drops drummed so loud on the umbrella that it felt as though they were pounding directly against my ears. How was I able to hear Yashiro's voice over this dull roar? Somehow she managed to be an enigma in every single capacity.

Then, as I was spinning the umbrella to shake off the excess water weight, I saw the front door open—just wide enough for a single eye to peek through. In response, I tilted the umbrella back to show my face. With this confirmation, the girl named Adachi finally showed herself.

From the front, she exuded an aura that somewhat resembled Yashiro's. She was tall, with a slim, well-proportioned face and hair so dark, it almost looked blue. But unlike Yashiro's beauty, hers felt within reach. Even from here, I could see it oozing from her every pore.

Evidently, she'd had no intention of attending school today, because she was dressed not in her uniform but a T-shirt the color of the ocean with a stylized fish on the front. The deep watery hues were a perfect match for the lowlights of her hair.

"Oh, um, so you're…Shimamura, right?" she called tentatively. No surprise there—we had shared a classroom, but no common interests. Not even a passing glance. If it wasn't for Puss in Boots, our lives wouldn't have intersected at all.

"Hi."

"…Did you need something?" she continued cautiously. This time, *hi* wasn't enough. But we had to shout to hear each other over the rain, and without the motivation to raise my voice, I could feel it caving like wet paper.

"Um…oh yeah! You weren't in class yesterday, so I thought I'd… check on you?" I tossed out on the spot. Not like I could tell her I was brought here for a date.

"Are you on the attendance committee or something, Shimamura-san?"

"Well, you know how it is," I replied evasively. What kind of goody two-shoes did she take me for? And why did that make me feel proud of myself?

"You came all this way in the pouring rain, huh?"

"Tell me about it." How would she react if I told her this weather was supposedly our fault somehow?

"You're soaked," she commented brusquely.

"Sure am," I replied, pinching at the rat's nest that the wind and rain had created atop my head. I couldn't imagine what must have crossed her mind as I stood there in front of her like a sad, bedraggled dog. She was hard to read, but to my eyes, it looked like… her posture softened.

"…Well, this is weird, but you're already here, so…wanna come in?"

Coming from someone whose sole personality trait at school was "antisocial," this invitation was entirely unexpected. Maybe she had a

human heart after all. If nothing else, the fact that she hadn't told me to get lost was a good sign, right?

"Okay, just for a bit."

It seemed I was going to make it to the date venue after all. But what was Yashiro's definition of *meeting* this girl, anyway? Surely, our conversation just now had to count—in which case, could I go home? Then again, it didn't feel like we were properly acquainted, and I suspected that was probably my answer.

At Adachi's invitation, I followed her inside.

"Thanks for having me!" I called, loud enough to be heard through the house, but there was no response, and the hallway was dark. Ignoring the drum of the rain, it was so quiet that I might have thought no one was home, were it not for the girl standing right there. Exhaling, I folded up my umbrella. The insides of my shoes were so soggy, I almost wished *I'd* gotten to wear the rain boots.

"Are your parents out?" I asked. No sooner had the words left my lips than I remembered that it was a weekday and therefore they were almost certainly at work.

"Yeah, Mom's…my mother's at work right now."

"Gotcha."

She made no mention of a dad, so I inferred that he wasn't in the picture and left it at that. Then she led me to the living room, where she handed me a small towel—an unspoken request to dry myself off before sitting on the furniture. Even when I thanked her,

her expression remained stoic, with no trace of a positive emotion. It was the same face I'd seen in passing at school.

"You're too trusting, Adachi," I cautioned her jokingly as I handed the towel back.

"Huh?"

"You can't just let a stranger into your house. What if I have bad intentions?"

Sure, she knows me from school, but what if I was planning to… uhhh…hm, I can't think of anything. Annoyed by the damp strands still clinging to my face, I combed my bangs up and away from my forehead. All the effort I'd put into my hair and makeup had gone completely to waste, but whatever.

"Do you?" she asked, frowning at the floor.

Now I wasn't sure how to respond. "I mean…I don't think so." Then again, I *did* essentially bump into a random kid on the street and take her home with me, so maybe I was in no position to talk. "Would someone with bad intentions bring *these*?"

When I opened the donut bag, the sweet fragrance rose up once again to meet me, and I felt myself smile. Adachi, however, kept a straight face…and now that we were in close proximity, I realized just how *pretty* she was. How had no one in class ever noticed her? Did she hold her breath and keep still the entire time? Or was I simply oblivious while our other classmates were all swooning for her?

"Take whichever one you like."

"Um…I don't really care which one." She glanced into the bag and promptly took the sugar-coated honey-dipped on the far side. "Yeah, I'm not getting any bad vibes from you," she continued, her expression barely shifting.

"Ha ha ha…"

Her trust seemed as easily bought as these donuts, but I liked that about her. Sipping the tea she'd made for us, we sat down on opposite sides of the table. The lights were off, but I was grateful not to be under a spotlight right now, anyway.

"Well, *bon appétit*," I prompted her.

"Thanks," she mumbled half-heartedly. This attitude carried over into the eating process as well—lips barely moving, no sign of enjoyment.

"Not a fan of desserts?"

"They're okay, I guess," she shrugged.

Maybe she just wasn't passionate about food…in which case, the "experienced lady" had offered me a flawed strategy from the outset.

For a while we ate in silence, the feel of my sugar-encrusted fingertips lingering heavily on me. Adachi must have felt equally awkward sharing donuts with a classmate she barely knew. "Not much to talk about, huh?" I admitted.

"Nope," she agreed. But then her eyes narrowed. "Wait a minute… How did you know where I live?"

I nearly choked on my donut, but retained the composure to chew and swallow, followed by another sip of tea. As I drank, her

dubious gaze stabbed into my forehead.

"I got directions from someone who claims to be a friend of yours."

"…Who could *that* be?"

It sounded like she honestly had no idea, and though I suspected any explanation I could offer would only confuse her more, I nevertheless gave it a shot: "A weird blue-haired girl in a kitty onesie. She knows where you live, despite admitting to having never actually met you."

"Okay, that's scary."

Having laid it all out like that, I was inclined to agree. It was normal to be afraid of a stranger who made those claims, let alone one who followed you home and started living there like it was no big deal. Yashiro was merely lucky that her weirdness paled in comparison to my mother's.

"Get this—she said you and I have to find each other at any cost," I continued, like it was a funny story. But instead of laughing, Adachi's eyes widened. *Wh-what?* My gaze flicked from her face to the chocolate-dipped side of the angel French donut.

"Uh…are you hitting on me?" she muttered in her confusion. This, in turn, confused me right back. I hadn't expected her to interpret it like that, and I could feel my shoulders and tongue tingling stiffly.

Hitting on her? Well…then again, it is a date, I joked to myself as I recovered. "I wasn't particularly planning to yet." But if one single

step out of place was all it took to miss my chance at meeting her, she must be pretty special. Granted, if I said *that* out loud, she'd think I was hitting on her for sure, so I kept my mouth shut.

An awkward silence followed, during which the second half of my donut barely tasted like anything. Adachi looked pretty embarrassed to have suggested it, because there was now a faint blush on her pale cheeks. "Yet?" she echoed after a beat.

Girl, don't read into my word choice! It's not that deep!

"Uhhh…so anyway…were you out sick yesterday?" I asked, blatantly changing the subject as I wiped the sugar from my fingers.

"Why do you ask?"

"You weren't at school." And I was nominally supposed to be checking on her.

"Yeah, I was," she argued.

"You were? Like, in the nurse's office?"

"No, the gym."

The gym? I mouthed the words to myself, tracing over them. Then I thought back to gym class and frowned. "I didn't see you there."

"I was in the loft." She pointed upward, toward the ceiling, as she ate her last bite of donut. I considered telling her about the sugar stuck to the corners of her mouth, but it was funny, so I opted not to.

That aside…wouldn't this mean she was hiding in the gym loft the whole time I was staring up at it? It was such an incidental detail,

and yet it felt to me as though I'd caught a glimpse beyond the curtain, so to speak. "Isn't it hot up there?" I asked.

"Definitely. That's why I just sit there like this."

To demonstrate, she walked over to the wall and slid down to the floor—a small gesture, but the earnestness of it warmed my heart. Like me, she didn't seem to have any bad intentions. "You're so weird," I laughed.

"Am I?"

"Nah, not really," I replied, retracting it nearly as soon as I'd said it.

"Now *you're* being weird," she retorted, and I thought I heard her voice soften a tiny bit.

When she returned to the table, she gazed at me in silence for a moment. Now that we'd finished our donuts, we'd lost the buffer keeping us from an all-out staring contest. I was willing to challenge her head-on, but whenever I tried to meet her gaze, she would avert it. Yeah…this girl really didn't seem as bitchy as everyone claimed. If anything, she just wasn't very outwardly expressive.

"You're not gonna ask me why I ditched?"

It wasn't until she pointed it out that I realized I hadn't paid it any thought. "Do you want me to?"

"No…I was hoping you wouldn't, since I don't really have a reason."

Her honesty was a delicate flower that I didn't dare pluck. "Then I think it's fine," I replied, smiling.

"It's fine?" she repeated incredulously.

"Yeah, I mean…sometimes you just don't feel like going to class, right? Everybody has those days."

Prior to that gremlin grabbing me by the head, I had been yearning for escape. If she hadn't whisked me away, I might have discovered what it felt like to put some distance between myself and that classroom. Was *that* what Yashiro meant by interfering? Were the two of us about to meet in the gym loft that day?

"The loft, huh…" I had no familiarity with the place, and consequently, no idea what it even looked like. But the rain had eased slightly, which made it easier to hold a proper conversation. "What's up there?"

"Uhhh…ping-pong tables."

"Ping-pong?" As far as I knew, nobody at our school played it. I hadn't heard the telltale *thwock* in years.

I knew it had to be sweltering and miserable up there in that loft, but something about it was so enticing, I felt my head tilt upward in search of it.

"What if we spied on our class from up there?"

My vision went white. It almost felt like I was gazing up at the underside of my own face from somewhere outside my body. Like there was a second me, and I was her.

"I wanna know how it feels…to look down on them from above."

It almost felt like I already knew. Like I was trying to remember. Like I was chasing after that memory at full speed.

"You want to join me?"

It was an offhand question, and yet it burned a line across my cheeks. The harsh glare faded from my sight, as if my eyes were adapting…and there she was. I felt her presence keenly, like a stab of pleasant pain, oxymoronic as that was.

"Yeah, just like this."

Rising to my feet, I walked to the wall. Likewise, Adachi stepped toward me, as if by magnetic pull. Side by side, we gazed up at the stormy swirl…and then suddenly, our eyes met.

Up close, Adachi felt as deep and mysterious as the cosmos. In that vast space, I sensed something unfolding endlessly. It didn't make sense, and it would only freak her out if I told her, and then we'd never see each other again…but now that we were within reach of each other, I realized that she was equal to the universe.

All I could feel in this haze was the pumping of my own blood. Had the same line split her cheeks, too? The warmth seemed to awaken something neither of us understood.

Until this moment, we were strangers who had never spoken to one another. We had no way of knowing what words or gestures would affect each other's emotions. And yet…it now felt as though the tips of our index fingers were touching.

"Sounds fun," she agreed, her lips ever so faintly curled in a smile.

It was barely a promise, but it felt like this summer's blanks were finally filled in—with a name, a location, a time. What once had

sagged under the weight of great waters could be pressed back into place with a gentle guiding hand. Yes, it felt as though I had crossed a threshold…and while I couldn't describe it in words, I could tell the empty space was filling with precisely what Yashiro had hoped for.

At last…the two of us had met.

***

"It appears to have gone well."

"Whoa!"

The moment I walked out of Adachi's house, Yashiro was there waiting for me. The inside of the umbrella was stained sky blue.

"You think so?"

"I can tell from the look on your face."

For a cryptid, this judgment was surprisingly sensible. Did she know me that well?

"Hee hee hee!"

She gazed up at me, satisfaction radiating from the depths of her heart, her lips glistening with…

"Yeah, you seem to be an open book yourself."

"It tasted like destiny!"

The lower half of her face was coated in raindrops and sugar and blue motes of light. Retrieving a napkin from inside the donut bag, I wiped the cat's face, and she closed her galactic eyes in contentment.

***

That fuzzy sensation stayed with me well into the night. Even though all I'd done was buy donuts and visit a classmate's house, it felt surreal in a ticklish sort of way, and now I was too antsy to sit still. I could almost believe that something big was about to happen.

With the freshly washed plushies in my arms, I couldn't see in front of me, but that was fine; I could navigate this hallway with my eyes closed. As I was walking, however, I heard a sound—unusually high-pitched but pleasant to the ear. Drawn to it, I stepped into the living room, where I found a cat with her back turned, playing music.

"Mama-san has washed your plushies for you," I announced, mimicking her voice.

"Much obliged," Yashiro replied as I brought them over.

She set her instrument down, picked them up, and gently guided each of them into her rucksack. Once the teddy bear phone strap was safely tucked in the corner, she closed up the bag, and I wished a silent farewell to my seal plushie's twin brother.

"I will need to give my thanks to Mama-san later."

Grabbing her instrument once more, she gave the strings a *twang*—well, the actual sound was different, but functionally it was a twang.

"Is that a ukulele?" I asked.

"Correct," she replied, turning to me as she played. It was a kid-sized ukulele, but nevertheless, possibly the first I'd ever seen in real life. The sequence of notes was a tidy replication of a nursery song I knew.

"When you're done, can I borrow it?"

"I suppose…"

And so, I waited beside her, listening quietly until she finished her song. It was one they played at the park in the evenings, and I sang along here and there, though I was a little hazy on the lyrics in the second half. Once it was my turn, I held the ukulele just as I'd seen her do it. Naturally, I had no clue how to actually play the thing, but with string instruments, all you really had to do was twang the…

Wait, where's the twang?

The strings vibrated, but my fingers passed right through with no resistance.

"Hey, it's not making a sound…"

"Alas, it looked as though it might break, so I held it. And by 'held it,' I mean I rendered it immutable. That is why no sound was produced."

"Ah." I didn't understand a word of that, but I had a vague idea of what she was trying to say. For now, I decided I wouldn't question how she was capable of such a thing.

"I myself am merely reproducing the sounds stored in my memory."

"Wow. Sounds complicated."

In other words, only she could play this instrument. Giving up on my hopes of an all-girl high school band, I handed the ukulele back to her, and as I did, I noticed a sticker on the back—a price tag identical

to the ones at our local toy shop. Evidently, this "memory" of hers was fairly close at hand.

"Will you play it again?"

"Heh heh heh! I can, but it will cost you dearly."

Placing her little fingers on the strings, she began to strum. Sure enough, this time, it actually produced a sound. More accurately, the sounds likely weren't coming from the instrument itself, but I suspected the act of "playing" was still important to her. She looked like she was genuinely having a blast. Like she was furnishing the space around us with her music.

The song—"Yuuyake Koyake"—rolled on. Before long, the little sunset of the lyrics was preparing to head home. But it had been raining so heavily that I hadn't actually seen the sunset in a good while…and the crows wouldn't come with us unless the skies were clear. The downpour had lightened somewhat, but it was still drumming calmly. Had meeting Adachi actually changed anything?

"Worry not. I am sure there will be clear skies tomorrow," the cat predicted, having noticed my fixation on the weather outside. Rain or shine, indoors or outdoors, day or night, her hair always glowed blue, and her eyes always contained the universe.

"Knowing you, you're probably right."

If it was sunny tomorrow, then perhaps I'd take a detour on my way home from school that afternoon…and perhaps I'd invite my new acquaintance. The prospect was a tiny bit exciting.

***

Early the next morning, before the sun had risen over the neighbor's hedge, I sat up in bed, having realized that there was an empty space next to me where the blanket had been flipped up. A trace of blue sparkles lingered on the futon, leaving a dim trail that led to the door of my bedroom. Rising to my feet, I pursued it for a few steps and saw that it continued down the hallway to the front door. To avoid waking the rest of the house, I followed the rest of the way on tiptoe.

The figure in the entryway was glowing like a ghost in the dark.

"Yashiro?"

Puss in Boots smiled up at me like she had known I would give chase. "You're up unusually early, Shimamura-san."

"Impressive, I know." I flattened my bedhead, then stepped into my flip-flops. "Are you leaving?"

"Yes," she admitted honestly, hoisting the rucksack onto her shoulders. "My job here is done."

"The group date was your job?"

Though she had never outright said it, I could infer that she had come here solely to ensure I met Adachi. In that case, it wouldn't be absurd to say that the group date was her purpose…absurd as that might sound.

"Please tell Little and the others that I enjoyed my stay."

"You should tell them yourself." *They're* your *feelings, after all.*

"Must I?"

"You must."

"The problem is, if I wait for morning, then I will want to leave after breakfast, but once my stomach is full, I will want to take a nap, and when I wake it will be lunchtime, so I will want to leave after lunch, and—"

"So you have no willpower whatsoever?" Apparently, her resolve was as soft as the rest of her.

"To circumvent this issue entirely, I decided to leave at first light," she declared with her hands on her hips, as if it was some brilliant plan. I gave her unguarded tummy a poke.

"Well, okay. If you're set on this, then I'll tell them for you."

"Please do." When she bowed, the ears on her hood drooped in unison, almost like they were a part of her body. *Fancy*. "Now then, I bid you farewell. Please have a happy, fun life with Adachi-san."

"Okey-doke. I don't know if we'll get along that well, but I'll give it my best shot."

She waved goodbye energetically, as though she were already a mile away. But she was right in front of me, so I waved back gently. Then she turned and unlocked the front door as though she'd done it a hundred times before.

But before she could leave—

"Come back again sometime."

On impulse, I wished aloud for our reunion. She turned back to me and smiled like she recognized the words. "Yes, I will see you again someday."

Deep down, I knew she would never be back, but we made the promise regardless. And just like that, Yashiro disappeared from our house.

First she fell from the sky, then she made me feel things I didn't understand, and then she was gone.

Without her, the entryway was quiet but not desolate. I considered returning to my room, but instead, I stepped outside, splashing into a tiny puddle on the porch. The raging storm had run away with the little cat, leaving calm blue skies behind.

I want to go to school…and see her again.

"Hey there, Adachi."



Interlude:
What If…Hello? Are You There?

"WHAT IS THIS, a phone call?"

"Yeah…?"

I awoke, confused, to an equally confused Adachi.

"Oh, sorry. Anyway…" Rolling over in bed, I cradled the phone lovingly against my ear. "It feels like we've finally connected."

Oddly enough, I was certain I was finally home again.

Chapter 4:
What If Everything Was Back to Normal?

"T H-THE OCEAN sure is big, huh?"

As soon as class let out, Adachi marched over with a proclamation I was sure she must have silently practiced all day long. I thought maybe it was the start of a nursery song, but she didn't continue.

"…What if we went?"

Her bangs bounced away from her forehead as if alarmed by the burning fever. An invitation to the beach? What was she, a pickup artist? …No, probably not.

"Wait, are you hitting on me?"

"No! Well…I guess I could be… Yeah, okay, I'm hitting on you."

Kind of wishy-washy for a pickup artist. Surely she could stand to have a bit more confidence, given her good looks. And our relationship status. *Am I that intimidating?* I wondered, pinching my cheek.

"Shimamura?"

"Right, right, the ocean."

Summer break was starting—our last summer as high school students—but I wasn't sure it was a good idea to make plans for fun first and studying second. In my case, anyway.

"I've never been there before, so I thought it might be nice."

"Oh, right, I guess you haven't." She wasn't exactly on good terms with her family. To be fair, I hadn't been to the beach myself in many years. After all, we lived in a land-locked prefecture. "The ocean, huh…"

"Yeah."

"It's pretty big," I continued, prompting her when she fell silent. She didn't take the hint, however, and merely blinked back at me with the smallest of polite smiles on her face. *Alas*. "Sure, we can go… maybe next week, or the week after that."

Adachi's first reaction was to celebrate my favorable response—but before she could reach cloud nine, she hit the ceiling and froze. "Next week?"

Was she thinking we'd go this weekend? Or tomorrow? "We should probably wait until summer break starts, right?" That way, we wouldn't have to worry about times or days of the week—and if we went on a weekday, it'd be less crowded.

She started to slump her shoulders but quickly caught herself, straightening back up. "That's…true," she conceded, though her eyes were wavering.

Knowing her, it would mean extending the period of time in which she agonized sleeplessly over our upcoming plans. I understood that, of course, but at the same time, I wasn't actually all that flexible. There was another reason I wanted to postpone the trip.

"I just…need some time."

If we were only going to be walking around the beach, then sure, I could be ready by tomorrow. But I had other things to account for.

***

"If we're going to the beach, then I can't make any other detours," I announced to Adachi outside the school gates. Naturally, she didn't seem to understand. "No date today," I rephrased more bluntly.

Her eyes and lips quivered for a moment, but then she looked up again. "Wait…I have work today, anyway."

"Do your best!" *And by that, I mean hang in there until we get to the ocean. These dates aren't cheap.*

After two laps around the block, we parted ways. There was no lively conversation or anything, but Adachi seemed happy to be going in circles with me, so I wanted to humor her. Though it wouldn't shorten either of our journeys home, that didn't make it pointless.

On second thought, maybe dates didn't have to cost money after all. Still, I was nervous about spending too much time goofing off.

It had taken scarcely a few minutes for my hair to absorb the summer sun. Smoothing the hot strands into place, I headed home. The air was dry and smelled faintly burnt, as though the season itself was roasting. When I gazed up at the unyielding sky, no less blue than midday, I thought I saw my younger self racing past with a puppy in tow.

I had come a long way since those days. Summer break was nearly upon me, but my hopes didn't swell like cumulonimbus clouds. I was in my final year of high school and tentatively studying to go to college, so in a sense, I could only watch passively as my teen years came to an end. But I couldn't picture what would happen after that. On some level, it had felt as though I would spend the rest of my life in this uniform.

Maybe I was born a high schooler. Perhaps I was already sixteen from the moment I opened my eyes, or the moment I developed a conscious mind.

Okay, stupid idea. Maybe my hair is starting to melt my brain.

On a different subject, the walk home was now dangerously hot. Whenever I passed under a tree, the cicadas' screeches would descend upon me in a torrent. I had thought I generally preferred summer over winter, but in this heat, I was tempted to switch sides.

Then I saw one of them lying in the driveway of a stranger's house, having surfaced ahead of the season. In spite of the miserable heat, I stopped and watched it for a moment; then, once it started wriggling its legs and wings, I went on my way. Unlike me, cicadas probably didn't have time for self-doubt. In that sense, I was glad I was born human.

Before my sweat could start dripping completely, I arrived at home.

"I'm back," I called from the entryway.

"Welcome home, pwecious!" my mother shouted back from the kitchen. Whenever she didn't come to greet me face-to-face, it meant

she was in the middle of cooking. As a kid, I would always run right to her and say hello all over again…

In summer, the heat haze always seemed to afford me a glimpse of my own memories.

Stepping out of my shoes, I headed not for my bedroom but the kitchen.

As I entered, my mother stopped humming and glanced over her shoulder. "Hm? What's up?" No one else was in the room.

"Nothing. Just wondering what you were making."

"Isn't it obvious?" she demanded, thrusting a tomato out in front of her.

Sadly, I wasn't smart enough to guess the answer from one ingredient. "Uh…whole tomatoes?"

"Correct!"

On second thought, I apparently was. She sliced the tomato in two and handed me half as a prize. And so the brilliant guesser retreated, leaving behind the unsolved mystery of a meal that called for whole tomatoes.

Drawn to the faint chill flowing into the hallway, I peeked into the living room and spotted a cat munching crisply on a slice of watermelon. The amazing part was that she could eat the whole thing —not just the seeds, but the rind, too. At first, I figured maybe her mouth was built like a trash compactor, but then I remembered how she'd bite me sometimes when we were horsing around… *Maybe I should be concerned.*

"Ah, welcome home, Shimamura-san."

"Thanks."

"Incidentally, I also enjoy watermelon popsicles."

"Incidentally, I didn't ask."

When I offered her my tomato half for her watermelon slice, she readily agreed. Plopping down next to her, I took a bite. To a parched throat, the watery texture was heaven, though naturally I couldn't eat the seeds, so I had to spit them onto the plate. Wearily, I basked in the air conditioning.

"I daresay no place on Earth is more relaxing," Yashiro whispered with a smile as she reclined comfortably. I studied her for a moment.

This mysterious mooch had found tranquility in someone else's house—but with her appearance and ambience, she could get away with anything.

***

In the bathtub, my mind was full of white-crested waves as yet unseen. What would I need to bring to the beach? I counted on my fingers as I contemplated.

First of all, I would need a swimsuit. Sure, I could get away with wearing my old school-issued one-piece to the *gym*, but for a trip out of town, I was probably better off buying something new. Above all else, Adachi would be seeing me in it—well, technically, she saw me in it before, but our relationship was different now, so…you know.

Okay, gotta buy a swimsuit, I thought to myself as I extended my index finger. At the same time, I felt my wallet wince; after so many dates with Adachi, it was already bone thin. *Wish that was me, har har,* I joked to myself and made a note to check its contents after I got out of the tub. What if I didn't have enough? Could I get next month's allowance early? In my half-melted mind, I calculated how many days were left before my "payday."

In truth, this was my biggest reason for delaying our outing. Being in a relationship, I now understood, did not come cheap.

But obviously, I couldn't wear *just* a swimsuit; I'd need sandals and accessories, and so two more fingers joined the first. Then I remembered I'd have to factor in the cost of travel and meals, too. It was increasingly looking like next month's allowance was my only lifeline—assuming that was even enough to cover it.

Adachi had saved up a hefty sum from her part-time job, and I'd never seen her want for money. But as much as I admired her for it, I didn't lift a finger to follow her example.

If I told her I couldn't afford it, even just as a joke, she would immediately offer to pay for everything and, in so doing, make me an involuntary gold digger. At that point, not only would I feel like a loser, but it would also raise questions about the health of our relationship, and then I wouldn't be able to wholeheartedly enjoy the trip. Her nest egg was the manifestation of her hard work, and I had no right to touch it. Even if it brought her joy to spend that money for my sake, I couldn't allow myself to enable it. A healthy relationship was one

where we could at least reasonably *pretend* to be on even footing, whether it was true or not.

Therefore, money was an obstacle.

We'd need to decide which beach we were going to, which meant finding out which was the closest. The thought of the crowds already had me feeling suffocated. But Adachi wanted me to go with her, so I never considered saying no.

Still…the way she went about inviting me gave me pause. I liked to think of myself as a kind, affectionate girlfriend, so why did she cower in front of me like I was a wicked witch whenever she wanted to ask me something? Did she think I hadn't noticed the way she walked on eggshells? Not that I wanted her to trample over me like my mother, but she was allowed to assert herself. Just…preferably not the way my mother did.

If I had to guess, both of us were contributing to this problem in some way, but to be blunt, I couldn't think of what I was doing wrong. What about Adachi? What did she see when she looked at me? Unfortunately, if I tried to ask her, I suspected she wouldn't give me the brutally honest evaluation I was looking for.

Dating was hard…but then again, if I always had all the answers, maybe it wouldn't be any fun.

These were the things I contemplated during my long, long bath. I could feel that I was starting to overheat, and sure enough, after I climbed out of the tub, I nearly lost my balance. For now, I would focus on two points: that I was going to the beach, and that I was worried about money.

After I toweled off and got dressed, I walked into the living room and announced, “Bathroom’s free,” to the two girls roughhousing there. As soon as she heard it, the cat leaped up and started to bolt.

“Come on, Yachi, it’s bathtime!”

“I have been captured!”

Seized under my sister’s arm, the cat flailed her limbs—an amusing sight that was only possible because Yashiro was so light. *Unnaturally light, really,* I thought to myself as I sat down and started drying my hair. *With all the food she eats? Where does it go?*

Then I grabbed my phone from where it lay on the table and checked for any notifs from Adachi; seeing that there were none, I put it back again. When I turned the electric fan in my direction, my towel and hair billowed in unison. Shielding my ears from the sound, I envisioned the cost of a swimsuit and felt a pang of misery.

But I wanna go on a daaate, so I need a cute fiiit, which meeeans I need moneeey…

It all made an incredible amount of sense. This was the kind of struggle that forced everyone to care about money. Only now did I understand why some young boys and girls turned to delinquency, as was so often lamented as a societal problem. Thus far, I had been frugal with my spending, but evidently, I would need more than love to have a fun day out with my girlfriend. For the first time in my life, I truly grasped the feeling of being poor…

“What’s the matter, girl? You look like you’re questioning your

life."

My mother marched over, carrying a laundry hamper, and purposely positioned herself between me and the fan's breeze. But I didn't bother to point it out; knowing her, she'd play dumb.

"I was thinking of ways to get more money."

"Get a job." And so, having offered me the most correct of answers, she walked out. But coming from someone like her, it was hard to swallow. Or maybe the truth always was.

"A job, huh…"

I only had a week or two at most before we went on this trip. Having never worked a part-time job, I had no idea how quickly I could expect to get paid, but if it took an entire month, then there was no point in working at all. I had so little knowledge about this field that I was nearly as bad as Yashiro, and that was alarming indeed. I couldn't survive by mooching like she did.

Speaking of Yashiro, that moon rock she sold me was probably the most valuable thing I owned…not that I would ever sell it. Something told me I stood to lose a great deal if I sold off my memories, and so I wanted to avoid it at any cost.

"Your allowance isn't enough? What the heck did you spend it on?"

My mother set the laundry hamper down and returned to the living room empty-handed, which was all well and good, but I wished she wouldn't stand behind me and prod my butt with her toes. I couldn't imagine how she would react if I told her I needed it for a

date. For that matter, I never *said* my allowance wasn't enough… though her assumption was correct.

"I dunno. Stuff."

"Stuff you can't tell your mother about, hm?"

"I just don't want to list it all out."

"Honey! Our daughter's using her allowance money for nefarious purposes!"

"He's asleep, you know."

My father was ensconced in the beanbag chair in front of the TV, nodding off. The post-dinner lull was comfy—a feeling I knew all too well.

"Ugh… Like daughter, like father."

"Isn't that backward?"

"So, you went on a spending spree and still have more to buy?"

The interrogation made my rebellious streak twinge, but I knew this woman wasn't going to leave me alone until I told her. Besides, when it came down to it, I needed money. "I was invited to a beach trip," I admitted reluctantly, my face concealed under my towel.

"A beach trip with who? Oh, I know. Adachi-chan, right?" she asked, promptly answering her own question.

"Yeah."

"Ah *ha*. Oh *ho*. No staying overnight, missy."

"I don't have money! That's my point!"

"Sucks to be you! Gah hah hah hah!"

I knew the "staying overnight" thing was probably just a joke, but…could she have figured out that Adachi and I were an item? Not that I minded if she knew… Then again, I dreaded the thought of her teasing us over every little thing.

"Let's see… I'll raise your allowance if you help around the house during your break."

"Doing what?" I pulled the towel off my head and looked up at her.

She smirked back down at me like it was a brilliant plan. "Cooking, cleaning, the works. Well, actually, we can do the cooking as a team."

She was already outlining the particulars before I'd even decided whether to take her up on it…though I suspected I probably would. Did I want money badly enough? Yes, I did. For Adachi's sake as well as my own.

"You know I gotta study for college, right?"

"Then don't go the beach, punk."

Fair point.

"I'm kidding! You should go."

"What's your problem?"

"Do your studying, do your housework, and don't forget to make time for fun. Fit it all in while you're young."

With one final kick to the butt, she turned to leave again; I tried to grab her foot in revenge, but she dashed away at the speed of

light. No matter the circumstance, my mother was always brimming with vitality, and it was the one thing I admired about her.

So there it was: I would earn money doing chores, go to the beach, study for college, and find time for sleep. It reminded me of my elementary school days, when my summer vacations were dictated by a schedule so full, I couldn't possibly achieve it all.

"Ugh, I'm so busy."

After I graduated, would I have even more to do? I tried to picture it but was so overwhelmed by the possibilities that I was tempted to dump some in the trash. For now, I decided I would focus on the fun and money right in front of me, like the flawed human I was.

When I tilted my head down, the sound of the fan blades descended over my skull, down to my ears.

***

"What the… Hougetsu?"

Early in the morning that weekend, my channel-surfing father looked up from where he lay and was surprised to see me enter the living room carrying the vacuum.

"My name is Shimamura Hougetsu, and I'll be your housekeeper for the summer."

"Huh. It's not often I see you helping out around here."

"Yeah, I know. Stuff came up. Now get out of the way."

I gave him a nudge with the nozzle, and he dutifully rolled to the side so I could clean the floor directly under him.

"Okay, all done."

At my prompting, he rolled back into place. It was the kind of thing Yashiro would immediately try to imitate if she was here to see it.

"She said she wanted a part-time job, so I hired her," my mother declared as she walked in, ostensibly supervising my work.

"Interesting," my father replied, TV remote in hand, studying me for a moment. "Did you run out of allowance money?"

"It's a long story." By which I meant: *The cost of dating has gone up.*

"I suppose you're getting to that age," he murmured, and I was glad he was in no need of convincing…though he showed no signs of spoiling me with extra cash.

"Just let her do it, all right?" My mother clapped me airily on the shoulder. As usual, her touch was so rough, it came across as condescending. In junior high, nothing was more infuriating; these days I could endure it, but only to a certain point. "Learning to do chores now will help you later on in life. Or do you plan to live here until you die?"

I knew it was meant to be a rhetorical question—so why did it feel like a blow? Just as I couldn't spend eternity in high school, there was no guarantee of forever in this house. Mentally I had acclimated to these things…and yet my skin still bristled.

"Your final year of high school is meant to prepare you for adulthood. This will give you a better chance at a good future."

"…You sure know how to sound smart when you want to, huh?"

"Gah hah hah! You know it!" Unsurprisingly, my mother took this as a point of pride. With her chest puffed out, she strutted from the room.

"When I was your age, there was so much I wanted from life. So many hard choices," my father reminisced, lying with his hands on his stomach like an otter.

"Did *you* have any part-time jobs, Mr. When I Was Your Age?"

"Nah. I'd tell myself to sleep on it, and by the time I woke the next morning, getting a job always seemed like too much of a hassle."

Enviable as that sounded, in my case, that wasn't going to fly. Even if I shrugged it off, Adachi would come and remind me.

Once I finished cleaning the living room, I moved on to the hallway. With a vacuum in hand, the once-cramped space seemed to stretch on infinitely, long enough for a hundred-meter dash. Okay, that was an exaggeration.

So, would I live here forever? Assuming Adachi and I stayed together, she'd probably ask to move in together at some point, but I couldn't picture her agreeing to live with family, be it mine or her own. She only ever wanted a kingdom for just the two of us. Naturally, that meant no one else would be around to do chores or pay rent; we would have to provide for ourselves.

Me and Adachi, living together, every day… Where would we go from there?

It was the start of my final summer break of high school, and as I swept the dusty corners, I had a lot on my mind.

"What are you up to, Nee-chan?"

"Oho, it appears she is cleaning."

Two balls of energy walked up to me: my sister, openly relishing the beginning of her summer break, and…*wait, what* is *that?* I couldn't tell if Yashiro's new onesie was meant to be a raccoon or a tanuki.

"Did you get in trouble or something?"

"Look, life's complicated when you're in high school, all right?"

"Well, you missed a spot! Chop chop!"

"At once, mistress!"

"Hgghh!"

My sister was getting a little too cheeky, so I vacuumed her face, then bent down and smacked her head. "I'm busy right now, so go do your homework or something."

"Okay, but no slacking! I'm gonna check your work later!" With one final saucy quip, she returned to our room. The…creature, however, stayed behind.

"May I help you, Ms. Tanuki?"

"I am merely observing."

She didn't correct me, so apparently, I had guessed correctly. Through her legs, I could see her tail swaying cheerfully.

"You're welcome to help me, you know."

"Heh heh heh! Mama-san has decreed that I am not obligated to assist due to my general uselessness."

That's not something to brag about, kid, I thought as I poked the tanuki's white belly. I knew better than to expect her to be any good at vacuuming, but maybe she could offer some amusing conversation. Thus, I carried on cleaning without chasing her away.

"Have you ever been to the ocean?"

"To collect rocks, yes."

"Rocks? Oh, the ones you were selling?"

I vaguely remembered her mentioning something along those lines when she held that bazaar of hers, though she never specified where she dived to get them. Suffice it to say that her interpretation of "going to the ocean" was a bit deeper than what I was imagining.

"So, you've never, like, hung out on the beach?"

"I have no time for such dalliances."

"Right," I scoffed, knowing full well that this mooch's plans never consisted of more than goofing off with my kid sister.

"Hrmmm…"

The tanuki began to pace back and forth, mulling something over—contemplating a naughty prank, perhaps, like in old folktales? Then again, the worst Yashiro ever did was sneak a peek inside our fridge. She walked all the way to the end of the hall, then doubled back in my direction.

"What do people do at the ocean?"

"Um…" I didn't have an answer prepared. Go swimming, and… what else? "Good question. I forget, what did I do when we were there last…?"

It had been a long time ago, before my sister was even born. We drove to the neighboring prefecture, and I had a vague recollection of playing with a beach ball and pretending to be sea lions with my mother. The rest I couldn't remember, but there couldn't have been much else to do, since they hadn't expanded the facilities back then…

"Oh yeah, I think we had a barbecue."

"Ooh, that sounds delightful."

"Other than that…I'm not sure what else people do."

And so the conveniently timed realization hit me: If Adachi and I went to the beach without a plan in mind, we might end up bored. Yet another thing for me to worry about.

"Heh heh heh! By all means, think it through."

"Don't condescend to me, brat."

After I vacuumed her face, I released the tanuki back into the wild. Like the rest of the native fauna here in the Shimamura household—giraffes, sharks, and all the other onesies—she ran off to find my sister. Personally, I was just glad they were getting along.

As for me, though I had barely started vacuuming, I was already breaking a sweat.

"Hmmm…"

Perhaps I'd ask Adachi if she had any ideas.

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"How are you still so clumsy?"

"I apologize, mistress."

I scowled at the commentary on my cucumber-cutting. My mother was starting to sound like a workplace bully. What more did she expect when, in all my life, I had only ever used a kitchen knife in home economics class?

The moment I finished vacuuming, she had dragged me in here to help her make lunch. At this point, fatigue oozed like sweat from my every pore, and my heart yearned for bed.

"Do better next time."

"No," I shot back defiantly. Then I gathered up the diagonally cut cucumber pieces and sliced them into sticks.

We were making *hiyashi chuuka* for lunch today, and my mother was supervising my work while frying up a thin layer of rolled omelet. Thus far, I had learned that my ideal coworker was one who *didn't* know my entire life story from start to finish.

"Y'know, it's not often you come crying to me for fun money."

"Could you not phrase it like that?" I retorted, objecting to her biased account. I couldn't bear to look at that stupid smirk on her face.

"You wanna buy a cute bikini and show off for Adachi-chan, is that it?"

"Totally."

"Once you've picked it out, let me know how much it costs. Wouldn't wanna pay you less than you need."

"Yeah, yeah…"

I averted my eyes as I handed over the cucumber sticks. This kind of talk made me uncomfortable, but because I was effectively asking her to buy me a swimsuit, I was in no position to complain. Furthermore, this "job" of hers had already taught me something.

While at first glance, my mother seemed lazy, I now understood painfully well just how much of herself she put into life every single day. In spite of the summer heat, she cooked, cleaned, ran the washing machine, went to the gym, and looked after the kids—all without complaint. On the contrary, she had so much energy, it bordered on obnoxious. And while I would absolutely never admit it aloud…in a way, I couldn't help but respect that about her.

On second thought, why wouldn't I tell her? It wouldn't cost me anything. I knew this, but I had never learned how to just be honest… No, that wasn't true. As a kid, I'd accepted the world with my whole heart and given my unguarded self in trade—exactly like Yashiro, who savored her portion loudly and gleefully. It had been about a year now since she first started living here full-time.

"Mrnnn!"

She noticed me staring at her and moved her chopsticks to shield her omelet strips. *Brat.* Then I realized: She had lived with me long enough to know that eggs were one of my favorite foods.

Incidentally, she had so many "favorite" foods of her own that I could name a dish at random and probably be right.

After we finished eating lunch, my employer told me I was free to clock out for the day. "Can't go too hard on you right out of the gate, or it'll scare you off!"

"Gee, thanks."

"It really takes a load off to have you do the cleaning. Agh, these old bones!"

My mother made a show of clutching her lower back, then headed off to the gym. She was just so *spunky* all the time. Did she get her energy from working out, or was she only able to work out because of that energy?

My father was weeding the yard; Yashiro and my sister were out playing in the heat. With no one else inside the house, it suddenly fell perfectly silent, at which point the cry of the cicadas began to seep in through the walls. Strange, since there were barely any trees near our house.

Walking down the empty hallway gave me a funny feeling, too, as if everything I knew had been surgically removed, turning it into someplace foreign. As I got older, would I one day be forced to go through life alone, just like this? Then again, I probably wouldn't be the last to die, considering my sister was younger than me—but either way, someone would end up alone. The thought hurt my heart.

Back in my bedroom, my next tasks were to study, sleep…and what else? Several options were available to me here, but above all,

my first move was to pick up my phone. *Shows you where my priorities are,* I thought to myself with a smile.

Beep, boop, bleep…

"…Hello?"

"Oh, Shimamura… Yeah, hey."

It always caught me by surprise just how quickly Adachi would answer her phone. Coming from anyone else, those speedy reflexes would be downright frightening. But unlike my house, hers was always this quiet, so she probably had an easy time hearing her phone ring. Then I heard a muffled chuckle on the other end of the line.

"What is it?" I asked curiously.

"Oh, nothing. I'm just…kinda happy you called."

Her words tickled me in turn. "In that case, next time you ask to call me, maybe I'll call you first."

"That's not what I mean…"

"Ha ha!" I knew that, of course; she was happy that I was taking the initiative to connect. Regardless, everything I offered to Adachi was laced with a hint of provocation and shyness. "So anyway…"

"Y-yeah?"

"You're taking me to the beach, right?"

At times like these, why did I position myself as a passive participant? For some reason, I avoided giving myself agency, almost like I was distancing myself. This was something I wanted to work on.

"…Yeah?"

"……"

"Shimamura?"

"We're going to the beach, right?" She probably wouldn't understand why I needed to rephrase that, but nevertheless, I felt it was important.

"Yes? And?" Sure enough, she sounded confused.

"Well, I feel like there's not a ton of stuff to do there," I explained, retracing the path my mind had wandered while I was cleaning.

"Th-that's not true." She must have interpreted it as reluctance on my part, because the reassurance was audible in her voice.

"You think so?"

"I'm gonna plan out a bunch of stuff for us to do. I'll…show you a good time."

"That's perfect, actually."

"Huh?"

"Before we go, we should each come up with a list of activities and keep it a surprise until the big day. Then, when we're there, we'll choose what to do from our lists."

This was the conclusion I had reached by the time I was done vacuuming: If there was nothing to do, then we would simply come up with something on our own. This way I could truly savor the

experience of going to the beach with her. Fortunately, she agreed to the idea right away.

"Got it. I'll think of as many as I can," she replied, and I thought I heard relief in her voice—probably because she was looking forward to my swimsuit.

"Preferably an amount we can reasonably get done in a single day." After all, too much luggage would make travel a nightmare.

But Adachi was looking at it in a different way. "Whatever we don't do this time, we can save for next time." She was the kind of girl who would stuff her toybox full to bursting, then carry the rest in her arms, taking care not to drop a single one.

"Oh, that's an optimistic outlook… I like it."

In spite of her trepidation, she believed without question that we would be together forever, and I had started to suspect that this was what made us compatible. Yes…we worked so well together, it felt like destiny. And I wasn't so desperate for company that I would settle for anything less.

"Are you going to buy a new swimsuit, Adachi?"

"Y-yeah…I was thinking of going shopping today."

"You sure? Couldn't you just wear your old one?"

I thought back to that summer day long ago when she sent me a selfie of her in a swimsuit. In hindsight, it was kinda dirty of me to ask for it, huh? At the time, my mischievous streak was only just starting to blossom, but if I tried something like that now, I'd get a very different result…or would I?

"No, you already saw that one."

"Oh…" In other words, that old swimsuit had outlived its usefulness after just a couple of wears. In her eyes, fashion wasn't about beautifying herself but instead about impressing me. Her abundant love for me made my cheeks twitch.

"Are you going to buy one, too?"

"That's the plan," I answered coolly, though below the surface, I was flailing my limbs just to stay afloat. *Please wait until I complete my apprenticeship,* I wanted to say.

"Okay, then…I'm super-duper looking forward to it."

Super-duper, huh? The sparkle in her voice felt genuine rather than obligatory. She was excited to see me in a swimsuit…a step closer to nakedness. I often thought back to the way she had ogled me in the bath during our school trip. Frankly, it was a miracle she didn't overheat and pass out.

Did the thought of me wearing a swimsuit inspire in her certain feelings of the…you know, pubescent…or primitive…or, to be totally blunt, sexual variety? I knew I should choose something with her reaction in mind, but…was I meant to envision what kind of reaction that would be? For that matter, why did she want to go to the beach in the first place? Sure, she'd never been there before, but I realized now—arrogantly, perhaps—that it was possible her main goal was to see me in a bikini.

I just wished this epiphany would have waited until after I hung up.

"Well, um…let's both do our best, Adachi."

"Do our best…?"

"I'll pray for our success."

And with that, I hung up. Clawing at the smoldering itch in my cheeks, I set my phone down. Long after the call was over, one specific area of my brain was lit up bright enough to blind me.

"Now, then…"

With the drowsiness I'd felt this morning all but evaporated, the distant cry of the cicadas carved a path through the space, guiding me to my study desk. *Yeah, I guess I should,* I thought as I pulled the chair out and sat down. My mother had given me a kick in the butt to get it all done, and I was a tiny bit motivated.

This was what my final summer break would look like for the foreseeable future: doing chores and buying a swimsuit. And accessories. And possibly new sandals. I wanted a hat, too, but I'd need to keep some money in reserve to use while we were there. *How am I supposed to think about the future with all this going on?* I laughed to myself.

As if trying on ball gowns, I danced through each day, all the way to the beach trip. Or, put more simply: I was giddy.

***

The night before the big trip, I was milling around the house when my father called out to me, fresh out of the shower: "You've got a lot of stuff there, Hougetsu. Are you going somewhere tomorrow?"

"To the beach! With a girl!" my mother cut in before I could answer. She wasn't wrong by any definition, but that didn't mean I liked the way she made it sound.

"*What*?!" My father recoiled in alarm for a moment, then realized it wasn't all that surprising. "Oh, okay." Compared to my mother, he always seemed like the rational one, but I was starting to think he was pretty weird in his own way. "Be safe and have fun."

"I will."

And so it was time to go. We had agreed to meet at the station square, but I had secretly arranged to arrive half an hour early. I had considered showing up a full hour ahead, but on the off chance I was wrong, it would sting—not because I'd have to wait, but because it would mean I misread Adachi.

When I reached the bus stop thirty minutes ahead of schedule, sure enough, there she was. She didn't have as much luggage as I feared she would; notably, she was carrying a rucksack on her back, and from a distance, she looked like a little kid going on a field trip. Also, she was carrying what looked like a beach umbrella. *I didn't even think to bring one,* I thought to myself with an exasperated smile.

"Hey, Adachi."

Once the gulf between us had shrunk far enough, she noticed me and came jogging over like—okay, kind of a rude analogy, but I'll say it anyway—like a dog greeting her owner at the front door. For some reason, she always exuded "loyal hound" energy.

"Um…good morning!"

How long has she been waiting to say that? I wondered with a wry grin. "You're here early."

"Oh, uh…yeah, a little."

Her definition of "a little" seemed loose enough to gently encompass anywhere from five minutes to an entire lifetime. Broader than mine, in any case.

"Good thing it's not raining, huh?" she continued.

"For sure." The cumulonimbus clouds billowed as tall as castles, and my skin already felt like it was burning. Once we got to the beach, I worried I might split open like a hot dog on a grill. "Nice beach umbrella, by the way," I remarked, indicating the covered pole resting against her shoulder. "I totally forgot to bring one, so I appreciate it."

At this, Adachi beamed proudly—a rare sight, since she generally never emoted with confidence. Perhaps the prospect of a summer beach trip had brought out her inner child. "Your hat looks good on you!"

"Thank you kindly," I replied, wiggling the newly bought brim as if a stiff breeze was blowing. "Shall we?"

"Yeah!"

Her pace seemed faster than usual, so I worked my legs in an effort to keep up.

Our first stop was Nagoya, where we changed trains and headed for the ocean. Ah, how far away it felt. Because it was a weekday,

most of the stations were relatively devoid of waiting passengers. As Adachi and I stood side by side, she tapped my hand with her pinky finger to get my attention—*like she's fishing,* I thought with a grin as I took the initiative and grabbed her hand in mine. At first, her eyes went wide, but before long, a derpy smile spread on her face, the corners of her lips curling clumsily.

But in the summertime, we couldn't pretend that the only product of our touch was love. In my grasp, her hand went from warm to melty in seconds flat.

Knowing Adachi, she probably hadn't studied at all since the start of summer break. Part of me found this amusing, but on the other hand, I was a little worried. Then again, she always got better grades than me, so maybe I didn't need to be.

On the train, we managed to secure seats for ourselves. Adachi nodded off partway, her head drooping onto my shoulder, and I figured I'd let her sleep for the duration of the ride, brief though it was. Knowing her, she probably hadn't gotten a wink of sleep last night, which was adorable—as was the peaceful, innocent expression on her face as she slept. She put her heart and soul into living every single day of her life, and I was happy to help relieve some of that fatigue.

To keep myself from drifting off along with her, I forced my eyes open wide, as if to sear the scenery into them. At that exact moment, the train crossed a bridge over a river, and the glint of the water's

surface neatly stabbed directly into my vision. For me, it seemed our summer trip was already thrilling to the point of tears.

***

Behind me lay the path I'd taken to get here, and in front of me was the smell of hot brine. The clouds and mountains formed a clear divide between sky and sea, almost as if someone had filled it in with pencil.

We headed down the gently sloping stairs toward the sand. There were already a handful of beach umbrellas in full bloom, adding dots of color to the pale expanse. Many of them were blue for some reason—maybe because it was a refreshing cool tone.

Just before the beach was a well-kept grassy area where all the facilities were found. Taking note of the showers and changing areas, I stepped down onto the sand. Our first order of business was to find ourselves an open spot. Fortunately, this wasn't hard.

"Here we are!"

"Uh…wooooo!"

As we crouched down and dug at the sand, I could feel my back already dripping with flecks of molten sweat. This summer was armed with two weapons: the suffocating air and the stabbing rays of sun. Once we had a hole, we thrust Adachi's blue umbrella into it and opened it up, creating the perfect amount of shade for two people to enjoy. Then we rolled out a beach mat and set our luggage on top to keep it from blowing away.

After I plunked myself down, I patted the spot beside me, and Adachi lunged for it. As we gazed at each other, I watched the shyness spread across her face.

"Well, we're here."

"Yeah."

"First, let's get the sand out."

We rubbed our hands together as if under running water, shaking loose whatever grit was stuck under our nails. Once they were clean, it was time to beach it up.

"Okay, I guess we'll take turns changing. Who's going first?"

At last, the moment was upon us: the swimsuit debut. Last night before bed, I had tried to imagine what Adachi might wear today, but I kept inadvertently distracting myself by thinking of onesies and other joke options. Probably the influence of a certain cryptid in my life who wore them like a uniform. To be fair, though, Adachi would look cute in anything.

She stared down at her hands for a moment, then stole a glance up at me. "In that case…you go first, please."

"Sure. Any particular reason?"

"If I went first, I'd have to sit here in my swimsuit all alone waiting for you, and…I think I'd feel bad."

I couldn't explain it, but I had a feeling I understood what she meant. Like a sandcastle, her sadness could only be washed away with a tidal wave of…uh…me being there? I was trying to think of something poetic, but never mind. Pushing against my knees, I hauled

myself onto my feet—and in the process, nearly smacked my head on the inside of the beach umbrella. Kind of forgot that was there.

"Well, I'm more than happy to go first, since yours is probably gonna be way better."

"Th-that's not true! Don't get your hopes up…but then again, I *do* want you to."

With a smile, I turned and left Adachi to her conflicted mumbling, carrying my stuff in the direction of the changing areas. The telltale scent of chlorine gave me a taste of my childhood: the distant days in which I'd wear my swimsuit under my clothes whenever I went to swim at the school pool. Once I'd gotten dressed, the memories filed themselves back into their dusty drawer.

After checking myself over one last time, I headed back to where I'd left Adachi. She kept glancing in the direction of the changing areas approximately once every three seconds, so she caught sight of me well before I made my flashy entrance—and when her eyes landed on me, her face froze in my direction. *Note to self: Avoid looking this way when it's her turn.*

"Yo!"

Pinching the hem of my pareo, I walked around in front of her to show off my beachwear. She closed her eyes sharply, as if blinded by the sun, then slowly wrenched them open once more. For a swimsuit debut, this was starting to feel a little dramatic—was I supposed to strike a flashy pose?

Meanwhile, Adachi was already blushing. "Pretty…good look for you!" The small stumble suggested she had waffled over what to say,

thus fumbling it at the last second.

"Thanks! Hee hee. I think this pareo is the best part."

That said, I actually had the most trouble deciding on my shoes, but I ultimately settled on a pair with cute white ribbons. After I sat down, I wiggled my feet to show them off, but Adachi's gaze was already magnetized to one very specific point: my stomach. *Oh god, is she looking at my chub?!* I panicked for a moment before I remembered that she wasn't that shallow.

That said, she was being kind of an enigma today.

"Your…your belly button's showing."

I looked down at it. It sure was. "Don't worry. It won't fall off."

"I'm just…not sure it's appropriate." Despite scolding me for my immodesty, she continued to ogle it openly. I felt as though I'd caught a glimpse of her tumultuous inner conflict. "Everyone's going to stare at it."

"I don't think other people will notice."

"W-will too!"

She protested so effusively, her hand inadvertently landed on my stomach, covering my belly button. Instantly, she froze in place. With her slightly sandy palm against my skin, the silence grew warm. It was certainly one way of getting me to cover up in public…although now *she* couldn't see it, either.

Realizing this, she—just kidding. Flustered by the skin-to-skin contact, she bolted to her feet, shouted, "I'll go change my…get changed!" and ran off in a tizzy. The way she snaked her arm through

the strap of her bag and carried it off with her, I could tell she had some great athletic reflexes. Yes, I could see it now: If she had been on my junior high basketball team, they would have made her a regular.

"Well, that was weird," I muttered to myself, clearing the air. Wherever she was, Adachi was probably pretty dizzy right about now. But this always happened with her, so I figured she would be fine.

Setting my hat down next to me, I faced forward and closed my eyes. Surrounded by sun, I chose to plunge into darkness. I wanted to see if I could recognize the sound of Adachi's footsteps as she approached.

For a while, all I heard was the breeze blowing past and up into the sky. Then, finally, I caught the crunch and hiss of traversal through sand.

"Adachi?" I called hopefully.

This would be really embarrassing if it turned out to be someone else, but as luck would have it, my impassioned guess was correct. A pair of bare legs entered our circle of shade. At first glance, I thought she was naked, and my heart nearly stopped, but obviously, she wasn't. When I looked up, I saw a crisp, clear shade of blue that blended in neatly with the umbrella above.

It was Adachi, dressed in a bikini. She looked back at me, red-faced and gasping for breath like she was submerged up to her lips in water. Her swimsuit was the blue to my pink, and by some coincidence, both were flower-patterned. But then she tried to hide behind her iridescent floatie.

"Oh no you don't," I chided, and stole it away.

Now her swimsuit was exposed to all the world—by which I mean our immediate surroundings. She grasped helplessly at the empty air, as if to cover herself with a pareo she wasn't wearing.

"Oh *ho*…" I ran my gaze over every inch of her as she sat beside me with her knees folded, trying to ignore it.

"I remembered…um…you said…you like blue, so…"

"I wuv it."

She even thought of me when she chose the color, so how could I not? That aside, I couldn't help but peer beyond the shield of her arms and knees—intently, as if I'd spotted a cicada clinging to a tree trunk. And the longer I looked, the more I thought I might start screeching myself.

"I didn't realize, but…" Partway through, I stopped myself from finishing the stupid comment, but I wasn't fast enough.

"But what?" she prompted.

I wasn't sure it was a good idea to say this, but decided to tell myself the freedom of summer had led me down a wicked path. "I didn't realize your boobs were so big."

It made a nice contrast, considering the rest of her was so slender. But I meant it as a genuine compliment, not sexual harassment—did she understand that? Then her ears turned red, and I knew I had screwed up. My only option was to flee from responsibility and turn my attention to the scenery until she had recovered her composure.

As I stretched my legs out and relaxed in the shade, I caught sight of a plane flying at a low altitude from the direction of the local airport. The roar of its engines was almost reminiscent of the sound of blood pumping through my veins—possibly because in both cases, it carved a path forward.

As I watched families splashing in the ocean with their kids, I felt it would be a waste not to do the same while we were here. But once we went in, it would wash off my makeup, and I realized now that I had no way of putting on more. *Ugh, I shouldn't have waited to pack until the night before… Okay, I think that's enough time.* When I looked back at Adachi, however, she flinched and bent forward to hide her chest. Something told me I had given her the completely wrong impression.

"Didn't you want me to see you in your new swimsuit, Adachi-chan?" I pressed playfully, ignoring the inadvertent sexual harassment.

She gasped. "You're right," she whispered, suddenly harboring a new light in her eyes, as if awakened to an epiphany. Then she moved her arms away from her chest, put her hands on her hips, and closed in on me. "Wh-what do you *think*, hmm?" she taunted, slamming her boobs against me like she was daring me to look at them.

Apparently, I had pushed her a little too far in the opposite direction. Now it was my turn to get flustered.

"Look. Look at me," she demanded, blushing beet red. I put a hand on her scrawny shoulder, and suddenly, the distance between us

shrank. Our faces were inches apart, close enough to touch, and we gazed into each other's eyes at point-blank range.

Only then did Adachi snap out of it. Her lower lip trembled, and her eyes shimmered like the reflection of the moon on the water's surface. And like a swimmer kicking off from the pool's edge, I gently pushed against her. But although we were now farther apart, the air between us was still tense, as if we might collide at any moment. Perhaps bare skin was simply too intense in large doses.

"Wanna go have lunch?" I asked, forcing a subject change.

"Yeah," she agreed, her burning ears akin to the wings of a scarlet butterfly.

We packed up our valuables and headed off, leaving behind only what we could live with having stolen: the beach mat and umbrella. Times like these, I kinda wished there were more people traveling with us, but I knew Adachi would never want that.

"Next time, maybe we should have a barbecue." As we walked past the grassy plaza, I saw big white umbrellas standing tall with the trees, smoke and chatter billowing out from under them. The smell tugged hard at my nostrils, probably because I was already hungry. "But I think you can only reserve one of those if you're in a group, so…"

"The minimum group size is two," Adachi replied promptly, like she was answering a quiz question. When I glanced at her, she averted her gaze. "I saw it written somewhere."

"You really did your research, huh? What a good little student." In response to my compliment, she took my hand in hers, as if to

reward herself—and I couldn't help but praise her again: "You've gotten a little better at holding hands, too."

Sure, we were in public, but…eh, why not? I swung our hands widely as we walked.

A barbecue sounds lovely indeed, I thought I heard a voice say.

Oh, I'm sure my family will take you to one sooner or later, I thought in reply.

I couldn't help but get a little sentimental, wondering how much time we had left together… No, if I wanted us to go, then it was up to me to tell them. While I didn't intend to move out until after I graduated college, my gut told me this was my last chance. Like waves on the shore, the flow of time could all too easily wash away people's dreams. Procrastination would only lead to regret.

"Ooh, there's a café. We could get…*coffee*," I said, in my best American accent.

"Wow. You sound like a native."

If it was good enough to impress Adachi, then I was in danger of getting carried away, assuming I wasn't already.

And so, we decided to have a leisurely meal at the café. The tropical trees that surrounded us were so lush that I could easily believe we had been welcomed into another country. The clay-colored building was two stories tall, and from the look of it, the second floor offered terrace seating with a full view of the ocean. Unfortunately, it looked to be completely packed.

We were led to a table in the corner of the restaurant, where the very tanned server handed us our menus. Under the table, I could feel the grit of sand against the soles of my shoes. In addition to simple meals, beer, bar food, and shaved ice, the café apparently also offered beach hut and equipment rentals.

"These sure are some *coffee* prices."

"Meaning…?"

Meaning seasonal tourist destination prices.

The food on offer was fairly limited in variety: curry with rice, hashed beef with rice, sandwiches, and yakisoba. Times like these, I was the type who defaulted to curry. Then there were the drinks; since alcohol was off the table, that left us with coffee, tea, or juice. I wanted to make the most of the tropical atmosphere, so I decided to get the pineapple juice.

"Okay, I'm ready to order. What about you?"

"Mmm… Tea and a sandwich."

"Ha! Classic Adachi."

"Wh-what part…?"

It was just like her to opt for something blander than curry and pineapple juice. After we put in our orders, we gazed idly at each other, just as we had already spent much of the day doing. Maybe it was because special moments didn't need words? *Ehhh*… No, that probably wasn't it. But I felt no particular discomfort in holding her gaze—just nonstop good vibes, the kind I always felt whenever I had no reason to break the silence.

Seated at our corner table, we could see the beach through the window right next to us. From a distance, it was fuzzy, but in a good way, like it had a dreamy filter over it. With the palm trees swaying in the breeze, I could almost convince myself we had left Japan.

"*Hey*," I said in English, like I was American all of a sudden.

"Uh…*hi*?" Adachi replied stiffly, her gaze flicking to and fro.

"*Hey, George*."

"*Wh-who is this*?"

We probably should have had a slightly better grasp of the language if we were hoping to get into college. Then, while we were showing off our (lack of) knowledge, the food arrived. While I tucked into my somewhat spicy curry and swooned at the sweetness of the pineapple juice, Adachi silently shoveled her sandwich into her mouth. Even in an exotic new location, it would appear she still found no enjoyment in the act of eating. But whenever our eyes met, she would offer me a stiff smile, and I swooned all over again.

After we paid our bill, we were each given a corsage as a souvenir. *Ah, that makes up for the extra cost,* I lied to myself.

"Pop quiz! What kind of flower is this?" I asked, holding a corsage in each of my palms. Adachi clearly hadn't expected me to put her on the spot, but nevertheless, she tilted her head in contemplation.

"…Hibiscus?"

"Correct! Probably!"

One was red and one was yellow—the most Hawaii colors imaginable. Not that we were anywhere close…yet. Maybe if I kept on living.

"I'll help you put it on. Which one do you want?"

Her gaze darted gracefully from left to right. "You can choose for me."

"But I'm asking which one *you* want. Now go on." I thrust them in her direction to relish her reaction. She was always terrible at making these sorts of decisions.

"Okay, then…this one."

The red one, then. Rising on tiptoe, I tucked the corsage into her hair. The spot of scarlet created a lovely accent when paired with her blue swimsuit, but then again, so did every part of her. With her features—and no, I didn't mean *those* features—she looked good in anything.

Meanwhile, Adachi affixed the other corsage to my hat.

"Cute."

Her hands were clenched into fists, possibly to keep her voice from shaking. My cuteness was just that powerful, apparently. Still, she looked really good with that flower in her hair… I admired the sight of it all the way back to our beach umbrella. Then, once we'd settled back in, I decided to announce one of the ideas on my activity list.

"Look around, Adachi. What do you see?" Flourishing a hand, I directed her attention.

"Lots of people in swimsuits."

"Little farther down." I lowered my hand accordingly, and she dutifully tilted her head down, arriving at what I wanted to show her: the ocean's warm, white cradle. "Since we've got all this sand here, why not play with it?" I scooped up a fistful and let it trickle through my fingers.

Adachi followed suit. "This one was on my list, too."

"Well, then, it works out perfectly."

Thus, we set about playing with the sand beneath our umbrella.

"But my idea was less 'make something' and more…play a game like pick-up sticks."

"That sounds good, too." We had already proved for a fact that anything we played together could be fun, even thumb wrestling. "Let's do it!"

"Uh…wooooo!"

"So, whatcha wanna make?" I asked, once we had piled the sand high. She stared at the mountain for so long, I thought it might crumble under her gaze.

"Could we do…an elephant?" she mumbled.

"You bet!" I was curious why she would choose an elephant specifically (and I had a feeling the trunk would be a challenge), but I was ready to make memories together. "Don't worry. Back in the day, I was the queen of the sandbox for three days straight."

"Th-three whole days, huh? Wow."

I could tell she was trying to be nice, so I thrust my chest out proudly. As a kid, I tended to get bored easily, so after those three days were up, I moved on to the horizontal bars. Back then, I was jealous of the ease with which my mom could do back-hip circles.

Unfortunately, like with the beach umbrella, I had forgotten to bring any buckets or shovels. Not that I minded using my bare hands, of course.

"After we've had our fill of sand, we should swim in the ocean." After all, Adachi had gone to the trouble of bringing a tube-shaped floatie, and besides, I wanted to get in the water at least once while we were here.

"Okay…sure." She glanced over in the direction of the waves. With no special memories of the ocean, perhaps it was little more than a pretty sight in her eyes.

And so, we passed the time making small talk as we worked on our elephant.

"You don't really care about names, huh?" I asked, since I'd always found it kind of surprising.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I call you Adachi, and you've always called me Shimamura."

Sometimes, we jokingly called each other by first name, but it never lasted long. This would suggest that she wasn't particular about terms of address, which was odd to me, considering how much she

loved to be special in every other regard. Did she truly have no interest in pet names? Her name was Sakura, so…Socks?

"…Hm." Given my naming sense, perhaps the reason was clear.

"Well…" As she packed sand to form the elephant's legs, Adachi began to explain why she didn't care—or more accurately, why she was content with what we had: "Your voice is special as it is."

She shot a glance at me to gauge my reaction. *Voice*, I repeated silently, my lips tracing a crescent through the air.

"When you call my name, it sounds…totally different from anyone else, so…"

She looked at me for confirmation, but how would I know? "Okay," I shrugged, feeling my cheeks flush. If there was a special spice in the way I called her name, I couldn't tell. From my perspective, I was just…saying it. But as embarrassing as it was, perhaps I could find the answer through trial and error.

"Adachi." Her shoulders flinched. "*Aaa*dachi," I repeated, with the emphasis on the first syllable. Then I tried a third time in a singsong voice: "Adaaachiii!"

How about that, huh? I thought, having sated the bizarre urge to be a contrarian. Meanwhile, Adachi closed her eyes for a moment, listening carefully. Then her lips stirred.

"See? It's just *special*."

"It is?"

Granted, I rarely had the chance to hear other people call her name, so perhaps I simply wouldn't know the difference. But she

seemed happy about it, so clearly there was one, and I'd just have to take her word for it.

Once the elephant was finished, we moved on to the game Adachi had suggested. Incidentally, we'd decided our elephant was a baby. I was in charge of designing the eyes, and…well, not to brag, but they turned out very round and cute. Those button eyes now watched us compete.

The game worked like this: We piled the sand up to form a big mountain and put a stick at the top. Then we each took turns removing a handful of sand at a time, trying to avoid making the whole thing collapse. Unfortunately, I did not succeed, partly because I kept taking too much sand, but also because my opponent was naturally gifted at things that required a careful hand. Though she tended to fumble whenever I was around, Adachi Sakura was, on the whole, more competent than I was.

"And so, to ease the pain of her loss, she walked straight into the ocean," I narrated to myself as I snapped my swim goggles into place on my forehead.

"Hey, um…you didn't, like…lose on purpose or something, did you? Ha ha…heh…"

"The victor sneered, rubbing salt in the wound," I choked, pretending to take a blow.

At first, she flinched in surprise; then an idea occurred to her, and she withdrew something from her rucksack. "Here, have this… token of my apology." She held out a bottle of sunscreen, her eyes pointedly averted.

"Is that what I think it is?"

Her forehead ripened like a persimmon as she continued to avoid eye contact.

"In that case, I think I'll have *you* do the honors."

I could tell where this was going, though I wasn't sure what "this" was. When I turned my back to her, I heard her take a deep breath, and my bent knees stiffened. Was it really that big of a deal?

She pressed her palm to my back—gently, like I was a masterpiece. Then she flinched away, and it took her more than five seconds to find the courage to return. Even then, her fear was palpable, almost like she was crossing the line into wrongdoing…and it made the mood between us so tense that I didn't dare speak until at last it was over.

"Thanks," I said, breaking the awkward silence. Having crested the peak of embarrassment, Adachi's flushed complexion turned so beautifully porcelain, I hoped it wouldn't be ruined with a tan… "Okay, my turn."

Squirting sunscreen into my palm, I reached out in her direction—but she scrambled backward, out from under the shade of the umbrella. "I…I'm good," she stammered, shaking her head like a maraca—not merely back and forth, but all over the place. Maybe it was a hint about how she was feeling…or maybe not.

Having gained nothing but a sticky hand, I had no choice but to rub the excess lotion onto my arms in a thick layer. It was kind of a letdown.

The ebb and flow of the ocean made it seem almost alive, the way it was there one moment and gone the next. I stomped down on the waves like I was trying to pin them in place, goofing off like a little kid.

"Wanna use my floatie?"

"Mmm…I'll steal it from you later."

For now, I wanted to use my own two feet. I waded out up to my hips; when I swayed from side to side, I could feel the motion of the ocean against my skin. Carried by the wind, the conspicuous scent of seawater rose up to greet me.

"So, how do you like your first taste of the ocean?"

"Um…it's hot on top and cool below."

"What is this, a riddle?"

Adachi lay sprawled out on her floatie, arms and legs splayed. Playfully, I gave the sole of her foot a poke—just a quick touch to show my affection. Or so I thought.

"Bfffgh!"

Reflexively, she kicked her foot up, splashing saltwater directly into my face and up my nose. The pain scraped against my nasal cavities as though I'd been punched by a tiny fist. If someone did this to me every morning, I'd never need an alarm clock again.

"Are…are you okay?"

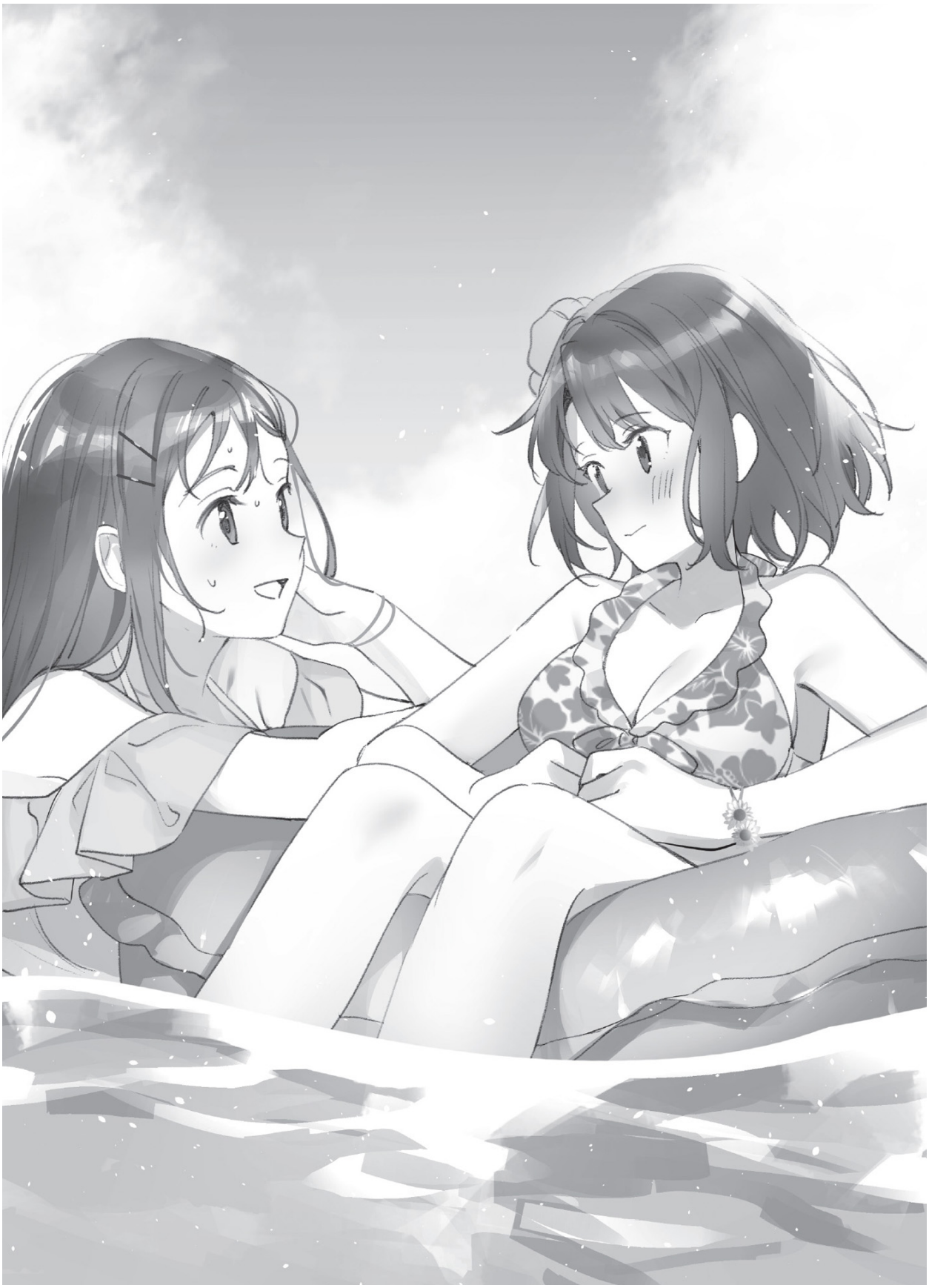
"Yeah. Life is salty sometimes."

Powerful stuff, this seawater. If we got into a splash fight, I'd have to take care not to hurt her. That said, I'd completely brought it

on myself, so I accepted my punishment with humility. It had probably washed off all my makeup, too, but I decided I didn't care anymore. Instead, I pulled my goggles down over my eyes and dived underwater.

It was obvious in hindsight, but here in the shallows, the only thing under the water was more sand. There were no glittering fish or coral reefs to be seen; the only thing of note was Adachi and her swimming ring.

Gliding slowly through the water, I positioned myself directly beneath her. As the oxygen bubbled away from my lips, I found my gaze drawn from the scenery to her back. Clearly, I hadn't learned my lesson, because once again, my mischievous streak reared its head. Reaching up, I extended my index finger…and poked her through the underside of the ring.



"Bfffgh!"

Adachi leaped straight up, floatie and all, and her flailing arm inadvertently smacked me over the head. But seeing as the villain of this story had been quickly given her just deserts, it was clear to me that all was right with the world. As I reflected on this, I rose to the surface and took my goggles off. After that blow, my brain was sloshing around inside my skull.

"I'm sorry," I whimpered, combing my soaked bangs out of my face.

Adachi stared back at me, a blush on her cheeks.

"…Adachi?"

"You, um…you look good with your…b-bangs slicked back."

Inexplicably, I got the Adachi stamp of approval.

After that, I borrowed the floatie for a bit. Once I'd had my fill of the waves rocking me back and forth, we headed back to the beach umbrella. There, we found that someone had placed a hibiscus flower on our elephant's head. It felt like its expression was cuter now, too. The longer I looked at it, the more the weight of my soaked swimsuit seemed to evaporate until I was feather-light.

"It matches yours, Adachi," I laughed, pointing at the flower blooming in her hair.

She stared down intently at the elephant and its corsage; squinting, she crouched down to examine it further. "Yeah," she replied after a long moment. Perhaps she saw something in it that I didn't.

"Can I take a pic?" I asked, retrieving my phone from my bag and aiming it at her.

She tentatively held up a peace sign, then switched to a beckoning gesture. "Let's take it together."

"Don't mind if I do." I crouched down on the opposite side and snapped a pic of the three of us. It felt important to immortalize our elephant, not just in my memory but in my camera roll, too. "Okay, what next?"

I spread my arms upward, where the sun and sky were still so bright. Adachi was looking at the seawater dripping from my bicep… and for some reason, she was blushing. Then she snapped back to her senses, sprang to her rucksack like a startled rabbit, and retrieved something.

"Um…ta-daaa." Timidly, she held up a beach ball—but in place of your bog-standard watermelon-patterned ball, she had chosen a muskmelon. Classy. "We should play…uhhh…"

"Ooh, we can play the sea lion game!"

"What?"

Bring it on! Retracing my memories, I knelt on the sand and struck a sea lion pose. If I remembered correctly, this was the way my mother used to pose while I threw the ball to her. One of us must have gotten the idea from a manga or something.

Adachi blinked back at me, gripping the ball. How much of that had gone over her head—the game part, or the sea lion part? Musing to myself, I thrust my nose into the air. Striking this weird pose by

myself under the blazing sun was torture in more ways than one, so I continued to stare at her, begging for some kind of reaction. Then, at last, she came back to life, her shoulders quivering.

"Ha…ha…" Stumbling over her laughter, she fought to catch her breath. Then she leaped, gracefully, into the air. "Ha *ha*!"

I watched as she flung the ball with a bright, flawless grin—the kind she'd normally never wear. In response, I prepared to catch it, dreaming of the moment we'd both be sea lions together.

***

After tuckering myself out in the first half and following it with a short nap, the rest of our time flew by surprisingly fast, considering we spent it just lounging around together. This disconnect only happened when I failed to notice that I'd twisted the faucet of good times from a trickle to a torrent—when I was having too much fun to think about it.

As the sun began to sink in the sky, the crowds dwindled until eventually the beach breeze could stroke my hair without having to take any detours. Sadly, our elephant's legs were already starting to collapse. Sunset was our cue to pack up.

We sat under the umbrella with our knees bent, gazing out at the scarlet waves calmly lapping at the sand. When I looked up, I found the setting sun was now dim enough that my eyes could tolerate it, casting its rays like a lighthouse to illuminate the sea. The outline of the distant mountains had blurred, as if they were retreating into the distance. Yes, there were so many aspects of this moment that I wanted to remember forever.

"We'd better head home soon."

"Yeah," Adachi replied, a hint of sadness in her voice, as she leaned against me like a needy baby. She was relaxed to the point of nodding off, as if to suggest that this private moment between us, in a place farther than we usually traveled, was her ideal cradle.

"We'll go on another date sometime. We still have the whole summer, y'know."

Once we made memories with everything today had to offer, it would be time to do the same with tomorrow—although I wasn't sure it was a good idea to go on dates several days in a row, considering all the studying I needed to do.

"Th-then…can we go on another date tomorrow?"

Evidently, my dear Adachi-chan had no such worries. She was so capable. Truly the light of my life. And it was adorable how she kept poking my shoulder.

"Okay, sure. Wanna go to the mall tomorrow?" When in doubt, go to the mall—the motto of every teenage city girl.

"Ha ha…" She laughed like she was filling the space, and I felt the gentle weight of her relief against my shoulder.

"Did you have fun?"

"Yeah."

The hibiscus flower still adorned her hair, bowing in the sunset breeze. What did her misty eyes see out there on the waves?

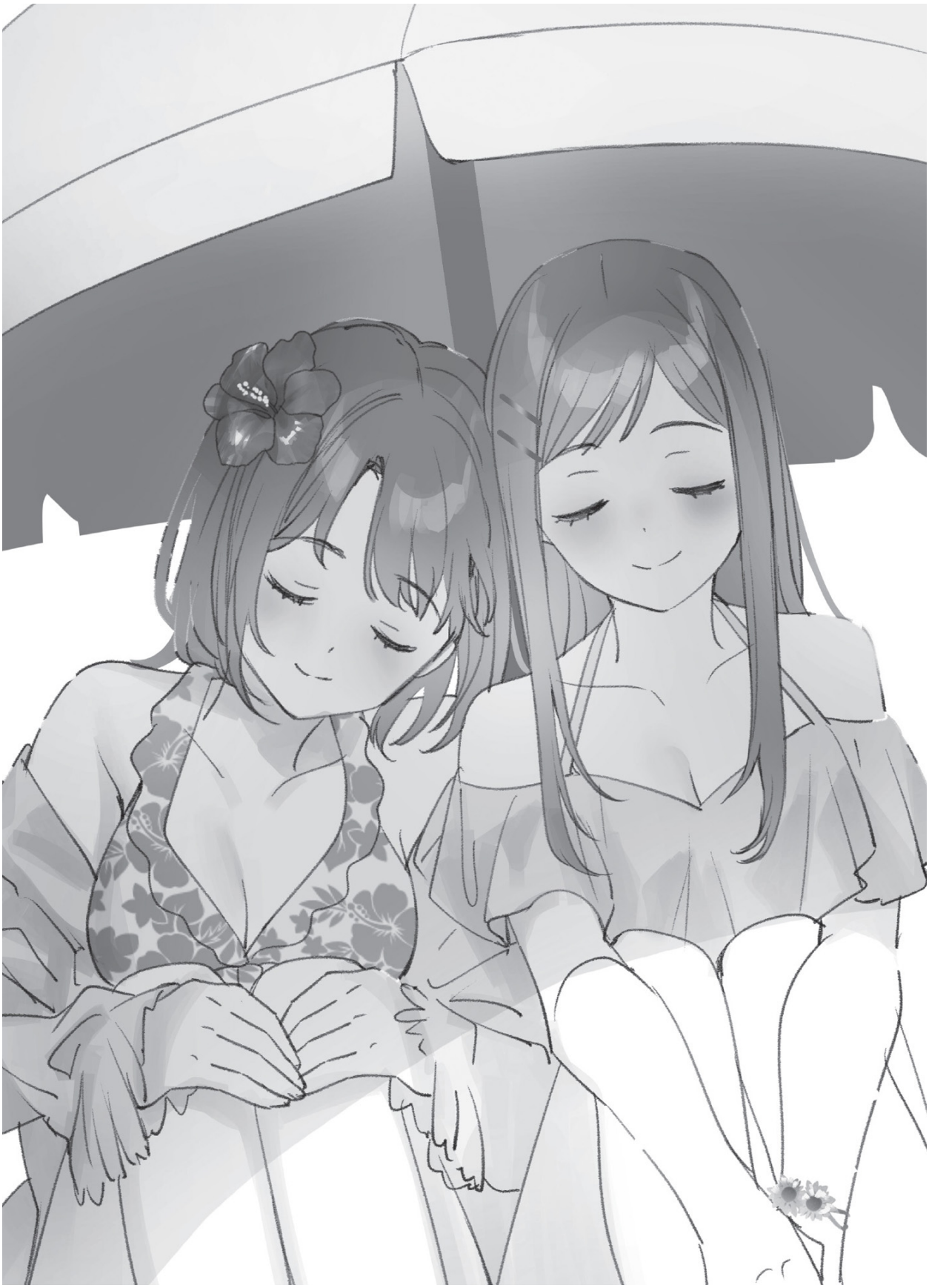
Happiness was invisible to the naked eye, but if I were to choose the next best thing, I suspected it would be drowsiness—the

conscious mind just barely tethered to the waking world. Perhaps Adachi was experiencing something similar this very moment. After all, the happiness she dreamed of wasn't in her dreams at all, but real and right here, fully formed. With just the two of us, our world was complete at the smallest possible size…but how long would it last?

There was no substitute for mutual feelings—a single obstacle, yes, but one with a single solution. Adachi had overcome so much in pursuit of one person that she was probably content with the way things stood now. But from here on, her happiness would continue to grow…and accordingly, I was prepared to follow her to new heights.

The world was full of awful things. Deception. Hypocrisy. Murder, betrayal, poison, perjury. But I prayed for our future—prayed that our life together would remain unsullied among all humanity.

That tranquil sparkle had inspired me, and so I decided to admire it for just a little longer.





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