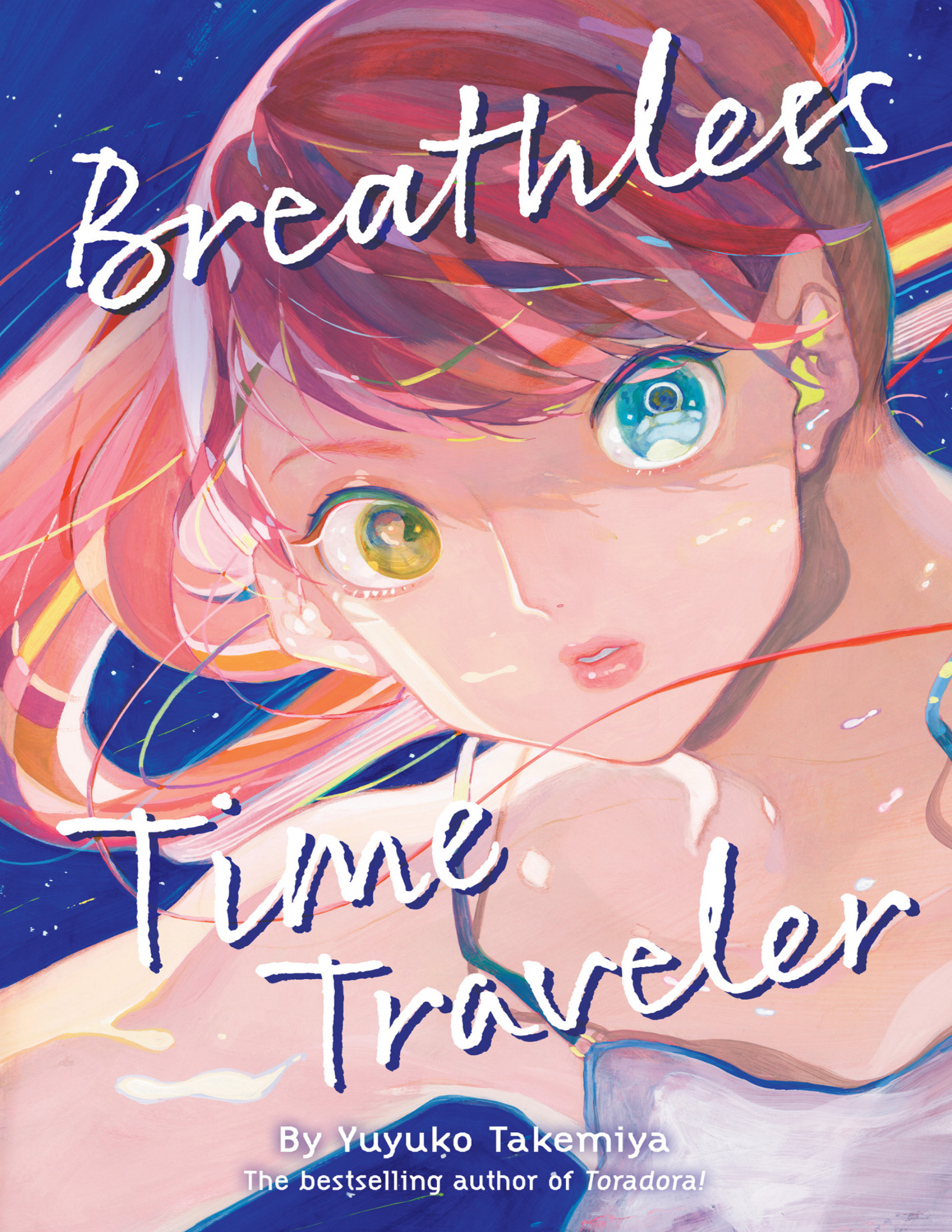

Breathless
Time Traveler
By Yuyuko Takemiya
The bestselling author of Toradora!

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Breathless Time Traveler

BY
Yuyuko Takemiya

TRANSLATED BY
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Seven Seas Entertainment

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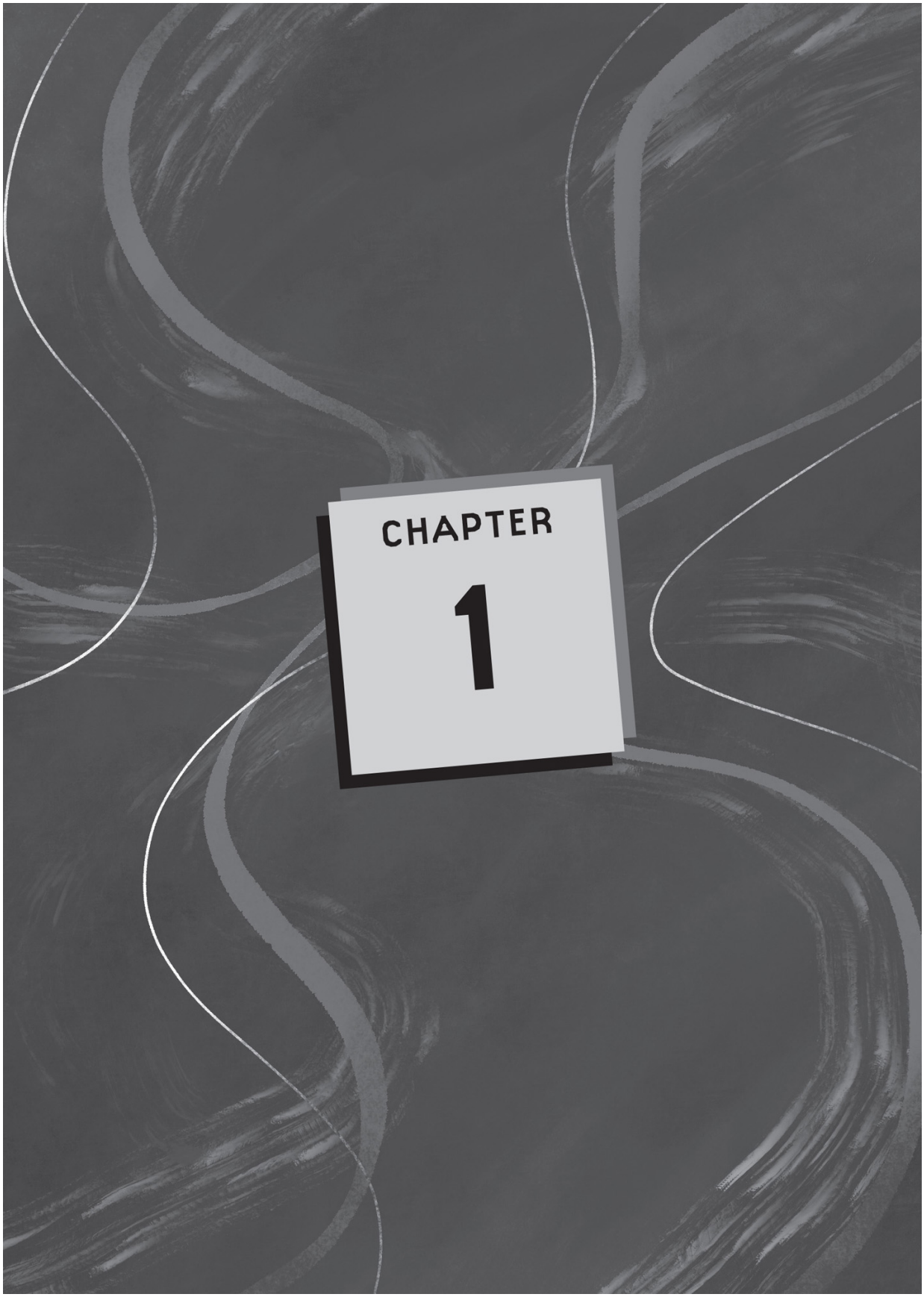
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1

Chapter 1

READY?

Five seconds.

Four.

Three.

Can you hear me? You're there, right? Don't panic. Just open your eyes…

Two.

Take a deep breath…

***

I guess it'd only be natural to question my current situation. I know I would. I mean, what the heck *is* this? But, whatever, I'm gonna have to start the story here.

Where am I? Well, take a look. It's pitch-black, and it's the middle of the night. The air is hot and stuffy and smells like grass. I am *here*, completely wrecked and trapped deep in the pits of despair. Picture a piece of roadkill: a rat, a deer, a monkey, a fox, a raccoon, a bear, a baboon, a boar…wait, no! I don't vibe with *any* of those! Just think of a cute little dog or something! Anyway, *that's* what I look like right now—thrown out like a busted-up sack of organs with its insides oozing out. I'm about to die all alone and without anyone knowing.

That was where I found myself when I woke up from my dream. That's why I was crying. And now, the story is about to start.

First, let's talk about me. My eyes were wide open and my face was turned to the side. The back half of my head was completely

gone, gouged out, and my battered brains were spilling out of the massive wound. My body had burst open at several points and was soaking in the pool of blood and fluids that were flowing from it.

Was I marinating?

Nah, I think "fermenting" covers it better. Anyway, you get the idea.

My vision was flickering. The long grass was swaying in the night as far out as I could see. There was a fallen motorcycle a small distance away from me: a dull-silver CB400. The engine had stopped, and it was completely silent, like it had rushed to die just before I could. Farther away was a pink object that used to be a helmet. Now it was crushed and broken. Dead too. I wonder if it felt regret for its failure to protect my skull.

My vision was still wavering, and it wasn't just because of my steady flow of tears. Part of my brain was hanging over my face, sliding into my open eyes. At some point, all of it was going to fall out, leaving my head empty. I probably only had until then—until my brain ran out—to still be me, to think what I thought, and to feel what I felt.

There was no light here. None. Everything around me was sinking into the pits of darkness. It had all fallen silent and still. The same went for me. I'd been tied up into a tight knot that couldn't even make a sound. Did I mention that yet? The thing about the knot? I don't think I have. No, I'm sure I haven't. Okay, okay… So, a knot is like a big bundle of stuff that can't be pulled apart easily. What I mean is, um…I mean…uh… Sorry. I need to calm down, huh? I get that a lot.

Okay. Let me start again.

I know I was talking about my death, but I think I need to go back a bit. Otherwise what comes next isn't gonna make much sense. *Now* I'm about to start. Okay. The thing about the knot.

A super-hard knot that can't be undone. It's a metaphor for what's going on with me. A tangled, mind-boggling mess. *That's* the

situation I'm in right now.

I was a picture-perfect twenty-year-old: a social-media-addicted Ariana Grande wannabe with long, thick hair and a naturally (I swear!) big chest, who was able to do an amazing feline flick that lifted up my eyes *perfectly* with my favorite eyeliner, without which I *couldn't* take a decent selfie, and when *that* happened I would *freak out* and not even be able to breathe and would start hyperventilating because, well, it just didn't look like the real *me*, and I couldn't *believe* that's what I *actually* looked like because I was *way* cuter in real life than in the selfies I took without my eyeliner.

Ahem.

What I'm saying is that I was just like every other girl out there—even though I'm sure I was prettier than most of them. I was the kind of girl that pops into your head as soon as you hear the word "girl." The kind of girl who would do anything just to get her thighs a little slimmer.

But back to the current situation. The one where my skull was steadily leaking its contents. My brain was the sand in the hourglass; every passing second had me forgetting more and more about everything I was. Like the playlist I listened to every day. I couldn't even remember *one* song from it. Rest in peace, playlist.

Luckily, I could still remember my name. It was Rara. There was one other thing I knew for sure: I was not going to survive this.

It wasn't just my brain. Sludge was oozing out of my stomach too. You know how when people get wrapped up in something massive, they usually overlook the smaller stuff? Think about this: You're walking down the road. Something suddenly hits you from behind, sending you flying, and your bag gets snatched. You can't even get up to chase after the thief. And then, they're gone. You're thinking about your phone, your wallet, your keys, your license, your insurance card… You're not gonna realize that your perfect eyeliner got smudged when you hit the sidewalk.

Or let's say you're at a movie theater. The lights go down, and the trailers start. Then some guy shows up and tries to shove past your seat, and you're trying to get your legs outta the way, but when you look, he's actually a centaur. He's huge! He reeks like a horse! He's got a *bow and arrow*! Are you really gonna notice how the elbow of the person sitting next to you is slowly pushing in on your personal bubble? *Especially* when there's a sign on the centaur's back telling you that you wouldn't steal a car. Well? Did you hear that single piece of popcorn dropping onto the floor from your bucket?

Try this one. You're living your normal life when, one day, an alien who can see into the future shows up and warns you the world's about to end. But then a beam comes down from the sky and zaps it out of existence. You don't know what you should be doing anymore. You're screwed. You panic. Even *TV Tokyo*'s gonna be running special bulletins instead of its normal anime schedule. That's the crisis you're dealing with. Are you gonna notice the cute twenty-year-old girl who just got hit by a motorcycle and is knocking at death's door? Do you think *anyone* would notice me?

Didn't think so. In short, that's how I knew I was a goner.

Unfortunately, when something big's going on, people miss the small stuff. That's just part of being human. Even more unfortunately, although I made up the stuff about the snatched purse and the anti-piracy centaur, the thing about the alien and the world ending was true. And that beam that came from the sky too. And how I was hit by a motorcycle. And how I was about to die. This big bundle of events is what I was talking about when I mentioned the knot.

Look at that motorcycle on its side. Look at what happened. Look at my brain. My lost playlist. My goopy insides. The alien. Its knowledge of the future. The end of the world. That piercing beam. This despair. This solitude.

It'd be tough enough to deal with just *one* of those things. And now *all* of them had just come raining down on me at once. I had

zero ways to defend myself against that messed-up pile of bricks, and now all I could do was cry and fade out of existence. It seriously sucked, but there was one thing that I'd bet you'd agree sucked most of all: the timing. That was the real salt in the wound.

There are folks out there who say that fate determines everything that's going to happen to you in life before you're even born. If that was true and there was no avoiding all this stuff, then I wish it all could've at least come for me one thing at a time. Then I might have had time to find my composure, think things through, understand, and accept this "fate" of mine.

Reality wasn't so kind. My thread of life was a jumbled mess.

The way I see it, life is like a single line, a piece of thread. Everyone will have moments along that thread where things get tangled up into knots. It's got to be pretty rare to find a string that you can run through your fingers from start to finish without coming across a single bump. I get that.

The issue I had was that my thread was a total *mess*. It wasn't just way too short; it was a perfect representation of chaos. Too many things had happened all at once. The knot was too big. Impossible to undo. And there were probably a ton of smaller knots hiding inside the huge one, to boot. Unforgettable memories and experiences, both good and bad. I couldn't really be sure of that anymore, though. The knot would never come undone. Its size and complexity had totally floored me, and I'd lost sight of both the beginning *and* end of my string. I didn't know which way I'd come from or which way I was heading. It was *my* thread, but I couldn't smooth it out anymore.

Basically, I just wish that the accident had happened without any of the other crap. Then at least someone could've come looking for me when I didn't make it home. They would've found me, called an ambulance, and I would've been taken to the hospital. Even if my injuries were fatal, at least I wouldn't have woken up here, in this grass, stuck all alone crying as my time on this planet runs out.

Either that, or I could've done without the accident altogether and waited for the end of the world along with everyone else… Actually, I guess that'd be pretty terrifying too. Maybe I should've just been happy that I *didn't* have to see the world end. From my view, the end of the world wasn't even real, seeing as I was going to die before it happened and all.

In the end, I wasn't sure which outcome was better. I wonder which one I'd pick if I had the choice. Either way, this was my reality: A big change (the end of the world) and a little change (my death) were coming. And I was going to die alone.

That was what I thought at the time, anyway. I know this is sudden, but I'm about to drop some spoilers for what happens after this. If you don't want to read them, skip ahead to the next ※. Okay, ready? Here goes.

After thirteen minutes and twenty-four seconds, somebody joined me, and it only made the situation even crazier. They approached me one step at a time, parting the chest-high grass as they went. It wasn't long until I could hear their footsteps. And their mechanical breathing. My knot became bigger, tighter, and all the more unbearable. But before any of that happened, I had to spend a long while lying in my silent bloody pool. So, yeah… ※

There's something I want to show you right now before we move on. It's related to what I was saying about the small things that go on while something huge is happening. It's pretty boring though. Dumb and pointless too, I guess. It's just a piece of the ordinary life that I was about to lose.

While I've been talking, my brain's been running down my face, and my nonexistence has been getting closer and closer. I'm not asking you to remember the stuff I'm about to lose for me. I just want you to pay attention for ten, twenty minutes or so before we get back to this mess. I want you to get a sense for what the *alive* part of my life was like. I also want to remind myself of a more normal time. Ready?

Look over there at that glossy, dark-chestnut-colored lump. It didn't have a super deep meaning or anything—it wasn't a knot. That was my hair, all tied up in a bun. Undone, it reached past my shoulders. I'd wanted to grow it longer. It took me seven years to get it just perfect. I started when I was thirteen.

There I was, a junior-high-school student, sitting cross-legged on the couch in our living room. I had a printout of English vocab that I was marking with a highlighter pen—I was studying, as much as I didn't want to. Finals were coming up, and I was in the worst mood ever. The living room was tidy, but ugly and dated, and the setting sun was glaring through the window. Thinking back, I was constantly mad at *everything*. Could you blame me? Pimples were bursting out on my face at a rate of three a day!

"Rara?"

That was my mom.

Mom…

***

"Rara?"

I didn't say anything.

"Come on. I need to talk to you. Look at me."

"I don't wanna talk."

"If there's a good reason for this attitude of yours, please do fill me in."

She should have known just by looking. Knowing my mom, she'd have learned my exam schedule by heart.

I mouthed to her that I was "*studying*," and spread the printouts—all of which I was supposed to be memorizing, by the way—out in front of me like a fan. Not wanting to bother explaining further, I shoved my earphones in.

"I won't interrupt you for long."

I was genuinely shocked when she pulled my earphones out like it was nothing—like it was her *right* to do so. Didn't I tell her that I didn't *want* to talk to her? Can we say communication issues? I gawked at her.

Mom sat down next to me like she was totally innocent. Her weight made the couch push up against my butt. "Come on, look at me." Taking off her ridiculously thick-rimmed glasses with her left hand, she brought her face closer to mine. "Do you notice anything?"

She rarely took off those glasses, so the top of her nose was dented from their weight. There was no ignoring the stubbly peach fuzz underneath her nose either. I didn't want to point those things out though.

"Look at me," she said again. "Not just at my face, but my entire body. What do you think?"

I was trying to look away, but she forced her face in front of mine. Still holding her glasses, she pushed her bangs out of her eyes and stared at me with laser-like focus. I looked down at my printouts, ignoring her, but then she suddenly snatched them out of my hands.

"Are these from a textbook? No… Your teacher made them?"

"Mom…"

"Oh, there's a quiz paper in here. Kannami Rara, seventeen points… Seventeen?" Cocking her head at it, Mom put her glasses back on. Obviously my grade wasn't gonna change just because she could see it with 20/20 vision now.

"Seventeen…out of thirty," I said.

"Seventeen out of thirty."

"Why d'ya think I'm studying right now?" I reached out to grab my papers back, but Mom dodged by flinging her arms dramatically into the air.

"Okay, but first, you need to tell me if you've noticed anything."

"Give those back!"

"Well, Rara? Notice anything? Or not?"

"C'mon, give them back!"

"Answer my question."

"Oh my *god*!" I lost it. I'd thought it was weird that Mom was around the house on a weekend, and I was starting to wish she wasn't. "You're so *annoying*! Just shut up! Get outta here! I don't wanna talk to you!"

"Oh."

It always amazed me how Mom seemed totally immune to my anger. She was keeping her cool, just like always. She didn't even *pretend* to be shocked. Her breathing stayed steady as her perfectly manicured eyebrows went up. Not that it's super important, but when I was in my second year of elementary school, some bully dumped an entire bottle of ink over my head. My teacher called Mom to the school, and when she saw me looking like an oversized, thoroughly used calligraphy brush, she said: "Oh." The tone she used and the look on her face back then were the exact same as they were now.

"I'm trying to think about your outburst from two different perspectives," Mom said.

I bet it was exactly the same when she saw me fresh out of her womb, piping hot and covered with blood: "Oh."

"The first perspective is the objective one. You told me to 'shut up.' Usually, people are only told to do that when they're being loud. Objectively speaking, you were the one being loud, not me. The second, subjective perspective is that it's inappropriate to speak to your mother like that. I have a clear vision of your future. The memory of your lack of respect will prove a strong source of regret for you."

Can you blame me for wanting to scream like a madwoman? Maybe my mom wasn't even human, like she could have come from another planet or something. It was a miracle that I'd been able to stand her for thirteen entire years.

"I don't care about your dumb-jective perspectives! I just need you to shut up *right now*, just like I needed you to shut up like five minutes ago!"

"I'm using an indoor voice. If you don't trust my judgment on that, then maybe you should interview every person in this room with whom I've spoken to in recent years and come up with an index of your own."

"*This* is why I want you to shut up! Why d'ya have to pick apart *everything* I say? You're so *annoying*! I feel like my head's gonna explode just talking to you! Everything about you gets on my nerves!"

"It's perfectly natural to get hormonal at your age."

"*Huh?!* You always think everything I do is because of hormones, hormones, hormones, *hormones*! It's like you can't think of any other possible reason! My feelings are way more complicated than a seven-letter word!"

"It's eight letters when it's plural."

"I. Don't. Care! How can I get it through your thick skull how annoying you are?! I'm *seriously* getting *ticked off*! I was actually trying to study for once, and you had to come barging in! There's no way I'm gonna get back on track now! It's gonna be your fault if my grades suck!"

"You really ought to study in your room. This is the living room. It's for the family to gather and make conversation."

"My room's probably the most old-fashioned bedroom in the entire country!"

"Can you show me your basis for making such a claim?"

"No!"

"I am your mother, so I will be more than happy to accept any amendments or withdrawals you'd like to make to your statement."

"Yeah, right! Anyway, how am I s'posed to study in my room when it doesn't even have AC?"

"If you wish to devote yourself to your studies in an air-conditioned space, then you should go to the library. Though I can't say I approve of our taxes being consumed by an extravagance like air conditioning…"

I was practically screaming. "I'd have to get up at the crack of *dawn* to get a seat in the self-study space on a Sunday! You talk like you're the authority on everything, but you don't know jack!"

"Though I may have given birth to you, I am unable to manage your cortisol secretion for you."

"The heck?! I dunno what you're babbling on about, but it sounds gross! Look, I'm *done*! I'm gonna go to the oldest bedroom in all of Japan and stab myself all over with the splinters from my tatami! I'm even gonna put them in my eyes! Is that what you want?!"

Completely drained of patience, I leaped to my feet. I managed to snatch my printouts out of Mom's hands and started to head for the door.

"Stop right there, Rara. I haven't finished talking to you. In fact, I haven't even started on what I need to tell you."

"I don't have time! *You're* the one who's always biting my head off about not studying enough! Yeesh!"

"It's about a phone."

I was a step away from the hallway when her words hit me like a bullet, stopping me dead in my tracks. Did she just say a *phone*? As in the thing that I'd been *dying* to have for ages, begging for constantly, only for Mom to tell me every time that, for some reason, I had to wait till I was eighteen?

"You said you wanted one, didn't you, Rara?"

There was no time to waste. I rewound my steps, walking backward till I was standing in front of her again, and turned to look at her.

"You're kidding. You wanna buy me a phone?"

"You know that your father doesn't think you should have one until you're eighteen, don't you? To be honest, I don't think there's a need to be quite so strict anymore. You would be able to contact us in an emergency, and owning such a piece of technology might encourage an interest in IT. I think it might be good for you to learn how to handle that level of responsibility."

"Yeah… Yeah, you're *so* right!"

"I've been thinking about negotiating with your father to see if we can get you one a little earlier instead of just putting our feet down until you're eighteen."

"I think that's a *great* idea!"

"However, you can't get anywhere in a negotiation without bringing something to the table first. Do you understand what I mean? For example, my bargaining position would be stronger if I was able to tell him that you've promised to work hard and improve your grades. Or if you've promised not to act contrarian toward your parents anymore."

"Oh, I can totally promise that! I'll keep to it, too! I'll study hard, and I'll never tell you to shut up ever again!"

"Wonderful! In that case, I have a promise of my own to make. I will come at these tough negotiations with everything I have and ensure that they have drawn to a close by the time you start high school, at the very latest."

"Sounds good, whatever you just said! I'm rooting for you! Oh my god, I'm *way* too hyped! You gotta make sure it's an iPhone, okay?!" I started to skip from the living room, happy as could be.

"Wait. *Now* you have to look at me."

"Huh?! I said I don't have time!"

"Oh." Mom crossed her legs and fixed her eyes on me. She raised an eyebrow in that one familiar expression and shoved her glasses up her nose with her middle finger. I could *hear* her voice through the face she was making.

"Who was it that just promised not to act contrarian toward her parents anymore? Well? I'm waiting. Tell me."

"Okay, fine! I get it! Just stop using your weird hypnosis on me. What is it I'm s'posed to be looking at exactly?"

"Something is different about me, something that I've only just noticed myself. I wanted to see if you could pick up on it."

"Huh? I dunno. You didn't go to the salon, did you? And you've had those clothes for ages."

"Allow me to give you a hint." Without getting up from the couch or taking her eyes off me, Mom slowly flexed her left arm and placed her fist on her chest.

"Uh, I still don't know. Is that how they perform their national anthem overseas? They do that at soccer games, right? Like, da, dum, dum, da, dum! We're so pumped for this game!" I sang, then laughed. "Wait, okay, I really wanna guess this now. What country are we talking about?"

"You are on the wrong track entirely."

"Oh, okay, um, then it's, uh…that one comedian who's always beating his chest… Passion…Naha? Mera? I dunno, I feel like I'm way off…"

"Focus your attention here." Mom pointed at her left wrist. Was it her joint? That bony bump on it? Her watch? Oh.

Her watch!

"Your watch is gone!"

"Correct!"

"All right! I got it!"

Mom always wore this intricate gold watch on her left wrist. She loved that thing; Dad had given it to her before I was born, and she never went a day without wearing it. It was only now that I noticed it was gone. Kinda embarrassing that I was cheering about getting the right answer…

"Wait a sec! So you're not wearing your watch. Did you really have to get all dramatic over it?" It wasn't like the dumb thing was glued to her. She could take it off whenever she wanted. What kinda weirdo made a big deal about wearing it or not wearing it?

"I don't remember *how long* it's been gone for exactly." Mom was mumbling. It wasn't like her. I didn't like where this was going.

"Wait…"

"Yes. I seem to have lost it."

I was so shocked I couldn't even make a sound. My mouth hung open as I stared at her. She must have been depressed. It was almost impossible to tell at a glance, but as her daughter, I could just about pick out the slightly upturned angle of her eyebrows.

It was unthinkable that Mom could lose something so important to her. She was as incredible as she was annoying. She taught at a university, and she even wrote books. Where I sucked at everything, she excelled, and I'd never seen her make a mistake. Dad would always say her only misstep was marrying him, and then burst into laughter. I'd then jump in to agree with him. Mom would be the only one not laughing. She'd just say "Oh" in the usual tone of voice and with the usual expression.

And now, my perfect mom had just screwed up. Big time.

"You lost it?! No way! When?! Where?!"

"I really don't know. I only just realized it was missing."

"Think! Did you have it yesterday?! The day before that?"

"I cannot remember the last time I took it off. I wonder whether you would allow me to explain my theory to you?"

"Sure."

"I have little evidence, but I can assure you that the logic behind it is watertight."

"I get it. Hit me with it already."

"I think I must have lost it at the funeral."

"Ah…"

Last month, my grandpa (on my mom's side) suddenly fell ill and passed away. Before that, he was perfectly healthy and living on his own, so it was a huge shock to the family. None of us had been prepared, and it was a real trip to attend the funeral. Our sadness and exhaustion meant the mood in the house was the pits for a while afterward. It was only recently that his ashes were put into his urn and we were finally able to get on with our regular lives.

"I was so busy with everything, greeting everyone and all sorts of preparations, that I didn't even sleep. I was so exhausted that it felt like there was a thick haze over my mind. I might have taken it off when I went to the bathroom, but I'm not sure. Either way, I've lost it. It's such a pity…" She let out a lethargic sigh.

"Hey! Don't just sigh about it!" I grabbed her by the shoulders and gave her a vicious shake. A simple theory about how she might've lost it wasn't enough to calm me down. "You need to *panic*! You loved that watch! Didn't you say it was like a symbol of your whole married life?!"

"Panicking won't solve the problem. Besides, I've already done what I could. I've called the funeral hall, the crematory, and the temple to inquire. I even contacted the police. I'm more concerned at the moment about whether your father noticed. You didn't, so…"

"I mean…"

Mom and I exchanged a glance and, two seconds later, a nod. There was no way Dad would have noticed. I was as different from my mom as I was like my dad. We had similar faces, and our personalities and paces of life were exactly the same. We were cut

from the same cloth, or at least that was my theory. If I hadn't noticed, I had no doubt Dad wouldn't have either. I mean, *Mom* hadn't realized, and she was the smart one. Dad and I were Tweedledum and Tweedledumber, so what hope did we have?

He was bound to be upset if he noticed. There was no way he would blame Mom. Instead, he'd do everything to hide his distress for her sake. She and I both knew it, so if we could, we'd rather spare him from that sadness in the first place.

"Why not just buy the same watch again?"

"I thought you might make that suggestion, but I think you know why I can't."

"Yeah, I know. You won't lie to him."

"Exactly. I can't lie. I've been that way ever since I was born."

"What are you gonna do, then? Just go on living your life like it never happened 'cause you know Dad won't notice? Like you never had the watch? D'ya really think you could?"

"You never know. It could turn up out of the blue."

"I mean, I sure *hope* so."

Mom fell silent, her fingers coming to rest on her bare wrist. It was rare to see her so troubled.

I looked at the wall clock. It was half past three. Dad would be home from the gym soon.

***

We never thought we'd see that watch again, so it was a real shock when it showed up just like Mom said it would. I didn't even get the chance to try to convince her that buying a new one was her best bet. Turned out that the funeral hall had been keeping it as a lost item at their office the entire time. The staff member Mom called checked the safe and rang back right away to say it was there. It was back on her wrist the very next day.

Dad never realized that it was lost or that it came back. We were all dealing with a huge event—my grandpa's sudden passing—so none of us noticed the smaller matter of the missing watch.

Mom kept her promise. She managed to convince Dad, who was paranoid about putting phones in the hands of kids, to get me one. I had just entered my third year of junior high when they bought me my long-yearned-for iPhone.

I, on the other hand, very much did *not* keep my promise.

Forget about studying for a sec. I talked back to my mom hundreds, if not *thousands* of times after that. "Shut up!", "Leave me alone!", "None of your business!", "Who cares?!", "Get outta here!", "I hate you!"…and way worse things too. I was always so mad, I felt desperate to hurt her however I could. I wish I knew why. Maybe I didn't want to take her for granted and thought I had to shake free of her if I ever wanted to become an adult. Or, y'know, maybe it was a hormone thing.

Who knows? Either way, Mom was right when she said, *"The memory of your lack of respect will prove a strong source of regret for you."* Mom accurately predicted the future. I was *really* regretting my attitude right now. I wished I could take back all the horrible things I'd said to her. I wish I could start over. Tell her I loved her. Tell her I wanted to spend more time with her. Tell her how great her cooking was, how happy she made me, how grateful I was for her. Tell her goodbye in the mornings. Hello when I came home. Shout "hi" when she got in. Ask her to sit with me. Ask her for a hug. Ask her not to leave me on my own. Ask her to talk to me. Ask her to stay with me till I fell asleep, and then become a baby again, clinging to her with everything I had, crying my lungs out.

She'd probably say, "Oh." Then she'd lift me up and pat my back and gently rock me till I stopped crying. Just like she always had. And, as always, it would soothe me. I would close my eyes and fall asleep.

I'd do anything to hear her voice again, even just once. My mind couldn't replicate it anymore. I was about to forget what it sounded like. It was slipping away from me.

It wasn't just her voice either. The warmth that radiated from her skin when I touched her face, her scent, *everything* that I'd taken for granted was dripping out of me with each drop of blood. I wouldn't be able to remember what she was *like* anymore. My memories were falling apart one by one, and whenever I tried to pick up one of those lumps of time, I couldn't even remember the title I'd given it. They got more faded the more I chased them. All of them. Disappearing.

Don't go. Please. I want to hear her voice… Just once. Once*, before my mind completely shuts down. Please. Please. Please, please…*

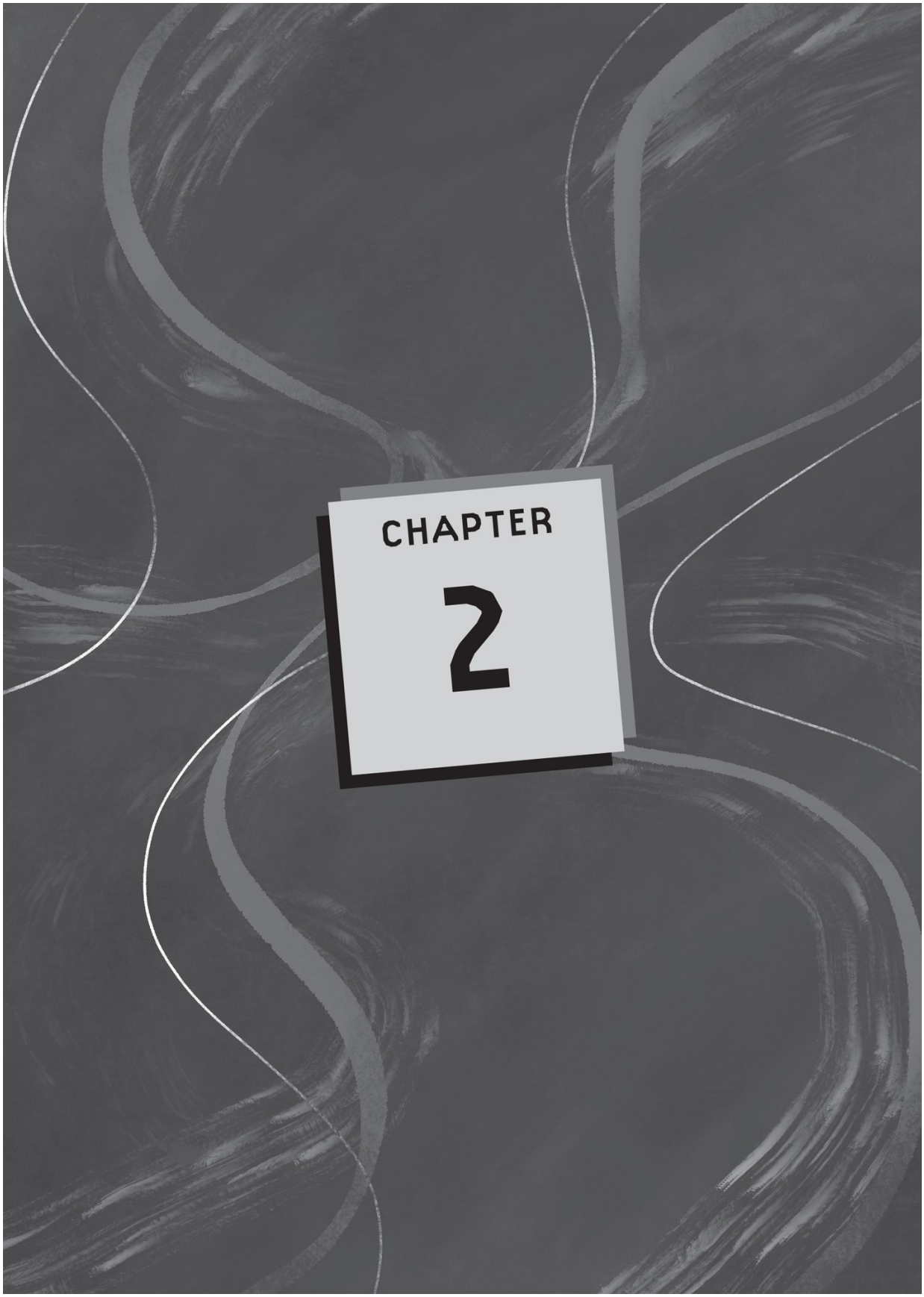
What was it I was begging so hard for just now?

See? I'd totally forgotten. The next time I closed my eyes might have been my last. I might never open them again after that. The thought terrified me, so I was doing everything I could to keep them open. The contents of my head were still sliding down over its surface. I was steadily losing everything, steadily growing colder.

I knew there was something I *really* wanted to hear just a few seconds ago. So I listened as hard as I could for the sake of my past self. That was when I heard something that caught me off guard: footsteps on the grass.

At first, I thought I'd misheard. After all, there was no way that anyone was gonna find me. But they *had* to be footsteps, and they were slowly getting closer. I could hear a weird, rhythmic squeaking sound too, like an eraser rubbing against something hard.

That was when I saw the alien. I'm not even kidding.


CHAPTER
2

Chapter 2

OKAY, SO HERE'S HOW IT WENT.

You can't exactly freak out when you don't know what's standing in front of you, right? The only people who would lose it, shouting "alien!" when they saw one, would be people who already knew what aliens looked like.

I freaked out, though. Obviously.

"A—" I began, hoping to finish off with "—lien!" before something pushed up into my throat and got caught. I thought it was something gross. Blood, maybe. Or puke. When I tried coughing it up, though… "Wah… Aaaah!"

It turned out to be pure emotion. A lump of emotion so big and passionate you'd think it had been building up for years, decades, centuries… No, *more* than that. For thousands, millions, *billions* of years.

I couldn't look away from the alien as I desperately pushed out the cry from my parched throat. It was looking back at me. I thought my body was gonna explode. A fresh wave of tears sprung forth from my eyes, different from the ones that were mourning my impending death earlier. They washed away the blood that had dripped down my cheeks.

"You… You're alive? You're alive! Thank god." I guess I was starting to forget just how seriously worried I was about him.

The alien pointed at himself with a thumb. "I sure am," he said with a confident nod. He got down on one knee next to me and looked down at me. I was still crying. He smelled strong. Like disinfectant. "You okay?"

I couldn’t answer. All I could do was look back at him. His voice was muffled because of the mask he was wearing over the lower half of his face. There was a tube coming out of it that connected to the tank he carried on his back. Air was being sent through the tube, and the inside made a weird squeaking sound whenever he took a breath. The tank was probably full of air from his planet. Aliens couldn’t breathe the same stuff we did.

The alien was glowing with a pretty blue light against the dark night, like he had a spotlight on him. It shone from his masked face, the hair that fell over it, and the silhouette of his broad shoulders. I felt dazzled by his aquarium-blue body. Still crying, I reached both my hands out toward him. Nothing about me was functioning properly anymore, but I still gave it everything I had. I just wanted to touch him. To know he was there.

“You’re here. Right?”

“Yes.” The alien reached out for me in return.

“And you’re really an alien?”

That large hand and its long fingers. They gripped me firmly the moment they came into contact with me.

“Yes.” The fingers easily fit both of my limp hands in their grip. “I’m an alien.”

We stared at one another, our gazes locked together. My tears would not stop. His clothing, like blue leather, didn’t seem damaged at all, despite the beam that had hit it. (If you want to know about the beam right now, skip ahead a little bit and look for a **Q**.) “I thought you were gonna die. I mean, I saw what happened…”

He was here. There was no doubt about it. I put as much strength as I could into every finger on both my hands to return his grip. Clinging to him, I started to unpeel my heavy body from where it was glued to the ground. It was hard going, and I had to twist this way and that until I finally managed to get up and launch myself into his chest.

"I saw it… All of it!"

The alien held me to his chest. "Sorry" was the only word out of his mouth. He didn't squeeze me or push me away. He just stayed there, letting me listen to his breathing.

Every spot where our bodies were in contact felt cool. I was cold, and he was cold. The silence dragged on as I kept clinging to him, and I started to grow scared. Did he *care* as much as I did? Wasn't he going to cry about the fact that I was still alive like I was crying for him?

I pulled back slightly and looked up at him. His cold, blue face was right there. Those blinking eyes were looking right back at me. The mask covered from below his nose right down to his jaw. I widened my eyes, trying to take in everything I could. I wanted to stare at him forever.

That was when I saw it. The richly colored galaxy, that twist of stars, spread out above his head. Countless stars, slowly spinning into countless streams of silver. They drew spiraling arcs that fell down past the western horizon and rose again from the east. It was an endless whirling, like a record on a turntable. His whole *sky* was a record that a DJ was playing just for us. As soon as the needle dropped, the music would start. As soon as the music started, the night would become magical.

This was no ordinary night. There was more to it than just my death. This night existed just so that the two of us could meet. I just didn't know how to express it yet.

I stared silently into his eyes, nothing on my mind except for a wish that this would never end.

I want to be with you like this forever.

I wanted us to revolve for all eternity like the starry sky, without beginning or end. Morning would never come for this fateful night, and I wanted it to go on forever.

"Y'know, I kinda wish I wasn't in such a state right now. I mean, look at me."

There was no denying that I was a total mess, but his eyes just softened almost imperceptibly. Was it okay to take that as a smile? I wanted him to be smiling at me so badly that the tears started running down my cheeks again. I wanted to hear his voice. I just wanted him to say something.

"I… I, um…uh…"

"Rara."

The blue light seemed to scatter from the tips of my eyelashes. I blinked. A fresh wave of tears. I was Rara. The scattered light particles illuminated me. They bathed the lines of my body with their gorgeous glitter, defining my image against the dark of the night.

"I know you, Rara," he said quietly.

His voice was a little low, but crystal clear. Blue. As far as I was concerned, it was the only voice in the world. The only one. It was the only voice I knew anymore. Every other voice had left me but this one.

"How do you know me?"

"Because I've been searching for you this whole time."

"No way… You really mean that?"

"You've been waiting for me too, haven't you?"

"Yeah, I think so. I *know* so."

"This is your world, Rara. You *are* the world. And I promise to protect you."

"That's…hilarious."

"Do you know what I'm trying to say?"

"No. I *really* don't get it, and that's why it's hilarious. But that's okay."

I meant it too. It was fine. Anything was fine. As long as we could be together, I didn't need to understand. He was searching for me. He came all the way out here to find me. That was all I needed to know.

"I'm so happy," I said.

The alien paused. "Happy?" The sound of his breathing stopped for a few seconds too. "How can you be happy right now?"

He gently stroked my cheek with the pads of his fingers again and again, like there was something he was trying to wipe away. He moved on to my eyes, my lips, my temples. When he carefully ran the tips of his fingers through the long hairs that were plastered to my forehead, I noticed his irises wavering slightly. I knew that even he was anxious about what was going on, but I still ended up smiling. I was just happy that he was touching me so tenderly despite his fear.

"I'm happy to see *you*. If I were a dog, my tail'd be wagging so hard that it'd lift me up by the butt and I'd be flying around like a helicopter."

There was another short silence.

The alien gave a quiet "I see" from under his mask before finally embracing me.

Everything that was left of me was being supported by his chest. I really couldn't be happier, and that happiness was all I could think about. I wrapped my arms around his back to make sure we wouldn't be torn apart. I clung to him with everything I had. I never wanted to be apart from him ever again. I never wanted to let go ever again. I pressed my face into his cold leather chest and closed my eyes.

This is perfect.

As long as we could stay in each other's arms like this, nothing else mattered. Maybe it was a bit sudden to be thinking along those

lines when we'd only just met. I don't know… Maybe I was being dumb.

Truth is, it wasn't as sudden as I'm making it out to be. He stole my heart the moment I saw him. It was still with him now, as it had been since then. The alien had flawlessly taken the form of my true love.

I could remember sitting on the floor in front of the TV with my knees up. It was three months old and had a forty-inch screen. I was wearing my usual camisole-and-shorts combo. It was my loungewear, honestly not that far off from underwear. In my left hand was my then-current cup noodle addiction: tom yum flavor. I had chopsticks in my right hand. My iPhone was right next to me.

Be warned, this is the **Q** part. That's what I call this section of the timeline.

Surprised was how I felt right then. Something had just happened that I couldn't believe. There was an alien on TV. It was trying to give a message to humanity. It was standing there all alone under a clear blue sky. Night had fallen beyond the drawn curtains of my bedroom window, but it was still daytime wherever the alien was. The word "live" was in a bouncing white font in the top-right corner of the screen. I had no idea where this was being broadcast from.

The alien walked slowly up to the podium and stared right at me through the camera. I blew on my noodles so that they wouldn't burn my tongue and carefully slurped them up, waiting for the alien to speak. To be honest, none of it felt real. I got a bit closer to the TV and increased the volume.

"To every human who is watching: Thank you for your patience," the alien began. There wasn't a single building disturbing the view of the blue skies behind it. Its voice was coming through perfectly clear. "I hope you'll remain calm and listen. The world's end

is approaching. We know because we aliens possess technology that can predict the future."

No way.

I'd just bitten off a mouthful of noodles that I was forgetting to chew. The camera pulled back, making the alien shrink.

"This is not a joke. This world is about to end very soon."

The world was gonna end? Seriously? So, wait, what did that mean exactly? Was everyone gonna die? All at once, just like that? Or was some massive calamity gonna come for us? A pandemic? A war? Was some little robot girl in glasses gonna come chop the Earth in two? The alien could at least spell it out for us.

"I want humanity to stop the world from ending. That's why I'm here. I implore you to keep your composure, but please believe me that everything I am saying is true. There *is* a way to avoid the end, but you cannot continue on this path. Watch carefully and think back. This is a drea—"

I saw something flash in the sky above the alien's head, way beyond the clouds. The alien bent right back and looked up, and then it seemed to shout something. The next second, the light shot silently toward the ground, a single white line. It looked just like a piercing arrow. It was a beam shot at the alien from the heavens. The creature was caught in the middle of that pillar of light and then vanished without a trace, like it had evaporated. The screen showed a dazzling, flickering glare, and then everything was breaking into pieces. There was a flash of light and a thunderous roar, a twisting sandstorm, clouds of dust. The sound cut out, and the screen shook violently. Wreckage rained down from the sky, and the ground was split and pushed up. Earth was compressing and getting torn apart. The world was beginning to end.

"No…" For a moment I didn't know who'd said that, but then I realized it was me. Still gripping my cup noodles, I inched closer to the TV. "No… No, no! There's no way this is happening!"

No one was coming to save the alien, who had completely vanished. I unconsciously touched the TV screen with the hand that was still holding my chopsticks.

"No! Please…someone!"

I knew no one would hear my screams. Hitting the screen was pointless. All it did was put the TV in danger of falling over. I couldn't help it though. I *saw* the alien. What was that insanely loud noise? A car horn? I could smell mud. I saw a bright light.

No! Get away! I can't see!

"Please, someone! Save him! He's right there! Someone, *anyone*, find him! He's gonna die otherwise! There's no way he's not hurt! Someone help him, *please*! Hurry!"

I could feel the floor trembling like an earthquake. It started off gently but then got rockier and rockier. The shockwaves from the impact I saw on TV had reached us.

"Someone save him! 'Cause I can't!"

I still couldn't stop shouting at the screen. I was more worried about the alien than I was the Earth's impending destruction. It said that it could see the future. If that was true, it should have known what was about to happen to it, and yet it still came all this way to save humanity. It wanted to stop the world from ending, even at the cost of its own life.

I just felt like there was something far, *far* more important to me than the Earth or anything else. Like there was something I was forgetting. Something quiet and unmoving…

"Please! Someone! No…you can't die! Hang in there!"

My heart was beating hard enough to explode, and my bones seemed to clatter as I started shivering. My throat was trembling, turning my breaths into shrill sobs. I wondered if the *alien* was breathing. How much pain it was in. Someone had to go help it. Because I couldn't. I couldn't do anything. I couldn't even breathe. My panic transformed my next cry into a shriek.

"Breathe!"

I dropped my cup noodles, and the steaming hot soup spilled out over the floor. I reflexively turned to my right to apologize, but the apology never made it out of my mouth. There was no one there. There was only an empty space, big enough for one person.

I looked back at the TV. The sky was still there, but a darkness was riding up from both sides of the screen, closing over it like a zipper. The floor was still shaking underneath me. Fragments of something were flittering down all around me. The lights cut out. The ceiling was collapsing. Everything was flaking away, falling down. Beyond it all was nothing but black.

I closed my bloodshot eyes. And then I remembered. How could I have forgotten? Someone was supposed to be to my right. They weren't here, and then it hit me.

"I'm dreaming. It's gotta be a dream! I mean…"

That's it.

I saw the alien on the TV, and I saw it get hit with that beam. Then I did a lot of shouting. That's what **Q** is. By the way, I called it "**Q**" because I needed some way to refer to it, to keep track of these particular events. It doesn't have any specific significance. I'm gonna pick up the scene from earlier now.

The blue alien loosened his grip on me and pulled back slightly. "I need to continue what I was saying."

"What *were* you saying?"

"This world is about to end. I was looking for you so I could stop that from happening."

I lay with my head in the alien's lap as I listened. I was pretending to listen, at least, but the night sky above him was just so pretty… He looked so hot in that mask too. This was the best angle ever. Before I knew it, my eyes were slipping shut.

"No, Rara. You have to listen. This is important." He grabbed my cheeks and tugged on my lower eyelid. I opened my eyes. He was glowing blue.

"Don't do that. I'm gonna get wrinkles under my eyes."

"Listen. You can't die here. Do you understand me? The world depends on you."

"No, I don't understand. And besides, I can't do anything."

"This world can't go on without you."

"I can't do it."

"You're not even trying to understand!"

"Huh?!" His tone made me mad. I opened my eyes again. My drowsiness was gone. As wonderful as the alien was and as happy as I was to meet him, none of that meant he couldn't tick me off. "Look at this a sec. Don't you get it? Tell me what you see."

I pointed at the massive hole in my head.

"It's gross," he said.

"Be more specific."

"Your brain's leaking out of you."

"Yup. So you *do* get it. As you can see, my brain's currently in the process of dripping outta my head. You understand that anything you want me to do right now *might* be a little difficult for me? Aren't aliens s'posed to be smart?"

"But this is important! I need you to understand!"

"Then you're gonna have to dumb it down for me!"

"Look, I've been observing this world, and *you*, Rara, are—"

"Blah, blah, blah! I already said I don't know *what* you're talking about! Okay, look, lay it out in *Dragon Ball* terms! Which character am I in relation to 'this world'?"

"You're—"

"And if you're gonna say I'm Mr. Satan, you can stop right there! I'll never be able to wear a skirt again if I get that hairy! I could shave forever and it would grow back again the second I was done! Every giant pore, plugged with a wriggly sprout of dark hair and—"

"You're Toriyama."

"Huh?"

That caught me totally off guard. *Toriyama?* What did he look like again?

"You're *One Piece*'s Oda. *Attack on Titan*'s Isayama. *Conan*'s Gosho."

"No way. Wait, how come you used surnames for all of them except Gosho?"

"And I'm the reader."

"Um… Um, okay… Who's editing, then? What about the publisher? Who gets the royalties?"

"Don't worry about that stuff. You'll only overcomplicate it. My point is that *you* created this world. And I was simply an observer from outside, until I came here to stop it from ending. In other words, I'm an invader. I'm with you now, inside what you consider to be yourself. Reality here is comprised of everything you've seen, known, and thought. To an extent, this is true for everyone, but the important thing is that this is *your* world."

"Wait, I *really* don't get this. Um. So you're saying that this world is a manga? That's so scary! That means it'll burn if it gets set on fire, right? I mean, I guess that's just like anything else, but still! Well, wait, not everything. There're some types of trash you can't burn. Hold on, when we separate trash into burnables and unburnables, is the unburnable stuff *really* stuff you can't burn? Like, you can't burn glass bottles, right? Or can you?"

"Don't panic. Bottles are recyclable. And I only meant the manga thing as a metaphor. You asked me to explain in those terms.

I was trying to paint a picture of this world's structure in a way you could understand."

"I'm screwed then, because I *don't* get it! Though it sounds like you came here to save me or something, right? *Right?*"

The alien gave an assertive nod. "Yeah. Exactly." Holding my hand, he brought his masked face closer to it. I could hear each breath with perfect clarity. "I came to save you from death. I won't let this world end."

"But…" I slid my gaze away from him as I tried to find the words to explain.

Honestly, I thought he was doomed to fail. There was no coming back when most of your brain was missing. You were dead. I might have been kinda dumb, but even I knew that much. Still, he risked his life to come here and search for me. I didn't wanna be the one to tell him it was a waste of effort. In the end, all I did was giggle like an airhead. Well, to be fair I guess my head *was* just full of air at that point.

"Let's forget about the complicated stuff for a second." I knew it was a pathetic attempt at changing the subject, but I didn't know what else to do. "Wanna go somewhere fun? See that motorcycle there? We could ride it together and go *anywhere*. Take me someplace nice, okay? I've always wanted to hop on the back of some guy's bike and spend a night on the town. It'll be like a date. We'll be making memories! You get me?" I fluttered my eyelashes at him at warp speed.

"Though I'd rather be wearing a mini dress! One that was all fluttery and sparkly. And high heels—no tights. I wish I was looking my best for you! And I wish we had a shinier bike in a nicer color. Still, I wanna go! C'mon, please?"

It was time for my perfectly sexy, jet-black eyeliner to shine! I kept fluttering my eyelashes, hoping he'd give in.

But he didn't. He shook his head.

"That isn't an option yet," he said, letting go of my hand. He grabbed my shoulders and shook me. "Listen, Rara," he continued as he shook.

"Ah, ah, ah! Quit it! My brain's splashing everywhere!"

"I'm not giving up. The world doesn't *have* to end."

"Uh, are you sure?"

"I'm sure. I'm an alien, so you can trust me. You do, right?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I do, it's just—"

"I'm going to pick up on my earlier example. Right now, Toriyama has to stop drawing *Dragon Ball* and start drawing *Kobo-chan* instead. He's got to go back to when he started, toss out the *Dragon Ball* draft, and restart with a four-koma manga about a little boy with a distinct haircut. Rara, you need to choose the world where Toriyama draws *Kobo-chan*."

"I don't think those two series started at the same time."

"It's just a *metaphor*! It's been a metaphor this whole time! I'm telling you to make a world that's different from *this* one. A new reality! Then you need to *choose* the one that's different."

"I don't know what you mean by 'make' or 'choose.'"

"Then *think*, Toriyama!"

"I'm not Toriyama."

"Clear your mind and think back! You already know when the change has to happen, so let's go already!"

"Huh?! Wait! Go where? Go *when*?!"

Okay. Sorry, at this point I just need to stop and explain something.

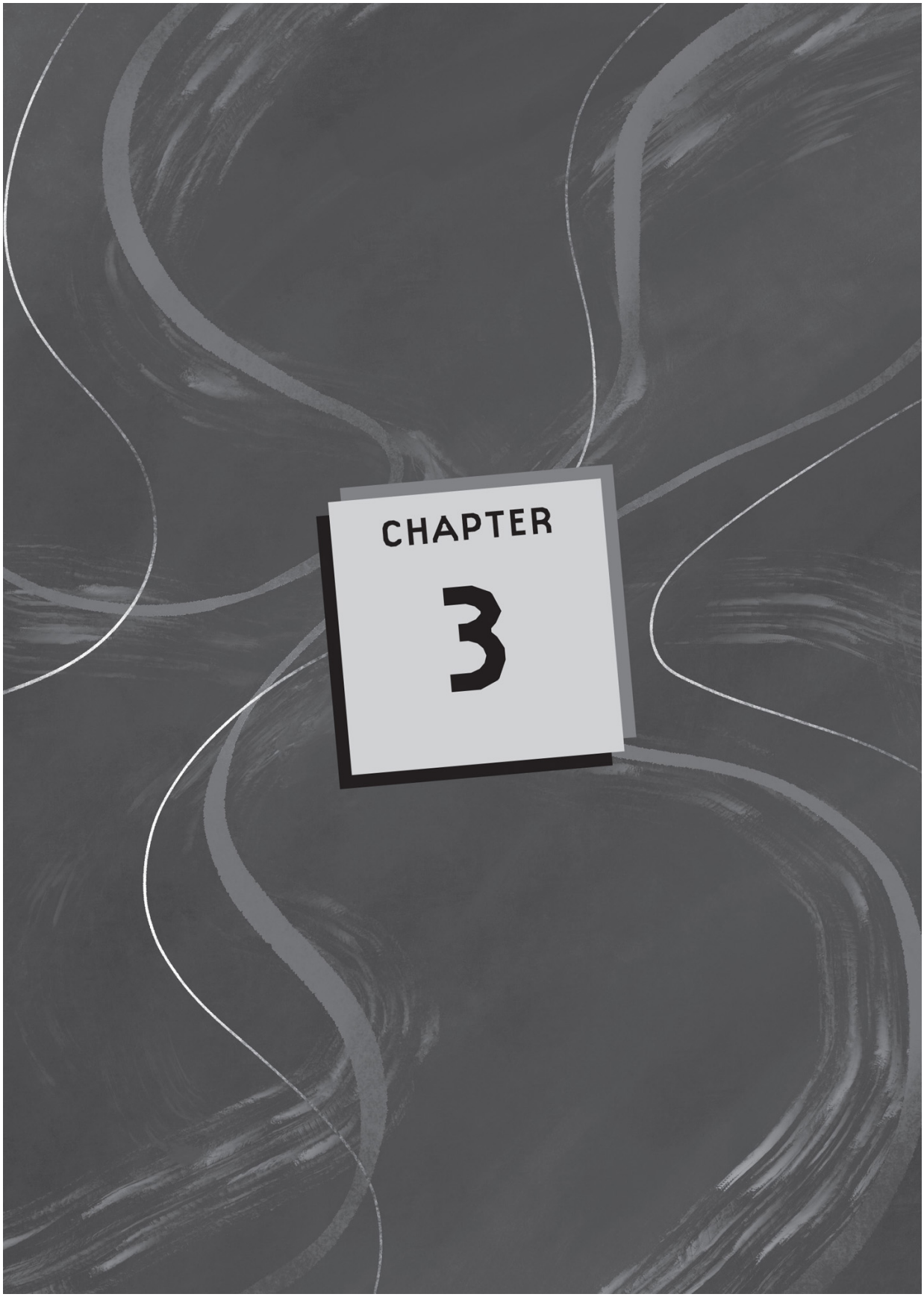
The time between me being roadkill and waking up to the part I got to just now will be called **X**. Again, there's nothing deeper

about my choice of letter. I woke up crying in a pool of blood, met the alien, and then we talked about *Dragon Ball* and *Kobo-chan*. After that, he said he was gonna take me somewhere. This part of the timeline is **X**. Remember it, because we'll be coming back to it over and over. Okay. Back to it.

"Huh?! Wait! Go where? Go *when*?!"

"Spring of your first year of high school. The red train, second carriage from the front."

The alien's gaze leaped into me. I could go forward or I could go back, and the knot was only tying itself up tighter. Listen, I get it: This whole thing's a mess. But the story's gotta keep on going, so try to follow along.


CHAPTER
3

Chapter 3

SPRING OF MY FRESHMAN YEAR OF HIGH SCHOOL. The red train, second car from the front. Outside the window was a residential area, and it was clear the cherry blossom season was well and truly over. The small hills that rose up here and there among the town above were thick with light green foliage. The fresh leaves were still soft and subtle in their hues. They looked like they'd be pretty tasty if you boiled them up—kinda like broccoli.

I rode this train every day. I tried to wait for the train at the exact same spot on the platform, at the exact same times, whether I was going to school or coming home, so that I could board from the exact same door. It had been more than a month since I started doing it. I *liked* this spot. I never sat down, even if there were seats free. I liked to stay standing in this exact spot.

I boarded at the station closest to the school to go home. The train then stopped at the next station. The doors opened. People got off, and people got on. There was that group of three.

There they are! Wait… Huh?! No way! His hair's black now?!

The doors closed, the train started up again, and I was a malfunctioning metronome. My heart was pounding nonstop. A fire, a festival, a runaway horse. My ears, nose, and forehead were burning. My whole face was a fireball. They were speaking right next to me.

"So then Mou-chan shows up…"

"Huh? No way."

"Yeah, I call bull."

"No, she was there!"

I couldn’t look, so I was watching secretly from the corner of my eye like I always did. I could see him from where I was standing.

“C’mon, quit being a dumbass. There’s no way.”

His silky black hair shook with his laughter.

It felt like my insides were turning inside out and about to spill from my mouth. I quickly looked away. And then I looked back. My mind was going crazy and it wouldn’t stop. The blood was charging through my entire network of veins. I couldn’t get enough oxygen; I couldn’t *breathe*. I took a load of quick, quiet breaths, making sure no one would notice, and pretended to look out of the window.

The three of them were together about eight out of ten times. They always got on and off at the same stop, which was probably the one closest to their school. They never wore their blazers properly, and the bags they hung over one shoulder were always squashed. They didn’t talk much in the mornings but got pretty loud on the way home. And *one* of them was as lethal as poison.

Even just stealing glances at him made me feel like I was gonna stop breathing. And while I was at it, why not let my heart stop beating too? I couldn’t stop looking. But I couldn’t take a *proper* look either.

He hadn’t been there this morning, so I was screaming internally. I hadn’t seen him for an entire *day*. He was having more of an effect on me than usual. I mean, he’d dyed his hair again, by which I meant he’d gone back to his original color. My eyes were darting back and forth ’cause I wanted to look, but I couldn’t, but I wanted to look, but I couldn’t.

His collar was slack around his long neck. His bangs were a little too long, and the eyes underneath them slanted upward a teensy bit. Even when he smiled, his gaze was so cool that it had to be at least forty below zero. He was tall too, like he was existing on another plane from the rest of us. His uniform was worn, so he couldn’t have been a first-year. He was older than me. From the mature way he carried himself, he was probably a senior. I was

pretty sure I'd die if those eyes ever looked right at me. I'd burst into flames… No, wait, I'd *freeze* to death. If he were a mage, he'd definitely specialize in ice magic instead of fire magic. Or so I figured. I was totally right, though.

I didn't think anything of him at the start. Though I started at an all-girls high school that spring, I was in a public junior high school with plenty of boys in my class before that. Boys weren't a rarity or anything, and it wasn't like I paid them much attention. So the trio ended up riding the same carriage as me for three days in a row. Kinda interesting, but no big deal.

The next time I saw them, one of them had blond hair. It threw me off. If anything, I was in awe at the lax rules at his school that let him get away with it. He was blond for three days, until he decided to shock me again. His hair was silver this time. It suited him a million times better than the blond. It drew my eyes right into the cool gaze under his bangs. From there, I couldn't look away. I couldn't even blink. He was like an otherworldly being. I felt like I was seeing him for the first time. I *wasn't*, but that's how mysterious he suddenly looked to me. He was like an illusion, something that even my imagination wasn't capable of conjuring. I was looking right at him, but I wasn't sure whether he was real. He could have been some strange, untouchable lifeform from another dimension. That was what I saw when I looked at him.

It wasn't *just* his hair color that hooked me. It was his listless movements and the way he didn't laugh quite at full volume. It was his long limbs, his slightly hunched back, and his blue veins that only appeared on his neck when he looked down. Then there were his super-clean nails. His smooth jawline. His shoulders, which were way wider than mine. Everything about him just looked so *different* compared to everyone else. There could be thousands of people around him, but I could only see him, shining brighter than everyone else. Every new detail I noticed about him was like another bullet hitting my chest. And I was noticing something new every second. My eyes were glued to him.

Another three days passed. This time, his hair was red. Three days later it was purple. He went from one color to the next, each as vibrant as the last. It was unbelievable. Which color would he go for next? I *could not* miss it. I would start looking for him every single day. He and his friends always boarded from the same door.

I didn't know his name. I didn't know how old he was. All I knew was where I needed to steal the best glances at him, and I knew it *well*.

That takes us back to now.

His hair's black again? That was the last color I expected! Oh my god…

Still screaming internally, I opened up LINE on my phone. I tapped out a rapid message to my friend.

I saw him! He's got black hair again!

The *read* marker came up right away, followed by the reply.

Seriously?

You should see the state of his cuticles!

How glossy does his hair look now?

Super glossy and more breathtaking than mint gum!

I wasn't exaggerating. His hair was so gorgeous in black that it didn't even make sense.

Think you could get a photo?

When I read that, I thought my eyes were about to pop out of my skull.

"Are you kid—" I started without realizing it. I snapped my mouth shut and began to tremble. Was she serious right now?

No. Way.

Not even gonna try?

No, I meant it. *Was* she serious? I was so exasperated. I left her on read, like she deserved. What kinda weirdo would take sneak

pictures of people? It wasn't even one of those things that was pretty much fine as long as you didn't get caught.

A photo, huh? I thought.

With a photo, I could look at him whenever I wanted. I could zoom in. If I ever got a video of him, I could plug my earphones in and listen to his voice on demand. I'd hear him deep in my ears, and it'd be like he was only talking to me. He could call me a "dumbass." Be like, "c'mon!" and stuff. As many times as I wanted him to. Just thinking about it made it feel like my heart was gonna jump right out of my throat.

Crap! I need it! Wait, no! Not happening! I gotta respect his privacy!

Clenching my stomach, I let out a long, passionate breath. This was a line I couldn't cross. Just because I was an innocent teenage girl with an unrequited crush didn't mean I got a free pass to do whatever I wanted.

Once I miraculously got my breathing under control, I started chewing on my lip. I glanced sideways at him. A photo was out of the question, so I at least wanted to get a proper look at him while I still could. I needed to burn his image onto my retinas till they started smoking.

I wish my eyesight was better. I wish I had 40/40 vision. I wonder if I can get glasses that'll give me that. Like glasses that make you see super well even if you're not shortsighted. Oh wait, they're called binoculars. Yeah, binoculars… When could I get away with using binoculars on a train? Right, never. Maybe it'd be better to find cover from a faraway spot and watch him through one of those scope things they have on bazookas… Wait, what's wrong with me? I swear, I'm getting more stalkerish by the second!

Obviously, I didn't wanna make him feel awkward or anything. I was happy just staring at him like I always had. Though I guess it'd be nice to know his name. And how old he was. And…

I wonder if he's got a girlfriend.

That was vital info. He might have one. I wouldn't be surprised if he did. Then again…

If he had a girlfriend, why would he hang out with the exact same two friends every single day?

Thinking about it that way, he might *not* have one. I sure hoped he didn't. *Please* say he didn't. Because if he didn't…

Right then, my delusions started zooming away from me at full speed.

No girlfriend, silky hair, and more breathtaking than gum. One day, he noticed the existence of the lone teenage girl who always rode the same train as him. She had been watching him this whole time…

I closed my eyes, opened them again, and looked at him.

"You really gotta stop blaming everything on Mou-chan," he said, slapping his friend's shoulder, flashing his white teeth as he grinned.

Finally, our eyes meet, and a strange sensation washes over us. It's like we've known each other forever, like our meeting has been foretold since the beginning of time. Like we've come home for the first time in years… We're immediately attracted to each other, instantly in love…

Dates. Confessions. Kisses. Memories. Celebrations. Evenings that we share, just the two of us. Damn.

I wanted to bang my head against the wall—the hardest wall I could find. This cascade of delusions was out of control. Inside, I was rolling on the floor like crazy, enough that I felt like I was gonna fall over for real.

Oh my god! I can literally see *it! Like a vision of the future!*

I was probably the biggest idiot to ever walk the planet Earth. I could swear I was gonna cry. We were so in love in my fantasies that things couldn't be more perfect or romantic.

Decades pass, and he gets older. The waves lap at the shore in the distance. He listens to them with his cane in hand as he slowly climbs the slope beside the sea. And next to him… Huh?

A woman around his age, her gray hair in a loose bun. She was wearing…a long, fluttering skirt in floral print? Wait a second.

No way am I ever gonna wear a skirt that long. I'm too short to pull it off. Is my fashion sense gonna change when I get older?

Meh, the details weren't too important right now. Lemme continue.

They'd lived happily together ever since their wedding. Their children had flown the nest some time ago, and now their days were peaceful as could be. He's telling her the same story he always did when they were younger. He points far beyond the clouds and draws a line down toward the horizon, like he's searching for something precious. She smiles beside him.

"That story doesn't have an ending," she says.

"It doesn't," he replies, "and I'm gonna keep telling it over and over."

The couple naturally reach out for each other's hands, and the shadows by their feet merge together as one…

Suddenly, the train jolted violently. I'd been so wrapped up in my fantasy that I lost my footing.

"Ack!"

I staggered backward at an angle and failed in my attempt to grab the bar. Determined not to fall, I tried to keep my balance. It didn't work. I let out another series of cries.

My foot was forced to step to one side, and I crashed right into one of the trio. Of course. The impact made me drop my phone, which I automatically stooped to pick up, only for the entire contents of my shoulder bag to spill out over the floor. I let out the dumbest shriek ever.

"You okay?"

I couldn't look up to see who'd asked.

"No, no, no, no, no, no, *no*. This can't be happening!" I muttered on autopilot, my mind blank. I might have been about to cry. Scratch that, I was dead. My life was over. I started to pick up and gather all the stuff I'd dropped while my thoughts went crazy.

I threw everything into my bag at random, snatched up my phone, and let out another scream to top it all off, because I'd just stumbled in the other direction. About to fall over, I stamped my foot on the floor like a sumo wrestler to hold my ground. This time, I managed to grab the bar. The train was arriving at a station. *My* station.

"Sorry!" I couldn't turn around. I could only leap through the open doors onto the platform and run. I wanted to cry so badly. I was never taking that train *ever* again. I could swear I was gonna faint, but I kept running anyway.

"Ah! Wait! You, in the uniform!" The shout collided with me from behind.

"Uniform?" Did he mean me? I stopped.

"That's my…"

Confused, I turned around. The doors were sliding shut. One of the trio was looking panicked on the other side of the glass.

"…my phone!"

The doors shut completely, cutting off his voice.

His phone?

Dumbfounded, I looked at what I was clutching in my hands. In my right hand was my white iPhone. In my left hand was something else, still white, but lighter and thinner…

"Huh? *No.* No way!"

The train started to rock into motion, leaving me glued to the spot. I watched the window slide past me like nothing was wrong. I

couldn’t think.

Help. Help. Help!

I saw the black-haired boy bring his face closer to the window as it moved farther away. Without thinking, I ran a few paces down the platform in pursuit of the train. He was mouthing something at me, but I couldn’t figure out what he was saying. It looked like he was pointing at my hand. The train accelerated until it was out of sight, and I was left alone on the platform.

I didn’t know what to do. I still wanted to cry. I looked down at the unfamiliar phone in my hand. It vibrated out of nowhere, making me gasp. A LINE message appeared on the screen.

Wait there. We’re coming back.

The message had come from a “Kengo.” I did exactly as the message said, waiting on the platform without moving a muscle. It wasn’t long till a train came in on the other side of the tracks and the three of them got off it. They found me right away.

“*Yes!* My phone! Really sorry about that. I dropped mine too.”

He was behind the smiling guy who approached me. He was looking at me. I was surprised how useless my brain was being. I raised my left hand like a puppet and returned the phone to its owner. I couldn’t even apologize, though I really should have.

I was looking at him too.

“Are you okay, though? Didn’t rick your ankle or anything?”

“‘Rick’? What the heck does that mean? You asking if she twisted her ankle?”

“What, you don’t say ‘rick’? It’s how we say it at home.”

It was a conversation between two of the three. *He* didn’t say anything. He was still looking at me.

I opened my mouth. “Um, uh… Uh, um… Er…um…”

It was the best I could do. I didn’t know what I was saying, or even what I was *trying* to say. My brain had completely shut down,

and my face was probably bright red.

"You say 'rick,' right? I mean, girls say 'rick.'"

"*No one* says 'rick.' They say 'twist.' That must be some regional thing."

"You're kidding. No one's ever accused us of *that* before. Kengo, you say 'rick,' right?"

His eyes were as cool as the ocean. "No." His reply came with a slight smile. The smile showed no signs of fading as he turned his gaze back to my frozen form. "It's no big deal, right?"

I was cooked. The limits of my mind had just been breached. Rationality, common sense, social norms.

"Uh…"

Overflowing.

"Um…"

Spilling over.

"Er…"

Gone.

"Mm…"

An irrepressible desire darted upward like a little bird from its depths, flying out in the open for all to see.

"Photo…"

"Huh?"

"Can I…take a…photo… Urgh…"

What the heck was I saying? I groaned at myself internally. I was creeping *myself* out, but it wasn't like I could unsay what I'd said.

He cocked his head at me. "A photo of what?"

His eyes were staring right at me. I was awake but unconscious. Without being aware of what I was doing, I pointed

straight at his face. I couldn't get any more words out, though it must have been pretty obvious what I meant.

The other two exchanged a glance, paused, and then burst out laughing. "You want a photo of Kengo?"

"*Just* Kengo? What about us?"

Still looking at me, he straightened up slightly. He was blinking at the speed of light. "Seriously?"

I nodded.

"You want my photo?"

I nodded more firmly.

"Why?"

I kept nodding. "I want a…record of your hair color?" I replied without thinking, my voice gradually trailing off.

That's right. I was a weird, *weird* teenage girl. The urge to cry was stronger than ever. I knew I wasn't as innocent as I pretended. I was rapidly devolving into a creep. Who wouldn't be scared of me? Who wouldn't be freaked out? I would run from me. *He* should run from me. I wished he would. I stared at him, begging him to hear my silent pleas.

"Oh, okay." He held up a peace sign. "How's this?"

No way.

My mouth was still glued shut, and all I could do was think. He shouldn't have said yes. After all, I was just some random girl who showed up and asked for his photo. He shouldn't have been *posing* for me. He didn't have any idea who I was. We were in the age of social media. His digital literacy must've been appalling.

I'd frozen again.

He was still looking at me. "What, you're not gonna take it?" he asked and started to lower his hand. "Then we should probably get go—"

"C'mon, Kengo, stop moving. You're making a super awkward face. You got yourself a fan this cute; you gotta smile for her. Pose properly!"

"Exactly! This is literally never gonna happen to you again." Kengo's friend suddenly turned to me, making me jump. "What's your name, anyway?"

"Ra-Rara…"

"Rarara-chan? Seriously? Is that your *real* name? What about your surname? What school's that uniform from?"

"Rara… Two 'ra's. My surname, um… The kanji from…'to view' and 'waves'…"

Kannami Rara. I was a first year at Jingu Girls' High School. I was about to explain before I gave up and closed my mouth. This was a once-in-a-lifetime thing. I was never going to meet him again. I was gonna change trains tomorrow out of sheer embarrassment. I'd *decided* that this was it. And that was why I couldn't tell them anything else about myself.

I opened up my phone's camera like my life depended on it. Nothing mattered since this was the last time I'd be seeing him. It didn't matter what he thought of me. I pointed the lens at him without hesitation. He was still holding up that peace sign and waiting for me. My hands were trembling so badly that I was struggling to get the camera to focus. I was too excited. I wanted to get the best photo that I possibly could. I wanted it to be a full encapsulation of this moment, one that I could keep for the rest of my life. It would be my treasure, and I'd never stop staring at it. Holding back my tears, I forced myself to look at the screen. And then I noticed something.

His face was bright red. I looked up over my phone to make sure I wasn't seeing things, but it was true. He was blushing.

The next moment, I let out a quiet, "Huh? That's so…human."

The others must have heard me, because their grins evolved into an outpouring of laughter.

"Oh my god! This is incredible!"

"That's actually hilarious!"

They spluttered in unison. They were clapping their hands, bent double, and gasping for breath.

He looked at them, his brows knitting together slightly, and muttered, "'Cause I *am* human," while his face turned an even brighter shade of red. "I can't help it."

I watched the screen as he gave the tiniest of pouts. All without breaking his pose. I wished I could watch him make that face forever.

So I pressed the shutter. The photo was mine.

My heart was thudding so hard I thought my chest was gonna rip in half. Squeezing my eyes shut for a second, I prepared myself to look up and face the real him.

"Wrong."

"A—" My iPhone slipped out of my grip. *He* wasn't standing in front of me anymore. Instead… "Alien!"

It was a glowing blue alien. He had a tank on his back, a mask over his face, and his eyes were fixed on me as I cried out.

"What are you doing, Rara? You're missing the point."

I didn't understand what it was doing here. It was so out of left field that I couldn't even scream. I couldn't call for help. My legs turned to jelly, and I sank down onto the platform.

"You can't just do the exact same thing you did last time. You have to make a *different* choice. You were supposed to say you couldn't take a good photo, apologize, then run off. Then you wouldn't have had to see him again. Why did you do the same… Are you listening to me? Rara?" The alien bent down to peer at me.

I couldn't look away from him. And then it hit me: I was dreaming.

"Yeesh. Okay, wait for me in five years. I'm not giving up."

It had to be a dream, because this wasn't what actually happened. Instead…

My heart was thudding so hard I thought my chest was gonna rip in half. Squeezing my eyes shut for a second, I prepared myself to look up and face the real him.

"You get a good shot?"

I nodded vigorously. I took a stealthy deep breath. And another and another, till my breathing finally started to settle and I was able to look up again.

"You should introduce yourself, Kengo!"

"Yeah! Get her to be your friend. *We* could use a new friend too, y'know!"

"Ah, right. My name…" He pointed at himself with a thumb. "Hagio Kengo."

"I'm, um…"

"Rara." His face still red, Kengo called my name. "I know you, Rara."

We stared into each other's eyes for some time, neither of us able to move. Why did this feel so intensely nostalgic? Would this peace, like I'd just come home from a long, long trip, keep on spreading from my heart? I had no idea.

X

"HUH?! WAIT! GO WHERE? GO *WHEN*?!"

"The first summer after you met!"

The first summer after…

"You're kidding me."

I hadn't seen Kengo in a while, and my jaw was on the floor the moment I saw his hair…or, I guess, his head. We were sitting at a cafeteria table in the station building, and an awkward silence reigned over us mercilessly. I'd prepared a few conversation topics and responses for our meeting. I couldn't remember a single one now.

"You're…kidding?" I knew it sounded dumb, but it was the only thing I could say.

"You can stop now."

"Can I? Maybe I should keep going."

"It's not *that* weird. I kinda like it. Keeps me cool."

He was right: It wasn't *that* weird. It didn't *not* suit him. I took a moment to find the right words. "You, uh…look like you're gonna spend your summer on the baseball team."

Kengo ran a hand over his crew cut and pouted slightly. "You could've said literally anything else. Those guys are always walkin' round school on their tiptoes to 'strengthen their calves,' and they guzzle like a ton of protein powder every month. They don't know the meaning of fun. I'd never be friends with them in a million years."

We took our trays from the counter and to a table, where we sat facing each other. Kengo was drinking his oolong tea through a straw. He hated sweet drinks, so he always picked water (still or sparkling) or tea. I had an iced café au lait.

"I guess it was unfair of me. You'd be way more tanned than that if you'd been playing baseball all summer." I *did* like sweet drinks, so I put some syrup into my coffee.

"Right. If anyone asks, I was gonna say that I'm volunteering at a temple."

"That's amazing. A temple that even shaves its *volunteers'* heads?"

"Hey, Rara, don'tcha think you're addin' *too* much syrup?" Kengo frowned as I added my second little syrup packet.

"No?"

"That's gonna be way too sweet."

"Yeah, and? I *want* it to be too sweet. You paid for it, so I wanna enjoy it as much as I can, and that means making it *super* sweet! It can't go down smooth, or I'm gonna drink it too fast."

The faster I finished it, the sooner we'd be saying goodbye. Which was not something I was looking to rush. I wanted to be with Kengo for as long as possible, even if the difference was only a second. Obviously I wasn't gonna tell him all *that*. It was my secret. Plus, I knew how valuable his time was now that he had entrance exams coming up. I was just so happy to be with him right now that I couldn't help but giggle as I sipped at my overly sweet café au lait. I was getting used to his new haircut too.

"What are you laughing at?"

"Nothing!" I trilled.

"That's gonna melt your teeth."

"Fine."

"It's not 'fine'…"

It *was* fine. Besides, it was too late. My teeth were already melting. So were my bones, my mouth, my eyes, my ears, and every one of my organs. Kengo was right in front of me, after all!

Ever since we exchanged our LINE IDs on the platform, we talked almost every day. We spoke on the train, on the platform benches, and we messaged each other. At first, I called him Hagio-senpai. Then Kengo-senpai. That quickly changed to Kengo-kun. And

now it was just Kengo. I changed the way I spoke to him over time too. I was speaking to him way more casually now than I had been at the start. It had all developed completely naturally.

Kengo told me why he used to change his hair color every few days. His parents divorced when he was in his second year of elementary school. He had been living mainly with his dad since then, but his mom lived close by, so he was constantly ping-ponging between the two of them. In the spring, his mom started dating a stylist. Her boyfriend was young—way younger than she was. Worried about her, Kengo started looking into him behind her back. His school didn't have any restrictions on hair, so he started going to the salon the guy worked at like crazy, borrowing money from his dad to do it. His cover story was that he was in a high school visual-kei band and was struggling to figure out the "character" he wanted to adopt.

He worried that the guy was a weirdo. Or a gold digger. Or a cheat. Or didn't have legit feelings for his mom. He spent more than a month having conversations with this guy to scope him out. But getting his hair colored cost a few thousand yen a pop, his scalp was starting to fry, and he couldn't borrow any more money from his dad. The time came to think up a new plan. Before he could though, the stylist finally told him something that turned his stomach…

"Y'know, I've known you were my girlfriend's son this whole time. You look just like her. You don't have to force yourself to keep coming back. Also, one look at you is enough to tell me you've got nothing to do with visual kei. Sorry, no refunds."

So Kengo went back to black. The stylist's feelings for his mom were genuine and, moreover, had saved his hair from any further damage. His mom found out and told him off, forcing Kengo to throw in the towel for good. Then summer came around, and she announced that she was moving. Her boyfriend was going back to his home prefecture of Aomori, and she'd decided to go with him so that they could eventually marry.

Kengo showed me the message she sent him: *Sorry, but we won't be able to see each other as often anymore.*

He had been worrying about the new life she was building this whole time. He thought she was moving too fast. He was too distracted to study for his entrance exams properly, and it was like his brain was on vacation whenever he was with me and the other two. Honestly, he was a bit of a mama's boy. And when I told him so, he wasn't able to deny it. He just kinda nodded.

The second summer vacation started, Kengo went up to Aomori to visit his mom. He didn't even tell me when he was coming back. I was panicking that he never would. I knew it made literally zero sense for him to transfer during the summer of his last year of high school, but I was still anxious that he would. Even though we spoke on LINE, I could only send the most vanilla messages known to man, and he would just send me pictures of the countryside or the meals he ate with his mom and her boyfriend. The pictures made it look like he was having fun, which just freaked me out even more. What if he *liked* it in Aomori? My anxiety was spiraling.

We were now a few days into August. Kengo came back yesterday without warning. He asked me to meet up, so here I was, having gone all out on my outfit. I worked hard to get my hair as shiny as possible, shaved my arms and legs, and spent three hours in front of the mirror this morning mixing and matching clothes and accessories.

"It was so quiet I didn't realize you were home," Mom said, poking her head into my room.

"Go away! I gotta get this right or I'm literally gonna *die*!" I grumbled.

"Oh," she said, leaving at once.

And then Kengo showed up with a freaking crew cut…

"How was Aomori? Nice and cool?" I asked.

"The days were still kinda hot, but it was pretty cold in the mornings and evenings. I hadn't packed any long-sleeve shirts, so I had to buy some."

"Huh."

"Up there, the summer doesn't suck so much."

"Huh," I repeated, casually averting my gaze from the face right opposite me. The smile was receding from my face like an ebbing wave, and I chewed my straw with my front teeth so that he wouldn't notice.

If he was about to say he'd decided to move there and had even decided on a *date*, I didn't wanna hear it. I loved his voice and could listen to it for hours, but if *that* was what he was gonna use it to say, I was ready to plug my ears.

"I got to see Mom's boyfriend's new salon. It was actually way cooler than I thought it'd be. He's young, but it looks like he's got things figured out."

"What about their place? You stayed with them the whole time, right?"

"With her boyfriend and his family, yeah. It's just like one of those big houses you always see in the country. And Mom's new house with him is gonna be built soon. They showed me the plans. Looks like it's gonna be pretty sweet. The plot they've got for it is apparently huge. And his grandparents are still super healthy, and relatives and neighbors were always comin' over with food… Wait, I sent you those photos from the barbeque, right?"

"Yeah, I saw them. So much food."

"I know, right? It wasn't just meat either. There was a ton of seafood, like sea urchins and scallops and stuff."

"Yeah, and you sent me those shots in the middle of the night. That's pretty much bullying."

He laughed. "I know. Did you wanna strangle me?"

"'Course I did."

"Nice. I timed it on purpose."

"I hate you."

"The food really won me over, y'know? Like, I kinda think it wouldn't be that bad to live out in the country."

"Ah…"

I didn't like the sound of that. I wanted the conversation to change track. If we stopped here, at least I could kid myself that he was joking. If we just stopped talking…

No. Stop. Don't leave me. I wanna be with you. We only just started talking properly. This is only the first time we're meeting with just us*. I want you to know me better. I want to know* you*.*

We were still only friends. If we got separated now, that was it for us.

"Didn't you think so when you saw the photos? Didn't it look amazing? 'Cause I'm kidding. It was super stressful."

"Huh?" I'd been staring at the straw wrapper, but now I looked up.

"The arguing was crazy. We never stopped, not even when we ate."

I looked Kengo in the eye. This wasn't how I'd been expecting the conversation to go at all. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. I mean, I went over there to raise hell. Her boyfriend could've been the greatest guy in the world, but there was no way I was gonna let her remarry. I really laid into her." Kengo added a touch of dramatic flair to his voice as he repeated his own words. "I'm still a minor! You're really gonna abandon your own kid?! Just 'cause you divorced Dad doesn't mean you're not my mom anymore! Moving all the way out here is just irresponsible! A parent's s'posed to prioritize their kid!" He paused. "That was the gist of it. And it went on and on."

Before I could even say anything, Kengo shrugged. "Yeah, I know. Immature, right?" He sighed, and then his tone strengthened with confidence again. "But I was right. The normal thing for a mom to do when her son asks her to stay isn't to ignore him and move away anyway, right? What kinda mom prioritizes her love life over her underage kid? But then Dad called me and was like, 'Quit being childish and sticking your nose in. It's none of your business.' And now for some reason, he and Mom are fighting over all that? I mean, I guess it could be worse, but it sure feels like torture."

Kengo paused again to take a sip of his oolong. He looked back at me as he continued. "That's how it was. And like, night before last, everyone was just like…" He put an index finger below each eye and drew lines down his cheeks. Then he did it again, over and over, his fingers pressing into his skin.

When he said "everyone," maybe he was including himself in that. He was 5'10'' and in his last year of high school. Looking at him, you'd think he was an adult. But that didn't mean he was as in control of his emotions as one.

"I don't get what their problem is. It wasn't like I was crying for my mommy. It was just that I suddenly had to deal with the fact that I wasn't Mom's top priority anymore… Uh, I guess that sounds super immature too. But, like, I always thought she cared about me more than anyone else, and now I'm thinking it's unrealistic to expect that from someone. I guess I'm feeling kinda…hopeless? It's hard to accept, y'know? I mean, I've got Dad, but it's not really the same."

The way he was looking at me, it was like he wanted me to say I understood his point. I didn't know anything about Kengo's dad, but I could tell that Kengo saw his parents as two totally separate figures. I gave a small nod.

"We kept fighting, and Mom said if I cared so much, why didn't I go up to live with them?"

"Huh?!"

"Yeah, I know. 'Huh.'"

"Wait, but…what about school? There's no *way* you could move."

"Right. And I told her. I'm all settled here, I can't transfer schools *now*, I got my exams… I told her it wasn't happenin'. I was showing her my phone photos, saying I got friends, and that's when that one photo came up. The one you sent me."

"Which one?"

"The one you took of me."

The image flashed into my mind right away. I'd never forget how Kengo looked in the photo he let me take on the platform for as long as I lived. I didn't even have to close my eyes to see it.

"A ton of stuff came flooding back to me when that photo showed up, like a volcano had gone off inside my head. You remember what you said to me back then?"

"What, 'Can I take your photo'?"

"No, after that. You said, 'That's so human.' I could hear you saying it clear as day, and then I looked at my mom. I saw how she was so mad, crying and screaming, and I was like, *that's* so human. 'Cause she *is* human. She only gets one life, one crack at all of this, and there's only one of her. I never thought of her like that before. My mom's just a person, and that's that. No one has the right to tell her what choices to make. Not even her own kid. It was literally the first time I saw things in that light since I was born. And then yesterday I was like, guess I'll go home. So here I am."

"You don't care about what your mom does anymore?"

"Nope," he said firmly, almost aggressively. But then he lowered his voice and spoke more tenderly. "She'll be fine."

He hadn't meant to sound so harsh. I knew that.

"Humans shouldn't need permission to live their lives in a human way. Before I caught the train back, I went to her boyfriend's

salon and told him not to worry about me anymore. I thought it'd be weird to say just that though, so I got him to cut my hair like this, 'cause it's hot and all. I'm sick of dyeing it anyway. Plus, he said he'd do it for free. Kinda funny, huh?" Kengo grinned, flashing me his white teeth. Still smiling, he suddenly closed his eyes like something had just come flying at him. He pushed his index fingers into his eyelids. Apparently he was just pretending to get emotional though, because he went on.

"Yeah, funny… I know I said I don't care, but maybe I'm still hoping for something to change. I dunno what I'm trying to get out of telling you about it. There's probably something…something I *really* want, but I dunno what it is. And I don't know when I'll be able to stop looking for it either."

As I listened, I reached out a finger toward him.

"Ever since I was a kid, I've always felt like I'm missing something, y'know? Like I've been torn away from something or like, whenever I cling to something I *want*, I get pulled away from it. And then I'm searching for whatever it is that's missing… My point is that I'm, like… Well, I dunno…"

Kengo was pressing his eyes again. My finger touched his hand. It was my first time touching him. I grabbed his wrist and pulled it toward me. He let me do it, but kept his eyes closed.

"There's something about you, Rara. I keep thinking it whenever we see each other and when we talk and stuff. I dunno what it is. But I think it's the reason I could tell you about all this weird stuff."

"I don't think it's weird."

"It *is*. Did you even understand what I was on about? 'Cause I didn't…"

"I didn't get all of it, but I don't care. I just like listening to you talk."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah, so keep talking. I wanna listen to you talk forever." I put my hand over Kengo's, which was resting on the table, and waited for him to open his eyes. "Say something."

He stayed silent for a moment. "I'm lonely."

"Yeah?"

"I'm lonely," he said again.

"Okay."

"I'm lonely and…" His thin mouth crinkled. I couldn't tell if he was smiling or not. "I'm gross," he said, voice quivering.

"Yeah…"

"You think so too, huh?"

"But I love you."

"Yeah?"

"I love you."

"You know it's 'cause of you, right? 'Cause you were here for me? That's the only reason I decided to come back."

"I'm glad I could be here then. Super glad. I was waiting for you to come back, all by myself. I felt like I was stuck while you were away."

Kengo slowly opened his eyes. "The hell are you talking about?" he asked, looking at me and laughing.

"I dunno." I grinned back at him. "Hey, it's raining…"

It was raining from my eyes and pouring down my cheeks. I had no idea where it was coming from. I couldn't even begin to guess. But it was raining, and I bet my mascara was running. If so, this was an emergency. Still, I wanted to feel Kengo's warmth through my hand more than I wanted to wipe the streaks away. My cool palm was slowly heating up.

"I'm glad you're here for me, Rara."

"I'll always be right here. With you. I wanna be with you forever and…"

I didn't know who gripped the other's hand first. Either way, we were holding hands tightly, both of us pulling the other one in as we supported each other's weight. Our bodies moved closer. Glancing around us to make sure no one was looking, we kissed over the table.

It only lasted a second. But in that single second, my everything and his everything came together to form *our* everything. I had lived my whole life just for this moment, and I would go on living for it and nothing else. What else could I possibly need?

I was trembling as I opened my eyes. Then, I let out a cry and nearly fell out of my chair in surprise. Panicking, I grabbed the edges of the table for support, but it wasn't stable enough, and it and I ended up in a spectacular mess on the floor. I *swear* Kengo had been right in front of me a second ago.

"Alien!"

There he was, glowing blue and standing there with a mask over his face and a tank on his back.

"Wrong!" he declared, underlining and elongating the word as he took a step toward me.

I hurriedly wiped my mouth with the back of my hand as I shrank away. He was glaring down at me accusingly.

"Nothing's going to change at this rate! Why can't you handle this? Why are you making the same mistakes? You need to be leaving that childish, pain-in-the-ass narcissist behind! Just ignore him and go on home! I don't get it!"

I didn't get it. There was no one else around me, just the alien's voice booming through the cafeteria.

"You are Toriyama."

"No, I'm not…" I was trying so hard not to cry. "I'm Kannami…"

The alien ignored me. “Stop drawing *Dragon Ball*. Draw *Kobo-chan*. Nothing’ll change if you don’t.”

I couldn’t move. My legs were shaking worse than a newborn foal’s. I couldn’t run from him. That was when it hit me: I was dreaming.

“Got it? No more mistakes. Okay, onto the next one.”

It had to be a dream, because this wasn’t what actually happened. Instead…

I was trembling as I opened my eyes.

“Rara.”

I heard Kengo’s voice with my entire body.

“You’re all I’m gonna come back to anymore. And if you disappear, I’m gonna search for you. I’ll find you, no matter how far away you go. I promise I’ll come get you. I’ll go faster than the speed of light. It doesn’t matter where I have to go, how many times, or even if it kills me. I won’t give up.”

I couldn’t say anything. I could only nod over and over.

“That okay?”

Yeah. Sure is.

A fresh wave of rain fell with each nod. I wanted him to remember this rain. If we ever got separated, I would let it fall freely as I called out for him.

Come look for me whenever you smell rain. I want you *to find me, Kengo. No one else. Wherever I am, however long it takes, I’ll wait for you to come looking. Forever and ever.*

X

"HUH?! WAIT! GO WHERE? GO *WHEN*?!"

"The year after you started dating! When you got separated!"

The year after we started dating. When we got separated. It was only about four months ago. I never thought our relationship would be tested so soon after we became official.

I couldn't stop thinking about what my friends said.

"Pretty sure that means you're done already."

"I bet he's having tons of fun over there."

"He's a college student living by himself. There's no way he's not gonna take advantage of it."

"One of my senpais told me the college club drinking parties get pretty *crazy."*

"Just forget about him already."

Whenever I told them they were wrong, they would just come back with twice as much stuff I didn't wanna hear. Sometimes three times as much. Wasn't long ago that I just stopped responding to it. I just *thought* all my comebacks without saying a word.

That's not true. This is Kengo we're talking about. My boyfriend. I love him soooooooo *much, and he…*

Stuff like that. But…

I sighed. The mechanical pencil in my iron grip hadn't been doing its job for several minutes, so I threw it down. It clattered quietly as it rolled to the other end of the small café table. The textbook in front of me had been open to the same page for ages. My eyes wouldn't focus on the text. My drink definitely wasn't cold anymore, and water droplets were beading on the glass. I had exams. I needed to study. It was why I spent nearly five hundred yen from my allowance to come to this café. Reality was tough.

Kengo does love me, right? Like, I don't have anything to worry about, right*?*

I let my gaze drop to my notebook. The page was filled with a tight spiral. It was proof that I hadn't been focusing in class. The shape gradually turned into maximum chaos, wandering off to dart back and forth before transforming into a tornado that zipped up and down and became a bundle of messy lines that ruined the page before eventually coming to a sudden stop. Might've fallen asleep around then.

Kengo went off to college at the end of March. We were both totally chill about it. We had our phones, so we could talk, FaceTime, or hop on LINE whenever we wanted. If we were missing each other too much, he could just come home for a weekend. It was only an hour-and-a-half trip on the bullet train.

"It's no big deal, right?" Kengo had said with a grin.

I smiled back at him. *"Right. If we were worried about being apart, it'd mean our relationship was weak, so I'm glad we're not."*

We shared that kiss in the cafeteria during summer vacation, and then we started dating. I'd been so, so happy ever since it happened, and I felt like it'd take a lot to ruin that happiness. So how the heck did I end up like this so quickly?

We had a set time to talk, but Kengo couldn't stick to that one, simple promise. If he couldn't call me, couldn't he at least send me a LINE message to let me know? Was it really that hard?

I had no idea where Kengo was or what he was doing when he ghosted me. When he would finally get around to contacting me and I asked him where he'd been, he always had some excuse. He was asleep, was out drinking, was with his friends, was studying, went out and forgot his phone, was out *right now* and couldn't talk much, had work soon so he had to go, was tired so he'd speak more tomorrow. The next day would be radio silence all over again.

All I wanted was to hear him every day. See his face. I wanted to talk to him about what we each did that day and what we were

gonna do tomorrow. How much we missed each other when we lived so far apart and how strong our love for one another was. Then I could go to bed happy. I wanted to feel like we were together in spirit even though we weren't together physically. And I wanted him to want that too.

So why couldn't he do it? Why was he letting me stew in my angst?

He was never lazy or anything. Maybe he's having a total blast at college and it's changed him? Maybe he doesn't care about me anymore.

I sighed again and stared at my eraser. It was white with four corners and I wanted to bite it. I wanted to break the spongy thing in two with my front teeth. Instead of putting it in my mouth, I flicked it to the end of the table.

I couldn't stop thinking, *Why?* The word went round and round in my head, a question forever unresolved. He hadn't contacted me yesterday either. The *why*s were drawing a spiral in my head. Finally, instead of an answer, I came up with a different way of looking at things.

Maybe he hasn't changed, and I just never understood the kinda guy he was in the first place.

As soon as we started dating, it was like he came to his senses and started seriously studying for his entrance exams. It was already the summer of his senior year, so he *was* starting a little late. I was always careful not to get in the way of his studying. It took a lot of effort to keep myself in check. No matter how much I wanted to be with him, I never pressured him to spend hours going out with me, and I never forced him to call me no matter how much I wanted to hear his voice. When he didn't reply, telling myself that he was studying was enough to reassure me.

That was how I supported Kengo the whole time. It made him happy. He always used to say that I was his motivation for working hard. I was pretty sure he meant it.

He'd had a late start though, and that meant his results weren't great. First he took the national university admissions test, only to come out saying there was "no way." Then there was the first test for the national university near his home—his first choice. I could remember the way he sighed when he didn't pass. And the way he groaned when he didn't get into a *single one* of the private universities he went for. By the time the second exam for his first choice came around, he was practically screaming with frustration. He ended up having to aim lower. That was when he finally got into a national university that was too far to commute to.

"Yes*! I did it, Rara! No gap year for me! Woohoo!"*

He was going off to live by himself.

Now that I thought of it, we'd been dating for nearly a year, and most of that time was spent prioritizing Kengo's studies. After that, we went long distance. We never spent enough time together to fully understand each other. It felt to me like he had changed. Maybe he thought I'd changed too. That would mean we were even.

I scrolled through our LINE chat. It was full of messages from me being mad at him for not getting in touch. He always apologized, but he never changed. I just got madder and madder. He probably started thinking I was a pain in the butt because he gradually spoke to me less and less.

I asked him to come home that weekend so we could talk.

I can't. Tests are coming up. You got your finals soon too, right?

Literally just for the weekend, I said.

I really can't.

Just for one day, then.

Too expensive.

Please. I miss you.

I'm seriously too busy.

Why? How? C'mon, reply. Don't ignore me. Fine. Be a jerk.

That was how it went.

I loved Kengo, so I wanted to feel like we were connected twenty-four seven. I wanted to *be* with him twenty-four seven. He was always supposed to be on my right side. That was his spot. And I was always supposed to be on his left side. There was no point to this world if he wasn't going to be right there next to me where he belonged. It was the same as if nothing existed at all. I'd be left behind, all alone, in that empty world of nothing. You couldn't even call that "living." I wouldn't be able to breathe. There would be no air in that world *to* breathe. That was why I was so desperate.

Maybe it's just me who's desperate.

My friends told me to *"Just chill out for a bit."*

"You're not yourself right now."

"You're asking him to be as committed as you are, and he got mad. That means he knows *he's not as committed as you."*

I didn't get what they were saying at the time, but maybe I understood now. Maybe they were right.

No, they were *definitely* right.

Kengo and I were in different worlds. And, honestly? I knew it. And that meant I had my answer.

I am *the only one who's desperate.*

I didn't even feel the slightest bit of surprise. It just felt like I was free-falling from really high up. The ground would probably be painful, miserable, and lonely. The falling wouldn't last for long. It couldn't. I was going to hit the ground eventually, and that would be it. So worrying or stressing over anything else *right now* was pointless. I started typing on my phone keyboard.

I don't think we're in a good place right now. Sorry to say this, but I don't really know what to do about it. So if you still No. Start over.

I've been thinking. If you still love me,

Also bad. I didn't want to turn this into a test. I didn't want to hide what I wanted to say behind any weird waffle. I really only wanted to ask one thing.

Can you breathe over there?

That was it. My message was done. I went to press the Send button. I couldn't. There was no way Kengo would know what I meant. He'd ask me. And then I'd have to explain. We weren't together. We weren't looking at the same world. We weren't *in* the same world. I wanted to be together. Right now we weren't, and it *hurt*. I couldn't breathe where I was. I couldn't go on. I couldn't exist in a world like this.

"Goodbye."

And then it would be over. I knew what Kengo was going to say. He'd already said it, just not with words. This conversation was going to finish us. I didn't know which route we'd go down after I took the first step, but I knew where we'd end up. That was what my words meant.

I knew exactly what I was trying to do. The inside of my nose started stinging. Everything in front of me was blurring. Maybe this was just how teenage relationships were. No matter how important it felt, we'd never actually let it mature. I stealthily wiped away an overflowing tear with the back of my finger. I was ready to send my question.

My phone started buzzing before I could.

Huh?!

It was Kengo. It wasn't even the time we promised to call each other—not that he stuck to it anyway.

Why? Why? Why?

My phone kept vibrating even as I panicked. I knew it would be a bad idea to hear his voice. I knew I should ignore the call, calm down, and send my message.

I *knew* it, but then I saw his face on the screen again. It was like he was calling me, not just through the phone, but physically. His arm, his hand, was reaching out for me. His fingers were coming to clasp mine. The spiral I'd been drawing in my mind immediately came undone. It was now a single line heading straight for Kengo. It was crying out, hoping to reach him.

I answered the call before I knew it.

"Kengo!" I called for him.

"Wrong. Again."

"Huh?" I looked at the screen again. It wasn't that photo of Kengo smiling in the coat he wore to school. It was a glowing blue alien.

"A…" He was wearing a mask. "Alien!" My voice shook as I shouted. What was going on?! "Why's an alien calling *me*?!"

"You messed up again, Rara. You ignored your friends' advice. You keep making the same mistake over and over. I just watched you do it *again*."

"What? Wait, I didn't… No way. What the heck are you talking about anyway?!"

"There's nothing to do but to move on. You've missed your chance here. But I'm not giving up. I'm gonna keep on until you make a different choice."

"Wait, wait, wait, wait, I mean… I mean… Ah! I got it!"

I was dreaming. It had to be a dream, because this wasn't what actually happened. Instead…

"Right. What comes next is heartfelt apologies, a new commitment to understanding one another, and you guys clearing up all the misconceptions you had about each other's feelings. Then, four years later, *this* you is still going to meet me. Because you got it wrong again. You have to wake up, Rara. Open your eyes."

X

AS SOON AS I SAW HIM AT THE TICKET GATE, I started running. When Kengo noticed me, he broke into a run too, his big bag swinging. He ran right through the automatic gate with a huge grin on his face.

"I'm back, Rara!"

"Welcome home!"

He spread his arms out for me, and I leaped right into them. I didn't let up even when he grunted. I put all my weight on him, all my strength into my arms. He was so warm as I hugged him. I pressed my face into him, inhaling the scent of spring and putting everything I had into holding back my tears. I didn't care if people were watching. I hadn't seen him since New Year's.

The cherry blossoms in front of the station were in full bloom. They had come early this year, so my class got to graduate yesterday under a rainfall of petals. As of next month, this girl was going to college!

Right now, the rest of my classmates were meeting up in their uniforms and going to karaoke. Well, now that I thought of it, they were "uniforms" yesterday, but from today they were more like cosplay. Though I did get an invite, I passed so I could come here. My friends who went had been sending me a ton of photos, and it looked like they were having a great time. I also had messages like this: *There are guys from another school here! One of them said he's been wanting to talk to you for ages. You really can't make it? You don't have to stay, just show up to say hi!*

I couldn't go because I wanted to meet Kengo at the station. And even though yesterday was graduation, most of my friends were going to the same college as me—the one that was affiliated with

our high school. There wasn't anywhere I wanted to be more than here. I had Kengo, and I would *always* choose Kengo.

I clutched the fabric on his back. "I missed you!" I cried, my voice squeaking. "I missed you so, so, so, *so* much! You're really gonna be around for the whole of spring break? There's so much I wanna talk to you about and a ton of places I want us to go! Mom wants you to come to our place for dinner too!" I babbled.

"Wrong," came the response in my ear.

"Huh?"

Confused, I took a step back. Did my makeup rub off on his clothes? I wasn't wearing any foundation—just a bit of color on my eyes. What did he mean by "wrong," anyway? I looked up to ask him—and then I jumped back with a cry. The guy in front of me wasn't Kengo.

"Alien!"

It was a glowing blue alien. He wore a mask on his face and a tank top on his back.

"Rara…"

"Ew! Stay away from me! Kengo? Kengo!"

Kengo was gone. I looked around as I backed away, but the alien came straight for me.

"Listen to me. This. Is. *Pointless*. Your friends were having a blast with a bunch of boys, right? You might have met someone new. Someone you were *supposed* to be with. That might have been what fate wanted for you. So why did you come to the station again? Are you gonna forget every single time you get a do-over? Well?"

His eyes were probing me. They were shifting slightly from left to right like they were telling me off for something. There was something unsettling about the way he was speaking and the way he was walking.

"I dunno what you're talking about! Look, just stay away from me! Seriously, what the hell is going on?!"

"Please. You have to remember what you need to do. I know you know. The way things are going, nothing's going to change. Please, make a different choice! You have to change things, Rara. We have to aim for a different outcome. You can't go on like this."

He went to grab my shoulders, which was when I screamed and ran away. I was running as hard as I could, but his voice was following me.

"Rara! I'm not giving up! I'll do this over and over till you make a different choice! Wait for me at the next one!"

I was dreaming. It had to be a dream, because this wasn't what actually happened. Instead…

X

"I THINK I'M GONNA GO TO BED."

"Sure. Sleep well."

"When are you going to come join me, Kengo?"

"I'm stayin' up tonight. I've got too much stuff to do."

"Seriously? Trainee teachers have it tough. Sorry 'bout that."

"It's not just tough; I'm actually gonna die at this rate. Today *sucked*. The kids wanted me to play tag with them *while* giving them a quiz, and, of course, I was it. So I did it—even though it was super hot out—and by the time I got to the thirtieth question, I felt like I was blind, and I was shaking all over. I couldn't even eat the school lunch 'cause my hands were trembling so bad, but then my supervising teacher got *so* mad at me for leaving food. Like, why?"

"Yikes. You got your Pocari Sweat?"

"Always got my flask on me. Also been told that I suck at writing on a blackboard. Apparently, that's a skill? You ever had a teacher who you've been like: 'Wow, they sure have a talent for writing on the blackboard!'? I mean, what am I s'posed to do? Art's never been my thing."

"Doesn't that just mean your handwriting sucks?"

"Huh, maybe."

"Kids in elementary school don't read the board properly anyway. Just go with the flow, y'know?"

"Yeah, the flow. Anyway, g'night. My eyes are killin' me…"

"Wait, your eyes hurt?"

"I think it's eye strain? Or I've got those 'floater' things? Either way, they're stinging, and everything's kinda blurry. But I gotta keep working on this lesson plan."

"Wait, you said before that you were gonna eat something. What happened to that? Go check the kitchen."

"I already di—waah!"

"What happened?!"

"Oh man, that was close! I forgot I was cooking udon! I left the heat on, and now all the water's gone… I've turned it off now, but it's all burnt black!"

"Ew! What the heck are you doing over there?"

"I woulda burned the place down if it wasn't for you!"

"Oh my god, really?! You gotta be more careful!"

"Wrong."

"Huh?"

"Moving on."

"Hold up! What did you do to your profile picture? Why's it blue? Wait, are you—"

"Moving on."

"Alien!"

X

KENGO'S EYEBROWS SHOT UP WHEN HE SAW MY little bag. "Huh? I thought you'd bring an umbrella."

"We're not gonna need it today, are we? Besides, you don't have one either."

"Yeah, 'cause I thought you'd bring your folding one."

"Ever thought of taking responsibility for yourself? There's only a 20 percent chance of rain today according to the weather report. Of course, Mom said I should grab my umbrella anyway…"

There were a bunch of clouds high up in the sky, and they were moving pretty quickly. But the sky between them was bright blue and the sun was super bright, so it didn't look like we were in for any bad weather. Which was good 'cause our date today was gonna be a bit of a hike.

"It'll be fine. It's not like it'll start pouring after the sun's gone down, and we'll be forced to shelter somewhere, and then by the time it lets up the trains'll have stopped, so we'll be stranded and can't go home. C'mon, Kengo."

He didn't say anything.

"What's up?"

He'd been grinning this whole time, but now he'd suddenly got quiet on me.

"Huh?"

I was holding onto Kengo's arm. Or it was supposed to be Kengo's arm. But when I looked to my right…

"Alien!"

It was a glowing blue alien wearing a mask and with a tank top on its back. It tilted its head slowly as it looked down at me. "Wrong. *Again*."

X

"GO DOWNSTAIRS ALREADY, MOM!"

"I can't. I haven't finished talking to you."

"Yes, you have! Get outta here!"

"This house belongs to your father and me. You cannot bar us from certain portions of it. That is unreasonable, and I'm afraid I do not approve."

"Yeah, got it. Just leave already!"

"Now wait just a moment!"

Half her body was already leaning into my room, so I pushed back against her with my hips.

"Rara!"

"Shut up! Leave me alone!"

I closed the sliding door (Yeah! Still! In this day and age!) as hard as I could. I then put my trusty pole in place at an angle to make sure it couldn't be opened from the outside.

"Is this my fault?" Kengo carefully lowered himself into the chair that sat in front of my decrepit children's study desk and pointed toward the door, which I *knew* Mom was still standing behind so she could listen in. He made the chair look even smaller than it was.

"'Course not!"

"Not at all, Kengo-kun!" Mom called from the hallway, as if her opinion mattered more than mine. "It's because of Rara's immaturity!"

She was *seriously* ticking me off.

"Go. Down. Stairs!"

"Yes, I know. Let's have our discussion later, then. You lack the composure for it at the moment. Besides, it isn't the sort of conversation to have in front of a guest—not in tone nor in subject matter. As your mother, I choose now to defend your societal reputation."

"Oh, wow, *really*? Thanks a *bunch*! You're so understanding, Mom!"

I could hear her footsteps going down the stairs. I was just breathing a sigh of relief when I heard them coming back.

"Don't let it get too late, Rara. I'm not going to bed until you do, so I'll know."

"Not the feint! And you don't hafta stay up! You gotta get up early tomorrow, don't you?! Argh!"

This time, she really did go downstairs. I was irritated, on the verge of being enraged. I turned on my heel and pointed in the direction of the retreating footsteps. "What the hell was that?!"

I was trembling with anger. My face was probably bright red.

"I mean. It *was* your mom." Kengo was smiling at me. He was in a band T-shirt and loose joggers. Basically, as chill an outfit as you could get. He was holding his phone in one hand. It didn't look like he had any sympathy for me at all, but he *did* look really hot with his new cropped hairstyle. It suited him way too well.

Still wasn't enough to calm my anger, though.

"Yeah, *my mom*! She literally makes no sense, right?! I swear, she never has! I just don't get her!"

I'd worked one day at my new part-time job at a diner so far. I *needed* to take the next shift off. That was it. So I put on this super pathetic voice and called them saying I suddenly got a fever. And that was how I got out of work this evening. No big deal.

I mean, yeah, I knew it wasn't the *greatest* thing to do. I knew it inconvenienced other people. I *did* feel bad for the manager and the others who were working tonight. But I *needed* to be off work today. *Genuinely*.

This spring, Kengo came back to work as an elementary school teacher. His dream job was unbelievably busy, he came home late, and even on the weekends he had tons of stuff he needed to do for work. We didn't have any time for laid-back dates. But since he lived nearby, now and then he'd suddenly be able to pop by without warning, just like today. And if that happened when I had a shift, I was gonna call in sick. I mean, I missed him. I wasn't about to skip a chance to see him. If it happened again, I was gonna call in sick again. And again. Every time. I'd spent four hard years without being able to meet him regularly like this, so obviously, now was my chance to make up for it.

But Mom said I was being "unbelievably irresponsible." When she found out what I'd done, she told me to go to the diner right away, fess up, and apologize. And then work my shift like I was supposed to. Way to overreact.

Seriously, what the hell? That would just make things *weird*, especially since they already had someone in to cover for me. Plus, *everyone* pretended to be sick once in a while. I was sure I'd end up taking a shift for someone who was playing the same grift at some point. It's called "give and take." I explained this all to Mom, but she wasn't buying it.

"Why should others' behavior have any influence over your own responsibilities?"

I'd told her *why* I'd done it in the first place too, of course.

"You shouldn't have taken on a part-time job in the first place if you were going to have this attitude toward it."

But I needed money!

"Your father and I pay for your living expenses, your school fees, and everything else. What other costs could you possibly have? I would like an explanation."

But… Well, Kengo was struggling, and I loved Kengo, so I didn't want to be a burden to him!

"Yes, Kengo-kun has an occupation that requires a lot of responsibility. That's why you have to become a responsible member of society yourself. If you intend to keep moving forward as Kengo-kun's partner and equal, you cannot just wait for him to pull you along. Otherwise, you'll be nothing more than baggage. He is a kindhearted young man and will go out of his way for you no matter where you are. He will take you to the ends of the earth if he has to. If you continue to be the type of person who waits instead of taking initiative, you will just keep holding him back. You have the ability to walk the path you choose on your own two feet. Do ensure you don't forget that."

The heck?! I'm sorry, but what were we supposed to be talking about again? And "baggage," seriously? How rude! I wasn't baggage! Also, excuse me, but I *was* preparing properly for job searching. I *was* thinking about this stuff! Why did Mom think she had the right to lecture me about all this outta nowhere?

"The bottom line is that I do not think you should have called in sick today. You will come to understand with the passage of time."

Kengo showed up in the middle of everything, and then Mom finally backed off. But I knew I wasn't off the hook. She would go off on me again about my irresponsibility for *hours* once Kengo left. And what pissed me off the most?

"She's right."

Yup.

Kengo put his phone on his knee and looked up at me, his eyes gentle.

"Mom's *always* right! So she's probably right today too. Everything she says always comes true, like she can see the future or something. And it's *annoying*."

Why couldn't she take the side of me and my feelings for once, even if it made her wrong? Why couldn't she accept me making the wrong decision? Let me regret it later and then comfort me? Be nice to me? It didn't even have to be every time, just now and then. Couldn't she just understand that sometimes I *wanted* to be wrong? Wanted to be human?

"Mom just doesn't get how I feel *at all*!" More than anything, I just wanted to know *why*.

"Take a deep breath and try to calm down for a second. You've got a good mom. She's always there for you."

"No she's not! Like, at all! She's always at work! Sometimes she goes abroad on business for weeks! Ever since I was a kid, I'd always be waiting for her to come home."

"It's 'cause of the work she does that you're able to live the life you do. I'd say that counts as being with you. You gotta be grateful for that."

"I *am* grateful! That's not the point! It's like Mom just…doesn't understand. I mean, like she's not human… Like she's living in another dimension, or she comes from another planet! Right! Like she's an…"

The moment it hit me, I knew I was right.

"An alien."

"What?" Kengo grinned at me. "You serious?"

"Yeah. She's *gotta* be."

It was the only explanation that made sense. She was a mysterious being that could see the future and only said stuff that

was correct and true. She'd come down from way beyond the skies and thanked me for my patience. That was who she was—an alien. It all clicked into place once I realized she wasn't human.

"Mystery solved! Y'know, I've spent all twenty years of my life trying to figure it out."

"Um, this is your own mom you're talking about. If she's an alien, what's that make you?"

"I'm a clone of Dad. But there's no way I'm gonna ask her about it. She'll absolutely just start waffling on about the true definitions of 'reproduction' and 'DNA.' It'll take just under an hour. And she'll finish with: 'Your logic is far from watertight.' See? I can kinda tell the future too! You think I inherited that from her? You think I'm half alien? Oh my god! That's too gross!"

I started stuffing items into my backpack as a joke. I looked at myself in the mirror. I grabbed my hair where it was tied just below the nape of my neck and pulled it loose, shaking it out as I went. Volume was *everything* when it came to this hairstyle. If I let it go flat, I might as well die. I closed my eyes halfway to check my eyeliner, looking at it at an angle and from the side.

Perfect.

The jet-black feline flick paired *amazingly* with my features. Just extending and lifting the outer corners of my eyes slightly tightened my baby face into something way more adult.

Wait, my lips!

I grabbed my pouch and sat down in front of the mirror. Kengo was watching me, then suddenly he clapped his hands together in realization. I thought only old men did that. Maybe he picked it up at work.

"What?" I asked.

"I'm a mama's boy, right? But I think you're seriously a mama's girl."

"Huh?!" I stared at him through the mirror. "No, I'm not. I get along better with my dad, so I'm more of a daddy's girl."

"It's not really about who you get along with."

I couldn't help but smile slightly as I struggled to pick a color to put on my lips. "Just 'cause you're a mama's boy doesn't mean everyone else has to have the same issues. Obviously, I love my mom, but that's normal."

"It's not about just loving her either. You trust her completely, right? Like, she's your mom, so everything she says is correct. *Everything.* That's what you believe from the bottom of your heart, without a shred of doubt. You think your mom's like this perfect being, and you badly want validation and acceptance from this perfect, all-powerful being. That's why, when things get just a tiny bit confrontational, you get super emotional and snap back at her like you did just now. Your anger comes from your absolute trust in your mom. You get me?"

"Nope."

"You're not even trying to understand!"

"I don't hafta to know you're talking nonsense. By your logic, everyone who trusts their mom has mommy issues."

"Only in the most extreme cases. Like yours."

"No way am I an 'extreme case.' *You* are. By the way, how *is* your mom doing?"

"She's great, thanks. Oh yeah, she told me to ask you if your family wanted her to send over a load of garlic this year too."

"Um, *yes*! Tell her I'm super excited for it. All of us go nuts for garlic. The resident alien always fawns over it and goes on about how delicious and healthy it is. She fries the bulbs whole and then eats every last clove off of 'em. Says there's no garlic like Aomori garlic."

"Man, I'd love to see that." Kengo laughed. "An alien gorging on garlic."

“She’s not wrong about how tasty and healthy it is though. If an alien thinks so, you gotta believe it, right? I mean, I do.”

“Yeah. If I’m gonna take anyone’s word for it, I’ll take an alien’s.”

“In terms of technology, that might be where we’ve got aliens beat. Aomori garlic’s gotta be the best there is.”

“Y’know, maybe you should’ve gone to work after all.”

“Hey!” I stopped coloring my lips for a second. “What’s that gotta do with garlic? I’m glad I skipped! Nothing’s more important to me than spending time with you.”

I found myself getting mad at Mom all over again as I spoke. Because she went off at me, the precious time I had with Kengo was now tainted by a dumb sense of guilt. I wasn’t gonna let that ruin the evening though!

I jumped to my feet. “All right, I’m ready. And starving!”

“Wanna eat out? Or at my place?”

“Hmm. Either way works for me.”

The huge house Kengo used to live in with his dad got put on the market and sold right away. His dad went back to the country to live in his parents’ house, while Kengo had been living alone in the city since he started job hunting.

“I think I’m craving some ramen,” I said.

“You sure? After you’ve gotten all dolled up?”

“I sent you a link to that one place, remember? I wanna go there.”

“Oh, that place? I looked it up, and apparently it’s crazy popular. We’re probably gonna have to line up to get in. You okay with that?”

“Why don’t we go over there and see? If the line’s super long, we can figure something else out. Like, we can go to your place and cook something together, or maybe get takeout.”

"I guess. Let's check it out, then. Okay, so it's 7:37… Prime dinnertime. It's probably gonna be packed. You need to go to the bathroom?"

"Nope."

"Grab a jacket too."

"Oh, right!"

Kengo made sure I put my hoodie on before pulling on his light leather jacket. It was warm out, but he said we had to wear 'em for safety's sake.

I took the pole away from the door and started down the stairs. Halfway down, I turned to Kengo and put my finger to my lips.

"You sure you shouldn't tell her we're heading out?"

"It's fine!" I whispered as quietly as I could. "I don't wanna hear another lecture."

Keeping our footsteps light, we made it right up to the front door.

"Rara?" Mom called from the living room. "Are you going somewhere?"

I swear she had the sharpest hearing on the planet. Kengo looked like he was gonna say something, so I pushed him right out of the door and stepped out after him. I really didn't wanna speak to Mom right now, especially when I was due a long "rational discussion" with her later. For now, I wanted to enjoy the time I had with Kengo.

"Your mom's gonna think I'm rude now. I mean, I just ignored her and took you out without saying anything."

"Don't sweat it. I'll explain it all to her later. Let's just get outta here. Hopefully we can get that ramen."

Kengo sighed at me. He had two helmets in his hands, one pink, one black. Obviously I took the pink one; it was mine. Kengo

made sure he picked out a cute color when he bought it for me.

After putting his own helmet on, he turned to me. "Hey."

"Mm?"

"You sure about the pink one?"

"What are you talking about? I love it."

"What if I told you that the black one might be tougher?"

"C'mon now. It's not gonna be tougher when they're the same brand. The only difference is that the pink one's cuter, so the pink one's mine!"

"Thought so," Kengo said, but then he paused.

Confused, I looked up at him. "What's up?"

He was wearing a full-face helmet, so I couldn't see enough of his expression to figure it out. Kengo didn't answer. He just swiveled round so his back was facing me.

"Kengo? What's wrong?"

Again with the silence.

"Are you mad about something? Kengo? Wait, is it 'cause of that thing with Mom? 'Cause I was rude to her?"

He still wasn't saying anything.

"I'm sorry. But, I mean, you kinda went silent outta nowhere. What's up? C'mon, please. Please just say something."

It was like he'd suddenly turned into a completely different person. Had I messed up somehow? Made a mistake? Done something I shouldn't have?

"Kengo?" Panicking, I touched his shoulder. It was trembling. Heaving over and over like he was sobbing. The night was silent. There was no disguising his convulsing breaths. "Why are you crying?"

Eventually, he turned around without a word. He took off his helmet very slowly. Our surroundings were immediately bathed in a

blue light. I was too shocked to even scream.

"A… A… Al…" I backed away. My breaths were shuddering, and it took me too long, but in the end, I managed a scream.

X

"I HONESTLY DON'T MIND EITHER WAY."

"Hmm… What to do?"

"I'm gonna finish up quick, so I won't be long."

"Okay. Then I guess I'll wait at your place." I took off my helmet. My hair was probably messed up. I pressed down on my hairline as firmly as I could over and over.

"Yeah, that's probably for the best. Sorry about all this."

"It's not your fault. I'll take the bus. Even though I'll look pretty dumb hauling this thing around."

"I *am* sorry. I'll be as quick as I can."

"I can't believe you have to work so late."

"Same. There're some cup noodles you can have if you get too hungry. I grabbed a whole box of the kind you like."

"Yay! Thanks! Catch ya later."

I raised my hand and watched Kengo as he switched on his taillamp and rejoined the traffic lane. Then, I headed for the nearby bus stop, helmet hanging from my hand. Luckily, the next bus arrived at 8:10, and I was right on time. I got on board and took a seat. The bus and Kengo each set off along their different routes.

We'd tried going to that ramen place, but while we were waiting at a light, Kengo's phone went off. He glanced at it, panicked, then pulled over to the side of the road to call whoever it was back. I knew it couldn't be good news.

The call was from the school. It was something about some data that they needed right that second. Data that only "Hagio-sensei" knew the password for. Something like that.

"I understand. I'll be there at once." Kengo hung up the call and turned to face me.

He looked genuinely apologetic as he explained that he had to go back to the elementary school he worked at, but that it wouldn't take long, so I could come with him and wait till he was done. Otherwise, we could give up on the ramen, and I could go wait at his place. It was up to me.

I didn't mind either way, but I decided to go to his place. I didn't know how I felt about it, though. I wasn't mad or anything. It was more like I felt sorry for him being so busy, and I was worried about the effect it was having on his health. That, and we didn't get much time together in the first place, so the situation kinda sucked. But it was fine. I'd wait for him.

I let the bus ferry me along for a while before getting off at the stop right outside Kengo's apartment building. I hadn't heard anything from him yet.

I used the spare key to get in, then pulled off my clothes. The exhaust fumes had made them kinda musty. I opened up the closet and changed into my usual loungewear, which was honestly closer to underwear: a camisole and some shorts.

I switched on the forty-inch TV to wait for Kengo to get in touch. He'd bought it in a flurry of excitement just after moving in. A few minutes passed, and he still hadn't called, and my stomach was starting to hurt a little. It always happened when I got too hungry.

I got up and grabbed a pack of cup noodles from the kitchen cupboard. Tom yum flavor—it couldn't be beat. I didn't like how many calories were in it, but I could just have a smaller dinner.

I boiled the water in the electric kettle, poured it into the cup, and waited three minutes. While I waited, I decided to wash the dishes that were left in the sink. Kengo was one of those people who

liked to have a proper breakfast, but it looked like he'd been in too much of a hurry that morning to wash everything up. There was the bowl he'd had his egg and rice in, his chopsticks, the small plate he'd had a side dish on, and the wooden bowl for his miso soup. They were all soaking in the washing-up bowl. I washed each one carefully and put them on the dish drainer.

I looked for a fork but couldn't find one, so I wiped down the chopsticks I'd just washed and took them and the cup noodles back to the room. I wasn't gonna wait—I pulled the lid back right away. That was when my eyes ended up glued to the TV I'd left on.

X

"I HONESTLY DON'T MIND EITHER WAY."

"Hmm… What to do?"

"I'm gonna finish up quick, so I won't be long."

"Okay. Then I guess I'll tag along with you." I started to walk around the bike so I could get right back on the rear seat.

A sudden hand on my shoulder stopped me. "You can't."

"Huh?" I looked at Kengo. Maybe I heard him wrong?

"You can't, Rara. You have to make a different choice."

"What's that mean? You said you didn't mind either way."

"Don't choose him anymore. Change things. Make a different choice."

"I don't get what you're saying. You okay, Kengo? Is the stress from work getting to you?"

"*I* can't change my reality!"

His voice suddenly took on a forceful tone, making me freeze. Was he mad about something? Did I do something wrong? Or was

Kengo misinterpreting something?

"Kengo—"

"I want this to change! But I can't do anything about it! I just can't! All I can do is exist *here*, in your world. *Why?!* Seriously, what the hell is… What am I s'posed to…"

"Um… Why don't we just, uh… Okay, let's just head to the school for now. You get your stuff done, and then we can take our time and talk things through. Everything's gonna be okay."

"We *can't*!" Kengo cried sharply. He still had his helmet on. He fell to his knees and hunched over right in front of me.

I reached out for his back. "It's okay. Everything's fine," I repeated over and over. I didn't know what could have been hurting him so badly. I couldn't even begin to guess. What was going on? What should I do? Maybe he needed professional help, like a doctor or a counselor. Even then, was there anything that *I* could do for him? "You're okay. I'm gonna help you, Kengo, I promise."

"You have to…change things…" he sobbed, still hunched over.

The lights from the passing cars were making his back, his shoulders, and his helmet glow blue. I kept on stroking his back, over and over again.

But then I stopped. Because I realized that it wasn't Kengo's back. He took off his helmet and turned to look at me. Silently, I screamed. It hit me. I was dreaming. It had to be a dream.

X

"I HONESTLY DON'T MIND EITHER WAY."

"Hmm… What to do?"

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"Okay. Then I guess I'll tag along with you." I started to walk around the bike so I could get right back on the rear seat.

A sudden hand on my shoulder stopped me. "You can't."

"Huh?" I looked at Kengo. Maybe I heard him wrong?

"You can't, Rara. You have to make a different choice."

"What's that mean? You said you didn't mind either way."

"You *can't*!"

My heart jolted at the ferocity in his tone. "Wh-what?"

"You *can't* choose me anymore. Ever. *Change things.* Make a different choice. One that doesn't involve me."

"I don't get what you're saying. You okay, Kengo? Is the stress from work getting to you?"

"Fine. If you're not gonna do anything differently, *I* will."

He was wearing a full-face helmet, so I couldn't see enough of his expression to figure it out. Nothing he said was making any sense, like he'd changed into a completely different person.

"This time, *I'm* going to make the right choice. And the next time, if I have to. As many times as it takes!" Kengo swung one leg over his motorcycle and started the engine before I could hop on.

"Huh?! You're kidding, right? *Kengo?!*"

He rode off. Seriously.

"Is he for real?!"

I was left alone at the side of the road, completely stunned. He *was* for real. He left me behind. All I could do was stare after him as he and his bike got smaller and smaller.

Is *he for real, though?*

I was too confused to be mad. Way too anxious. Was Kengo okay? I'd never seen him act like this. Maybe his workload really *was* affecting his mental state.

Seeing as I didn't need it anymore, I took off my helmet. My hair was probably messed up. I pressed down on my hairline as firmly as I could over and over. I thought about giving him a call, but decided not to. Whatever was going on with him, I felt like it'd be best to wait for him to calm down. I'd wait at his place. He'd come back eventually.

I headed for the nearby bus stop, helmet hanging from my hand. Luckily, the next bus arrived at 8:10, and I was right on time. I got on board and took a seat. The bus and Kengo each set off along their different routes.

I figured it had to be stress. He was so busy, day in, day out. It'd be weird if he *wasn't* stressed. I couldn't be mad at him, even though he took off without me. I was worried sick. Was his physical health okay? I felt really bad for him. I just hoped he'd come home when he felt calmer. It was fine. I'd wait for him.

I let the bus ferry me along for a while before getting off at the stop right outside Kengo's apartment building. I hadn't heard anything from him yet.

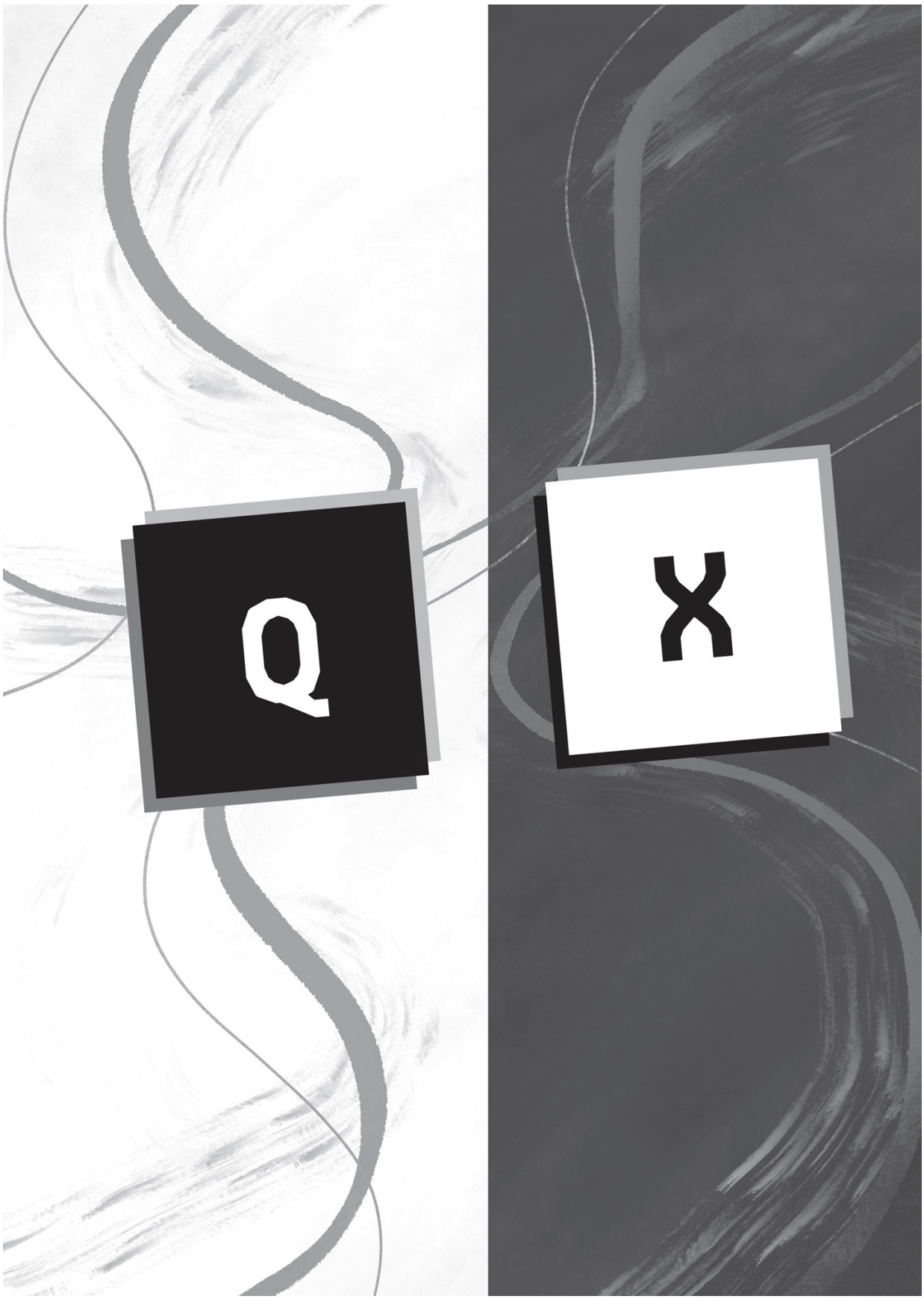
I used the spare key to get in, then pulled off my clothes. The exhaust fumes had made them kinda musty. I opened up the closet and changed into my usual loungewear, which was honestly closer to underwear: a camisole and some shorts.

I switched on the forty-inch TV to wait for Kengo to get in touch. He'd bought it in a flurry of excitement just after moving in. A few minutes passed, and he still hadn't called, and my stomach was starting to hurt a little. It always happened when I got too hungry.

Eating was the last thing I wanted to think about right now, but it wasn't like I could ignore my stomach. I got up and looked inside the kitchen cupboard. There was a whole load of cup noodles in there. I took one out. It was my then-current cup noodle addiction: tom yum flavor. The only way to be rid of my stomachache was to eat something. I was still more worried about whether Kengo would come home safe or not than anything else.

I boiled the water in the electric kettle, poured it into the cup, and waited three minutes. While I waited, I decided to wash the dishes that were left in the sink. Kengo was one of those people who liked to have a proper breakfast, but it looked like he'd been in too much of a hurry that morning to wash everything up. There was the bowl he'd had his egg and rice in, his chopsticks, the small plate he'd had a side dish on, and the wooden bowl for his miso soup. They were all soaking in the washing-up bowl. I washed each one carefully and put them on the dish drainer.

I looked for a fork but couldn't find one, so I wiped down the chopsticks I'd just washed and took them and the cup noodles back to the room. I wasn't gonna wait—I pulled the lid back right away. That was when my eyes ended up glued to the TV I'd left on.


Q
X

QX

SPRING OF MY FRESHMAN YEAR OF HIGH SCHOOL. The red train, second car from the front. Outside the window was a residential area, and it was clear the cherry blossom season was well and truly over. The small hills that rose up here and there among the town above were thick with light green foliage. The fresh leaves were still soft and subtle in their hues. They looked like they'd be pretty tasty if you boiled them up—kinda like broccoli.

I rode this train every day. I tried to wait for the train at the exact same spot on the platform, at the exact same times, whether I was going to school or coming home, so that I could board from the exact same door. It had been more than a month since I started doing it. I *liked* this spot. I never sat down, even if there were seats free. I liked to stay standing in this exact spot.

I boarded at the station closest to the school to go home. The train then stopped at the next station. The doors opened. People got off, and people got on. There was that group of three.

There they are! Wait… Huh?! No way! His hair's blue now?!

The doors closed, the train started up again, and I was a malfunctioning metronome. My heart was pounding nonstop. A fire, a festival, a runaway horse. My ears, nose, and forehead were burning. My whole face was a fireball. They were speaking right next to me.

"So then Mou-chan shows up…"

"Huh? No way."

"Yeah, I call bull."

"No, she was there!"

I couldn’t look, so I was watching secretly from the corner of my eye like I always did. I could see him from where I was standing.

That was when he looked right at me. Our eyes met. I quickly looked away.

Not quickly enough.

“Rara.”

It sounded like he called my name. No. He couldn’t have. I misheard him. He shouldn’t even *know* my name. So why was he walking over to me? He was getting closer. My mind went blank.

“Um, um, uh… Huh? Huh? *Huh?* No, wait… I don’t get—”

“Rara…”

He hugged me out of nowhere. I screamed and dropped my bag. I knew what he was. I *knew*.

“Alien!”

I had to get outta there.

“I miss you…”

I was trapped in the alien’s arms. He was holding me tightly and crying. He was wailing like a kid, his tears soaking my ear.

“I miss you, Rara. Rara, I miss you! I just want to be with you as much as I can! I don’t care anymore… I don’t care… This is fine… I don’t… I don’t care. I just want to be with you.”

I was dreaming. It had to be a dream, because this wasn’t what actually happened. Instead…

X

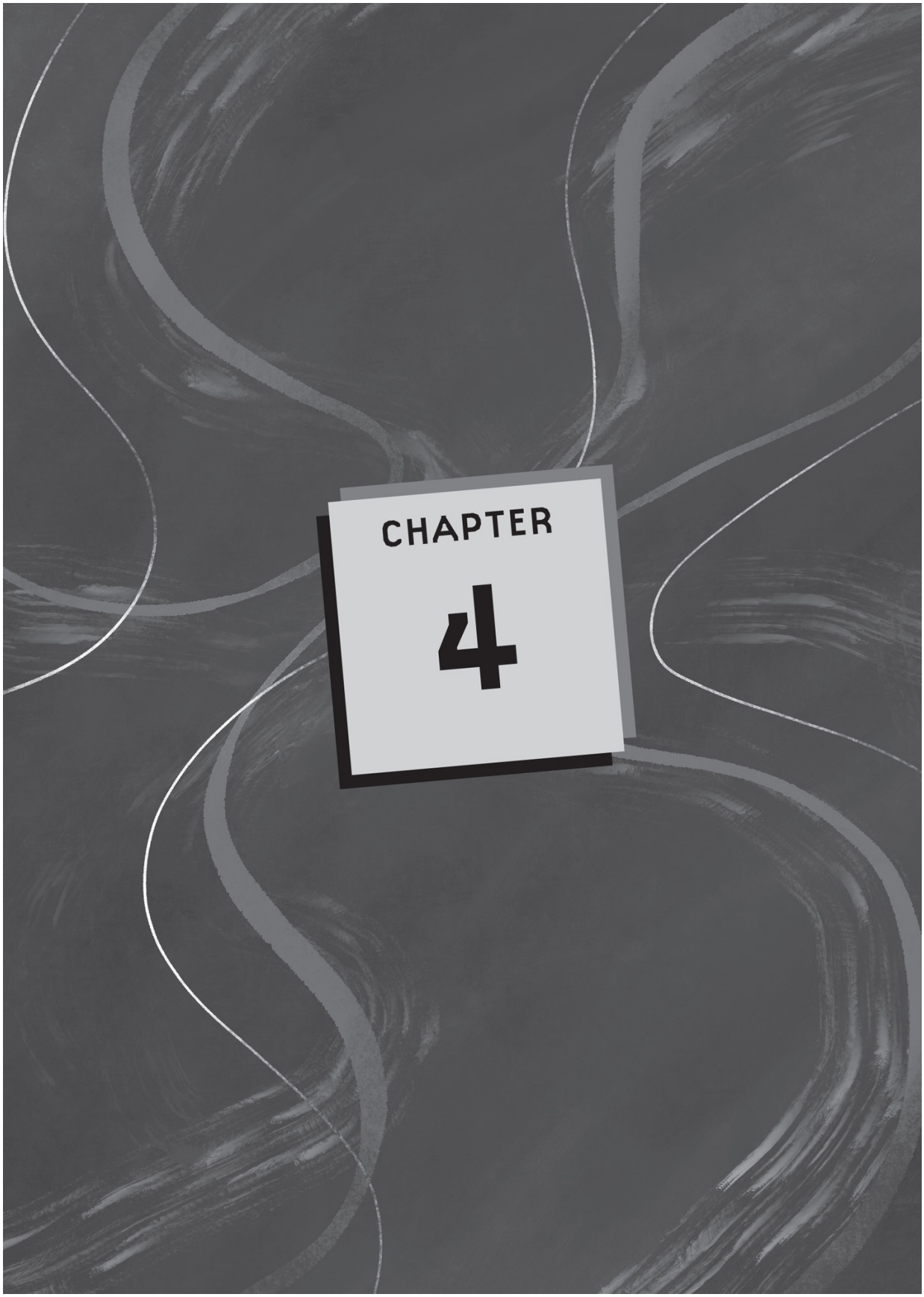
THAT TOOK A WHILE, DIDN'T IT? We went back to the start over and over again, so many times that it felt like it would never end. Then we were off again to head right back where we started. Sometimes things unfolded differently (that's **Q**), but at the end of it all, we always came back to **X**.

Q: When I watched the alien on the TV get hit by that beam and the world got destroyed.

X: When the alien found me collapsed in a pool of blood and took me to a different time.

Thanks for sticking with me on this journey. I really appreciate it. That was the last **X**. I promise. This is it. The new stuff begins now. Well, it'll be new to you, at least. I've seen it before, obviously. I know what happens too. Because I've seen it—all of it. I've been through it all, and now I'm *here*.

Okay, it's time to go beyond **X**.


CHAPTER
4

Chapter 4

"HUH?! WAIT! GO WHERE? GO *WHEN*?!"

"Forget it."

"What?"

"We're done. We're not going anywhere."

It was only moments ago that the alien was telling me to draw *Kobo-chan* and saying I was Toriyama, but now he suddenly let his hands drop from my shoulders. His blue masked face tilted upward like he was zoning out.

What's gotten into him?

"Y'know, it kinda feels like you're messing with me," I said. My brains had been dripping down my face this whole time, like sweat after a workout. Turned out it wasn't as refreshing to wipe *that* off with the back of my hand, though. I didn't even wanna *think* about how I looked right then.

"We're done," the alien said firmly. "It's time to make a different choice."

"You're hitting me outta nowhere with this. I didn't even get what point you were making in the first place, and now…I can't even remember when we stopped talking about manga."

"Just now. Look, we're done. Let's just…go somewhere."

"So we *are* going somewhere!"

"No, I mean somewhere *else*. Remember what you said, Rara? That you've always wanted to ride double on a bike and go have some fun?"

"Um…I guess I did." I laughed nervously, suddenly hit by a huge wave of embarrassment. I put my hands on my cold cheeks

and tilted my head this way and that, since I knew how cute it was. My brains sloshed out and splattered onto the ground. I didn't care though. Not anymore. I couldn't let it get to me every single time. "Yeah… I wanna leave the world behind and see how far the two of us can go. Wait, I sound like a total rebel, right? I'm not, but I've always wanted to do this…so maybe I am a *bit*…"

"Let's do it." The alien nodded, his gaze intense. I was sure he was smiling under his mask. "I'll take you wherever you want, as far as you want. Let's blast off to the very edges of space."

"You mean it?"

"Take a look."

He pointed to where the fallen motorcycle had been. The half-crushed silver CB400. Only…

"You're kidding!"

I couldn't believe it. There was a gorgeous, streamlined motorcycle, glowing with the full spectrum of visible color. It was like nothing I'd ever seen before. The wheels were floating a couple inches off the ground. The paintwork was real stylish—only, it wasn't paint. The vehicle's glossy surface was giving off that colorful sheen naturally. More dazzling than anything else was its transparent, pulsing tank, its contents glowing the color of pure flame. It was waiting for us to get on and start it up. Around it floated several particles of light, each flickering and twisting in the darkness separately from the others.

My mind had frozen. I could only mutter "no way" over and over. I couldn't take my eyes off the motorcycle either. It twinkled against the dark of the night. I'd never seen such an amazing vehicle before, not even in my wildest dreams. It was beyond my powers of imagination. This thing really could take us *anywhere*. I was sure of it. We really could go blasting off to the edges of space. We might even be able to touch the distant galaxy that spun around us like a record. My finger could be its needle. What kind of music would it play? Whatever it was, it would be perfect. It would be

something we could dance to forever, something that would let us forget everything, something that would stop the dawn from ever coming.

"Let's go, Rara." The alien stood up and walked over to the bike. He turned to me and reached out a hand, jerking his chin toward the motorcycle to hurry me up.

"W-wait." I wanted to follow him. I wanted to take his hand. But I couldn't. "I can't walk anymore. I mean, look at my—wah!"

Touching my stomach had made my organs slip out of me like one long worm. I tried desperately to stuff them back in, but it was no use. So I just grabbed them and tried to pull *all* of them out. I regretted it immediately. They wouldn't stop coming. The worm was endless.

"Ugh. These are my intestines, right? What do I do? I know those thick belts are in fashion right now, but there's no way I could pull this off! Let's see… Nope, tying 'em into a bow isn't gonna work either! It's obvious that they're intestines, and there's no hiding that organ-meat color! And wait, what's all this stuff clogging them… Eek!"

"Calm down, Rara."

"Wait… Wait… Eeeew, something's coming out! Ah! Okay, that's it. Look, I wanna go with you, but there's no way this is gonna work out. It was doomed from the start. I should probably stay here on my own…"

"I won't let you. You're going to be fine. I'm…" As calm as could be, he pointed at his face.

Yeah, I know. You're an alien.

"*I'm* the one telling you this. Rara, you trust me, right? It'll all be fine."

"It will? You promise?"

"I mean it. Come on, stand up. Try walking. I want to go with you. There's no point going if you're not coming with me."

Anything the alien said to me was true. The alien was correct. The alien couldn't lie. That meant he was telling the truth. I really was fine.

I started pushing myself up, which was when I realized that he was staring at the center of my chest. He pointed. I looked down to see what the big deal was only to feel a sensation there that I'd totally forgotten about.

"Ah!"

A fist-sized lump was radiating heat in my chest, its pulsing light eventually overflowing from that spot.

"No way…" I looked at the alien. He was looking at me, and he nodded. I was sure he was smiling.

"Yes way. That's you, Rara. That's you right now."

"Wow. Wow! *Wow.* Wooow!"

My chest was glowing with a bright fiery light, just like the motorcycle. There was light. Right here. It was pumping all on its own, sending out heat without the need for gas. My whole body had gone cold, but it warmed up in seconds, the numbing fire spreading to each one of my extremities. I spread out my arms and studied them, which only got me more hyped. I filled my lungs with air and *screamed* into the night like I was at the climax of a rave. Then I laughed at the fact that I was able to scream. I could *see* the glowing energy flowing through my veins. Gold, silver light running under my skin, illuminating my whole body in the process.

I could stand!

I put everything I had into stretching out my body. I spun around, the veil of light chasing me a second later to drape itself around my skin. The thin tulle layers of my mini skirt transformed it into an upside-down flower that floated and fluttered. Sparks flew out in every direction every time it shook. I combed my fingers through my hair, which was now dyed with every color of the rainbow. The wind began to blow, and each settled layer that made

up the silent air of this world came back to life. My long hair billowed out behind me, scattering colorful particles of light. My eyelashes, my pupils, my nails, my lips…all of me was glowing with the rainbow and twinkling in the night. Pulsing.

When I took a step with my heeled mules, my toes lifted up off the ground. One step, then another, and then I was flying like a butterfly. I was weightless. There was no force that could stop me.

"Take me with you! Take me far, far away! As far as you want!" I took the hand reaching out for me. He pulled me closer.

"We'll be together forever, Rara."

The alien hugged me, and then we were spinning, around and around like the leads in a romance film. Like we were lovers finally reuniting after a long period apart. Particles of rainbow light danced around us, illuminating us against the darkness.

"What about helmets? My pink one broke, but one of us can wear the black one, right?"

"Doesn't matter. We don't need helmets."

Still holding my weightless form, the alien walked slowly over the grass toward the motorcycle. He sat me down on the back seat, then turned slightly to look at me. "Sorry to make you wait so long."

I nodded with a smile. I was so happy I thought I'd explode. "It's okay. I always knew you'd come get me. Always."

The engine switched on, and the bike sped away. We shot off at a dizzying pace like fireworks into the night sky. We really were blasting off! The alien couldn't lie.

"This is amazing!" I shouted, wrapping my arms around the alien's torso and pressing my face into his back.

I loved doing that. It meant I couldn't talk, but it made it feel like we really could escape this world together. I watched the scenery fly past us from the corner of my eye. It was like we were living in a world that moved at a totally different speed. The time we spent together like this was more important to me than anything.

We only had a limited amount of it each day, and there was always something hanging over our heads. Every day, there was a ton of stuff we needed to do, and I was always thinking about how far apart we were or how much time we had left together…but right now?

"I wanna be together like this forever! Forever and ever!"

My wish had come true.

The wind was rushing past us, and we were piercing through the clouds. We broke through the boundaries of the sky itself. We left the planet, cast off everything that bound us to the earth, and flew higher, farther. I blinked rapidly as the twinkling stars of the Milky Way rushed up to us, holding tight to the body in front of me. I would never let us be apart again.

The bike continued on, carrying us on its back. It climbed right up toward the zenith above us, leaving a sparkling trail against the black curtain of the night. It was heading right for the other side of space. I knew that we'd melt into oneness the moment we reached it. We'd end up wandering the same space forever, exploring the infinite expanse of time.

The alien turned and put one hand on his mask before tearing it off like he was done with it. Then he smiled at me and raised his arm to throw the mask away.

"Huh?" Surprise had me catching the piece of cloth in one hand. "You need to put this back on!"

"No, I don't. I don't need it anymore."

"But…"

Wait a sec. What did he just say?

"But you're not gonna be able to breathe!" I finished.

My confusion lingered a beat. Speeding through space felt so good that the moment would probably end up left someplace far behind us. I needed to keep it together. I grabbed the sense that something was off by the tail. I thought it over. I *had* to. Why was it

such a big deal if the alien took his mask off? Why would it mean he couldn't breathe? Why did I think that? Why shouldn't he take it off? I was with him.

"I promise you it's fine. I'm with you, Rara. And I've decided that's not changing. So it's fine." His lips stretched into a tender smile. I loved his face. His eyes softened quietly as he dodged around the mask I was trying to put back on him.

"You have to…"

That quiet blue light. The silence that had replaced the sound of his breathing.

"I said it's fine. Okay? I said it, so it's true."

I turned to look at the bike's glittering ruler-straight trail. A long, sparking line. A thread of light.

"No. No, you have to wear it."

"No, I don't."

"You do! You have to breathe! *Breathe!* Stop this!"

We were trying to make this journey together. We were trying to move forward by following this thread. But then it hit me. Or I guess more accurately, I was finally starting to remember something.

This isn't my *thread!*

My thread was way messier. It was a massive knot that couldn't be undone. Even though I saw it all unfold, I'd completely forgotten where it came from and where it was going, where it started and where it finished, as well as the very moment that it had ended. I arched my spine as it all came rushing back, putting some distance between me and the alien. My thread had ended, but his hadn't, and now he was twisting the end of mine around his and forcibly tying them together. They were supposed to go off in different directions. Now that they were joined, did that mean we were heading for the very end of eternity?

"That's right, right?! I mean, that's totally what's going on!"

"Hm?"

"My thread's all messed up. And it's not my fault, it's—"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

I closed my eyes with a sigh. Then I opened them again. That was close. It was a good thing I realized I shouldn't be with him.

"This is wrong! You can't do this! I won't *let* you do this! I won't!"

"Where's this coming from? Look how far we've come."

"Please breathe! I know you can!"

"I can't go back."

"Yes! Yes, you can!"

"I don't want to."

"You *have* to!" I cried, trying to force the mask back on him. "Breathe! Please… Please just breathe!"

He was still glowing blue as, facing me, he fought back against my attempts. He wasn't saying anything anymore. There was a question I had to ask him.

"Can you…"

Can you…

"…breathe here?"

I knew what the alien was going to say. He'd already said it, just not with words. This conversation was going to finish us. I didn't know which route we'd go down after I took the first step, but I knew where we'd end up. That was what my words meant.

"I can breathe."

No, he couldn't. That was the correct answer. He and I were different. As different as it was possible to be. We needed to live in

different worlds. If I could breathe, he couldn't. That was how it had to be. He was nothing but a…

"Liar!"

I pushed him to one side, reached for the handlebars, and grabbed them. I yanked them this way and that, making the motorcycle wobble. I leaned my whole weight to one side.

"What are you doing?! Stop it!"

"You're a liar, and that means you're not an alien! You pretended to be someone I trust so that you could trick me into thinking this is right! I bet that beam never even hit you! Because the alien who came to tell us the world was ending was—"

"Let go! We're gonna fall off!"

I shoved him as hard as I could.

"Rara!" His left hand lost its grip, and he reached it out toward me instead. But he was too slow, and that hand—those fingers—scrabbled fruitlessly through space.

The motorcycle flipped over, and all three of us turned into a single mass of light that started to fall like an arrow.

I knew where we were gonna fall. There was a voice calling: "Over here!" We would crash, destroy and erase everything, and then we'd wake up somewhere else entirely. It wouldn't be **X**; it'd be the continuation of actual reality. We were going to be torn apart.

"That alien was me! And Kengo's human!"

"Goodbye."

I already knew it was going to happen.

Okay, sorry everyone. Can I talk about the knot again? No? C'mon, please? I'll keep it as short and sweet as possible. I need to explain, otherwise you're gonna struggle with what happens next and you're probably not gonna understand what's up with everything

that's just happened. (If you're still not feeling it, just skip forward to the **#** symbol.) So. The knot. My knot was a bit like the ones you can make if you wrap thread around your finger and pull one end through. Only it was huge, more complicated, and definitely not made deliberately. There was a spot on the timeline where past and future got tied together, creating a ton of loops. That was why I kept going back to, and waking up in, the same spot over and over.

Everything was that fake, lying alien's fault. You guys already know *all* about him, right? Hagio Kengo. My first and last lover. I wanted to go eat ramen with him. I accepted the restaurant might be busy. I knew we might have to give up on it. You guys get that too, don't you?

We drove that dull-silver CB400 off into the night, but we stopped when Kengo got a phone call. And you all know what the call was about. The truth was that I chose to go to the school with him. On our way, at 8:36 p.m., something happened. I'm gonna call that something "**P**." I'll explain what I saw in a bit. Anyway, **P** happened, and then Kengo and I were ripped apart into different worlds. My thread ended there. It was simply too short, and I arrived at its end. That was the spot I saw the future from.

Kengo's gonna come look for me.

I saw it happen with my own eyes and clear as day. After we got separated, I made it rain. Kengo came to look for me. Somehow, he was able to step through the boundary between worlds to enter mine. My thread had ended, so my world sat outside the constricts of time, everything completely still. My world had come to a complete stop, and there was no progression of any kind. All that was left was for me to forget who I was and contract within the constantly expanding universe, decay, and then disappear. It was only natural. Every living thing was born with that same end waiting for them in the future.

But Kengo tried to set time into motion again. He invaded my world, shook me awake just as I was about to forget everything, wound time back to a previous spot in my memories, intervened and

changed things, then tried to create a new world with a different ending—a world without **P**. Every time he tried again, a new branch shot off from my thread just before its end. That was how Kengo messed up my thread, turning it into a complex knot that couldn't be undone.

He pretended to be an alien because he thought it'd mean I'd go along with his attempts. He thought it symbolized truth to me—that an alien was a being I'd place absolute trust in. Just like my mom. My mom, the alien. He used my dependency on my mom to stop me from accepting my ending. But no matter how many times he tried, I wasn't ever able to make that different choice. The outcome never changed, because I always followed the same track. **P** was unavoidable. The endless branches just followed the same path before returning to the original start point. They got refastened to the exact same spot. Every single attempt meant restarting from that one point.

But Kengo didn't give up. His attempts numbered in their tens, their hundreds, their thousands, their *millions*… They might as well have been infinite. Until finally, there was a tiny change in just one of them. And that change led to a different event.

On that branch, I rode the 8:10 bus. It meant that the fatal injuries I suffered from **P** were suffered by Kengo instead. My phone rang while I was waiting in his apartment by myself. It was from his dad.

"I've got bad news, Rara-chan."

That was how it started. It almost sounded like he was smiling.

"I don't know what to do, who to contact…but it's bad news. They're saying they can't save Kengo."

That was where my vision of the future ended. I'd seen everything.

It was easy to overlook the smaller stuff when something massive was going on. That's what being human *was*. Kengo was about to spend an eternity making countless repetitive attempts to

change something. That was massive. So there was no way to notice that tiny change or realize how the world was going to transform because of it.

But I *did* notice it. Or I guess I recognized it because I'd seen it. Obviously, I wasn't about to accept it. I *needed* to destroy the world that branch led to. I couldn't let it become reality. I had to jump ahead of Kengo before he realized it and snuff out the possibility before he had a chance to react. It didn't matter what I had to do to achieve it.

I had to signal to the *me* who was waiting in his apartment that the world she was in wasn't real—that it was simply a wayward branch of a point in the past. That she was dreaming. I needed to get her to wake up. But how could I get her to believe me? She needed to be convinced that I was telling the truth, that I could see into the future, and that I was contacting her, in that room, from someplace beyond the skies.

Ah. *Ah!* Ah…

Alien!

It was the exact same idea that Kengo was gonna have, but I knew it would work this time. The girl waiting in his apartment was still me. If an alien gave her a speech, she'd believe everything it said. I got up and started walking. I would be the alien. I *had* to be the alien. I might've already been one, actually. I might've been one for a long time.

This was my world, so I could be whatever I wanted. I could do whatever I wanted. I could become an alien and show up on Kengo's TV. I didn't know what I'd look like to the me who was sitting there, but she should be able to recognize me as an alien, because I was one. An alien was on TV. That was what the me in the other world would think.

"To every human who is watching: Thank you for your patience."

She would be able to hear me.

"I hope you'll remain calm and listen. The world's end is approaching. We know because we aliens possess technology that can predict the future."

Kengo was about to vanish from this world. That would be its end. This branch was heading for the end of his world.

"This is not a joke. This world is about to end very soon."

I was putting everything I had into reaching the version of me who was sitting in front of the screen.

*The world can't end like this. This branch isn't a part of the real world. The world you think you live in is nothing but a dream. Wake up. Think back. You exist, and that means **P**'s already happened. Kengo wouldn't have come looking for me if it hadn't. The world wouldn't have branched off. But it has, and so **P**'s happened. It's already passed. I saw a vision, a vision of everything. **P** is real, and you've gone through it. All you have to do is remember. What did I see? What did I hear? What did I think? What did I shout?*

"I want humanity to stop the world from ending. That's why I'm here. I implore you to keep your composure, but please believe me that everything I am saying is true. There *is* a way to avoid the end, but you cannot continue on this path. Watch carefully and think back. This is a drea—"

There was something coming down from beyond the clouds. Of course I knew what it was already; I was an alien. That arrow would fall down from above, destroy this world, and link my alternate self's present moment back to that knot—back to that moment that would become **X**, when she would wake up.

I looked up and cried, "Over here!"

Land right here. Destroy this dream. Erase it. Wake up…

I could no longer speak as I was caught in that blinding white light. A second was all it took for everything to burst apart. The body

I recognized as my own—the body-shaped *something*—was torn to shreds by the impact and vanished.

The end of this world had been foretold by a real alien that was struck by a real beam, leaving it to disappear as nothing more than a dream.

You'll wake up in five seconds. Ready? Five seconds. Four. Three.

I waited for myself to wake up as I lost everything. She was collapsed in a pool of blood. She was about to go on a long, long journey. I knew because I'd seen it all in my vision. I would become a continuation of her, and she would become a continuation of me. We would blink, and the events of our future would become the events of our past. Meanwhile, we would meet Kengo, fall in love with him, and fight with him, over and over and over again. We would live over again a near-infinite amount of times. Kengo had made a mess of our knot, and there was no untying it.

You believed me, didn't you? I'm glad. I really am. It meant we could be together. Can you hear me? You're there, right? Don't panic. Just open your eyes…

Two. A deep breath. And then to the beginning of **X**.

Of course, there was no need to go back. I meant it when I said this was the end. I was right, and I couldn't lie. I just wanted to let you all know what I've been through to get here. So, goodbye. Here's your **#** symbol.

I guess I'll go back a bit now and start from **P**. Do you remember what **P** is? It's what happened at 8:36 p.m., after we drove off into the night. After **P** comes everything that follows the "goodbye."

***

I glanced at my watch. It was 8:36 p.m. It must have been a really frantic job if he had to work this late. When I was in

elementary school, I never noticed how exhausted or stressed my teachers were. I was so busy learning one new thing after another that the time just flew by. Kengo had ventured back into the eye of that hectic storm, only this time, he was an adult.

The motorcycle continued on its way to the school, passing by a towering wall of concrete on its right. It took a loose turn, winding its way up around a reinforced mountain. I shifted my weight as it tilted. Kengo was right when he told me that it was easy as long as you kept a proper eye on the direction the bike was heading in.

I didn't know how long I'd be waiting after we arrived at the school, but the later it got, the less crowded the ramen place should be. Or would it get more crowded?

I dunno… Eh, I guess I could always just make dinner. If *Kengo's got ingredients, that is… If not, we'll have to go to the supermarket…*

I tried to visualize what would happen if I ended up having to cook. It'd have to look good, because I wanted to impress him. I also wanted it to be filling and have plenty of veg. *And* it should be something I hadn't made before.

What should I fix for us?

Just then, the headlights of an approaching car in the opposite lane started flickering. And then swaying from side to side. The vehicle swerved and then vanished from view. I was trying to figure out what had happened when something sent us flying from behind. My neck snapped forward as my whole body was shoved into Kengo's back. My chest and stomach were forcibly crushed between him and the bike. I didn't know what had happened. I thought I heard brakes. Then there was this huge sound, and Kengo and I were pushed forward together before bouncing back from the recoil. The front tire was dodging this way and that. The car's headlights came at us at an angle and crashed into us, flinging us off to one side.

I let go.

All sound stopped. Even my scream was absorbed by something. As Kengo was thrown into the air, I saw his body twist so he could look at me. Reach out for me. Everything was happening in this creepy slow motion. Kengo's hand was too far away to even touch me, and we ended up separated. His body still bent, he drew an angled arc through the air as he vanished.

I fell along with the bike, hitting my head several times, the impacts making my vision splinter. Kengo was still airborne. His limbs were making sweeping movements like he was trying to swim. I'd fallen sideways onto the road and was sliding along it with the bike still between my legs. There were these big black lumps raining down on me from the sky. But I couldn't hear anything, and soon I couldn't see anything either. I couldn't even tell if my eyes were open or not.

I couldn't feel anything. I didn't know how much time was passing.

"No…"

I was pretty sure I'd said that.

"No… No, no! There's no way this is happening!"

I could hear my own voice with my deaf ears. I could see what I was looking at with my blind eyes. I could feel a trembling fear with my numbed heart.

Kengo had collapsed on his back, but no one had noticed he was there yet because of the black stuff on him: the dirt, the mud, and the night's darkness. There wasn't a single sound coming from underneath his full-face helmet. He was silent and peaceful. The chest buried under all the sediment wasn't moving.

"No! Please…someone!" I was crying out with everything I had, but I didn't even know if anyone would hear me.

There were tons of cars stopped on the road, all facing random directions. Some of them were crushed after having collided with each other or the guardrail. Horns were blaring and making the

evening air vibrate. There were so many people illuminated by dazzling lights. Lumps of concrete and debris that had peeled away from the sloping mountainside were strewn across the road, along with the stones and rocks that had rained down on us from above. Trees that had been knocked down. Kengo was underneath it all, unmoving.

"Please, someone! Save him! He's right there! Someone, *anyone*, find him! He's gonna die otherwise! There's no way he's not hurt! Someone help him, *please*! Hurry!" My tearful cries echoed through the night sky. "Someone save him! 'Cause I can't!"

I couldn't do anything anymore. It was all over the second something sent us flying from behind. A rock fell from the crumbling slope and crushed me, shattering my helmet and cutting into the back half of my skull.

Kengo.

"Please! Someone! No…you can't die! Hang in there!"

The earth was scraped away, allowing the light to reach Kengo's body. A bunch of people ran over to him and hooked him up to a machine. They brought a stretcher right up to him and loaded him onto it. His chest still wasn't moving.

"Breathe!"

I was still crying out in a voice that no one could hear as my destroyed body was put into a bag. The zipper was pulled up. This wasn't a dream. My thread was at its end. The image of that single moment of stillness remained. The fallen bike, the split helmet, and my crushed, bloody body beside them. My eyes were open.

My vision of the future exploded into life.

***

I woke up alone and sat up. I looked at my hands, my body, and lost hope.

Thought so…

Even though I'd been glowing so brilliantly before, my body had now turned into an invisible nothingness. I wasn't here anymore. My physical form didn't exist.

Obviously.

After falling from the sparkling stars, I'd come back to where I was crushed like a piece of roadkill. There was no colorful, pulsing motorcycle here. The crash site was sealed off, now populated by roving heavy machinery. Reality was black and brown and dull. I slipped past the tape and started walking down the road.

I trudged along in search of Kengo, invisible to everyone else. I was heading for the hospital the ambulance rushed him to after he was loaded onto the stretcher. I went through the entrance and hung around the lobby, but obviously no one was gonna tell me which floor he was on. I was invisible. I climbed the stairs, turned the hallways, and went through a ton of doors, all to find Kengo.

And eventually, I did.

The room was full of machines, and there were a surprising amount of people gathered around him. They were practically shouting at each other, hurriedly swapping out tools and touching his open wounds. He was lying on his back with a light-blue cloth hanging down over him like a tent. There was a hole in his stomach that everyone was sticking their hands into. I was desperate to see his face, so I ducked under the cloth. The bright lights of the operating room shone through it, making him glow blue.

His eyes were closed. There was an oxygen mask on his dirty face that was connected to a tank via a tube. He was breathing, but it was clearly labored. Kengo had come to the end of his long journey with me and arrived here. He was in the form of my true love, and he was breathing.

Meeting him over and over again made me so happy. I was able to travel through a dream that lasted millions and millions of years with him. Nothing could have made me happier. But it couldn't

last. I needed to end it at any cost because I wanted to save Kengo. I wondered if he'd understand.

Are you still mad? Please don't be. I love you.

I couldn't touch him even if I reached out for him, so I slowly leaned forward and let my body overlap with his glowing blue form. The parts where we touched were the first parts of me to start gradually melting away. The boundaries that separated me from the world and kept me as me were vanishing.

Was this how Kengo had reached into me too? Did he leave his body to make contact with me? Lose himself to come look for me? I still remembered how gentle his fingers were. He used them to stroke my cheeks and push back my hair. It wouldn't be long before I forgot all about how gentle he was. It was just how things go.

On the plus side, I wouldn't have to worry about the flow of time anymore. Before I could forget everything, and as I continued to melt and disappear into Kengo, I decided when and where I'd wake up next. I already had perfect knowledge of the future.

Once the summer's over, you're gonna go back to your apartment. My mom and dad are gonna come visit all the time. Sometimes Mom'll come by herself. She'll still be looking for me, and she's going to be desperately trying to follow the traces of me that exist in you. Dad's going to stay mentally strong to protect her, but she won't be able to do the same. She'll keep searching for me till she reaches the very end of her own thread. Time will keep passing until she makes it to the point where it stops, and that's where she'll finally find me. And then we'll wait together for Dad, who we love with all our hearts.

You're going to meet so many people who will love you. One of them—someone very special—is going to walk with you into your future. She'll stay right there by your side as you unite and become a family, as you grow older, and as you start needing a cane to walk. You'll slowly walk up that slope together, listening to the waves. The wind that makes her long skirt flutter will bring the slight scent of

rain with it. You'll look up at the sky and remember falling with Rara, the alien, from beyond those clouds. You'll remember the long, long dream you shared with her. You've told the story over and over, but she'll patiently listen to you tell it again. You'll be happier than you've ever been, there with the woman you love. You'll be fine. I mean that. I'm not lying. I already know everything. I've known for a long time. The rain will fall out of happiness for your joy. That's what you'll smell.

But none of this has happened to you yet. You're still standing at the end of summer. Rara isn't there anymore. You've only just been discharged and gone back to your apartment. You turned on the TV to see an alien. It was a relay broadcast from who-knows-where. And you listened to me telling you all of this. I'm sorry it got so wordy. I'm done now. Thank you again. I was always told that I was bad at keeping calm. I guess it was true. My story jumped all over the place. It was hard to follow, right?

Wait, I meant to welcome you back, but I totally forgot and started blabbing. But don't worry, I'm not gonna start all over just 'cause of that. I mean, I already got through everything. So I'm gonna say it now. I'm gonna wave and be nice and loud so everyone can hear.

"Welcome back!"

There are lots and lots of you who, on the same day, opened the door and walked through it into this room at the exact same moment, sitting down in the exact same pose. You're all *here*. You're all listening to me speak to you through the TV. You hear that? Another one of you was born every loop. There were tens, hundreds, thousands, *millions* of you—and you've all come back to the exact same spot. You've all come back *here*. You're all making the same face, crying the same tears, and calling out for the same alien with the same voice.

This is how it's meant to be. I couldn't be happier knowing that all of you are right here. See how wide my smile is? You've got a long future ahead of you. All of you.

"D'ya think you're dreaming 'cause there's an alien on TV? This *is* a dream, actually, but your world isn't gonna end when you wake up. Everything's gonna carry on from where it left off today, from when you came back to your room without me. You'll be at tomorrow morning. But you'll be fine. I said it, so it's true. The world isn't going to end, and you're going to be fine. You'll wake up in five seconds. Ready? Five seconds. Four. Three. Can you hear me? You're there, right? Don't panic. Just open your eyes… Two."

Take a deep breath.

About the Author

Yuyuko Takemiya is a writer of light novels, novels, games, and manga. She debuted in September 2004 with her light novel series *Watashitachi no Tamurakun*, and is best known for *Toradora!*, also available from Seven Seas in light novel and manga form.

About the Artist

Tsubasa Yamaguchi is an award-winning manga artist and graduate of Tokyo University of the Arts. After publishing two one-shots in *Good! Afternoon*, she went on to write two series, *She and Her Cat* and *Blue Period*. *Blue Period* won the Manga Taisho and the Kodansha Manga Award, was nominated for the Tezuka Osamu Cultural Prize, and received an anime adaptation in 2021.



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