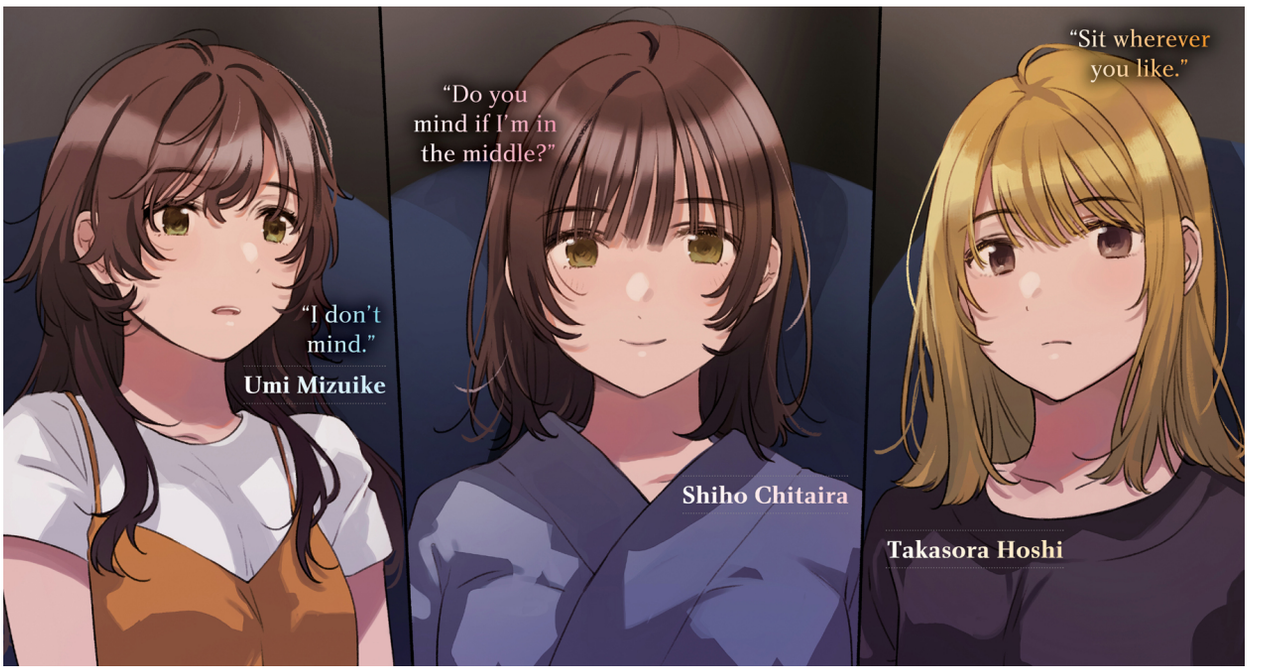
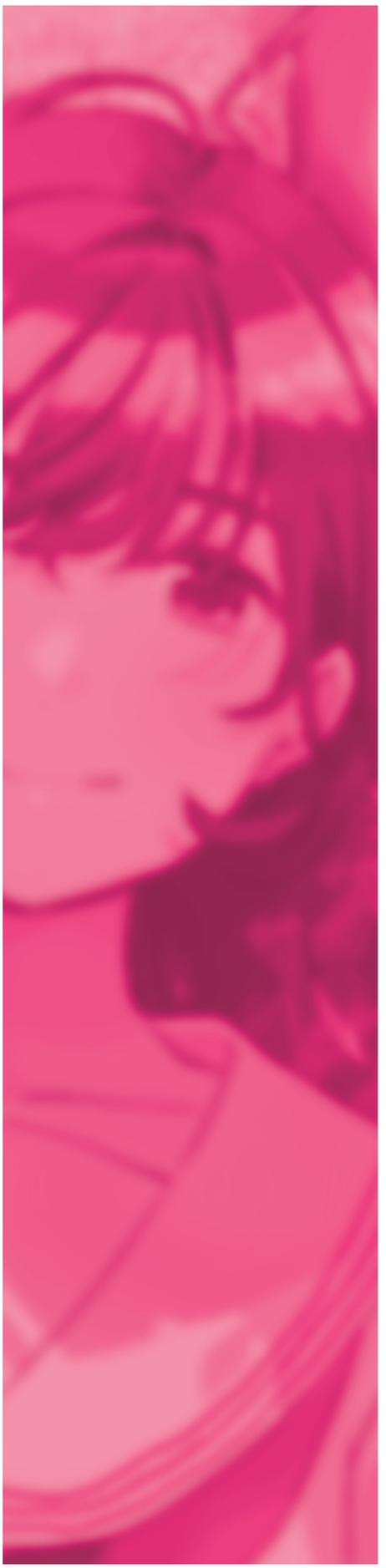

Hitoma Iruma
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3
FINAL
My First Love's Kiss


Hitoma Iruma
Illustration by Fly
3
My First Love's Kiss


"Do you have apple juice?"
"It's sweet."
"Okay, no. I love it."
"I'll have…iced coffee, please."
"…So you like apple juice?"
"…Cool."


"I don't mind."
Umi Mizuike
"Do you mind if I'm in the middle?"
Shiho Chitaira
"Sit wherever you like."
Takasora Hoshi



[c o n t e n t s]

Dreaming with Eyes Open

Feeling Alive

Storm-Raising Shiho Chitaira

Wish Upon a Star

Distant Stars

Endless Blue


My First Love's Kiss
3
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YEN ON
NEW YORK

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My First Love's Kiss, Vol. 3

Hitoma Iruma

Translation by Kiki Piatkowska
Cover art by Fly

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Dreaming with Eyes Open

I honestly hadn't seen that coming. This whole affair had been nuts, though, so maybe this twisted outcome was the most fitting, all things considered. I guess I should be happy since it'd brought about the result I'd been hoping for.

The summer passed, and the cicadas disappeared, but a summery smell still lingered in our small apartment—the scent of Umi Mizuike. It had become so settled in my room that at times I didn't even register it. I was becoming desensitized, which made me a little sad.

That aside, time seemed to flow differently in the mornings. There never seemed to be enough of it, as if I'd sliced the available amount of time too thinly, carelessly discarding the bits I'd cut off. But although I was busy in the morning, another creature in my room still had her face pressed against her pillow, hair spread around.

As I'd learned, Umi didn't get up on weekday mornings unless someone made her.

"Wake up," I said, shaking her shoulder.

No longer was she the vigilant, evasive creature she'd been when I'd first met her. Now I could shake her delicate body and she'd just mutter sleepily, not bothering to open her eyes. Maybe that's how it was having a younger sister. Not only had she stopped being wary of me, she'd become perfectly habituated.

Better to think more about that later in the classroom, when I had the time.

"Okay, then."

Unable to wake her up normally, I grabbed her by the ankles and dragged her out of the room, still wrapped in the blanket. The blanket got pulled off when it caught on the doorway, and Umi's head landed on the living room floor awkwardly, jaw first.

"Nguh!"

“Oh, sorry.”

I hadn’t been trying to hurt her, but at least she was awake now. She pressed her hands to her jaw and rolled over before trying to get up, bent backward with her feet and head against the floor. As if there were no easier way to get up. Then she propped herself up with her hands, inadvertently trapping her long hair underneath her. As a result, she lost her balance and fell back down.

“Owww!”

She hurriedly took her hands off her hair, rolling to the side in another quick burst of motion. She clutched her head, which hurt from pulling her own hair, and finally rolled into a sitting position.

“That was your own fault,” I told her.

“Maybe it’s time I cut it…”

She ran her fingers through her hair, which was looking even more unruly than usual since she’d been lying on the bed.

“Morning,” I said.

“Mornin’…,” Umi replied weakly. She looked up at me groggily.

“What? Sorry about your chin, but that was an accident.”

“Can you cut my hair?”

“Who, me?”

“It gets in the way.” She brushed her hair off her shoulders. “I only want it shorter. No need to go to a salon for that. You can do it just as well.”

“No, I totally can’t. It’s going to be a mess. Hairdressers actually know what they’re doing.”

“Really?”

Somehow, she didn’t seem to believe me. I swear, living with this girl meant teaching her about everything. On the other hand, I was learning a lot from her, too. Never a dull moment with her around.

“We can talk on the way to school.”

Instead of showing her the time, I stomped my feet to convey the urgency. I extended my hand to help her stand up.

Umi looked from my combed hair to my clothes, finally stopping her gaze at my fingers.

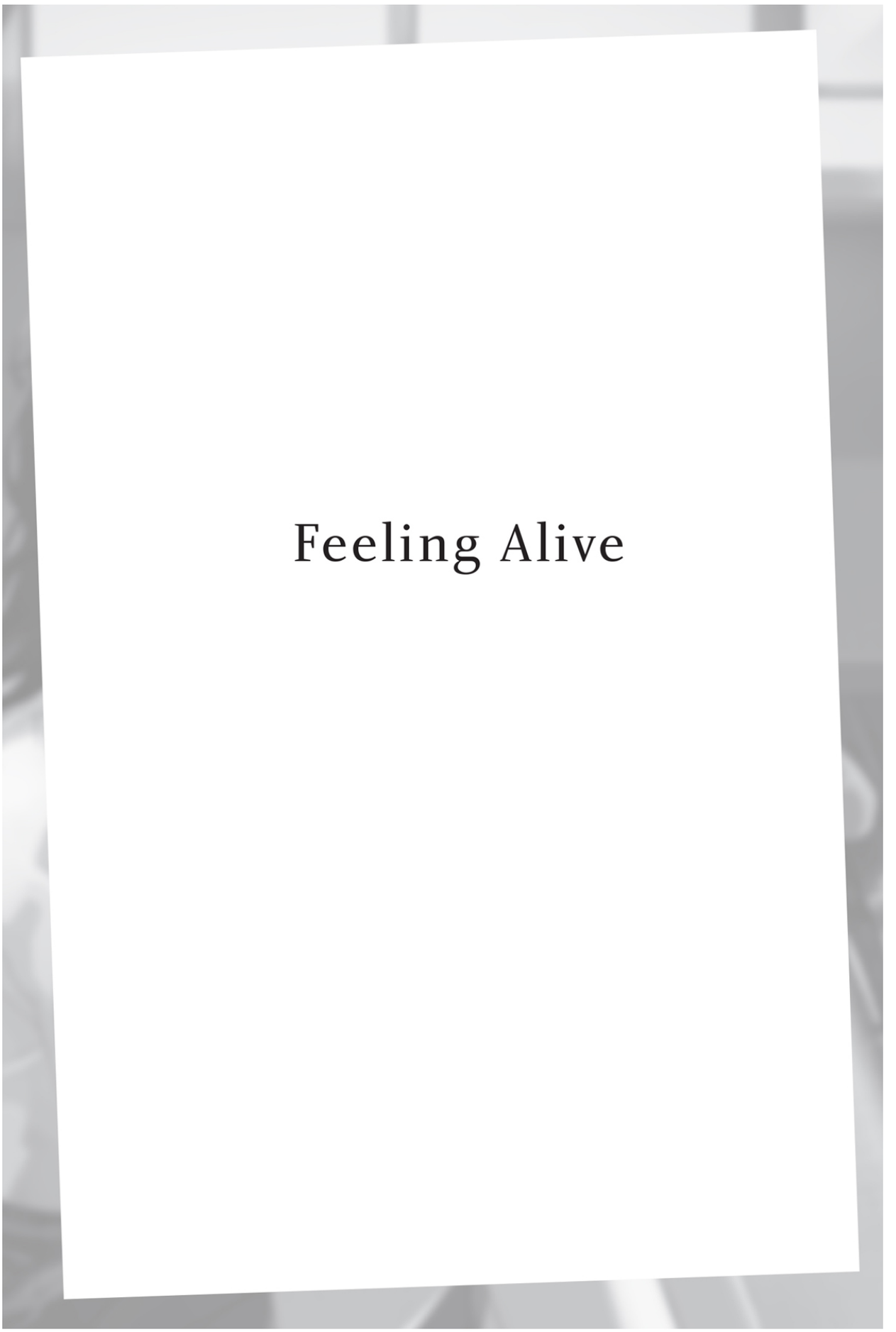
“Okay.”

She took my hand compliantly and lightly jumped to her feet.

As she stood next to me, her scent wafted up past my shoulders. I couldn’t describe it. It wasn’t exactly flowery. What was it?

Umi turned on her heel like a dancer, let go of my hand, and scuttled away. A slight feeling of loss crept into my heart when she took her hand away. As I watched her busily running around getting ready, other feelings began to rise in my chest. I closed my fist, as if I could hold on to the sensation of Umi’s hand.

I never would have guessed things would turn out this way. It was a dream, something unimaginable that couldn’t have happened. Something that wouldn’t have happened even if it *were* imaginable. An impossibility.



Feeling Alive

I was only four years old when my mother and I had to leave the big house. It wasn't my mother's fault—I could read it in the face of the tall grown-ups that my father had made some kind of big mistake. With the maid. He'd caused a problem that made my mother furious, and she'd declared she could no longer bear to live under the same roof as him. She decided to leave and take me with her. In retrospect, my mother probably did it for my sake.

The maid left the house at the same time as us, and my mother did not hesitate to kick her in the ass.

The maid was as delicate as tissue paper or gauze, gossamery and fragile. Her face, framed by long hair, had a dainty, beautiful profile.

The only reason that kick didn't knock her over was because she caught herself on the tall fence. My mother's glare at the maid was murderous, and I thought she might kick her to death. But she didn't.

The maid was only smiling gently at us. She turned to me.

"Bye-bye, Shiho."

I waved back at her, because even though I knew she'd done something bad, she had been my playmate for many years.

The maid was waving happily as you would to a friend.

My mother's relatives let us stay at their house until my mother found a new job. To be precise, it wasn't really a house, but a large, traditional Japanese inn that was even bigger than where we'd lived before. It was a good environment, I thought, but we stayed there for only three months. As a side note, those relatives' last name starts with "ki." For my alias, I took "Chi" from "Chitaira" and added my relatives' "ki" to it. I spelled it with the characters from my mother's maiden name.

Once my mother found employment, the two of us moved into

a small apartment. The fire extinguisher between our door and the neighbor's was so rusty, it would probably be completely useless in case of an emergency—and that should tell you the state the entire apartment building was in. Because I'd grown up in a large residence, the move to an apartment that would have comfortably fit inside a Chitaira bathroom was a huge shock to me.

To compare, it was barely bigger than Takasora's home, I would say.

In any case, my mother had grown up in a similar place, so she didn't seem bothered by our new abode. As for me, I remember hating the cold winter, but I spent most of the time playing outside in the park, so I didn't care that our home was so small. Maybe I found it easier to accept because I loved my mother more than my father.

But only six months later, I was returned to the big house. My mother dumped me with my father.

"I'm sorry. I do love Shiho, but there's this one thing about her I just can't stand," she explained bluntly, not a hint of a guilty conscience in her voice. "Her eyes remind me of her father, and I don't want anything to make me think of him."

With that, she turned on her heel and left me in the Chitairas' house, discarding me.

All because of my eyes?

Rather than watch my mother walk away, I turned to look at my father. Despite his embittered expression, his eyes—the exact same color as mine—had a slight sparkle to them.

Everyone in the Chitaira family had eyes of that particular color—hazel. It was in our genes, apparently, although nobody had any idea who we got it from. Because of my hazel eyes, my mother had rejected me.

By the time I was returned to the Chitaira family, my father had lost his standing, and consequently, the treatment I received was different from before. Daddy's princess, his pretty little butterfly, had been kicked back into the house like a soccer ball. My parents' problems had affected other family members, too, and their children, sensing the grown-ups' discontent, began to bully me with unrestrained cruelty. They knew nobody would defend me, and they would sometimes twist my arms or legs so

hard, I wondered if they wanted to rip them off my body. I understood then why my mother had taken me with her when she'd left my father. But in the end, she had abandoned me to those people.

Looking back, I was lucky to get out of there before it was too late. I really had the luck of the devil to make it out with all my limbs intact.

I used my head to earn a safe space for me to live in. My forehead injury was much worse than I imagined, and I ended up bedridden with a fever for about a week, perilously near death. I'd bashed my head harder than I should've, which probably affected my mental capacities at the time, too.

While I was lying in bed, waves of heat would come and go. Each surge made my eyes burn inside my skull, and sweat would pour out along my hairline. My breathing would stop, and I'd try again and again to inhale. After several failures and mounting desperation, I would finally get a little air.

My mother was gone from my life. My grandfather was true to his word. Neither he nor my grandmother came to comfort me, but they did provide me with a spacious room and a large futon. I couldn't move—it was as if my limbs were dissolving into boiling hot water—but I desperately searched for light.

The other side of the sliding shoji panels was bright. I remembered thinking I'd seen light before hitting my head against the wall, too. Looking at it made my eyes throb with pain, and I could only vaguely make out what I was seeing, but the pain also made what I was sensing feel real, and I wasn't yet feeling too nauseous from it. A thought occurred to me—being alive was being able to feel things in your body.

When the hot waves passed, I slid the shoji open with my own two hands. What awaited me on the other side wasn't light, nor any kind of special truth, but simply a well-maintained garden.

Storm-Raising
Shiho Chitaira

“Umi, I’m your half sister, Shiho Chitaira,” Ms. Chitaira announced cheerily with two thumbs up.

Mizuike’s blithe mom made as if to copy her, but sudden self-realization stopped her with her hand half raised, thumb sticking out as if she were about to have a thumb war with someone. Attempting not to look silly—although it was already too late, in my opinion—she actually started thumb wrestling my mom. The frantic evasive movements of Ms. Mizuike’s thumb, which looked like a thin, white stick, reminded me of feeding the pigeons for some reason.

“Thank you for letting my Umi-Umi-Umi stay at your place!”

Ms. Chitaira giggled and took an exaggerated bow. I wasn’t sure if she was thanking me or my mom or what, and it kind of grated on my nerves how she called Mizuike “her Umi.” I had no idea anymore what this woman was supposed to be to any of us.

The bigger problem at the moment had to do with the other thing she mentioned—my place. After the meeting outside the station, it was somehow decided we’d all go to my apartment. Why couldn’t it have been somewhere else? Then again, Ms. Mizuike didn’t have a house of her own to invite people to, so my home was probably the only option left for her.

We had too many people to cool everyone down with just one rotating fan, so for this special event, my mom turned on the air-conditioning. It was rattling at regular intervals, as if the mechanism was catching on something. I’d cleaned the filter recently, but to me, the air coming out of the AC stank of mold. I could feel the sound of the cicadas chirping outside against my neck.

Ms. Chitaira had revealed herself, and I was faced with the reality of her sitting in a corner of my living room. The smell of her perfume filled up the cramped space, rising from her like the

fragrance of a flower in full bloom.

It was now a straight shot between my home and hell.

“What a plot twist,” my mom commented.

I couldn’t agree more. She was still thumb wrestling Ms. Mizuike, who had been quietly listening and staying uninvolved.

“A beauty in a kimono, in this small room.”

“I’m sorry. I’ll leave as soon as we’re finished talking.”

We’d never had as many as five people at once in our living room, and it did feel really cramped. You couldn’t help being very aware of other people’s elbows. Next to me was Mizuike, who’d walked back from the station dragging her feet. I imagined if I shook her by the shoulder, she’d make a rattling sound like she was empty inside. The revelation that she had an older sister was a bolt from the blue for her, and given the complexities of the circumstances, I didn’t blame her for not being able to process it all right away.

“How long have you known?” Mizuike asked, her gaze and voice drifting upward as if they were climbing the lamp string.

“How long? Hmm… Since I met you.”

Ms. Chitaira finally put her thumbs down. Her reply was as relaxed as ever, her smile as cool as an unseasonal frosting of snow. Her foreign eyes seemed to see through everything.

They were the same color as Mizuike’s. That was why I’d had this strange feeling that I’d met her before.

“I chatted you up outside the station by chance, but one look at your face was enough to tell me who you were. A girl I hadn’t met before with those eyes? I could think of only one person. I thought about what I should do, and the obvious conclusion was that I should treat my little sister with love, you know?”

She looked at me as if she wanted me to agree. I averted her gaze without a word.

A sister. The word came out of Ms. Chitaira’s mouth so easily, as if it didn’t signify a very important connection. I became anxious. What if I suddenly found out I had a sister, too? What if a relative I didn’t know about turned up out of the blue?

I glanced over at my mom. She was still thumb wrestling with Ms. Mizuike.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Um, because you never asked?”

Judging from the look on her face, Ms. Chitaira had kept her knowledge secret purely for fun. Was Mizuike in anguish because she'd unknowingly fallen in love with her sister, or because she'd discovered she was related to someone from a completely different world? Or maybe she wasn't in anguish at all? Her jaw was slack, elongating her face in an expression that was free of emotion. Her naturally fair skin had taken on an even paler hue as if she were fading away, a sketch losing its outline.

This was the younger sister of that awful woman. Thanks to the new connections between them, the dots painted a picture that finally made sense to me—I had been at the mercy of these two sisters. The thought brought me some relief. I wasn't swaying between two completely different people; I had a well-defined type… Ugh, what was I saying?

A blameless little sister and a rotten big sister. I had sensed that the latter had a twisted personality, a combination of destructive and kind tendencies, but I'd never guessed she would subject her own little sister to it as well. Was she giving Mizuike money out of sisterly love, to support her financially? It blew my mind to imagine that might've been what their arrangement was about… Seriously, you'd have to be nuts to think that way.

"Well, I've run out of things to talk about…"

Ms. Chitaira pinched her fingers like crab pincers, gazing around the room looking somewhat lost. But why? Of all of us, she had the fewest reasons to feel lost. And she was saying she had nothing else to talk about? After dropping that bombshell on us? No, she definitely had more explaining to do, about…what, exactly? There was something left unsaid, no? No…? Wait a second, was that really it…? She'd revealed she was Mizuike's sister and told us about her past, but there still was an elephant in the room. Ms. Chitaira had talked about the past and the present, but not about the future.

What was she planning on doing now? It was a pretty damn important thing to know, but she hadn't said a word about it.

If they're sisters, does that mean…they'll move in together? Here? No, no way. Will they go and live together in the Chitairas' residence, then? Or maybe Ms. Chitaira will leave without Mizuike and go back where she came from as if nothing has changed…?

"I want to talk to you alone…," said Mizuike, clinging

desperately to her…her sister.

“Sure.”

Ms. Chitaira stood up with Mizuike still clinging to her arm, shot me one glance, and walked out of my apartment with her sister. Her eyes were brimming with the same amused delight and affection she had shown me when we had been meeting alone.

The lingering floral scent turned the pages of my memories starring Ms. Chitaira, as if they were a photo album. Jealousy, regret, and passion rose like flames in my heart.

Now that only three people were left in the room, it was as though the pressure had dropped; the tension collapsed, and I had more space to be in again. But I couldn’t relax—as the cool air-conditioned air found its way toward me, so did a sense of helplessness.

“If she’s Umi’s sister, what does that make her to you, Izumi?”

“A friend? We used to play together all the time.”

“I don’t think you can write it off as that…”

While the moms talked in the background, my consciousness was like a balloon let loose. I tried to catch its trailing string.

What was going on this summer? Hell was washing toward me like a wave, lapping at my legs all the way to my knees. The change from my uneventful life was so stark, I couldn’t lift my head or even close my eyes. I had no idea what might happen next. What I had established that day was that the Chitaira woman was the sort of pervert to have her way with a girl despite knowing they were sisters. And I and that woman had been…

“…”

I was lost, not knowing where to look as the thoughts flitted through my mind. I was a lost child whose mother wouldn’t hold her hand because she was already holding another woman’s.

I couldn’t look around, because that would attract hostility. I thought the only way to survive was to keep my head down and stare at the ground. But the world was full of things to see, and I couldn’t fake it that I was blind to them all. Then I met someone who would take my hand and lead me wherever I wanted. I

didn't care if fate had brought us together or if she'd picked me out on purpose. She was the one who'd made me look up at the world, and she was next to me. I was always edgy around her, but since she'd told me who she was, I felt even more nervous.

"What should I call you?"

I was crouching with my back to the wall of the apartment building while…this person…stood with her arms folded, squinting up at the sky. I followed her eyes and saw birds in the distance, their wings looking sharp, as if they were going to slice through the clouds.

"Call me Chiki, Shiho, or Sis. Whatever you like."

Her expression was as clear as a cloudless sky reaching from horizon to horizon. Her lips were softly stretched in an affectionate smile, her cheeks having some childlike charm in them—she looked the same as always. What would have to happen to make her change?

Chiki… Shiho… Or…

My mouth hung open so long, the tip of my tongue dried up. The summer heat was bearing down on me, and my skin was starting to feel too hot. That was how long it took for me to get a word out.

"Sis…"

"Yes, Umi?"

I walked my fingers across the floor toward the wall.

"Sis…?"

"That's me."

"Sis…"

"I'm right here."

She stooped down to get closer to me. My sister was smiling at me warmly.

My *sister*…? Every time I said the word, a strange feeling came over me. Doubts came over me, too. Inside my chest, emotions were spinning like a whirlpool. I felt as though I were watching a red fruit burst open in front of my eyes, with something about to jump out from the inside. I was sweating, but not from the heat.

"Sister…"

"Mm-hmm."

My heart was being peeled and its core exposed; I felt helplessly vulnerable while all around me was warmth. The

contradiction between the warmth and the anxiety hiding in it made me so uncomfortable, my hair stood on end.

I looked up and met my sister's accepting smile.

"What does it mean, that you're my sister?"

My inane question was quickly followed by an answer.

"It means exactly what you're feeling right now."

I looked at her. What I was feeling toward her right now was the kind of unease you feel when you have a wobbly tooth.

"But I was your…"

When I thought about what she and I had done together, my head hurt as if there were an open wound in it and someone was prodding it.

"You and I…"

I felt pain rushing through the flesh just below my eyes.

Shiho must have guessed what I was thinking about, because she laughed out loud. Her laugh was as cheerful as always.

"Everything's possible."

The way she said it was salt in my wounds.

"Why are you laughing…?"

"Because I was remembering our happy times together."

"Happy times? It doesn't…bother you?"

"Why should anyone be bothered by sisters loving each other?"

She peered at me as if pressing me for an answer. She clearly didn't feel bad about it. Right, that was the kind of person she was. I had ignored all the red flags and approached her of my own will, but I kept forgetting that. Shiho could be so nice, but she also had no common sense.

"I…don't know. But you did…those things to me…knowing we were sisters?"

"Yes. You're my sister, and you're cute, and you're a high school girl." Shiho listed my qualities, counting on her fingers.

Maybe I was just being insecure, but it was the last one I suspected mattered to her the most… Right. She'd told me, her sister, that she was only attracted to high school girls. And I wasn't going to be a high schooler forever. If I hadn't been wearing my school uniform the day we'd met, maybe Shiho would've walked past without even noticing me.

"You should've told me…"

“Would you have believed a stranger suddenly claiming to be your sister?”

“…Probably not.”

I had never considered the possibility of having siblings. My mother was the only family I knew about. I’d never even really thought about my father.

Shiho seemed to think for a few moments.

“You get both meat and milk from cows in a cheeseburger, right?” she asked.

“Huh? A what…?”

A big question mark appeared in my head. Her question was confusing, and I didn’t even know what a cheeseburger was. I kept thinking about the word, turning it over and over in my mind, splitting it into two. *Cheese* and *burger*. A hamburger with cheese? I’d heard of hamburgers, but I’d never eaten or seen one up close, so I only had a vague idea what they were.

But why was Shiho talking about cheeseburgers all of a sudden?

“Milk comes from cows, which is why it goes so well with beef.”

“Ah…”

“Like us. A common source means we’re highly compatible! In many ways.”

The corners of her eyes creased as she laughed. I understood what she meant by “many ways,” and I immediately wanted to pull my hair over my face to hide behind it. I didn’t want to talk about this outside during the day, especially not when I was already boiling inside from the heat.

It used to unnerve me when Shiho was a total mystery to me, but now I caught myself thinking she should be doing more to keep certain details of her life secret. Despite that, there was still something bugging me, and I couldn’t let it go. Like my sister, I had that unreasonable streak.

“…Before you become a sister to me, I want to ask Chiki a question.”

I might never use that name for her again.

“How philosophical. Shoot.”

“Did you…did you cheat on me with Hoshi? I won’t be angry. Please, just answer.”

“Hmm.” She turned toward me. “And what is your definition of cheating?”

“…Doing sexy things together.”

Shiho burst into laughter. “Hearing you talk about sexy things is so titillating, Umi.”

How could she keep that smile up when she was trying to dodge my question?

“I don’t want to do this kind of banter now.”

“Oh, but that’s exactly why I want to tease you. You used to think I was a terrible pervert. I have to live up to your expectations.”

“Answer my question.”

I caught her by the elbow. She pursed her lips into a very sad face, closed her eyes, and dropped her shoulders. She was taking her time. Talking to her was always like this. She always derailed the conversation to something sex-related. Maybe that was all my sister ever thought about.

…My sister?!

Whenever I thought about the fact that she was my sister, my heart nearly stopped.

My sister. What did it mean for her to be my sister?

“So you wanted to know about cheating?” she asked as if it was the most tedious topic ever.

I gave her a slight nod.

She smiled like usual. “I did…not cheat.”

Why the pause?

“You swear?”

“You don’t trust me at all, do you, Umi? Why did you even ask if you don’t believe the answer?”

She laughed, but she was rebuking me, and her tone reminded me of the near breakup a few days ago. I felt intense, painful pressure, crushing every part of me down to my eyes.



Being abandoned by this person would be the same as death to me. Ever since I'd learned she was my sister, my life had been hanging by a thread.

"But you…went on a date?"

"We did, yes," she readily agreed.

I was losing momentum, but I knew I had to press on. Shiho was very good at lying, and recently I'd realized why—she separated the parts she was willing to admit and the parts she lied about. Then she mixed a bit of the truth with a bit of the lie, and she was so obviously practiced that I could tell she was used to deceiving people.

…She probably was a bad person after all.

"You did that without telling me… You didn't think about how I'd feel?"

My laughably poor vocabulary was really showing—I was anxious and couldn't express myself. I went to school like the other girls, but I couldn't argue like them. Where did they learn how to do it? From books? From TV?

Something was missing in what I had said, but my simple brain couldn't even figure out what it was.

"It'd be tiresome to report to you every time I'm going out on a date."

"Wait, that's not what I'm asking you to do." She shouldn't be going on dates with other people at all. I flapped my hands frantically. "Until an hour ago, I was your girlfriend."

And what were we now? Being sisters came first, I guessed. Could you be sisters and girlfriends at the same time? How did Shiho see me? The way she was looking at me was the same as the first time she'd seen me, the same as when we had gone to hotels. It was always warm and gentle. Her eyes never changed, no matter what she was looking at.

"You can still be my girlfriend if you like. What do you want us to be, Umi?"

"I…"

She threw the question that had been driving me insane at me, and I started thinking about it earnestly…but then I realized what Shiho was doing.

"I'm not falling for your tricks."

"Aw, you're so smart."

She patted me on the head. I repeated to myself that I wasn't going to fall for her tricks while accepting the head pats.

"To tell you the truth, Takasora and I almost did have a moment."

"What?"

"Let me finish, okay? I mean that I was stroking her hair, but then she suddenly burst into tears. So I comforted her, took her out for a nice meal, and walked her back to the station. The end."

Shiho sighed and raised her hands in resignation. I looked at her profile and at her soft, defeated smile, which soon brightened like clouds parting to reveal the sky.

"Of course, acting like a baby isn't the best way to handle these things, either. Takasora should have been a bit more reasonable… but she seemed much better after getting those tears out of her. It was for the best, I suppose."

She was smiling as if she had only the best of intentions.

As I watched her, the sharp emotions inside me began to lose their edge, and I didn't want to fight Shiho anymore. I'd tried to confront her, and I was left with this washed-out feeling. Shiho always casually talked her way out of any question she didn't like, and that made me feel pathetic and powerless. I found a tiny bit of comfort in knowing it was always like that with her.

Tears started flowing from my eyes.

"Am I not a good big sister?" she asked.

"You're the worst…"

"Aw, now you're crying too, Umi?"

"'Cause you make me cry…"

My mood was like the patterning on a snake, blurred splotches of emotion. The ache in my heart, the sting of my tears, and the sensation that I was alive were all things I had this person to thank for. This person—my first love…and my sister.

"You're my sister, but I still love you" was the answer I stumbled on as I racked my empty head.

She was a bad person, but I loved her. She paid to use my body, but I loved her. I was sure she was lying to me, but I loved her. No matter what happened or how she made me feel, my heart always resettled into loving her.

The fact I was grateful for this curse probably meant I'd gone too crazy to be saved.

“Aw, that’s what I wanted to hear!” Shiho crooned happily, running her fingers through my hair.

As she untangled and smoothed my hair, I felt as if my thoughts were becoming more ordered again, too, but maybe I was only telling myself that.

“I quite like it when you call me ‘Sis.’”

“Sis…”

I’d gotten a new name to call her, but she still called me the same thing she had when we’d only been girlfriends. I felt like I was missing out…but did I really want her to call me “Little Sister”? No, that would only put more distance between us.

“If my mother didn’t say anything, would you have kept it a secret forever?”

“Hmm…”

Shiho gazed into the distance, narrowing her eyes.

“My view on this matter is skewed, but the Chitaira family is a collection of scumbags. At least to me. Oh, and that includes myself, by the way. Getting involved with the family would only cause you grief, Umi. That’s why I didn’t want you to know.”

“I don’t care to know them.”

“Good.”

“But you’re not a scumbag.”

The only person in my heart, the light of my life, and the meaning of beauty was my sister, and it made me mad to hear anyone say bad things about her. That included the woman herself.

“You’re a good person, you’re kind…and you’re my sister.”

The idea of having a sister was only an hour old for me, but it was already ballooning in importance. My body was producing tears with the same ease as sweat on a hot day, and they quietly dropped from my face onto the ground.

“It’s nice to hear that.”

She stroked my hair again. I used to dislike her treating me like a child, but now I was hungry for this sort of affection.

“But you really need to learn to read people better.”

“…No, I don’t. I don’t care about other people. Only you.”

I’d become entirely dependent on her alone. She’d made me into this creature.

“Hmm. That approach might work, too, I suppose.”

She never ever told me I was wrong. She embraced me, comforted me, accepted me. At first, she had been paying to be with me, then we'd become girlfriends, and now we were sisters. Did that mean we were getting closer? It made my head hurt to try to answer that.

"…I want you to look at me, Sis."

"I am looking at you?"

"Don't look at other girls. Look at me."

I wanted to say, "Look only at me," but somehow I couldn't get that out.

"I told you you're special to me, didn't I?"

"I thought you said that to all girls."

"Heh." Shiho's lips curled upward in a proud grin. "Everyone loves to hear they're special. They want somewhere to belong." She drew a shape in the air and laughed.

"And you think that makes it right…"

"Making sweet schoolgirls happy is the right thing to do, isn't it?"

"…Why are you like this?"

Was I really complaining? If she weren't like that, I wouldn't be living in this apartment, which would also mean not knowing Hoshi. Hoshi was a nice girl, and I wanted to be friends with her, but I didn't think she wanted to be friends with me.

…Meeting Shiho had influenced my life both in a good and a bad way.

"Did you give me money because of who I am?"

"Yes, plus your earnings."

"Earnings…?"

"Ha-ha-ha!"

Not funny to me. Shiho really was a pervert obsessed with high school girls.

"Tell me, Umi. Did you never think it was strange how we have the same eyes?"

"When I saw yours, I thought it must be a common color…"

I'd lived my life avoiding looking at people's faces. I didn't even want to look at my own. That was why I'd had no idea there was anything unusual about hazel eyes. I'd spent hours gazing into Shiho's eyes, letting her gaze deep back into mine, and not understanding the connection.

“Ah, that’s the conclusion you drew from it. Your naïveté is so precious.”

Shiho braced her hands against her knees and stood up. Her kimono shimmered in the light, casting a deep shadow on me.

“Sis?”

“I’ve told you all the important things now.”

I sensed she was getting ready to leave, and I almost fell over from my crouch.

“…Wait. You’re…going away somewhere?”

I was aware it sounded stupid. It wasn’t like we were living together, so of course she had somewhere to go. But she was my sister, so…so…so what?

An emotion formed inside me, but I had no name for it. It was frustrating not knowing how to communicate it, but Shiho sensed it all the same. She extended her hand toward me.

“Would you like to come with me, Umi?” she asked me gently, taking my hand with reverence.

I didn’t want to let go of her hand. I didn’t say “yes,” but I didn’t say “no.” Squeezing Shiho’s hand back was more important than any words. I stood up without being prompted and started walking.

The cicadas were so loud, I felt as if they had perched on the back of my head. I was staring at the ground, at my feet, but I was moving forward. My sister was taking me somewhere…

My sister?! *I have a sister*, I had to repeat to myself again. I was following my sister, holding her hand. My sister…who used to be my girlfriend.

Her hand was as warm as always. I’d felt bad when she’d first taken my filthy hand, but she hadn’t seemed to mind. She’d interlaced her beautiful fingers with my dirty ones and held on tight to me. She’d even cleaned my wounds. She’d shown me how quickly I could heal.

Feeling her hand in mine made me excited and at ease at the same time. Where did she want me to walk with her? I’d stay with her until this day was over and the next one started and ended as well. I’d always be with her—the thought made my chest grow warm with happiness.

With my sister, I could go anywhere without lifting my head to look where we were going. If she was with me, I wanted to be

there.

…But would she stay with me forever?

“Um…”

“Yes, dear?”

Her hand was holding mine, but all she needed to caress me was her voice.

“Sis, do you love me?”

“I love you so much.”

“Even now?”

She pulled me closer and put her hands around my back. Without pulling my body against hers, her lips smoothly found mine. They were slightly moist, as if there were summery dew on them. Mine were always dry.

“What do I need to do to make you happy?”

Our lips separated, and she gazed into my eyes, her face still close to mine. Our eyes really were the exact same color, but hers had a soft expression in them that mine didn’t. Everything about her was graceful.

“Um…”

“Would you like me to carry you in my arms? Kiss you? Take you to the amusement park? Have sex with you? Take you out for a nice meal? Or take you to feed the pigeons?”

“Pigeons…?”

“What do you want, Umi? Tell your sister.”

Having nimbly dodged my question, she was watching me with a gentle, quizzical look.

“I’m not yet used to being your sister, either, so you have to tell me what I should do, Umi.”

That was a revelation to me. Shiho hadn’t thought about how to be a sister before that day? The woman who always knew everything, could do anything, was starting the journey of sisterhood with no experience, just like me. We had to decide for ourselves what being sisters would be like.

So what did I want from Shiho? What did I want in general?

“I want…”

“Hey!” someone called suddenly.

My head turned as if someone had pulled a string. I immediately recognized that voice.

Behind me was Hoshi, her shoulders heaving. Her hands were

closed into tight fists, not holding anyone else's. Plastered to her sweaty forehead, her bangs shone even more like gold in the sunlight. Midday Hoshi was so shiny. Like one of the stars above us now—although you couldn't see them in the blue sky.

"Where are you going?"

"Where…?"

I didn't know. I was simply following my sister.

"You're sharp as a tack, Takasora. I like that about you."

Shiho giggled, looking Hoshi up and down in appreciation. Seeing her smile and praise Hoshi with that gentle softness in her eyes made black lines appear deep inside my heart.

I had no doubt my sister liked Hoshi, too. And Hoshi wasn't our sister. She'd have to be something else to Shiho. I could picture what that would be, and it made me feel like my lungs were filling up with muddy water.

"Where are we going, hmm…? People have been asking themselves that question since time immemorial."

"What?"

I wasn't sure which one of us said that out loud.

"I suppose I'll leave Umi with you for a bit longer, Takasora."

Shiho let go of my hand and gently pushed me toward Hoshi, as if offering me as a gift.

"Umi, be nice to Takasora."

"Uh… Okay."

While I stood there confused, Shiho was suddenly next to Hoshi. She didn't run over—it was as if she'd glided over in an instant. Hoshi seemed about to take a step back when Shiho put her hands on Hoshi's shoulders and whispered something into her ear. Hoshi grimaced, and her eyes turned steely.

"Well, bye, Umi," Shiho said in the same casual tone as always.

Farewells normally required a response, but she was already walking away without waiting for one. In the end, we couldn't just walk off together? Before that day, I'd known saying bye never implied we'd see each other again, but now…we were sisters.

"Wait…"

My sister was walking away. She was walking away somewhere far from me. I was scared if I said bye, I'd never see her again.

“Sis!” I called after her in a voice clearer than ever before, using another name for her.

I waved stiffly, as if I were trying to shake off my own hand. “See…you…”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Soon… See you…”

“Sure. See you soon.”

Shiho deciphered my incoherent message and gave me a firm nod.

I didn’t have any other way to keep her. The summer heat suddenly started getting to me, attacking me down to my ankles. It was as if I’d been holding my breath this whole time, not seeing and not feeling anything around me, focused solely on my sister. With her departure, I was thrown back into reality—a reality where I was joined by a blond girl. We stood next to each other, alone.

Hoshi brushed her bangs off her face in annoyance, turned, and clenched her hands again.

“Let’s go,” she commanded sharply.

I could tell her entire body was tense, even with her shirt covering her torso. I was so feeble that her tension alone was exerting force on me.

“Sorry for interrupting, by the way…”

“Okay…”

We both left our lines unfinished. Was she really sorry?

“I thought you were going to kiss or something… Didn’t know the right timing to call out.”

“Really…?”

Then she shouldn’t have said anything at all…or maybe not? She’d stopped my sister from taking me away…but I didn’t feel resistance at the thought of going back to Hoshi’s place. My thoughts were still a mess. The inside of my head was still vibrating, as if a great bell had announced I had a sister. I didn’t feel present, so no matter what was happening to me, I didn’t feel part of it. Why Hoshi had come after me, why I was going back to her house—those questions were too abstract for me. I’d have to come back to them later. I thought that maybe my sister had left me to give me time to think everything over.

I looked ahead, but I couldn’t see the apartment building yet. I

had walked quite far without realizing. I glanced over at Hoshi's sweaty face. She had run a long way to catch up to me.

…What a weirdo.

"What did my sister tell you?" I asked, walking back with her.

"Something that was obvious anyway."

Her short reply told me nothing. I wanted to press her to tell me more, but she walked ahead before I could.

"Hmm" was the only thing I said.

We walked the rest of the way in silence.

There should've been plenty of time until the evening, but the day ended in the blink of an eye. Suddenly, I was staring at the dark ceiling, scratching at mosquito bites on my legs. I might have been the only person to scratch cross marks over mosquito bites. I don't know why I did that—it didn't make them itch any less. I breathed slowly, quietly, in rhythm with the faint pain of each scratch. Like the day before, the room had filled with that obnoxious heat that made it hard to sleep. Above my head, the fan was spinning weakly, its whirring concealing the breathing of my roommate. My sleeping roommate.

"…"

What'd made me dash out after her, really? A bad feeling in my stomach, nothing more. All of a sudden, I'd been out the door, running down the street, leaving the apartment door open. If I hadn't caught up to them, I'd probably never have seen Mizuike again. She'd have disappeared without a word, just like how she'd appeared. I couldn't bear for it to end that way, so I'd run under the scorching summer sky. Now here I was, with Mizuike sleeping in my room again, stirring something inside me and keeping me awake.

The light summer blanket was still too much in this heat, but I had to cover myself with something or I'd feel too exposed.

"*Isn't my little sister cute?*" that awful woman had whispered in my ear.

She'd been bragging but also stating an obvious fact.

Her little sister, huh? That explained why she felt so familiar to me, even when I hadn't really known her. She and Mizuike shared the same blood, the same eyes.

That wicked woman, that pretty woman, that woman who'd seen me in many embarrassing moments, that kind woman, that horrible woman.

That woman who'd slept with her own sister.

She was a crazy patchwork of things, defying my understanding of how the world worked. And yet…instead of hatred, she awoke in me this strange impatience. I was a terminal case, too.

I shut my eyes, annoyed I couldn't sleep. The breeze from the fan was too slow to stop me sweating. It just cooled the little beads of perspiration forming on my skin.

"Sis…"

I couldn't ignore that faint whisper.

"…Ugh."

I turned away from my roommate, but I felt her rolling over to face me.

"What's *ugh*?"

"What you've been muttering under your breath over and over."

I turned toward her, too, deciding to confront her, and I almost snorted out a laugh. Mizuike's angry pout only made her look even more childish. She was scowling at me suspiciously, like she didn't believe me. Her head must have been so full of her sister that she hadn't noticed she was talking out loud—the words came out involuntarily with her breath. The discovery that she had a sister was a bolt out of the blue for her, so of course she'd be thinking about that. I didn't blame her. But the *moistness* in her voice whenever she said "Sis" was repulsive.

"Why are you saying 'Sis, Sis' constantly anyway?"

I wasn't sure what the woman was to me anymore as I discussed her with her sister. The world had been turned upside down. I hated that woman, but hatred wasn't the only thing I felt toward her.

Mizuike held on to the edge of the blanket she'd pulled over her head as she showed me her phone. "She's not replying to my texts."

"…Of course she's not."

"What do you mean?"

She made big eyes at me. Seriously? She hadn't noticed?

“She left her bag behind.”

“What? Oh…”

Ms. Chitaira had forgotten to take her bag with her when she’d left. She probably hadn’t expected that Mizuike would want to talk to her alone outside, and then they’d gone off together on the spur of the moment, except then I’d caught them and Ms. Chitaira had ended up leaving alone… She hadn’t had the time to come back for her bag, apparently. I hadn’t looked inside, but I guessed her phone would be there.

“That’s why. She wasn’t avoiding me…”

Mizuike’s voice and facial expression relaxed, the explanation comforting her like a warm blanket. She didn’t need to worry about Ms. Chitaira ignoring her anyway—fueled by her selfish desires, that woman was quick to reply to her targets and reward them with her attention to keep them hooked. She was as methodical with her texts as a keen businesswoman dealing with customer e-mails.

Would Ms. Chitaira be okay without her phone, though? What if she came by the next day to pick up her bag? I wondered how I should treat her if I saw her again, and my mood turned dark.

The woman, the bitch, Ms. Chitaira, *her*.

The way I referred to her in my mind changed to reflect the kaleidoscope of my feelings toward her. I might never meet anyone like her again, anyone who’d stoke such complex emotions in me. I had to believe I’d never again meet someone so twisted, because it was terrifying to allow the possibility there were more people like her out there.

“That’s okay, then…,” Mizuike mumbled to herself, shutting her eyes and letting it go.

I thought I heard her drop her phone, and then she started shuffling under the blanket toward me.

“What is it?”

“I remembered I wanted to ask you something.”

“But why are you creeping closer…? Eh, whatever.”

She should just ask me whatever it was, I thought, without the unnecessary wiggling, but it probably wasn’t unnecessary after all. I crept closer to her, too, ignoring the invisible line we’d agreed would separate us, so that our voices wouldn’t have so far to travel. When we were face-to-face, even in the darkness,

Mizuike's beauty made my heart beat faster. It was the first time we'd lain down next to each other like this, and for all I'd thought I had desensitized myself to her, I was keenly aware of her being so close.

"So what do you want to ask?"

She hardly ever wanted to speak to me without being prompted, so I was at once wary and excited. It was quite dark, but I could see her eyes. She was looking at me.

"I know you've met with my sister in secret."

What a cruel jab right into the innermost part of my heart. In the end, she only wanted to talk to me about that woman again. The disappointment was like rubbing my head against a coarse wall.

"Just because I didn't tell you about it, you're calling it meeting in secret?"

Ms. Chitaira and I'd met up only to hang out as friends, after all. I had to admit to myself that lying the way Ms. Chitaira did to justify myself made me uncomfortable. But anyway, what more did Mizuike want me to tell her about it? I had no obligation to admit everything, even if she asked.

"You have to tell me if you're meeting her."

"Why?"

I pretended I didn't understand, dodging Mizuike's gaze.

"Because she's my sister."

Mizuike threw the blanket off her and sat up, frowning at me.

She wanted me to report if I was meeting Ms. Chitaira because she was her sister? Not girlfriend, but sister? That was what she chose to be particular about? Jealous, even? Somehow, I couldn't help laughing.

"Was there something funny?"

Sure was. "Siscon."

"What?"

"That's what they call people like you."

A person jealously guarding their lover created a hostile image, but a little sister worrying someone might steal her older sister—now, that was kind of sweet, maybe because it indicated a purer, childlike attachment. It just made you smile.

Mizuike glared at me, maintaining that angry frown from before, as if I'd seriously touched a nerve. But then she curled in

on herself as if trying to hide her head between her shoulders and asked, “What does it mean?”

She wasn’t mad I’d called her a siscon, just confused by the word she didn’t know. How should I explain it to her, though? I’d only learned the word in passing, too.

“Well, you know, someone with a sister complex? That is, someone who really loves their sister.”

Mizuike cocked her head, thinking. Then her lips formed into a pout again, eyes sharp.

“And what’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing.” I’d never said she was doing anything wrong. Her sister was the bad person.

“So you already love your sister?”

She’d sure adjusted quickly to the switch from lovers to sisters.

“I’ve loved her a long time now.”

“Yeah, but…in a different way, right? As a sister?”

I just wanted to hint to her that it wasn’t a good idea to mix up different kinds of love, but she glared at me like I was the unreasonable one here, and I almost cringed.

“I don’t know what loving someone as a sister’s supposed to mean.”

“…Not that surprising.”

It’d only been one day, after all. She’d never experienced what having siblings was like before, so different forms of love wouldn’t be immediately apparent to her.

“I never thought I had a sister… But I don’t know much about my mother, and I don’t know anything about my father. Maybe I’ll find out I have even more siblings.”

“That’d be crazy…,” I commented, but then my eyes darted left and right as I thought about something. “…Actually, I might have siblings I don’t know about, too.”

The only thing I remembered about my dad was his hair, blond like mine. For all I knew, I might have half-siblings out there that I might bump into someday. It was kind of a scary thought. Our small apartment didn’t have room for any more people.

“We both have dysfunctional families, huh?”

One little thing we had in common. An intersection of two very different paths.

“Yeah,” Mizuike agreed, her expression a tad softer. “But my

sister is all I need to be happy…”

Her words trailed off as she closed her eyes, drifting off to sleep. Was she really going to sleep right next to me?

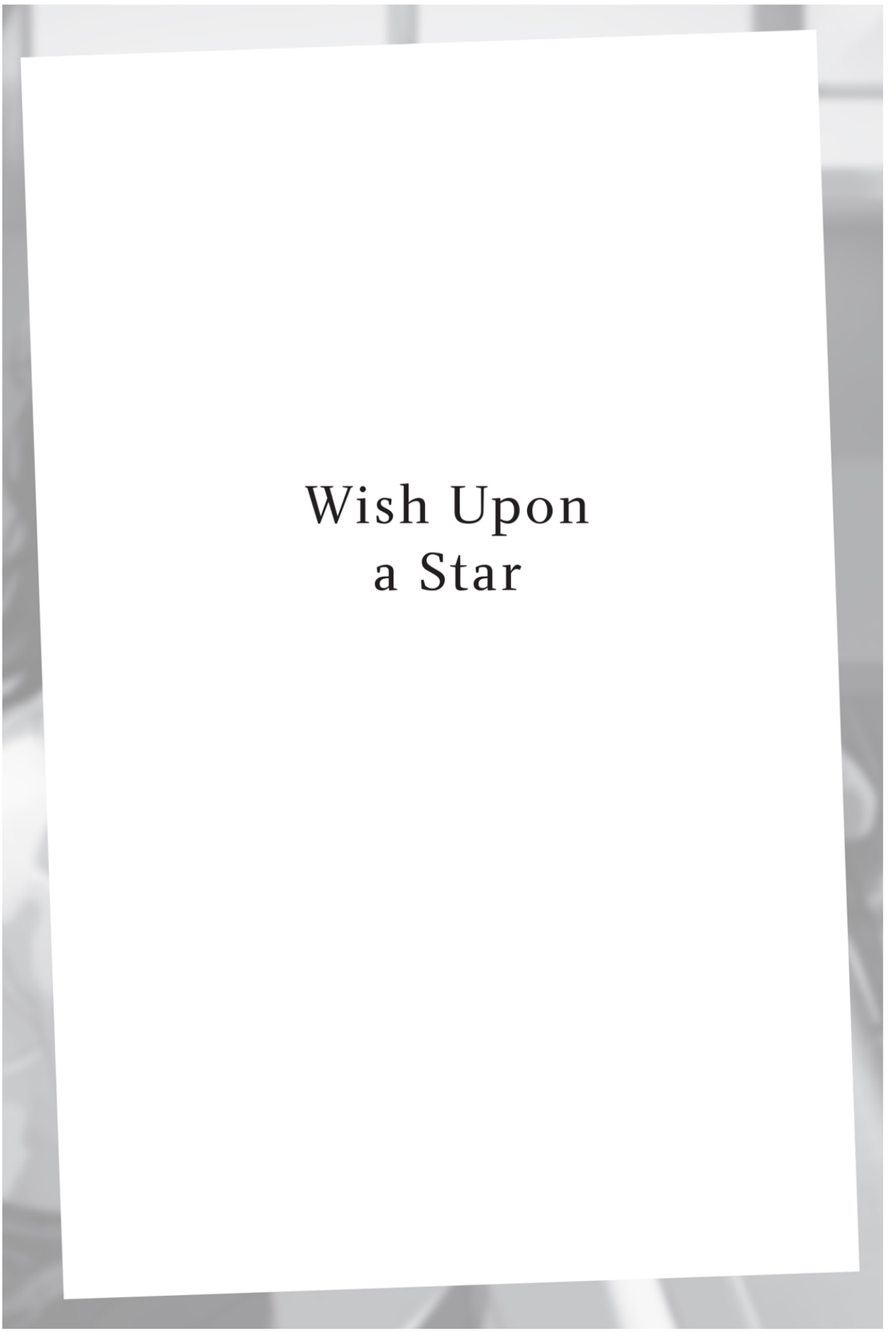
…If she was okay with that, I had no complaints. We should’ve been sleeping like this from the start. If only I’d known she’d come to inhabit not only my room, but also my heart. Maybe it wouldn’t have made a difference, though, since she’d met that woman long before me. I’d found my first love too late; the spark had just fallen to the ground without kindling.

“…”

Could there be anything between me and Umi Mizuike? Could anything grow between us?

Midsummer was approaching. This summer was ferocious, attacking me with a tsunami of experiences I wasn’t ready for. What was going to happen when it reached its full intensity? When its unstoppable energy reached its zenith? What would I lose? What would I gain? What would it leave in its wake? How was it going to be transformed by my encounter with these weird, messed-up sisters who’d stolen my heart?

“I’m…”



Wish Upon a Star

I'd been so used to sitting in dark rooms without switching on the light that I still sometimes reflexively hunched, shirking the brightness in well-lit places. It was very clear to see how resigned I was. There had been a time when I'd assumed I wasn't allowed to exist where there was light, but there I was, sitting with my knees on the floor in a bright, sweltering-hot room, daydreaming. There, I was allowed to simply do nothing, so I sat quietly enjoying that…

I was in a good place—the thought made me so happy, I swayed side to side with my arms around my knees.

It was like finally reaching calm waters after swimming through rough seas… At least, that was how I imagined it. I'd never been anywhere near the sea myself.

Hoshi stuck her head into the room and stared at me.

"You've got nothing to do, right? Come help me with cleaning."

She motioned with her hand for me to come with her.

It was true I had nothing to do. I pushed myself off the floor and stood up. I wasn't left alone to enjoy doing nothing, but I was only asked to help out instead of getting beaten up. Here in this house, I was asked to do things, not forbidden from doing anything. A nice change.

The apartment wasn't big, so it didn't take long for a team of two to clean it. Sometimes, my mother would randomly decide to join in, too.

With four people, it did feel a bit cramped, but life was peaceful. To me, that was magical. I couldn't believe nobody was hitting me or yelling at me when I was cleaning. I was allowed to help. Hoshi and her mom were unlike any other people I'd ever lived with. When my sister, who had still been Chiki then, had told me there were good people in the world, I'd thought she was just saying it, but it wasn't just a lie.

I had to move my sister's bag when tidying up. I didn't know what was inside, as I wouldn't open someone else's bag, but I worried about my sister being without it. It had been five days, and I hadn't heard from her.

…Should I bring it back to her? But how? I didn't know where she lived. Why was there still so much I didn't know about my sister? But my mother should know the address. If she hadn't forgotten.

"…She probably forgot."

I put the bag back in the corner of the room and resumed cleaning. I didn't want anyone to touch the bag. Only I could, because it was my sister's.

I finished cleaning and tugged at my sweat-soaked T-shirt to get it unstuck from my body. Hoshi came over to me again.

"You're free?"

"Um… I am now, yeah."

Was I ever not free? I studied sometimes, but…well, all students did. I never had anything planned, though, apart from when my sister wanted to see me. When I wasn't meeting her, I had nothing but free time on my hands, like that day.

"Will you come with me to the supermarket?"

Hoshi wanted me to help her carry the shopping. I paused to consider whether I could say no to that, listening to the chirping of cicadas. I was a freeloader, so I shouldn't be lazy.

"…Okay."

I had a feeling my sister wasn't going to come anyway. I had better chances of running into her if I went outside. Maybe it wasn't very likely, but my first meeting with Shiho had been the unlikeliest thing ever, and it'd happened. I left the apartment with Hoshi, hoping against the odds.

My mother had gone out earlier, probably not for any particular reason—just to kill time. She might have been the most carefree person I knew. How could she afford to be so carefree, though, when she didn't have money or even a home? Like my mother, I also didn't have anything to my name, but there was nothing carefree about me.

"You like summer?" Hoshi asked me when we were passing by a large, two-story parking lot.

I turned my head side to side, thinking about summer, heat

that made the air shimmer, cloudy skies, and strong sunshine that made your skin feel wet.

“Never thought about it.”

“Ah, okay.”

“I’ll think about it now.”

Everything that made up summer was right there around us while we strolled to the store. The heat surrounding us—that was summer. Walking outside was like being submerged in a big puddle that was warmer than your body. Did I like it or not?

I walked on, thinking very hard about my relationship with summer and feeling it especially around my shoulders. I hummed and groaned, trying to figure out if I enjoyed being clammy from sweat.

“Dunno.”

There was good sweat and bad sweat. It was hard to tell which one this was.

But was that what Hoshi meant? If it was some sort of philosophical question, then it totally went over my head. That sort of talk was alien to me.

Hoshi let out a short sigh.

“Damn, it’s hot…” She scratched her head and added, “Me, I keep switching between liking and hating it.”

She shot me a meaningful look.

“Must be a lot of work, keeping up with how you’re feeling about it.”

“What can I do?”

We were skimming on the surface, avoiding going deeper into the topic. I wasn’t interested in probing the matter, and Hoshi was scared to talk openly with me about what was going through her head. Even I could understand as much, based on what I knew about Hoshi—that she was in love with me… But was she, still? I think I wasn’t really nice to her. I didn’t have my sister’s gentle character. I wasn’t a nice girl, so what did Hoshi like about me?

“I wonder which one you’ll end up with…,” Hoshi muttered. There was pain in her voice and a grim look in her eyes.

At the supermarket, I obediently followed Hoshi, feeling like a fruit that’d fallen off the display and was rolling around on the floor. I looked around the aisles trying to spot my mother, but she

must have gone somewhere else that day. My guess was the library. Was there another person as unchangeable as my mother? Encounters with other people didn't influence her at all —while I was totally different now.

I'd lived with my mother my whole life, but she didn't make much of an impression on me. I didn't know if she was strong or weak. I felt like I owed her, but only vaguely.

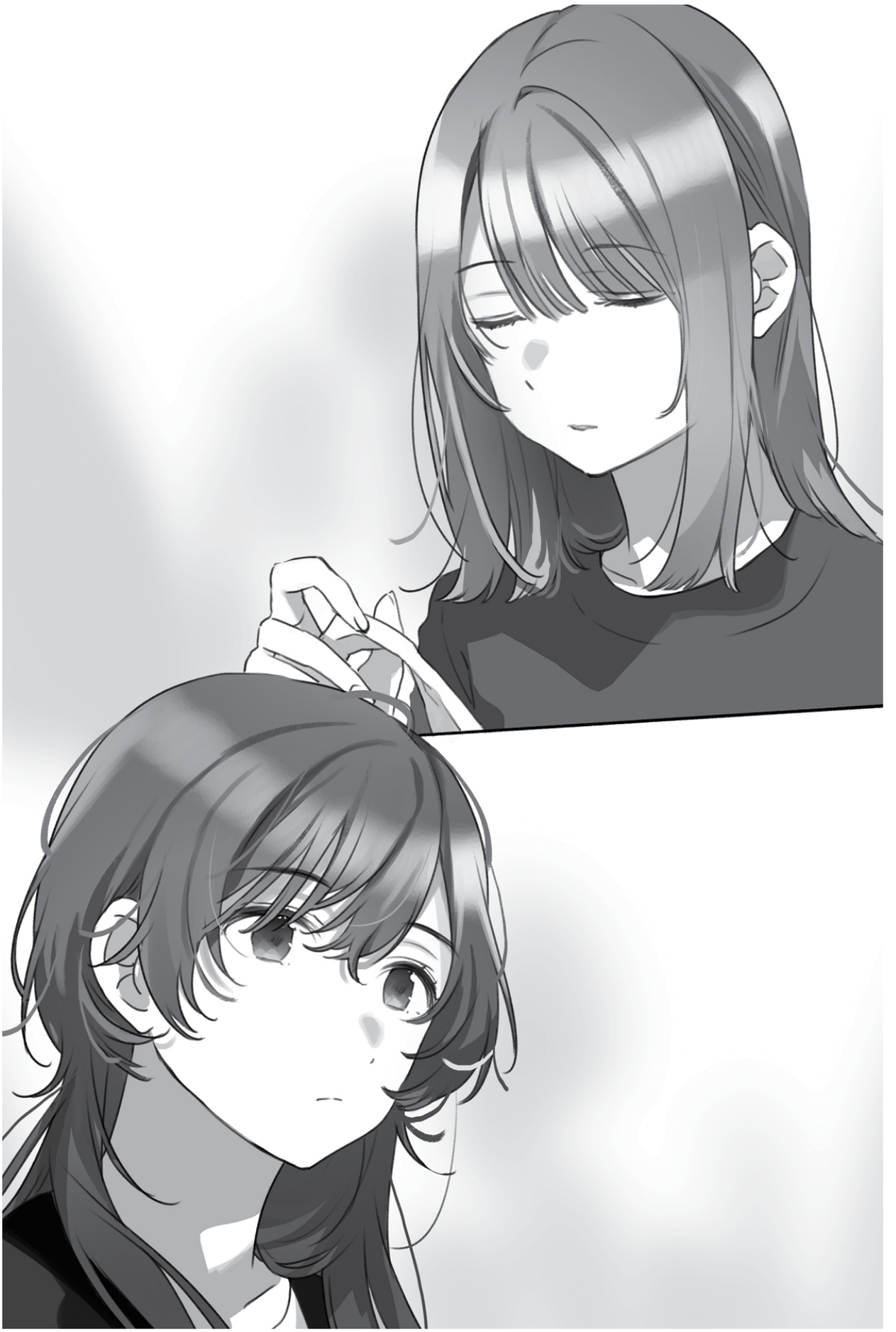
I watched from the side as Hoshi bagged the groceries. If it were me packing them, I'd put them in the bags in any order, but Hoshi seemed to have a system. She kept checking what was left before deciding what to put in the bags next. I watched her, trying to work out her system, but I couldn't. I had nothing else to do.

Hoshi noticed and looked up at me. "What?" she asked.

"I was wondering why you put some things in before the others."

She cocked her head at me, then looked at the vegetable she was holding.

"Ah," she muttered, catching on. "Well, it's like this. You put in things like milk first on the sides to make a sort of frame, then other things that won't get squished, and soft items go on the top… That's basically it."



“Wow… I see now. Wow.”

“…Is that impressive to you? Really?”

Hoshi stuck the few remaining items into the bags, looking away from me like she wanted to hide something. She shut her eyes.

“I just thought…you must be smart to come up with that.”

Her eyes sprang open, and she turned to me like she wanted to say something, light reflecting in the corners of her eyes. I thought maybe what I’d said hadn’t come out right, and I tried to think of a better way to say it, but I couldn’t. You have to be smart to know the right way to say things. I admired my sister for always having the words.

“Well, anyway,” Hoshi said with resignation. She stuffed the last thing, a daikon radish, in a bag.

“Want me to carry that?”

“Naw, but thanks,” she replied, mimicking the soft intonation of my dialect.

I put my hands on my hips and walked out of the store after her. I felt like something was pulling at the backs of my knees annoyingly… Was I upset Hoshi had mimicked me? Nobody had ever tried to copy anything I did before… It felt weird.

We went back the same way, in the same heat as before. The only difference was the shopping bags swaying as we walked, separating me and Hoshi. I heard a railway crossing alarm in the distance. The crossing we’d gone over on the way to the supermarket came to my mind. For some reason, the rhythmic alarm made me feel uneasy, like I had to hurry back home. I wondered if something had happened in the past that made me feel that way, but all my memories were of staring at the ground, of asphalt, dirt roads, puddles, dirty, worn-out shoes… Which reminded me I should buy new ones so I wouldn’t embarrass my sister standing next to her. Whatever I thought about, my thoughts always got sidetracked by my sister.

We turned from the main road to a narrow lane, and I saw the railway crossing from before. Past the crossing was…the home I was walking back to. Not mine. My classmate’s. Thinking about it, why was I walking home to a place that wasn’t mine like it was normal? Hoshi was weird, too, to accept that.

Hoshi’s shopping bags swayed forward and backward, then

paused. I stopped abruptly, moving my forward foot back before it touched the ground.

Hoshi pointed at a building we were about to pass by.

“Want to go in?” she asked cautiously.

Three steps after the railway crossing, I steeled myself to make sure my voice wouldn’t betray excitement. I summoned strength into my wrists and the depths of my heart, speaking to tamp down those parts of my body that I’d strained. “Want to go in?” I asked, erupting in sweat that had nothing to do with the summer heat.

I didn’t want to just keep walking back home…because that would be the end of things. The rest of the day would be the same as always. Doing the same things over and over again hoping for some sort of change was foolish. Instead, I plunged into the deep, gathering my courage to ask Mizuike if she’d make a stop with me on the way home.

“Go in?”

Mizuike leaned forward toward the place I had pointed out, brushing hair off her face.

I wondered how to interpret her question. Was she hinting she thought I was being ridiculous, or simply unsure what sort of place it was? Umi Mizuike didn’t hide any meaning in between the lines, I thought, and when I caught her gaze, the look in her dark eyes confirmed she simply didn’t understand where I wanted to take her.

“It’s a teahouse.”

How had she reached her age without ever having been to a teahouse? She was shockingly ignorant of things I would have assumed were totally basic.

Mizuike touched her chin, mouthing “teahouse.”

“A place you go to drink tea?”

“Pretty much.”

What even is this conversation?

Mizuike’s gaze drifted to the side. “Like *doutoru*…”

“*Doutoru*? What?”

It was my turn to draw a blank.

“I didn’t bring my wallet. Is it okay if I just sit with you?”

She waved her hands as if to prove she hadn't brought anything with her. I was about to tell her I'd treat her, but I hesitated. I didn't want to have Mizuike sponging off me. On the other hand, I did want her to like me, and I didn't see anything wrong with using money to win some points with her. That was how that woman did it. Even if the amount of money she spent on Mizuike was on a vastly different scale, why shouldn't I do the same? Still, something inside me resisted, maybe because I'd classified that woman as a bad person. If I started acting like her, I might turn into a bad person too, eventually. Would that bother me, though? I wasn't sure.

"I'll pay now for both of us, and you can pay me back later."

"Oh, you can do it that way, too… Makes sense."

She seemed to be okay with it. Good. Nobody would be in anyone's debt. We'd be on equal footing. There'd be no bias.

I'd passed by that teahouse many times, but I'd never been inside before. The store entrance curtain had "Ice" written in calligraphy on it, which you'd assume was a seasonal design advertising shaved ice, but I knew they had those curtains year-round. Did they serve shaved ice during winter, too? No idea.

The teahouse was pretty small, with two tables and a few counter seats. It felt like a grotto that'd been carved out at the base of this little building. There were sharp angles everywhere like the corners of a block of cheese. Fortunately, the air-conditioning was working exceedingly well in that small store. That was enough to make me feel optimistic.

"Welcome," an elderly man said to us from behind the counter, standing up quickly. It seemed he hadn't been expecting customers, or at least customers like us.

The man must have been drinking in the summer sun given his deep tan. His hair, tied at the back with a slight wave to it below the hair tie, was strikingly white against his dark skin. His style was something I associated with beach store shopkeepers, not teahouse owners.

We could've gone to one of the big cafés near the station instead, but it was too much to walk in the summer heat, so this would do. We sat down facing each other. There were no other customers besides us, and the walls were close on all sides. It made me feel strangely pressured.

As soon as I set down my grocery bags on the floor, the old man came over.

“What can I get you?”

“I’ll have…iced coffee, please.”

I didn’t normally drink coffee, but one time wouldn’t hurt.

Both the old man and I looked at Mizuike.

“Could…,” she started, but she closed her mouth and asked after a pause, “Do you have apple juice?”

“Yes, we do.”

“I’ll have that, please,” she said, looking down at the table.

People would probably think she was just being shy, but I knew it was her natural gloom at work.

I could almost believe I was special to her, since she maintained eye contact with me in some of our conversations. My heart would soar, buoyant with joy. It didn’t take much for my mood to swing dramatically up or down. Being in love was an energy-intensive state, I had observed.

“So you like apple juice?”

“It’s sweet.”

What a talker. She did smile as she spoke, though, which was unusual.

“Okay, no. I love it.”

“…Cool.”

My stupid brain took her smile and the word *love* out of context. A searing pain flashed through my earlobes as if someone had pricked them and left them bleeding.

The teahouse owner brought us glasses of water with ice in them. I picked mine up and swirled it gently in my hand, enjoying the clinking of the ice cubes. I noticed Mizuike was playing with her glass in the same way. Now, I might be accused of not being objective, but I thought when Mizuike was doing it, it looked more childish. It suited her.

Mizuike’s uniquely colored eyes glinted faintly in the dim, diffused light, like a treasure glittering at the bottom of the dark depths of the ocean. Those eyes took my breath away and rendered me speechless—not all at once so that I was gasping for air, but slowly easing me into breathlessness.

The heat, the clammy sweat, the smells in the air—everything my other senses were picking up was secondary as sight took

over. I never used to have amazing concentration, but I could sit there focused solely on Mizuike without ever growing tired.

I was spellbound, and my eyesight sharpened. Suddenly, something moved in the corner of my vision.

I didn't know how to react when my eyes met those of a woman standing outside, voyeuristically peering into the teahouse through the window in the door. She smiled, as if pleased I'd seen her, and opened the door.

I didn't know her. She might have been around the same age as my mom, but unlike my mom, she had this aura of energy and robustness. Like she was bursting with life, or like no force in the world could make her sit still.

"I've never seen customers here before!" she proclaimed, beaming.

The old man looked up, but instead of greeting her, he sighed heavily. "Well, you certainly aren't one."

"I'll have one serving of premium iced caffè latte!"

"Try again."

"One premium… Hmm… Caffè… Caffè… One caffè, please!"

"Go home."

The old man waved her away like a pesky fly, and the woman walked out of the teahouse, chortling, a bounce in her step.

What was that about? On second thought, the woman reminded me of someone…but who?

"Sorry about the commotion," the old man said to us from his seat. "I've known her since she was young. I could count on my fingers the times she actually ordered anything to drink here."

"Ah…"

That woman's frenetic, chicken-like energy had overwhelmed Mizuike, who'd shuffled closer to the wall.

"There are all sorts of mothers out there," she said.

She was clearly marveling at the difference between the woman and her own mother.

"Yeah…," I said, even though I wouldn't have made the assumption that the woman was a parent.

In the end, I couldn't figure out who she reminded me of.

After that, even though Mizuike and I looked at each other a few times, we didn't talk. I couldn't think of anything to talk about, so instead of trying to force conversation, I sat back and

enjoyed the cooling breeze from the AC. The only common topic Mizuike and I could discuss was Ms. Chitaira—how ironic that she was our connection. I'd rather not talk at all than talk about her, though.

I thought it was nice Mizuike and I could enjoy our time together in silence without it being weird. I chose to appreciate the simple things, like the daily bowl of rice with my dinner. I had to hope Mizuike wasn't the type of girl who craved meat for every meal.

"Thank you for waiting."

The old man brought us the apple juice and coffee. It hadn't been a long wait, actually.

Steam was rising from my cup, while Mizuike's drink was in a glass with ice cubes floating in it. Then again, of course apple juice would be served with ice. There was no such thing as hot apple juice. Well, there was apple tea, but that was something else.

I had this feeling like something wasn't right, but I got distracted by Mizuike drinking her juice. She held the glass very carefully with her slender hand and took a tiny sip through the straw. Then she licked the corners of her mouth and smiled, her gaze dropping down as if she were looking at something under the table.

Next time I went to the supermarket, I should get apple juice. Mizuike's smile had convinced me it would be money well spent.

I put some sugar in my coffee and brought the cup to my lips. The steam and the aroma wafted up to my nose, overwhelming, as I swallowed the throat-burning liquid without even tasting it. Again, I felt like something was amiss. Again, Mizuike took my thoughts off that.

"Is coffee really that good?"

She sounded like a little kid. Cute.

Sometimes she acted like a girl my age, sometimes like a child. Never like a baby, though. She had all these different sides to her, which was one of the reasons she was fascinating to observe.

"Want to try some?"

I pushed the coffee cup toward her. After a brief pause, she reached for it and pulled it closer. She lifted the cup with utmost caution and slowly brought it to her lips, puckered into a tiny O

shape. She looked suspicious, and her face didn't change after trying it.

"It's hot."

"Well, yeah."

A cloud of steam was rising from the cup… Wait…

"And it's like broth."

"Broth? Oh, I kind of get what you mean."

After the juice, the coffee must have been too rich for Mizuike. She winced from the bitterness—exactly the reaction I had anticipated.

She pushed the coffee back to me and looked at her juice glass, then my cup again. She slid her glass toward me a little, then pulled it back. She repeated the motion, and I was puzzled at first what she was doing. Then I realized she wanted to offer me a taste of her drink in return. Reluctantly. It wasn't a good deal for her to give up a little of the juice she liked in return for a sip of something she'd found disgusting—hence her hesitation. I thought it was funny.

"It's okay, I don't want any," I said to put her at ease, motioning for her to go ahead and drink her juice.

She put the straw in her mouth and started taking little sips, looking up at me like a small, watchful animal at a watering hole.

My drink was too hot to go down so quickly, but I played it cool and sipped at it anyway. That was when I remembered—surely it was iced coffee I had ordered, right? Had the arrival of the crazy chicken woman confused the teahouse owner?

I was absorbing both the summer heat and the heat of the coffee into my body. This couldn't be good for me.

Mizuike stopped drinking her juice.

"Have this," she said, offering me her glass with a tiny bit of juice on the bottom among the ice cubes.

"…Thanks."

It was a lot for her to give up, and after a long mental battle, too. I wished that battle had been shorter so there'd be more juice left. Anyway, I grasped the straw with my lips. I didn't get butterflies in my stomach thinking Mizuike's lips had been on that straw just moments ago. We'd been living together for a while, and we'd shared food utensils before.

Come to think of it, we were doing everything backward.

Normally—not that I'd ever done it normally—you fell in love with someone, and you moved in together only after going steady. That's how people were supposed to do it. No, that's how everyone did it. Except us—Mizuike had moved in with me first, and only later had I developed feelings for her. So I'd been flailing, backing away, becoming paralyzed, suffering, and squirming. You're supposed to sip a love potion like this a little at a time, but I'd been forced to down it all at once.

…What a ridiculous comparison. I'd probably only thought of it because of the sweet-and-sour apple juice I was tasting on my tongue…barely. What I was drinking tasted like water.

"This isn't juice."

What Mizuike had left me to drink was just melted ice. I sucked it up through the straw loudly, purposefully being rude to show I was annoyed. Mizuike watched me for a moment, and then she burst into laughter.

"Ha-ha… Ha-ha-ha!" Her laugh was awkward, like she wasn't used to it.

Her white teeth gleamed as she laughed. The bangs that normally covered her eyes were thrown back to show her happy face.

I didn't want to let go of the straw, so I kept sucking as if I were vacuuming the bottom of the empty glass.

Something had changed. A new, cozy feeling had formed between us. At least, I felt it, and as I held on tight to the glass, which had warmed up to the same temperature as my skin, I wished it would last.

Come to think of it, it was the first time I'd made Mizuike laugh out loud. And maybe it would be the last.

"Maybe I like summer a little after all," I said after we left the teahouse.

"Oh yeah?" Hoshi said brightly.

She walked forward to stand next to me and looked up at the sky. I followed her gaze to the cloudless blue sky filled with the buzzing of cicadas. It felt strangely good to be outside, like I was enveloped in summer, like the heat was caressing me. Until I felt the sweat rolling down my neck.

“No, I take that back.”

“I totally get you.”

We were dragging our feet on the walk back, like we were kicking invisible soccer balls in front of us with no energy to hurry home.

“Too hot!” Hoshi said what I’d been thinking.

She opened the door to her apartment, and we crammed inside to get out of the heat. My mother’s head popped out of the living room. She had gotten back while we’d been out.

“Welcome back!” she said to us.

“…Hi.”

My mom quickly disappeared back into the living room, like an animal hiding in its burrow… Well, not like I wanted to talk to her anyway.

Panting, Hoshi and I unloaded the shopping and put it in the fridge. Then we ran to our room and switched on the fan first thing.

People who had bigger fridges didn’t need to go shopping so often, so they had more free time to enjoy life, I thought, remembering my sister’s warm smile.

“I feel icky. Going to take a shower,” said Hoshi.

She grabbed a change of clothes and shot out of the room. I was impressed she had the energy to run after so long in the heat.

I moved from one side to the other, following the breeze from the turning fan. It was extra effort, but I’d rather do that than stop the fan from turning, because then I’d feel guilty for hogging it. I was cooling down a bit, but if I stopped too long in one place and the breeze was off me, sweat poured out of me even worse than before.

Hoshi returned from the shower, dressed in fresh clothes. She sat down in front of the fan and started roughly toweling off her hair. She was treating her hair so badly, but the strands sticking out—spilling out?—from the towel shone like some special ornaments.

Hoshi noticed me watching her dry her hair, and she stopped moving.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Did my sister like blonds? I had noticed she often commented

on Hoshi's hair.

I picked up a strand of my unruly, wavy hair. The tips were kind of brown, but my hair was black. I'd never done anything special to care for my hair. If I knew for sure Shiho liked blonds, I'd dye it blond. If she said she liked blue, I'd dye it bluer than the summer sky. I had to be exactly what my sister wanted, even if it meant no longer being me. I'd throw away everything I was for my sister.

"You can take a shower too, if you want," Hoshi mumbled.

"I know?"

Hoshi rubbed her cheeks dry with the towel. "I mean…you're sweaty."

"Huh? Do I smell bad?"

"Look, I don't know. I'm not coming over to sniff you, but you're sweaty."

She hid her face in the big bath towel, drying herself off with cartoonish motions. She was bad at choosing her words… Funny coming from me, but it was the truth. She always sounded anxious, like me when I was saying good-bye to my sister. I'd always search and search for the best words to use, but I'd never find them.

Being able to recognize the same trait in Hoshi gave me hope about us becoming friends at some point. She didn't want me to be just a friend, but I could become a good friend to her, I was sure.

"Okay, then… I'll go use your bathroom."

"…'Kay," she mumbled quietly from under the towel.

Before meeting her, I had always been the one who spoke the most quietly in any house I stayed at. Hoshi was so nice. She didn't yell at me, and she wasn't scary. I often thought how lucky I was to have met her.

But…good as it was to have drifted to peaceful waters after the tide had turned in my life, I wasn't a fish. Someday, I'd want to get out and walk my own path.

Every now and again, her eyes looked like those of a child. Granted, we were still children to a surprising extent, not-yet-fully-formed people unable to live on our own, but her eyes were

far younger than her age indicated… She was like a preschooler who had yet to develop character, who had yet to have their feelings hurt. That was the impression she gave me. The dissonance between Umi Mizuike's childlike naïveté and the acts of debauchery she'd committed with her older sister made my head spin.

On the topic of her sister, I'd been sure she'd turn up the next day, as nonchalant as ever. I'd resigned myself to that unwelcome prospect. But the days had been passing, and she hadn't shown up. The wicked woman would never do what I expected.

She had told me she was leaving Mizuike in my care for a while. What was she plotting? Even if she left us alone for a while, she wouldn't disappear for good…right? I could recognize amusement in that woman's eyes when she was up to some mischief, but apart from that, I couldn't work out what she was thinking.

Over five days, I had been finding errands and tasks for Mizuike, having her accompany me outside to help with this or that… In other words, I did what I could to increase the amount of time we spent together. Was it working? Honestly, I couldn't tell. Showing emotions wasn't something Mizuike did very much. Still, I did it because I wanted to.

As I watched the spinning blades of the fan, I thought about that walk back home with Mizuike, and I felt the muscles of my face form a smile.

I'd had fun going out to the store with Mizuike. Whenever I glimpsed a shadow of that woman over her, my heart sank, but when we were walking down the aisles of the store together, I was happy—that was a fact. The initiative was always mine, but just having Mizuike's company made me feel like my heart was being filled up, except not with blood but with a different kind of fuel. A smile would appear on my face, and I would feel restless. I wondered if that was what love was.

Thinking about that made my head feel sweaty again, so I rubbed it more with the towel. Then Mizuike came back from her fairly quick shower, so I shuffled to the side, giving up the prime fan-breeze spot to her. It was nice to hear a little "thanks" when she crouched down next to me.

A gentle, warm breeze came over me like wingbeats. Mizuike

was leaning forward toward the fan to dry her long hair… And leaning forward meant…

A bolt of shame hit me. I had to turn away, although I tried to be as inconspicuous as possible. Movement attracts attention; that's how humans are.

"Um, Hoshi…"

Damn—she noticed.

"Yeah?"

"I see you staring at my breasts a lot."

Suddenly, I was so self-conscious that it was as if I were bleeding from behind my ears.

"M-me? S-staring?"

"You do it all the time."

"No I don't!" I shouted in agitation, which was basically an admission of guilt.

Beads of cold sweat appeared on my back. Mizuike was looking at me, her eyes shaded by the towel and the mass of her wet hair.

"I'm sensitive to people's looks. I've always had to be."

"R-really…"

I understood she didn't mean people's appearances, but their stares. She'd grown up in a rough environment where attention was a threat. Anyway, I wanted to die now, and the shower I'd taken had all been for nothing because I was sweating like a pig again.



I wished Mizuike had learned to be a bit more sensitive to people's feelings, too.

"You want to touch them, I guess?"

God! Just drop this topic already!

"No… Not really…"

"I'm asking you seriously. Please answer me seriously, too."

Does she think I'm an idiot?!

"When I fell in love with her and touched her breasts for the first time, I cried."

Too much information!

My head was on fire. I wanted to rip off my scalp and replace it with a new one.

"I thought I was going to make her feel gross by touching her, but she let me…and pulled me close to her. I felt so happy."

"…I don't want to hear about this."

"I thought, maybe you wanted to touch my breasts like I wanted to touch hers. So I'm asking. I wouldn't ask anyone else."

Don't ask me, either! Don't openly ask me if I want to fondle your boobs! Seriously!

But she *was* asking me. It was in Mizuike's nature to be direct. She didn't know how else to interact with people. To her, it wasn't an awkward question, even though I was squirming. When you're asked a question, you should answer—that was what my teachers always said. The hell was I thinking? This wasn't a classroom.

My fingers were anxiously drumming against the floor.

"Urgh… Yeah, sure, I'd want to touch them."

Like a cornered mouse, I wanted to make myself small. Saying that one sentence out loud had taken all my strength.

"…You're horny."

"Bsstshwah!" I made an incomprehensible sound.

"Want to touch them now?"

"Huh?!"

I swear, something was wrong with this girl.

"Like, why do you have to ask me again? Are you offering to let me touch them, or what?"

"Yeah. You can touch them now, if you like."

I thought I was going to faint. I forgot to blink until my eyeballs turned sandy-dry from the fan.

I'd seen them before…her boobs, I mean. But to touch them… Mizuike didn't love me. I knew that, sad as it was. Was she as depraved as her sister? Did she not know right from wrong? Was her brain working at all?

Mizuike was toweling her hair and turned toward me. Her breasts were hidden only by her T-shirt.

"Are you teasing me?"

"I don't really know how to tease people."

"Are you mocking me, then?"

"What?"

"Is it pity, then?"

"Why would I pity you?"

I went through all the possible explanations, but Mizuike just cocked her head at me, giving me a blank stare. I should be the one staring in confusion at her.

She seriously wasn't trying to wind me up. There was nothing but innocence in her eyes.

"…You're so stupid."

"I know. I know that better than anyone."

"No, I didn't mean it like that…"

Okay, I had to admit I had been staring at her boobs on multiple occasions. They were so big; how could I not? How could I not mentally remark on how big they were for such a small person?

I couldn't help looking again even then. My face was on fire. I looked at the two defenseless mounds bulging under her loose T-shirt. Mounds or mountains? Strands of thought were becoming entangled in my head.

She wasn't far. Thanks to my tiny room, we were very close to each other. She was within arm's reach. It would be little effort to extend my arm toward her. A straightforward task. There I was, trying to make a mission of some sort out of it.

My head low, I looked up at Mizuike. She held my gaze, waiting for me to make a move. Neither of us spoke. The whirring of the fan was whipping up the thoughts in my head. My lips parted and closed, making little bubble noises, and little specks of saliva escaped my mouth. I stopped drumming on the floor, shakily raising my hand. I could hear a constant noise, as if I were still rubbing my ears dry with a towel.

What on earth were we doing in that cramped, hot room?

I slowly moved my arm as if tracing a square with my elbow. I was keenly aware of the proximity of those soft mounds I was about to press my hand against, and a little moan escaped me. My hand was getting closer and closer, but Mizuike wasn't stopping me.

And…

It wasn't like landing on the moon—no, the experience was more prosaic. The shaking of my hand matched the tempo of my breathing, and I felt like someone was trying to rip out my earrings, even though I didn't wear earrings.

I was touching Umi Mizuike's boobs. At first, my senses momentarily stopped working and everything spun around me. The encounter with the unknown had sent my heart racing like a terrified chicken. My hand twitched as my senses restarted again, and it felt like the bones in my neck were going soft.

What the hell. This part of her body wasn't that far from her shoulders; I was basically just touching her shoulder. And that made me want to die. I was so disgusted with myself that I might as well drop dead.

Why was I feeling this way? It was almost like touching her shoulder, just a bit lower… What a lousy excuse.

I'd even seen her naked, but seeing and touching are two very different things. My ears were hurting. I thought they might fall off.

Ah. Aaaaah… Aaah.

"Interesting."

Mizuike's dispassionate comment made me quickly pull my hand back. I was panting and sweating as if I'd just completed a marathon. Meanwhile, Mizuike seemed completely unaffected, as if I hadn't just groped her boobs.

"I don't feel anything when you touch me," she said simply.

Blood drained from my fingers, rushing the other way. I shuddered, suddenly cold.

"I don't dislike it, but there's nothing more. Your hand was warm, but it didn't make me feel anything inside. It's like…I don't really feel you."

That was pretty much my crush telling me to fuck off. Maybe she didn't mean it that way, but that was effectively the message I

got.

My blood was getting colder and colder, freezing inside my veins and tearing them apart. Mizuike was killing me.

“When my sister is touching me…it’s very different.”

And now my blood was boiling again. I felt weak with the realization that every time we spoke, went out together, looked into each other’s eyes, Mizuike was thinking about that woman. I had thought maybe we were getting somewhere, but I’d been so, so wrong.

I was angry at Mizuike. She’d made me touch her breasts as a test, not to do me a favor. She only wanted to feel her sister, to go through the motions of something they did together.

“Sometimes I think not doing anything will keep things as they are,” she said, and when I didn’t reply, she continued, “But that’s not true… Or maybe it’s not always true… I think, in most cases, if you don’t do anything, things will start getting worse.”

I had no idea what that monologue was about. I didn’t want to listen to her, but, pathetically, I craved the sound of her voice.

She took the towel off her head. Her hair was still damp, and her eyes were glistening darkly.

“I’ll go to my sister.”

That was a death sentence for me. I could swear I heard the roar of an approaching train.

I felt like a fool for taking up the offer of physical contact and stupidly pushing Mizuike in the direction I feared the most. This was all one bad chain of events, which had started with me witnessing Mizuike and her evil sister kissing. I felt like someone had punched my head when I realized the downward spiral of my relations with Mizuike had helped her solidify her love for her sister.

I had anticipated this would happen, so I wasn’t really shocked, although my pulse was still quicker than normal. For a second, I had the urge to hit Mizuike, but there was no way I’d actually do it. I wouldn’t hurt that pretty face.

“I’ll get the address from Mother… I’ll find her.”

She was determined to do it. What was she going to do when she did find her sister? She probably hadn’t thought that far. All she wanted was to go to her sister and see her. I hated how I could totally understand that, but that didn’t mean I’d just let her

do it. Doing nothing would make me even more miserable. Even if I couldn't stop her, I didn't want to be completely out of the picture.

"…I'll go with you."

I wasn't fighting back, but I wasn't giving up, either.

"Why?"

"…To keep you company."

I kept my real intentions under lock and key. I didn't have the courage or the mental strength to be honest.

Instead of telling me to eff off, Mizuike looked at me in silence, her face inscrutable. I felt as if she were peering directly into my soul, although she was too disinterested in me for that.

"Thanks," she said, her body and face relaxing in relief. "I'd be a bit scared to go alone."

I could only laugh emptily at her trust in my fake show of friendship.

Not to call myself a philosopher, but I saw life as the cumulation of countless choices at crossroads where we had to pick our way forward. They could be so small we didn't even notice them sometimes. The one I'd just passed was huge and very obvious, but only one of the paths was visible to me. I wasn't even interested in searching for the others.

My awareness was shimmering like the heat haze, the chorus of cicadas as loud as heavy rain. Summer was still in full bloom, but for some reason, as we walked toward the station, I sensed its nearing end.

It was noon, and the station was as empty and hot as if the people had melted away. We easily made our way to the ticket gates on the second floor. The barriers had been left open, and we passed through them together with the hot breeze. Mizuike checked the name of the station her mom had told her to get off at, and she started running up the stairs to a platform. The train we needed had just arrived, and Mizuike was determined to catch it and see her sister as soon as possible. I almost teared up; she was so impatient just for the chance to be reunited with that person from a world I didn't belong to.

The train was ready to leave the station when we got on. It was

the first time we had taken a trip somewhere together, but our destination was that woman's house. I wanted to bang my head against the wall. I knew the path I had chosen was a dead end, so why did I keep walking? I must've lost my sanity, but even knowing that, I was powerless to stop and turn back.

We sat down next to each other at the nearest empty seats. The seats were in that box style on the train, and I got one by the window. I leaned against the glass, putting my chin in my hand. The sun was shining on my arm. Out the window, I could see the opposite platform, buildings around the station and store signboards.

It was going to be a long ride. The woman had been making a long journey every time she came to meet Mizuike or me. That was dedication. Maybe the secret behind her charm was her ability to make you believe everything was effortless for her. I wished I could do that, but I was pretty sure it was impossible for me.

"Can I call you Umi?" I asked Mizuike, spacing out as I stared vacantly out the window.

"Me?"

"Are there any other Umis here?"

I'd never met anyone else named after the ocean, and I'd never seen the ocean, either. My world was so small.

"If you want," she replied, her relaxed attitude contrasting with my heavy mood. "I'll call you Sora, then," she added.

The train started moving, and I was lightly jolted forward. I shifted in my seat, watching the station disappear behind.

"My name's Takasora, though."

"That's too long."

I silently repeated my name and Umi's nickname for me in my head, comparing them. She did have a point.

"Okay. Sora's fine."

I didn't actually like being called Sora. It annoyed me that people kept calling me by something other than my real name. But if Umi was going to call me Sora, maybe I'd warm up to it. Getting over something that annoyed me would be a positive of being in love with Umi. Although that love might not have much time left.

Umi. Being on first-name terms flicked a switch in my brain. A

little light was flashing. It'd taken me so long to ask her if I could use her first name, it was a struggle for me. It was so awkward.

"Do you love my sister?"

The question made me blind to the scenery I was looking at.

"What?"

"I asked if you love my sister," Umi repeated with her usual directness.

She didn't beat around the bush, and she didn't leave room for others to do that, either.

"No."

"But you went out on dates?"

She didn't say "without telling me," but I heard that in the sharpness of her voice.

"They weren't dates… We were just hanging out together."

"I think that's called going on dates."

She was right.

"She told me you almost started making out one time."

Her voice fell, and I understood that was the part she was really upset about. I buried my face deeper into my hand, cursing the woman for telling Umi about that. It occurred to me she might've even told Umi what'd happened afterward, and I moved my hand higher over my face, covering one of my eyes.

"My sister…does stupid things sometimes." I peeked at Umi from between my fingers. She was pouting. "I'm not gonna let you take her from me," she added, facing forward.

"I don't want her anyway."

"Liar."

"It's the truth."

I really had no need for that woman. Or to be more precise, she wasn't someone I wanted to get close to. She could be a star, dazzling but totally out of reach, farther than the moon or the sun, and I was fine with that. She was a being so distant, you'd have to be out of your mind to think you could ever reach her. She was to be admired from afar.

"It's just…"

"Just what?"

I moved my tongue in my mouth, my gaze slowly shifting away from Umi.

"Never mind."

Every time I tried opening up to her, I abandoned the attempt and drew the curtains over the windows to my heart. I wasn't used to this, to being in love. I had no roadmap. I wasn't confident I could make the distinction between what I wanted to tell Umi and what I should tell her. My desires, hopes, and logic had melted into one hot stream of thought that made it impossible to feel at ease.

I didn't desire that woman. Sure, she was beautiful, and it was a pleasure to indulge in her warmth. I found her disinhibition exciting, too. There were things I found attractive about her, but finding someone attractive doesn't mean you have feelings for them.

"It's just that…," I muttered with my hand covering my mouth.

It was just that she'd never mistaken my name. From the start, she'd known to call me Takasora. She'd even told me my name was nice.

…Was that all it'd taken for her to lodge herself so firmly in my thoughts?

That was how she stole hearts, through her attention to detail. She was an expert. Not that I'd let her win me over. If she actually tried to make me fall for her, I'd fight back. I'd build a wall around myself to keep her out. If I didn't do that, if I didn't resist, I'd lose myself completely.

Did I imagine it that I could smell the ocean? Was that the sharper note in the warm air I was drawing into my lungs when we got off at a faraway station? We were somewhere else, but it was just as hot as back in my town, and I thought of the purpose of the trip with the same heavy heart as before we'd boarded the train.

We left the station, striding into a city neither of us knew. Directly opposite the station exit was a bus stop along a busy road. Pigeons crowded by a small fountain on the side of the plaza. They were so used to people, they showed no fear when someone passed by, and there were many people passing by. We were told this city was a popular tourist destination, but I hadn't expected to see such a mass of humanity.

It was summer vacation, but I saw a group of teenagers in high

school uniforms gathered around a map, discussing where to go. Many people were walking around with yellow paper bags—gifts to bring home from some famous local place? Having observed people for a while, I thought it was easy to tell the locals from the tourists.

"It's…that way," Umi said, pointing after checking the notes from her mom.

I was surprised at how neat the map her mom had drawn and the accompanying notes were, each line as delicate and dainty as Umi's mom herself.

We went in the direction Umi said was the right one, leaving the station plaza and stepping onto the main road, which had a big gate like you see at shrines and large stone statues… What were they? Massive Jizo statues? Foreign tourists were taking photos of them. On the road, runners were pulling rickshaws carrying more tourists.

This city's atmosphere was vibrant, unlike the dried-out, desolate feel of my hometown. It matched the vibe of that woman.

We turned away from the bustling main road and walked up a gently sloping street lined with touristy restaurants and bars with a handful of convenience stores squeezed in between. As we got higher, I saw a view that made me gasp.

"We can see the horizon."

I pointed ahead. The scorching sunshine was already making my bangs feel heavy.

"Huh?"

Umi finally looked up from the ground, the sun's glare making her squint.

"It's the ocean," I said.

We couldn't see it that clearly from where we were, but if we kept walking straight, we'd reach the water. The beach was probably chock-full of tourists at this time of year.

"What? Like, the real ocean? Huh. Hmm. Neat."

You'd have thought she'd be more impressed to finally see what she'd been named after. It was always like that with her; she just had this phlegmatic character. Only Shiho Chitaira seemed to activate something in Umi's emotional department.

We passed by another line of Jizo statues and turned into a

narrow alley, suddenly finding ourselves in a quiet area away from the bustle of the tourist hotspots. It was a tranquil neighborhood where even the buzzing of cicadas seemed more polite than where I was from. I glanced around nervously. The houses were big residences with massive gardens, everyone far from their neighbors. The entrances were marked by imposing gates. You could tell that was where rich people lived.

The notes from Umi's mom described details like the color of this or that house's roof to help us navigate, and I'd thought they'd be useless since it had been more than ten years since she'd last been there. But everything still matched. The traditional residences had been preserved, unchanging, for decades.

Following the sketched map, we passed by a storehouse with wooden lattice windows on the second floor—a building whose function I couldn't guess at—with Japanese dolls displayed by the windows and all doors left open, a small building with a sign saying "HQ" and a fleet of rickshaws parked inside, and a house with tangerine trees sticking out over the fence. And then we found the residence we'd been looking for, which reassuringly had a plaque with "Chitaira" written on it by the entrance.

The Chitairas' residence looked even more massive than their neighbors', with a ridiculously tall entrance gate perhaps meant for giants. Lots of faces looked at me from both sides of the gate—election posters, a whole four rows of them, showing faces of grown-ups who were probably pondering things I'd never imagined.

"The other house looked better," said Umi.

"Which one?"

"The one we passed by a bit earlier."

With that remark, Umi walked toward the gate. Wasn't that gate meant to be the place you waited next to until someone came to invite you inside? Was it…okay to just walk in? Well, Umi was a Chitaira by blood…but no, that didn't give her the right to enter the house uninvited, right? You had to have some common sense… But then again, houses with gates like that one were so far removed from the reality I'd lived, my common sense might not apply here. What did I know, really?

"Uh… The gate's open, so…I guess it's okay to go in…" I weakly

convinced myself and followed Umi.

It was a long way from the gate to the actual house, the path leading through a maze of vegetation that made up the garden. At the far end, the garden turned into a grove of trees so tall, it must have been a real pain to keep them neatly maintained. The stone path there was almost buried under fallen leaves, as if it hadn't been swept in a long time. If this were my house, it would've bothered me so much to find the path in that state, and I would have run to find a broom right away.

The leafy corridor took us to the entrance, where there was an old-timey wooden shoe rack. It looked like we were expected to leave our shoes there before entering the house. There were no other shoes on the rack. I ran my finger along one shelf, and it picked up dust. The people living there weren't neat freaks, that was for sure.

"Who are you?"

We'd been spotted by a man carrying a parcel. He was quite tall, and the large parcel made him look even bigger and more intimidating as he approached. The heels of his sloppily-slipped-on shoes click-clacked against the floor.

I looked at his eyes, wondering if he might be related to Umi, and I saw they were exactly like hers and Ms. Chitaira's. A cold chill ran down my spine.

"What do you want here?"

His tone was sharp, telling us we weren't welcome, although maybe he was so annoyed because his hands were full and he couldn't wipe the sweat off his face. Still, his expression and attitude made me instantly feel antipathy toward him.

I glanced over at Umi, waiting for her to explain why we'd come. She looked lost, though; her eyes were swimming, beads of sweat on her face. Being so petite, she looked like a child cowering in front of a scolding adult. Imposing house gates didn't scare her, but people did.

"Does Chitaira… Does Shiho live here?"

"Shiho?"

The man's prickly attitude got even pricklier. It seemed the Chitaira family disapproved of Umi's sister and her unconventional lifestyle.

"You're looking for her? Who are you?"

His reservations toward the guests in his house had given way to open suspicion. It was honestly scary for me to have an adult glare at me like that, and I understood why Ms. Chitaira didn't bring her girlfriends home. Umi was scared, too, staring at her feet.

Although we only knew a little about Ms. Chitaira's past, I had a feeling people like this guy had been giving her a lot of grief.

"What…?" the man growled, noticing Umi's eyes.

I sensed trouble and wished I wasn't there, my anxiety rising. They say waves sound louder to people who are drowning, and in my case, it was the buzzing of cicadas that suddenly seemed to intensify. The noise was towering over me, pushing me into the floor.

"What's going on there?" someone asked in a drawn-out voice.

A tall, old man came into the house from the grove. He was carrying a sack filled with soil and wearing a short yukata for gardening. I could see his wrinkled ankles and wrists. His hair, tied at the back, was almost all white, while his skin was bronze from the sun. That old man had hazel eyes like Umi. It must have been a dominant trait in this family.

"Is there a problem?"

The man who'd seen us first relayed what Umi had said. Maybe I only imagined it, but it looked to me like the old man's eyes lit up at the mention of Shiho.

"How unusual. Shiho doesn't bring her girls home," the old man said.

He looked at me with undisguised curiosity, coming closer. He smelled like dirt, but maybe that was just the smell of that bag of soil. The dry, earthy smell suited him, I thought, as he stared at my blond hair.

"Um…"

"There are many blond girls out there, but few look good with this color. Shiho made a great find," he commented appreciatively.

He'd mistaken me for one of Ms. Chitaira's girlfriends. I wanted to clear that up and tell him it was Umi that was her girlfriend, but on second thought, that might have been problematic.

It seemed Ms. Chitaira's proclivities weren't a secret.

While the old man was intrigued by my hair color, he didn't remark on the color of Umi's eyes, even though he must have noticed it. Maybe with the whole family having hazel eyes, he simply found it boring?

"Well, come inside. Shiho's in bed in the room at the back."

"She's in bed…?"

I looked at the sun instead of checking the time. Some people took afternoon naps; I knew that… Ms. Chitaira was having a laid-back day, it seemed. Mine, on the other hand, was far from it.

I got the feeling that the younger man didn't want us in the house, but the old man patted me on the shoulder, saying "It's all right." The younger man walked off with a dissatisfied look on his face. He wasn't going to show us the way to Shiho's room.

"No one goes against me in this house," said the old man with a laugh.

Then he turned around and left us, too. His confident laugh reminded me of Ms. Chitaira. Was he the grandfather she had told us about? If so, he was Umi's grandfather, too. I couldn't tell if she was thinking the same, or if it mattered to her. Something else was on her mind.

"Shiho's still in bed… Is she sick?"

She was worried about her sister, assuming that being in bed at this hour meant being unwell. I was pretty sure Ms. Chitaira was just having a nap.

We'd been invited in, so we left the porch and entered the hallway. Nobody was there. The house was pretty dark, and everything was smooth—the slippery wooden floor, the furniture, the walls. Smooth, soft interiors conjured the image of wealth to me, but I wasn't even sure why. Maybe it was because I didn't have anything like that in my room.

After looking this way and that way uncertainly, Umi started walking to the right in her socks. I'd never been in a house where the entrance hall led in multiple directions. My apartment's floor plan was a straightforward rectangle. You couldn't really run in it without quickly coming to a wall, but in this residence, I'd probably be out of breath before reaching the end of the hallway.

The singing of cicadas began to fade, unable to follow our twin pair of footsteps deeper into the house. Umi had a reason to be in that house, but me? I had no connection to it. My head felt

slightly hotter than normal. Where else would I find myself following Umi Mizuike and Shiho Chitaira?

A door suddenly opened, and I tensed. Umi also stopped abruptly and took a few quick steps back timidly. It was cute.

A middle-aged man was eyeing us suspiciously. We dipped our heads in a shy greeting. At first, he cocked his head, but then he gave us the slightest of nods and passed us by, then suddenly turned and looked at Umi with great surprise. He was looking at her eyes, to be precise. He had hazel eyes, like her.

He was so rattled, I could venture a guess as to who he was…

His eyes still wide, the man pressed his lips into a tight line and quickly walked away.

“Wonder who that was,” said Umi.

“…Who knows?”

Could she really not guess? Did the category of father not exist in her head? To be fair, based on what Ms. Chitaira had told us, Umi had only had her mother, so the thought that she did in fact have a dad must have been totally alien to her.

I fell silent, thinking about how Umi’s dad, grandpa, and probably grandma, too, and other family members all lived in this house. She had lots of relatives. They might not want her, and she might not want them, but she had a family. I was a little envious. Umi had other places to be, unlike me. I only had that sad little room in a small apartment. Did I want another place to belong? Ever since I’d crossed paths with that wretched woman, I’d begun to break down and long for more places in the world where I’d feel welcome. It was getting hard to bear the thought of being confined to that hot, cramped room. But I knew there was no place for me beside Umi Mizuike and Shiho Chitaira. Why had I tagged along to this house, then? Why were we walking together down this long corridor? Seriously, though, where were we going?

“Umi…”

“Yeah?”

“You don’t really know where to go, right?”

She kept on walking, her small head bobbing up and down.

“No,” she admitted after a pause.

We’d been told Ms. Chitaira was in a room at the back, but how far back? Which room was it? Rich-people houses stretched really

far, with lots of rooms you could describe as “at the back.”

After walking for a while, not knowing where to stop, we came out onto a…walkway? Outdoor hallway? Whatever you called it, it was on the outside of the building and went around the inner garden. Out in the sunshine, my neck and feet started sweating again. We kept walking in silence, but we were effectively lost.

The garden was a dazzling miniature landscape. There were those trees that looked like giant green mushrooms that I was sure I knew the name of, but I couldn’t recall it just then. I’d never before seen a garden with a stone path winding through it. There was even a pond. Having lived my entire life in an apartment block where gardens weren’t a thing people had, I felt like I’d stepped into a different world.

I saw someone moving among the trees. Based on his posture and white hair tied at the back, it was the old man we’d met earlier. He was resting long pruning shears against his shoulder, looking up at the trees.

I was wondering if we should go and ask him which room was Ms. Chitaira’s when he noticed us. For a while, he just watched us, tilting his head to the side. Then he laughed.

“Ah, of course! My bad, my bad indeed!”

He started walking toward us, opening and closing the shears. I squealed in fright, my heart in my throat. The old man looked at the shears as if he’d only then noticed what he was doing. He laughed again, but he kept snipping them anyway. I wished he’d stop it already.

“You don’t know which room it is. Well, let me show you.”

We didn’t even have to explain our predicament. The old man was as observant and sharp-witted as his evil granddaughter.

He shook off his sandals and stepped up onto the walkway barefooted, smelling of soil and dry sunshine. We followed him. His height added to the feeling of authority, but it also meant we couldn’t see anything from behind his back.

“I would love to see Shiho’s flustered face, but I have a lot of work left in the garden…,” he said to us over his shoulder with amusement.

He cast a glance at us, smiling. Just like Ms. Chitaira, this man seemed to find everything entertaining, laughter at the ready no matter what was happening.

“As a rule, Shiho keeps what’s precious to her well away from this house,” he said.

Shiho didn’t want to tell us about her family for a reason. I thought the old man was wrong about me having any value to Ms. Chitaira, but we’d probably made a big mistake coming to that house. Not that knowing it was a mistake would make Umi turn back.

“It’s this room. Go on in, don’t worry about waking her up.”

After pointing out one of the rooms about midway through the long hallway, the old man turned around and started walking away. After a few steps, he suddenly turned again.

“You, young lass.”

He was looking straight at Umi, the long shears resting against his shoulder.

“Yes…?”

She was about to open the door to Shiho’s room, but she froze, startled, when the old man spoke to her.

He watched her intently in silence for a few breaths, and then he smiled.

“It’s good you don’t resemble your father,” he said with satisfaction.

And then he left us to do his gardening.

So the old man had recognized his granddaughter in Umi. On the other hand, she might still not have realized who he was, based on her indifferent reaction.

“I wouldn’t know,” she said. “I’ve never seen him.”

“Yeah…”

She had seen him!

Moving on…

We were in front of the sliding door to Shiho’s room… Which part of a sliding door do you knock on? Or maybe you don’t knock? I’d never been in a traditional Japanese residence before, so I didn’t know the etiquette. As I fretted over what to do, Umi simply went to the door and slowly slid it open a little. We stuck our heads in to look inside…and jumped as another pair of eyes met ours.

Ms. Chitaira’s gaze fell on my blond hair, and her pupils shrunk as if she were looking at the sun. At first, she seemed guarded, but soon enough her face relaxed into her usual easy

smile that drew eyes and people to her.

“Welcome to my house, Umi and Takasora.”

Light from the open sliding door fell on Ms. Chitaira, who sat up on her futon and was gently beckoning us in. The shimmering, summery air created a strange, dreamy atmosphere.

Ms. Chitaira looked so pure and delicate in her white pajamas… No, her sleeping yukata? Her dark hair blended with the shadows, giving the illusion of it being so long it reached down to the floor. What really struck me was her face, though, which had lost its vitality, like a withering plant at the end of its season. That face spoke volumes.

I shuddered when I stepped into the room, as much from the cold air inside as from the sudden unease of entering the room of an apparently sick person.

I couldn’t smell Ms. Chitaira’s flowery perfume. Maybe it was disguised by the smell of the tatami mats. Western-style furniture and accessories stood out in that traditional Japanese room, which gave me the impression that Ms. Chitaira had had it furnished to her own preference, although she still slept in the futon spread on the floor. We politely sat down beside it.

Ms. Chitaira rested her hands in front of her. She was pale, but her forearms didn’t look any thinner than before.

“Close the door. I have the AC on.”

“Oh, sorry…”

I reached behind me to pull the door closed. While I was turned away, Umi’s voice broke as she said, “S-Sis…”

Ms. Chitaira smiled.

“Yes, dear?”

“Are you…sick?” Umi asked fearfully, as if she wanted to shrink away from her own question.

“Well, you see…,” Ms. Chitaira began, still smiling.

I noticed Umi was squeezing her hands into fists, her sharp knuckles and veins prominent. I looked at my hands. They were hot and sweaty, but I held them open.

“After saying good-bye to you the other day, I realized I’d left my bag in Takasora’s apartment…,” Ms. Chitaira continued. “I thought about going back to get it, but that would have undone the impression I wanted to leave you with, so I decided to walk home instead.”

“…What?”

“I didn’t know the way home on foot, though, and I didn’t have any money on me, or my phone. That walk home might have been the most extreme thing I’ve done in my entire life. Three days later, I finally made it here, and I was surprised I was still alive.”



She laughed as if recounting a funny episode, her cheeks gaunt. I had thought she was going to confess she was suffering from a serious illness or something. The hard feeling leaving my chest—was that relief? In any case, I didn't get the sense that Ms. Chitaira had made that story up. She'd worn herself out walking for three days. Her face did speak volumes, but I'd misunderstood the message.

Ms. Chitaira was crazy. Totally crazy. There was no other way to describe it… I did try, but the only other words that came to me were *stupid* and *idiotic*, and they didn't quite fit.

I knew she didn't have her bag—I'd noticed that right after we'd gotten back home—but I had assumed she had at least her wallet with her. Nobody in their right mind would have done what Ms. Chitaira had in that situation, but then again, I knew she wasn't normal.

Umi, who'd been stressing out thinking her sister was ill, only managed to mumble "Oh… You walked home…" in response. She was back to acting the way she had been before the whole sister thing had come up.

"Yes. I'm not sick, but I've been a bit under the weather and stayed in bed for a couple days." Ms. Chitaira smiled a little sadly, her eyes unusually sharp. "But I'm fine now. I was only sleeping in today. Gosh, I have bed head," she added, pinching a strand of her hair that was sticking out and examining it with amusement.

It certainly looked like she'd been in bed until we'd dropped in.

"By the way, I brought your bag…" Umi reverently handed it over to her sister.

"Thanks."

Ms. Chitaira smiled as usual and graciously beckoned us to come even closer, even though I thought we were already at her bedside. Umi shuffled across the floor. I sighed, not sure if at Umi or Ms. Chitaira, wondering whether I should just stay back as Ms. Chitaira pulled Umi into an embrace.

"Did you miss your big sister, Umi?"

Umi raised her head as if she were going to say something defiant, but then she thought better of it and buried her face in her sister's bosom instead.

"…Yeah."

"It's cute when you're so honest, but it leaves me a little

unsatisfied.”

“What do you want me to do…?”

Umi’s long hair draped over her back, its dark river spreading into many little streams. Ms. Chitaira gathered it with her hand and watched it slide back, smiling.

“You come over here too, Takasora.”

“Wait, what…?”

“No!” Umi snapped, clinging to her sister.

It wasn’t even like I was yearning for her sister to hug me, I didn’t know why Ms. Chitaira wanted me to join in, so I really didn’t appreciate the hostility. I narrowed my eyes, glaring at the jealous Umi. Girlfriend, sister—it didn’t seem to matter to her what Shiho Chitaira was; she was hopelessly obsessed with her regardless.

“Don’t say that, Umi. She came all the way here with you.”

Ms. Chitaira was insisting on this group hug. So who should I please, Umi or her? Honestly, I didn’t want to listen to either of them, but there was no third choice.

While I was hesitating, Ms. Chitaira made a move. She shuffled toward me, pulling her covers with her, and wrapped an arm around my shoulders. I didn’t get to choose in the end. Ms. Chitaira pressed both me and Umi to her chest.

“I get *all* the girls,” she said with satisfaction.

She wasn’t holding me in a viselike grip, so why didn’t I just shake her arm off and wiggle free?

I stole a glance at Umi. She was watching me, pouting angrily. Cute.

“So, Umi, did you come with her for company?”

“…Kind of.”

I’d tagged along because I didn’t want the two of them to be alone together, but which of them was I really guarding? Umi? Or Ms. Chitaira? My head was spinning, and I couldn’t tell anymore which of them mattered to me more. When I was hanging out with Umi, I was in love with her, but whenever I was with Ms. Chitaira, things weren’t so clear-cut. It gave me the most awful headache.

I shouldn’t really be comparing Umi with this wicked woman, but somehow, I was putting them on the scales, and they weren’t tipping one way or the other.

Ms. Chitaira was like a modern-day witch, exploiting your psychology to keep you under her spell.

"Umi, Takasora is a really nice girl. It'd be a terrible waste for you two not to be friends." Ms. Chitaira spoke softly, not in an older sister voice, but in a motherly tone.

Now she was being the mother with us as her babies? I thought my head would explode.

"I'll be friends with her if she doesn't get friendly with you."

Umi treated both of us to a silent, accusatory stare.

Ms. Chitaira stroked her back, unruffled. "I get *all* the girls," she repeated.

"I don't want to be friends with her…"

I hated that woman, didn't I? Yet somehow I was sitting on her bed, being cuddled. She always got me to do exactly what she wanted, as if she'd cast a spell on me.

"How did you know where to find me…? Ah, Ms. Izumi must have told you."

"Yeah, I got it from Mom."

"She remembered the way after all those years? That scatterbrain?"

"I also worried she'd have forgotten…"

Umi's mom used to work here, but…I couldn't really picture her holding down any kind of job. Not to be rude, but, well. At least she'd started helping out with housework a little recently, but normally she seemed to spend her days out walking in town, sleeping, or goofing around with my mom. I did wonder if my mom had something going on with her.

"Well, it's nice of you to come to visit me, but…"

Ms. Chitaira paused. Her fingers on my shoulder felt warmer, as if blood had rushed to them.

"I never wanted you to come to this house," she continued in a stern voice I wasn't used to hearing. "Only bad people live here, and that includes me."

I often called her bad or wicked in my head, but I was jolted when she said that about herself. It reminded me that I'd grown up in an environment free from conflict, where people didn't make scathing remarks about themselves or their family.

"Do you mind waiting while I get dressed? I'd like to go out somewhere together."

She got up without waiting for an answer. Umi was still clinging to her. Ms. Chitaira unceremoniously peeled her off and pushed her toward me. Umi bumped into me shoulder-first, and we both fell over onto the futon. Even when someone is much smaller than you, it hurts when they hit you with a bony part of their body.

Umi quickly got up, her long hair getting in my face and sticking to it. I brushed it off, but it got caught on my fingers. I accidentally pulled it, making Umi cry out. Her hair was like a tangle of seaweed, and I was finding it difficult to free myself from it.

“Hey, stop pulling my hair!”

“Sorry.”

I was still struggling with disentangling myself.

“Ow, jeez!”

“Huh?”

I was surprised to hear her swear.

“Oh… Um… You were hurting me.”

“Yeah, I got that…”

I wondered if she actually swore often in her head.

She stopped trying to get away from me and moved closer instead, leaning in so her chest pressed against mine. Her soft scent wafted up to my face. I opened and closed my mouth like a fish puffing out rings of smoke. Completely unperturbed, Umi set about pulling her tangled hair off my fingers.

As we repositioned on the futon to make that task easier, Umi suddenly yelped with surprise. My heart racing, I looked up to follow her gaze, and I was assaulted by yet another unexpected sight—Ms. Chitaira had taken off her sleeping yukata and was standing there stark naked. My head went blank.

“Put some clothes on!” Umi and I shouted in unison.

“Why are you upset?”

She turned toward us unashamedly, tilting her head to the side quizzically. Then she looked down at her exposed body.

“Ah, I see… But we have all seen each other naked before.”

“We have, but…” Umi shot me a warning look. “Don’t be naked in front of Sora.”

“Why not?”

“I think she likes you too much.”

“No I don’t.”

“Aw, I’m sad to hear that.”

That awful woman didn’t sound sad at all as she said that. She wasn’t even trying to act. She put her hand on her hip, zero shame whatsoever, and smiled with satisfaction.

The thought that I’d felt the breasts of both of these sisters somehow filled me with embarrassment. Well, rightly so.

It wasn’t a dress or a blouse Ms. Chitaira chose, but a neatly folded yukata in a light purple color. She began to put it on in a practiced manner. I watched her sleek back, her shoulder blades, her soft…um, derriere disappear under the fabric, not knowing what to do with my eyes. I felt like she was putting on a show for me… I was restless, my heartbeat matching the gentle movements of Ms. Chitaira’s fingers. I was having strange palpitations. This woman was so bad for my heart.

I sensed something and looked to the side, meeting Umi’s sideways stare.

“What?” I asked.

“You perv.”

I realized she’d been watching my eyes, and it took a lot of willpower for me to appear unmoved by her accusation.

“Who are you calling a perv?”

“You. Ogling my sister’s body.”

I *had* ogled her.

“It’s not my fault she was standing there naked, is it?” I protested weakly.

I didn’t have the guts to confidently deny everything. I wouldn’t have gotten myself in this whole situation if I had a more confident personality.

“And you think it’s okay for you to look at her?”

“…Why, do you get to decide who looks at her?”

Umi was normally so timid, pretending she didn’t exist, but she was fierce when it came to her sister. It was as if her humanity was entirely dependent on her sister. Without Shiho Chitaira, Umi was a mere shadow. It wasn’t a healthy way to live, but she seemed to thrive on it. It was too late to change her.

“Don’t fight, girls. It’s simply too hilarious to have you so hot under the collar because I let you see my naked body.”

“You shouldn’t be naked with anyone other than me.”

“Oh, is that so?” Ms. Chitaira asked with delighted mischief in her voice.

“Yes.”

“I didn’t know that!”

She’d obviously said that only to placate Umi.

“Are yukatas your go-to outfits?” I asked to change the topic.

“Hmm. It depends on what mood I’m in and what I have planned for the day.”

“I love how you look in yukatas, Sis.” Umi just had to get a word in. She was like a small dog, always yapping.

“I’m glad you do! Tonight, I’ll have to go somewhere with a traditional dress code. It’s a bit of a tiresome affair if you ask me,” Ms. Chitaira explained, tightening her obi sash. She got her wallet and pulled us up to our feet. “Let’s go!”

Then she wrapped her arms around our shoulders and walked us out of her room, leaving the AC switched on—but it was her house, so it shouldn’t have bothered me.

We walked out of sync in the external corridor around the garden. My sweat quickly evaporated, cooling my body. I noticed Ms. Chitaira had to walk hunched a bit to keep her arm around Umi, who was shorter.

Ms. Chitaira easily spotted a tanned figure among the garden vegetation.

“The old man told you where to find me?”

Her tone was as calm as usual, but I was surprised by the rude way she referred to her grandfather.

“Yes. That guy was the one who let us in.”

Based on Umi’s reply, she still hadn’t put two and two together.

“Of course it had to be him. Anyone else would have turned you away.”

“…What about your grandmother?” I asked, remembering she had been raised by both her grandparents.

“She passed away a long time ago,” she said without emotion. “Besides, she wouldn’t have let you in, either, even though she was an oddball.”

Was it only oddballs that let guests into this house?

We left without saying good-bye to Umi’s grandpa. As soon as we walked past the gate, Ms. Chitaira’s hands slid down from our shoulders, and her fingers found ours. We carried on walking

while holding hands, me on Ms. Chitaira's left side, Umi on her right. At first, I was a bit taken aback when the woman took my hand, but at least her touch took my mind off the summer heat. Only the cicadas were loudly reminding me of the season.

"Now, where shall we go?"

Flanked by me and Umi, Ms. Chitaira was in a terrific mood. There was a spring in her step, as if she were walking on clouds. Even her voice was bouncy. Her fair skin seemed to reflect the sweltering heat, keeping her cool.

"My star and my ocean…" Without slowing down, she looked from me to Umi and back again as if she'd only just noticed us. "Why don't we admire the starry sky today?"

My heart skipped a beat as I wondered if she meant it figuratively or if it was a reference to my name. Umi gave me the stink eye. But I supposed Ms. Chitaira was being literal and was only talking about stargazing.

"The ocean's well worth seeing, too, but let's plan for it. That way, we'll all have swimsuits."

Ms. Chitaira's lips stretched into a wide smile as she very obviously stared at Umi's boobs. That kind of stare could get a person accused of sexual harassment, but when the perpetrator was a beautiful woman with a pleasant, gentle smile, somehow she got a free pass to ogle as much as she wanted. Some people were born more fortunate, and they could get away with more than normal people.

Perhaps for the first time, I was annoyed I had a name that was also a common noun. Like Umi. When Ms. Chitaira talked about the ocean or the starry sky, my first thought was always that she meant Umi or me, and I looked for hidden meanings she might not have even intended.

"How are we going to see any stars? It's daytime," I said.

"If you know where to look, you might see a star right now," Ms. Chitaira replied.

Again, I couldn't help wondering if she was being playful with words. That's how smart people let you know they're oh-so-clever.

"Where I'm going to take you, though, anyone can see stars at any time of the day," she added.

"…Ah, I know where that is."

I figured there must be a planetarium nearby. Umi was staring

blankly, but soon enough, she gave up on thinking about it. Her gaze dropped to her hand, clasped by her sister's, and she smiled with contentment.

What did I want to give Umi? She already had what she wanted, and now she was jealously guarding it. She was full of love, and there was no room in her heart for anyone else. I was too late to ever see a gap I could squeeze into. My love was stillborn.

I walked on, holding hands with the girl I loved and her sister-slash-girlfriend. Neither of them loved me. It was glaringly obvious I shouldn't be there, but it was too hot for me to resist. I was feeling too sluggish to tear my hand away. Not one to give in to resignation completely, I raised my head and looked up at the sky to search for any stars hidden in the sunlight. I couldn't see any.

We passed by the public library and through a park, and then we walked some more. Eventually, we arrived at a building with structures that looked like giant slides and a silver globe. The globe shone in the sunlight, as if it were a miniature sun that had dropped down on Earth. The path to the entrance was lined with all sorts of curious metal objects. When we got closer, I saw that the globe was a model of Earth, with "Children's Museum" written at the front.

We went in, and there was a ticket desk across from the entrance.

"Let Big Sis buy you tickets," Ms. Chitaira said to us, triumphantly raising her wallet.

"Big Sis is only mine," Umi said dumbly, always jumping at every opportunity to assert her exclusive rights to Ms. Chitaira.

I didn't have the energy to feel annoyed.

Ms. Chitaira turned and smirked mischievously at Umi, making the peace sign with her hand.

"Two adult and one child ticket, please," she said to the receptionist.

"What?!"

Umi tapped her on the back, but Ms. Chitaira ignored her.

"Ha! They believed me!" she rejoiced after we left the ticket

desk.

She had bought three adult tickets in the end, though. Just as the receptionist had entered the amount due, she'd confessed that the short girl behind her was a grown-up, too. The receptionist had given her a frustrated look, but Ms. Chitaira didn't mind—she'd had her fun.

"Do I look like a middle schooler? Is it…just because I'm short?"

Sulking, Umi put her hand on her head, and then raised it to her sister's height.

"I don't stand a chance, do I?" she muttered, dropping her hand.

Ms. Chitaira smiled softly at her little sister. It was a terrifying smile, irresistibly charming, drawing her victims to her like a flame attracts moths. How many high school girls had been burned by her? Chillingly, even her own sister wasn't immune to it.

Even inside the building, Ms. Chitaira held our hands. We walked down a spiral staircase, and the walls were painted to look as if we were going inside an ancient shell. In the basement, trees were painted on the wall for a forest background.

The basement was an exhibition hall with all sorts of items on display. There were masks and folk outfits from different periods in history, a stand where you could measure your temperature, a table with lots of toys I'd never seen before, and a giant egg at the center of the room. Kids were poking that egg. Its peeling label informed us it was a model of a dinosaur egg.

"Oh, this takes me back! The display hasn't changed at all," Ms. Chitaira said happily, squeezing in between the children to look at the egg.

"Do you come here often, Sis?"

Calling Ms. Chitaira "Sis" had become pretty natural to Umi.

"I used to. Nowadays, I always go to the third floor."

She told us she'd just felt like taking a look at the basement first that day. We did a full circle around the room, and then Ms. Chitaira started walking back up the stairs briskly. It wasn't the first time I'd thought she walked with the same energy as a child, as if nothing in life ever made her tired. Maybe some people were just like that. Or maybe she had energy to spare because unlike

us, she'd slept in late.

"Our destination's on the third floor. Let's go!"

Our hands swayed back and forth as we walked. How much longer was she going to hold our hands? Why was she doing it anyway?

We walked back up the stairs and passed by the ticket desk. An arts-and-crafts workshop for children was taking place in the area at the back. There was a signboard with "Tickets Sold Out" written on it. No one had ever taken me to an event like that, so I marveled at how good those kids had it.

Ms. Chitaira led us up another spiral flight of stairs to the circular second floor with bluish lights, which created the illusion that the AC was stronger there. The room featured a lot of desks, with PCs showing some space-related images. Monitors on the walls displayed orbits of the planets in the Solar System and played back prerecorded commentary. To me, it was weird to see so many screens around—we didn't have a computer at home. Kids were sitting there talking, not even looking at the PCs. Apparently, they were there just for the AC. I couldn't help staring at their slender, tanned arms. I'd never had a tan when I was a kid. My household situation hadn't nurtured a love for the outdoors in me, to say the least. I'd spent my summer holidays diligently doing homework, house chores, and sitting in front of the fan. I'd been a very well-behaved child. Nobody had praised me for being good, but praise was due, and I gave it now to my past self.

There were no stairs to the next floor. We had to take the elevator, which was already waiting in a dim corridor leading to the emergency exit. It was smaller compared with the one at the hotel, without any decor. It shook disconcertingly as it transported us a little closer to the sky.

The elevator moved for a long time, but when it stopped, the floor number displayed was still only "3." The door opened, and we stepped out into a long, narrow corridor going in a circle along the outer wall of the building. We passed by posters advertising summer events and went through a purple door.

"We're in the globe you saw outside," Ms. Chitaira explained as if she were a tour guide.

"Huh."

The room had purple walls, a purple floor, and an atmosphere of mystery. The floor slanted down with several rows of seats. Many were still empty. Ms. Chitaira wasn't letting go of our hands, so we had to find three free seats next to each other.

"Do you mind if I'm in the middle?" Ms. Chitaira asked us before sitting down in a row on the right side of the projector.

"I don't mind," Umi said, looking at me.

I guessed she didn't care where she sat as long as it was next to her precious sister. If I tried to get in the middle, she wouldn't have it.

"Sit wherever you like," I said.

It was less hassle to keep our formation than to change who was holding whose hand. Why were we still holding hands anyway?

"I don't get all the girls, so I can be on the edge," I added.

The center seat wasn't my place.

"Takasora, you could be immensely popular if you wanted," Ms. Chitaira said with a sigh, adjusting her reclining chair right next to me.

The upholstery was purple, and so was Ms. Chitaira's yukata. She was blending in.

"You've been dealt the winning hand right at the start of the game, Takasora."

"I'm not sure what you mean, but something tells me your mind's in the gutter," I said, verbalizing what I'd been thinking.

She'd say anything with that charming smile plastered on her face just to get your attention. Maybe she even did that with the full knowledge you could see through her.

Umi moved the backrest of her seat into a reclining position and stared at the purple around us.

"Why are we sitting here? What's gonna happen?" she asked her sister.

I looked past Ms. Chitaira at Umi, in complete disbelief. Had she never heard of planetariums? Did she live under a rock? It was a miracle she could hold a conversation and attend school like a normal person.

"You'll find out soon. I promise, it'll be fun."

Ms. Chitaira didn't tease Umi. Far from it—she spoke to her with a gentle patience that could deceive you into thinking she

was a caring older sister.

"I'm sure I'll like it. I always like it, wherever you take me."

"…Heh-heh-heh."

A lecherous tone found its way into Ms. Chitaira's laughter, which was how I knew it was probably sincere.

The lights suddenly darkened like a candle being blown out. The show repeated throughout the day was about to start again. There were still many empty seats around.

It was actually my first time in an observatory's planetarium.

We sat there in pitch-darkness. Why is it that your shoulders feel heavier when it's dark?

I felt something touch my collarbone—it was only the cold air from the AC, but it made me shudder. I couldn't see anything. The hand I was still holding over the handrest was my only anchor. It irritated me to think this woman was happy to hold my hand when I hadn't yet established what my feelings were toward her.

…She thought I was attractive enough to be popular, huh? I'd agree with that, except that somehow the girl I wanted treated me like air. So much for Ms. Chitaira's assessment of my appeal.

I sank back into the plush seat and gazed at the darkness, thinking about how much the tickets to this place cost. A few moments later, we saw the five-hundred-yen starry sky.

I heard a mechanical noise diagonally above us, but it was still dark in the room. I felt like I was floating in the dark, with only my sister's warm hand to keep myself oriented. Something was about to start, but what? Was this a movie theater? I'd never been to one, but I knew they switched the lights off before the screenings. I'd rather watch my sister's profile than any movie, though. I hadn't seen her for an entire week.

I'd known her as Chiki for much longer than I'd known her as a sister, but it felt more natural for me to think of her as my sister. Whenever I thought, "This is my sister," my heart ached from emotion.

My jaw started quivering. I wanted to call her "Sis" so bad. I wanted to cling to her arm and cry on her shoulder.

I didn't know what to call this tight feeling in my chest. Being away from my sister, by any distance, made me impatient. I

leaned in toward her to be closer. Another emotion, not the love I'd been feeling before, had stuck its fingers into the mesh fence around my heart and started rattling it. Rattling me.

Sis…

I was breathing that word in and out instead of oxygen. Maybe that was why my chest was hurting.

My stream of thoughts was interrupted by dots of light appearing in the darkness. It took me a moment to understand those lights were meant to be stars in the night. There were too many of them, like pretty, shining grains of sand scattered over the dark sky. That was how the sky was supposed to look, I guessed.

I hadn't really seen real stars much. For most of my nights, I had curled up small and hoped to survive by not making any sounds to draw attention to myself. The sounds I heard at night made me nervous. They reminded me why I was there and what it cost. They caused me physical pain.

The image of the night sky didn't make me feel anything. It was just an alien sight. But when I looked up, I shuddered, suddenly sure I was doing something bad. The muscles in my neck tensed up, and so did my shoulders. My sister must have felt it, because her hand tightened around mine. Her face was lit up by the fake night sky. I was happy to see her lips were gently curving upward. None of the stars could compete with my sister's sparkling eyes.

The sky above us started to change, and a staff member, whose name I didn't catch, started explaining what we were seeing, beginning with the stars we'd be able to see that night—what constellations were visible and where they were in the sky. *What would they talk about if tonight's sky was gonna be too cloudy to see anything?* I wondered, half listening to the fancy names of stars that I had no hope of remembering.

I didn't know any constellations, or where I'd been born, or even my blood type.

It wasn't the staff's fault I was bored. The stories about the stars were weird, but kind of poetic, maybe… I wasn't engaged because I had no interest in the stars, so I just sat quietly through the show. The star talk was simple enough for anyone to understand, but I didn't have the basics to really wrap my head

around it.

I kept taking my eyes off the stars and looking at my sister instead. As she happily admired them, she was radiant. She was my star.

Sometimes, when I was looking at my sister, my eyes would meet Sora's. She always looked at me like she wanted to say something, but whatever it was, it wouldn't spill out. Like tears when you were holding in too much. She'd say nothing, or she'd say something that wasn't what I saw in her eyes. Sora listened to reason, and she was a good person. Better than anyone else I'd met. My sister was unendingly kind to me, but was she a good person? There were arguments against that. Like, a good person wouldn't be hitting on other girls when she already had a girlfriend. My sister couldn't help herself.

Where was I…? Right. Sora—she was a good person. And she loved me…apparently. That was kind of a problem. Maybe I was being heartless calling her a problem, but I had no idea what to do about her loving me. I'd learned how to deal with nasty people, scary people, my mother, and my lover, but I had no experience with friends or classmates.

Sora didn't think of me as a classmate or a friend, though. When she'd timidly felt my breasts, I'd seen it in her face. Her cheeks flushed, and her eyes darkened with desire. I could hear the wild thumping of her heart. She couldn't hide it. I knew what it felt like—I'd been like that, too, with my sister. I didn't feel that way about Sora, though. She didn't melt anything in my chest. My caring, sweet, loving sister was all I wanted.

It was my sister who had taught me about all those things that were good, shaping my understanding of them until nobody else could fit into those shapes. This might be wrong on many levels, but…if Sora could be caring, sweet, and loving exactly in the same way as my sister, I'd totally fall in love with her, but that was impossible.

Maybe, if I'd met Sora before Shiho, I'd have felt differently about her. But if I hadn't met my sister that day, I probably wouldn't have met Sora, either. So Sora and I just weren't fated to be a thing.

I liked Sora, but in a way she wasn't happy about. Like I mentioned before, I felt like I'd be comfortable living together

with her for a long time, but it would probably be best for both of us if I moved away.

If my sister didn't reciprocate my feelings, I'd probably just die. And Sora might be feeling the same way about me…so it wasn't good for us to be near each other. I should move out soon, even though I didn't dislike sleeping next to Sora in that stuffy room.

Those were the thoughts running through my head when I was looking at Sora, who sat on the opposite side of my sister. I only knew Sora from one side.

She was looking back at me for a while, but in the end, she escaped my gaze, looking at the fake night sky again. Feeling left out somehow, I also turned my head to look at the stars and spaced out again.

"…"

So many little lights that did nothing for me. Why was I looking at them? Not that there was anything wrong with the stars; it was me. I didn't want to think about my past, but it was something I could never forget, and it was killing me to think I'd have to go back to living like that again.

The only places I'd go were the houses of strangers and whatever school I was attending. Straying from the path home could end in the lights getting kicked out of me. I remembered getting yelled at—"What if someone finds out?!"—being knocked off my feet and landing on my elbow, which hurt so bad I couldn't move at first. I thought I'd gotten a bad bruise or something, but the bad part turned out to be the pain slightly higher than my armpit, which didn't go away for a very long time. It hurt to breathe, so much I thought I might throw up, and I made a strange wheezing sound. I had to curl up and force myself to stop breathing to ease the pain for a moment. I did that at night so I could fall asleep, and it'd turned into a habit. Thinking about it now, I'd probably cracked a bone.

The person who'd done that to me was family, if you called the people you lived with family. They were all basically like that. My mother did nothing to protect me from the temporary families who despised me. I was the outcast, loved by nobody, the target for violence.

But then I'd found family that was different—my sister. Saying

that word, even just in my head, filled my chest with something warm and sticky. I lapped up that feeling. It was sweet, in between sugar and chocolate, and thick. I was addicted to it after the first taste. That was why I'd had to come and find my sister that day.

When my sister was holding me, I was full. There were no gaps left for bad thoughts. Shiho filled them all. My idea of perfect happiness was her taking over every cell of my body.

It must've been because I was sitting in that dark room that all those memories and thoughts kept coming to me.

The image of the starry sky kept shifting, and a long line like a river of light appeared. For some reason, my eyes teared up when I saw it. Maybe I'd forgotten to blink, and my eyes had gotten so dry that they'd gone watery. Or it was from relief, that a day had come in my life when I could relax gazing at the stars.

I shut my eyes, but I could still feel the stars on the undersides of my eyelids.

A little later, the staff member who had been telling us about stars came into the room, and there was applause, so I opened my eyes. The starry sky was gone, and the light came back as abruptly as it had disappeared earlier.

"It never gets old," said my sister.

She beamed, satisfied with the show. Even her voice had livened up.

"Did you enjoy it too, Takasora?"

"…No."

Sora's eyes were dry, but I heard tears in her voice. After replying to my sister, her eyes fell on me, and she froze awkwardly. My sister noticed and turned toward me, too. I guessed I still had tears streaming from my eyes. Shiho didn't try to wipe them, though. The other time I'd had a big cry, she hadn't wiped them, either. She didn't see crying as a bad thing. She smiled at me with acceptance.

"Umi," she said. "You've seen so many stars today. Why not make a wish?"

"Make…a wish?"

Speaking made more tears gush from my eyes.

"People have been wishing on stars since ancient times."

The show was over, and the ceiling above us was a starless

purple. The only shining star left was next to me. Whenever I looked at her, my shoulders trembled. There were so many feelings inside me, I was drowning in them, but I didn't know what to say. My sister watched me, silent and dazzling as the distant stars.

She'd asked me many times what I wanted from her, what I expected from her as my sister.

What did I wish for? Just to be close to her. Just to be with my sister. I wanted to have a place next to someone who would be happy to have me there. I wanted someone to care about me.

"I want to have a sister that's all mine."

My wishes started pouring out of me like they were bleeding from a wound in my shoulder. My voice was wobbling like an earthworm.

"I want someone who accepts me. Someone that won't hit me. Someone caring and not scary, just caring, caring, caring, caring, caring. Warm and caring. Accepting. Who accepts me."

Not sure how to say what I meant, I simply let my wish tumble out of my mouth in my pathetically limited vocabulary. My head was on fire as I scrambled to find the right words, drawing a blank every time. Memories of the past pummeled my temples, knocking me back. Bad memories were piggybacking on one another, and I couldn't think about anything else. I'd had so many good, happy times with my sister since I'd met her—although I hadn't known she was my sister at the start—but I couldn't recall those good feelings. There was only this anxiety I could never shake off. The anxiety of knowing I couldn't keep my sister with me. Every time we said good-bye at the station, I felt like I was being shoved away toward the end of my life, alone. I hated the "byes," the "take cares." I didn't want to be constantly anxious. I wanted certainty. I wanted to get rid of my fears. Basically, I wanted…

"I want to be happy."

When I finally said it, something snapped in my brain. My head dropped, my eyes opened wide, and muffled grunts escaped from my mouth. I couldn't move my eyelids, and my eyeballs were drying up. My neck was hot, like blood was rushing up to my head. I could hear it bubbling.

"Hmm…" I heard my sister hum thoughtfully. "Happiness

means something different to every person, unfortunately."

Was she talking to me?

"Yeah, whatever," came an irritated response.

"Finding your own happiness is easy, but making someone else happy is a difficult task," my sister continued. "That's a line from that novel. Have you finished reading it yet?"

"What do you care…?" the angry voice came back.

"Umi's my little sister, though… I suppose it's on me to rise to the task."

I glanced up at Shiho and saw her close her eyes and smile with satisfaction.

"Besides…I have to keep my promise," she said.

"What promise?" I asked.

My sister raised her chin higher and smiled. Her warmth made flowers bloom, and it made their petals scatter in a gust of wind. She knew how to dose it just right.

"Umi, would you like to come live with me?"

She put her hands over mine, like that first time when my hand had been hurt.

"…What?"

"Not in that house, of course. We'd rent an apartment together. Just you and me, without your mother."

I slowly, fearfully raised my head, and I saw pure light. My eyes honestly saw just whiteness, nothing else. My sister's voice floated to me through that white light.

"I cannot think of another way to make you happy, my dear… Although I wish I could."

I didn't understand why she'd added that last part, but it didn't matter. What did matter was that I could be together with my sister. For the first time since I'd met her, there'd be no more long separations. I'd have my sister from morning until evening, and from evening until forever.

I tried to reply, but I only made gargling noises like I was clearing my throat. Blood was still gushing out from the part of my brain that had broken earlier.

It was a blessing, what my sister had said. A blessing that would last forever.

A red torrent spilled over the glowing whiteness, and I could see the outlines of what was around me again. Another star came

into focus in this dramatic two-color world. A star that had been hidden by the supernova of my sister.

Sora's eyes glistened like polished stones, but there was no light inside them.

Ms. Chitaira had walked us back to the station…or at least I thought she had. My head was cooked from the heat and from what had happened earlier, so my memories were hazy. When I snapped out of the shock, I was getting on the train back with Umi, shuddering while gallons of sweat poured out of my back and forehead.

"I'm going to move in with my sister," said Umi, looking out the window at the station. "I'll be happy with her."

"…Okay."

I couldn't think of anything better to say. I sure as hell wasn't going to tell her what I really thought about it, but I couldn't bring myself to fake feeling happy for her, either. I had nothing more to talk about with Umi. I'd be spending the journey staring out the window.

I'd known it was going to come to this, but I'd been completely powerless to stop it. It was like knowing a meteor was going to hit Earth in a week and everyone would die—you couldn't do anything to save yourself in that situation, either. Nobody had any right to tell two sisters they couldn't live together, including me.

Before leaving the planetarium, the wicked woman had apologized to me. I didn't want to think why.

"What about school?" I asked Umi.

"Dunno. I'll ask Shiho if we could find a place near my school… Actually, no, I don't care if I have to move to a different one…"

Ambivalent as always. She was unable to think into the future, as if she didn't really believe it would come. Meanwhile, I'd made the mistake of allowing myself to dream. That woman had crash-landed in the dreamless desert of my life, and now look what she'd done to me.

"I bet you care a little… And are you going to look for a job?"

Maybe she wouldn't need to work? Maybe all she wanted from her life was to be living together with her sister and doing

nothing else. If that was the case, I'd just have to let it go.

"I don't need to worry about it…"

"No? Why not?"

She giggled. "Because I'm planning to die after leaving high school."

The rumble of the train sliced my head in half. For a moment, my ears shut down, and all sounds disappeared. I stopped resting my chin in my hand and very slowly, carefully lifted my head. I was used to looking away from Umi, but this time, I held my gaze on her beautiful profile.

"What did you say?"

"Huh? I'm planning to die."

The word pierced my ears, refusing to be drowned out by the thrum of the train running on the tracks. Hair rose on my back and arms, and I had the urge to flinch away. But I couldn't do it while I was sitting down.

"You want to die…? Seriously?"

"Yeah. I'll have to do it myself. I can't ask anyone for help with this."

Umi's forehead creased as she stared into space.

"What's the best way to kill yourself without causing anyone trouble…?"

Was she muttering that to herself, or was she asking me to brainstorm with her? Please no.

I struggled to find my words, as if my head had been stretched out, like, seven meters behind me. The thinking cells were too far from the rest of my body.

"Sorry, but…what are you trying to say?"

"I'm saying what I'm saying? My sister won't love me anymore when I'm not a high schooler."

She was calm like a windless sea, while I was barefoot on a scorching-hot beach.

"I don't think she's that intense…"

I didn't get the impression her sister was completely ruthless. She wasn't being nice to her sister just to spite me; she did have a heart.

Umi shook her head at me.

"I've lived long enough now to know I'm useless. I know better than anyone there's no good future for me. I know if I work really

hard and make a lot of effort, I might be able to make a living. But it wouldn't be better than what I have now, because now I have a sister who loves me. This is as good as it gets," she said, sticking her big chest out.

The silent, massive waves of her resignation were coming at me, while I was stranded on the beach with no escape.

"She might still love me as a sister, but that's no good for me. I want all her love, including her love for high school girls. When I'm too old, I won't be able to stand her loving other girls. But that's how she is, and I can't change it. I can only die."

"N-no…"

No, no, no! This was too much for me. I couldn't wrap my head around what Umi was saying. This was worse than any exam question. It made no sense. There was so much wrong with it, I didn't even know where to start. She'd told me why she wanted to kill herself, but how was that a reason? How could she think that was her only option? Seriously… Who'd kill themselves for a stupid reason like that?

Weren't people supposed to want to live until old age, until their bodies and minds wore out…? Although, was that the right goal for everyone? If a movie's boring, you might want to switch it off before it gets to the end. But wasn't it more satisfying to make it all the way to the credits? Get your money's worth. Your life's worth. At least, that was how I saw it… Although maybe life wasn't like watching movies. If not, what was it like? What did I know?

"Do you even know what it means to die?"

She was so casual about it, talking about taking her own life without batting an eye, that I started to doubt she realized what death meant. I looked at her arms. They were so slender and delicate, it seemed she shouldn't be able to lift anything with one hand. How was she going to take her life, exactly?

"Do *you* know, Sora?" she asked back, shutting me up.

I couldn't know, never having experienced death myself, but everyone said suicide was bad, and thinking about dying made me shiver. The idea that death was to be avoided at all costs was visceral for me, and it was driving me insane that I couldn't logically explain it. Like having an itch you can't reach.

People just shouldn't kill themselves, and you shouldn't need

to explain why. If someone didn't understand that, maybe it was too late to help them.

I eventually said, "When you die, it's all over."

Umi nodded. "I want it to be over."

She cut me off before I'd made it to the end of the maze of her motivation. Here was a beautiful girl who had her mind set on suicide. What should I say? The mental load was too much for me. Umi was my first love, and I still loved her, but she didn't want my love. What could I say to make her reconsider throwing her life away?

"I think if you keep your uniform, you can pull off the high schooler look until you're twenty, at least," I heard myself say without any involvement from my brain.

"…You think it'll work?"

"Worth a try…"

I had to turn my eyes away from Umi, who was seriously considering my suggestion. The views outside the window were my escape. The train was crossing a metal bridge over a wide river that sparkled in the sunshine. Outside the window, it was a perfect summer day, but from my upper arms to my back, I felt a disquieting chill.

Umi was going to kill herself after graduating high school? She really meant it?

As that slowly sank in, I felt so shocked and confused again that I did a double take at Umi's calm resting face.

Once Umi got an idea in her head, that was all she could think about, and so the next day, she packed her stuff and was ready to move out. She didn't have much to pack, so it didn't take long.

She'd arrived in my home suddenly at the beginning of summer, as if blown in by a strong gust of wind. Summer wasn't over yet, but she was already leaving. That was what I'd wished for a long time ago when I had been a completely different person.

Umi was staring at the supposedly-five-million-yen ring on her middle finger. Was it going to be the last day I saw her childlike face framed by unruly, wavy hair? She didn't care about school anymore. She was on the self-destructive course she'd chosen.

What didn't make sense was that she was the calm one while I was losing my sanity.

Unable to stand how she was looking at that ring with her expression of total fulfillment, I asked her, "And what does your mom think about it?"

Her mom wasn't invited to move in with Ms. Chitaira. I wondered what she was going to do, but that wasn't the biggest of my worries.

"She said if I was sure I wanted to do it, she was okay with it."

"She's okay with you killing yourself?" I snapped.

Umi interlaced her fingers behind her back, as if she wanted to hide her precious ring from me.

"I didn't tell her that."

I'd figured as much. Even her mom would try to stop her… right? Or did she not even have the strength to do that? I didn't know any other mother who'd be as powerless as Umi's.

"You want to say my decision is wrong."

She cut ahead of me, like that one other time I had been attacking her with questions.

"Because it is."

I didn't have any supporting arguments, but that was what I thought. Umi nodded, acknowledging my opinion and her right to disregard it.

"I told you this earlier, but I'm not smart enough to do the right thing even when someone tells me what it is."

"…"

I said nothing. I was guilty of the same thing, and besides, I didn't really care if suicide was morally wrong or not—I just didn't want to lose the star of my life.

"My sister is everything to me. She comes before good or bad."

Umi's tone was unclouded by doubt. It was chilling how she could be so calm while I was losing my mind.

She picked up her bags, then turned to me as if she was remembering something she'd forgotten.

"Thanks…and sorry for everything. I'm not gonna let you have my sister, though."

It was clear to me she was pushing me away. The wall between us was built. In the end, this was it. She could only see what was between us distorted through the lens of her sister. Like straw

catching fire, the flame of anger rose in me fast and bright, but it quickly burned itself out. I just felt powerless, resigned, and eviscerated after the faint thread of hope had irrecoverably slipped through my fingers.

"…Yeah, whatever. Just go already."

A mean-spirited good-bye, I knew, but I couldn't summon the energy to say anything friendly. Besides, what she'd said, if she really meant it, amounted to telling me to fuck off.

"'Kay."

She left the room, indifferent to my crushing despair. For a moment, I kind of wanted to go after her, but my legs and arms felt too heavy to move. I fell backward onto the futon, spreading my arms and legs.

My room was back to how it used to be, without the extra inhabitant and her stuff. I sure wasn't—I'd been permanently affected…

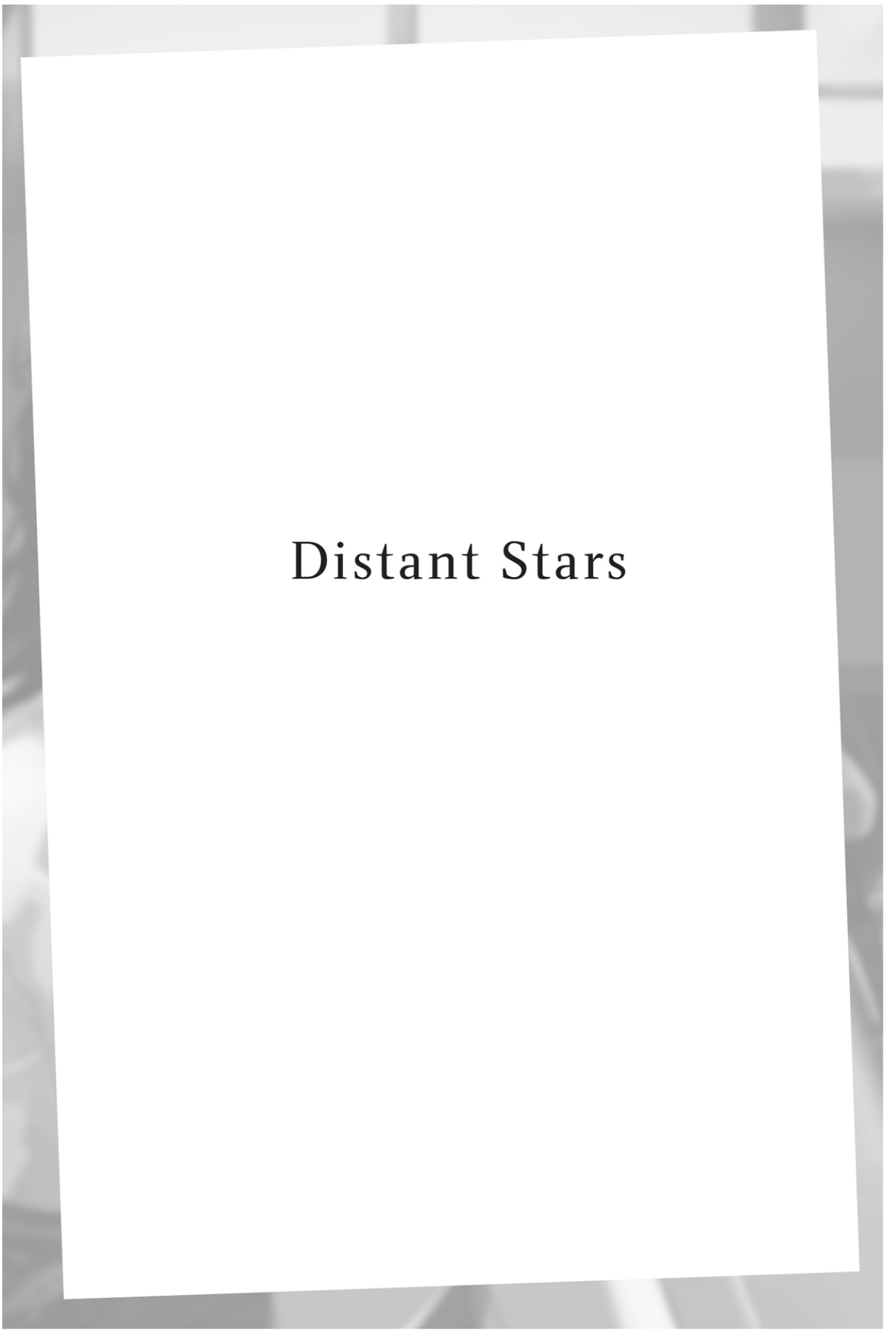
Actually, my room wasn't completely the same as before Umi's arrival, either. Her dry scent lingered in the air, like an afterimage of her body only my nose could see.

It didn't feel to me like the Umi chapter of my life was finished, but it definitely was. It was all over. What a sucky summer.

A massive wave had washed over me, soaking me through, nearly drowning me, taking my breath away, and now I was miserable, lonely, anxious. As the wave moved on, it pushed me down to the bottom of the ocean alone, unable to bob back up to the surface. It taught me how infinitely beautiful stars could be when you saw them from the depths.

After the ocean had cruelly played with me, it spat me out on a beach.

I might as well just say it now. That was the last time I saw the Umi Mizuike I thought I knew.


Distant Stars

It was a dream. I'd been dreaming wide-awake. It was an impossible dream, wilder than anything I could've imagined… A pitiful waking dream, gone forever in the blink of an eye.

I sat and sat thinking in silence how long that dream had lasted, but eventually I gave up and just stared at the backs of my hands blankly. I rolled over, stretching my arms to the ceiling as if I wanted to poke my hands through it. My gaze shifted to my fingertips. Heat was piling up on them like snow. Beyond the ceiling, summer was beating down in a torrent of sunshine.

The summer reached down to my cheeks, making them clammy, and then it rolled down them and dropped into a little puddle on the floor.

I wished it was evening already, but the world was still bathed in sunshine. There were so many hours left to go.

As I lay on the futon on the floor, spread-eagled, I mused that my room had gotten bigger. Unlike the blades of the fan, the gears in my brain weren't turning as I observed the ceiling.

On the way back from the planetarium, Umi had told me she was going to move out, and she had been true to her word. She didn't have many personal possessions, and she'd left none behind. She was gone, just like that, before the summer was over. It was too tedious to count the days she'd been living with me, so in the end, I didn't know how long exactly we'd spent together. The floral scent that always followed her around was only clinging to dust now.

I stared in silence, thinking about how at first, I couldn't wait to be rid of Umi. At some point, I'd stopped thinking about her moving out. I hadn't known when it might happen, and I'd deceived myself into thinking it never would. And then, it suddenly had.

The blossom of my first love had been trampled. I'd been

telling myself this love had no future, but even so, it'd hurt when it had ended. The single, ordinary flower had died before any more buds had the chance to open. The circumstances in which I'd met Umi were bizarre, but my first love was a common story of unrequited feelings.

The woman called Shiho Chitaira did surprise me a bit. I hadn't reckoned she'd stay with Umi, but she had, so I'd had no choice but to give up. Umi Mizuike might be even more of a free spirit than her eccentric sister.

In other news, Umi's mom was still living with us, with no sign of that changing. I could hear her loudly talking with my mother, and it annoyed me.

"Did you notice the syllables of my name read the same backward and forward?"

"Mi-zu-i-ke-i-zu-mi… You're right. I didn't realize!"

"That was a fun fact about me. Your turn."

"It wasn't even that funny!"

My mom was enjoying Umi's mom's company more than she ever had mine. Neither my mom nor I were still the same people as when it had just been us two. I couldn't help seeing a line separating me and her. Or me and all the other people I used to be connected to. Maybe they wouldn't see it, but I did.

Don't be silly, thought a very different me, a girl I no longer identified with. I didn't know who I was anymore, and thinking about it only made me tired.

"I want to go home…," I muttered, even though I was in my own room.

I sighed deeply and closed my eyes so all I had to see was darkness. Beyond it, the whirring fan made my hair sway like barley in a field.

Umi Mizuike had moved out and was now living with Ms. Chitaira…or at least, that's what I believed. I didn't know the details, and I sure as heck wasn't going to ask either of them about it. They hadn't contacted me since Umi had moved out, and I didn't seek contact with them, either. I didn't know where they'd rented an apartment or their phone number… Wait, had I exchanged numbers with Umi? I couldn't remember. My

memories of Umi had become muddled. Muddled, or faded? In any case, they were becoming more distant.

When I got up, I'd robotically start doing house chores. It was convenient, not having to think. The empty feeling, like a constant dryness in my throat, shouldn't be painful if I managed to keep my brain switched off.

When I was in my room without anything to do, even when I didn't have the energy to think, memories I didn't want to view again would surface in my head.

"I'm gonna die," I said out loud, imitating the cadence of Umi's voice.

I couldn't say it without cringing. She'd been serious about ending her life when she was no longer a high schooler. Umi and her older sister were two different spins on the same theme. Once one of them got an idea into their head, they would follow through no matter what, and they both had more than a few screws loose. On second thought, they had probably unscrewed those screws themselves.

At that moment, was Umi showing her naked body to her sister?

I shouldn't have thought about that, I realized, pressing my fists into the floor.

"She brainwashed her…"

Ms. Chitaira had gotten Umi to believe she could only feel happiness by being with her, and Umi was subconsciously making it true. If Ms. Chitaira was the first woman you got close to…I could totally see how anyone might turn out like Umi. That woman was powerful and skilled enough to mold people into what she wanted, and given her twisted personality, that didn't spell anything good for her targets.

If only Umi had met me first. I'd have shown her how caring I could be. I'd have treated her with respect. As for money… Well, I didn't have that. But did you need to have money to have a successful relationship? Theoretically, no. In practice, you were out.

It all boiled down to money. That wicked woman had said having money enabled you to care for others, and it was true. Money made a lot of things easier, giving you more free time, making you less stressed… It allowed you to be kinder to yourself.

I'm sure there were amazing people out there who managed to be kind to others even when their own circumstances were putting them under heavy strain, but I wasn't that strong. In other words…even if I had met Umi before her sister had gotten to her, I'm pretty sure I would have failed.

Umi and her sister were destined to be together. I wasn't. End of story. Umi didn't see a problem with her girlfriend also being her sister. When someone had no concept of what was normal, you'd be wasting your breath appealing to common sense.

I rolled around on the floor, letting resignation sink in. There was nothing I could've done differently that would've helped. The whole affair had been doomed from the start. That was a fact, but the more I told myself that, the more acute my regret.

I remembered being on the train with Umi on the way back from the planetarium. That scene and that conversation would torment me until I died. I felt like…I should've said something then, but what and how? I'd had the urge to tell her something, but I'd been too stunned to put it into words, and now regret was drilling a hole in my brain.

Umi used to read her textbooks all the time to "get smarter." Now I wished I were smarter, too.

I rolled to the other side.

"You chose being a dumbass…," I accused Umi. I was a sore loser.

The fan wasn't set to turn anymore. It was fixed on me.

"Taaakasora!" chirped Umi's mom.

Why was she still here even though her daughter had moved out? Why was she calling me with such familiarity, sticking her head into my room? The wispy lines of her body made her look like a ghost. If she actually was a living, breathing human being, how was there enough strength in her body to lean against my door?

"…Yes?" I replied without moving.

"I made lunch. Want some?"

"…Huh?"

Now that was unexpected. Umi's mom's contributions to house chores were so insignificant they could legally be omitted from the ingredients list on the label of our household life. Had she actually done something that counted as genuine help?

I sat up on the futon. With a smile, Umi's mom waved for me to come.

I was mildly intrigued, so I fought back the heavy, oppressive heat and stood up. My mom still went to work while I was on summer break, but it hadn't occurred to me until then that I'd been alone in that apartment with Umi's mom. Normally, she was so quiet I didn't even register her presence. Well, she was quiet when my mom wasn't around. When my mom was in, they were always talking, apparently having a great time.

Mom never laughed when she was just with me. That stung a little.

I wondered if Umi's mom was trying to prank me. I could imagine her saying, "Only joking!" when we got to the dining table, but there was actually food on it. Inside a small bowl was… steamed lettuce with tomatoes? It smelled faintly of alcohol. There was also a frying pan with some kind of potato dish… maybe a gratin? It was resting on a pot stand we never really used. I could see there were other ingredients besides potatoes in that frying pan, but a layer of melted cheese made it impossible to guess what they were.

I was shocked Umi's mom had made what appeared to be actual food. Never mind that she'd used what we had in the fridge without asking.

"…You can cook."

"I used to be a housekeeper."

She giggled with a hint of pride and sat down at the table, her legs folding like a dry stick breaking in two.

I had to think about where to sit, eventually choosing the opposite side of the table. A strange atmosphere filled the room. I was about to have lunch together with a woman I had absolutely no connection to, who was smiling at me amiably from across the table.

"I often made snacks for Shiho. She loved glazed roasted sweet potatoes."

"Really…"

I knew she used to work for the Chitaira family as a maid until she'd gotten kicked out after Umi's dad had gotten her pregnant. She came off as a completely harmless person, but she might secretly be devious. It seemed unlikely, though—my take on Umi's

mom was that she was a total pushover with zero ability to defend herself against those who wanted to take advantage of her. That was how she'd ended up giving birth to Umi, who in turn had given me hell as my first crush. Thinking about this domino effect made me dizzy.

"…Thanks for cooking."

"You're welcome," she said, already picking up the chopsticks.

She was the first to start eating. I was a bit taken aback by this violation of etiquette, but I soon followed suit and tried some of the steamed lettuce and tomato salad. The dressing…was good. Umi's mom seemed like the most unreliable person in the world, but she knew how to cook.

What was going through my head must have been showing on my face. Umi's mom grinned, munching on a tomato.

"I'd say I'm a pretty good cook."

"Then why haven't you been cooking for us until now?"

"Nat said I didn't need to."

She giggled with childlike glee. I didn't understand why she was so happy. It was also weird to hear someone use a pet name for my mom.

"But I thought I should share in the chores if I'm living here with you."

"I see…"

How long was she planning on living with us, though? Hold on. Had she moved in…permanently? Come to think of it, my mom seemed perfectly happy to have this woman living with us. Was I going to have two moms from now on? Wow… I better hurry and move out myself.

I had some of that potato dish next. It was pretty tasty, too. I wouldn't have used as much salt, but I could forgive that in summer. Even though I liked the food, I didn't like eating it together with a person who was largely unknown to me. I didn't know what to talk to her about, but one thing was nagging at me.

"Why didn't you stop your daughter?"

"From moving out to be with Shiho?"

"Yeah, that."

"Oh, I wouldn't want to meddle. It was Umi's own decision."

I was tempted to ask her if she also didn't mind Umi's other decision, to die after graduating, but Umi's mom continued

talking before I could say anything. “She was never happy when we lived together. Quite the opposite, really. I’m sure she’ll be happier living with someone else.”

“…”

So this woman had given some consideration to her daughter’s choice, but it was nearly impossible to tell the difference between her being supportive or blithe about it. Not that there was any point dissecting the matter anymore. What was done was done.

“Shiho is such a caring girl. I’m sure she’ll be good to Umi.”

“Yeah…”

What a wonderful big sister, so caring toward her little sister she also had sex with.

“She’s also very well-off.”

“Yeah…”

That was the crucial part. Money meant possibilities. That was the asset I lacked that Ms. Chitaira had more than her fair share of, and I couldn’t do anything about that.

“Well, thanks for lunch. It was really good.”

I stood up, a little hopeful that if I just left everything on the table, Umi’s mom would tidy up and do the dishes, too.

“Takasora.”

I felt like it was a child calling my name, not a grown woman.

“You were a good friend to Umi. Thank you.”

That was the sort of thing you’d say to a friend of someone who’d died. Somehow, it really annoyed me.

“I’m still her friend,” I said angrily.

Umi’s mom laughed joylessly.

“I’m still Umi’s friend,” I repeated.

“Sure.”

The way she said it sounded like she pitied me. I ran back to my room—to hide.

I had to admit that Umi’s mom was right. I was no longer anything to Umi, never mind a friend. Umi had permanently shut me out of her life. I was just slow adjusting. I was never going to see her or her sister again. Nobody else was going to take up space in my room. The summer would end, and I’d go back to school. Every day, I’d go to school, come back home, and that would be my life. Soon, I’d be back to how I used to be before Umi Mizuike and Shiho Chitaira—a girl who always walked staring at

her feet.

Did it really have to be like that?

I lay down on the floor, rolling around and struggling to accept the inevitable. The movement made my cabinet shake a little. I noticed something sticking out from under it. I crept to the cabinet on my hands and knees and pulled out the thing… I stared in shock at a large amount of money. It didn't take much thought to figure out whose it was.

"…Ha-ha."

Umi's hidden stash. She must've forgotten about it in her hurry to go and live with her sister.

"That girl and her one-track mind…"

I grabbed all those banknotes, the money Umi had earned with her body. This used to be her lifeline, which she no longer needed. Well, congrats, Umi.

I threw the notes on the floor, thinking I'd lie down on them instead of my futon, but it wasn't enough. It just looked like a mess. Anyway, I sprawled out on the floor on top of the cash, waiting for sensation to return to my fingertips.

That summer hadn't just been a dream. Umi Mizuike had really stayed in my room. She'd let me feel her breasts in this room. That was my most vivid memory of her, I was ashamed to admit.

I was still feeling antsy, like I was expecting something to happen. I sat up as if I were going to get up and go somewhere, but I wasn't moving. Did I want that something to happen? I wasn't sure. My anticipation was equally mixed with fear.

Then it happened.

Want to come over?

By the time Ms. Chitaira texted me, cicadas were already dropping dead from the trees.

It took me two days to reply to her. During that time, I didn't think about her message. Instead, I focused on cleaning the house, doing laundry. The physical work was a good escape from thinking, but I couldn't run forever.



I lay down on the floor with my phone in my hands. First of all, I wanted to ask why she wanted me to come over. I had no idea why she'd invite me, and it was killing me.

When I checked my phone, I saw Ms. Chitaira had sent me another message.

If you decide to come, make sure to wear your school uniform.

Why? I typed to her.

Because I want to see you in it.

I was sure she had other reasons, but I didn't want to waste time thinking about it. I put the phone down and scowled at my school uniform, which hung from a hook on the wall. I snorted.

"Goddamn school uniform…"

I pinched the scarf, hating myself for being so weak.

And so, on the day we agreed, I went to the station trying to look like an ordinary girl on the way to school, and I boarded a train to hell.

Ms. Chitaira had moved quite far away from her family home, escaping her family both figuratively and literally. I'd never been to that town before, either—one more reason I felt small heading in there. I got off the train, checked the map Ms. Chitaira had sent me, and started walking away from the station. The air smelled salty, like in the town where Ms. Chitaira used to live. I watched a flock of pigeons take to the air from the station plaza. They left behind a smell that brought back certain memories.

At the address Ms. Chitaira had given me was a wide apartment house that could be mistaken for an inn when seen from below. It was several times taller and wider than the crummy little apartment building I lived in.

A woman in a sky-blue yukata greeted me in the lobby.

"My, Takasora! It's been too long!"

"…You're the same as ever."

Her vibe and soft smile were exactly the same as when I'd last seen her a few months earlier. She was a witch who brought people to ruin with nothing more than her smile.

She took my hand as if we were close friends, and then she led me to the elevator.

"I like your uniform!" she said with a level of enthusiasm that

left me embarrassed.

It was the first time she'd seen me in my school uniform. The change in her behavior was a stark reminder that her fetish was the real deal.

I got on the elevator with this woman smiling like the god of luck, Ebisu, and we went to the fourth floor. Ms. Chitaira's apartment was the second to last at the end of the corridor. When we got to the door, I stopped sharply, noticing the view.

"It's the ocean."

I could see the white crests of breaking waves on the shoreline running parallel to a long road. This was a seaside town.

I used to think the ocean was far away, too far for me to ever reach it, but it was just a short walk from this tall, expensive building.

"We should go to the beach together," said Ms. Chitaira.

"Yeah…," I said with obvious reluctance, which she pretended not to hear.

As she turned the key in the lock, I heard quick footsteps, as if a pet cat were rushing to greet her missing mistress. It was not a cat, of course, but a person… Huh? Who was that? Question marks appeared over my head.

"Er… Who are you?"

I recognized the face, but the girl's vibe didn't match my memories. My brain was struggling to process it.

"You need me to remind you my name?"

Her voice was the same, but something didn't feel right about it.

The girl standing in front of me was certainly Umi Mizuike, but not as I remembered her. The most noticeable difference was that her long mop of hair had been cut short and tied into a neat little ponytail. And it was dyed light brown.

"Your hair…"

"Oh, this? I went with Sis to her hairdresser, and this is what I came out with."

"Ah, I see…"

She was wearing denim shorts and a sleeveless crop top—the kind of outfit I associated with the beach or maybe the poolside—with a sleeveless shirt tied above her belly button. It hugged her figure, emphasizing her big bust. Her makeup was bolder, too,

with thick eyeliner drawing attention to her eyes. I also immediately noticed her scent—that flowery fragrance. It wasn't just hanging out around her; it was as if it had become a part of her, like invisible flowers blooming on her body.

"Your clothes…"

"Sis said she likes this style, too."

"Ah, I see…"

Gone was the dark-eyed girl who wore wrinkled T-shirts. She'd had a total makeover. Next, I saw her fingernails had been manicured with each painted a different color, like M&M's. Noticing my gaze, Umi showed me her hand. She held out her middle finger to me, which had the nail painted blue.

"Sis and I were trying to see which color looked good on me. She said they all did," she explained happily before I even asked.

"…You've been keeping busy."

"And why did you come here anyway?"

Something felt very out of place… Ah, right. It was Umi's manner of talking. Her speech was no longer marked by that soft regional accent, replaced by standard Japanese, like a rough stone being sanded until it had a uniformly smooth texture.

Despite all these changes, one thing about Umi was just the same as before—her disinterest in me.

"I…wanted to talk to you."



“Oh yeah?” She obviously couldn’t care less. “Okay.”

“Huh?”

“Talk.”

I could only laugh nervously. She was so ready to be done with me and send me back out the door.

“Let’s talk at the beach! Sand and school uniforms are a match made in heaven!”

Was that why Ms. Chitaira had invited me over? To leer at me in my outfit at the beach?

“A walk on the beach? I’m coming, too!”

“Huh?”

At first, I didn’t recognize Umi’s cheerful, high-pitched voice. She scuttled over to her sister, her feet in pretty sandals. Her toenails were also painted like M&M’s. It was garish.

Ms. Chitaira caught her little sister in her arms and smiled.

“Great! We’ll all go!”

“Does it have to be *all* of us?” Umi whined in the most beautiful voice. “Are you really coming with us?”

She joined her hand with her sister’s as if they always walked holding hands now. The look from Umi—no, from this flower-scented girl—was filled with hostility. Good to know she was still as morbidly in love with her sister as before. Rather than be put off, I found myself reassured by the consistency of her obsession.

“Yes, I’m coming with you.”

Honestly, I wanted to go back. Not back home, but back in time. I’d come all the way just to regret it. If only I could run away from that mistake. Leave it behind me in the dust.

The beach was a busy place, with bistros attracting customers and many feet kicking up sand into the air, which stuck to the skin unpleasantly, canceling out any enjoyment of the fine weather and refreshing breeze. Ms. Chitaira took us away from the forest of beach parasols over beach mats, leading us to the breakwater, where she sat down. I limply followed suit, already exhausted by being exposed to strong sunshine reflected both by the waves and the beach sand.

“Umi, could I ask you to go for a stroll while I talk to Takasora?”

“What? I don’t wanna,” Umi replied without beating around the bush. “Not leaving you alone with a girl in a school uniform.”

“Ha-ha-ha! Zero trust, as usual.”

“You talk. I won’t listen.”

She sat down in between Ms. Chitaira’s legs, hunching over and plugging her ears. After getting in that position, she grinned…grinned? Huh? She was smiling up at her sister so innocently, the scene wasn’t making sense to me.

“So stubborn.”

With an air of mischief, Ms. Chitaira covered Umi’s eyes with her hands. Umi smiled blissfully at her touch.

Seriously, I didn’t recognize her.

“Don’t take too long,” said Umi.

“Don’t worry,” Ms. Chitaira replied.

I wondered if Umi could actually hear everything even with her ears plugged. The wicked woman smiled with pride, as if showing off how well-trained her little sister was. I’d had enough.

“Sorry, but can I just go home now?”

“Oh, but you’ve come such a long way… Not to say I don’t understand your feelings, Takasora.”

She played with Umi’s short hair, tickling her. Umi wriggled, enjoying the touch.

“Oh, you do? Really?”

Of course she did. She did, and she took pleasure in stomping all over me.

“With her new look, Umi isn’t your type anymore, is she?”

“You think that’s what’s been on my mind?”

Actually…I kind of liked girls in shorts, but I wasn’t going to discuss my preferences with this woman.

“I wanted to apologize to you once more,” she told me.

“For what this time?”

I could think of a number of things.

“For taking your Umi from you.”

“……It’s fine.”

I almost added, “Everyone’s feelings are important,” like an elderly matchmaker making excuses to a client, but I meant it. Umi didn’t love me. She’d fallen in love with this evil woman. Ms. Chitaira hadn’t stolen her from me at all. Umi had happily gotten to be with the person she wanted, and it’d be perfectly

wholesome if not for the fact they were sisters…although I couldn't say what exactly was wrong with it. I couldn't put a name to where that sense was coming from.

"I thought Umi might choose to leave me after learning we were sisters, but to my surprise, that didn't even occur to her. As for me, being sisters didn't really make a difference. Not a negative one, at least."

"It made a positive one, then?"

"Oh-ho-ho-ho… So anyway, that's all I wanted to tell you."

"Really? Well, it wasn't much."

She could've just said this over the phone.

"I suppose my primary motive was to see you in your school uniform."

"…Save your kink for your little sister."

I wasn't wearing my uniform to satisfy Ms. Chitaira, but considering the effect it had on her…

"Oh, we do plenty of that kink, of course."

I didn't need to know that. She made me imagine Umi in her uniform, sprawled out on this woman's bed, and I felt sick. They say beautiful natural scenery brings joy, but there I was on a sunny beach with storm clouds in my heart. You have to marvel at the strength of human emotions.

I also had something I wanted to talk about with Ms. Chitaira. Just one thing.

"Did you know Umi wants to kill herself after graduating?"

"Yes, she told me." Ms. Chitaira was calmly gazing far at the sea.

"Then get it out of her head," I said sharply.

"I'm working on it," Ms. Chitaira replied with a smile. "She's changed quite a bit, wouldn't you say?"

"That's one way to put it…"

She'd been pretty much remolded into a completely different form.

"I reasoned that completely changing her worldview was in order."

Oh, were the revealing clothes and colorful nails part of Ms. Chitaira's plan to stop her little sister from committing suicide and not another kink? I couldn't tell if this woman was serious, but I could tell she was staring very intently at my school

uniform.

“…What?”

She kept her eyes on me, slowly moving her hand toward my skirt, but she didn’t get to lift it up. I wasn’t the one who stopped her, but Umi. She slapped her sister’s hand away from me, her lips tightening into a surly pout.

“Sis!”

“Yes, dear?”

“Don’t make me angry.”

“Aren’t you already angry?”

“I am.” Umi stood up, taking her fingers out of her ears, scowling like a toddler. “You’re finished talking, aren’t you?”

Without her accent, she sounded colder, somehow.

“We are. Now it’s your turn to talk to Takasora—”

“I’ve got nothing to talk to her about.”

“Yeah, great, so I’ll be going.”

Umi had changed too much. She didn’t even want to look at me. Her constant smiles, innocent voice, and dumb cheerful energy made her completely alien to me. The Umi Mizuike I’d come to see must have gotten lost after getting on the train to reunite with her sister.

“Oh, temper, temper! You girls really should talk.”

The devious woman put her hand on my shoulder and forced me to sit down again. Then she made Umi sit next to me while she jumped down from the breakwater onto the beach.

“I’ll wait here while you chat.”

She smiled at us, plugging her ears as Umi had earlier. Umi flashed a smile as big as hers, showing her white teeth, and waved at her sister like a fan waving at their fave. These exaggerated interactions made me feel as if my skin were drying up.

When Umi sat back down next to me, I couldn’t help noticing that even her sitting posture was different now. Instead of hunching, she had her back straight, feet together. Someone had taught her how to sit properly like a lady. I wondered how much work Ms. Chitaira had had to put into correcting her little sister’s habits.

I supposed this transformation was necessary. It might’ve been too late to help Umi Mizuike without overwriting her entire

image and personality. Unfortunately for me, it also meant she was no longer the person I'd come to meet. What should I do? I'd prepared what I would say to her, but finding her so different, I suddenly wanted to convey a message opposite to what I had intended. Should I go with what I had originally wanted to say or not?

"So you had something to say to me?"

Not to you, I wanted to tell her. I was strongly put off even by that new inflection in her voice. She was a stranger to me. I wanted to go back.

"I don't want you to die," I finally said.

A malicious voice in my head asked me whether I still really thought so, and I almost started crying when I realized I wasn't so sure. I should've said it to Umi way earlier, during that train ride home. That had been the right time, but I hadn't been ready. I'd been too inexperienced to deal with the situation.

"Sis said that, too."

If only she'd shut up about her sister. I was talking to her now; this was *our* conversation. I didn't want her sister brought into it.

Tears welled up in my eyes, but the scorching heat made them evaporate before they had the chance to roll down my cheeks.

"She really has a weakness for school uniforms, though," Umi moaned, and she reminded me of a girl complaining to her school friend about something pathetically minor. "I'm experimenting with some new things, though."

She looked almost smug as she said it, her eyes bright and determined.

"So she'll stop only loving high school girls."

"…Good luck, I guess."

"For example, Sis likes it when I play mommy to her."

"……"

……*Uh.*

"What."

"It's because she's so starved for motherly love. Her real mother left her, remember?"

What Ms. Chitaira critically lacked wasn't a mother, but sanity.

"She gets so sweet when I cuddle her in my arms like a baby. She calls me 'mommy.' It gives me this tingling feeling on my back. I guess you call it…ecstasy? I melt inside when she's acting

like she's entirely dependent on me—"

"I don't want to hear about that." I stopped her, suddenly afraid of what she had to say.

I jumped to my feet to get away from this adorable monster staring at me with round eyes, not understanding why I didn't want to listen to her lovely story about what she got up to with her sister.

Why had it taken me so long to realize she was a lost cause? Everything about her except her looks was broken beyond repair.

I looked around at the scenery, which was perfect for a final good-bye. For that subtle change in expression that brings out those bittersweet feelings. Waves murmuring in the background, the sky a beautiful blue, summer at its most vivid as it reaches the end. We had covered all the bases—summer, school uniform, first love, summer break, sudden encounter, friendship, crush—but the movie that'd played wasn't the melodramatic high school love story I'd expected. It had been ruined by the main character boasting about her mommy role-play with her older sister.

I'd lost. I'd been totally defeated. Something broke inside me, and it was destroyed so completely it could never be rebuilt. I didn't care anymore.

"I'm going home."

I'd come to see the wrong person. Having zero sense of direction, I'd strayed too far down the wrong path. That was my own fault.

"Will you come again?" Umi asked instead of saying bye.

I didn't even pause to think about whether she wanted to see me again or if it was the opposite. It no longer mattered to me what she thought.

I slowly looked her up and down. She was my first love, but she'd become a stranger. I nodded firmly, overcome with the nihilistic desire for one of us—me, Umi, or her older sister—to just die already.

"Are you stupid? Not in a million years."

Walking in the heat outside was like being immersed in warm water. I forced myself not to look away from the shimmering ocean despite the glare, but it got pretty bad. At some point, I was

half blinded, but I still kept moving one foot in front of the other until suddenly I was on the train, traveling back to a very different square of the patchwork of reality. I felt as if I were dreaming while awake, and my stomach churned.

When had I started sleepwalking this summer?

Time passed quickly even as I kept my eyes open. I was hurt… Or was I? I couldn't tell if there really was a wound in my heart or how deep it was. Maybe it was so big, the only way to cope for me was to temporarily lose all sensation.

Anyway, I was on the train. I had made my way to the station in a daze, and the train was taking me away. Maybe you could go through life like this, letting things just happen without your conscious participation.

I felt like such a fool for all the time I'd spent agonizing, all the effort invested, the way I'd turned my life upside down with nothing to show for it. In hindsight, it was worse to lose trying than to lose without doing anything.

Why did she have to come to my house? Couldn't it have been somewhere else? I wished I'd never met her.

I didn't remember hearing the name of my station being announced, but I stood up when the train stopped, and my joints were so leaden that each step felt like wading through a river. Whenever I tried to think, warm water would trickle into my head. I couldn't wring it all out. My thoughts became too soggy to hold shape.

Outside, I recognized my surroundings. I had gotten off at the right stop, seemingly subconsciously. Still feeling dazed, I moved my heavy limbs to steer my body through the ticket gates, down the stairs, and on the road home. I found that extreme reluctance to do something made dying as an alternative seem less unattractive.

I was just so tired from giving everything I had just to hit a wall. I didn't have any more energy to go on. If something came flying right at my head now, and I knew it'd kill me, I would make no effort to dodge it. My future looked like an endless copy of the same unappealing reality. Who'd said there was no point in having a future if it was going to be just the same as the past?

I'd hit rock bottom, and from down there, there was no view toward anything I could aim for. Ever since I'd met that girl, rock

bottom had become a familiar place. She was the worst curse. Pathetically, if I ran into her in the street, I'd probably foolishly gravitate to her just as before. Which was why I strongly wished never to see her again.

"Stupid," I spat, insulting her, the memory of that last look on her face already fading. "Stupid, stupid, stupid! Goddamn idiot! So fucking stupid!"

"Oh, hello!"

My footsteps sounded stiff. The hardened feelings inside me had flowed down into my feet, weighing them down. I barely registered that I was walking, but my body was moving forward, and I wasn't quite sure why.

"Hello!" someone shouted again, and it was only then I realized they were talking to me.

That reminded me of another time when I'd been surprised someone had called out to me in the street, back toward the start of summer. Here at the end of summer, I turned around to look at the beginning.

"Ah, it's you…"

It was a girl I knew from junior high school basketball club. She was a year younger than me, and she had gone to a different high school. She wore her hair, dyed blond, in a ponytail. Not to be gatekeeping blond hair, but I thought blond didn't suit her.

"You don't look so good," she said bluntly.

I definitely wasn't a pretty sight, but I didn't want to think about it. At least looking sad wasn't as bad as full-on crying, although maybe I had been and the girl didn't want to make it worse by pointing it out. I was sure I'd cried at some point on the way home.

"It's just the heat," I lied.

The girl laughed casually, buying my excuse.

In junior high, she'd made more of a cold, uncaring impression, but she seemed to have mellowed out a bit. I still got the sense she was only poorly hiding a general lack of interest in other people, though.

"Why are you wearing your uniform?" she asked me.

"Huh? Um…"

I reflexively touched the edge of my scarf, thinking about how to explain it, but in the end, I couldn't be bothered coming up

with anything elaborate.

"I just felt like it."

After the fact, all the perfectly plausible excuses came to me—that I'd gone to some school activity or club that day, for example. Why hadn't I thought of that earlier?

I wondered what face the girl would make if I told her I was in my school uniform because a certain perverted woman had asked me to put it on. Maybe she'd just say "Really?" and laugh it off without much interest.

"I get it. Some days are like that."

"You have those days, too?"

"Er, no, not really."

We both laughed in a shallow, put-on way.

I noticed the girl didn't have a bag or anything with her. I wouldn't call it a nice day for a walk, but she was a bit weird, so maybe she didn't have enough to do on her summer break and was taking a walk anyway. I wasn't in a rush to go anywhere, either, but I wasn't enjoying a leisurely day—what I felt was not freedom but emptiness. And after getting back home, there'd be plenty for me to do. Thinking about it made the back of my neck feel so heavy, it might break.

I thought of Umi, the ocean girl. If I somehow saw her again, I'd take a dive and never swim back up to the surface again.

"…Want to go somewhere for tea?"

"What, me?"

Who else was there? Was she really so shocked she had to stare at me wide eyed, toying with her hair? I had only invited her because it would mean I didn't have to go back home yet. If she didn't want to hang out with me, I wanted her to hurry up and say it. I wouldn't press her; I'd just keep on sleepwalking back to my place.

"Hmm… Yeah, okay."

She probably didn't have anything else to do anyway, but I bet a couple years back, she would've flatly refused.

We'd never been close friends, but after so long being out of touch, she was almost a stranger to me. She seemed softer, as if the sharp edges of her character had been smoothed out. Dealing with other people would be smoother for her now, I was sure, but I kind of missed her unapproachable vibe.

There was an air-conditioned café near the station, so we walked a short way back to it. The café floor was a long rectangle, with most tables taken as the business was good during summer break. When we smelled the freshly baked goods on offer, we couldn't resist buying some. My ex-basketball club friend ordered tea with milk. I stared at the menu board for a while, eventually going with apple juice. Not for any particular reason. I just wanted something sweet.

We sat down next to each other. I looked out the window at the street, where cars of all colors were passing each other by, going in opposite directions. On the other side of the road were tall buildings, both old and new. A group of students in PE outfits were waiting outside. The buildings were so close together, they blocked the view, but it wasn't like I'd catch sight of blue-green here anyway—the ocean was too far away.

"You like school?" I asked like a parent.

It was the first summer break since starting high school for my friend.

She tucked her hair behind her ear to stop it fluttering in the AC blowing right on her.

"No, not really."

"Ah."

What an empty conversation. Was this what I wanted, to talk about nothing with a girl I didn't know well at a café? If I didn't feel like going home, I could've just walked around town. No need to waste this girl's time as well. Whenever I saw her, I never got the feeling we'd make hanging out together a regular thing, but I didn't want to just bore her to death. Except that at that moment, I was too empty inside to properly engage with another person.

"I don't enjoy anything about school, either."

"Um… Well, that's like you."

The pause told me she'd been at a loss at first on how to continue the conversation.

Come to think of it, what *did* I enjoy? Not school. Not housework, either. But besides those two, I didn't have anything else to occupy my time. Maybe I hadn't yet discovered what was fun for me. I used to look down on Umi for being so ignorant, but I was ignorant, too.

The woman who did nothing but what she enjoyed was always

smiling. Was she happy because finding what she liked came to her with such ease, or did it come to her with ease because she was always happy?

Meanwhile, Umi caused me to feel a range of emotions that I couldn't quite explain. She frustrated me. She annoyed me. Those two emotions were easy to define, but then there were so many others all mixed together. I couldn't make out what they were. Anyway, that chapter was closed. All I'd learned from it was that first love could feel like scratching yourself until the meat started coming off the bone.

"I envy you. Being a natural blond," my friend said, sandwiching a bite-size comment in between sips of tea.

We were both blonds now, but her shade was quite different from mine. I'd always had blond hair, but she hadn't, so her new look was very fresh to me.

"Why'd you make the change?"

I gave her hair a closer look. It was bleached almost white. It used to be brown, looking quite pretty when the last rays of sunshine fell on it during basketball practice in the evenings at the school gym.

"Well… I was hoping for that 'new hair, new me' effect." She pinched a strand of her hair.

"And? Did it work?"

"The only new thing was my family complaining about it. They say blond doesn't suit me."

"Aw."

I drank my juice, not really invested in this conversation. The sweat had dried from my neck, and I was almost feeling too cold. I was getting chilled and heated, chilled and heated, depending on whether I was inside or outside. I was noticing the transitions with a delay, buried too deep under other people's affairs to feel what was happening to me in real time. Even when I spoke, I didn't feel like it was me speaking—I simply heard my voice emerge from my body.

"I went to see the ocean."

I said it so quietly my friend probably had to wonder if I was talking to her or to myself.

The ocean. Umi. Suddenly, the tops of my shoulders were hot again, my skin tingling. The dying embers of my love sending out

a last spray of sparks.

"Um, you mean, like, today?"

"Yeah," I confirmed, glad my friend had managed to make sense of my random statement. "It was pretty far away."

"Huh, I guess it is a ways away. Our prefecture is landlocked."

She smiled faintly.

She was right—the ocean was beyond the borders of our prefecture, just like Umi was beyond the borders of my world. I'd been seduced by a wave that had gotten unexpectedly close, and I'd cried tears as salty as seawater. I had let myself get carried away…and then summer had ended.

"What did you do at the beach?"

"I…just stared at the ocean."

I'd stared at the ocean, at Umi, unable to decide whether I was witnessing beauty or something blindingly lurid. Umi was as changeable as her namesake, but no matter which way the wind blew, I could never get close to her.

"Say… What would you do if a…let's say, a friend, told you they were going to die in a year?"

I tried to make it sound like just a hypothetical question. Myself, I hadn't managed to do anything. The realization I was in no position to do anything was so painful, it had shattered me, and I was still reeling from shock. But maybe someone else would have come up with the answer I'd never managed to find. I was desperate for a second opinion, even though it wouldn't change anything anymore.

"Imagine it's not guaranteed to happen…but it's a possibility."

I think that flustered my friend. She put down her teacup and gazed out the window. I thought she was looking at a little doggy carried by its owner.

"If I had a…friend who might die…," she said, her voice hoarse from emotion.

The expression on her face changed to something I'd never seen before—her eyes filled with sorrow, and darkness fell on her face like the moon in shadow.

"I'd hate myself, but I'd want to run away."

She let out an awkward laugh, her eyes gleaming as if she was about to cry. I got the impression she was thinking of someone specific, but I didn't want to press her for details.

“Why hate yourself for running away?” I asked, trying to play it cool.

“Well…”

Maybe it was all in my head, but I thought her expression became sharper again, like when we’d been in junior high.

“Is running away not an understandable reaction?” I rephrased.

“…If I ran away, they’d follow me. Slowly, on unsteady feet, but they’d follow. Even if they might never catch up to me, they’d keep on walking in my direction… I’d only feel bad for trying to get away.”

She was watering it down, her words only skimming the surface. She probably wasn’t aware I could see tears welling up in her eyes, high enough to spill if she shook from a sob. I’d seen her make others cry, but never her crying.

…I envied her. She had someone who’d want to follow her, someone who wanted her. She’d been living her life better than I ever could.

“I hope someday you won’t feel the need to run anymore,” I said to her.

I’d tried to ask her for advice, tiptoeing around the problem on my mind, but in the end, I was the one offering her encouragement. Well, maybe that was for the best. If I helped her in some way, I’d at least have that to my credit.

“I hope so…,” she replied quietly, but then she had second thoughts. “No, actually…what I should be hoping for is for that person to not die.”

The sadness in her smile told me her wish had slim chances of realization.

“Of course,” I agreed nonetheless.

Did I want Umi to live, even if we had no connection anymore? Many times, I’d thought I wouldn’t care if she died, but after some introspection, I concluded I would rather she lived than not.

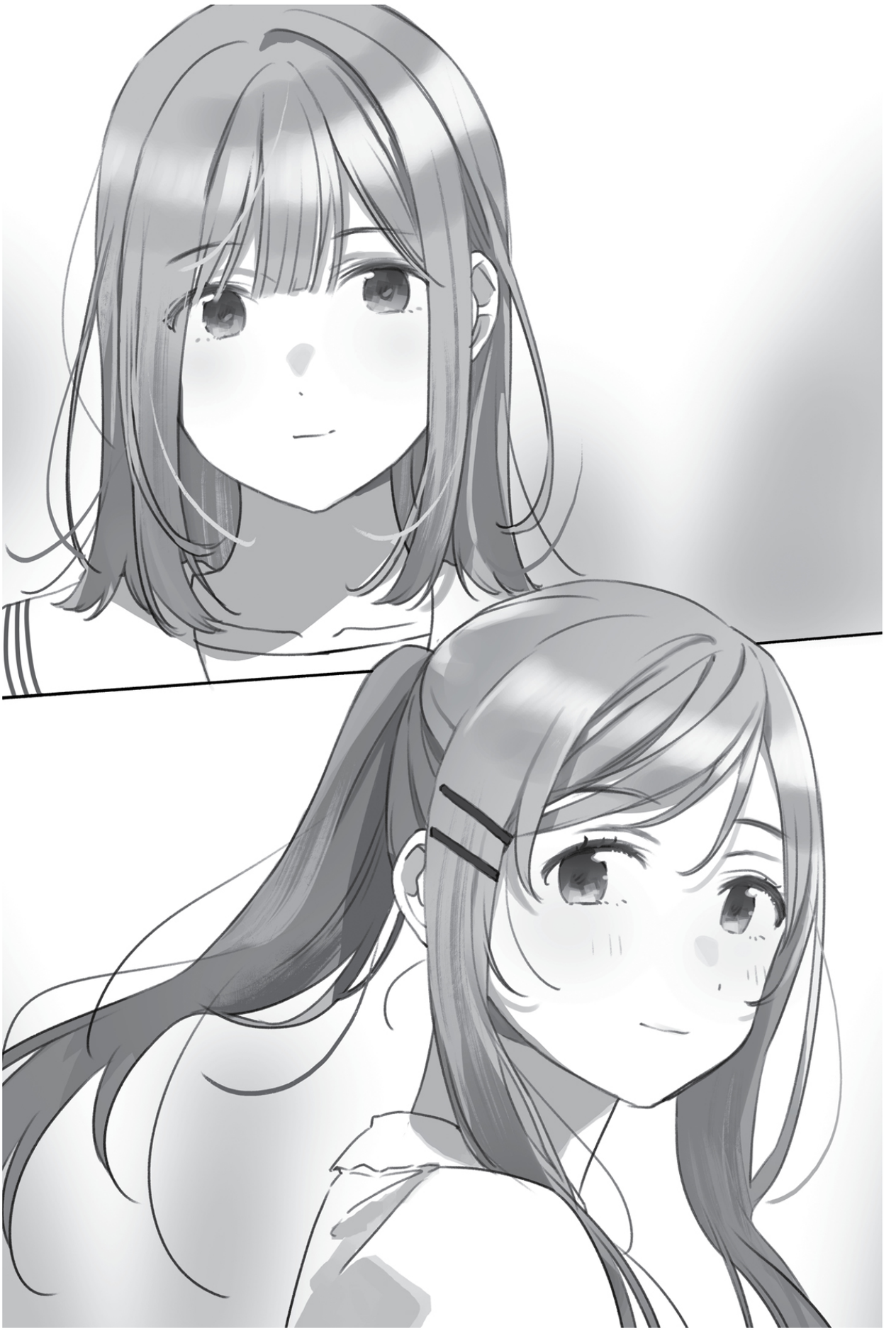
My friend and I finished our drinks and left the café. It seemed a natural time to say good-bye. I looked at the girl as she stretched, gazing up at the sky with narrowed eyes, and I racked my brains for her name. At last, I remembered.

“Shimamura,” I said, and she turned in surprise. “I hope school gets a bit more fun for you.”

I wished her well, even though I'd lost hope for myself. My own life at school was an empty husk I knew I was going to hate crawling back into again.

Shimamura smiled at me in the serene way she must have acquired since starting high school.

"It's been a while since someone called me by my surname."



“No way…”

What was her social circle like, I wondered. Was she buddies with everyone, letting them call her by her first name? Was she not an ordinary girl like me?

I tried to remember her first name, but I couldn’t.

“Well, it was nice seeing you. Bye!” she said.

“Bye!”

We went our separate ways, and as always, I didn’t get the feeling we’d meet again. This was a day of many permanent goodbyes for me, with no prospect of meeting anyone new. I had to laugh at the injustice.

For some time, I just stood in the street, staring into nothing, the taste of apple juice still lingering on my lips. I looked at the station, my home station, and sighed, accepting that the thing with Umi had ended. The daytime star guided me home.

The story was over. It was a tale of two stars on a collision course. They crashed and suffered damage, but they couldn’t help gravitating toward each other. It was a summer story of banal attraction.

I wasn’t either of those colliding stars. I was merely an accidental observer, a dirt-covered, earthbound star, envious of the dazzling, beautiful lights in the distance.

I slept and awoke, the line between dream and reality thin and translucent.

The remainder of my summer break trickled away. Again, I was moving between school and home like a character controlled by someone else, watching the scenery change without any conscious input from myself. Whoever was controlling me was doing well, since nobody was complaining. If they could so easily make me go through the motions of my life, perhaps I should just let them.

No, I knew I couldn’t let it go on forever, but not knowing when I was awake and when I was dreaming, I didn’t know when to try to open my eyes. I kept missing the opportunity.

Was I up against a wall, or was the path wide open for me? I

didn’t know how to tell the difference. I had no energy to sense my surroundings.

That summer had been the beginning of it all, and probably the end of it, too. I felt stuck, with no way out.

That day, I was walking somewhere, but I couldn’t remember if it was a day off from school or if I was actually going to school. For no particular reason, I suddenly realized I didn’t know if the cicada season was over, and I turned my head this way and that, listening for their chirping. Then I saw something that made time slow down to a stop.

At the bottom of the embankment, in the river up ahead, was a space suit.

“……”

I stared, speechless. Had I finally lost my mind after living for so long through a dreamy, hazy curtain? Was I seeing a mirage in the heat haze?

“Whuh…?”

The illusion was being carried downriver, the late summer sunlight reflecting off its helmet. What if…what if the space suit wasn’t empty? Was someone swimming in the river, dressed like that for fun? Had they fallen in by accident? Were they drowning? The space suit was drifting downstream, without any sign of resistance, so it might be empty… But what was a space suit doing in the river at all? Was it really there, or was I imagining it? I stared, motionless and utterly confused.

What if nobody fished it out? Would it get carried all the way out to sea?

“……”

Beads of sweat were tracing hot lines on my skin.

In the end, I couldn’t ignore it. I climbed down the embankment. I didn’t rush; if I didn’t get down there in time, so be it. I trod down the slope carefully so as not to slip. Not because people would laugh at me if I told them I’d gotten injured chasing after a space suit in the river, but because I didn’t think I had the mental strength to get up again if I fell down.

The river current was slow, and I was catching up. I peered at the water to make sure it wasn’t deep, but I hesitated before going in. Once I’d left my bag on the ground, I walked into the water. My foot met the bottom of the river, and I pushed through

the water, splashing left and right. I belatedly regretted not having taken my shoes off. After I was pretty far in, my senses awoke, and with each movement, I felt both the heat of the sun and the coldness of the water.

I caught up to the rather small space suit…and grabbed it. I heard breathing from the inside, so loud it was almost theatrical.

“Whoa.”

I almost lost my footing from shock when the inhabitant of the space suit spoke in the high-pitched voice of a young girl.

“And who might you be?”

“Who indeed?” I replied grumpily, dragging the space suit girl out of the river. The suit looked thick, but it was very light, like a vinyl bag. When we got close to the riverbank, the space suit girl stood up and walked out of the water without my help. It looked like rescue wasn’t needed. What a waste of time.

Now I was the one in the river. My waterlogged socks felt icky on my feet. I was knee-deep in the water, which was so much colder than the air above it, it made me shudder. I raised my head to glare angrily at the sun, and I saw the sky. A blue sky stretching high above. My ears popped and sound returned, the buzzing of cicadas enveloping me like a pair of wings to remind me summer hadn’t gone away yet. The sun was baking me, my shirt unpleasantly sticking to my clammy back. Back in the realm of the living, I was again struggling against the stifling heat.

I could hear my breathing, so loud it was annoying. Blood was bubbling up my arteries, carrying heat all the way to my consciousness, melting my bones and organs into a throbbing mass. The boiling pressure was chasing up the lukewarm dream that had persisted inside me for so long, squeezing it out of me together with the sweat. As the sun beat down on me, my skin cried like a newborn baby.

…Really? Had it been that easy to shed that dream? But while it’d been easy, it left me with a tremendous sense of loss.

“Excuse me, Miss,” the girl in the space suit called to me from the riverbank.

She was waving her little arm at me, hopping to get my attention. The movement sent blinding reflections off her helmet, so I had to shield my eyes with my hand as I clambered out of the river.

I wasn't sure what'd pushed me to rescue the girl, but the fact I had proved I had some optimism left in me, I thought.

"Please accept my heartfelt thanks for your help."

"…Uh."

I'd snapped out of my daze, yet the soaking wet girl in a space suit was still there. I looked down and saw that my shadow had completely engulfed this small person.

"I was wondering which way to go, and then I was suddenly carried away by the river."

"What…?"

The situation was becoming more and more surreal as I talked to the girl in that ridiculous space suit. What a summer I was having, meeting all sorts of weirdos.

Suddenly, I couldn't bear standing in squelching wet shoes anymore. I took them off and held them upside down to drain the water… Would you say that, "drain the water"?

"You're a very lost little…lost little girl…?"

The girl was so short and sounded very young. My protective instinct kicked in. I'd become quite desensitized to weirdness over that summer, also learning it was the weirdos who looked normal on the outside who were to be feared most. A girl in a space suit didn't daunt me.

"Perhaps it is apt to call me lost. But while I had been adrift, I travel with the purpose of meeting someone."

"Like…a relative?"

She wasn't getting to the point, so I thought asking more specific questions might help.

The girl shook her head, though. "I do not yet know who they are."

"Er…"

"I shall discover that after I find them and we gradually get to know each other."

She spoke perfect Japanese, but my brain couldn't make any sense of it. It was as if the conversation was revolving around two different axes… Or, no, as if hers didn't have an axis at all, but only a distant point I failed to see.

The little astronaut continued, speaking in a strangely measured way, "I am certain meeting this person is of crucial importance. I exist everywhere. Existing everywhere, I take on

any form or shape, confined to no definite state. Dimensions, including distance, are not limiting factors for me, and hence, I am here now, too."

"…Right."

I understood none of it, but I didn't think it mattered. The important part was that I had rescued this girl from the river. I'd chased after her in her ludicrous outfit, and in doing so, I had crawled out of the mire of my lukewarm dream.

"Now I must decide where to go next."

"Where to next, huh…?"

Until a few moments ago, I'd also been lost. We both looked around uncertainly. I gazed in the direction Umi Mizuike had vanished…and then I pointed the opposite way.

"Try going there."

I was pointing, but with a tightly closed fist.

"Thank you. I shall head in that direction," the strange astronaut agreed readily.

She began resolutely walking where I'd pointed her to, even though she didn't know anything about me. She marched along the river, in that puffy space suit, as if summer heat didn't affect her.

As if on second thought, she turned her head to look back at me. Her helmet reflected the blue sky, fluffy cumulonimbus clouds, and me.

"And where will you go?" she asked.

"Me? Um…"

Before I could offer her an answer, the little astronaut shook her head as if to tell me not to bother.

"In any case, I wish you safe travels," she said before hobbling away.

When she was pretty far away, I saw her rest a fishing rod on her shoulder, even though she definitely hadn't had anything like that with her when I'd gotten her out of the river.

Where might she end up if she kept walking in that direction? An old-fashioned teahouse, maybe? And where would she go to next? Since she had that rod, maybe another river, or a fishing pond, or…the ocean?

I had a flashback to that blindingly bright, unforgettable seaside scene. I had to squint from the brightness, unable to

make that memory fade.

Who would that girl meet? Where would she cast her line? What new beginnings awaited her? We'd only known each other for a few short minutes, and she was a complete mystery to me, but I hoped she'd find whoever it was she was seeking. I hoped whatever she started would lead somewhere. She was a complete stranger, but I sincerely wished her the best of luck.

She had gone, leaving me behind.

"Um…"

I wanted a fresh start, too.

As I thought about it, the gears in my head had seemingly made my head turn, too. I lost my balance and slipped. My body twisted as I fell so that I ended up cracking my skull against something on the ground.

I saw stars. Stars, which should've been forever beyond my reach, touched my eyes and burned them until I was blind. My lower lip was quivering for some reason.

I slowly pushed myself off the ground. When I raised my head, I noticed that although it was my forehead that had bumped against something, I felt a strange heaviness behind my ear. I was shaking uncontrollably, and I felt as if something was dripping from my goosebump-covered skin.

I was so cold. So cold. I repeated the words that were wrong for summer, my shoulders shaking. Even my fingertips were trembling. No part of my body was static. It was the most visceral way to feel alive.

"Travels… Traveling…"

I stared at the shimmering river, my thoughts and blood oozing out. I felt as if I'd made it out of stagnant water only to find myself in a quagmire, and now I was stomping down on it to firm it into something I could walk on.

I took my soggy socks off, removed my wallet from my school bag, and then threw both the socks and the bag away. I swung my arms, which felt much lighter.

"Aaah-hum-hum-hum, hmm-hum-hum-hum, aaah-hum, hum-hummm, hum-hum-hum-hum-hummm-aaan, ee-hee-humm, aaah-hum-hum-hummm…"

I broke into a dance, singing a song I'd never heard before. It was a song of joy, coming straight out of the injury in my head.

Clouds. Sky. World. Town.

What my eyes saw was changing fast. What a new feeling, not knowing what would be next.

Was this what it felt like to be reborn?

I stopped dancing and started walking in the direction I pointed out to myself. My place to belong was myself. I belonged wherever I was. There was nowhere I didn't belong. I didn't have to go anywhere to find a place for me. I didn't have to search for it. The world under my feet was all there was.

Others were too far away. Their skin, their bones, their love. But I—I was always reassuringly within my own reach.

I was thirsty and greedy for life. I had a refreshing lightness in my head, as if I'd really broken it open and a pleasant breeze were blowing through it, even though an awful ringing in my ears kept coming back and going away again, tracing an ellipse from delight to queasiness and back again.

I walked, each step peeling off a layer of fantasy from my back. I didn't mind whether I was heading toward a new beginning or a dead end. I wanted to see the ocean.

Endless Blue

Kotori had been acting strangely lately. *Kotori*, “little bird” in Japanese. Her surname was *Mori*, “forest,” which added to the potential for confusion. It wasn’t any little forest birds I was worried about, though, but my classmate, Kotori Mori.

Her name suited her; she was as small as a little bird, although she had very unbirdlike fangs, which she didn’t hesitate to put to use. She thought of biting as a valid form of conflict resolution. Kotori was what you’d call a problem child.

When she got in a heated argument with someone, she’d resort to head-butting, too, so you had to be careful around her. I had foolishly thought she’d outgrow that habit by the time she graduated to high school, and just last fall, I’d learned firsthand that was not the case.

Kotori had let her hair grow out. Her longer, naturally wavy hair would convince most that she was a sweet, gentle girl. Or, simply put, she was cute until she opened her mouth.

I’d known her for a long time, and at some point, I’d decided I had to protect her from getting in trouble. I was the sort people called “goody two-shoes.” Kotori’s house was close to mine, so I’d been seeing her around since we’d been little, and we had gotten to know each other pretty well. It was probably her cuteness that’d cemented our friendship, though.

When her behavior changed, I was quick to notice.

We were walking home from school, and Kotori was being strange again.

It was that time of day when afternoon hands off the sky to evening. The sun was low, its rays tracing lines on the asphalt to compete with the traffic markings. Students from different schools were walking home, footsteps overlapping, school uniforms brushing against one another. Our uniforms were whiter than any others when seen from behind. Seen from the

front, our pale blue scarves were the most noticeable detail.

The setting sun was just above a line of tall buildings, with some clouds in the sky. Kotori and I were chatting when she suddenly froze mid-sentence with her mouth hanging open. She stopped, looking up at the sky, so I unwillingly stopped, too. Other students had to walk around us.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Were sunsets always so pretty?”

“Say what?”

That was so random coming from Kotori. The rays of the setting sun fell on her hair and her tongue in her still-open mouth.

“Look at that yellow cloud over there… It’s so pretty.”

She pointed to where the sky and clouds blended into a sea of gold around the setting sun. It was pretty. But…

Kotori’s pale brown hair cast off multicolored reflections in the evening sunshine.

“Is it really you, Kotori?”

“What do you mean?”

“The most materialistic girl I know waxing lyrical about the sunset?”

Kotori growled at me, more like herself again. She snapped her teeth at me and started walking again.

“Things happen. People change,” she spat.

“What happened?”

“Stuff. Can’t be bothered to talk about it.”

She brushed me off like a bit of dust on her clothes. I was annoyed, but I didn’t know what to say, so I just pursed my lips, making a droning sound like a cicada. We walked on in silence.

Kotori hadn’t hidden things from me before. That was the biggest change.

Out of the frying pan and into the fire, I thought, scratching a mosquito bite. Summer was impossibly hot. I hated overheating, so I opened the window to let in cooler night air, and as a result, my legs got bitten by mosquitoes. The itchiness made me consider turning on the air-conditioning instead.

Scratching the bites, I went to sit down on a chair on the small

second-floor balcony. I was thinking about Kotori. From the balcony, I could see the roof of her house.

Then I thought I could hear her voice. I looked down at the street.

“Kotori?”

I saw her walking down the residential street, dressed in her school uniform even though she’d been home after school. She didn’t notice me as she passed by my house. It was pretty late to be out. I turned to look at the clock in my room. High school girls didn’t normally hang out in town at this hour, especially still in their uniforms.

“…”

I thought about how strange it was, and after briefly hesitating, I went back inside and then sneaked out of the house, careful not to alert my parents on the first floor. I scratched the bites on my legs one last time before hurrying after Kotori.

She was dressed as though she were going to school, minus her bag, but I was sure there were no school activities this late.

I kept my distance, but Kotori didn’t turn back to see if anyone was following her anyway. She walked purposefully down the streets, easily finding her way even where there were no streetlights.

Nobody at her house would tell her off for going out late. She’d normally invite me along…

She was going to the station, the biggest one in our town, which always seemed to have some construction work going on. She passed the bus stop and the taxi bay, and she was about to go inside the station building when her gait changed as she saw something. Her steps quickened with excitement, and she was almost skipping. I had to hasten, too, running on my toes, a terrible premonition making my mouth dry. Each of my feet was in a rush to join the other, as if scared of the gap between them. It was a strange feeling I’d never experienced before.

What was it that Kotori was being drawn to at such speed? I couldn’t see anything unusual at the station. Kotori and I used to always hang out together, seeing the same things, but now, she seemed to be looking at the world through a new lens.

She stopped, like a bird landing, next to a young woman. Just as the question “Who’s that?” popped into my mind, Kotori stood

up tall and greeted the woman with a kiss.

“…What?”

I couldn’t believe my eyes. The woman and Kotori stood pressed against each other with an aura of mischief. My eyes unfocused, and their silhouettes blurred against the station lights.

What? What? What?

So many questions were swirling inside my head. Kotori… But… We…

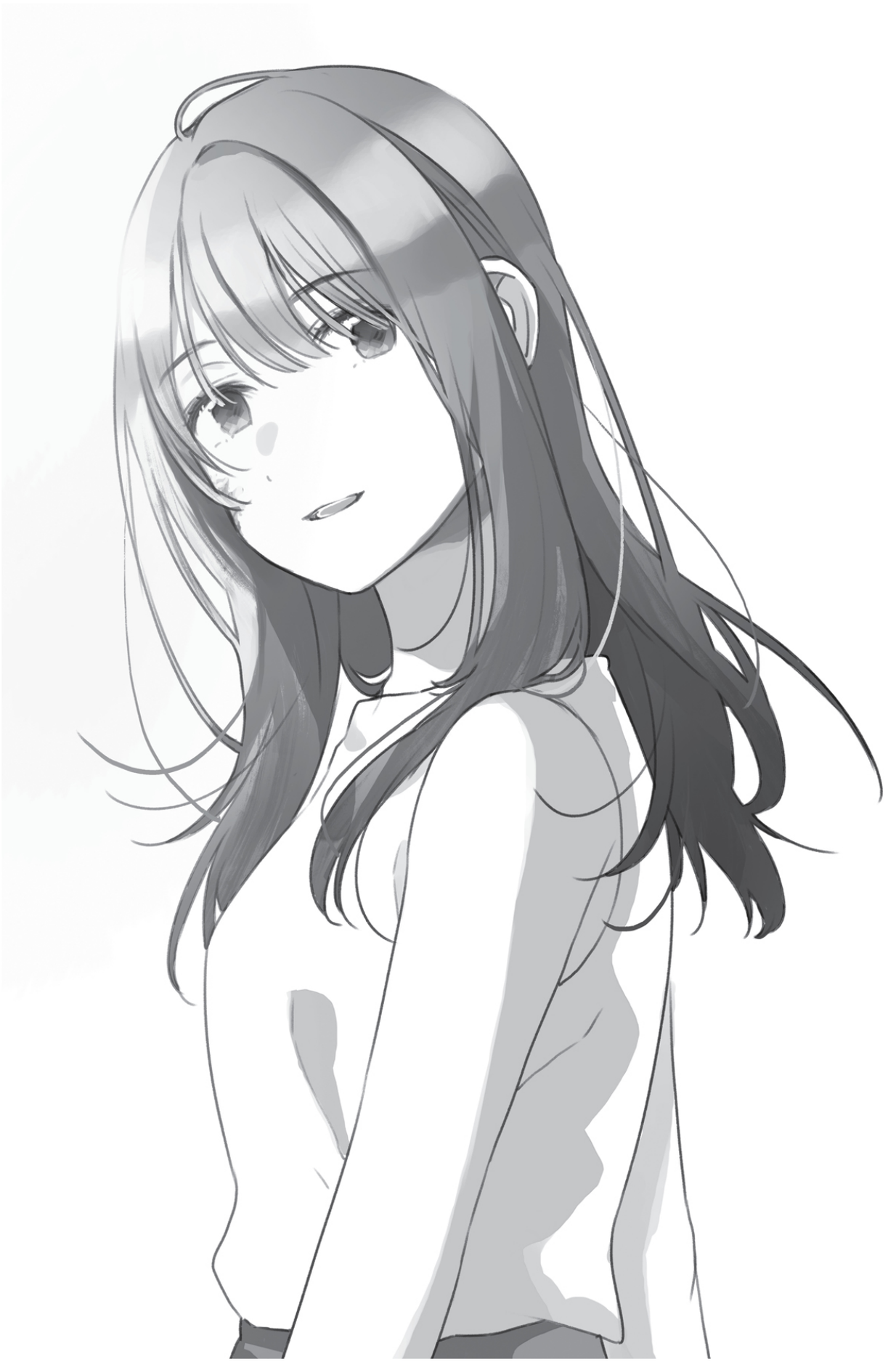
Everything that had been between me and Kotori was unraveling, twisting, warping. Blood and sweat rushed up to my neck, and I felt like it was swelling.

When the woman stopped kissing Kotori, she cocked her head, noticing me. She was looking straight at me, her gaze pinning me to the spot, making excuses impossible. Kotori saw the woman was looking at something, and she turned, too, her blissed-out face freezing when she saw me.

I could swear I heard a rumble when Kotori and the woman separated. The woman put her arm around Kotori’s shoulders and walked with her toward me, smiling as if she’d seen through me. She might have been four or five years older than me and Kotori. Her long, golden-blond hair, which appeared to be natural, shone brilliantly beneath the streetlights. It bounced as she walked, softly caressing the night. When her bangs swayed out of the way, I saw the woman had a faint scar on her forehead.

Kotori and I froze, while the woman was perfectly at ease. She smiled at me, radiant like a star.

“Sorry, but only short girls are my type.”



Afterword

This is the end of the story. It's not an infinite loop!

We've reached the end. How did you like *My First Love's Kiss*? The Japanese title is pretty long. I'd been trying to think of a neat way to shorten it, but before I came up with anything satisfactory, I ended up finishing the story.

It was the first time I'd had this idea to make it a three-volume story when I started writing. Other than that and the main theme, I didn't really have a clear structure for the plot in mind. I just wanted to write a love comedy revolving around an evil woman. She was my favorite. It's so easy to write a character who's meant to be enigmatic. You don't know what they're thinking because I hadn't thought about it, either! I just put her in the story and let her do her thing.

The finale has this "Episode 0" feel to it, like it's filling in the gaps outside the main story. That's intentional, I assure you! I thought fans of *Adachi and Shimamura* would like it... If you haven't read that series, please check it out! It's only on Volume 11, so you'll catch up in no time! What, you think eleven volumes is a lot...?

Well, *My First Love's Kiss* is finished. As for my next story, I might go with a completely different theme...or not. In any case, I'm sticking with the love comedy genre, of course. Love is what I love to write about!

A bit short for an afterword, but I don't really have anything more to say. Thanks for being my readers! There'll be more to come from me next year! Have a good one, everybody!

Hitoma Iruma

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