
Adachi and Shimamura
99.9
WRITTEN BY
Hitoma Iruma
ILLUSTRATIONS BY raemz
CHARACTER DESIGN BY Non

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Adachi and Shimamura 99.9
Written by Hitoma Iruma
Illustrations by raemz
Character design by Non



Source:
***Adachi and Shimamura* Animated Series**

Teaser Visual

Key Animation: Shizue Kaneko
Background Art: Masami Saito
Paint Check: Megumi Arai

Color Design: Yumi Aburaya
Special Effects: Miho Kawanishi
Photography: Tsuyoshi Shimura (T2 Studio)



Source:
***Adachi and Shimamura* Animated Series**

Key Visual

Key Animation: Shizue Kaneko
Background Art: Masami Saito
Paint Check: Keiko Nakamura
Color Design: Yumi Aburaya

3D CG: Hideyuki Sakai
Special Effects: Miho Kawanishi
Photography: Tsuyoshi Shimura (T2 Studio)


Source:
Adachi and Shimamura Animated Series
Blu-ray/DVD Volume 1 Cover Illustration
Key Animation: Shizue Kaneko
Second Key Animation: Akio Ujiie
Paint Check: Megumi Arai
Color Design: Yumi Aburaya
Background Art: Masami Saito
Special Effects: Miho Kawanishi
Photography: Tsuyoshi Shimura (T2 Studio)



Source:
***Adachi and Shimamura* Animated Series**

Blu-ray/DVD Volume 2 Cover Illustration

Key Animation: Sugimura Tomokazu
Animation Direction: Shizue Kaneko
Paint Check: Megumi Arai
Color Design: Yumi Aburaya

Background Art: Noriko Ooishi
Special Effects: Miho Kawanishi
Photography: Tsuyoshi Shimura (T2 Studio)

Source:
***Adachi and Shimamura* Animated Series**

Blu-ray/DVD Volume 3 Cover Illustration

Key Animation: Sugimura Tomokazu
Animation Direction: Shizue Kaneko
Paint Check: Megumi Furuya
Color Design: Yumi Aburaya

Background Art: Noriko Ooishi
Special Effects: Miho Kawanishi
Photography: Tsuyoshi Shimura (T2 Studio)



Source:
***Adachi and Shimamura* Animated Series**

Blu-ray/DVD Volume 4 Cover Illustration

Key Animation: Sugimura Tomokazu
Animation Direction: Shizue Kaneko
Paint Check: Yumi Fujiwara/Fusako Nakao
Color Design: Yumi Aburaya

Background Art: Li Feng Yu
Special Effects: Miho Kawanishi
Photography: Tsuyoshi Shimura (T2 Studio)



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ADACHI TO SHIMAMURA VOL. 99.9
© Hitoma Iruma 2023
Edited by Dengeki Bunko
Illustrations by raemz
Character design by Non

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Adachi and Shimamura 99.9

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Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment



Chito



Chapter 1:
Chito

HOW MANY YEARS HAD PASSED since I first met this strange little creature? I tried to pinpoint how long it had been, but at some point, I'd given up completely on keeping track of the date. Her presence was simply a part of life now, and each new day so strongly resembled the last that they all blurred together. In the river of time, I was a pebble.

"What is the matter?" she asked calmly, her voice somehow entirely unaffected by me squishing her soft cheeks.

Man, they can really stretch. "Nothing. Don't worry your pretty little head over it."

"If you say so." Nodding amiably, she moved to the opposite side of the campfire. When she sat down, however, she realized her cheeks were still stretched out and started squishing them back to their usual shape.

I'll just pretend I didn't see that.

The campfire flames cut a small hole in the veil of shadow, revealing a glimpse of our surroundings. Resting my elbows on my bent knees, I gazed absently at the scenery. Overgrown vegetation had laid claim to the once-great buildings, and it seemed that this area too was mostly abandoned—save for the pair of us, nestled in the emptiness with only our exhaled breaths to keep us company. And mine sounded so slow and weak, I didn't need a mirror to recognize that I was exhausted.

I'd forgotten to keep an eye on the sun while I was walking around. In a blink, it sank beneath the horizon, and the darkness made me sleepy.

My head drooped away from its resting place in my palm, and I slumped forward. My consciousness sank even faster, as if caught in quicksand. *Why do living creatures need to sleep, anyway?* I wondered, quietly imagining what lay beyond the dark. *If only I could keep going... If I never needed to stop...I'd get so much farther...*

“Incidentally, when are we having dinner, Chito-san?”

The sound of my name swept away the pleasant drowsiness. Now that my companion’s cheeks were back to normal, she was once again demanding food.

“Oh, right. Gimme a sec.”

On her prompting, I glanced around, then retrieved one of the red fruits threatening to spill from my knapsack. It had taken me half a day of running around just to find those, and when I held the fruit in my palm, I felt the weight on my shoulders grow heavier.

“No clue if it’s poisonous, but here you go.”

“Nom nom.”

I was joking, of course; I knew full well that the fruits were safe. Still, this little creature would eat not only the skin but the bitter core too. Since I was in no position to waste food myself, I’d once tried to do the same, only to fail miserably. On another occasion, I’d found her eating something off the ground and assumed it was safe for me as well, only to end up wrestling with rainbow-tinged hallucinations that lasted hours. Those experiences had taught me quickly not to take cues from her eating habits.

Her teeth were another mystery; each bite carved a perfectly flat incision into the fruit. Sure enough, with a rhythmic crunching, she devoured it core and all. Satisfied, she began rocking from side to side in time with the fire. As her hair swayed, it sent sparkles into the air. Whenever I tried to catch one on my finger, it melted away into nothingness.

Like the fire, my companion was an important source of warmth and light.

“Tell me another story.”

After traveling all day long, I had no intention of moving a hairsbreadth. At times like these, I took the most comfort in listening to her babble about something or other, knowing I’d surely fall asleep before she finished.

“Is there more to the one you told me last time?”

“Oh, *that*?” Her deep purple eyes locked onto mine for a moment. Then she closed them and rested her hands on her small, bony knees. “Let me think…”

If every word of it was to be believed, then that silly little story of hers was set more than 3,700 years in the past.

***

“You know those anecdotes about the stupid misunderstandings that kids sometimes have?”

“Uh…yeah? What about them?”

“When I was little, there was this local art store called Realm Art, and I always thought it was called ‘Real Mart’ for some reason.”

“You did…?”

“Yeah.”

We walked down the street, our eyes on the traffic light ahead. *What were we going to buy again? I feel like I was craving strawberry jam…* As I combed my memory, I felt eyes on me. They were Adachi’s, and she seemed to be waiting patiently for me to continue.

“That’s all,” I explained. “End of story.”

“Oh…okay, then.” Frowning, she faced forward.

“What? We’re going to the store, so I was just talking about stores.”

“Yeah, I know. You’re always like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like *that*.”

What’s that supposed to mean?!

Sometimes, walking along the road from the condo to the grocery store was as breezy as a midday jaunt; at other times, it felt like a death march. Today was one of the better days, in part

because it was the weekend. With Adachi at my side, I strolled along blithely under the clear blue sky. The month of May had barely begun, yet it was already as warm as June. If I tilted my head back, I'd probably feel sweat trickle down my neck.

The moment we stepped into the store and felt the faint chill of the air conditioning, I felt something akin to deep relief. Before I could grab one of the red shopping baskets near the entrance, Adachi retrieved one for me.

"How very thoughtful, my dear Adachi-chan." I was trying to sound like a rich lady, but Adachi gave me a weird look. Confused, I waited for her to explain.

"...You sound like your mom," she told me.

"Urgh..." That felt like a harsh reminder that I was getting older—not that I minded, but it was hard to accept unhesitatingly. "Ho ho ho ho ho! Oh, Adachi-san, you're simply too much... Come on, there aren't any snobby ladies like that at your job?"

I gave her shoulder a little nudge; she swayed sideways dutifully, forcing a smile. "No...? Does anyone in the world actually laugh like *that*?"

"I'm not sure." Hino was the wealthiest lady I knew, and even *she* didn't sound like that.

Adachi and I worked at different companies—since, as she put it, "We'd never accomplish anything otherwise." Considering that she was the same person who'd wanted to do everything together when we were teens, perhaps that was proof that she'd grown up...or calmed down. Either way, I felt like a proud mother hen.

All jokes aside, I was glad to see that she'd found a sense of security. Maybe, over the years, she'd developed a firmer grasp of my feelings...and maybe I'd gotten better at expressing them. *Gosh, I hope so.*

With Adachi in charge of carrying the basket, we wound our way along the aisles. Humming, I swept my index finger through the air as if tracing it over all the fruits and vegetables in turn. Something akin to a vibrant musical note surfaced in my mind as I imagined how each would taste—probably because I was hungry.

“You always have fun at the grocery store, don’t you, Shimamura?”

“You think so?” I thought back over the time we’d spent here thus far, and…yeah, I *was* in a pretty good mood. “Well, I mean… isn’t it fun to see all the mountains of fruit and stuff?”

“Uhhh…”

Evidently, she wasn’t inclined to agree. But hey, she was entitled to that opinion, just as I was entitled to mine.

I returned to admiring the piles of bananas and neatly boxed cherries. Maybe thanks to all the pops of color, looking at them made my heart soar, and as we passed the tidy rows of pineapples, I felt their tangy scent practically seep into my chest. However, that clearly wasn’t a universal experience; even though she was right there with me, Adachi’s perspective seemed altogether different. Perhaps, for someone with so little interest in food, there simply wasn’t much to enjoy.



Knowing Adachi, if I asked her to describe what she saw, her response would be plain and blunt: *“Um…the produce aisle?”* And she’d be correct, of course.

As we walked, she squinted at the shelves like she was searching for something.

“You don’t have to force it,” I told her.

“I know,” she replied, her eyes still scanning. “But when you’re having fun, and I’m not… I feel left out, I guess.”

In response, I reached up and started stroking her hair. These days, she let it grow a bit longer than her high-school style.

“Wh-what?” she asked.

“Oh, you’re just cute, that’s all.”

She pouted unhappily. As usual, my little grumpy-pants disliked being treated like a child. Her reaction reminded me of how my little sister had scowled at me all those years ago. When I tried to keep petting Adachi, she snatched my hand, and just as I wondered what she planned to do with it—

“N-nom nom!”

“Aaagh!”

For some reason, my middle finger was now inside Adachi’s mouth.

She froze, her face sweaty, as her front teeth sank ever so slightly into my skin. I stood there waiting, but she didn’t move a muscle. She evidently hadn’t thought about what to do next. Her face rapidly reddened and reddened, as if she were having trouble breathing. That color change was all the more pronounced when contrasted against the pale daikon radishes piled directly behind her.

Then Adachi started to look queasy, so I moved to withdraw. Yet that was when she sprang into action, grabbing my wrist to hold me in place. Her behavior was so perplexing that I felt myself break into a sweat. *What am I supposed to do here?*

At any rate, we finished grocery shopping and left the store to see the sun half-concealed behind a cloud. As it shifted through

the sky, the sunbeams on our path narrowed into thinner and thinner streams before disappearing entirely as though someone had shut a door on us. For a while, Adachi and I just stood there and watched the scenery. Then Adachi took my free hand in hers.

“Huh?”

Her technique had improved by leaps and bounds. Whereas in the past she would practically smash into me, she now glided down with the grace of an airplane landing—although, using that metaphor, her “takeoff” could still use work.

“I was gonna wait, since we’ve got a lot to carry,” she mumbled at the ground in explanation. As usual, it took me a minute even to figure out what she was referring to.

“Yeah,” I replied, the grocery bags I held swaying faintly.

Then I started swinging our joined hands like crazy. Although baffled, Adachi nonetheless attempted to follow suit. She’d never been very adept at playing along, had she? I could still faintly feel where her teeth had grazed my finger. Our eyes met, and we smiled; her hand grew warm.

“Feeling hot?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

Grinning, I watched her flush all the way to her ears.

***

A few days later, I arrived home to find that, just as her message had informed me, Adachi was indeed still at work.

“Locked…”

The door handle had told me all I needed to know. I used my key to unlock the door, kicked it open lazily, and walked inside. After I shut the door behind me, I was overcome with the desire to collapse right there in the hallway without even bothering to take off my shoes.

“It’s not like anyone can see me… No, I really shouldn’t…”

The moment I got horizontal, there'd be no guarantee that I would find the strength to get up again. Sighing, I pulled off my shoes and set them neatly in place. As I stooped to do so, however, I felt the last dregs of my energy plummet into oblivion. I couldn't lie down or I'd die, but surely I could *sit* for a bit, right? With that compromise in mind, I plopped into a sitting position on the spot, stretched my legs out, and reclined on my palms.

"Uggghhh." My brain had run out of gas, and now the engine was stalling. In other words… "I'm so *tired*," I whined to myself, for lack of an adequate metaphor.

The older I got, the harder it became just to survive in this world. These days, it was a miracle that I was managing at all. The mere *thought* of doing housework was enough to exhaust my will to live. When I was growing up, my mother had always seemed so lazy, but now I was awed by her ability to juggle it all.

I should've felt relieved to be home, but instead, I was crumbling under the realization that tomorrow I would go straight back to the office all over again. I was so sick of it; I wanted nothing more than to throw a tantrum right there in the hall, flailing my limbs like a child. But if I did that, I'd lose something of myself in the process, so I held back. Besides, if I had that kind of energy, it would be far better spent changing out of my work clothes and starting dinner.

"Gotta do it…"

I pushed myself off the floor and was surprised that I managed to get up relatively easily. *Guess I'm not that old after all.*

It had been two or three years since Adachi and I moved into this condo, and our life had progressed at what I felt was a comfortable pace—no massive leaps forward, but no major setbacks either. And while it didn't feel like a perfect situation, there was just enough spice to keep things interesting, and I was still enjoying it.

Back on my feet, I was met with the calm, still air of a dark and empty home. In truth, I didn't entirely mind the tranquility. Gazing at the far wall, I focused on my breaths, exhaling a bit of

built-up fatigue. As it slipped away, I shivered at the change in temperature.

I knew from the outset that neither would last forever, but the thought of living without them made me want to scream.

I tossed my bag into the living room, then went and changed into more comfy clothes, including a shirt I'd worn over and over for however many years. At this point, its collar and sleeves were stretched beyond recognition, and one armpit had a hole the size of my pinky. That suited me just fine, however.

Before leaving for work that morning, I'd closed the curtains; now I opened them once more, greeting the sunset as it dyed our neighborhood in its colors. I gazed out at it for a while, my hands resting on the windowsill. I hadn't noticed the scenery at all on my way here, which suggested to me that I must've trudged along with my head hung. In any case, I was glad to have a second chance to appreciate the sunset's beauty.

When I opened the window, I heard birds chirping outside. Unfortunately, I was no expert, so I couldn't identify them by ear. But they weren't crows, at least. Maybe my animal-loving little sister would know what they were. I could still remember the encyclopedias back at our parents' house... I could only imagine what had happened to my bedroom since.

"Now, then..." I passed through the living room to the kitchen, pulled the barley tea from the fridge, and took a swig. "What am I making for dinner tonight?"

Adachi and I took turns cooking every day, aside from times when one of us was overloaded with other things. My "turn" had lasted a full week now, but hey, Adachi being busy with work was a good thing.

"Gotta get that money, honey..."

Singing to myself, I reopened the fridge and looked over the groceries we'd bought last weekend, searching for dinner ideas. Adachi never much cared what we ate, which made meal planning a challenge. After all, if I was going to put in the effort of cooking something, then I wanted her to like it. But no matter what I made, she always ate in placid silence, and whenever I asked for

feedback, she only ever said, “It’s good.” Asking her for meal ideas was a waste of time too, because while she’d at least attempt to consider the question, she would always reach the same conclusion: “Anything’s fine.” Really, it was more efficient to skip the conversation altogether.

Looking back, I found I sympathized with Mrs. Adachi a tiny bit. Her daughter was a handful and a half! The only thing she seemed to actively *like* was…

“Well…now I’m blushing.” That liking hadn’t changed for many years now.

“How about udon?”

“Whoa!”

When I saw the person who was suddenly standing next to me, I nearly jumped out of my skin. She responded by raising a small hand in greeting. This evening, she wore cow-print pajamas with soft horns on the hood.

Come to think of it, in real life, have I ever seen a cow with horns?

It was Yashiro, a mischievous cryptid and the resident mooch at my parents’ house, who often appeared out of nowhere hoping for a free meal.

“I didn’t know you were here!”

“Apologies for the intrusion.”

“Funny—I thought I locked the door.”

“Ha ha ha ha ha!” She jovially laughed off my comment.

I could only assume she’d phased inside through the floor. *Wouldn’t put it past her.*



“I thought I would offer a solution to your quandary.”

“Why, thank you.”

“But, of course, anything would be fine in my book.”

Yashiro’s definition of “anything would be fine” wasn’t quite the same as Adachi’s. She clicked her pale-blue teeth loudly. When I looked down at her, I felt as though she’d somehow gotten even smaller since I was in high school.

“Why udon, anyway?”

“I saw it on television this afternoon.”

“Doesn’t take much, huh?” Was this my mother’s influence at work?

Grabbing Yashiro by the shoulders, I gave her a good shake —“Whoawhoawhoa!”—until I was satisfied. Then I peered back into the fridge, taking stock of our noodles.

“If I make udon, there won’t be enough for you.”

“That is a major problem.”

Standing on tiptoe, Yashiro peeked past me, scanning our fridge’s contents from top to bottom. As soon as she spotted the chocolate on the highest shelf, she jumped up and lunged for it—but I reflexively swatted her hand away, knocking it straight to the floor.

“You’ve gotten better, Shimamura-san.”

I smirked proudly. “Heh heh heh.” Really, I probably should’ve been concerned that Yashiro had just jumped two meters off the ground like it was nothing, but I decided to ignore it. With one hand on her shoulder to keep her in place, I continued to brainstorm. “Okay, uh, what’d you have for lunch today?”

“I partook of a single peach.” Not very helpful.

I pulled out the leftover rice from last night and squinted down at it. “Guess I could just make fried rice.” When I was growing up, that was what my mother always defaulted to when she was out of better ideas. Not much rice was left in the

container, but I could make up for that by adding a bunch of other ingredients.

“Yay!” Yashiro cheered, just as she would have for any other meal.

“Have we got miso soup to go with it? Yep, found the mix… Okay, what else…?”

“I shall set the table!” Grabbing three sets of chopsticks from the cutlery drawer, she toddled off. It was a considerate gesture, albeit a tad premature.

“You’ve learned how to help out, huh? I’m proud of you.”

“Heh heh heh. Little is always asking for my assistance.”

Grinning smugly, she set the chopsticks neatly in front of each chair. I watched for a moment, then laughed, slouching. “How is she, anyway?”

“What do you mean?”

“Um…” For a moment, I wasn’t sure how to rephrase the question. “Does she give you lots of treats?”

“I am indeed well-fed.”

“Glad to hear it,” I said with a laugh, mildly concerned for my sister’s wallet. “Will you set some spoons out too?”

“Okey dokey!” Yashiro ran around the kitchen on her stubby little legs, plopping silverware onto the table and dashing right back to me. Her gaze was…expectant.

“What?”

“When I assist Little, she always gives me a reward.”

“Really, now…”

“Hint, hint!”

I get it, thank you. I stared down at her for a moment, then reached downward and ruffled her hair.

“Ho ho ho!” I thought she’d demand more, but surprisingly, that seemed to be enough for her.

“Hmmm…” Now I felt like a cheapskate, so I decided to give her a piece of candy too.

Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.

“You’re supposed to suck on it!” *That way it lasts longer!*

With nothing left to help with, she began wandering aimlessly around the kitchen.

“Hey, uh, you’re kind of in the way.”

“I am?”

“Go watch TV or something.”

As I steered Yashiro out of the kitchen, she raised both hands and squealed, dashing straight to the couch. There, she flopped down, grabbed the remote, and started channel surfing, only stopping when she spotted a food commercial. *Predictable.* Then again, knowing her, she could probably read the wavelengths of a static screen if she really wanted to.

“Is Adachi-san working late tonight?”

“Yeah. Just a little. She takes her job really seriously.”

Not that I *didn’t* take my job seriously, but given that Adachi had worked part-time all the way through high school, she was clearly used to putting in effort consistently. Her salary was higher than mine too, so whenever it was her turn to do the chores on top of work, I couldn’t help feeling like a bit of a mooch.

When we’d first decided to move in together, we discussed everything—where we would live, whether one or both of us would get a job, even the size of our refrigerator and the style of our dining table—because if we didn’t, Adachi would just shrug and say that she was fine with whatever I wanted. She had no qualms about me making all her life choices for her. Not that she really *needed* to have qualms about that, I supposed.

Once her TV show had come to an end, Yashiro soon started snoring on the couch. My sister had once described her as “a cat in human form,” and I was inclined to agree. Whenever she had a chance to nap, she took it. That said, I was in no position to talk… although, as an adult, I obviously could no longer sleep whenever I wanted. Except on weekends.

“The other day, I slept in until 2 p.m., and Adachi was so flabbergasted…”

“How very slothful of you, Shimamura-san.”

“Says the girl who’s face down on my couch right now.” *You’re also supposed to be asleep.*

I figured I might as well prep dinner as much as possible, since there was still time before Adachi got home, so I peeled an onion, diced it up, and started frying it. This was the way my mother always made fried rice, and now it was the way *I* made it—the sort of trifling quirk inherited not through anything so grand as blood, but merely through human connection.

“It smells delicious already.”

“Yeah.”

“Zzzz…”

“Either nap or talk. You don’t get to do both.”

Was she doing that thing where half of her brain slept while the other half was active? I had heard that that was possible for certain bird species, and if birds could do it, maybe other creatures could too.

Once dinner was prepped, I sat down on the couch and tossed a light blanket over Yashiro, who lay next to me. One side of my body felt oddly heavy, as if all my fatigue had migrated there, and I tilted sideways onto the armrest. With my mouth dangling half-open, I zoned out and admired the slanted view of the sunset through the window. The slightest change in perspective sent our ordinary town soaring into space—like a game I was playing with nothing but my own two eyes.

“That looks like the color of curry, doesn’t it?” Yashiro remarked. I wasn’t sure what she was looking at, considering that her eyes were closed.

“*Curry?*” I repeated wryly. The kid wasn’t beating the “glutton” allegations anytime soon. More importantly, the sky wasn’t quite as dark as curry, so I offered an alternative. “That’s what they call a ‘caramel-colored’ sky.” Or sometimes “candy-colored,” although I

wasn’t sure why. Maybe as a reference to cotton candy, if I had to guess.

“Really?”

“Really really.”

“Very well. Caramel is tasty too.”

“Is that all you ever think about?”

I poked the sole of her tiny little foot. *Squish.*

“Zzzzrrrggg…” Now even her snores were starting to sound weird. Was her imitation of a human really this bad, or was that weirdness simply her default state?

With the setting of the sun, I inevitably ran out of things to do. How would my younger self have spent this time…? After a moment of reflection, I decided I might as well take a nap myself. The moment I started lifting my feet onto the couch, however, it occurred to me that I was acting like a 1950s housewife waiting for her husband to come home. The thought didn’t sit well with me. But if I wanted to stay awake until Adachi got home, then I couldn’t stay seated.

Rising to my feet, I started doing whatever random radio-calisthenics exercises I could remember. Before I knew it, Yashiro had joined me, matching my movements with her eyes still closed.

“One, two, three, four…”

“How do *you* have these memorized?”

“I do them with Little all the time.”

“Oh, wait, I think I remember that.”

When we were kids, there had been times during summer break when my sister came home from the radio-calisthenics venue dragging Yashiro with her. Of course, these days, she clearly didn’t need to be dragged. As I watched her strange, floaty motions, I felt like a refreshing drop of cold, crisp water was trickling into my chest.

Later that night, after I’d killed enough time (and my drowsiness to boot)…

“Ah. She’s returned,” Yashiro announced, interrupting her umpteenth nap to open one eye.

“Wait. Really?”

At this point, I didn’t bother questioning how Yashiro could possibly sense such things; past experience had taught me that she simply *could*. Sure enough, as I rose to my feet, the doorbell rang. *If only Yashiro could learn to do the same thing,* I thought, heading to the entryway.

“Welcome home!”

“Thanks.”

It was nearly eight o’clock by the time my hus—er, Adachi—came home. She was much earlier than she had been the previous night, however, and seemed much less exhausted. Swatting her bangs out of her face, she let out a breath.

“You had a long day today, huh?”

“What, like you didn’t?”

Smiling faintly, she took her shoes off and lined them up next to mine. Only when our shoes were side by side did I realize that hers were slightly larger. *It’s not like any part of my body is bigger than Adachi’s, though, right? Ha ha ha. Well, except maybe my heart.* Considering all those years I’d spent caring for my younger sibling, I hoped that was one area where I beat her by a landslide, but…

“Hmmm… Not sure…”

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

“Oh, nothing!” Forcefully changing the subject, I took Adachi’s briefcase. *Dang, this thing’s heavy.* “Are you tired?”

“Yeah.” She nodded without hesitation. Then she froze for a moment, her eyes darting. At last, she looked back at me, blinking rapidly.

“What…?”

“Er, I mean…! I-I’ll never get tired of coming home to…you…!”

It was clearly a line she’d thought up on the spot, then gotten too embarrassed to finish. I found it oddly energizing. “Oh yeah?

Then let’s hear your catchphrase.”

“Huh?!”

Was that really such a surprising request when, by my estimation, we repeated this exchange on a near-weekly basis? Adachi stared down at the floor, processing. Then, finally, she looked up…and put her arms around me.

“Wha—?”

“Upsy-daisy!”

“Whoa!”

“I’m doing just peachy, girlfriendo!”

Grinning from ear to ear, she’d hoisted me up into the air. I felt her firm muscles against my back and giggled, kicking my dangling feet. At this point in our relationship, it only took a scant few words to make us smile.

After setting me back down, she laughed weakly. “See? Just peachy.”

“Gee, sorry to tucker you out like that,” I replied, pretending to pout as I felt her energy rejuvenate me. “Am I really that heavy?”

“N-no! At least, I don’t think so! I don’t know!” she blurted out, then turned and strode away. When I gave chase, she broke into a run; to prove I was no slouch, I followed suit. Really, I was just relieved to know that she wasn’t completely drained.

“Welcome home,” Yashiro greeted her from the couch.

Adachi stopped short. “Oh. You again.”

“Yes. Good evening.”

She eyed the little girl’s bright-blue hair. “Were you eavesdropping on us?”

“‘Just peachy, girlfriendo’!” Yashiro responded. Then I heard a lunging sound, followed by, “Ho ho ho! You may lift me too if you like.”

“Pass.”

Despite Adachi pinching her cheeks, Yashiro was still smiling. Meanwhile, I set Adachi’s briefcase down. I was glad to see that

she and Yashiro were on better terms lately. “Go get changed while I make dinner.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

She walked off to the bedroom, leaving Yashiro standing there with her face all stretched out like a drawstring bag. The little alien toddled to the dining table, took a chopstick in each hand, and posed. “*Shing!* I am prepared.”

“Fix your face while you wait.”

“Oops.”



At my prompting, she began massaging her cheeks back into shape. *Is she made of clay or something?* Shrugging it off, I started making the fried rice.

“Come to think of it, Little has been learning to cook as well.”

“Wait. She has?”

“In order to make delicious treats for me.”

“Lucky you.”

“Yes. I look forward to it!” she exclaimed, beaming.

That sister of mine must really love this kid, I thought. When she was in grade school, the two had seemed like cute little besties, but now they were more like…siblings, maybe? I could hardly imagine what their relationship would evolve into next, given another five or ten years. After all, however old my sister got, I was pretty sure Yashiro would stay exactly the same… My vision of the future was riddled with holes, like Swiss cheese, leaving much to ponder as I cooked dinner.

That was when Adachi walked in, having changed clothes and put away her things.

“So how’s overtime been going?” I asked.

“It’s mostly over now,” she answered as she sat down at the table. After a quick glance at the food, she looked back at me. “I’ll cook for us next week.”

“I look forward to that as well!” Yashiro remarked, already stuffing her face with rice. Adachi shot her a weird look, but Yashiro carried on eating, smacking her lips loudly.

“Ha ha ha…” Averting my gaze, I laughed awkwardly. Yashiro used to be like another little sister to me, but our age gap had widened so much that it kind of felt like she was our daughter. “No, no, no.” Surely, *daughter* was pushing it. Yashiro and I looked nothing alike—particularly our hair.

“What?” Sensing my gaze, Yashiro looked up, her spoon halfway to her lips.

“Nothing. How’s it taste?”

“Like destiny.” That, I had learned, was her way of declaring her satisfaction. “In fact, it reminds me of Mama-san’s cooking.”

“You think so? Hmm… Well, I guess that makes sense.”

This was a flavor I’d grown up with, after all. Perhaps one would assume that I’d gradually adjust my cooking to suit Adachi’s tastes, but Adachi didn’t really *have* tastes to begin with. Aside from bitter foods—which she avoided—she ate everything in total silence. It was similar to the way she behaved around other people.

“How’s it taste?” I asked again, this time to Adachi.

“Uh, good,” she replied—so flatly, I felt myself smile in exasperation. A beat later, she gasped, realizing something. She looked up. “Like…d-destiny!”

Thanks for reading the room, but… “No need to talk like this twerp,” I replied, giving the twerp in question a little smack over the head. Yashiro was so engrossed in her food, she simply glanced around the table, then forced a laugh. Sometimes she struck me as weird in a completely different way—like she was tossing out a premade response that didn’t quite fit.

Before long, the three of us finished eating.

Yashiro raised her hand. “I shall now return home,” she announced. I’d expected this, of course. She couldn’t spend the night here, because my sister would start to miss her…or so she always claimed.

“Give my sister my regards, okay?”

“And how do you regard her?”

“It’s a figure of speech… Never mind. When you see her, just say, ‘Regards.’”

“Okey dokey!”

My sister was going to be *so* confused. I certainly would’ve been. “And be careful on your way home.”

“Yes, I know.”

“That means you need to watch out for pedestrians. Got it?”

Assuming she planned to run straight home to my parents' house, she was liable to crash into someone. Or get snatched up by creeps. Either way, the people around her were more of a danger to her than she was to them.

And so, off she ran, without the slightest pretense that she'd visited for any reason other than a free meal. I suspected that, when she got back to my parents' house, she would eat dinner there too. All she ever did was eat and sleep all day, like a gorilla, except really cute… Not that regular gorillas *weren't* cute, but…

"What am I thinking about…?" Frowning, I walked back to the living room to find Adachi sitting slumped against the couch. "Adachi?"

"Huh…? Oh, sorry. I zoned out," she replied, sitting up straight. Once her belly was full, her fatigue must've taken over.

My gaze wandered bashfully for a moment. Then I sat down next to her and gently guided her head and shoulders into my lap, where she settled without protest. "I don't know if this'll help you feel better, but it's worth a try," I explained as I ran my fingers through her hair. The Adachi I'd once known would've gotten flustered by now, but tonight, she seemed to lack the energy for that. Her eyes tracked my movements calmly for a while before falling still.

"It's…very soothing."

"Glad to hear it." Her word choice likewise put me at ease, and I decided not to think about the pile of dishes in the kitchen sink.

As I caressed her with all the gentle affection of a back rub, her eyelids appeared to grow heavy, and her eyes closed. Then her lips moved—clumsily, like she was talking in her sleep. "How are you…doing at work?"

"Mmm…fine, I guess? It's business as usual." That was all I could really say, since I hadn't achieved anything noteworthy. I essentially did the bare minimum at work; it was no different from when I was in school.

"That's good."

“Yeah.”

As we chatted back and forth absently, I wiggled my feet. A moment of silence followed. For a second, I thought maybe Adachi had fallen asleep, but she evidently hadn’t thrown in the towel quite yet. “There’s probably a better way to ask, but…I guess I’ll never be good at talking,” she muttered, scoffing at herself.

“Nah. I think you’ve improved a lot over the years.”

“Really?”

“You don’t remember what you used to be like? Hoo boy.” Thinking back, I could probably have named an awkward incident for every star in the sky. Those memories made me laugh out loud.

“Hey. What’s so funny?”

“They were good times, that’s all.”

“Look… I admit, I was a bit of a mess back then, but…”

“A *bit*?” I repeated incredulously.

She fell silent, as if pretending to be asleep, and I couldn’t help giggling at her brattiness. In all this time, the fire of her passion hadn’t dimmed in the slightest, and thus I was content to wait as long as she needed.

When she next spoke, she changed the subject with what looked like tremendous effort, forcing her lips to cooperate. “Let’s stay focused on our careers for now… But once things calm down, we should go somewhere again.”

“On another trip?”

“Yeah.”

Another journey with Adachi to a distant land of our choosing—a metaphor for our relationship.

“To be honest, I don’t care where we go,” she said.

“I know.”

“What matters most is that I’m with you, Shimamura.”

“Mm-hmm.”

I suspected that, if Adachi ever went on a solo vacation, she wouldn't enjoy a minute of it. In fact, it was difficult to imagine her feeling positively about anything that wasn't me—which admittedly sounded arrogant, but I'd seen enough of her emotions firsthand to know it wasn't all that far-fetched. She and I were connected at the fingertips.

"Maybe we should go out somewhere next weekend," I suggested. That would be like a stepping stone to a bigger vacation.

"Where...?" she asked sleepily.

"Anywhere is fine with me! Where would you want to go?" I asked in turn, despite knowing that she probably wouldn't have an answer.

In high school, it had been Adachi who spontaneously invited me on a trip abroad. For better or worse, she was always quick to take the initiative... Come to think of it, that kind of mindset would've been a great help to me right about now.

After another long moment of silence, I looked down to see her eyes and lips both firmly closed. "Guess she's asleep." Gently, I brushed her long hair out of her face. With my hand blocking her face from view, she almost looked like a teenager again.

Whenever I reflected on the day we met, it felt impossibly distant, yet only a single step away. Strangely, I couldn't seem to settle on one or the other. Maybe that was because the two of us had walked this long road side by side.

So where would we end up?

I'd asked myself that question dozens of times, and when Adachi first proposed that we move in together, I'd asked myself yet again. Ultimately it didn't matter, though, because it turned out that I was willing to follow her just about anywhere.

***

"Weren't we going to go (just about) anywhere, my dear Adachi-chan?"

“I’d rather stay right here today.” The mumbled reply came from an almost suffocating proximity. She was sitting between my legs, facing forward, her hair brushing against my cheek.

“I see.” *Well, if that’s what she wants.*

That Sunday, we hadn’t yet set foot outside our condo. We were cuddled up on the couch, whiling away the time. And when I asked her what she wanted to do, her answer was that she wanted to make me her personal recliner.

I glanced at the empty spot next to us. This couch was more than big enough for two people to sit side by side, so with both of us cuddling in one seat, it seemed downright oversized…or perhaps we were simply being space-efficient. When we first sat down, Adachi had hunched to avoid crushing me, but now she was so exhausted that she entrusted me with her full weight, and I pressed my lips against her shoulder.

There was plenty of time left in the day; the sun had barely risen into the sky. For some strange reason, that thought filled me with warmth. The downside, however, was that the May weather was warm enough on its own, so in a way I felt like I was being smothered by an affectionate Labrador. If I said that aloud, would Adachi get mad at me?

“Like a dog…” The words slipped out unconsciously. *Oops.* I had a bad habit of speaking without thinking.

“What?”

“I said, um…I like dogs. They’re cute.”

“Oh…uh…yeah.”

She didn’t sound very enthused, which came as no surprise. Was having only one interest in the entire world easier? Or was it miserable? Either way, I had the power to shape Adachi’s entire life, and it was a big responsibility.

There wasn’t much else to say about dogs, so I just sat there and zoned out—that is, until Adachi attempted to continue the conversation.

“Do you ever think about getting a dog?”

“Mmm…” Before I could stop it, the ghost of an old friend appeared before me. I waited until he turned to look at me, then gently closed my eyes. “This place doesn’t allow pets.”

“Okay, but what if it did?”

“Even then, I don’t think I’d want one. It’s too hard to say goodbye.” In the past, I would’ve done anything to avoid answering this question, but with Adachi, I was honest. “Nothing is forever, and it sucks.” That was why I fought so hard to ensure that things always ended on a high note—even if it meant straight-up lying to myself.

I combed through Adachi’s hair, the faintly chilly strands gliding between my fingers.

“But if everything always stayed the same”—Adachi’s head swayed slightly—“I never would’ve known that saying goodbye could be hard at all.”

She turned to look at me.

“No matter what, I’m glad I met you, Shimamura,” she declared as her cheeks began to flush, her face like a pitcher slowly filling with scarlet liquid. “I…I love you.”

There was something beautiful in the way she self-destructed. At this point, it was like an art form unto itself.

“Th-thanks?”

Did she think I wouldn’t get flustered, considering that we were close enough for strands of our hair to intertwine? Then again, with her power, she could fluster me from any distance. She stared at me, waiting patiently for me to carry out her unsaid order, and as I met her gaze, I did so:

“I love you too. The same as I always have.” As usual, I chose to conclude with the poetry of forever.

However, Adachi wasn’t satisfied. “Just ‘the same’?”

“What?”

“Well…I kind of wish you loved me *more* than before.”

“Greedy girl, aren’t you, Adachi-chan?”

But maybe that was what made our life together worthwhile. After all, if I wanted to stay in the same place perpetually, that was what memories were for.

"Going forward, I pledge to do better." *To think more of you… and the road ahead of us.* "Sound good?"

"Yeah." She seemed pleased, despite my flippant tone.

When I saw that serious look in her eyes, though, I felt the urge to make it silly. "Plus, I mean…one dog is enough for a lifetime, don't you think?" *If we got another, she'd get jealous! Ha!*

"Wait…are you talking about *me*?" Adachi asked. She pointed at herself, eyes wide with confusion.

"Ha ha ha!"

She pouted in annoyance at my laugh. "I'm nothing like a dog."

At one time, I'd always imagined her with a wagging tail. Even now, I could sometimes picture her with droopy ears. "You were so cute back then…"

"What about now?"

Caught off-guard, I very nearly blurted out the thought I'd just had about her droopy ears. "Huh?"

"Am I not…cute anymore?"

When I looked down at the sad puppy dog in question and saw her gazing back anxiously, I couldn't help but chuckle. "You're *adorable*."

As I stroked her hair, she closed her eyes and accepted it in silence. Given her personality, it felt so *wrong* for her to be taller than me, yet there was something cozy about the contrast.

"This is kind of nice."

We already had a pet mooch, and believe it or not, I was fairly content with that. After all—though I couldn't prove it—I was reasonably confident that Yashiro wouldn't die before I did, and that thought put me at ease. I needed at least one person to outlive me so that, after time's long, winding river wore away everything else in my life, I wouldn't have to feel alone. Again,

there was no proof that I'd live longer than everyone else. Since I slept more than most, though, I suspected that it was a possibility.

I waited for Adachi to face forward, then spoke. "Sometimes I feel like…the point of meeting someone is to try to make something of it. And I'm not just talking about you and me."

Every now and then, I found myself gripped with stone-cold conviction that sent shivers down my spine, urging me to leave my mark on the world.



“Uhhh…”

I knew I needed to say something more. For her part, Adachi offered nothing but plain puzzlement. To be fair, the desire I’d voiced probably didn’t make sense to someone who only ever lived in the moment. Still, that was something I dearly admired about her.

“On second thought, never mind.”

Shrugging it off, I went back to burying my face in Adachi’s shoulder, eyes squinting in the sunlight. Outside our window, the skies were still clear and blue.

***

“What’ll it be today…?”

Later that evening, I stood at the fridge with my arms folded, pondering aloud. As I did, I heard…

“How about some nice, cold hiyamugi noodles?”

“You again?” And this time, she’d manifested out of thin air onto my shoulders. But I hadn’t even noticed that she was there until she spoke. “You sure love noodles, hm?”

“I love *all* food.”

“Good. That makes things easy.”

Sky-blue motes wafted like spores from her weightless body. When I caught one on my finger, it melted, perhaps from my body heat. *Is her whole body made of these?* I had yet to witness the vast reaches of the universe and surely never would, but for a moment I paused to reflect on it.

“For lunch today, I partook of an apple.”

“Didn’t ask.”

She shimmied down my body to the floor, then looked back up at me, her eyes more sparkly than ever. “Oh ho! It seems that you have decided.”

Were those eyes all-seeing, or was I simply this obvious? I nodded. “I want to make something Adachi might like.”

Giving her more things to love—more things to think of whenever she thought of me—was my goal from now on.

“Yay!” Yashiro raised both hands into the air. She seemed to do so purely on reflex; still, something about it felt a tiny bit encouraging.

***

“If I had to choose, I would say you more closely resemble Shimamura-san.”

“Oh yeah? You think so?”

As Yashiro continued last night’s story in bits and pieces, I finished packing up, then stuffed her into my oversized knapsack. That sounds nuts, but she really did fit; only her head poked out from the top. When I’d asked her whether she was okay with it, she’d said that was better than having to walk. *You sure it’s not cramped or anything? Oookay then.*

Although the knapsack was nearly bigger than I was, I heaved it onto my shoulders—before promptly remembering something and setting it back down.

“Huh?”

“Well, I don’t want you to hurt yourself if you fall.” As I spoke, I set a helmet on her head—yellow, the front labeled with a name I didn’t recognize. As the helmet slid over her hair, a cloud of motes rose into the air.

“Much obliged.”

I didn’t know what that meant, but it sounded like a thank-you, so I nodded. “Mm-hmm.” Then I slid the knapsack back onto my shoulders and set off for real this time, pedaling hard.

Since gasoline was so scarce these days, a bicycle was a valuable mobility option, enabling me to travel for as long as my physical stamina allowed. When the tires inevitably went flat, I’d

find a new bike and keep going. How many had I gone through at this point? I remembered the red frame of my first, but none of the ones that came after. I traveled on foot for as long as it took to find a working bike, rode it until it broke down, then went back to walking…over and over and over, never staying too long in one place.

At first, the bike juddered weakly over the cracks in the pavement, but over time its glide smoothed steadily. With each bump we hit, a fresh wave of blue motes washed over me from behind—yes, even though we were moving forward. The physics of that didn't make much sense to me. My gaze followed the motes' trajectory into the stagnant tangerine sky as they seared the clouds and faintly enveloped all that was left behind.

"It would appear that this planet has a caramel-colored sky."

"'Caramel'?" I repeated.

"Doesn't that sound tasty?"

Yashiro was clearly busy entertaining herself. I usually understood what she said, but every now and then she'd toss out a word I hadn't heard before. Some language from some other planet, maybe. In any case, this so-called "caramel-colored" sky served as the constant backdrop for endless ruins and overgrown foliage, all painted a shade of sunset that made me want to turn away on sight.

The world was crumbling.

"It is also the color of curry… To this day, I don't think anyone will ever make better curry than Mama-san."

"Oh no?" I had no clue what she was talking about, but that sounded like a nice memory. However cheerily she spoke, I heard the slightest contrasting inflection in her voice. "You said all your stories take place on some other planet, right?"

"Indeed. The one I visited before I came here."

"You're really on a whole other level." If you took her at her word, she'd traveled across the galaxy all on her own like some kind of alien. "Okay, prove to me that you're from outer space."

"Shall I take you there?"

“Mmm…no thanks.” *Not if there’re more of you out there. I have enough trouble as it is foraging for your meals.* “What about me resembles her, anyway?”

“The fact that you feed me.”

Was that her way of calling me an easy mark? “That’s all you’ve ever cared about, huh?”

“‘That’ being what?”

“Eating.”

“Ah, yes. I get that a lot.” I could practically feel her thrust her chest out proudly.

“Well, you do you, I guess. I’m not judging.”

“It is not the first time I have heard that either.”

“Who’d you hear it from? That girl I resemble?”

“Indeed.”

“Hm.”

Once again, I found myself wishing I could meet that girl—but, since that wasn’t possible, perhaps that wish was what drove me to hunt for other people on this planet instead.

Fortunately, the roads were more than safe enough for mindless chatter along the way. The fauna had dwindled to the point that the whole planet was little more than a botanical garden.

But though I’d started this journey alone, there were now two of us. And while Yashiro wasn’t especially helpful in most circumstances, I suspected her value lay in her stories of another planet. The girls she spoke of were so familiar to me, they somehow felt like the first friends I’d ever made.

“An easy mark from 3,700 years ago, huh?”

“Perhaps it was 37,000 years ago.”

“Oh, come on.” To me, that seemed like a huge discrepancy, but perhaps it wasn’t to her.

“I distinctly remember the three and the seven.”

“How the hell do you count…?”

In response, she whipped her little hands around the sides of my face to show me “three” and “seven,” respectively. As for how she could possibly show the number seven with just one hand—it was written on her palm, obviously.

“Anyway, really makes you think, huh?”

“I beg your pardon?”

Considering that those girls had lived millennia ago, well… “They’re long gone, aren’t they?” I asked, purposely choosing a more indirect turn of phrase.

Since I’d lived my whole life alone, I didn’t really understand what it was like to lose someone. That said, I’d seen the old footage with all those people in it, and I couldn’t pretend I was unmoved by it. As I reflected on that, the spinning bicycle tires whistled a soft note.

“Indeed.” That was the extent of her reaction—calm and collected, as always.

My gaze absently wandered upward. Sometimes I wondered whether this alien felt emotions at all.

“I must say, they are proving quite difficult to find, aren’t they?” she asked.

“I’ve seen traces of activity here and there. We should surely bump into someone any day now.”

We came upon a brief slope where a jagged chunk of earth rose away from the rest, and my voice tensed with my legs. Leaning forward and clinging to the bike for dear life, I propelled us upward, enduring and enduring until at last we reached the top.

“Uggghhh! I just want to find another human!”

Pulling my feet away from the pedals, I stretched out my legs and let gravity pull us down the other side. The stagnant, sweltering air began to flow at last, blasting hotly through my hair.

“Ho ho ho! But you have me!” the decidedly inhuman creature insisted.

“A human whose face isn’t freakishly stretchy, then!”

“What will you do when you find one?”

“I dunno.” At the very least, I *wouldn’t* stretch their face out—probably. “It just feels like I need to meet someone, or else… nothing will ever happen in my life.”

Granted, maybe that was just what I told myself in order to keep going. As for what I’d do when the time came—well, I’d take my cues from my gut. After all, there was no guarantee that I’d find any other survivors at all.

Our ancestors had landed on this planet, cultivated it, built homes for themselves, then apparently decided it was “unsuitable”—unfit to sustain life, if I had to guess. Thus, the last dregs of humanity had abandoned us. Now all I wanted was the chance to connect with someone before we went extinct.

“Why’d you come to this crappy world, anyway…?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You said your last planet was teeming with life, right?”

Sure, it might’ve felt claustrophobic if so many people were crammed together in the same place. But they wouldn’t have to stay on the move—they could settle down and build a community with one another. Then it occurred to me: Was the loss of those dear neighbors perhaps what had driven my companion away?

At last, she spoke. “Well, you see…I made a deal with Shimamura-san.”



Shima



Chapter 2:
Shima

AT THIS POINT, I wasn't sure whether I was searching for humans or just bicycles.

This region was particularly overgrown, compared to the cities—lush wilderness untamed by human hands, thriving freely. Maybe this planet was more stable without so many humans on it.

Those were the sorts of thoughts that might have crossed my mind as I scanned the spot for my quarry. To keep myself grounded, I shot occasional glances over my shoulder at the massive tree I had designated a landmark. Behind it, I saw that perpetual caramel-colored sky. The clouds had split off in all directions, as if fleeing the sunset.

"Doo doo dooooo…daaah da da daaah…doo doo dooooo…ho ho ho…"

"Ho…?" I stopped short, then yanked Yashiro out of my knapsack and set her on the ground.

"What is the matter?"

"I think it's time you do some walking for a change."

"Why is that?"

"Because I said so." Read: Because I could tell she was taking it easy.

"Oh, very well."

She toddled along beside me. Not once had I ever seen her get breathless or even break a sweat. She simply never lost her sparkle. Still, puzzling over every little mysterious detail was too tiring, so at some point I'd started shrugging that off.

How long ago had I started traveling with this unidentified life-form? Sometimes, I suspected it would feel a lot more poetic if she were a dog instead. Then again, dogs couldn't hold a conversation, so maybe this *was* the better deal.

“Incidentally, where are we headed?” she asked after we’d walked for a while.

“I don’t know exactly. Just wherever there’s a bicycle.”

In search of a replacement for the bike I had ridden to death, I wandered deep into the forest, where the trees there seemed to absorb all wind, leaving only heavy heat hanging over us. Well, I used the word “forest,” but I could see the remains of old buildings here and there, so I was pretty sure this had been a town at some point. And survivors tended to live among ruins…according to the person who’d raised me. That had been true for us, at least. Thus, I hoped I’d conveniently find an abandoned bike lying around this area somewhere.

“A bicycle, you say…?” Yashiro tottered along without giving the slightest indication that she was helping to look. “Do you need one?”

“I do.”

“I thought you said you found a place where *people* might be.”

“I did.” I felt her eyes on me as she walked, as if she were confused about my priorities. *She just doesn’t get it, does she?* “But to get there, I’ll need a bike.”

“Why?”

“So I can make a quick getaway if I need to.” On foot and mostly unfamiliar with the land, I was at a disadvantage. With a bike, however, it was much less likely that someone could catch me. But of course, I doubted Yashiro would understand any of that. “There’s no guarantee that they’d be friendly, you know?” I added. I couldn’t assume that others would share my motivations. That was just common sense.

“Wooow,” Yashiro exclaimed, though I was sure she didn’t actually give a rat’s ass. “You are truly an odd duck, Chito-san.”

“Pot, meet kettle,” I chuckled.

“I find myself uncertain as to whether you actually want to find people.”

“Ugh…”

I hated that she saw straight through me—and with that silly smile on her face. Sometimes, she could almost trick me into thinking she was a deep, introspective girl.

“Oh. I have just remembered.”

“Hmm?”

She walked a short distance from me, spun in a circle, stopped facing in a specific direction, and set off running.

“Whoa! Where are you going, alien?!”

“I’ll be baaack!”

With a wave, she retreated into the trees. I started to run after her, but her tiny silhouette slipped away into the shadows, and I sensed that I wouldn’t manage to keep up with her.

“Putting her cryptid powers to good use, I guess…”

All I could do was watch her go and wonder how she moved so fast. Standing there, I scratched my head. I didn’t have a clear reason for traveling with her; we’d bumped into each other by chance, and so here we were. Even now, I was just going with the flow.

“I suppose I could wait around for a little while.” Lowering my knapsack, I plopped down on the spot. The air temperature seemed to increase almost instantly. “It’s not like she can get very far, anyway.”

I flopped onto my back as if defeated—and, in the process, felt a light stabbing pain, possibly blades of grass biting into my cheek. As they mingled with my hair, both equally hot to the touch, I could almost hallucinate that I’d become one with the earth itself. If I stayed here long enough, perhaps I’d put down roots and never get up again.

Of course, it didn’t take anywhere near that long for Yashiro to return. She dashed through the trees without stopping, almost as if phasing through them entirely. Unlike before, her little hands were now laden with fruit.

“I get it. You remembered you were hungry?” I scoffed, smiling.

Then she walked right up to me and offered me one of the fruits.

“Huh…?” This was uncommon behavior for the little glutton, so I sat up in surprise.

“Today is the anniversary of the day we met.”

“It is?”

“I have been counting, so I am fairly certain.”

I took her gift from her hand. It was the red-skinned fruit that we always ate. “Yeah, it feels like it *was* around this time of year, huh?”

One might think that it would be difficult to track dates and seasons in a world where the weather barely changed, but somewhere in my memory I had engraved the feeling of the air against my skin. This time of year, the heat was like a sticky blanket. Shaking it off, I tilted my head back and took in everything raining down from the sky.

“Anniversaries are very important.”

“Oh yeah? Is that so?”

“So I am told.”

You don’t sound very confident. Faced with her bright smile, I exhaled. “Anniversaries, huh…?”

Muttering to myself, I bit into the fruit.

***

“Oh. It’s my birthday.”

I frankly deserved praise for noticing at all. For some reason, I tended to forget until way later every year. Were birthdays really that boring to me? What kind of birthday could possibly be boring?

“It should be flashier…like shiny gold origami paper…”

At this point, even *I* didn’t know what I meant, so I quit thinking about it. Maybe birthdays simply weren’t exciting at this

age. After all, I'd already had so many.

"Hmmm…"

And so I turned twenty.

"Wait, I'm in my twenties now? Really?"

Naturally, there was no response from the empty air, nor any proof. I pinched my cheeks, jumped in place, even swung my hips, but my body felt no different from yesterday.

"Oh well."

Scanning the calendar, I found today's date and drew a star on it. Each of its five points turned out evenly sized. *Wow. I'm an adult, all right!* I admired my perfect star for a moment, then glanced around the room, wondering what to do with myself.

It was the weekend, but I'd woken up surprisingly early; it was still morning outside my window. Squinting into the bright sunlight, I reached for my cell phone. No one had tried to contact me.

"Hunh. You'd think Adachi would have everything about me memorized," I mused quietly, making myself blush. Was I just being arrogant?

Considering that Adachi's first name was "Sakura," she deserved a spring birthday way more than I did. My name, on the other hand, was written with the kanji for "moon," so its seasonal vibe was more…autumnal, maybe? Harvest moons and all that. Then again, I liked seeing the moon's faded glow in the clear blue sky during a long summer day. Pretty cool stuff.

My thoughts carried on in a disjointed tangent until I eventually decided to have breakfast and left the room. Out in the hall, the house didn't seem any different either.

"Oh, I forgot."

I immediately doubled back to my room to grab my phone so I'd have it on hand at all times, just in case Adachi called. When I stepped in, however, I saw a little butt and pair of legs sticking out from under my blanket. *Where'd* you *come from?!*

"What are you doing?"

As if in response to my question, the legs wiggled; I grabbed her ankles and yanked her out. Dangling upside down, she gazed up at me calmly, her hair somehow defying the pull of gravity. “Nothing of particular significance.”

“Figured.”

Obviously, it was Yashiro—who else would it be? Well, maybe my mom would’ve done this to troll me… As I contemplated that possibility, Yashiro flipped onto her feet. Today, she wore a lion onesie; yesterday, it had been a chicken onesie that my sister bought her. Personally, I liked that one better.

“Good morning.”

“Yes, yes, good morning.”

“Hmm?” She squinted up at the calendar. “Today is marked with a star.”

“The star is for birthdays.”

“Wooow.” After that half-assed response, she toddled over to me. “Is it your birthday, Shimamura-san?”

“Yup. My twentieth, in fact.”

I held up two fingers; through the gap in my inadvertent peace sign, I could see Yashiro’s blue eyes. They moved slowly, like twin planets swimming through the galaxy.

“Twenty years old at last? You are still practically a baby.”

“Not as babyish as you, kid. When’s *your* birthday, anyway?” I asked offhandedly. I had to stop myself from continuing the question with “if you even have one.” Obviously, she *had* to have a birthday, even if she seemed beyond such things at times.

“My birthday? Let me think…” She started counting something on her stubby fingers, but she quickly gave up and dropped her hands. “Today is close enough.”

“Today?”

“That means we match!”

“Ha ha ha…” Watching her jump for joy, I decided not to protest.

“I shall now go brag to Little!” With that, she ran from the room, arms thrust in front of her.

“What’s there to *brag* about…?”

Having a birthday was so mundane. Now I was really starting to think she didn’t have one. Phone in hand, I headed to the kitchen.

“It’s so hot…” I’d barely walked ten feet, yet I was sweating as if it were already summer.

Then a voice from the living room flagged me down: “Hey, come here!”

Backtracking, I peered into the room to see my mother lying on her side in front of the television, cuddling a cushion, like an otter with a seashell.

When she spotted me, she bolted upright. “I hear it’s your birthday today.”

“Shouldn’t you have that kind of thing memorized, Mom?”

“Come on. I’m obviously just joking! Pfff ha ha ha ha!” When I tried to ignore her, she smacked the floor. “Come have a seat.”

“What about breakfast?”

“It can wait!”

Prompted by her obnoxious floor-smacking, I reluctantly sat down beside her.

“Now lay back.”

She grabbed my head and shoulders and pulled me toward her. Unable to struggle against her gym-honed strength, I fell sideways. My head now in her lap, I looked up at her. “What is it?”

“Doesn’t this feel like a special birthday scene?”

How should I know?

Her fingers combed through my hair to my exposed earlobe and gave it a pinch. “Happy, happy birthday!”

“Gee, thanks.”

That pinch didn't feel like a very kind gesture, but when I tried to sit up—"Hey!"—she held me down, forcing me into the celebration. (Never thought I'd have to write those words in that order, but here we are.) How long had it been since I'd last rested my head in her lap? I dreaded the thought of my little sister walking in on us—knowing her, she'd never let me live it down.

As I squirmed restlessly, my mother located my cowlick and began to twirl it.

"Could you stop?!"

"Oh—I found a gray hair."

"Pull it out!"

"No way. Keep it! It's a grown-up's badge of honor."

It certainly wasn't one that I'd ever wanted—but maybe that was the point. Not everything about growing up would be sunshine and roses. Of course, I knew my mother hadn't thought about it that deeply. The television screen in front of us displayed a news reporter standing beside a pink pig.

"You've really outgrown my lap, huh, kid?" As she spoke, she gave me a slap on the butt, which I didn't appreciate. "Twenty years… God, I feel so old." She heaved a long, heavy sigh, and for once, I couldn't quite tell whether she was joking. "So, are you going somewhere with Adachi-chan today?"

"No plans yet."

If I asked, Adachi would surely suggest something. But for some reason, I found myself waiting—wanting her to make the first move. And if midnight rolled around before I heard from her, I was prepared to forget about it until next year…at which point I'd probably do the exact same thing.

"What about you? Do you see her at the gym a lot?"

"Huh?"

"Mrs. Adachi, I mean."

"Nah, not a lot. And whenever I *do* see her, she tells me to go to hell at least twice."

"Wow. You guys are besties now."

“I know, right? Gah ha ha!” she cackled gleefully, and I started feeling a tiny bit sorry for Adachi’s mom. “We might be even closer than you and her kid.”

“Uhhh…” *Mildly concerning if true.*

“Anyway, is there something special you’d like to eat today?”

“What do you mean, special?”

“You know, a favorite of yours or something?”

“Well, there’s tamagoyaki and okonomiyaki… I also like yakisoba…”

Being my mother, of course, she obviously knew all those. Still, even though *she’d* asked the question, she didn’t sound enthusiastic about my answer. “Hm.”

“Weren’t you offering to make something?” I asked, perplexed.

“Ehhh…”

What kind of reaction is that?

“I already make those all the time.”

“So?”

“I guess I could mix ’em all together.”

Addition was seemingly the only solution her brain was capable of. “What are you, five?”

Chuckling, she rubbed my back gently, her touch soft enough to reach my soul. Then, before I could fully process my confusion, she leaned forward to look at my face.

“Something wrong?” I asked.

“Just thinking about when you were a baby.” Her smile was so familiar that I couldn’t help combing my memories in search of it. “Whenever I watched you sleep, I’d say to myself…”

“Yeah?”

“I don’t think she needs to be rich or famous…but I want her to be a thoughtful, strong girl.”

“Is that…an *Earthbound* reference?”

“Gah ha ha ha!” She dodged the question. “So *are* you strong?”

“How does it feel to be strong?”

“Is that a *Hajime no Ippo* reference?” As she spoke, she closed her eyes and smiled, then looked back at me. “If you ask me, strength feels like having the courage not to shy away from things that scare you.”

My mother seldom let herself be serious, so this was a rare birthday treat. I looked up at her, chasing that elusive ray of light; she was still smiling softly at me, as if I were her baby all over again.

“I guess that’s what I’ll strive for, then.” *Now that I’m all grown up.*

“Good.” She gave me another slap on the butt. Was I her personal drum now?

“Eh, whatever.” Just this once, I somehow didn’t get mad at her.

“Twenty years old,” she murmured again. Then she scoffed. “Lucky brat!” Out of nowhere, she yanked my hair.

“Gah!” I felt a tiny prick of pain in my scalp. “Excuse you!”

“What? You told me to pull the hair out.”

“The gray one?”

“Maybe.”

“Hey!”

As if to spite me, she brought her hand to my face and opened her fingers. Before my eyes, a single strand of hair danced down to the floor—and, yes, it was gray.

***

A long time ago, I’d read an essay someone wrote about their twentieth birthday. In it, the author claimed that, from that day on,

their whole town looked brand-new to them. I decided to test that theory for myself.

"Left, right, left..."

The streets were so empty, I felt no qualms about muttering to myself as I walked. The road to the train station looked no different from yesterday; at most, the comparative lack of clouds made the morning sun seem slightly brighter. No miraculous makeover had breathed new life into my everyday reality. Slowly, the strange feeling of accomplishment I'd experienced back home began to fade.

"Hmmm..."

I checked my phone periodically. There was still no word from Adachi—which was fine, of course. But if possible, I wanted her to remember my birthday without me having to point it out. *You can do it, Adachi!*

"Am I being high-maintenance...?" I mumbled aloud as I tucked my phone away. But arguably it was *her* fault I had these expectations. You know, due to her...um...setting me loose. Now I was worlds from my previous self, feeling things that previous self never would've dreamed of. And, without Adachi, this town was just a town.

That was when I realized: It wasn't my age that would change me. For better or for worse, it was Adachi whose ups and downs sent me on a roller-coaster ride. That was the kind of speed she was capable of—though, admittedly, she sometimes lost control and sent us both crashing headfirst into a brick wall.

I was starting to wonder whether there was any point walking around here at all. Nevertheless, my feet carried on through pure inertia, until...

"Well, if it isn't Shimama-chan!" a voice called from slightly below my line of sight—*Sorry, is that rude?* I turned to look.

It was Hino. She must've turned twenty herself this year, but she was still just as short as in high school. Clad in a red kimono, she gave me a wobbly little wave. I saw her wearing traditional Japanese clothing around town a lot more often these days;

maybe it was related to her familial responsibilities, or maybe she simply preferred it. In any case, I walked over to her.

“Got nothing to do today?” she asked.

“That’s the way all weekends should be, in my opinion.” They were meant for resting, after all.

“Fair point.”

Hino rolled up her long sleeves and folded her arms. Her hair was tied up in a bun, which suited her traditional look. She looked at the sky, shifted from side to side, then started slapping my shoulder, suggesting that she was just as bored as I was.

“I was actually gonna go for a walk before I bumped into you, Shimamama-chan,” she explained, casually adding another “ma.”

“Oh, right. Your house is in this neighborhood, isn’t it?”

“It’s only a two-minute walk until you can see it, but it’s a ten-minute walk to reach the front door.”

“Sounds like good exercise.”

As I humored her rich-girl small talk, she turned on her heel. “Since you’re here, wanna come up for a cup of tea?”



“At the Hino mansion?”

“Where else can we get free drinks? Well, I guess there’s Nagafuji’s place too.”

“Okay, then, I’ll take you up on that.” I didn’t get many opportunities to chat with Hino now that we were out of school, so I figured, *Sure, that works.*

I’d only ever been to Hino’s house once. Even then, I’d never set foot inside—but the surrounding scenery was truly unforgettable. There was so much bamboo! As we walked among the trees, the sunlight streamed down in a soft green that seemed to peel away all my impurities. When I told my mother about it later, she said she’d once had a similar experience—“I went exploring in there and nearly got myself arrested,” as she put it. Free-spirited as she could be, there were times she really needed someone to rein her in. *Do your job, Dad.*

“Is Nagafuji around?”

“Don’t be stupid. It’s *my* house.”

Yeah, that’s why I asked.

The road to Hino’s house was as breezy as I remembered. The very air felt different there, almost as if I’d wandered into a tourist resort—it was quiet and pleasantly chilly, like an invisible blanket of powdered snow. The wind carried a faint aroma from somewhere beyond the trees, and I breathed in a lungful. Ahead of me, Hino walked along idly, like it was all perfectly ordinary—because to her, of course, it was.

As it turned out, ten minutes was an exaggeration, but still, it did take a full five minutes to reach the front door. Beyond the expansive front yard, which could only be described as “picturesque,” I saw several parked cars. Without a word or even so much as a glance in their direction, Hino walked into the house, and I followed suit.

“I’m hooome!”

“Back so soon, my lady?” A middle-aged woman cleaning the shoe cupboard, presumably a household assistant, looked over

her shoulder at Hino. She noticed me standing there and quickly rose to her feet. “Forgive my impropriety.”

“It’s fine—she’s just a friend. Carry on, carry on.”

Hino patted her shoulder. Smiling wearily, the woman knelt back down. With a quick nod to her, I removed my shoes, moving to add them to the cupboard—but the woman took them from me and did it herself. I bowed to her again, to be polite.

“It feels like a whole different world here. A world with maids,” I remarked quietly as we walked down the hall.

“Dude, you said almost the exact same thing last time.”

“Did I?”

When I frowned in confusion, she snickered. “Sheesh. Your memory’s as bad as Nagafuji’s.”

“Whoa.” As we passed an open door, a little head peeked out, and I stopped short reflexively. The baby looked up at us, barely a tuft of hair on its head. “Is this your...sister?”

“Really?” Hino responded wryly. “Better that than my *daughter*, I guess... No, it’s my brother’s kid. He didn’t move out after he got married, unlike our older siblings.”

Crouching, Hino reached out a hand, and her niece (or nephew—I couldn’t tell) crawled over. She lifted the baby into her arms, where it seemed perfectly content to stare at me over her shoulder.

“Hiii,” I greeted it, raising a hand. No reaction. I lowered my hand back down awkwardly.

“Tons of big-sister energy, but no mommy vibes yet, it seems.”

“I’m not sure I want to know what either of those things mean.”

Given my relationship with Adachi, I surely had a *bit* of a mommy vibe—not that Adachi liked it much. What made the big-sister schtick any different? Evidently, it was a fine line.

The next thing I knew, a woman—probably the baby’s mother—joined us in the hallway. “I’m so sorry, Akira-chan!”

“Eh, it’s fine.”

When Hino tried to hand the baby over, however, it flared its nostrils like it was about to cry. She hastily took it back, but it scowled grumpily.

“You’re popular, huh, Auntie?”

“I *guess*…”

Under her self-deprecating grin, I could see that she was a tiny bit pleased.

Once the baby was taken care of, Hino led me to her bedroom. It was my first time ever setting foot inside. The room was easily much bigger than the one I shared with my sister, and as I glanced around, I couldn’t help wondering how one person could possibly use all the space.

Just then, an indigo floor cushion flew in my direction, spinning horizontally. I reflexively smacked it to the ground.

“I’ll go brew some tea.”

“”Kay.”

“Feel free to read my manga.”

“Will do.”

Hino disappeared back down the hallway. Across the room from the opaque *fusuma* sliding door was a *shoji*-style lattice door; when I slid it open, I found an open-air corridor surrounding a spacious courtyard.

“Whoooa,” I murmured, admiring the bright-white pea gravel. *No wonder Mom almost got arrested for trespassing—this place really* is *like a resort.*

Next, I scanned Hino’s bookcase, which contained five shelves in total. The bottom two were packed with manga, the center shelf was reserved for novels, and the second-highest held a set of thick hardcover books. At first, I thought they were encyclopedias, but not quite; I realized from the titles on their spines that they were how-to books on the art of tea ceremony and other topics pertaining to Hino’s family business. Judging by

the poor state of their bindings, each had been read and reread many, many times.

As for the highest shelf, it was stuffed messily with textbooks, from elementary-school books all the way to those for the last year of high school. *Oh man, I used to have the same music book! That takes me back.* Crouching, I peered at Hino's manga collection, running my finger along their spines.

"*Asagao to Kase-san*[1]... Sure, that works."

The books were organized in alphabetical order by title—*not* by the author's last name, which struck me as unusual. Grabbing one at random, I slid a floor cushion to the center of the room. Someone had once told me that they didn't feel comfortable unless they sat in the corner—who was that again? My eyes were on the pages in front of me, yet I dug through my memories for the answer... But before I came up with anything, Hino returned, carrying a tray.

"Your books are organized weird," I remarked, pointing at the shelves.

"Oh, yeah, Nagafuji got bored and rearranged them a while back."

"Gotcha."

Hino sat down across from me, placing the tray between us, then slid a teacup in my direction. "And *here's* our teatime snack." She picked up an open box lined with small metal tins—*konpeito* candies, if the labels were any indication—and gave it a shake.

"How very...luxurious." Particularly the tea. The scent that rose with the steam had a deep richness. Personally, I would've been fine with stuff bought from a regular store.

"This was all we had in the kitchen, other than booze."

"Oh, I'm allowed to drink. Today's my birthday." Not that I'd ever tried any alcohol.

"Wait. For real? In that case, you can have *two* of these, as a treat." She set two brown *konpeito* candies side by side.

That's it? Well, better than nothing. I reached over and picked them up.

"Come on. I'm just messing with you," Hino added, handing me the entire tin. "Have as many as you want."

"Aw, thanks." I put just one in my mouth to start—and found myself mildly surprised. "Wow. These are good."

The quality was far beyond any candy I was used to, and from the refreshing aftertaste, I suspected they were super expensive. *I'd hate for Yashiro to find out about these.*

"I think Nagafuji had the same reaction. It was a while back."

"Is that a good thing or a bad thing?" I joked, and Hino flashed her pearly whites.

We sat there in silence for a while, just drinking tea and gazing out at the garden scenery. I considered starting a conversation on a new topic, but in truth, my heart was at peace merely floating adrift in the serenity. Likewise, Hino sipped her tea at an elegant pace, as if searching for something more on the liquid's surface. Unlike mine, her every motion was perfectly practiced. We were no longer in high school, but it was still readily apparent just how differently our parents must've raised us.

So there I was, drunk on the thrill of munching on fancy *konpeito* and washing them down with fancy tea. When our cups finally ran dry, Hino rose to her feet.

"Tell me, dear Shima-san, are you better at shogi or go?"

"I'm clueless about go, but I do know how to play shogi."

As a kid, I'd played it out in the countryside with my grandpa, who'd always taken great pleasure in his landslide victories against me. Then he'd pat me on the head and tell me that I'd beat him one day.

Back in those days, it was me, my grandpa, and...

"....."

And now I was twenty, and I still hadn't beaten him.

"Shogi it is."

Hino walked to the corner of the room and retrieved a weathered yet well-built shogi board. I was no expert on antiques, granted, but I suspected it too was expensive. I ran a finger along the wood's smooth surface. Why did everything in Hino's house feel so good? Was "refined" the word I was looking for?

"I'm honestly way better at Othello," Hino remarked.

"Shouldn't we play that instead, then?"

"Ha! A worthy battle can only be fought on even ground."

"Oh, shut up."

"That was my Nagafuji impression."

After lobbing a potshot at our absent friend, Hino started lining up the pieces. To be fair, that *had* sounded like something Nagafuji would say.

Was I capable of doing an Adachi impression? Maybe not. Imitating all that energy would take a lot of effort.

I'd always liked the clacking sound the pieces made against the wood. For some reason, it reminded me of nail clippers. I briefly considered voicing that observation to Hino. I'd mentioned it to my grandfather once, but he'd just laughed at me.

"So what have you been up to, Hino?" I ventured instead, my gaze wandering along the tidy row of pawns.

"Me? I haven't been doing anything," she replied, taking one piece and moving it forward a space. Then she hunched forward, setting her chin in her palm. "Since we graduated, my life's been a whole lotta nothing. Just fishing, walking, hanging out with Nagafuji... That's about it."

"Lucky you."

"That's a modern rich girl for ya. Don't have to work to keep a roof over my head." She let out a self-deprecating laugh. "How's college, Shimama-chan?"

I couldn't help noticing that the "ma" count had gone back up to two, but I didn't mind. "Mmm, not bad. So far, at least."

"Glad to hear it."

She made each of her moves without much pause. As for me, I had a decent grasp of the rules, but I hadn't studied the game, so I didn't know any specific strategies to employ. Thus, I moved my pieces basically at random.

"How's Ada-cheechee?"

"She's…ehh…she's good."

"Fortuitous tidings indeed."

"Why ask me, though?"

"Because it's easier," she answered matter-of-factly, squinting down at the shogi board.

"I guess so…" I hadn't told her much about Adachi, but maybe she sensed our connection somehow. Still, she didn't outright ask me about it—proof, perhaps, of a good friendship. "So you guys don't have any pets?" I asked, flicking my gaze out at the yard.

"Huh? I mean, we've had some animals move into our pond, but they're not *pets*."

She said it so casually—like a house having its own pond was the most normal thing in the world. The only thing that had moved into *my* place was a blue-haired alien… On second thought, maybe I had no room to criticize.

"Given how much my family loves to travel, pets would complicate things."

"Gotcha."

"Why do you ask?"

"Just wondering." I slid my rook far across the board. After a moment of contemplation, Hino moved one of her pieces toward it. Now my poor rook was all alone and in trouble. "Oops."

"You're not thinking this through, are you?"

Smiling, I scratched my head sheepishly. *Guilty as charged.*

From there, we played two rounds, both of which I lost. Right around the time we were considering a possible third, however…

"That reminds me—didn't you say it was your birthday?"

“Yeah.”

“Hold on a sec.”

Rising to her feet, Hino walked away from our game and left the room. Taking the hint, I sat up straight as I waited for her. Sure enough, she returned with what was ostensibly a birthday present.

“You really didn’t have to…”

“Of course I did. Gifts are important, you know! Lemme think of a way to explain it…”

“Okay.”

Folding her arms, Hino murmured under her breath, shooting glances out at the courtyard beyond the lattice door. “A is for ‘awesome,’ B is for ‘bestie’…”

“What is this, kindergarten?”

“That was a joke!” Popping her thumb joint, Hino stared out at the garden. “Take the wind, for instance. We can’t see it directly, but when we notice the plants sway, we know it’s there.”

“Yeah…?” I followed her line of sight toward where the gentle breeze trailed through the carefully manicured plants.

“Well, maybe gifts are like that too. They’re side effects of the invisible human heart.” Grinning, she dropped her arms to her sides, then leaned forward and repeated, “The *invisible human heart*.”

“Oooh. Very cool,” I murmured, applauding her effort.

“I know, right?” Pleased with herself, she sat back down.

“Say that again.”

Handing over my present, she chuckled softly. “Don’t be stupid. You already know I’ve forgotten it by now.”

Yeah, figured as much.

Still, that breezy exchange was enough to stir the greenery in my chest.

***

“Man, your rich-girl mansion is something else.”

My mind and body were both so relaxed, it had evidently loosened my lips.

After treating me to a lovely lunch, Hino had (probably jokingly) suggested that we take a midday soak in the tub—to which I readily agreed. Relaxing in my towel afterward, I was so cozy that I fell asleep. Strange how something as commonplace as a post-meal bath could feel so much more refreshing here.

“One minute, I’m nodding off, and the next thing I know, the sun’s setting.” What was more, I remembered sitting in the open-air corridor, yet now I found myself lying on a bed. “Did you carry me here?”

“*Me?* Good one. No, I asked Enome-san…uh, one of the assistants.”

“How thoughtful.”

“You were out cold, by the way. She thought it was hilarious.”

“That’s really, um, shameful. My bad!” I laughed, running a hand through my surprisingly silky hair.

“You’re kind of a ditz, you know that?”

“Huh? I am?”

“See? There it is again!”

She pointed at my face, so I reached up to touch it. After that bath, my skin was as smooth as butter.

On my way out, Hino walked me to the front door.

“So I heard you’re moving away after college.”

From who? I wondered. Nevertheless, I nodded. “Depends where I get hired, of course. But, ideally, yeah.”

“Then I guess we won’t see much of each other,” she remarked offhandedly.

That was an understatement. Once I moved away, we literally wouldn't see each other at all—quite possibly for the rest of our lives. For a moment, I wasn't sure what to say.

"This is how I know we're friends. If we weren't, we wouldn't even think about saying goodbye," she continued. Then, after a pause, she scratched her cheek. "That was a sick line, huh?"

"Sure was! Encore, encore!"

"Uhhh…Shima, you're my buddy, awright!" Hino burst out laughing, and I knew that this time, she hadn't actually forgotten what she'd first said—she was just being shy.

"Close enough."

"I know, right?" With a hand on her hip, she proudly thrust out her chest. "However many years go by, it won't change the fact that we were friends here and now. If you ask me, that's enough."

"…Yeah."

She made it sound so simple, yet it shook me to the core. To me, it sounded as though she took comfort in the past's immutability—it meant that the good parts would always be there, forever enshrined.

"Well, this is it."

"Yep."

"Say hi to Adatsy for me."

With a wave, I started walking. I briefly debated whether to say, "See you around," but ultimately decided against it. After all, like she said, what we had wasn't going anywhere. And so I left her house, taking in the sight of the bamboo forest dyed amber, like waves of grain.

Just then…

"Oh!"

As if on cue, my phone buzzed—and instantly, I knew who'd messaged me.

Sure, come over, I replied. Then, still holding my phone, I stretched my hand straight out in front of me, toward the horizon.

What was this strange thrill I felt? My heart was full of sunset, pumping it straight to my wrist. As my pulse quickened, so did my breaths, until at last the ordinary sunset turned tangerine, as if heralding the arrival of a new world.

And “arrive” she did, pedaling at such a breakneck speed that I thought she might bowl me over.

“Ha *ha*!” When I saw her, I couldn’t help laughing so hard that my voice cracked.

***

That night, I opened the living room window and looked out at our yard. Compared to Hino’s, it was downright tiny but also cozy—the ideal state for the place I called home. I could’ve stood there forever, gazing absently at the distant skyline, thinking back to the words I’d heard at sunset.

Thinking back to Adachi.

My post-bath flush had faded slightly; it now resembled something akin to a toasty-warm drowsiness that enveloped me inside and out. That feeling of supreme satisfaction evidently wasn’t limited to my stomach.

“You seem rather amused,” a childlike voice suddenly remarked from overhead. A beat later, a curtain of blue particles began to rain down slowly. If she was sitting on my shoulders, I could scarcely feel it.

“And *you’ve* got pillow marks on your face.” When I looked up, those—and the light—were all I could see.

“Whenever my belly is full, I become sleepy. That is simply the way I am.”

“Pretty normal, actually.”

I pulled her off my shoulders and plopped her down beside me. She stood there without a fuss, her lion tail swaying alongside her little legs. Why did it almost seem to have a mind of its own? It was just part of the onesie, right?

“You seem rather amused,” she repeated.

Was I smiling or something? I touched my lips lightly. After a moment of contemplation, I decided that her observation was correct; apparently, I was. After all, it was impossible to think back to the way Adachi had acted today without making myself laugh. “Yeah, I guess.”

“It is good to have fun.”

A persuasive statement, coming from a girl who seemingly never stopped smiling. There simply wasn’t an ounce of negativity in her body—like she was a manifestation of everything good in the world. In that sense, maybe she fell into the same category as Hino’s house.

“What about you? Did my sister get you a gift or anything?”

“She did not believe me. Ho ho ho!” Yashiro beamed, then lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “Little is very sharp, for in truth, I do not know when my birthday is. Please do not tell anyone!”

I’d seen that coming a mile away, but I nodded nevertheless.

“That said, she did purchase me a chocolate bar.”

“Nice.” Although no piece of chocolate could be sweeter than my little sis.

“I hope tomorrow is my birthday too.”

“That’s not how your birthday works.” I poked her head wryly; she pitched sideways, squealing in delight. “Birthdays are fun because they only happen once in a *looong* while.”

“Is that true?”

“Indeed,” I replied, mimicking her voice. Then I let out a breath. “Once a year, your age goes up, and then…”

“And then?”

“And then you keep making an effort to celebrate it instead of dreading it. At least, that’s my plan.”

“Ohhh.” She didn’t sound genuinely impressed.

Chuckling, I tilted my head back and thought I felt a cold liquid flow past my cheeks and chin. I reached up to search for it, but it turned out not to be the sort of trail my fingers could track.

“And I hope I never stop…right up until the birthday before I die,” I admitted honestly, wagging my index finger. “Because when death comes for me…it’d be kind of sad to want to fight it.”

After all, that wish would be doomed to go ungranted. So I hoped I’d be ready to welcome death on my final day. Was that a weakling’s mindset? If I was strong, would I be up for anything? I was still a total wimp, so I wouldn’t know that feeling.

“Hmmm.” Her lion ears wiggled. “To be truthful, I do not fully understand.”

“I’m not surprised.”

In my opinion, an alien didn’t *need* to understand that. But that was probably what I liked about her—the ease with which she bridged the gap between herself and entire planets.

She raised her hand to make an offer. “However, if you feel you would struggle on your own, I would be happy to figure out your final day with you!”

“You would…?”

“Heh heh heh. I am a very good person, you see.” She sounded confident, if nothing else.

“My final day, huh…?” While I appreciated her kind offer, that was (hopefully) a long time from now. “Do you know when that’ll be?”

In the worst-case scenario, I could die tonight in my sleep. Nothing was guaranteed.

“Ho ho ho! At the very least, it is not today.”

“Good. That would really suck.”

Adachi and I had already planned so much. There were a lot of promises I had yet to keep. Before I died, I wanted to live happily ever after…and to share that happiness with her.

“For right now—” Yashiro lowered her hood, her faint blue sparkle illuminating the room—“I wish you a happy birthday,

Shimamura-san.”

The words hit me squarely in the face, and as always, I could tell there was genuinely sheer kindness behind them.

“You too,” I replied after a beat.

The fuzzy feeling carved out in the aftermath of our conversation compelled me to reach out to stroke her hair. It felt like my fingers were combing through moonlight.

***

In the end, I never did find a bicycle.

“What a waste of time and energy.”

“Ho ho ho!”

I heard Yashiro laugh overhead and knew she’d sneaked back into the knapsack.

“Oh well…” At least, for whatever reason, I’d received an anniversary gift. Looking at things that way, this hadn’t been a complete loss. “How many years have we known each other now?”

“Certainly fewer than three hundred.”

“I’m starting to think you can’t actually count.”

Once we were out of the forest, I readjusted the luggage on my shoulders. Ahead of us was—to no one’s surprise—more sunset, this time shrouding a meadow. Now that I thought about it, perhaps a bike wouldn’t have been much use in this area anyway.

“Time to find out what we’re in for, I guess.”

Spotting some kind of pole in the distance, I started walking in that direction. Despite my fatigue, I found I rather enjoyed the sound of the grass underfoot—*crunch, crunch, crunch*. But it also made my ankles itch, itch, itch. For a moment, I resented Yashiro for getting a free ride. Then again, she didn’t appear to own any shoes, so I’d have felt awful making her walk through this…or was

my compassion wasted on her? Not that there was anyone I could ask about that.

“Will we find people here?” she asked.

“Not sure,” I answered, craning my neck up at the massive trees that now towered over us in place of buildings. “All I know is that I saw traces that suggested that.”

For example, the grass parted to form a path—as if this area saw regular foot traffic. And *that*...well, it sort of put me on guard, making me think about exactly how many people could be around here. My memories of other people had already been sepia-tinged by the time I first set out, and so I could scarcely even remember how to act around them, since I had yet to meet a single person since then.

No, Yashiro didn’t count.

“For some reason, humans like to camp around tall things.”

“Oh?” Probably to use those things as landmarks to find their way home again, if I’d had to guess.

“I enjoy being up high, myself.”

“I bet you do, half-pint.”

The day we met, she’d fallen out of the sky from well beyond my reach—from beyond the clouds. Looking back, I should’ve been more suspicious of her. But then she’d told me she came from far away, and that gave me the crazy idea of going on a long journey of my own. One thing had led to another, and now here we were.

Or maybe I’d never really cared *what* she was. Maybe I just wanted someone to talk to under this sickly sky. Someone to keep me going. Someone to call a friend.

“At least I am taller than *you* right now.”

“I’ll make you walk, you know,” I growled.

She laughed it off, though. “Ho ho ho!”

I should’ve known that kind of threat wouldn’t work on her. *Ugh. I’m so stupid.* My heart felt as squishy as her cheeks.

“So do you have a mission here?” I finally asked, after however many years of not really thinking about it—maybe because I hadn’t stopped to contemplate my *own* journey’s purpose.

“Technically, yes.”

That was an unexpected answer from a creature who was generally useless. “Wait. You do?”

“Although I may soon achieve it.”

“Huh?” *How*, exactly?

I glanced around but couldn’t see anything out of the ordinary. Meanwhile, I heard the distant rumble of a building, then felt its collapse through the vibration under my heels.

My footsteps slowed, and I looked up. “Hey. I don’t really know who you are, but…”

“Yes?”

“Once this mission of yours is achieved, what—”

“Oh. There *is* a person here.”

“What?”

Before I could finish my question, a humanoid figure had come into view, and my voice died in my throat. Its shadow was long and thin, as if cast by the sun—surely smaller than the trees among which it was ensconced, yet to my eyes it felt so far away. While I hesitated to close that gulf, however, the figure peeled away from the sunset in my direction…accompanied by the sound of spinning tires. I instinctively stood up strict as my gaze was drawn to the—*Bicycle!*

“Um…”

I immediately picked up on confusion and discomfort in her voice. For the only time in my life, the crack and crumble of the decaying town seemed to sound in sync with the pounding of my heart.

It was a girl with dark hair. She was…quite possibly…the very person I’d been searching for all this time.

So now what?

My objective had only ever been to *find* someone. I hadn't given a single thought to what would happen after. My mind was as yellow as the sun's rays—not so blank as to be white, but sort of in the middle. For what felt like an eternity, I stood paralyzed, fully conscious for each agonizing moment—a metaphor, perhaps, for life in general beneath this unending sky.

Her shoes were worn to tatters, like mine, and she smelled like dirt. If I'd had to guess, we were around the same age. Her green-tinged eyes wavered uncertainly as she looked at me. As I gazed back into them, I found myself admiring their beauty and fumbling desperately for something to say. Then I noticed the girl's choppy, uneven hair and realized she was probably all alone, the same as me.

"Hello there!"

Only Yashiro, cozy in my knapsack, remained utterly unperturbed in this moment. In hindsight, if I wanted to make a good first impression, I probably shouldn't have brought her with me. I could already see the other girl's eyes widening.

"H-hello..."

"Indeed."

"...I, um..."

From the way she looked at the ground, I got the sense that she'd decided to ignore Yashiro. *Smart*.

"I didn't expect to find anyone here."

Those words rippled through my heart. This was everything I'd ever wanted...but I said, "Yeah. I hadn't really thought about it either." That wasn't much of an introduction, but at the same time, it was plenty.

The girl smiled stiffly, which suggested she wasn't used to it. We were reflecting our inexperience back to each other like mirrors.

With a deep breath, she finally said: "I'm Shima. What about you?"

Her voice was as cold and bracing as ice. As for me, I hadn't needed to offer someone my name since the day I'd met the unidentified life-form, so answering took me a moment.

"I'm…"



Mura



Chapter 3:
Mura

“ARE THERE OTHER PEOPLE HERE?”

“No. I’m the last one alive,” she said, smiling.

“Same. That’s why I left my home”—I looked her in the eyes—“and came here.”

“Right.”

And so here we were.

However…

What I’d failed to notice while walking in circles was the massive crater right next to the town. It looked as if a gargantuan shovel had sunk deep, then scooped up an entire chunk of land. The flow of the local river had created a waterfall there…and when the girl first showed it to me, my legs almost gave out.

“If we fall, we’re dead meat, huh?”

Looking down, I saw no sign of a basin—only inky blackness. We’d traveled here in relative silence, so the water’s roar was practically deafening.

While I plugged my ears, however, the girl simply stood gazing at the scenery. “You get used to it.”

“Really?” Taking this view for granted would be an awful shame. I peeked over the edge again. “Maybe it’d be fun to jump in.”

“No, you’d die!” she replied with an exasperated laugh.

A few days had passed since we’d first set up camp at this waterfall town. Now I found myself crouching in the dim light of a passage I suspected the girl had spent a lot of time constructing all by herself. Using a series of footholds, I was able to descend about halfway down the crater. The girl must’ve created this path out of boredom or curiosity, because if all she’d wanted was water itself, she could’ve gotten it from the river more easily.

Maybe this giant hole contained some great secret about our planet. Alas, at the moment, I didn't really care. And after three or four perilous adventures climbing down mega-sketchy rope ladders and across impossibly narrow stones in the cliff face, I had to admit...

"Yeah, I'm used to this."

Behind the flowing water, a rock wall jutted forward slightly, creating a little roof. I was now crouched in that niche, the roar of the falls automatically filling my ears. Every time I got splashed, I felt as though I were submerged in an ice bath up to my chin.

Lately, whenever I had free time (not that I ever really *did*, hard as it was to live on this planet), I came here and zoned out. To be blunt, I wanted an escape from it all—a break from survival.

"I shouldn't slack off..."

But that self-criticism didn't weigh nearly as heavily on me as my fatigue did. Once I relaxed, it was impossible to get back up, as if the waterfall pinned me down.

"Oh. There you are."

For some reason, not even the waterfall could drown out that little cryptid's voice. She walked right up and crouched beside me. Her sparkle seemed all the more fleeting here in the dark.

"It's not safe here, you know!" I shouted so that she'd hear me over the water.

"It isn't?" Yashiro replied at her normal volume.

"If the rocks cave in, you'll be crushed flat!" I pointed upward.

She craned her head back to look. "Hmmm..."

Yashiro leapt into the air—soundlessly, almost like she was floating—and touched the ceiling, then landed and sat back down like it was nothing. "It appears that we will be all right for the time being."

"W-we will...?!"

She showed me her wet palm, her fingertips serving as little blue lamps illuminating her pale skin. When I touched them, they were as cold as the waterfall itself.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“Nothing much! Just zoning out!”

“I see.”

Since she seemed to hear me just fine, I decided to forego the shouting. “What about you?”

“I have finished my mission, so I think I will move on,” she answered offhandedly. “This is goodbye.”

“Oh…”

It was so sudden.

“Well, okay,” I mumbled automatically, before I’d had time to decide whether it actually *was* okay. “That reminds me—what *was* your mission, anyway?”

“To guide you, Chito-san.”

Me? I pointed at myself, confused.

Yashiro nodded. “I wanted to uphold my end of the bargain, but of course, I knew you would inevitably find her,” she explained quietly. This was something she’d mentioned previously, as I recalled. “For, you see, you were born to meet her.”

My gaze shifted upward, in the vague direction of wherever *she* was right now. “For real?”

“For realsies.”

This proclamation was significantly weightier than the connection itself felt. I barely even knew how to *talk* to that girl, which was why I came down here to hide in the first place. After all, I could count the number of humans I’d ever met on one hand—and I wasn’t sure this gremlin counted.

When I smacked her over the head, it bobbled as if she were a toy. “Mmgh?!”

“If she’s that important, then…what am I supposed to say to her?” I couldn’t gauge the appropriate distance to hold between us, either figuratively or literally.

“You can say anything you like, of course. Perhaps ‘hello.’”

“I regret asking you. My mistake.” I’d forgotten this kid was useless.

“Now that you have met, you may make of it whatever you choose.”

“Is it really that simple?”

“Do you know what is essential to a ciiircle?”

On that last word, her finger moved through the air in a clockwise motion, her nail leaving a streak of blue motes that formed a visible circle before fading. Another mystery lost to the waterfall.

“What’s *essential*? Uh…” The sudden change of subject had, dare I say, thrown me for a loop.

I’d never been great at riddles, and before I thought of the answer, she supplied it herself. “An unbroken line.”

“Oh. You meant literally.”

“If even a single part is missing, it loses its shape.” She drew another circle; then her fingers plucked a piece from the bottom left. “What remains is too damaged to still be considered a circle.”

“Okay…?”

By some inexplicable magic, both ends of the broken circle forced themselves together, creating a warped, defective shape, then faded away. Yashiro’s logic was admittedly making sense so far.

“And? Your point?”

“That *was* my point.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Oh dear.” She paused for a moment, watching the flow of the falls. “Think of the circle as your world.”

“Okay?”

“Now think of that missing piece as Shima-san and yourself. That is all.”

Shima-san? Oh, right. Her. I had next to no experience calling people by name, so I wasn’t used to it. I thought about the circle

and the piece that had been pulled out. Wasn't this kind of a bold claim? "Are we really that important?"

"Yes." She nodded. "To create the same shape requires the same pieces, each as essential as the last. And that includes you."

"The same pieces," I repeated, mulling it over as I thought about the red fruit we always ate. The appearance and flavor of each piece of fruit was slightly different, but they all consisted of more or less the same components. That was necessary to avoid food poisoning. Was that what Yashiro was trying to say?

"Therefore, whatever happens, it will all work out in the end. I believe that too is your destiny."

"It is?" Every now and then, this useless lump spoke as though she understood the universe. What had she seen on her journey here, falling through the sky? Facing forward, I wiped mist from my face. "I just don't get it." *Any of it.*

"Perhaps you will understand when you are older, Chito-san."

"Don't you condescend to me, brat."

Cupping her cheeks in my hands, I squished her face in, smooshing it like clay. Yet somehow that did nothing to muffle her laughter—so where was her voice coming from? When I let go, I noticed that my fingers were coated in blue. I watched sadly as it peeled away, fading before my eyes.

"There you have it. Now, I wish you a happy, fun life with Shima-san."

As far as I was concerned, she hadn't explained anything at all, but whatever. "Happy, huh…?"

In a world mired in ruin, how was anyone supposed to be *happy*? I'd known Shima several days now, and so far, nothing had changed.

"Well… I'll at least try to have fun with her, to start," I muttered aloud, rubbing my knee as the waterfall drowned my voice out. "I need a new goal, anyway."

Lately, I'd found myself at something of a loss. Finding a living person had been my sole objective; now that I'd achieved it, I had no real desire to seek out another. And because I hadn't

mapped my travels, I probably had no way to find my way back home either. In other words, I was stuck here. But now someone else was with me.

The thought filled my chest with an antsy kind of restlessness.

“So where are you headed next?” I asked.

“Hmmm,” Yashiro responded flatly, making a pretense of contemplating with her empty head. “I do have a set destination in mind, but I think I will go to a hot spring first.”

“A what?”

“I find I like them much better than baths, despite their similarity.”

Was this some cultural element lost to our world? From the comparison she’d made, I could only assume it involved…water? Maybe a tub? “So a ‘hot spring’ is a good thing, I take it?”

“Yes.” She nodded. “I have been to a hot spring exactly once before.”

***

“Shimamura, do you like warm places?”

Well, that’s *a roundabout question.* For a moment, I wondered why she was asking. Was it some sort of psych eval?

That seemed unlikely, so I decided to answer honestly. “Yeah, I’d say so. Like a nice, warm bed.” If I’d had to choose a single place to spend an entire day… Well, that would depend on the season, but my bed was a strong option. As someone who got cold easily, I’d spent much of my life gravitating toward warmth.

Adachi was kneeling on the floor, the cushion I’d offered lying rejected next to her. She’d turned up on short notice, and as usual, she was acting weird, her fingers rapping her knees restlessly as if she were playing an invisible piano. The second-story guest room had no window, but I could tell from the temperature that this Friday evening was slowly dipping into night.

“Beds are…important. But…”

“Yeah?” I replied. “*Important,” huh? Not sure why you’re blushing.*

“What about someplace more…open?” she mumbled, deepening the riddle.

Warm and *open*? This was getting complicated. For my poor brain’s sake, I wished she’d stuck to something like “What kind of tables can you eat? Vegetables!” Incidentally, my mother’s response to that one was, “Not at my high school, you couldn’t. Especially not the carrots. They were never cooked through.”

With that fun mental detour complete, it was time I faced reality: I still had no idea what Adachi was talking about.

“And what about…soothing?”

“I hate to ask, but if you could please just get to the point…” I felt like I was taking an exam I hadn’t studied for. *Have mercy, Adachi-chan!*

Blushing furiously, she finally looked up. “Do you want to go to a hot spring?!” she asked, so forcefully I thought that the red in her cheeks might fly out.

At last, the answer to the riddle. To her credit, that *did* sound warm, open, and soothing. “A hot spring?” I repeated.

She nodded—although, if her flushed shoulders were any indication, you’d have thought she was soaking in a hot spring already.

“Just the two of us?”

She nodded again—three times—and her ears grew ruddy with embarrassment. I was surprised to learn that she still hadn’t fully maxed out her redness meter. “And…and I’ll pay for everything!” she added hastily.

Now I was concerned about the trip’s optics. “You think I want to bum a free vacation on my girlfriend’s dime?” Was she trying to make me look like some gold digger?

“N-no, of course not!”

“You suuure?”

“I’ll pay because I *want* to,” she insisted, tucking her hair behind her left ear compulsively.

Now I understood: She wanted to spend this money for her own sake. Since she was entitled to do so, I saw no reason to try to stop her, and if that meant I had to be a gold digger, I simply needed to make that sacrifice…right? I *needed* to?

“Hmm…”

It’d be a hot-spring trip for just the two of us, and Adachi was blushing beet red. Together, those two factors could only mean one thing.

“Hmmmm…”

It didn’t actually take me long to figure out. I just needed to stall for time. And in this instance, that was a definite *need*.

“Wait. Is *that* what this is about?” Perhaps it was cruel of me to ask her flat out, but I couldn’t stop myself.

Adachi looked up and froze, as if struck face-first by a gust of wind. After her complexion had ping-ponged back and forth for a while, it eventually settled into her normal anxiety-pale shade. We blinked at each other awkwardly for a few moments.

“Oh, Adachi-chan, you’re so silly!” I exclaimed, patting her shoulder like a good-natured auntie. That immediately switched her face back to red, much to my relief. I evidently took some comfort in her flustered blushing.

“It…it’s not what you thinggh…!” Something caught in her throat, and she started coughing, which was very cute.

As for her proposition…

We’d already made plans to travel abroad someday, but now that distant landmark was replaced with one right in front of my eyes, which forced me to refocus. I obviously wouldn’t mind going on a trip with her, but when I considered what *she* was probably thinking about, it felt a little harder to voice a “yes.” Adachi wasn’t the only one capable of feeling flustered, after all.

“Hmmm…”

That said…at this point, I mean, did it really matter? I was pretty sure I loved Adachi, and I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that she loved me.

Ultimately, it was the room's icy chill that tipped the scales in favor of warmth.

"Sure, why not? Let's go."

Perhaps I was easily bought. Still, Adachi didn't seem especially overjoyed at my answer; she just kept nodding over and over. Suddenly, she sprang to her feet. "Well, gotta ret geady!"

"Ret geady?" I repeated. *Ooh. It's kind of fun to say.*

"Get…ready," she corrected herself weakly. Turning, she trudged slowly out of the room, as if to demonstrate that she was in fact perfectly calm.

You can go faster than that*, you know.*

Once she'd disappeared beyond the door, I heard her take off down the hallway at full speed, negating the pretense she might otherwise have kept up. Then I heard a thud that sounded an awful lot like her body hitting the far wall like a pinball. I could only pray that she'd be mindful of the stairs, if nothing else.

"Wait… 'Get ready' for what?"

For obvious reasons, that question made me blush. But, of course, Adachi had probably just meant she needed to go pack… Right?

"Yeah… I should ret geady too."

If we were only staying one night at a hot-spring resort, I wouldn't need much. Then again, if we were going to do…other things…

"Uh…how am I supposed to prepare?"

Do some research, maybe?

Research…what?

How?

"My head hurts."

This was all so complicated—and trying to dissect what “it” was made it even worse. For now, I’d have to pretend I wasn’t anticipating it. But if there was one thing I was a hundred percent certain of…

“She totally wants to see me naked again…”

Spoken aloud, the thought was even more intensely embarrassing, seeping into me until I flopped backward onto the floor, away from the comfort of the *kotatsu* table. But the cold didn’t matter right now. I smiled faintly to myself, eyes darting, thinking about Adachi. In that moment, I understood the meaning of the phrase “warm fuzzies.”

“Good thing she’s no mystery, huh?”

That suited me just fine.

Incidentally, we’d just had our first kiss too. When I thought back to the taste of her blood on my tongue, I felt a shudder run down my spine.

***

There we were, at a hot-spring resort not far from home.

Adachi had managed to change into her yukata without incident, but when she went to turn the TV on, she’d slipped on the remote and nearly smashed her head against the window. When she tried to pick the remote up off the floor, she’d banged her shin on the corner of the table. Seeking to escape the pain, she’d inexplicably downed her scalding hot cup of tea, and despite her expression—which betrayed her agony—nevertheless leapt back to her feet…only to pass out from the resulting dizziness.

“My ears are ringing,” she groaned from the floor of our partitioned room.

“You fought the good fight.” Like a superhero, she’d risen again and again.

“I can’t understand you.”

“Then you might have serious tinnitus.”

“That’s not what I mean…”

She lay a hand over one side of her face as if suppressing a headache—but when I caught her uncovered eye sneaking peeks at me, I found myself wondering whether she was ogling me in a pervy way, and at that point I couldn’t bear to meet her gaze. Obviously, I knew Adachi wasn’t that kind of girl, except… Well, she *had* invited me to a hot spring. And this was how she was acting.

“I, uh…I think I’ll go take a dip,” I decided aloud. Witnessing her antics had made me break a sweat.

“I’ll…go with you…” She hastily pushed herself up to join me.

I stopped her, though. “You, missy, could use a few minutes to calm down.” I didn’t want her to pass out *in* the hot spring next.

Fortunately, she seemed to have at least *some* awareness of her poor condition, because she didn’t press the issue further. “Okay.” She nodded, closing her eyes.

I pressed a hand to her forehead. “Besides, I need to cool off too.” Never mind that I didn’t actually feel all that warm, and that “cooling off” wasn’t really the point of a hot spring.

Out in the hall, I let out a breath and started walking toward the baths. Past the lobby, where hardwood replaced the carpet, my slippers slapped audibly with every step.

“Hmmm…I don’t know…”

What sort of mood were we supposed to aim for here? It seemed like so much work. Wouldn’t things just happen automatically once we took our clothes off? No… If we tried that here, it would feel like we were little kids at the pool. *Ugh. This is so complicated.*

As I mulled the situation over, walking toward the hot springs on autopilot, I noticed that a very familiar pitter-patter was now punctuating the airy slap of my slippers. Instinctively I whirled around.

“Hmm?!”

The moment we locked eyes, she froze in place, one foot raised, as if we were playing Red Light, Green Light.

“Hello there!”

Of course, only one creature on this planet would proceed to greet me like everything was fine. Today she wore a onesie that resembled…some sort of bird, probably. The big comb made me think of a rooster, except the wingtips had a blue tinge.

“When did *you* get here?!”

“I was bored, so I telep—” Her lips fell still for a moment. “Walked here on foot.”

“Were you just saying *teleported*?”

“Ho ho ho!”

That’s not an answer. With Yashiro here, I felt like I was back on that school trip all over again. “For a second, I thought maybe you’d stowed away in my backpack.”

“I have not been to the Shimamura residence today.”

“Oh no? My sister will miss you, you know.”

“Then I shall visit afterward, if you insist.”

“Um…” That wasn’t what I’d meant, but oh well.

How did Yashiro always manage to appear out of nowhere? Perhaps for a creature so far removed from Earth’s orbit, traveling any distance was little more than a hop.

“Now then, where are we?” She glanced up and down the hall.

“If you’d purposely walked all the way here, wouldn’t you know that?”

“Actually, I simply…found myself here.”

“This is a hot spring.”

“A *hot spring*, you say. I understand,” she replied.

It was clear that she didn’t, though. Considering how much she loved to veg out in front of the television, she must’ve heard about hot springs at some point, right? As we walked along, though, it occurred to me that she most likely hadn’t bothered to pay the entry fee. I’d probably get in trouble for bringing her in with me.

“Ugh. Fine…”

Just when we’d finally reached the changing-room curtain, I doubled back all the way to the front desk to pay a second fee—albeit the children’s rate, since I knew no one would believe me if I said Yashiro was six hundred years old.

“Oh, this place costs money?”

“You may be no different from a wild animal, but I figured I should pay your admission, just to be safe.”

I handed over the money, took the key, grabbed the girl, and headed back to my original destination. The front-desk clerk had looked deeply confused by Yashiro’s appearance, but I’d just smiled and played dumb.

“It seems that I owe you,” Yashiro said.

“You owe a lot of things to a lot of people.”

I envied her ability to coast through each day without having to worry about money, since I was starting to feel its weight more keenly now that I was an adult. However much time passed, though, *she* never had to change; no matter how tall my sister got, the pair still shrieked and squabbled like always. Perhaps that was the perfect friendship, in a sense.

“I am looking forward to this hot spring.”

“Do you even know what it is?”

“What does it taste like?”

That’s a “no.”

As we walked, the glass corridor provided ample sun and a scenic view. At last, we passed under a doorframe curtain into a room with warm lighting, wooden walls, and a damp floor. Yashiro scanned the area.

“Is this, perhaps…?”

“Come on, strip down.”

After she shed her skin…er, pajamas…and thus revealed that she wasn’t wearing anything underneath, Yashiro bolted butt naked across the room. I gathered all our discarded clothes

together, then hurried after her. As far as I could see and hear, no one else was using the facilities at the moment—which was ideal, for obvious reasons.

The moment I opened the door, a gust of steam billowed over my face. Bath buckets were stacked to the right of the entrance; beyond the entrance, I saw a few shower stalls and the telltale gleam of wet tile. Sure enough, the spacious bath on the other side of the room was devoid of occupants. All I heard was hot water flowing.

Yashiro had run in ahead of me, but I found her only a few steps from the door, standing as still as a statue. “This is just a bath.”

“Gee, I wonder what it tastes like.”

She toddled up to the water’s edge, crouched, and dipped a hand in. “It is the temperature of bathwater.”

“That’s the best part.”

Her butterfly braids shook side to side as she played with the water, making waves. This was followed by a “Cannonba—!”

“Nooope! You gotta wash yourself first.”

Before Yashiro could jump in, I yanked her out of midair and dragged her to a shower stall. When I glanced at the mirror in front of us, I was surprised to see her reflection, which—at the risk of sounding insane—wasn’t always guaranteed with Yashiro.

“Know how to adjust the temperature?”

“I am all-powerful,” she declared, twisting the shower valve and sending a torrent of hot water straight into her face. In response, she neither flinched nor moved to lower the heat. “Wharrgarbl!”

“Wash your hair.”

At my insistence, she swirled her braids around haphazardly, prompting me to ask a long-unanswered question: “Can you untie those?”

“What?”

I pointed at the butterfly wings.

“Ah. One moment.” Tugging the knots, she let out an unearthly screech of pain. “Gyaaaaah!”

“What are you *doing*…?”

Despite her scream, the braids indeed came undone, loosing a cascade of hair down her back. She looked so different with it down—like a fragile maiden.

“What is the matter, Shimamura-san?” she asked smoothly, paying no regard to the blue torrent of hair and water presently covering her face. Upon closer inspection, I realized her hair wasn’t actually getting wet; the water was rolling straight off it.

“Mmm, nothing.” I wasn’t sure whether she’d use it, but nevertheless, I handed her one of the plastic bath buckets stacked across the room.

“Little always makes me take baths as well.”

“Yeah, because you don’t take them unless you’re forced to.”

“I prefer swimming pools.”

“Then why not think of the tub as a warm pool?”

“Oh, that does sound nice.” She smiled, her eyes wandering to the hot spring.

She’s gonna try to swim in it, isn’t she? Maybe I shouldn’t have said that.

I was putting my hair up in a towel after showering when Yashiro took off running toward the bath.

“Hey, no running! The floor’s wet!” But by the time the words were out of my mouth, she was already in the water. “Good grief,” I mumbled as I walked over.

The bath edge formed a series of steps leading down. I lowered a cold foot onto the first step and found the water so hot that it made my toes ache. Meanwhile, Yashiro was already submerged up to her scalp—her *scalp*? Her hair floated on the surface as she swam to and fro.

“Well, that’s surreal.” It was almost like watching a bright blue jellyfish. “Wait—stop that!”

When I hauled her out of the water, she didn't protest but merely blinked back at me, dripping rivulets of blue. "When I sat down, the water level rose above my head."

"I get that, but in a hot spring, you're not supposed to let your hair...well, if that even *is* hair..." At this point, I wasn't sure anymore. After all, water simply clung to the surface of the strands; just that was pretty weird. And I didn't know how to explain the rules of society to a creature I barely understood. I did, however, know to snatch her by the scruff of the neck the moment she tried to swim away. "My point is, don't put your hair in the water. It's against the rules."

"It is?"

"It is."

"Very well, then." She fluffed her hair up until it pointed skyward. *What the hell?* "Is this acceptable?"

"Uh...yeah, sure, whatever. Also, no swimming in the bath."

"Why not?"

"It's rude to the other guests."

"But we are alone."

I glanced around; she was right. "Well, just pretend we aren't."

With that, I sat her next to me. Even on the steps, though, the water still came up to her lips. She started kicking her feet immediately. *Will you settle down?*

"Is this not boring, Shimamura-san?"

"Not to me." I rather enjoyed dunking my brain in hot water for a while. Facing the courtyard, I sank so the water was shoulder-level and let my thoughts trickle along comfortably, like sweat down my neck.

"What do you usually think about?"

"Me? Well..." Scooping up a palmful of hot-spring water, I considered the question for a moment. "When I zone out, I'm usually miles away, thinking about the rest of the planet—like all

the whales swimming in the ocean, or unexplored forests full of animals I've never even heard of. It's a weird feeling, you know?"

The act was akin to gazing out at the horizon. There was a whole world out there that I'd never discover for myself, yet I was still connected to it. That thought filled me with the strangest sensation—one that paired nicely with the warmth of a good bath.

"Hoo hoo," Yashiro chuckled, sounding not entirely unlike an owl. "I fear I do not quite understand!"

"Not surprised." Given that I only had a vague understanding of her, I didn't really expect her to get me either. "I just enjoy contemplating those kinds of things, that's all." It allowed me to draw my mind away from minutiae of my everyday life and turn inward, focusing all the way to my fingertips. That wasn't the kind of experience I presumed other people would understand.

"In that case, allow me to contemplate them as well." She faced forward, mouth agape, and I suspected she wasn't actually using a single brain cell.

"*You'd* probably have more fun thinking about dinner."

"That does sound nice."

She was quiet for a moment, suggesting she had indeed turned her thoughts to her next meal. Now *I* had to wonder what my parents would cook tonight.

"Is Adachi-san not coming?"

I whipped my head around to look at her. How would she know Adachi was here, unless...? "Did you...?"

"Yes? Did I what?"

"...You're amazing."

"Yay," she rejoiced lazily. Her hands shot into the air, the motion sending waves of water crashing into me.

Resting one hand on my shoulder, I focused on the reality in front of me. "She's...waiting for me."

"Then you had better return to her soon."

"Yeah..."

It surely wasn't her intention, but Yashiro had a way of always giving me exactly the encouragement I needed at the strangest times. *Weird kid,* I thought with a chuckle. Was she clueless or omniscient? Which was it?

"Hm?" When I glanced over at Yashiro, I noticed that her hair was suddenly braided up again, so I reached over and made the butterfly wings flap.

After our long soak, the steaming-hot Yashiro sat holding the ice cream I'd bought her from the lobby kiosk. "You know, I think I like this *hot spring* thing."

"You just like the ice cream, don't you?"

"Ho ho ho!"

Together, we devoured our treats. I could feel the chill of the ice cream seep all the way to my collarbones. Meanwhile, I gazed absently around the lobby, noting the various activities available. *Wait. Really? I didn't know they had* that *here.*

"Well, I should go…" I knew Adachi was waiting for me—but was I supposed to just leave Yashiro here?

"In that case, I shall return home, as it is snack time."

"You just *had* a snack."

"The more, the merrier, as they say!" With that, the greedy little goblin took off running. At the end of the hall, she stopped and glanced at me over her shoulder. "Absolutely *no* peeking."

"Who are we, Orpheus and Eurydice…?"

"Farewell!"

Waving goodbye, she disappeared around the corner. She went down a hall containing nothing but private rooms—yet I knew that if I tried to follow her, she'd already be gone, so I simply had to accept that she didn't play by the same rules.

Truth be told, it would've been a little awkward if she'd tried to tag along when I went back to the room. Was she being considerate on purpose…?

"Nah, not likely."

The thought of that didn't sit well with me, anyway. She was a free spirit, and I didn't want her to be constrained by... I didn't know. Social cues? *Eh, whatever.* I gave up trying to use my melted brain and instead skipped on warm toes all the way back to the room where Adachi was waiting. Outside the door, I started doing shoulder rolls.

"Here we go," I whispered on a whim to psych myself up, then walked in briskly. "I'm baaack!"

Inside, I found a very energetic Adachi with her arms raised in the air. "I! WON'T! BACK—oh."

"Uh...am I interrupting?" Maybe I should've done a few more shoulder rolls. Then again, I didn't want to risk dislocating anything.

Adachi was kneeling on the floor beside a tidy futon and blanket, waiting for me. *She really likes to kneel, doesn't she?* When I imagined her laying the bed out in a flustered tizzy, it nearly made me laugh.

Bashfully, she lowered her arms back to her sides.

"The water's great here," I informed her as I sat down.

She nodded slightly—so stiff that I practically heard her creak. She was as crispy as a potato chip, while I was soggy from the hot spring. Those two things didn't sound like they'd even remotely go together.

"Thanks again, by the way." *For bringing me here.* Despite saying that, I'd paid for a portion of the trip myself, since I obviously couldn't in good conscience let her shoulder the entire burden. "Did your dizziness go away?"

She nodded again, this time so vigorously that I feared it might cause a relapse.

"Cool. You should try the spring later."

"Uh...okay."

Hearing her voice was such a relief. When she shifted position, though, every motion was tense and labored, as if her whole body were coated in glue. The only exception was her eyes, which gleamed with fiery passion.

“Let’s…go together,” she suggested.

“You want me to go back? Not that I mind…” I had a feeling that Yashiro wouldn’t barge in this time. “Wait—we haven’t had dinner yet.”

I shot a confused glance at the bed, and Adachi’s face gently exploded; it was so red, I half-wondered if that ruddiness would spread to her hair next.

“Shimamura!”

The force of her voice swept over me. “Yes?”

“I don’t—!”

“Keep your voice down.” *We don’t want noise complaints.*

“I don’t! Want to! Do *that stuff*! Okay?!” Her statement came out in bits and pieces, and although she was wilting rapidly—like an unwatered plant—the upturned gaze directed toward me held firm.

That was a hell of a confession to make at full volume, and I wasn’t really sure how to respond. “You don’t?”

“I mean, I do—no, I don’t! Well…kind of…?”

She looked to me as if for help, but how would I know the answer to that? She must also have sensed that her pleading gaze was a misstep, because she leaned forward, grinding the heels of her hands into her thighs. The metaphorical gears at last seemed to be turning in her mind.

“What I *truly* want isn’t…*that stuff* specifically, but…”

“All right.” As she struggled to find her words, I decided I’d hear her out for as long as it took.

“It’s just…I love you…”

“Aw, thanks.” She probably said it twice a day at this point, if not more.

“And when I touch you, I get this warm feeling like my skin’s burning that makes me want you close to me… I want to feel you, and hold you, and squeeze you, and bury my face in you… And that feeling just gets stronger and stronger until I want to touch

your hips, and the insides of your elbows, and…" Before the last drops of her heart could spill, however, she snapped to her senses. "God, what am I saying?"

She hung her head in self-loathing. I could tell that she thought she was confusing me by being an emotional mess—but in that, she was only half-right, since I understood her just fine. Strange, wasn't it? Feelings like love were normally invisible to the human eye, yet she had a way of putting hers right where I could see it clear as day. I'd once talked to someone about that, though I couldn't recall who.

That, more than anything else, was probably why I…

"I know I said this before we left, but…" I reached out and touched her wrist; it was as scalding as the hot spring. "I like the heat, Adachi."

For that reason, I was pretty sure I'd always want Adachi to touch me…and I'd want to respond in kind, so I did.

"Actually, while I was gone, I found something for us to do together."

"Huh?!" She flinched, mouth agape, fingers quivering.

"Come on."

Grasping her hand, I pulled her to her feet and dragged her away—an uncommon occurrence, come to think of it. We walked down the hall, past the ukiyo-e woodblock print of the cormorant fishermen, peeking quickly into the post-bath rest area as we followed the signs to our destination. Sure enough, there they were: a pair of blue ping-pong tables framed by windows with mustard-yellow curtains.

"Can you believe there're hot-spring resorts with *ping-pong* of all things?"

That corner was neatly labeled HOT-SPRING PING-PONG, though the handwritten sign was old and faded. On each table, a pair of paddles lay side by side. I grabbed a blue one and waved it toward Adachi as she stood there, staring back dazedly.

"Now I get it," she mumbled—but with all the hair-twirling and face-palming, I wasn't quite sure *what* she was getting, so to

speak.

Meanwhile, I looked around at the empty chairs in the corner and at the unoccupied table next to ours, noting that the area was relatively clean, despite the marked absence of other guests.

“Disappointed?” I asked Adachi.

Personally, I’d thought this would make for a fun trip down memory lane. As for whatever Adachi had in mind, well…we could do *that stuff* later. Right now, I wanted more of an emotional connection.

She shook her head aggressively, like a dog after a bath. “No, I…*I’ll take you on*!”

“Who are you, and what have you done with Adachi…?”

Although visibly flustered, she nevertheless ran around to the other side of the table.

“Nostalgic, isn’t it?” I remarked after a moment.

Her eyes darted. “Um…not really.”

At that, I realized that she was right. The time we’d spent in the gym loft wasn’t that far back in the rearview mirror. Maybe the feelings we’d shared back then would always be with us in the passenger seat. After all, that was where we’d gotten our start.

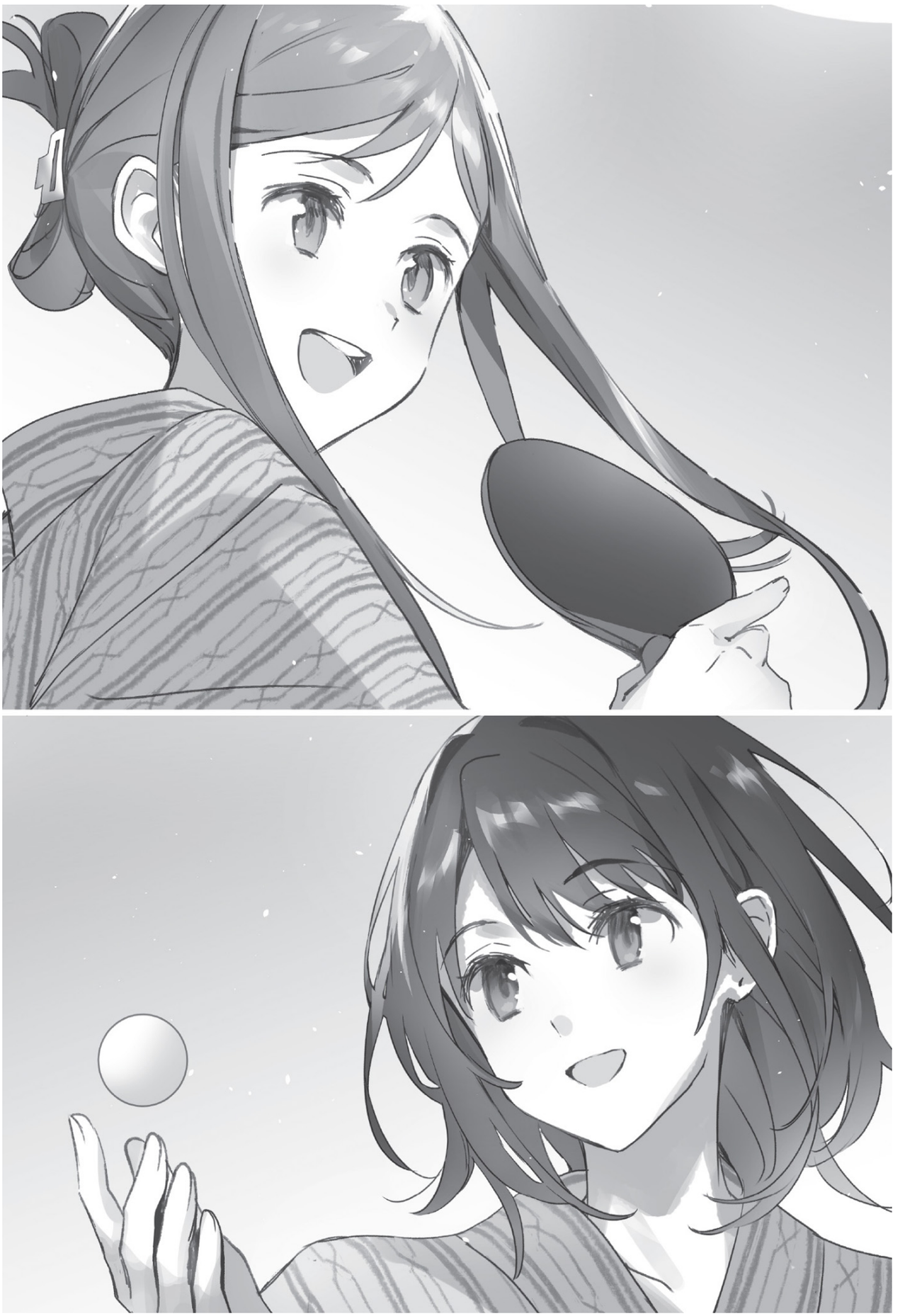
“I’ll serve,” I decided, moving into position.

“Okay.” She nodded.

Seeing her hold her paddle in her left hand, I almost hallucinated that the room’s temperature was starting to climb. I aimed at the right side of the ball and swung my paddle.

Thock!

It connected at a low angle, my arm having traced a smooth arc through the air. The ball bounced, weaved, and passed just over the net, grazing the edge of my dear opponent’s side of the table before rolling off to the corner of the room.



Adachi simply stood there, frozen in wide-eyed shock. “Was that a curveball?”

“I can only pull it off maybe three out of ten tries,” I admitted.

And whenever I succeeded, the ball inevitably bounced off the table. It had been a diabolical serve that flouted the rules of the game.

“Heh heh heh,” I snickered as I went to fetch the ball. With every step across the carpet, I could almost hear the creak of dusty hardwood instead. If we were wearing uniforms instead of yukata, would it have felt like nothing had changed?

Ball in hand, I returned to the table.

The room was a little stuffy, but there was no dust in the air. This wasn’t the gym loft—yet there we were. We were happy then, now, and forevermore.

After a beat, Adachi grinned widely, as if in imitation of a past smile. “Nice one.”

To that smile, I whispered silently: *I love you.*

Toasty warm indeed.

***

“Oh. There you are.”

Déjà vu. A second arrival approached me with cautious steps.

“I saw you from afar and noticed something sparkly,” she explained.

“Oh, this?”

I pointed at Yashiro’s hair, braided up in the shape of butterfly wings, then gave one a wiggle, filling the air with more sparkles—er, motes of light? It was a bit late to ask now, but what *were* they, anyway? The little alien let out a halfhearted screech in response to my movement.

Shima's well-worn shoes squeaked against the wet ground. A moment later, she crouched on Yashiro's opposite side, examining her with interest and grabbing at her hair and cheeks. Come to think of it, if Shima had grown up in an environment like the one I had, then *any* human-shaped visitor would likely be a marvel to her.

"Ho ho ho! What is the matter?" asked the marvel in question, jovially ignoring the poking and prodding.

"Are there more like you out there somewhere?" Shima inquired.

"We are everywhere."

"No, you aren't. Trust me," I cut in with a dismissive wave. However I combed through my memories, not a single other person on this planet had hair like hers. Nor had any fallen out of the sky.

"Wow. I wish I could meet them," Shima murmured pensively. She'd evidently chosen to take Yashiro at her word. "In a different world, maybe I could go find them."

"Believe it or not, that may be possible in your future."

"What? No way!"

"Now that its malformation has been corrected, your world might stabilize."

Shima frowned in confusion at that, and I might've followed suit had I not remembered the shapes Yashiro drew for me earlier. If we were the missing piece...did that mean our world was now a perfect circle? Because of *Shima and me?* That had to be an exaggeration. Our first encounter had by no means been world-altering, as far as I could recall... Then again, I didn't have any reason to believe a word out of this creature's mouth to begin with.

Meanwhile, Shima played with Yashiro's face, gleefully entertained by those elastic cheeks. Her new toy likewise seemed pleased as punch. Looking at them now, no one would ever guess that they'd only just met.

After a while, Yashiro rose to her feet, her cheeks still stretched out like clay.

“Fix your face.”

“Oops.” At my words, she massaged her cheeks back into place, then looked up at me. “Anyway, it has been fun.”

She was…saying goodbye.

“Okay.”

Not long ago I’d been questioning whether *anything* in this world could be fun, but now that I reflected on our uneventful journey together… It had been, hadn’t it?

“The feeling’s mutual,” I replied with a handshake. Her hand was so small, mine practically engulfed it.

“Now then, this is farewell.” And without a moment’s hesitation, she sprinted off like a rocket.

“Hey, no running! It’s not safe!” Shima called after her.

Across the falls, I thought I heard a tiny voice shout back, “I will be fine!” The girl was a dweeb to the bitter end, and it made me chuckle.

Over time, the waterfall’s roar grew louder, and I felt my focus shift from the conversation to our surroundings. The water sounded so near that it practically dripped down my earlobes.

Now it was just Shima and me. Without Yashiro here, we were quite possibly the only two people left on this planet.

“You’re gonna miss her, aren’t you?” Shima asked.

At that, I wiped mist from my nose and cheeks. “Well, I mean…we were together for a long time.”

Now that Yashiro was gone, I felt like part of me had been quietly erased. It wasn’t painful, but I could detect the empty space. Knowing that I might never see her again, I couldn’t help tilting my head back. If I had to, I’d have guessed that what I felt wasn’t quite loneliness; still, I didn’t know how else to describe it. And when I exhaled, it felt as though my body might fall away with the water—

“Oh. She’s back.”

“What?”

Sure enough, when I squinted into the distance, I saw a tiny streak of blue hurtling around the edge of the falls, moving in our direction. Perplexed, I waited for her to arrive, and when at last she did…

“As it is lunchtime, I decided we should share one last meal before I go.”

“Way to ruin it, genius.” Watching her was like watching a falling star change its mind and go backward.

She handed each of us a red fruit she’d plucked from who-knew-where. “One for you, and for you.”

“Why, thank you,” said Shima.

Yashiro watched her eat with great satisfaction, then sank her little teeth into her own fruit. “Tastes like destiny!”

Now it was Shima’s turn to watch in wide-eyed alarm as the girl devoured her fruit, core and all.

Once she’d finished, Yashiro raised a hand into the air. “Now then, this is farewell once more.”

“Oh, okay,” Shima replied with a small wave.

Yashiro offered one final smile in response, then dashed away.

“That kid sure doesn’t waste time, does she?”

I waited a few seconds, just in case, but she didn’t return. I couldn’t be sure she was really gone, though, so I gave it a few more minutes…

“Guess she’s not coming back.” *What a free spirit.*

When I glanced over at Shima, I saw her staring down intently at the uneaten core of her fruit…and then she put it in her mouth.

Crunch!

She worked her jaw a few times, then grimaced. “How in the world did she eat this part?”

“I don’t recommend taking any cues from her.”

“She made it look so tasty, I figured it must be edible. Shame.” Disappointed, Shima cast away the thoroughly gnawed core. I was starting to suspect she might be a bit of a ditz. “Think she’ll come back?”

“No, probably not.”

“Another shame,” she replied with a laugh. She raised a hand from her knee and stretched her fingers toward the errant droplets sprayed onto the rock wall. “I like to come here myself from time to time.”

“So all those footholds…”

“I made them, yes. But then I got busy with other things and couldn’t finish what I started.” She scratched her neck idly. “Nice and cold here, isn’t it?”

“Maybe a little *too* cold.”

But rather than being the literal temperature, the cold might’ve had a visual element as well. The space was cast into shadows unpenetrated by the endless sunset. It looked to my eyes as though we’d crossed into an entirely separate world—one of nothing but darkness engulfed in unfeeling stone. And, to a girl who’d spent her whole life seeing the same old thing every day, it felt so *new*. Maybe there was more to discover in the nooks and crannies, provided someone was willing to put in the effort to find it.

For a while, I silently faced the waterfall, its unending roar like that of a wild animal…

…Okay, I lied. Yashiro had made this girl sound so important that I couldn’t help stealing glances at her face in profile. Unlike me, however, Shima was truly zoned out, her eyes fixed on the spray in front of us. She even looked a little sleepy. While I was partly glad to avoid awkward eye contact, its absence saddened another part of me.

Now that I got a good look at Shima, she was… My eyes and brain kicked into high gear, attempting to wax poetic, but nothing came to mind. I could only think of simple adjectives at best. And

while I wasn't sure whether the term was good enough, ultimately...

Deep down, I thought she was beautiful.

That was the kind of compliment anyone could pay—commonplace and readily understood. But perhaps it was human nature not to stray beyond the basics at a time like this. There was arguably no description more accurate, after all.

I pictured Shima floating in the bottomless basin far below us, her arms outstretched, smiling with contentment, long hair swaying as if one with the water. And even though I was only imagining it, my heart pitched sideways for some reason. If I reacted like this to a mere thought, how much worse would I respond if I saw that for real? My pulse quickened, as if in pursuit of something.

Then my hopes reached my throat. "Have you ever been down to the basin?"

"No," she replied.

"What if we went to see it?" I suggested without missing a beat.

Her eyes widened. A moment later, an exasperated smile spread across her face. "Don't be silly. We'd die going down there."

"Well, what if...uh...we were really careful?" I asked, unable to think of a better way to phrase it.

What would she think of my new ambition? Would it seem like a waste of time? Because for me, this was the first time in my life that my heart—my body—had truly understood how it felt to be alive. And I wanted to act on that feeling.

Gazing down into the crater from aboveground, it seemed impossibly dark and distant, as if descending into it would be a voyage into space itself. But if we could reach space on our own two feet, hey, that came off as a hell of a bargain.

She let out a laugh like a balloon deflating, and I realized that she might be as nervous as I was. "That might not be so bad."

"Yeah. That's what I'm thinking."

I no longer needed to travel some great, endless distance, for what I wanted to see was now close at hand. I wanted to keep living life together with her…until the day our “not so bad” became “good.” Going forward, we could talk it out for as long as it took. Whether we moved forward, or backward, or down, or sideways, or even straight into space—we’d never stop.

When she offered me her hand, I gingerly took it…and nostalgia for something not my own made my lashes tremble faintly.



Abiding Diverge Alien



Chapter 4:
Abiding Diverge Alien

THE PERSON WHO RAISED ME had once told me that I had the eyes of someone who'd live a long time. "You just have that sort of air about you," they said.

The ruin we occupied was devoid of other people. Wherever we went, the wind smelled like dirt.

"You think so?"

"Trust me—I've seen enough death to know."

"Okay. I'll take your word for it."

"Good," they nodded curtly. They were never a very outwardly affectionate person.

According to them, we weren't related by blood—they'd simply shown up in town one day. I didn't know whether that was actually true, but since no one else was around, it didn't really matter one way or the other.

This person had taught me everything I needed to know to survive on my own. They lined up different plants and taught me all the relevant details—which parts were safe to eat, how to cook them, which season they grew in. And since they weren't in the habit of repeating themselves, I learned to memorize things fast.

For the most part, we never discussed the past, nor why the world had fallen apart. We didn't have time, and even if we had, they might've figured that information would be useless to me. Or maybe they didn't *have* the answers; maybe they were just focused on surviving and helping me to do the same. Perhaps that would explain why I never really felt connected to them; we were just two loners who happened to operate alongside each other, perceiving each other only on occasion.

"I suspect there isn't much time left," they'd often say. Sure enough, it wasn't long before they keeled over. It wasn't clear what caused that—did the gentle breeze carry a hint of poison? Either

way, from then on, mine was the only shadow that stretched under the perpetual sunset.

"You gotta make it, because I'd hate to be proven wrong."

With those final words, they gave me all the encouragement I'd ever need.

***

The crushing weight that plagued my body upon waking would likely persist for the rest of my life. I was keenly aware that I'd lost something I could never regain. It was like an itch I couldn't find the source of…although it kept me tethered to the spot. Once that weight too was gone, I was sure my final breath would follow.

My eyes, barely open, closed once more.

"Morning, Shimamura." It was… Yes, it was Adachi, who was already awake. *"You're up early today."*

"That's hardly new. These days, I can't sleep as long as I used to."

"Ah, yeah… Too many midday naps, maybe?"

"No, I think I'm just getting old. Believe it or not, I've heard that it takes a lot of energy to sleep."

"Really?"

"Really really."

"Well, let's get up and have breakfast."

"Okay."

I opened my eyes. Adachi was gone, replaced by a familiar white ceiling.

Talking to her was easy; at this point, I could simulate it perfectly, thanks to my years of experience. In fact, I was confident that there wasn't a soul on Earth who could do it better. I could even hear her voice—though it echoed not in my ears, but in my mind, and sounded a little distant. That was the one hurdle I couldn't seem to overcome with practice.

Now that I was awake, I became increasingly aware of heat clinging to my skin. Beyond the thin curtain, the sun was shining at full force. “I’m melting in here,” I muttered to myself as I rolled over, gazing absently at my outstretched fingers as I reflected on my conversation with Adachi.

Selfishly, I always imagined her the way she’d looked when we were in high school—the youngest I’d ever known her. Was that the version of her I liked most, or was it merely the version that had made the strongest impact? For the sake of my dignity, I hoped it was the latter.

I slowly eased myself into a sitting position, but then my mind stalled, unsure what to do. Like Adachi said, I needed to have breakfast, but the thought of all the cleaning to follow sapped me of motivation. Even when I had literally *nothing* better to do, I was still a lazy little sloth. I’d gotten older, yes, but perhaps hadn’t really grown up.

I gazed through the open bedroom door down the hall to the entryway. This wasn’t my parents’ house, not our condo, and not the apartment we’d moved into after we retired. After all these years, I’d ultimately ended up in a small studio…and, though its space was limited, there were days when it still felt too roomy for a single occupant.

There I sat and stalled, feeling the early spring sunshine through the curtains. The thought of going back to sleep was tempting.

The river of time had a way of whisking you away into old age in what felt like a blink of an eye, and now I was the only one left floating along. I never imagined I’d actually outlive them all, but alas, I had. My parents were dead, of course, as were my grandparents before them; Hino had died, as well as Nagafuji. Tarumi was gone too, and as for Sancho and DeLos and Panchos… Well, in those cases, I wasn’t actually sure, but the chances weren’t good. Not even Adachi had lasted as long as me—but make no mistake, we were together until the very end. Perhaps it had been a happy ending from her perspective.

“That’s not so bad, then.”

I decided to let that be my conclusion on the matter. Closing my eyes, I tilted my head down for a moment, then raised it once more.

The greatest shock had been learning that I'd survived even my younger sister. How had I managed to live so long when I wasn't even that good at taking care of myself? Was it all the extra sleep I'd gotten over the years? I stared blankly at the wall for a while longer, mulling it over.

Out there on the other side of the morning sun, the world was still the same as always. Yet of everyone I'd ever known, nearly none remained, for the next generation had now taken their place. All the connections I'd made had come to an end...save for one.

"Hello there!"

Her voice, and the sound of toddling footsteps, came from the direction of the front door, though I hadn't heard her open it. But the question of how she'd gotten in was inconsequential compared to the other mysteries she contained.

"Come on in."

The little alien hadn't changed since the day we met. Now she was all that remained to me. The onesie she wore today was the color of a baby chick, yet the hood bore the comb of a full-grown bird.

"You look well as usual."

I scoffed. "You think so, do you?" Then I felt her put her stubby little hands on my shoulders and start to climb, like I was her personal jungle gym. "Oh no you don't, missy. Get off me."

With a shake, I sent her tumbling onto my bedsheets. She rolled all the way to the wall before coming to a stop. There, her eyelids drooped weakly for a moment before she snapped back to her senses. "Oh no, I nearly fell asleep!"

"Ha! Simple creature." *Pot, meet kettle.* "Well, you can sleep if you like. It's not as though either of us have anything to do today."

"My schedule is actually rather packed."

"Whatever you say, dear."

She rolled her head directly into my lap. It was cool to the touch—cooler than the air in the room—and with her icy-blue hair freed from her hood, I could almost feel a chill coming on. When we first met, Yashiro had been like a little sister; later, a daughter; and now, a granddaughter, a role she'd likely stay in. She was a fixed point from which I had slipped further and further away.

While I thought about that, she swayed restlessly in my lap, her hair spilling motes of light with every motion. "How have you been lately, Shimamura-san?" She normally wasn't one for small talk, so I could only wonder who she was trying to imitate.

"What do you mean? You come over nearly every day." Primarily to eat free meals and sometimes even snacks. She almost never spent the night, though. That was a boundary she had drawn for herself, and I wasn't opposed to it. "Little old ladies like me don't get up to a whole lot, I'm afraid."

"They don't?"

"These days, I've truly run out of things to talk about." I had no life anymore—no future plans.

"In that case, let us simply do nothing."

"Sounds good." Her blunt conclusion suited me just fine. I zoned out so much, my brain was in all likelihood the only part of me without a wrinkle to be seen. Then, suddenly, I remembered: "Oh, that's right. I got a box of treats yesterday."

"Oh *ho*!" Her little legs started flailing with excitement.

"They're in the fridge, so—"

Before I even finished my sentence, she rose to her feet and made a beeline for the small refrigerator, slamming face-first into it. When she spotted the box, she retrieved it gleefully and raced back over to me. It was a gift from another elderly woman in the neighborhood—made by a famous confectioner, apparently. The name was certainly familiar.

"I see your priorities haven't changed."

"Ho ho ho!"

She impatiently whipped off the burnt-umber lid to reveal *mugian* wheat cakes, mostly untouched save for one in the upper-

left corner from which a bite-sized square was missing. When I'd brought the cakes home yesterday, I'd given that one a try and found that it sapped all the moisture from my mouth. From their color and appearance, the cakes looked like they were made entirely of compacted sand, but there was bean jam in the middle.

"Woo-hoo!" Without further ado, Yashiro raised a cake to her lips, took a bite, chewed, and swallowed, all without incident. Personally, if I hadn't washed the cake down with a cup of tea, I would've choked. "Tastes like destiny, doesn't it?" she remarked afterward.

"By all means, enjoy." One bite had been enough sweetness for me.

At my offer, her eyes sparkled, and she pulled the box closer to herself. "Heh heh heh! *Mine!*" Her body language reminded me of a squirrel guarding nuts. "There is something to be said for these more refined flavors, don't you think?"

She dug into her second cake, chewing loudly, and for a moment, the sight sent me back in time. Then I looked down at my hand, unmistakably wrinkled with age. It snapped me right out of the dream, but it left me with a pang of loneliness in its place. "It's strange to think I've known you for nearly seventy years now."

I reached out periodically to wipe away the powder that clung to her lips.

"Much obliged," she responded flatly, as if out of obligation rather than sincerity.

Getting up, I retrieved a bottle of barley tea from the refrigerator. After a quick sip, I handed it to her.

"Glug, glug."

Had she actually drunk any, or was she just pretending?

Instead of returning to bed, I sat directly on the floor, let out a breath, and closed my eyes. All I felt was Yashiro's presence and my own respiration—not even a hint of anything more.

Five years after Adachi's death had parted me and her, I realized that there must not be such things as ghosts. If there were, her spirit would still be with me, and I would certainly have

had the power to sense her at least once. No, there was only one place where ghosts existed, and that was the human mind. The soul of Adachi's memory lived on inside me.

Sure, most people would call that a delusion, but it kept my heart beating.

With nothing better to do, I switched on the TV. On the screen was an old woman, likely around my age, discussing the secrets to health and longevity: "I think perhaps...it's about having a goal in mind."

"Hm."

This woman had a strong, clear voice. When she was asked what her goal was, she replied cryptically, "I want to see a rainbow."

"A *rainbow*?" I repeated incredulously.

Then I lifted the corner of the curtain and peeked out at the sky. All that decorated its bright-blue color was a smattering of clouds—sure enough, no rainbow was to be seen. Now that I thought about it, I couldn't recall ever seeing one from this window. Perhaps it wasn't as easy as I'd assumed.

"That reminds me, Shimamura-san—will you not be eating breakfast today?"

"Hm? Oh yeah. I'd better do that."

"I look forward to it!" Yashiro exclaimed through a mouthful of cake. Perhaps the most frightening thing about her was that, having known her for so long, I didn't find her entitlement so rude anymore.

Anyway, I threw together whatever was in the fridge and served it for breakfast.

"Feeling lazy today, huh?"

*"*You *make something, then!"*

"Me? Good one." Adachi dangled her hands in front of her, imitating a ghost, and I laughed.

After we finished eating, Yashiro raised her hand to speak. "I nearly forgot—I have brought you something."

“Hm?” I squinted at her hands, but they were as empty as always. “Where is it?”

“One moment, please.”

She dashed out the front door and, two seconds later, walked back in carrying something. Whatever it was, I knew for a fact that she couldn’t have left it sitting out there. I decided not to think too deeply about that, though.

“Unfortunately for you, Shimamura-san, it is not edible.”

“If it were, you’d have eaten it yourself, punk.”

“False! I would surely have brought you half,” she declared proudly.

When she handed the object to me, I recognized it at once. “Talk about retro,” I murmured, pressing the buttons on the controller.

“Little and I played many games on this console.”

“Is that so?”

It must’ve belonged to my sister, then. I was the one who organized her things after she’d passed, but I couldn’t remember what I did with her video games. For a moment, I wondered why Yashiro would bring me this, but that was a stupid question. Why would she bring it except to play something together? Maybe she thought that I was bored and wanted to do something nice.

“Little wanted me to have it, but I shall pass this gift along to you.”

“You sure?”

“She gave me many other things.”

“I see… Will it even work?”

“Who knows?” Yashiro replied with a shrug.

At the very least, there was no way to connect it to a modern television. “I’ll need to figure out how to set it up…”

My first thought then was, *Too much effort*. That would certainly explain why I sat around all day, wouldn’t it? If every hobby was “too much effort,” it was no wonder I didn’t have any.

“So I guess I’ll try to do that…tomorrow, maybe.” If I went around town asking specialty shops, I could probably find a way.

“I shall accompany you.”

“I won’t be buying any snacks, you know.”

I watched, chuckling, as she visibly deflated.

After that, Yashiro stayed, not just for breakfast, but all the way through dinner before finally going home. But where *was* “home,” now that my parents and sister were gone? At one point, she’d tried to get out of taking a bath, so I’d snatched her up and forced her in.

“You are behaving like Little,” she had remarked.

“It runs in the family,” I’d replied.

That night, as I lay in bed with my eyes closed, Adachi came into view.

“Sounds like I’m buying a TV tomorrow,” I told her.

“You already have a TV,” she replied, pointing at the little screen.

“Well, I need a different one in this case.”

“You’re really going to play video games with someone else?” She narrowed her eyes reproachfully, and the guilt I felt was nostalgic indeed.

“You could play with us, you know.”

“Pass,” she spat, turning away sulkily. After a moment, she muttered, *“I wish I could.”*

“Me too.”

My agreement seemed to soothe her spirits, since she looked back at me. *“So you need an older TV?”*

“Yep. I guess you could say that the passage of time sometimes creates more problems than it solves.”

Adachi thought for a moment. As I waited for her reply, I noticed that she was wearing our high-school uniform. Then she raised her index finger to point hesitantly at herself. *“Like with me?”*

“Yep.”

She smiled faintly in response.

Now that I’d given Adachi the latest update, I switched gears and closed my eyes once more. For once, I actually had plans tomorrow, so I tasked myself with sleeping. In the past, that wouldn’t have taken much effort at all; as strange as it might sound, that was the aspect of life in which I most keenly felt my old age.

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These days, the rest of the world was in a tizzy trying to make first contact with extraterrestrial life-forms. I’d known one for years now, though, so I couldn’t really see what all the fuss was about.

“Heh heh heh! In truth, I am not an alien at all.”

“Get out of my head.”

At first glance, I couldn’t tell what she was supposed to be dressed as today. My guess was a deer, given the antlers. But in fact, she was apparently an out-of-season reindeer, trotting around downtown without a sleigh.

“Oh, right. Not to put you on the spot, but I wanted to ask you something.”

“Yes?”

“Why do you only ever say ‘hello,’ not ‘good morning’?” It was a little late to bother asking, granted, but the question had occurred to me when she turned up yesterday and was only cemented more firmly as of this morning.

“Little told me that she preferred ‘hello.’ Therefore, I say ‘hello.’”

“Hunh… What did she have against ‘good morning’?”

“Who knows?” Yashiro replied with an exaggerated shrug. She evidently hadn’t bothered to ask.

I mulled it over for a while myself, but I couldn't think of a plausible reason. Perhaps my sister was simply an odd duck. "How very strange."

"Indeed."

Maybe that oddness explained why she'd doted on Yashiro all her life.

I scarcely remembered the last time I'd gone into town with a friend—or the last day trip I'd taken, or the last time I'd bathed blithely in the sun. Today, its rays filtered dimly through a thin layer of clouds, its shape obscured as if by gauze. This weather made the walk easier on me, but still, it took its toll on my back and hips after a while. At my age, Earth's pull was too great to endure.

"It seems I won't make it into outer space." I had hoped to experience zero gravity before I died, but clearly that was still beyond me, and now I wouldn't live to see a free-flying world.

"Do you want to?" Yashiro asked casually, turning her innocent gaze on me.

I had a feeling that, if I said "yes," she'd knock me into orbit faster than I could blink. So was that what I wanted? To feel light again?

"Can you come with me into space, Adachi?"

"Wherever you go, I'll go."

"Glad I can count on you."

If there was indeed no such thing as ghosts, then Adachi couldn't go anywhere, since she was dead and gone. I'd never see her again, and...and there would never be a next time. If that was the case, then perhaps from now on, she could truly only be found in the haze of my heart.

"No thanks. I've got plans today."

"I see." With that, Yashiro donned her usual smile, as if saying that she didn't mind either way.

I decided to start with the electronics store before I went wandering around blindly. There, I listened to an employee's

patient explanation. Only half of it made any sense to me; to sum it up, though, all I really needed to get the console to work was an adapter.

"Well, that makes things easy." As it turned out, I didn't have to buy a second TV after all. *"Hear that? It'll work with the one I have."*

"That's good. You don't have room for a second TV anyway."

"True." I thought back to how Adachi and I had agonized over furniture placement in our condo. It had felt like playing with building blocks made of pure happiness.

Fortunately, I managed to get my hands on that "adapter" thing while Yashiro and I were out. Going to the farthest reaches of town was no grand adventure, but at my age, it was enough excitement for one day.

"Yaaay!"

It helped, of course, that I was accompanied by a gleeful gremlin carrying a bag of freshly purchased caramel corn.

When we returned, Yashiro helped herself to my bed while I set about connecting the console to the television. I hadn't thought to test my TV before we left the house, so if it turned out to be broken, we'd need to make a second trip into town. Naturally, that hadn't occurred to me until I was already home.

Fortunately, the TV seemed well-preserved; I couldn't see any discoloration on the plastic exterior, and it didn't…you know…*feel* old? The moment I had that thought, I paused to contemplate what it meant. Perhaps, to me, something only felt "old" if it was covered by a thin, sticky membrane of dust and dirt. I ran a finger over the back of my wizened hand. *Still young,* I lied to myself.

"Where'd I put the—ah, there's the remote. Now, will it show up…?"

Faithfully following the instructions I'd been given, I changed the channel. The TV screen darkened for a moment; then, at last, an explosion of color erupted.

"Ooooh!" Yashiro kicked her feet in excitement.

“It works! Attaboy, old-timer,” I joked, petting the machine, which was nearly as old as me. For a split second, I hallucinated that my baby sister was there with us, smirking proudly. Given that she’d lived a relatively busy life in and out of the spotlight, I wasn’t sure when she would’ve found time to play video games, but clearly, she had.

Yashiro came and sat in my lap. Holding her like a cushion, I pressed a few buttons on the controller.

“Oh, there’s stuff on it…”

A row of my sister’s digital purchases had popped up onscreen, the most recent of which was a game in which you went on a quest to defeat a dragon. I’d only played video games with my sister or friends, never by myself—looking back, I’d spent the majority of my free time sleeping—so I was almost unfamiliar with the series. But I didn’t think I could keep up with an action game’s pace, so perhaps something text-heavy was the perfect choice. Thus, I decided to quest after dragons.

As the game booted up, I mashed buttons to get to the title screen and accidentally skipped the opening cinematic. *Oops… Oh well.* When I selected Continue, I saw my sister’s name on the top save file.

You used your real name? I don’t know whether to cringe or feel proud.

Her character’s level was pretty high, so I was tempted to load the file and see whether she’d beaten the game…but opted not to. “Nah, that’s hers.” If I messed with it, she’d get mad at me. On the one hand, maybe I was silly to fear the dead, but on the other hand, ghosts were a Halloween staple for a reason. Smiling to myself, I decided I’d made the smart choice.

I started a new game. When it prompted me for a name, I waffled between my surname and given name, but I ultimately settled on “Shimamura.”

“Shimamura-san the Hero?”

“That’s me.” Only my family had ever called me “Hougetsu,” so at this point, I had very little attachment to that name. Not even

my old coworkers had called me Hougetsu-san… *That would've been weird, actually.*

"Little told me that a 'hero' is someone who irons out the world's many injustices, big and small."

"Wait, really?" That sounded like a lot of work.

"Therefore, it is perhaps a fitting role for you."

"Wow. I'm special." But the sudden compliment gave me pause. "Your flattery won't win you more snacks, just so you know."

"Noooo!"

Figured she was after those. "Now, let's see here… Shimamura the Hero, sixteen years old… Sheesh, that's young." What a cruel world, to expect a child to grow up so fast.

In the game, the king summoned me; when I waltzed blithely into the throne room, he ordered me to battle dark forces. As if I wasn't dealing with enough already! After that, a minister told me to take a few allies with me when I set out. If I'd played this back in middle school, I would undoubtedly have tried to go at it alone just to spite him.

"How very convenient to have friends bestowed upon you."

"True that."

I was allowed four party members max. After a moment of consideration, I requested to meet "Hino," "Nagafuji," and "Adachi." I'd come into contact with many people throughout my life, but whenever I thought of a four-person group, it was those faces that came to mind alongside my own, although it was a relatively rare occurrence. Nagafuji's parents had run a butcher shop, so she'd be a Merchant; Hino would be a Gadabout; but what would I do with Adachi?

"What vocation do you want?"

"Uh…employee?"

"No boring real-world answers, please."

"Okay then…Priest?"

“Wait, really?”

She wasn’t joking. *“I like the thought of…healing you.”*

How adorable. “Priest it is.”

I couldn’t help noticing that the group only had one fighter in it, but oh well; I invited Adachi the Priest to join us. Who’d have thought that I’d once again meet her at age sixteen, but this time in a video game? *Maybe it’s destiny,* I thought with a chuckle.

“What about me?” Yashiro protested.

“Oh…I guess I could make some more.” While I was at it, I created my sister too, turning her into a Mage on a whim. “As for *your* vocation, you’ll be a…”

“Heh heh heh! I would obviously be a Martial Artist.” She thrust out her stubby little fists.

“…Thief.”

“Huh?”

Specifically, she was always good at stealing from the fridge. On second thought, considering how many times she’d gotten caught in the act, maybe she wasn’t so good at that after all.

“All done! You and my sister will be in charge of eating snacks at home.”

“Not a bad deal.” She nodded to herself, and so I left her behind to go on a journey. “I look forward to the souvenirs!”

“There won’t be any!”

Outside the castle, I wandered around aimlessly. Nagafuji and I could take down whatever enemy got in our way, for the most part. Not only was the Merchant more capable than I’d expected, she picked up gold sometimes too. This “Nagafuji” worked harder than the real Nagafuji ever had! Conversely, Hino the Gadabout didn’t “gad about” much at all. Perhaps that title was pure self-deprecation consistent with the real-life Hino.

We commuted back and forth as if traveling to and from an office, earning money and experience. All things considered, this wasn’t exactly an exciting first step in the journey of a hero; it was

reasonably entertaining for the player, sure, but what about for onlookers?

“Are you having fun?” I asked, peering down at the face just below my own.

“Very much so,” Yashiro replied with a bright smile, as if to suggest that she meant it. “I spent many hours watching Little play.”

“Ah.”

“And she sometimes gave me treats.” She shot me a very pointed glance. “Wink wink.”

“I already bought you a treat,” I replied, aiming a pointed glance of my own at the bag of caramel corn she was now cradling like a newborn.

“No, this is a souvenir. A treat is different.”

“God, you’re so entitled.” I smashed my chin into her scalp in retaliation.

“Gyaaahhh,” she shouted flatly.

As the grind continued, I let my mind melt into the midday air. This was simple work, and seeing the numbers rise gave me a real sense of accomplishment. That was something I’d been sorely missing in my life lately.

“This is fun and all, but…” I wasn’t sure how quickly I could finish the game, and to be blunt, I was concerned that I didn’t have much time left. “I just hope I can beat it before I die,” I confessed quietly.

Back in town, I ran straight to the weapons-and-armor shop. I thought that I’d saved up a decent pile of gold, but upon perusing the items offered, it became clear that I’d need to choose carefully. As I scrolled up and down, waffling, I heard the bag below rustle.

“Perhaps you had better hurry, then,” Yashiro remarked offhandedly.

“Oh yeah?” Unable to decide whether to prioritize weapons or armor, I took a piece of caramel corn. I was grateful to find it

easy to chew and only mildly sweet. “Will I be dying soon?”

“Good question.” She poured a fistful of popcorn into her mouth, chewed loudly, and smiled. “To me, Earthling lives are all incredibly brief, so I have a poor grasp of their exact length.”

“Is that so?”

“It could happen tomorrow, or a hundred years from now.”

“Trust me, I’m not living another hundred years.” She estimated too broadly, but so did I, judging by my lack of financial planning in this game. “Oh well.” In the end, I decided to buy Adachi some good armor.

Looking back, I’d rarely bought her clothes in real life; I only ever got her something silly for her birthday every year. So I really had no business talking smack about Nagafuji. Come to think of it, though, Adachi’s taste in gifts was a little odd too. When we’d first moved into that condo, she’d brought a boomerang and an empty drink can, among other things. The former had been a gift from me, but where did the latter come from? It clearly must’ve held *some* sort of sentimental value, or she’d have thrown it away. Thus, I’d decided to display it on a shelf.

My curiosity had yet to be satisfied, however. Either I’d forgotten the can’s worth, or I would simply never know.

“Any recollection?”

“You *don’t remember?*” She pouted at me.

I laughed—not at her, but at myself. *Nice dodge.* “Well, if I don’t make it in time, will you beat it for me?” I asked Yashiro, since she almost certainly had nothing else going on.

She refused, though. “I am a very busy person, Shimamura-san,” she declared firmly, exhaling a waft of sweet caramel. She didn’t often reject suggestions so strongly. Maybe she wanted me to figure the game out on my own…

“Fair enough.” Too lazy to argue with her, I ground my chin into her skull once more.

“Gyaaaaah.”

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For a while, I tried to lie quietly in bed, but eventually I gave up and opened my eyes. It was pitch black either way. Fumbling on all fours, I felt around until I found the console and controller. As I turned the console on, I averted my eyes from the TV screen's sharp light, staring at the wall until they had adjusted.

I had decided to stay up playing video games instead of sleeping. Surely this was a smart choice that would have no lasting repercussions for my circadian rhythm.

I loaded my save from earlier that evening, at which point I had reached level eight. My fingers moved half on autopilot while I zoned out—so hard I saw double. I could see Adachi seated amid the blur, however. She was once again wearing her uniform, her limbs half-concealed in the darkness.

"It sounds like I might die soon," I informed her. As she frowned, I continued, *"The girl can be oddly convincing about these things."*

Yashiro was a terrible liar, after all, so I'd have known right away if she was fibbing.

"Does it bother you?"

"Well, sure. Everyone worries about it when they get older."

"Are you scared to die?"

For a moment, my fingers fell still, but I continued to face the screen.

"Mmm, not really," I answered, as though I was stepping forward onto even ground. Perhaps it was common to have regrets at this stage, but I'd already lost everything. "If you were still around, though, I'd be scared stiff to leave you all alone."

"I'm not so sure about that…"

"I'm serious! Poor little Adachi-chan. You'd spend every day crying your eyes out."

"Th-that's…probably true, actually."

“That’s why I think we were meant to go in this order.” Not that I much liked having been left behind myself. Meanwhile, Adachi had glanced over at me with her shoulders slumped, as if she was disappointed about something. “Yes? What is it?” I pressed.

“Just wondering if…if *you* ever cry about *me*.”

“What? Didn’t you see me at your funeral?”

“I was dead!”

“Oh, right.” I chuckled softly.

“So you cried?” she asked, her face faintly flushed with joy.

What’re you so happy about, you meanie? “Of course I cried.”

But in truth, I hadn’t shed many tears at all. Crying took energy I no longer had.

“You mean it?”

“I wouldn’t lie to you about that.”

“I feel like you’d cry harder over a dead dog.”

“Well…I mean…hmm,” I fumbled, hastily stopping myself from admitting that she was right. When she pouted, I continued, “You know how dogs can’t talk?”

“Uh…yeah?”

“They can’t understand anything I want to tell them. So, when they die, all those feelings just…come rushing out all at once. That’s what I think,” I concluded, before Adachi could get a word in edgewise. Then I pointed at the screen to change the subject. “More importantly, how come your attack stat is so low?”

“I’m a *healer*!”

“You need to help while Hino gads about.” We couldn’t divvy the game’s workload up like household chores—we needed to coordinate our efforts.

Adachi rose to her feet and walked over to me. She looked so much younger now that I felt out of place next to her.

“Shimamura…”

“Yeees?”

“Thank you for…um…staying until the very end,” she mumbled, gripping her skirt’s hem anxiously. “I wanted to tell you that, but I died in my sleep, so…I couldn’t.”

“Ah, yeah…” I paused to think of the right way to word my reply, but what came out of my mouth was, “You died well. I was happy—I mean, I was relieved, you know? That you felt no pain.” Our sparse vocabularies were glaringly apparent when it came to this sensitive subject.

“Yeah, but I abandoned you… I’m sorry…”

“Nah, it’s okay. You still come visit, don’t you?” Then I realized: perhaps this was an opportunity for me to convey some gratitude of my own. “Thank you for staying with me after death.”

She smiled awkwardly, as if she was out of practice—every bit the Adachi I’d once known. “But I’m an illusion.”

“I know, but…hmmmm. Yeah, I think it’ll happen soon.”

Adachi’s eyes widened, and we gazed at each other up close for a moment.

“I’m not sure when it started, but your voice sounds way closer now,” I explained, smiling.

After I lost her, I’d only ever heard her voice as an echo in the back of my head—but now I could hear it as though she were right beside me. *Outside* my body. And since I was rather enjoying that, maybe I shouldn’t have pointed it out…because the moment I did, she vanished. Wanting the conversation to continue, I began to close my eyes, chasing after the voice as it retreated back inside my skull. Then I thought better of it and looked up.

“That’s a Priest for you, I suppose.” She had given my heart all the sustenance it needed.

Maybe I was wrong about there being no such thing as ghosts. Maybe, in order to see them, you simply had to be close enough to death. If so, maybe I’d see a lot more of Adachi from now on. The future ahead of me was bright indeed.

“Spending a whole day on nothing but memories and silly games… For the first time, I’m starting to think that old age isn’t so

bad.”

With those final words, I directed my eyes in front of me.

I didn’t see or hear Adachi for the rest of the night.

***

“Hello there!”

“…Hi…”

“You look quite lively today!”

“Your eyes clearly don’t work, then.”

Lively, after pulling an all-nighter playing video games? Well… okay, maybe. My headache and red eyes certainly made me feel *alive*. For my trouble, I’d made it all the way to the desert. Adachi and I had never gone to a desert in real life, but Hino probably had.

“After all this time and effort, I’ll reach the final boss any minute now.”

“You are not even close.”

“Wait, really?” *Oh no. Any more all-nighters, and I’ll kick the bucket for sure.*

Yashiro slid onto my lap. “Ho ho ho! You appear to be enjoying yourself.”

“Well…yeah, I guess.”

I liked how it felt to travel freely, so perhaps this was my type of game. Alas, Merchant Nagafuji was gradually losing steam in terms of combat; she’d now been relegated to picking up coins.

“I appreciate your bringing me this, although I don’t know why you chose this moment.”

“You don’t?” she asked, tilting her head. “It was a birthday gift.”

“Whose—oh.” I counted back two days on my fingers. *Right*. I was always forgetting my own damn birthday. “You could’ve said

so, you know.”

“Heh heh heh!”

“That wasn’t your cue to laugh.”

“Happy belated birthday, Shimamura-san.”

“Thanks.” I recalled a previous conversation about birthdays, and what I’d said at the time. “Happy birthday to you too,” I replied. It was an expression of everything I felt toward her.

But I digress.

“Hmmm…” I came to a stop in front of a pyramid. “Are you craving any particular snack?” Knowing her, that was the only sort of birthday gift she’d want.

“If you are offering, then may I have a donut?”

“A donut? Yeah, sure.”

That had been the first treat I ever gave her—my first mistake, feeding a stray. I could only wonder what would’ve happened if I’d refused to share. I’d have no console now, so the TV would be off, and I’d be alone in the dark. Given Yashiro’s penchant for destiny, though, that outcome had probably been impossible from the start.

“I give you a donut, you tell me one of the secrets of the universe. That was the deal, wasn’t it?”

“Accounting for inflation, I will now require two donuts per secret.”

“Who taught you economics?”

“I would still appreciate a single donut, of course.” She was surprisingly willing to compromise.

I didn’t have any questions about the *universe*, per se, but what I wanted to know most at this particular moment was: “Will I find Adachi again?”

Perhaps, to me, Adachi *was* the universe.

“Yes,” Yashiro replied instantly. “In every universe, Shimamura-san will inevitably find her Adachi-san.”

I seemed to recall her mentioning something along those lines long ago. “So *other* Shimamuras will see her, but not me?”

“The living cannot meet the dead.” She stated that matter-of-factly; it felt viscerally wrong somehow, coming from *her* of all people. “I learned that from the television.”

“I should’ve known.”

Yashiro and common sense just didn’t mix. And she *was* wrong, wasn’t she? I considered telling her about the illusionary Adachi. Would that make me look crazy?

“But of course, that only applies to the *dead*.”

“Huh…?”

Something told me that Yashiro meant more than she was letting on, but I couldn’t work out her implication. Old age had done my brain no favors. Was she trying to say that I could see Adachi *in my memories*, or something cerebral like that?

“Well, whatever.” We’d expressed our gratitude to one another, albeit indirectly, and I was satisfied. “So are you able to visit those other Shimamuras?”

“I am able, yes. However, it requires some time.”

She spoke so matter-of-factly that I wanted to roll my eyes, but at this point, I didn’t even think of questioning her.

“Well, if any of us Shimamuras can’t find our Adachi—or vice versa—you should go check on her sometime.” Even if meeting Adachi *was* destiny, one incarnation of me was bound to slip up, and that thought was unsettling. “It doesn’t feel right for any version of us to be apart.”

After all, there was no “Adachi and Shimamura” without both of us.

“That sounds…fun.” Yashiro lowered her hood and grinned up at me. Maybe this would give her some actual purpose, rather than leeway to sit around doing nothing. “Very well, then. Do we have a deal?”

“Yep.”

“Now for the donuts.”

“Already?!” Honestly, I shouldn’t have been surprised, knowing her.

As I reached out and tousled her hair, she beamed back innocently…and I was oddly relieved that she was still cold to the touch, like the moon hanging in the sky.

***

That day, I found a relatively intact bicycle lying on its side behind what used to be someone’s house. I gingerly lifted it upright and tested its resistance, resting a foot onto it, then bouncing it up and down. It showed no sign of falling apart, so I wiped the seat and hopped on timidly. When I put my foot to the pedal, it let out a dull creak, like the sound my bones made when I woke up in the morning. *Needs maintenance,* I thought.

But even if I managed to repair it, I couldn’t picture myself leaving this town.

Unable to decide whether I should celebrate this decidedly inedible find, I began retracing my steps. As I pushed the bike, the feeling of rust and dirt on the handle made my skin crawl; checking my palm, I saw that it was blackened with grime. I instinctively wiped it on my leg—a stupid move that only spread the stains further.

My lips parted as I tried to say something, but all that came out was a parched sigh. I talked to myself less these days. Had I simply run out of things to say? I’d grown sick of the sky—even the patterns of the clouds—and now I only ever looked at the ground.

As usual, the sunset hung over me like a weight; when I realized I was slouching, I consciously straightened my posture. Then I noticed that the sound of my footsteps—my one constant accompaniment—had now been joined by the rattle of wheels, and I found some small enjoyment in the new melody.

Because most nonhuman animals had gone extinct (at least, as far as I was told), there was very little noise or movement save for rustling grass and gliding clouds. And me, technically, as I

headed to the edge of town. I'd taken a detour today—a whim that would only render the return trip that much longer.

Searching for food, then eating it. Sleeping, then waking. I could tell myself that my life was like a bicycle tire, but that would be a lie. Tires moved forward; I was stuck in a rut, and as I stood around purposelessly in town, I felt myself slowly wearing thin.

I'd been taught how to survive, but not how to *live*. This world didn't allow for such freedom, so if I wanted to find answers, I'd have to take matters into my own hands. Why was I alive? Did this even count as "living"? Something inside me refused to be satisfied with merely breathing, and that feeling grew at the same rate I did.

Assuming that the person who'd raised me was right about my longevity, maybe there was a reason—a *purpose*—for it. Maybe my heart wanted it. This shapeless feeling formed hazy silhouettes from distant memories of interactions—of speaking aloud and hearing something spoken in return.

Were any other people still living on this planet? With each passing day, my mind wandered further and further beyond the scope of my wildest imagination. Yet for all my thinking, I didn't act.

How far would I need to travel to find something?

I'd grown so accustomed to my life spent buried in the ruins of town that…for lack of a better way to describe it…a heavy lid of inertia pressed me down. After all, I could make it just fine on my own; if nothing else, I could *survive*. That was the only certainty I had, and I'd need more than that if I was going to go search blindly for the unknown. For that reason, I felt that I was most likely trapped here.

Until today. Until this very moment.

Snow.

I'd thought I said it out loud, but I couldn't hear the soft rasp of my voice. Winter had long since passed, yet specks of white now belatedly fell down from the sky, stopping me dead in my tracks to admire them. As they danced on the wind, I reached out and

caught one on my palm; instantly it faded, leaving only a faint glow.

For the first time in ages, I tilted my head back.

“Uh—”

A choked sound slipped from my throat and I froze, mouth agape, as something came into view. At first, it too was a tiny speck gleaming in the scarlet sky, but over time, it grew bigger and bigger until it took a humanoid form. It approached at a leisurely pace, as if it had blown in on the breeze, yet somehow it managed to land in front of me—directly into my new bicycle’s lumpy basket—without the slightest indication of pain or injury.

“Wh...whoa...” I hadn’t used my voice for so long, it took me a couple tries to get that out.

As the entity or whatever glanced around, I noticed that it was glowing, despite the daylight, exuding a pale blue the likes of which I’d never seen. Its descent had left a streak in the air that rose into the sky like a tower. Then, with a gust of wind, it was gone; the mass of particles blew over me, engulfing me briefly as they passed, and I caught a whiff of dry earth.

A beat later, the form turned and noticed me standing there. Her blue hair, I realized, was tied into the shape of butterfly wings behind her head—and when she fixed her gaze on me, her lips spread into a wide grin. Raising both hands into the air, she exclaimed cheerfully:

“Hello there!”

That was how it (all) began (again).



Halo



Chapter 5:
Halo

SOMETIMES, WHEN I STOOD STILL, a voice in the back of my mind asked, *Don't I have somewhere else to be?* Maybe it was proof of my overall contentment that, even then, I wouldn't be in any particular rush. This unfamiliar town had gradually started to feel like a well-worn glove; before, the buildings and other traces of civilization had looked to me like someone's discarded garbage, but now they brought a smile to my face.

Beneath the caramel-colored sky, I took a deep breath as if trying to vacuum up the gold-tinged clouds, filling my lungs with cold, cheerless air that made my fingertips tingle. Another day of living in this town, just me and her, the work divided between us. Whenever I spotted the long shadows stretching out from the buildings, I felt my anxiety claw into the ground. If I paused to listen closely, all I heard was the distant crumble of ruins—no sign of her. At some point, I began to question whether she was even still out there.

What seed had taken root in my heart, that I now dreaded our parting? I knew the answer, but not its name. It was a strange feeling—foreign but not unwelcome.

Our long-term goal, seeing the waterfall's basin, was still ages away. In a world bereft of humans and their culture, simply ensuring survival took longer than one might think. But unlike before, I now had a partner with whom to share that time, and since our individual efforts had been halved, I was content to make incremental progress in the gaps between. After all, if we reached the bottom of the crater too quickly, I'd find myself adrift all over again.

Thus, we'd chosen to center our survival on this place.

But one day, while I was standing outside the forest and debating whether to enter it, something other than wind rustled the trees. Flinching in surprise, I looked up—and, as if in response to my curiosity, the foliage promptly exposed the source of the

rustle. At that precise moment, grayish lumps pierced the sky one after another on wings spread to their full span, each tracing a wide arc through the air.

“That’s strange…” Just bearing witness to *one* other living being was uncommon enough, but an entire flock?

In a blink, they were already halfway to their next destination. At no point did I consider going after them or trying to catch one. Only my neck muscles moved as I stood there and watched them go.

Then, in the direction toward which they’d departed, another change struck me. My eyes widened in horror.

The sky…was *darkening*. It was as if a stream of black water were flowing into the caramel, slowly consuming it. The resulting red-purple gradient was admittedly very pretty, but something told me that I shouldn’t just stand there agog, so I turned on my heel and hurried back to town.

As I ran, I felt my breaths retreat quietly into the back of my throat, and I listened desperately for any other footsteps. Meanwhile, I stomped hard on the ground, hoping that by some miracle the vibrations would guide us back together. By the time the buildings themselves had all but transformed into inky black shadows, I saw her running straight toward me as if she was fleeing from danger.

We came together at a speed that threatened a head-on collision. Instinctively, we joined hands—my left in her right—and for a moment we spun, as if dancing, until our momentum declined. When at last we came to a stop, our necks craned upward in unison, and we watched the darkness paint thickly over every last inch of the sky. My free hand clenched into a fist as I wondered whether the world was finally ending.

“Oh, I know!” In contrast to my reaction, the wide-eyed, slack-jawed girl beside me didn’t sound especially worried. “This is called night.”

“Knite?” I questioned her, parroting the unfamiliar word.

“I heard about it from the person who raised me. Before the world fell to ruin, there was a set time each day when no light

would shine."

That explanation helped to jog my memory. "Yeah, I think I've heard of that." Was the girl who'd told me about it out there somewhere, flying through the cosmos?

"Well, maybe it's not actually something we need to worry about."

"But what if the light never comes back?"

"Good question," she replied, but her tone was too light for her to be considering that seriously. When my focus turned to our joined hands, the churn of restlessness eased slightly in my chest, while my burning cheeks threatened to illuminate the darkness.

"Yashiro…"

Before she left, she'd said that our world might regain a bit of its shape now that the other girl and I were together—as if something in stasis were reactivating. Did that explain the sky? The birds? Was the world finally taking action?

Well, two could play at that game.

"If the light does come back…" It was too dark to see more than a silhouette beside me, but I set my gaze on the dazzle of dreams. "We should go on a trip together."

The invitation was casual, yet my heart leapt into my throat. My blood, once frozen in fear of knite, now melted all at once, pounding through every vein in my body.

"I'll fix the bike, and we can ride it together—go see the sights a little ways out," I added. "Then we'll come home."

Home. Together.

She grinned so brightly, I saw her pearly whites flash in the dark. "Sounds fun. I'm gonna ride in back, so have fun pedaling."

From her smile, it was clear that she had no intention of exerting herself. *Cheeky*, I thought—but aloud, I accepted the challenge. "Fine by me." The words felt strange on my tongue, almost as if someone else had answered for me.

I imagined pedaling a bicycle with her riding behind me. Inexplicably, my heart rejoiced at the thought. It just seemed so

nice... Once again, I'd found a source of overwhelming happiness, as I had the time a sparkly blue alien crash-landed onto my planet and started me on my journey.

Evidently the stories of my life would always begin with the sky.

"Hey. Look at that."

She pointed toward a single massive star peeking into view through the long black cloud. As we stood there, baffled by the knite, it twinkled down on us as if offering us its guiding light.

"I've seen faint traces of that thing in the sky before. But, wow, it's super bright now."

"I wonder what its name is..."

She squinted, as if scanning for something she only half-remembered putting away. I likewise searched the light for answers. Its sparkle was so crisp and white, I could almost hallucinate a chill wetting my cheeks.

Then I remembered. "Oh, that's..."

Before I told her the answer, I looked up once more at the pale orb that Yashiro had professed to like.

The moon.

As if newly empowered, it exuded a ring of light, shining down upon us like a gentle hug.



and



Chapter 6:
and

M*NCH. MNCH. MNCH.*

The sounds she made were highly unnatural, but oddly enough, they still conveyed how much she was enjoying herself. As she stood beside me, a donut in each hand, a flower of sheer delight was visibly blooming on her face.

Then again, flowers were blooming all over the place, since springtime was in full force—I could identify the season from the lukewarm exhaust of the cars passing on the street. We leaned side by side against a building, a soft breeze tickling our noses.

“What a day it has been!”

“Indeed…”

As I was wandering around town, Yashiro had suddenly turned up beside me, as she was wont to do. Today she wore a bird onesie; I gazed at her, trying to pinpoint the species, until at last, the word *heron* rose from the dusty encyclopedia of my memory.

Yashiro’s sense of sartorial coordination left something to be desired, though; in place of the onesie’s hood, she wore a yellow helmet. Well…perhaps “wearing” wasn’t quite accurate, since it appeared to merely rest atop her head. It looked fairly old, given the scuffs and grime, yet she wore it proudly over her luscious locks. Contrasted with her blue sparkle, the helmet’s poor condition almost seemed an intentional fashion choice.

My opinion of her attire aside, I couldn’t help noticing that she was awfully aggressive today, demanding not one but *two* donuts. She was normally willing to walk past the donut shop, but this time, she’d all but dragged me inside; now here we were.

“We had a deal.”

“I don’t remember that at all,” I told her.

“That sounds like a problem.”

Still, she moved on to her second donut with an enthusiasm that suggested that she wasn't terribly concerned. Unlike her first, which had been chocolate, this one was custard-filled. I watched, chuckling, as her fingers turned sticky with sugar and oil. Yet the longer I looked at the hands poking out from her wingtips, the more surreal the sight seemed. Were her arms really that long, or did she extend and retract them as needed? It wasn't like I'd never questioned these minute details, but I suspected the spring sunshine had put me in a more inquisitive mood.

Mmncccch!

The sound had changed slightly—in response to the new flavor, maybe? The more time Yashiro and I spent together, the more silly observations I found myself making.

"These sweet treats truly taste like destiny, do they not?"

"That's destiny, all right." My shoulders shook with a suppressed giggle. It was such a silly concept, but coming from her, it carried mysterious weight.

"It must be impossible for someone to feel angry while eating a donut."

"Yeah…maybe." If they tried scowling with a mouth full of custard, it *would* melt away pretty quick.

While she made her slurping sounds, I tried to think of what our "deal" might've been, but I hadn't the faintest idea. Was she putting one over on me? *Hmmm…* I snuck a peek at her, but she looked happier than I'd ever seen, so I was tempted to shrug it off.

Her head was at the perfect height for me to reach out and slap a palm onto her helmet, causing a flurry of blue motes to rise up. I caught one on the tip of my index finger, but before I could examine it up close, a gust from a passing car whisked it away, and it vanished.

"Aren't you hungry, Shimamura-san?"

"Oh, it'll be dinnertime soon enough," I replied after gauging the sky. The sun's brightness had calmed a bit, the sinking vestige of spring blotting me and the wall behind me into an oil painting.

As I took in the seasonal scene, I felt my throat get dry and sweat bead on the tip of my nose.

“I see.”

“You could offer me a bite, though.”

“Ha ha ha!”

“That wasn’t a joke.”

Was it just me, or was she slurping faster now? *Little punk*, I thought, watching her finish.

“Mmm. Nothing beats the taste of a promise.” Both hands now empty, she gleefully raised them skyward, opening and closing her fingers in scissorlike motions.

“Your face is a mess.” I ran a napkin over her lips, then wiped her hands while I was at it.

“Ho ho ho! I owe you.”

“I’m used to it by now.”

Her skin was so smooth that the donut crumbs came away with no resistance. She patted her stomach, then put her hands on her hips and let out a proud, satisfied sigh, her gaze pointing skyward. I followed suit but couldn’t see anything of interest, save for the falling flower petals. Could she see things invisible to the human eye, like a cat or a dog could?

“Well then, let us be on our way!”

Cheerfully waving her arms—er, wings—she toddled off down the street. With each step, her hair bounced, and my eyes followed the trail of blue particles she left in her wake. “Um…to where?” I asked, since she was headed in the opposite direction from my apartment and showed no sign of stopping.

“Somewhere nice,” she replied. At a distance, she stopped and turned back. “Care to join me, Shimamura-san?”

At that moment, as if on cue, the scent of cherry blossoms engulfed me. Petals and blue sparkles danced together on the breeze, spiraling wildly around her—and the beauty of it captivated me so much that I scarcely noticed how unnatural it was.

“Wellllll…hmm. Somewhere nice, you say?” What sort of place could it possibly be, besides a bakery?

“A fun place!” The way she flapped her wings up and down, she looked very excited indeed. We surely weren’t going back to the donut shop, were we?

“Eh…okay. But only because I don’t have any other plans.”

The moment the words left my mouth, a thought struck me: *Wait. Do I really not have plans?* Something told me that I’d come into town for a reason, but my mind was hazy, like I was soaking up to my shoulders in the warm weather.

When I hurried up beside her, she met me with a soft, warm smile—one of pure, undiluted happiness without ulterior motive. It was the same smile she had maintained for the entirety of our friendship, and I liked that about her.

“Not sure where you’d find ‘fun’ in a town like this,” I remarked. All my life, I could never think of anywhere to go, which was why I’d always ended up at the mall.

“I would describe it as fun, and charming, and soothing, and nice, and dreamy, and quite aromatic, and I think you should visit.”

“Oh really…?” If Yashiro liked it that much, it could only be… “An all-you-can-eat cake buffet?”

“That would be wonderful.” Her tone was as light and springy as her gait—so giddy, in fact, I half-worried that she was about to get herself banned from the establishment. To her credit, though, it *did* sound fun.

We passed a handful of people on the street—old ladies on a walk, housewives pushing bicycles laden with grocery bags—and each time, they did a double take at the blue-haired alien. When she met their gaze, she’d greet them jovially, as if she were any other neighbor. Then again…maybe she was.

Although she didn’t blend in among other people, she looked right at home in the spring scenery. Given her sky-blue color palette, summer and winter would suit her too. Whenever she wasn’t stuffing her face, she was pretty, and pretty things had a way of fitting in just about anywhere.

We moved from the downtown district toward an area with more green hues. The modern buildings melted away in favor of farmland, with only the wide-open roads preserving the image of a town. As I walked, I glanced all around, wrestling with a strange sense of *déjà vu*. Some part of me seemed to have this confused with a different spot I'd spent a lot of time in.

"How far away is this place, anyway? I don't want to be out too late."

"Do not worry."

That…didn't seem like an answer to my question. I started to press the issue, but then a stream of flower petals passed in front of my face, as if to gently stop me. I reached out a hand and caught some on my palm. When I looked up again, I realized that the ground beyond the utility pole ahead was dyed pink with an entire carpet of the petals—far more than typically fell on a spring day. *Looks like blossom-viewing season is nearly over,* I thought.

My pace must've slowed while the petals distracted me, because Yashiro was now far ahead. She turned back and shouted, "What is the matter?"

"Oh, just the flowers."

"The flowers?" she repeated, as petals fell onto her head.

"It smells like flowers."

Where were all these petals coming from? Now that we were heading out of town, there were seemingly many more of them. Yashiro marched silently past the supermarket and gas station as if heading straight for the blossoms' source, and I followed beside (or sometimes slightly behind) her.

After a while, we reached an embankment with a clear view of the river, the surface of which gleamed like a mirror. I shielded my eyes reflexively; once they'd adjusted, I gazed at the rocky riverbed, thinking of how it looked in summer and winter. It was the same landscape, yet rendered in completely different colors.

"Must you be so difficult, Shimamura-san?"

The unexpected critique made me scowl. "Huh? What're you talking about?"

“Ho ho ho! On second thought, you might say this is part of our deal.”

She was clearly dodging the question, so I reached out and pinched her cheek. “What! Are! You! Talking! About?!”

“For the record, it is my first time here as well.”

“What? That can’t be true…can it?”

I glanced around, but everything looked perfectly familiar. We must’ve walked through this area together at least once before…possibly on the day of the festival all those years ago. Had she forgotten?

Yashiro eventually came to a stop in front of a plain-looking bridge that cut straight across the river. It was quiet here, with no sign of any cars approaching, and we had only the flower petals for company; it was almost like we were strolling through the silence of outer space, surrounded by falling stars. I couldn’t even hear the wind…yet the petals still danced in the air. Beckoning.

“Could I have a moment, Shimamura-san?”

“What’s up?”

The flow of the petals guided my gaze to Yashiro’s, her eyes twin glittering night skies. My reflection in them wore a school uniform and was tinged with a hint of the cosmos.

“From here, you must walk straight ahead.” As she spoke, her body retreated.

I beg your pardon? “More to the point, may I ask why you’re suddenly sliding backward?!”

She merely laughed that off. “Ho ho ho!”

This creature truly contained multitudes…and now those multitudes were slipping away from me.

“As promised, this is where I leave you. As promised, you must go straight forward.”

“What in the world is this about?” “Deal” this, “promise” that… I surely couldn’t have forgotten, yet somehow I couldn’t remember. Spring was a season of hibernation, so perhaps that was to blame.

“Go straight. All right?”

“All right, all right, I’ll play your silly game.” I knew Yashiro wasn’t a prankster, so I was willing to humor her on occasions like these. “Aren’t you coming to see this ‘fun place’ with me?”

“Oh, I have had lots of fun.”

Again, that wasn’t quite an answer…but some part of me didn’t mind. Maybe the disconnect in our conversation was my fault, not hers; I couldn’t prove that, but I could sense it.

Flower petals slowly filled the gap between us. I couldn’t feel anything here, not even the wind. Yet the petals were a sign that *something* was flowing. Something told me that I should keep moving too.

“Hey, Yashiro?”

“Yes?”

“Next time we meet, I’ll buy you more donuts, so…”

So come see me again. I knew that sugar was the perfect bait, but for some reason, I couldn’t voice the second half of my bargain. Fortunately, she seemed to intuit the unspoken part, because after a beat, she smiled.

“I will be there. You have my word.”

Oddly enough, I agreed, “Okay.”

She pulled off her helmet and tucked it safely into her onesie. Then she spread her “wings” as if they were real and took off running at a gallant clip, her braids bouncing like a butterfly flitting through the flowers. On a whim, I watched her tiny figure retreat into the distance at a brisk speed that almost made me feel…left behind.

“Oh, who am I kidding? I’m sure I’ll see her tomorrow.” Maybe the blossoms’ smell had just put me in a sentimental mood.

Once Yashiro had vanished from sight, I turned back to the bridge. I was apparently supposed to cross it and walk straight ahead, which didn’t sound hard. As for what awaited me in that direction—a hotel, as far as I could tell; mountains on the horizon;

and an entire amusement park. So where was this “fun place” hidden?

With a sidelong glance at the river, I began to cross the bridge.

There were no cars or pedestrians. Only my shadow. Only my footsteps.

The petals began to fly in a wild flurry, blocking more and more of my vision. Each petal had a little cleft at the tip—what was the name of that flower again? I’d gotten so used to seeing them that I couldn’t quite put my finger on it. It was a common flower that colored the city every spring… A flower that blossomed for those who entered our lives, and those who left… A pale pink flower…

The petals had nearly engulfed me now. I reached toward them, and they swallowed my fingertips, traveled along my skin, and slipped past—reminiscent of a school of fish swimming close together to form the image of a bigger fish, like in a picture book. As the petals parted, I tried to peek through to the other side…and the next thing I knew, I heard the screech of cicadas.

Cicadas in spring?

Instinctively, I stopped short. Between blinks, I could see a familiar set of stairs; as my gaze traced up the wall on their left side, I combed tentatively through my memories. The petals and the cicadas’ screeching mingled together, and it was so incongruous that my head spun.

When I glanced over my shoulder, I saw that the river and bridge were nowhere to be seen. The hotel and mountains were gone too, leaving only the smell of dry earth from the athletic field. It was as though Yashiro had put me under a spell.

“Hmmm…”

Up the stairs… Yes, up the stairs and beyond the door…

The doorknob was so cold, it was as if springtime had ended abruptly. I twisted it, opened the door, and peered furtively at what lay beyond the cry of the cicadas. It was dim inside…and deserted.

“Wait a minute.” Wasn’t someone usually here?

Yes, that’s right. It was…er…

I ran my palm over the ping-pong table, which appeared to have been used recently. The faint stickiness prodded my memories until a handful stirred, like seeds sprouting up through the earth. Without waiting for them to finish growing, I reached out and touched them; they promptly withered and fell away.

My vision wavered as I hallucinated a pair of silhouettes sitting against the wall, as if hiding from the sun streaming through the window. Was I supposed to wait? I seemed to recall that someone used to come up here after me…or was I the one who came up after them? Either way, I was sure I used to meet someone here.

My skin recognized the pent-up heat and the feel of sweat dripping down my neck. The cicadas’ screaming weighed heavily on my skull. But…

“Go straight, she said. Straight forward.”

Directly ahead of me was a second, unused ping-pong table, then a wall. Would it end there, or…?

With small steps, I slowly worked my way forward, praying for something to happen as I approached the wall. If nothing changed, I would smack into it face-first, fall onto my back like a turtle and never be able to get up again. *Come on!* I inched closer and closer until the wall was an inch from my nose. Then I reached out and tried to give it a shove.

Suddenly, the wall disappeared, revealing new sights and sounds. The cicadas were now explosively loud; that noise was paired with the same bright-blue sky I’d seen in town. I’d arrived at my grandparents’ house in the countryside.

From a distance, I noticed a layer of flower petals on their roof. As far as I knew, I’d never been here in spring—only during summer and for New Year’s. My parents’ car wasn’t in the driveway, so I had a clear view of the dusty old doghouse with the little blue roof.

Then the front door opened and my grandparents walked out, chatting with each other. When they spotted me, they looked surprised and delighted in equal measure, inviting me to come inside. I nearly agreed. Then I saw the small figure waiting behind them and fought the urge to break into a run.

"Will you come in and visit for a while?" they asked gently.

Again, I was tempted to say yes—but then I thought I heard someone call my name. *"Shiiimamuuura-saaan!"*

A shower of pale petals fell between us.

"...No, I have somewhere else to be."

Maybe if I'd stayed there, I *would* have felt true, genuine happiness, but...

"That's all right," they replied, letting me off after merely tousling my hair—sometimes taking turns, sometimes both ruffling it at once. My throat hitched, and I realized from the motions of my face what I must've looked like.

Instinctively, I crouched in front of the small dog weaving his way between my grandparents' legs. Scooping him into my arms, I gave him a hug, burying my face against his fur. I didn't say a word, but I heard a strange, beastly whimper leak out, like blood seeping from dry, cracked skin.

I felt him slipping out of my arms, so I released him and took a few steps forward. In a blink, the blue sky and fields were gone in a cloud of flower petals, replaced with the condo we'd chosen together. I had figured that this would be next.

Glancing around the bedroom, I waved at the seal and walrus plushies sitting in the corner. The sofa was so soft and comfortable, it threatened to draw me in, but I kicked it away and walked straight forward. Up ahead was a window, then a balcony, followed by nothing but sky, but even then, I didn't hesitate.

Before I could register whether I was walking on solid ground, the scenery changed again. Gradually, awareness of where I was and what I was doing set in like a rising fever, and around the time I predicted I'd see a graveyard next, I realized that I was falling. In a blink, the sky slipped away.

A moment later, I could tell that my feet had landed on solid ground. The fuzzy feeling of *déjà vu* faded, and as my vision settled, my surroundings solidified. Having fallen down alongside me, flower petals danced in the air once more.

Now I was in a place that was utterly foreign to me. This wasn't my hometown, nor the city where I'd gone to college, nor the neighborhood where our condo was, nor the district in which I'd worked, nor the grocery store parking lot, nor a vacation destination, nor the studio I'd ended up in.

I was in a crescent-shaped park. In front of me was a creatively colored slide: The ladder was green, the support beams were red, and the slide itself was yellow. Beyond the fence—so low, I wasn't sure it actually served a purpose—lay an unfamiliar cityscape. This wasn't the new world that I'd anticipated; still, it welcomed me peacefully.

Near the entrance, a sign stuck out of the ground, but its words were too faded to read. All I could make out was MURA.

Meanwhile, a massive tree occupied the center of the park, casting an equally massive shadow on the ground. Beside that tree fluttered flower petals, and the hair on someone's head, and a skirt. I caught a whiff of a scent, and with it, I remembered something. The tip of my tongue quivered as I spoke the word aloud.

At last, I'd remembered the name of the flower dropping the petals.

"Took you long enough."

The voice rose slowly through the petals, as if quietly taking wing, and I was elated to hear it after so long.

She was waiting for me there, dressed in the same uniform. Her voice bloomed like spring flowers—charming, soothing, nice, dreamy, and aromatic indeed. Meanwhile, my lips twisted into different shapes, distorting my voice into meaningless sounds as I fumbled for a joke—so awkwardly that I reminded myself of her so many years ago.

"...Yaaay, we're both young now!"

She stared back at me, wide-eyed and a little flustered. “Um… yaaay,” she chimed in stiffly, raising both hands into the air.

The sight yanked my heart sky-high, and my body nearly went with it.

“We lucked out, huh?” I couldn’t help wondering which of us had made this happen—and how. “Maybe once we got old, we both started quietly wishing the other was young again?”

“Not me! I’ll always…l-love you no matter what you look like!”

“Oh yeah? Then you wouldn’t care if I turned back into a granny right now?”

A deep silence followed, and I could only assume that she was seriously considering the possibility. My eyes grew warm at the sincerity of it.

By the time the fallen petals had nearly buried our feet, a bashful voice came fluttering out: “Um…I’d like the younger version, please.”

“I knew it! Same here, though!”

When I burst out laughing, she looked up at the sound and smiled in relief. For a moment we stood there smiling at each other. I felt my eyes and throat quiver.

“Reunited at last, huh?”

I couldn’t tell who’d said it aloud, but our feelings were the same, so there was no difference either way.

“As promised…”

The voices, the words—everything we shared made me so giddy. I was glad now that I hadn’t stopped at any of those other places; however long I’d waited, she wouldn’t have come. Besides, I didn’t need to see her in my memories, anyway.

From now on, we could go anywhere we wanted all over again.



Adachi

and

Shimamura

“Let’s cross the sea.”
“The sea?”
“We have a boat, so we can go anywhere we want.”
“Okay then, let’s go.”
“As far as we want. Just the two of us.”

Footnotes

Chapter 2: Shima

[1] *Kase-san and Morning Glories.*



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