
the Mimosa Confessions
Book Four
By Mei Hachimoku
Illustrations by KUKKA

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the Mimosa Confessions


When I think back on those days and how brightly they shone,
and the crushing reality sets in that we can never go back...
In my darkest moments, I can't help but second-guess:
Was it really my brother who changed? Or was it me?
USHIO TSUKINOKI
MISAO TSUKINOKI


WELCOME
NEW STUDENTS!
祝
平成十九年度
入学式
椿岡中学校
TSUBAKIOKA
JUNIOR HIGH
ENTRANCE
CEREMONY 2007
SAKUMA KAMIKI
USHIO TSUKINOKI

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in the Snowgleam

Interlude

MIMOSA NO KOKUHAKU Vol. 4
by Mei HACHIMOKU
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KUKKA

TRANSLATION BY

Evan Ward



Airship

*Seven Seas Entertainment*


## Characters

**SAKUMA KAMIKI**
The protagonist.
A high school sophomore.
Has very few friends.

**USHIO TSUKINOKI**
Sakuma's best friend.
Recently transitioned to
living her life as a girl.

**NATSUKI HOSHIHARA**
Friendly girl with a
whole lot of pep. Beloved
by the entire class.

**MISAO TSUKINOKI**
Ushio's younger sister.
Disapproves of her sibling's
newfound identity.

**ARATA TSUKINOKI**
Father to Ushio
and Misao.

**YUKI TSUKINOKI**
Stepmother to Ushio
and Misao.

# mimosa

**/mɪˈmoʊ.sə/, n.**

(not to be confused with the genus Mimosa)

Common name for *Acacia dealbata*, a species of fast-growing evergreen tree in the legume family Fabaceae, widely known for its fragrant golden blooms.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

# *To Days Gone By*



# Chapter Seven:
# To Days Gone By

"TO A CHILD, A PARENT is like a god."

This was an analogy I heard some time ago. And to be sure, when you're too young to take care of yourself, much less to have any exposure to how other people's parents differ from yours, why *would* you doubt that your mother and father knew best? They're the ones who raised you, fed you, and looked after you. Without them, you would neither exist nor have the means to, which made them feel like something wholly absolute—an unchanging and irrevocable part of your universe.

So what happened when a god died?

I happened to know the answer to that.

Something else had to fill the void they left behind. Whether it was another person, a particular cause, a self-driven pursuit, or some form of external validation—there needed to be *something* absolute you could believe in wholeheartedly and rely on as a starting point for interpreting the world. For me, the answer was obvious: I simply transferred all of my faith into the one person who was closer to me than anyone else.

Ushio Tsukinoki, my beloved brother and only sibling.

When our mother died, he became my surrogate god. Yet right now, I could feel my faith being tested.

"…*Why* are you wearing that?"

Because he was standing in the hallway, dressed in *my* school uniform.

It was a dark evening in the middle of June, and I was fifteen years old. My first reaction was to panic, actually. But how could I

not, after catching my own brother wearing my junior high sailor skirt the moment I walked in the front door? In what universe was I expected to remain calm in this situation? I stood there frozen, at a loss for what to say, and my brother did the same. His face had gone deathly pale and he stared at me, utterly speechless. It was as if, for a moment, time stood still.

Then I felt a dark, murky emotion creep up my throat like bile. Was it disgust? Disappointment? A mix of sorrow, anguish, and despair? No. I knew this feeling, and it was none of the above.

It was a sense of duty—a moral imperative.

The second I recognized it as such, I launched a slew of vicious insults and condemnations in Ushio's direction. I verbally eviscerated him in the harshest possible sense, like I was casting stones at a convicted criminal. My brother seemed to understand this was his rightful sentence too, as he just stood there in silence, letting himself be subjected to my judgment and scorn.

My words—my *emotions*—felt bottomless. Unending.

But after some amount of time, maybe a minute or maybe five, my breath finally ran out, and I swallowed hard in an attempt to coat my hoarse throat with fresh saliva. Rightly spotting this as his only opportunity to escape before my next lambasting began, my brother ran out of the house on bare feet and slammed the door behind him.

Once he was gone, an eerie silence fell over the hallway. No one else was home, and it was already dark out. All I could hear was the muted chirping of crickets in the distance.

Every ounce of strength whooshed out of my bones, and I collapsed beneath the weight of my crushing despondency. It was as though my entire body had gone hollow; I couldn't even tense my muscles. I couldn't help but feel like my brother had just run away

from home, perhaps never to return. And even if he did come back, he might never be the brother I thought I knew again… Or was I fooling myself there?

Had I not noticed signs in Ushio that hinted at this before?

Was I simply pulling the wool over my eyes for fear that I'd be proven right?

I couldn't say for certain. And even if I could, it wouldn't change anything now. I felt a prickling itch in my nostrils at the thought of my own powerlessness, and I sniffled.

*Will I really be okay if it ends like this?*

As I waited for my strength to return, I retraced my thoughts and feelings one by one—heading upstream along the winding river of memory as I sought the source of this strange sense of duty, somewhere deep in the distant past.

***

SIX MONTHS AGO

"Come on, Ushio… I just wanna know why."

I pestered my brother from across the dinner table, having failed to wring an answer out of him during our argument in his room before we got called down to eat. Frankly, I was starting to get a little peeved.

My patience felt razor-thin these days—something my friend Himeka attributed to me "hitting my teenage rebellious phase," but I knew there was more to it. There was always a method to my madness; my frustrations were never irrational or immature. I

wouldn't lose my temper until I'd considered why I was upset or, more importantly, whether those emotions were justified.

"Misao, please," Ushio responded, clearly irritated. "It's really not that big a deal. Would you give it a rest already?"

It was December of the previous year, and my brother—who was two years older than me—was in his freshman year of high school. Despite how close we'd been back when we were kids, he'd grown more distant over the years, starting around the time he moved on to junior high while I was still in elementary school.

"But it *is* a big deal," I said. "Everyone knows she's, like…one of the prettiest, sweetest girls at Tsubakioka High. I mean, heck, even I've heard of her. How could you let an opportunity like that go to waste?"

"Look, it's none of your business, all right? Just let it go." My brother lifted his miso soup to take a sip as he dodged the question yet again, his silver hair hanging down like a curtain to hide his expression. I'd always been mildly jealous that he'd inherited our mother's beautiful, silky locks while I'd gotten our father's plain old coarse black hair.

"Okay, that's enough arguing, you two," said our father, who'd been eating his meal in silence up until now. "What's this all about, anyway?"

"Some girl at Ushio's school asked him out," I said.

"Misao!" Ushio hissed.

"Oh, is that right?" said our father. "Well, well, well… Good for you, son. Sounds like you're really coming into your own with the ladies."

"But he turned her down, Dad," I said. "And this girl's been super popular since junior high!"

Since our hometown of Tsubakioka was a small, insular, and annoyingly tight-knit rural community, word traveled fast—especially when it came to relationship drama between its most popular

denizens. And given that my brother more or less fell into that category, it was no surprise that I heard about him turning this girl down through the grapevine pretty quickly.

"Sorry, but I'm not going to date someone I don't have feelings for," said Ushio. "Besides, it's not like she and I are all that close to begin with."

"Yeah, but still! You could do a whole lot worse than her, you know!"

"I already told you: I'm just not interested. Why are you being so persistent about this, anyway? It's got nothing to do with you, so drop it, all right?"

Now *that* ticked me off. I was only trying to get to the bottom of this out of concern for my brother and his reputation. Before I could think of a retort, I heard the sound of the front door opening—which meant *she* was home. So I held my tongue and decided I could pursue this line of discussion later this evening.

"I'm hooome…"

Yuki's long, glossy hair swayed behind her as she strode confidently into my periphery in her suit jacket. This woman was my father's second wife, whom he'd married the previous year, when I was in seventh grade—though I still refused to accept her as my mother. I knew Ushio felt the same. Not that she was a bad person or anything, mind you; in fact, she was about as good a parent as anyone could hope for. But she could never replace our mom.

"Welcome home, dear," said my father, the only one to return her greeting. "Sorry you had to work overtime; you must be pretty beat. Take a load off."

"Yeah, it's been tough. I've been *so* swamped lately… Thanks for taking care of dinner again, hon."

"Don't mention it. I mean, you still made the meal—all I did was heat it up."

Yuki headed into the master bedroom, then emerged a few minutes later in her usual loungewear. After grabbing her plate of food from the kitchen, she joined us at the table. She pressed her hands together politely, then dug in.

"Awfully cold today, wasn't it?" she said between bites.

"Yeah, no kidding," my father replied. "Heard it'll be even colder tomorrow."

"Oh, wow, really? Maybe we should bust out the kotatsu one of these days."

"No objections here. Let's do that this weekend, maybe. I'll help set it up."

"Okay, great! Sounds like a plan." Yuki turned her gaze on me, and I tensed up. "How's your bedding treating you, Misao? Too cold?"

"Just fine," I said.

"Glad to hear it. Let me know when you want something a little warmer, though. I'll grab you a thicker futon out of storage."

I gave a little nod, then looked back down at my plate.

We ate in silence after that, with only the cacophony of celebrity talk show laughter from the television resounding through the living room. Before Yuki started living with us, we never left the TV on during meals. Not because we'd been raised to think it was poor etiquette or anything like that growing up—it just was never a thing we felt the need to do. That changed as soon as Yuki moved in. As did the seasoning in our daily miso soup. And the brand of tissues we bought. And where we left the remote when we weren't using it.

So many things had changed, little by little, from how they'd been when our real mother was still alive. And every time I noticed one of these tiny differences, no matter how minor, I could feel little pieces of my heart being chipped away like splinters.

I finished my meal and excused myself without a word.

After taking my evening bath, I went back to my room and zipped through my nightly homework, then decided to study a bit for my upcoming end-of-semester exams while I was at it. Once spring arrived, I'd be in the ninth grade, which meant I'd have to start thinking about high school entrance exams as well.

As I was flipping through my English vocab notebook, my phone vibrated on my desk. I checked the display, which read "ONE NEW MESSAGE: HIMEKA SASAHARA." I picked up the phone and took a look at her text.

*"heya~☆ brrr! so cold out rn!! u down to chat real quick?"*

Himeka wasn't a big fan of texting (or, more specifically, having to wait for the other party to respond), and she preferred the immediacy of regular old phone calls. Which was fine by me, since I found it more efficient than sitting around clacking away on a clunky phone keyboard. I took her up on the invite and hit dial.

"Hello? Himeka-chan?"

*"Mii-chan! Whatcha up to right now?"*

"Just studying for finals."

*"Ooh, gotcha! Man, hard to believe it's almost winter break, huh? Wait, sorry—I'm not disrupting your focus or anything, am I?"*

"No, you're fine. I'm kinda reviewing stuff I already know at the moment. Nothing I really need to focus for."

*"God, I wish I was as smart as you… Our finals are coming up pretty quick too, and I feel like I might have to really bust my butt to scrape by this time around…"*

While Himeka and I had been friends since kindergarten, and we'd gone to the same swimming school growing up, we attended separate elementary and junior high schools; I was a public school kid, whereas she went to private school. She was always complaining about how hard their curriculum was and how much smarter her classmates were compared to her.

*"Oh yeah, so have you decided what high schools you're gonna test for? I remember you were having trouble deciding what your first choice would be."*

"Yeah, kind of. Think I'm going to stay with Tsubakioka High for now."

*"Right, makes sense for you and your brother to stick together. Ooh, maybe* I *should go there too! Then I won't have such a long commute, and we can see each other every day!"*

"Well, that's assuming we both get in, but yeah. It's a nice thought, for sure."

Himeka was a good friend, and her loyalty had never wavered since kindergarten. There was a sort of calming reassurance in the constants of my universe. After chatting about recent goings-on for a while, I asked her what was really on my mind.

"Okay, so, question… If someone you didn't really know asked you out, what would your first reaction be? Or what would you do, basically?"

*"Huh?! Where's* this *coming from?! Wait, don't tell me—did someone ask* you *out, Mii-chan?"*

"No, silly. It's just a hypothetical."

*"You suuure? You're not just saying that?"*

"Why would I lie to you about this?" I wasn't sure why she doubted me.

*"I mean, if you got a boyfriend, then you'd probably never have time to talk to me on the phone anymore… Oh! Not that I wouldn't be supportive if you* wanted *to date someone, of course! And I'll always be here if you want my advice or whatever, obviously!"*

"Just answer the question already."

Himeka whimpered like a puppy, then said, *"Well, hmm… I guess it would kinda depend on the person?"*

"Okay, what if it was someone who was really popular and attractive?"

*"Dang. You're playing hardball right out the gate, okay…"*

Himeka started hemming and hawing, muttering aloud to herself as she considered her options. She seemed to be enjoying the scenario.

*"Well, it'd be a really tough choice… But I think I might say no."*

"What?! But why? I mean, he'd be a really great boyfriend…"

*"Yeah, but I feel like I'd be way too nervous about the idea, especially in the moment… Plus, you never know—maybe someone put them up to it, and they're only asking me out because they lost a bet or something…"*

"No, no, no. Come on. You're being way too pessimistic about this."

Maybe Himeka had been the wrong person to ask about this. I tried tacking on some additional caveats and conditions in an attempt to coax a "yes" out of her by any means possible, but Himeka remained staunchly opposed to this hypothetical relationship. Every time she came up with some vague new excuse not to dive in and go for it, I got a little bit more annoyed. I mean, was I crazy, or wouldn't *most* people instantly jump on a proposition like that? If Himeka's stance was the norm, that meant I'd been wrong to criticize my brother for doing the same. And I couldn't have that.

But as I sat there wondering how I could possibly convince her to see it my way, there came a noise from the room next door. It seemed my brother had finally retired to his room for the evening.

"Sorry, Himeka-chan. I think I should get back to studying."

*"Oh, right. Got it, no worries. Talk to you later, then."*

"Yeah, talk to you later."

I ended the call, set my phone back down on my desk, then got up and walked out of my room. The cold wood flooring creaked softly underfoot as I padded down the hall and knocked on my brother's door.

"Yeah, come in," he said, and I stepped inside.

My brother swiveled in his rolling chair to face me. It looked like he'd just gotten out of the bath, as his cheeks were a little bit flushed; the red tint stood out quite prominently on his fair complexion.

"I wanted to finish our conversation from dinner," I said, taking a seat on his bed.

My brother had always kept his room pretty clean and minimal—almost to the point that it lacked personality—but it felt like there were even fewer noteworthy objects in it now than the last time I'd been here. I didn't spot the game console he used to have under his TV; maybe he'd stowed it away in a drawer somewhere.

"Do we have to?" said Ushio. "I was about to get started on my homework."

"It'll only take a minute. Well, assuming you're cooperative, that is."

"What is this, an interrogation?"

"Shouldn't be, unless you feel like you have something to hide."

"Okay, fine… Whatever. Just make it quick, all right?"

I saw no reason to drag this out either, so I cut right to the chase. "You've been asked out by quite a few different girls now, I hear. Am I correct in assuming you've turned down every last one of them?"

Ushio's eyes widened in surprise. "And where exactly did you hear this?"

"From my classmates. You're pretty popular around town, so everyone's always asking me about you. Now, am I right or am I wrong?"

"Who's 'everyone'?"

"Literally *everyone*, Ushio."

In truth, it was really only about three or four people who'd approached me with an expressed interest in my brother. Yet even that was enough to make me feel pressured, and I knew there had to be plenty more who were just as curious but not bold enough to ask. I waited as my brother thought to himself with his arms crossed, then faced me with a stern expression.

"Misao," he said. "Did Sugihashi-san put you up to this?"

"Huh?" This caught me off guard; Sugihashi was the name of the latest girl who'd asked him out. "No, of course not… I've never even met her. Why would you think that?"

"Just curious. Figured maybe she could've enlisted your help to ask me if there was a more concrete reason I turned her down, or some aspect I didn't find attractive about her, or something like that."



"No, nobody put me up to this… Wait. You mean there *wasn't* a concrete reason?"

"Oh, no, no, no! There was, believe me," my brother said, suddenly flustered. "And I told it to her straight—that I just want to focus on track and field right now, and I don't feel like I have time for anything else. But Sugihashi-san, well… She didn't seem particularly satisfied with that answer."

I sat there, staring at him in silence. Obviously, I could appreciate it if my brother truly felt like his athletic career was his number one priority. And with how much promise he'd already shown setting record times, even as a freshman, everyone seemed to agree that he really did have a chance to make it big, assuming he didn't get injured and have to retire or something. Still, this felt like a flimsy excuse to me—and my brother seemed to pick up on that.

"Look, I *do* feel bad about it, all right?" he continued, sounding slightly annoyed. "And I know how much courage it takes to ask someone out, even when you're as popular as Sugihashi-san. But at the end of the day, I still have the right to say no to a relationship I don't have any interest in right now. Because I've got my own priorities, and it's not my problem if they don't happen to align with hers."

While I felt like this was a fairly coldhearted way of writing her off, there was nothing technically wrong with what my brother was saying. And yet, this explanation didn't sit right with me, for whatever reason. There remained a hint of doubt in my mind that I couldn't quite put into words. And so I changed tack, hoping to finally grasp it.

"Everyone's been saying things about you, you know."

"Really now? 'Everyone,' huh?" Ushio said contemptuously.

"They're saying your standards are too high, or that you don't have any interest in girls at all… Are you really okay with letting those kinds of rumors fly around unchecked?"

For a split second, my brother's face stiffened. This wasn't the sort of gossip anyone would enjoy knowing people were spreading about them, and it seemed my brother was similarly averse to the implications.

"Don't be stupid," he snapped, so harshly that I recoiled from the vitriol in his voice. Then he looked me square in the eye and said, as if admonishing me, "Listen, Misao. Even if me having a girlfriend would probably put those rumors to rest, don't you think it would be pretty pathetic for me to agree to date someone for that reason alone? Plus, it wouldn't be fair to the girl either. That's not the right reason to go out with someone. And even if I *were* dating someone, I can almost guarantee that the type of people who enjoy indulging in juicy gossip about their peers would spread rumors about me regardless. They don't really care whether it's true or not; the sheer thought of a scandal excites them."

"…Are people really that shallow?" I asked.

"Yes," my brother answered without a moment's hesitation, then leaned back in his chair. "That's the kind of town we live in, unfortunately."

There was a hint of callous resignation in his tone. It was enough to make me suddenly feel like I could sympathize with what he was going through, and I lost the will to continue this conversation despite having plenty more to say.

"All right," I said, standing up to leave. Before I went, there was one last thing I wanted to add. "But for the record, it's not 'your business' when people start hounding *me* about it too. So I'd appreciate it if you could keep these rumors in check."

And with that, I exited the bedroom.

I awoke the next morning feeling chilled to the bone. Despite how much I dreaded the thought of having to go to school in this weather, I dragged myself out of bed and abandoned my pajamas to put on my uniform. The rest of my morning routine was pretty quick

and simple, which meant I had less than ten minutes left to brace myself to head out into the cold. I unlatched my schoolbag to double-check that I had all my textbooks; I knew I'd already placed them all neatly back inside last night, but this was my morning routine.

"…Oh, wait."

I noticed I was missing my electronic dictionary, and I realized I'd forgotten to borrow it back from Ushio last night (technically, it was mine and his to share). I did have a traditional hardcover dictionary as well, but I didn't want to have to lug that heavy thing around if I didn't have to. Unfortunately, my brother had already left the house for morning track practice. I'd have to go into his room without permission to take it back—which I normally wouldn't dream of doing, but in this case, it felt warranted.

I walked out into the hallway and let myself into my brother's room. The last time I came to retrieve it, I recalled him pulling it out of his desk drawer, so I figured I'd find it there—and sure enough, there it was. I let out a sigh of relief.

Right as I was about to grab it and go, I spotted something I didn't recognize in the very back of the drawer.

"Hm?"

It was an unadorned, aqua-colored accessory case. I wouldn't have even blinked at such an ordinary thing, had I not found it where I did. A new, unfamiliar object in my brother's otherwise barren bedroom more than piqued my interest.

I picked up the little zipper pouch. I could tell from how uneven it felt in my hands that it contained a variety of items, all with different shapes. My curiosity got the better of me, so I unzipped the pouch and pulled out the first object my fingers found.

"Wait, is this…?"

At first, I thought it was a small pair of scissors—but no.

On closer inspection, it was an eyelash curler.

I set it down and pulled out the other items one by one.

Lipstick, blush, eye shadow… They were all cosmetics.

*Are these my brother's?*

No, that couldn't be. Sure, I knew some boys wore makeup nowadays, but I'd never once seen my brother wearing any, and he didn't seem the type.

*Oh, wait. I see what's going on here.* One of his female friends had probably come over and forgotten this in his bedroom, and now he was just holding on to it for her. Heck, maybe this "friend" was actually his girlfriend. In which case, I could understand why he'd turned that other girl down—though it'd be awfully impressive for him to have a secret girlfriend without word getting out, one even his own *sister* didn't know about…

I put the cosmetics back in the pouch and returned it to the drawer. There was no reason for me to get all wound up over a little bit of makeup; whoever these things belonged to, it was no business of mine. So why was I feeling so rattled by it? A variety of tiny, scattered presentiments from across my memories threatened to converge on a single, scant possibility—but I hurried out of my brother's bedroom before they could form a clearer picture of whatever it was I so feared.

At that very moment, a string of cherished words flashed through my mind.

*"Promise me you'll always be a good older brother to her, okay?"*

Words my *real* mother—not Yuki—had said to Ushio long ago.

There had to be a reason why I was being reminded of them now.

But in that moment, I really didn't want to think about it.

***

TWO YEARS AGO

"Now, listen up, children. There's someone I'd like you both to meet."

Whenever our father called us "children" collectively, you knew it was going to be serious. And judging from his tone and expression, this had to be something even more important than usual. He'd broached this subject at the dinner table on a night of soft rains, two months after I'd entered junior high.

"And who might that be?" I asked, setting my chopsticks down. Honestly, I had a pretty good hunch. But I didn't want to have to be the one to say it out loud.

"I'm sure you two remember me mentioning Yuki Sofue, right?" said our father. "The woman I said I was going to propose to."

*Knew it.*

Our father had first mentioned his intent to remarry at the beginning of spring, only a couple months ago. Looking back, there'd been some telltale signs well before that. Out of the blue, he'd started dressing up and spending a lot more time out of the house. He generally seemed a lot livelier and walked with more of a spring in his step. Originally, I figured maybe he'd just found a new hobby or something—but then he dropped the bomb on us.

Bewilderment was my first reaction. There was something visceral about the notion of our father marrying anyone other than our mother that made it hard for me to look the idea in the face. Not that I planned on opposing it, of course—the last thing I wanted to do was make things harder for him after he'd worked himself to the

bone to raise and support us all by himself following our mother's death. And I was certain my brother felt the same.

"Sounds good," Ushio said, with the calm nonchalance of responding to some run-of-the-mill notification. We were both in junior high (though he was about to graduate), yet he seemed far more mature than me. "I don't mind at all. Thought you'd want to introduce her to us eventually."

"Good, good," said our father. "Glad to hear you've already been thinking about it, and that you're on board. Think you're ready for that too, Misao?"

"Oh, uh, sure!" I said. "I'm happy to meet her, yeah."

I figured I should probably follow my brother's lead here and go with the flow, but in my heart of hearts, I wasn't looking forward to it. Our father had told us she was a nice lady, but I had no clue what we were supposed to talk about, or what level of distance to maintain, as her future stepchildren. *Ugh, that sounds so weird.*

"Well, let's just make one thing clear, okay?" our father went on, perhaps sensing my misgivings. "As great of a person as I might think she is, you two don't have to force yourselves to love her or anything like that. Also, I don't want her to erase or overwrite your mother's memory. And just know that no matter what happens, I'm always on your guys' side first and foremost, so don't feel like you have to hide your feelings."

Having said all of this, my father chuckled to himself as if realizing something.

"Whoops—guess that was more like *three* things, wasn't it?"

One week later, Yuki came to visit the Tsukinoki household for the first time.

My initial impression of her was that she was a *very* beautiful woman. She had a slender, well-proportioned figure, and the

overhead lighting in our living room shone like a halo around her long, luscious black hair.

She walked over to where Ushio and I sat on the couch and bowed politely. “Hi there, you two. I’m Yuki. It’s great to finally meet you.”

My brother and I both jumped to our feet and returned the bow.

The plan for the evening was for our father to show off his cooking skills, though Yuki would be helping him out. Meanwhile, my brother and I sat side by side on the couch watching TV, stealing furtive glances at the kitchen.

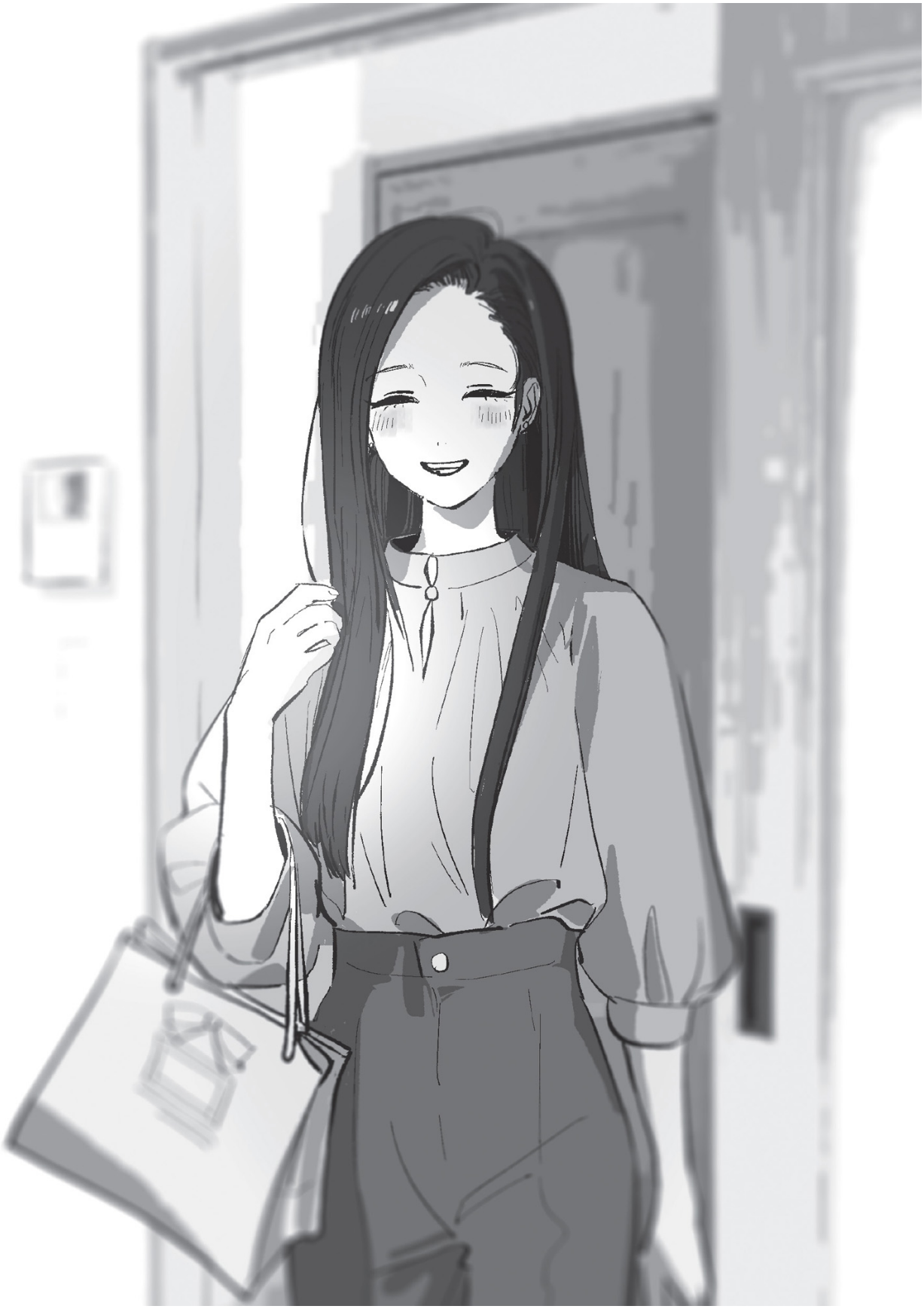
“Would you mind peeling the potatoes for me, Yuki-san?” said my father.

“Of course,” said Yuki. “I know my way around a kitchen, so anything you need, just say the word! Want me to chop them into bite-size pieces once they’re peeled?”

“Yeah, that’d be great. The knives are just on that lower shelf there, so feel free to use whichever one suits you best.”

“Okay, got it.”

The two of them seemed to have pretty good chemistry—but of course they did. They wouldn’t be getting married otherwise. When the cooking was done, we gathered around the dinner table. Despite the unusually impressive spread of food, I couldn’t muster up much of an appetite. As we ate, Yuki made a point of trying to strike up a conversation with me and my brother—asking how school was going, or what kinds of hobbies we had, or complimenting us on our good looks. She had a bright personality and was awfully talkative. I agreed with my father’s assessment that she seemed like a great person. But even so, I could not for the life of me picture a future in which I called this woman my mom.



After dinner, Yuki helped clean up the dishes, then went home. The whole visit was over in the blink of an eye. I went and sat back on the couch, letting myself sink down into the cushions. A little while later, my brother came over to join me.

"Appreciate your efforts today, both of you," my father said as though he was our employer or something. I *did* feel like I'd just done a full day's work; with how exhausted I'd made myself by being on pins and needles the whole time, I didn't even feel like I had the capacity to enjoy the meal. "So? What did you think of Yuki-san? Think she'll fit in here? Can you three get along?"

This, I couldn't readily answer. If she'd been applying for the position of private tutor or extracurricular club advisor or something, I'd have no complaints whatsoever. But if he was asking whether I could see myself liking her as a permanent fixture of our family, that was a whole different story. I just didn't know if she could fill our mother's shoes.

Apparently, my brother felt no such hesitation. "Yeah," he said with a nod. "She seems like a great person."

"Glad to hear it. How 'bout you, Misao?"

"Well…I guess I pretty much agree with Ushio, yeah."

"Got it… Okay."

His expression took on a shade of relief—though not without a heavy hint of uncertainty. Perhaps he'd been hoping for a more in-depth appraisal from us. Or maybe he'd just seen through my evasive veneer.

"Well, you two are still what's most important to me, so don't hesitate to speak up if there's something about this or her that makes either of you uncomfortable. Even if it might seem minor or trivial—if there's anything you think I should be aware of, you know my door is always open."

I couldn't help feeling that he sounded a bit like a private eye probing for details at the very end. He excused himself to run the

bathwater, leaving the two of us alone in the living room.

"So how do you *really* feel?" I asked my brother.

"What, about Yuki-san?" said Ushio. "Exactly what I just told Dad."

"You mean it?"

My brother let out a sharp sigh, then reluctantly clarified, "I meant it when I said I think she seems like a great person, yes."

"I see." So he *wasn't* saying he genuinely thought she'd fit in just fine. That made me feel a little bit better. "Well, I will say she reminds me of Mom a little bit."

"Yeah… You thought so too, huh?"

"Obviously not in the looks department, but the way she carries herself, and the way she talks, and even some of her little mannerisms. That sort of thing."

"Definitely."

"Guess Dad must've been pretty lonely too."

My brother didn't respond to this. He just kept staring blankly at the TV, looking bored out of his mind. I still wanted to know a bit more about how he actually felt, so I pressed the conversation onward.

"Gotta say, though…it does feel kinda heartless to me."

"What does?"

"Just the whole 'Dad getting married again' thing. I mean, if Mom was really the love of his life, then isn't it a little cruel of him to try to replace her like this?"

"Misao." Ushio's voice was so bitingly cold, it sent a shiver down my spine. "Don't you dare ever let Dad hear you say that."

There was such a judgmental, unremitting forcefulness to his tone that I felt like I'd been slapped in the face. And after momentarily being stunned speechless, I was swallowed up by a

giant wave of embarrassment. I could tell—emotionally, not logically—that I'd just said something unbelievably thoughtless and superficial.

"Y-yeah, no duh!" I sputtered. "I wasn't being serious, obviously!"

I pushed myself to my feet and stormed up to my bedroom.

*Great, way to make me feel like an absolute jerk,* I grumbled internally. Of *course* I would never say such a thing to our father's face. Besides, I'd only been thinking aloud like that in the first place because I wanted to see how my brother might respond. In that sense, I supposed I got the reaction I was looking for, but *man*…

I closed my bedroom door behind me and flopped face-first onto my bed.

My brother had changed. Back in elementary school, he was such a sweet, softhearted boy—the kind who'd never even hurt a fly. But ever since he started junior high, he'd become a lot colder, and a lot more distant—always keeping me at arm's length, and rarely if ever showing a smile. And I was pretty sure I knew the reason for that.

Our mother's passing was no doubt a big part of it.

But then there had also been his falling out with Sakuma.

Two things I was powerless to do anything about.

"Ugh…"

I was depressed, plain and simple. I wondered if maybe Yuki joining the family would help turn things around a little.

Something told me it probably wouldn't.

Three months after that first dinner at our place, Yuki and my father were officially married. She discarded her maiden name and joined the Tsukinoki household, and all of a sudden, we were a family of four again.

Yuki kept her day job while also working with my father to handle everything that needed to be done around the house. In the beginning, she seemed to have a tough time juggling everything, but she was quick to get the hang of it all. Before long, she was making dinner all by herself—then making our lunches for the next day to boot.

Everything she cooked was delicious; she always ensured we had plenty of variety in our diets and perfect portion sizes too. Anytime I admitted to liking her cooking, Yuki would be over the moon, then she'd push herself even harder to make more tasty things I'd enjoy. And yet, I never once found myself looking *forward* to dinner.

The more I found myself savoring the refined tastes of the meals Yuki so expertly prepared, the guiltier I felt, and the more I longed for the much thicker, heartier flavors of my mother's home cooking. I hadn't felt this way at all when adjusting to my father's cooking, but for whatever reason, Yuki's left a melancholy aftertaste in my mouth. And it wasn't just her cooking either—the way she folded my underwear for me, and how she said "Tsukinoki household, this is Yuki speaking" whenever she answered the phone… There were so many little things about her that bothered me in strange, inexplicable ways that it felt like she had my heart in her grasp, and she was slowly sinking her nails in deeper and deeper into its softest, most vulnerable parts.

Granted, I knew I was being a bit…okay, *very* oversensitive.

There was one morning early on that really exemplified this. It was a weekend, and I was sleeping in, when all of a sudden, I awoke to the sound of my curtains being yanked apart. Yuki had let herself into my bedroom—and for a moment, her shapely form, backlit by the morning glare, appeared to my bleary eyes as the silhouette of someone else entirely. Someone I should have known she couldn't be.

"Mom…" I muttered sleepily, and the figure spun around.

"Morning, Misao! Looks like it's going to be another lovely day!"

My mother's apparition was vanquished in an instant, sapping my remaining drowsiness along with it as my face grew redder and redder. Of all the people I could have accidentally mistaken for my mother… A muddled mixture of embarrassment and self-reproach swirled within me as I shot up in bed.

"Wh-who gave you permission to come in here?!"

Yuki's eyes widened in surprise, and her expression shifted with dismay. "S-sorry! The weather was just so nice, I thought maybe—"

"I don't need you to wake me up," I said. "You're not my mom."

"Right… Of course, sorry…"

When I saw the look on Yuki's face in that moment, I immediately knew I'd overreacted. I felt awful, and I wanted to apologize right then and there—but it was too late, as she'd hurried out of my bedroom.

From that day on, things felt even more awkward than they already had, and I started avoiding interacting with Yuki as much as I could. Not that I hated her or anything; I just knew I'd probably given her a pretty negative impression of me and how I felt about her, and I didn't know how to salvage that or make conversation with her without feeling weirdly vulnerable. Even when she tried to talk to me, I found myself unable to maintain eye contact with her, so I just defaulted to curt, standoffish replies.

But that didn't dissuade Yuki; she remained as presumptuously chipper as ever. She *always* seemed to be in a good mood—something I couldn't help but watch with jaded, judgmental eyes from time to time. Surely she had to be struggling more than she let on. Surely she had to be annoyed with my behavior. At times, I felt all but certain she was simply hiding how she truly felt about me in order to play the role of the perfect mother.

Yet I knew deep down that this probably wasn't the case. I was just looking for any reason to reject her.

"Hey, Misao," said Yuki. "How would you like a nice, hot pancake?"

It was a Saturday morning. My brother had practice and my father was at work, which meant I was stuck at home alone with my stepmother. And sure enough, I barely had enough time to wash my face before she tried to force an interaction with me.

"Your father told me you used to really love them," she said, "and I realized we've got all the ingredients here at home. So I figured, why not whip up a batch?"

It was true that I loved pancakes—so much so that I used to jump for joy whenever my mother made them for me in the past. But I hadn't eaten them in quite a while now. After a moment's hesitation, I nodded to affirm my interest. Yuki's face instantly lit up.

"Great! Give me one minute, then; I'll fry one up for you *real* quick!"

As I watched Yuki excitedly fire up the stovetop out of the corner of my eye, I went and took a seat on the couch. At the risk of sounding like a broken record, I didn't *hate* Yuki, and I certainly didn't want to have a negative relationship with her. If anything, I wished the two of us could get along. So if she was going to make a good faith attempt to grow closer to me, I didn't mind meeting her halfway. A sweet scent wafted over to me from the kitchen, and my stomach growled. *Heh. Look at me, actually thinking about letting* pancakes *be the thing we finally bond over. I'm so ridiculous.*

"Okay, order up!" Yuki called out, bringing a freshly cooked flapjack over to me on a ceramic plate. It was the sort of perfectly picturesque pancake you might see in a restaurant ad: fluffy, round, and golden brown, with a square of butter smack-dab in the middle. She brought over a bottle of maple syrup as well, and I drizzled out

a spiraling swirl before grabbing my utensils. I cut the pancake into eighths, slid my fork under a slice, then ferried it up into my mouth.

"Well?" said Yuki. "What do you think?"

She'd sat down to watch me eat her handiwork from the other side of the table, eagerly awaiting my first impressions. And it *was* a very good pancake, all things considered. There was a delectable airiness to its fluffy texture, and I tasted the slightest hint of vanilla in the batter. More than anything, it looked flawless, with no burns or splotches anywhere on its evenly cooked surface.

I was reminded of the pancakes my mother used to make for me. They were much more uneven—denser, flatter, and probably overcooked. I remembered always telling her that the instructions on the back of the box said to quickly cool the pan once it got to medium heat, and her assuring me it wouldn't make much of a difference. Meanwhile, Yuki had probably even wrung a wet dishcloth to get the pan to exactly the right temperature.

I brought another slice up to my mouth.

It really *did* taste quite good.

*Huh. Guess that explains it, then.*

*My mom just sucked at making pancakes.*

"I'm done," I said.

"Wha—?!"

I set down my knife and fork and stood up from the table. I didn't want to eat another bite, lest I forget what my real mother's pancakes tasted like. I could already feel that the mere presence of Yuki in our household—as a second maternal figure with which to constantly compare—was beginning to tarnish some of my fondest memories of her.

"W-wait a minute," said Yuki, her expression clouding over nervously. "Sorry, were you not hungry? Or did it not taste very good…?"

She was wearing the same look on her face now as the day I'd driven her out of my bedroom for simply coming in to open the curtains. It made me feel like I was being a totally unreasonable little baby—and I was. Just a stubborn, selfish, lonely little brat who still hadn't gotten over the death of her mother all these years later.

*Ugh, I hate this… I'm gonna start crying if I stay here any longer.*

"…I'm still tired," I said. "I'm going back to bed."

"Oh, are you not feeling well?" asked Yuki. "Want me to take your temperature?"

"No, I'll be fine."

"But—"

"I said I'm fine! Now leave me alone!"

I hadn't meant to raise my voice, and seeing how bewildered it made Yuki sent a stab of pain through my chest. Unable or unwilling to shoulder my own guilt, I stormed up to my room, collapsed onto my bed, and buried my face in my pillow. If only Yuki wasn't such a good cook. Yes, maybe that was it. Maybe if she wasn't such a well-rounded, well-put-together person, and there were more obvious faults with her I could latch on to, then I wouldn't have to feel this way. But even I knew that was a ridiculous thought.

That night, my brother came to visit me in my room.

"Misao," he said, "don't you think you're being a little too hard on Yuki-san?"

As he loomed over me where I sat on my bed, I felt my heart skip a beat. For a second, I wondered if he somehow knew about the pancake incident from this morning. But neither he nor my father had been home at the time, and Yuki didn't seem the type to blab about something like that, so I figured he was only asking this in reference to my usual demeanor around her.

"Not really," I said. "Just treating her normally."

"And how do you figure that? You won't make eye contact with her when she's talking to you, and sometimes you even ignore her outright. I don't care *how* much you don't care for her—she's Dad's new wife, so we all need to get along."

I almost cracked a smile. "Dad's new wife, huh? Not 'our new stepmom'? See, it's not just me. You totally aren't accepting her either."

"I don't let it show."

"Wow, and you're not even denying it. Maybe practice what you preach before you give me a hard time about it."

It felt like I was being talked down to, which obviously put me on the defensive. Even more so because I wasn't too thrilled with how little time and energy my brother had been investing in *our* relationship lately. He'd been so busy with practice and studying for entrance exams that he had virtually zero time to hang out with me. I realized that was a very childish thing to be peeved about, but it bothered me nonetheless.

"And what if you scare Yuki-san away?" Ushio said with a sour look on his face. "What if she decides we're not worth the trouble, and Dad has to start doing everything all by himself again?"

"Then I'll help out with the housework. I'll even learn to cook."

"There's a limit to how much kids like us can do. You sure as heck can't make money to help pay the bills, for one thing."

"Can too. I'll just get a part-time job or something."

"No employer is going to hire a seventh grader."

"Sure they will. Kids still deliver newspapers and stuff, don't they?"

My brother pinched the bridge of his nose. "Just what the heck has gotten into you, Misao?" he said after a moment. "Why are you

being so stubborn lately? I don't remember you behaving like this before."

"Yeah, well, that's because you—" I started, but stopped short.

"Sorry, what about me?"

*You haven't been giving me any attention.* I couldn't possibly say that out loud.

"You've changed too, you know," I said. "You used to be so kind and considerate, but nowadays you're just cold and distant. So if you think *I've* changed, it's your own fault."

It was a last-ditch excuse, but it did seem to give my brother pause.

"Come on, Misao. Now you're deflecting. Let's not try to place the blame on me, okay? We're talking about you here."

"No, we're not."

"Yes, we are."

"I said *no*, we're *not*!"

I didn't have the words in me to convey my emotions, so now I was repeating myself like an idiot. I was so frustrated with my own childishness, about ready to break down and cry—which only made me feel that much *more* like a baby.

"Ugh… You're not even listening to me," said Ushio. "I really don't have time for this. I've got enough on my mind as it is, you know."

His high-and-mighty attitude only made me that much more indignant.

"…What, like Sakuma-san, you mean?"

My brother recoiled. "Wha—?!"

I knew just how much weight Sakuma's name held for him and what a sore spot it had become; I preferred not to use it solely to

get under his skin, but I wasn't about to let him keep talking down to me either. I had to fight back somehow.

"Uh, no?" said Ushio. "Why are you bringing up *Sakuma* all of a sudden?"

"Just seems like he's the only thing you ever care about," I said.

"You mean, like, several years ago? Because it's definitely not like that anymore. I mean…he and I haven't even hung out in quite a while now."

All through elementary school, my brother and Sakuma had been such good friends, they hung out virtually every day. But almost as soon as they entered junior high, Sakuma started avoiding him like the plague, which my brother had taken *really* hard.

What was the reason for this sudden estrangement? I had a good idea as to why, and it wasn't just because Ushio had gotten so much busier after joining the track team. There was a much bigger, more fundamental reason for it—one I was fairly certain my brother hadn't realized, and which I had no intention of sharing. Even if I spelled it out for him, it probably wouldn't change anything.

"…I bet Sakuma-san just doesn't like you anymore," I said.

My brother's face went bright red. Thinking he was about to lash out at me, I looked away and braced myself—but no matter how long I waited, no reprimand came. Cautiously, I lifted my gaze to see that my brother was standing there ominously, looking down at me with a blank mask of an expression.

"Fine," he said. "Have it your way."

Then he turned on his heel to leave.

Immediately, regret welled up inside of me. Perhaps I'd been a bit too cruel to bring Sakuma into this after all; I had to apologize. I stood up from my bed and tried to muster up the courage to do so—but before I could, my brother stopped at the threshold and turned to face me with a frigid, penetrating glare.

"If they end up getting divorced because of you," he said, "you're on your own. Don't expect me to vouch for you. And don't say I didn't warn you."

And with that, my brother walked out of my room and shut the door.

I stood there, unable to move a muscle, struggling to digest my brother's words as though they were a lump of lead in the pit of my stomach. Obviously, I knew I'd said something quite cruel; I was well aware of how deeply depressed he'd gotten about the Sakuma situation, and I'd deliberately picked at those old wounds. But did he really have to be *that* brutally blunt just now?

Heat seared my eyes, and I bit my lower lip as hard as I could in the hopes that the pain might distract from the misery and despair I now felt, which was far more unbearable. I couldn't even remember the last time we'd had a fight like this. Hardly anything came between us back in the day. Our bond as brother and sister was rock-solid then—as beautifully unbreakable as a shimmering diamond.

I missed those days.

Sometimes I wondered how things might have played out differently if Sakuma had stayed in the picture. Maybe none of this would have ever happened.

***

FOUR YEARS AGO

I slammed my hand down on my blaring alarm clock to silence it. Morning sunlight shone into my room through a gap in the curtains. As I sat up in bed, a shiver ran through me. It felt way too cold to be March.

"Brrr… Ugh, it's freezing…"

Rubbing my shoulders for warmth, I slid out of bed. On the opposite side of the room, I could see that my brother had left his comforter in a heap on his bed. Apparently, he'd already gone out for his morning run.

While his absence was only temporary, it served as a kind of sobering reminder that he and I would only be roommates until the end of the month. After that, the renovations our father had scheduled would begin, splitting our single upstairs bedroom into two smaller ones. Personally, I wouldn't have minded continuing to share, but my brother seemed adamant about wanting his own space. Which I could kind of understand, I guess, given that he was going into junior high and all.

I headed downstairs; when I got to the first floor, the front door swung open.

"Oh, hey. Morning, Misao," said my brother—cheeks flushed, face covered in sweat.

"Morning," I said. "You're up pretty early today."

"Yeah, got my graduation ceremony in a couple hours…" He sat on the raised wooden step in the entryway and started unlacing his shoes.

It had been about a year since Ushio started going out on runs each and every morning. I was pretty surprised at first, since I'd never really thought of my brother as particularly athletic, and I certainly hadn't ever seen him engage in any strenuous physical activity of his own volition. But according to him, there was something calming about the exercise that helped to keep out unpleasant thoughts, so maybe it was just an effective coping method for him. And there was nothing wrong with that.

"Do you actually like running?" I asked, curious.

"Yeah, I do," he said. "Wanna come with me next time?"

"Mmm… I'll think about it."

I headed into the bathroom to wash my face, and my brother followed shortly thereafter. I watched him through the mirror as he took off his track jacket and T-shirt and wiped himself down with a towel. He was so pale and slender—the exact opposite of our father, though maybe he just hadn't hit his major growth spurt yet. I wondered if he'd start to really bulk up as a teenager; right now, I had a hard time picturing it.

All of a sudden, my brother met my gaze in the mirror.

"You don't have to stare at me like that," he teased with an awkward smile. For whatever reason, he always seemed to know when people were watching him. It was like he had eyes in the back of his head.

"Sorry," I said, knowing there was no point in trying to deny it.

We exited the bathroom together to find that the heat had been turned on in the living room; our father must have woken up. The two of us quickly got started on breakfast, with me boiling some water and pouring it into a couple of mugs while my brother buttered up a few slices of toast. As I stirred in some cocoa mix with a spoon, our father walked into the living room. It seemed he'd gone to hang our laundry up to dry.

"Oh, morning, you two," he said.

"Morning," we replied in unison.

He joined us in the kitchen. Thanking Ushio for handling the toast, he took over and fired up the stove to make bacon and eggs. Our kitchen wasn't the most spacious, so it was pretty cramped with three people working in it at the same time.

"Want some coffee, Dad?" I asked.

"Love some," he said. "Thanks, Misao."

Eventually, our humble family breakfast was complete, and the three of us took our plates and mugs out to the living room table. After clapping our hands together and giving thanks for the meal, we dug in—and for a few precious minutes, we simply enjoyed each

other's company as the early morning ebbed away like honey, slow and sweet.

"So what time is your graduation ceremony?" I asked my brother between nibbles of toast.

"Starts at nine. But I guess we're all meeting up at the school to do something beforehand, so I've gotta get there early."

"Ooh…? Something like what?"

"Not sure. Probably some sort of game to celebrate being done. Or maybe they just want to take a group photo or something, I dunno."

Today was the day my brother graduated from elementary school. Come April, he would be entering junior high, while I would be starting fifth grade. Honestly, with all that had happened over the past few years, it felt like the time had flown right by.

"Oh yeah, that reminds me," said my brother. "I was thinking I might join one of the school sports teams next year."

"Hey, attaboy!" said our father. "Good move. Extracurriculars are pretty important once you get into junior high. Got a team already in mind, or still thinking it over?"

"Pretty sure I wanna do track and field."

"Right, of course… Seems like a perfect fit for you, what with all the jogging you've been doing lately."

I took a long sip of my hot cocoa. "Is Sakuma-kun gonna be doing track and field too, then?"

"Mm-hmm," said Ushio. "He seemed kinda unsure what to do at first, so I invited him to join with me, and he said he'd give it a shot."

"Wait, it was *your* idea? Huh, wasn't expecting that."

"Yeah, I know. Pretty weird, right? Guess I just felt like I've been following in Sakuma's footsteps for so long, it was about time

for me to put myself out there and take the lead for once. Can't always be relying on him to make all my decisions for me."

I could respect him turning over this new leaf—though something told me he would have been crestfallen if Sakuma had said no and joined a different team or club instead. This was the same guy who'd spent a whole day moping because he and Sakuma had gotten separated when his teacher changed the seating chart. Not that I couldn't understand wanting to spend as much time as possible with your best friend.

Shortly after we finished eating, and our father started washing the dishes, the doorbell rang—followed by a loud voice shouting "Ushiooo! C'mon, we gotta gooo!" that made me wonder why he'd even bothered.

"Ugh, how many times do I have to tell him not to do that?" Ushio grumbled, though he sounded more pleased than annoyed. "We're gonna get a noise complaint from our neighbors one of these days…"

The voice belonged, of course, to none other than Sakuma—the boy who'd been coming to pick up my brother so they could walk to school every single morning for the past couple years. *Ever since that fateful day.*

"Ushio," my father said. "Before you go…"

"Yeah, I know, Dad." My brother padded over to the intercom panel to let Sakuma know he'd be out in a minute.

"You too, Misao."

I nodded. I knew exactly what we were going to do. The three of us entered the traditional-style sitting room where my mother's shrine was located. We knelt side by side on the tatami floor in front of her portrait.

"Guess what, dear? Our son's graduating from elementary school today," my father said as if she could hear him. "Gonna be a bit sad to say goodbye to that little leather backpack, but he'll be

getting a shiny new junior high uniform here before long. Also sounds like Ushio's thinking of joining the track and field team at his new school. Hope you'll continue to watch over him as his guardian angel, as I know you always do."

My brother simply stared at our mother's portrait a while, then said, "I'm headed out now, Mom. Love you."

He then stood up, left the room, and greeted Sakuma at the front door. I could hear both of their voices from all the way in the sitting room.

"Mornin', Ushio!" Sakuma said. "Now c'mon—we've gotta hurry, or else they're gonna start playing kick the can without us!"

"Wait, what?" my brother replied. "*That's* what we're doing before the ceremony?"

"Well, yeah! Gotta fit in one last game before we have to say goodbye, y'know?!"

"Pretty sure we can still play kick the can in junior high, but okay…"

As my brother closed the door behind him, their voices grew muffled, then distant, then faded out altogether. My father rose to his feet, and I followed him back into the living room.

It had been almost two years now since our mother's passing—and in that time, I'd become painfully well acquainted with just how hard losing a loved one could be. Never again would I hear her cheerful humming echo from the kitchen all throughout the house, nor would I bury my face in her chest to dry my tears. At times, the harsh reality of it all was so suffocating, it was enough to make me feel like my heart might burst.

Immediately after her death, there was a period when my brother and I took an extended break from going to school. We almost never left the house, spending all our time idling away the days with our hearts closed off to the world. Our father, racked as he

was by his own grief, was in no state to offer us much comfort or reproach. We all simply wasted away together.

Eventually, my brother and I broke out of the cycle. There were several reasons for that. Over time, the pain did dull a bit—and as it did, the sheer monotony of living in this strange state of denial became harder to bear than the grief itself, not to mention the guilt we felt for forcing our father to shoulder everything on his own. In my brother's case, though, I think the biggest contributor to his recovery from this depressive spiral was Sakuma.

From the moment Ushio started staying home from school, Sakuma came by our house almost every single day. Initially, it was just to drop off my brother's homework, but after a while, he started inviting himself up to our bedroom and practically strong-arming us into hanging out with him, despite my brother and I wanting to be left alone. We made this abundantly clear in our reception of him, and I was sure that Sakuma could tell—but he never folded. In the end, it was my brother who caved first.

"…You just don't give up, do you, Sakuma?" I remembered Ushio saying with a wry grin during Sakuma's umpteenth visit to our house. It was the first time I'd seen my brother smile since our mother died.

About a week after that, he started going to school again—and then I did the same, following his lead. I couldn't bear to be in isolation all day without him.

To be honest, I was a little bit jealous of my brother for having a friend as good as Sakuma. I had a few friends of my own who stopped by to check up on me as a polite gesture while I was away from school, but none who were as genuine and persistent in their concern for me as Sakuma was for my brother. Though I guess Himeka *did* send me a letter of encouragement, which was really thoughtful of her.

Part of me felt like I should be more assertive in making good friends of my own…but at the same time, I felt like as long as I had

my brother, I didn't need anyone else. Even if I didn't have any friends whatsoever, or Ushio spent even more time with Sakuma than he already was, I knew that nothing could ever hold a candle to the special bond we had as siblings. And that simple fact alone was reassuring enough to give me the strength I needed to face whatever hardships reality saw fit to throw my way.

At the time, I genuinely believed it. From the bottom of my heart.

After my brother's graduation ceremony and my own end-of-year ceremony were over, we dove headfirst into spring break. Ushio was making the most of it. He'd just finished one leg of his educational career and was right on the cusp of another, which would surely be much busier. It seemed like he was trying to make the most of his time off—namely, by hanging out with Sakuma virtually every day. And most days (like today, for instance), I tagged along with them.

We were at a nearby park, and my brother and Ushio had both taken their places on an arbitrary starting line, leaned forward in a standing start position. I stood off to the side, tasked with referee duties.

"On your mark, get set…go!" I shouted. My bangs fluttered in the wind as the two boys took off at a full sprint, running as fast as they could toward the cherry blossom tree that marked the finish line.

It had been Sakuma who suggested they have a race today. This was only the second time I knew of that the two of them had competed to see who was faster; the first time had been about two years prior, and my brother had lost miserably. It hadn't really surprised me back then, considering that Sakuma had always struck me as a pretty rambunctious, athletic kid, and my brother was anything but. This time around, it was anyone's guess. Maybe all those morning runs would pay off for Ushio.

After about ten seconds or so, they reached the finish line—but from where I was standing, I couldn't tell who'd gotten there first, so I jogged over to join them. Both boys had their hands on the cherry blossom tree, panting hard.

"Dang, I lost…" Sakuma muttered.

"Wait," I said. "Ushio, you actually won? Oh my gosh! Way to go, big brother!"

"Yeah, wow… I can't believe it either…" Ushio seemed more dumbfounded by his victory than he was thrilled.

Sakuma took a long, deep breath of resignation, then broke into a broad grin. He looked somehow refreshed. "That was *crazy*, Ushio. I mean, I wiped the floor with you last time, and you just beat me fair and square… You've gotta be the fastest kid in our whole class now!"

"What, you really think so?" my brother asked.

"Yeah, dude. You're a rock star. Hold your head up high!"

My brother giggled bashfully at this. "Huh, yeah… Guess I've gotten pretty fast, then." He seemed really happy.

Sakuma leaned his back against the tree trunk and sank to the ground. I was just about to make a comment about how dirty he was going to make his pants when my brother followed suit. I groaned internally, then crouched down to join them, hugging my knees and taking care not to let my butt touch the ground.

"Y'know, you've really changed, Ushio," said Sakuma.

"Wait, I have?"

"Totally. Like, ever since we got into sixth grade, it feels like you've been really starting to stand on your own… You're good at all sortsa stuff now."

"Oh, yeah… I guess I *have* been trying to push myself a little more."

"And you're going out running and stuff every single morning too? That's some serious dedication. I definitely wouldn't be able to do that."

"It's really not that hard once you get started. The main thing is, well…"

My brother lowered his gaze ever so slightly as he trailed off. There was a world-weariness in his eyes that made his previous bashful smile feel like it had been nothing more than a figment of my imagination.

"I knew I was gonna have to grow up sooner or later. Especially now that my mom's not here anymore… And not to mention," he went on, turning to look at me, "I've got to set a good example for Misao too. Who else is going to look out for her, if not her big brother?"

The sentiment alone was touching enough, but there was something about him saying this proudly in front of a friend that made me feel utterly elated. Yep, Ushio Tsukinoki was *my* big brother and nobody else's. That was what he'd been since the day I was born, and that was what he'd be until the day I died.

*He'll always be my good, sweet older brother.*

Just like he promised our mother he would.

"J-jeez, sibling of the year over here…" said Sakuma. "Makes me feel kinda stupid for all the times me and *my* little sister fight over who gets the last ice cream or whatever."

"I'd say that's still its own type of closeness, personally," said Ushio.

"Do you and Misao-chan ever fight like that?"

My brother and I looked at each other. I searched my memories, but I couldn't really think of anything that fit the bill. Even when it came to sweets or silly things like that, my brother was always happy to share anything I was even remotely interested in.

"Not really," said my brother. "Don't think we've even had a real argument before."

"Dang, for real? Me and Ayaka fight, like, every single day. Feels like she's always looking for an excuse to bite my head off. And my mom won't even step in—says it's a sign of how close we are that we can fight and make up."

I'd heard this claim a million times before, but it never really made much sense to me; I was even inclined to call it a straight-up falsehood. After all, my brother and I had never fought even once, and we were as close as we could possibly be.

"And to make things worse, I usually end up being the one who gets the blame," said Sakuma. "Can you believe that? It's practically discrimination, I tell ya."

"Ha ha… Sounds like you've got it pretty rough," said Ushio.

Out of nowhere, a question occurred to me. "Wait, so have you and my brother ever fought before?"

I already had a guess in mind—and sure enough, they both thought on this a moment before saying "nope" in unison.

"It's a little weird when you think about it," Sakuma said. "I mean, me and Ushio have pretty opposite personalities, but we just kinda click, y'know? Like when we were choosing who would be on what student committee, for instance. Both me and Ushio raised our hands to be library assistants without even talking about it beforehand."

"We did, didn't we…?" said my brother. "Honestly, I thought for sure you were going to volunteer for the athletic committee."

"Hey, I *love* books! Even if I might not look like it!"

I couldn't help but chuckle at this last comment. It was true that based purely on his outward-facing persona, Sakuma seemed like the furthest thing from a bookworm imaginable. But it was true; he even came with us to the library at least once a month.

"That's funny, yeah," I said. "And now you guys are even going to be on the same sports team too."

"Oh, right…" said Sakuma, lowering his voice as his face scrunched in discomfort. "So about that…I'm actually thinking of joining the tennis team instead."

"What?!" my brother exclaimed. "But you said you'd join the track team with me…"

"I know, I'm really sorry! I just realized I'd kinda rather try out a sport I've never had the chance to play before, is all…" Sakuma pressed his hands together as if pleading for forgiveness. It appeared he planned to back out of his agreement with my brother, and I couldn't overlook that.

"Not cool," I said. "Do you have any idea how much Ushio was looking forward to being on the same team as you?"

"Yeah, I know. I feel super bad about it, believe me…"

He *did* seem genuinely apologetic, but apparently he had no intention of changing his mind. But as I was gearing up to really give him a piece of my mind, my brother spoke up and completely took the wind out of my sails.

"Well, it's all right. No need to apologize. People change their minds, I get it."

"Wait, huh?!" I blurted out. "You're just gonna let this slide, big brother?"

"Yeah, of course. He's not obligated. Sakuma's done more than enough for me."

"Awww, Ushiooo…" Sakuma whimpered. "Man, what did I ever do to deserve a friend as good as you…?"

"Okay, now you're laying it on too thick."

My brother was shockingly calm about this. With how attached he'd been to Sakuma in the past, I assumed he would've been much more distraught or maybe even a bit angry about this betrayal. I

hoped he could adjust to losing such a huge chunk of daily after-school time with his best friend without too much trouble.

Though it seemed my concerns were misplaced.

"Anyway, it's fine," said my brother. "I'll just join the tennis team too."

Sakuma's eyes shot wide open. "Hold up. What?"

"I mean, lately I've been wanting to challenge myself in new and different ways too. Plus, it's not like I can't keep going for runs on the side. If I'm going to play a sport, might as well do something a little more interesting that I can't do on my own."

"But… But, like…" Sakuma faltered, though I had a pretty good guess as to what he was trying to say. "Nah, c'mon, Ushio. You can't join the tennis team, man."

"What?! Why not?"

"You were already so excited to be on the track and field team, weren'tcha? You shouldn't give up on that just because of me. Like, I'm sorry for backing out of our agreement and all…but that doesn't mean you should have to change *your* plans too."

I was in agreement with Sakuma.

"But then…" my brother mumbled, anxiously dropping his gaze.

I suppressed a sigh. I should have known my brother wouldn't be so quick to detach himself from Sakuma. For him, it hardly mattered which team they joined as long as they were together.

Unfortunately, Sakuma wasn't quite getting the hint. "C'mon, it'll be okay! I'm sure you'll do great on the track team, whether I'm there with you or not. You beat me just now, right? Have a little more confidence in yourself, why don'tcha!"

*He really doesn't get it, does he?* I cast a sidelong glance at my brother to gauge how he was reacting to all of this, and sure

enough, he looked pretty confounded. At length, he said, "Yeah, you're right. Guess I'll just stick with track after all."

It seemed he was finally ready to relent—which was for the best, I thought. Telling Sakuma the truth at this point would only make him feel guiltier for changing his mind and pressured to change it back—while also no doubt being a pretty embarrassing thing for my brother to admit. That said, Ushio still looked somewhat despondent.

"Hey, don't you worry!" said Sakuma, attempting to raise his spirits. "Even if we're on different teams, that won't change the fact that you and I are best buds. And we can still hang out on the weekends and after practice and stuff."

"Right! Yeah, I know!" said my brother, cheering up a bit. He was so predictable when it came to Sakuma. Part of me wished he'd stood up for himself a bit more, but at least they'd resolved things on good terms.

"All right," said Sakuma. "Then let's shake on it, why don't we?"

He stood up and formed a fist with one hand. Ushio rose to his feet and did the same, and then the two pressed their fists together. This little "secret handshake" of theirs had become something of a ritual between them in recent months (even if it was more of a fist bump than a handshake, in my view). It had been Sakuma who first suggested it, but in stark contrast to his eagerness, my brother seemed a bit put off by the whole exercise.

"Still not quite used to that, heh…" said Ushio.

"Wanna try out a different one, then?" Sakuma suggested.

He then proceeded to explain in great detail how this "new" secret handshake was meant to be done: First, you clapped the other person's palms with your own twice, once from above and once from below, before leaning in and bumping shoulders with them, and then finally turning one forearm up and pressing the backs of your hands together to stare over your clenched fists at one

another… Apparently, it was something he'd seen some soccer players from overseas doing when they subbed in for each other. Suffice it to say, this new handshake was far more complex, but my brother tried his best to memorize it nonetheless.

After watching him struggle with it for a few minutes, Sakuma said, "Man, Ushio… You've got some really girly hands, you know that?"

I assumed he hadn't meant anything cruel by this and was merely voicing an observation (albeit carelessly)—but to my ears, this slip of the tongue sure didn't leave a positive impression. In my experience, the only times a boy compared another boy to a girl were when they were actively poking fun or trying to demean them. And again, while I was fairly certain Sakuma hadn't meant any harm, I felt myself getting a little defensive on my brother's behalf as I saw him bite his lip and stare at the ground. Slowly, his face turned so red, I thought steam might gush out of his ears.

*Yeah, see, I was right! Intentional or not, it totally hurt his feelings.*

"Hey, don't call my brother 'girly'!" I chimed in. "You apologize to him right now!"

"Wait, no," said Sakuma. "I just meant that they seem, like… really delicate, and—"

"Right *now*, mister!"

Sakuma recoiled at me raising my voice, then turned back to Ushio. "S-sorry, man. Wasn't trying to be mean or anything."

At this, my brother finally lifted his head, then blinked a few times as though he'd snapped out of a trance. "Wha…? Oh, no. You're fine. It's okay. I didn't take it that way…"

He seemed pretty frazzled still. I thought maybe he'd been so caught off guard by Sakuma's unintended rudeness that he was in a mild state of shock—but then I noticed the corners of his mouth

twitching upward ever so slightly. Like he was trying to hold back a smile.

*Wait. So he* wasn't *bothered by it, then?*

I tried (and failed) to wrap my head around this as the two boys promptly went back to practicing their new handshake.

The following day, the construction workers came in to conduct the aforementioned renovations. The room my brother and I had shared throughout our entire childhood was split in two by a thin partition right down the middle. Though perhaps "partition" was underselling it, as there were no gaps or ways to get to the other side other than going out and around through the hall—so it was effectively a wall. Half of me was delighted to have this new private space all to myself, but the room also felt a lot more cramped, so I found myself having a hard time sleeping that night.

When I poked my head out from under the covers to check my alarm clock, it was one in the morning. Normally, I'd be fast asleep by now. Figuring I could read manga or something until I got tired, I sat up in bed—but just then, I heard a sound from the room next door. I walked over and pressed my ear up to the wall.

"Are you still awake?" I asked.

There was a brief pause.

"Yeah, what's up?"

*So he was up after all.*

"I can't sleep," I confessed. "It's just so different, you know?"

"Yeah, same here," said Ushio. "It's pretty weird, isn't it? I mean, it's not like anything's actually *changed*, other than there being a new dividing wall between us…" My brother chuckled to himself.

"Do you mind if I come over there?"

"Sure, go right ahead."

I stepped out into the hallway, then through the new door leading to my brother's side of our once-combined bedroom, where I found him sitting at his desk in his rolling chair. I took a seat on the bed and looked around. It was just as my brother said: Aside from slightly rearranging his desk and bed, everything looked the same as it had before.

"Doing some studying?" I asked, glancing at the notebook open on his desk.

"Yeah. Thought it might help me get tired enough to fall asleep, but it didn't turn out to be all that effective."

As he closed the notebook, I noticed a new hardcover textbook sticking out from the shelf atop his desk. *No, wait. That can't be a textbook.* It was too ornately bound.

"Hey, is that your yearbook?" I asked.

"Hm? Oh, yeah. Wanna take a look?"

"You bet I do!"

He pulled the yearbook off the shelf and handed it to me. The cover was incredibly smooth and glossy—as were the pages, I found, as I flipped through them. They were filled to the brim with group photos of every class, as well as individual portraits of every student and faculty member, plus miscellaneous candid pictures taken of the graduating class during school events throughout their six-year education.

"Oh, hey," I said. "Here's one from that class trip, the one where you got sick."

"Hm? Ah, yeah… That was embarrassing."

It was from the previous year, when Ushio was in fifth grade. It was supposed to be a four-day, three-night trip, but my brother caught a cold early on. After coming down with a fever the first night, he had to return home the second day.

"Such a shame," I said. "You only get so many class trips."

"Well, I still had more than enough fun that first day. I even got to sit next to Sakuma on the bus ride there."

"Cool, yeah…" I flipped the page to a selection of photos taken during the school's annual field day. "Oh, hey! There's one of you in here."

"From the relay race, you mean? Yeah, that was the time Sakuma tripped and fell when our team had a huge lead."

"Yeah, and then *you* came back from behind and won it for your team in the final leg, right? That was so crazy… It was the talk of the whole school for a while. Even in *my* class, everyone was all like, 'Wow, Misao! Your big brother's so cool!' or whatever."

"Ah ha ha… Okay, now you're just trying to make me blush."

This was a very fond memory of mine; I'd been delighted to hear all of my classmates—even the ones I never talked to—giving my brother the praise he deserved.

"Oh, neat. They've got your fifth-grade recital in here too," I said, moving on. "Look, I can even see you tooting on your little recorder, heh."

"Yeah, do you see Sakuma sitting next to me? Man, he screwed up so bad *right* at the very beginning of the concert, and we both almost burst out laughing…"

Again with the Sakuma anecdotes. I was beginning to feel like my brother had been joined with Sakuma at the hip throughout his entire elementary school career; he hardly ever mentioned the names of any of his other friends. Not that I was jealous or anything, but I had to admit it was starting to grate on me a little.

"You sure do like Sakuma, don't you?"

"Wha—?!"

My brother's eyes went wide with astonishment—and then for whatever reason, his expression flared up with rage.

"I don't *like* him!" he snapped. "Don't be stupid…"

"Huh? Oh, s-sorry…" I said, wilting at this rebuke.

My brother got up, walked over, and snatched the yearbook out of my hands. "It's past your bedtime. Elementary schoolers shouldn't be up this late."

"What? No fair! You're an elementary schooler too!"

"No, I already graduated! Now go back to your own room and go to sleep." And with that, my brother practically tossed me out into the hall.

After reeling for a moment, I hobbled back into my own room and threw myself down on the bed. Why had my brother blown up on me like that? I had no earthly idea, other than that it probably had something to do with me saying he liked Sakuma. Sure, I'd been a bit snippy about it, but that alone shouldn't have triggered such a negative reaction in him.

*Oh, wait. I get it.*

With a bit more reflection, I figured it out. My brother probably misunderstood and thought I was saying he "liked" Sakuma, like, in a *romantic* sense, not just as a friend. And I supposed that was fair; I probably should have chosen my words more carefully. Even in elementary school, you were always hearing people gossip about "who likes who," or spreading scandalous rumors like "I heard so-and-so likes so-and-so"—whether it was in an attempt to play Cupid or as a form of bullying. There was definitely a scandalous undertone to the word.

I felt kind of guilty for not considering the implications before I said it, but I was relieved to know my brother had only gotten angry with me over a simple misunderstanding—though I did still feel like he'd overreacted, honestly. I mean, it should only have taken a second's thought to realize that I'd obviously never accuse him of "liking" Sakuma in *that* sense. Boys didn't generally have crushes on other boys, after all.

Come April, my brother was officially in junior high school.

It didn't take long after he joined the track and field team for him to distinguish himself as a runner with serious potential, immediately outdoing several of the team's fastest runners. This earned him a spot at every interschool track meet, where he performed with flying colors. Combined with his distinctive good looks, it was enough to make him such a celebrity in our tiny rural town that every time he made waves, I was sure to hear about it even in my elementary school.

"Man, it feels like you're living in a totally different *world* from the rest of us now," Sakuma mumbled as he scritched his pencil across his worksheet. While he and my brother weren't hanging out as much as they had back in elementary school, he was still coming over to our house fairly often. The two of them were doing their summer homework together in Ushio's pleasantly air-conditioned bedroom; I was reading manga on my brother's bed and trying not to distract them from their studies.

"I wouldn't say that," my brother replied. "I'm just a little faster than the average person, that's all. Nothing particularly special about that."

"You won the prefectural tournament, dude," Sakuma argued, his voice tinged with envy. "That's pretty freaking special, if you ask me."

Indeed, one of the biggest reasons for my brother's newfound popularity was that he'd placed first in the seventh-grade hundred-meter sprint at the big prefectural track meet in July—the first win of its kind in the history of Tsubakioka Junior High. It was so momentous that they even hung a giant banner over the school building in honor of his victory, and before long, the whole town knew the name Ushio Tsukinoki.

"Now stop being humble and puff out that chest already," said Sakuma.

"Oh, come on," said Ushio. "You know I'm not one to brag. All I care about is getting the chance to run… Everything else is just a nice bonus."

"Man, you're easy to please… But I guess you've always been that way."

"Why don't *you* join the track team, Sakuma?"

"Wait, what? Me?" Sakuma gave an exaggerated shrug. "Nah, no way, dude. I didn't even make it through one month on the tennis team before I quit."

"Not this again… Why are you being so defeatist lately?"

"It's the truth, though."

My brother grimaced at this unrepentant self-deprecation.

Even *I* had noticed that Sakuma had grown a bit spineless compared to his old plucky self ever since the two of them entered junior high. That could've partly been him mellowing out as he matured a little, but it seemed to be an unwelcome change as far as my brother was concerned. I wondered if it was the new school environment that had changed Sakuma, or if maybe this lack of confidence had more to do with him comparing himself to my brother after Ushio's recent achievements…or something else entirely.

"Anyway, enough about that!" said Sakuma, apparently sensing the unpleasant way this conversation was trending and trying to change the subject. "There's something I wanna show you two."

*Wait… He's including* me *in this?*

I closed the manga I'd been reading and shifted my gaze to where they were sitting. Sakuma pulled a notebook out of his bag and flipped it open on the low table, stopping at a page featuring a shoddy, hand-drawn comic strip.

"Whoa… Did you draw that, Sakuma-kun?" I asked.

"Yep!" he proudly declared. "See, I had a thought the other day: I may not be all that cut out for any sports, but maybe I've got some other hidden talents, y'know?! So I took this personality test thingy, and guess what?! It said I'm mostly the artistic type!"

I took back my previous assertion that he'd lost his pluck. I wasn't sure where in the world he got the idea that this artwork was anything to be proud of, but judging from his overconfidence alone, he hadn't grown out of his old self after all.

I sat up and gave Sakuma's creation a quick read. It was just a basic, four-panel gag comic, but despite the crude drawings and the short length of the strip, there was a surprisingly decent setup and payoff to the punchline. I even caught myself cracking a smile, believe it or not.

"Wow," I said. "That's pretty funny."

"Right?" said Sakuma. "I'm super proud of it."

"I mean, not like laugh-out-loud funny, but yeah."

"Ouch… Way to set me up just to knock me down, jeez… What do you think, Ushio?"

My brother was already diligently reading through it for what had to be the tenth time or so. Now that he'd been asked to give his thoughts, he looked up from the page. "I think it's great. It's like an actual comic strip."

"Oho? So you think I've got what it takes, then?"

"Not sure I'd go that far based on this alone… But if you wanted to be a manga artist or something, I'd definitely support you in that."

"A m-manga artist?! Oh, man… I dunno if I'm *that* serious about it, ha ha…" Sakuma blushed, sheepishly scratching his head. He looked rather pleased with this assessment. "But, well…I guess if you like it that much, maybe I'll try making it a series or something and see where that takes me."

"Really? If you do make more, I'd love to read them."

"Yeah, I sorta figured you would, heh…"

It was almost amazing how shameless he was—and how patient my brother was being so as not to hurt his pride. Honestly, it was a good thing Ushio was so nice; if it weren't for that, Sakuma would probably have developed a pretty severe inferiority complex as my brother continued getting more and more popular. Luckily for him, Ushio had never been the type to rub it in. He was more emotionally intelligent than that.

Or so I thought, until the following week rolled around.

"Look, Sakuma. I made one too."

"Wait, huh?"

On the very day Sakuma brought the next installment in his new comic series to our house, my brother announced that he'd drawn his own full-on, short-form manga. Even I was surprised by this; I didn't know where he'd found the time to make such a thing when he was already busy with track practice. And what's more, my brother's artwork was actually *good*—enough to make Sakuma's look like scribbles in comparison.

"…When did you draw this?" Sakuma asked, trembling as he held the comic with both hands.

In contrast to his nervousness, my brother merely offered a timid smile. "Well, I've been kinda working on it bit by bit ever since that day you showed me yours. Wanted to see if I could pull it off too… It's the first time I've ever drawn anything, though, so it was pretty tough."

"Wow, you don't say…" Sakuma muttered vacantly, flipping through the pages.

Peeking over his shoulder, I read through the story along with him. On a surface level, my brother's manga was a fairly simple story about a boy taking a stroll. But it was told in a sort of stream-of-consciousness style, in that the only text to speak of was the boy's

inner monologue of passing thoughts about the people and things he walked by as he made his way down the road. It was almost like an autobiographical manga in terms of style, even though it wasn't about my brother specifically. It was only about five pages long, but there was an interesting appeal to it.

"Well?" Ushio prompted once Sakuma finished reading. "What did you think?"

"Huh? Oh, right. Yeah, it was good… Thought your art was great."

"Really? Gosh, that's a relief. Honestly, I've been so busy with practice that I kinda slapped it together in a hurry, so I wasn't sure if it'd be any good…"

Sakuma's expression clouded over. My brother didn't pick up on this, if his innocent smile was any indication.

"Okay, now let me see the one *you* drew!" he said.

*Ouch, big brother… Way to pour salt in the wound.*

There was no denying that Ushio's "slapped-together" manga was leaps and bounds more impressive than the little comic strip Sakuma had prepared last time, at least in terms of scope and artistic quality. But it seemed my brother was genuinely oblivious to this and wanted nothing more than to read Sakuma's work regardless of its objective shortcomings.

Ushio had always looked up to Sakuma, though. Sakuma was bright and cheery, had a lot of friends, and knew all the best games to play. No matter how popular my brother might get around town, or how many big tournaments he won, I was certain that Sakuma would always be someone Ushio aspired to emulate. Of course he wasn't considering how his own actions might be causing his idol to develop a bit of an inferiority complex.

"Yeah, so, uhhh…" Sakuma began, sounding awfully conflicted.

Maybe it would have been best for me to just tell my brother the truth. Though that would also have required putting Sakuma in

an even more awkward position, and I wasn't sure what the best way to go about explaining it would even be. Before I could think any further about it, Sakuma played it off with an apologetic smile.

"Sorry, I'm actually still kinda working on it! I'll show you once it's done."

"Okay, got it!" my brother said, grinning back. "Well, I'll be looking forward to it!"

But then Sakuma's expression turned distant. "Man, you really are something else, Ushio."

"Huh? Where's this coming from?"

"Sorry, it's nothing. Now c'mon—let's wrap up that homework, yeah?"

Sakuma took a seat and spread his textbooks and worksheets out across the low table. For someone who'd always been so buddy-buddy with my brother, he was being real reticent and evasive right now.

"Oh, I already finished my summer homework," said Ushio.

"Dang, seriously? How are you so fast…?" said Sakuma. "Help me out here, then. There's a couple parts I'm kinda lost on."

"Sure thing."

Ushio was rapidly overtaking Sakuma in terms of academics, athletics, and even popularity. And I was definitely happy to see my brother grow out of his wallflower phase. But in spite of all that, I couldn't help but sympathize with Sakuma just a little bit.

Sakuma never showed us the next installment in his series of comic strips. Probably because he realized that his art was too primitive—or rather, he'd gotten discouraged after seeing just how far off his own skills were from those of someone with natural talent. I couldn't say with certainty if that was the reason, but I did know one thing for sure: From that point on, Sakuma's visits to our house

steadily became fewer and farther between. And as they did, my brother's daily mood took a noticeable hit.

On one of these days, I caught him with his shoulders slumped in front of the landline.

"Sounds like Sakuma's been really busy lately," he mumbled as I passed.

I asked him what was up and learned that my brother had called Sakuma's house to ask him to hang out, but the answer was no. Part of me was livid on Ushio's behalf. How dare he turn down an invitation from my big brother! At the same time, I could kind of understand it from Sakuma's perspective. It couldn't be easy for someone who'd always been the "leader" in the friendship to suddenly compare so unfavorably to the other in just about every respect, and it definitely wasn't fun to feel jealous of your friends all the time.

While Sakuma hadn't had any apparent trouble extending a helping hand to my brother when he was at his lowest point—having closed himself off to the entire world following the death of a beloved family member—it seemed this new inferiority complex was simply too much to bear.

Granted, this was all mere conjecture; it was entirely possible that Sakuma's situation was much more complicated than I realized, as an outside observer. But regardless of the reasons why, it was plainly obvious that he and my brother were growing further and further apart by the day. I had to wonder what had become of their friendship, which had once burned so bright that it seemed inextinguishable.

It hurt to watch my brother fall deeper and deeper into depression, and I wished there was some way I could step in and fill the void Sakuma had left in his heart. Yet my brother didn't seem to want that. If anything, he started being more and more emotionally unavailable to *me* as well.

One night, shortly after my brother had started eighth grade, I heard coughing from his room right before I was about to go to bed. And it wasn't just one or two little coughs—it was a whole fit, like Ushio was trying to clear his throat after something went down the wrong pipe. It wasn't loud enough to keep me awake, but it did make me a little concerned, so I padded over to Ushio's room to see what was the matter.

"Big brother?" I asked. "You feeling okay?"

"Misao…" Ushio rasped.

My brother was sitting on his bed, clutching his throat with both hands. He looked up at me in desperation, as if he was begging for help. Immediately, I could tell something was seriously wrong, and my whole body stiffened up.

"Wh-what's the matter? You want me to go get Dad?"

"It's my voice…"

"Yeah, what about it?"

"I can't…make it sound right… It's not as high as it used to be…"

For a moment, I couldn't register what he was telling me. So he just thought his voice wasn't "high enough" anymore? Was that really such a big deal?

"Um, okay… So you're not in pain or anything like that?"

"No, of course not," he said, sounding almost angry with me for even asking. And while I was relieved to know it wasn't serious, part of me felt a bit peeved that he'd gotten me worried over something so minor.

"Are you sure you don't just have a sore throat? Have you been yelling a lot at practice or something?"

"No… I think it's just puberty, probably."

*Puberty.* I'd learned this word in health class not too long ago. In other words, his voice was changing because he was growing up.

Come to think of it, his voice *had* been getting huskier lately… Though it was hard for me to notice such a gradual change, since we were always together.

"Wait, I don't get it," I said. "Do you have a choir performance coming up or something?"

"I mean, no…"

"Then what's the big deal? Who cares if your voice is getting a little deeper? It's only natural, right? Don't worry about it."

This was about the best reassurance I could offer him. Honestly, I wanted to ask why he was getting so worked up over something so silly, even more so when it wasn't a medical condition or anything—but he looked genuinely distraught, so I tried to be considerate of that. Yet even then, my words only seemed to make my brother feel worse.

"I should sleep." After cutting off the conversation without even a word of thanks, he rolled onto his side in a huff like a petulant child. This kind of curtness was *extremely* unlike him.

"You sure you're okay?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"…And you're really not in pain or anything?"

"Misao, I need to go to bed. Turn the lights off on your way out, okay?"

Evidently, he really didn't feel like continuing this conversation, so I did as I was told and flipped the lights off as I left. Once I was back in my own room, I felt a mild indignation well up inside of me. Where did he get off treating me like that when I was obviously checking up on him out of concern?

Then again, he was probably already feeling pretty overwhelmed by a lot of the other things on his plate, especially with Sakuma still avoiding him and whatnot. So I figured I should probably let it slide and give him the benefit of the doubt this time

around. *Yeah, he's probably just feeling really stressed out,* I told myself.

I could live with this explanation. As long as that was all it was.

***

SIX YEARS AGO

I didn't remember much from the night of the wake. I'd long since purged the detailed incense-burning instructions our father had given us from my mind.

Until the time came to gather around and chant sutras, my brother and I just stood there in a corner of the hall, watching our father conduct the ceremony with the funeral attendant we'd been assigned. Our father's face was sunken and fatigued, and he offered only minimal, one-word responses throughout the entire procession.

The whole thing felt a bit unreal to me, like I was an outside observer watching these events play out from somewhere far away or through a massive TV screen. The only thing that really anchored me in the moment was the warmth of my brother's hand in mine. Even now, I could recall how it felt just by clasping my own hands together.

It had been two weeks since our mother entered a never-ending sleep, and still I cried all through the night every single day. I'd shed so many tears by this point that if you bottled them, they could probably fill a small aquarium. And yet, I almost never saw my brother crying—though not for lack of being as sad as I was, surely. I suspected he was trying to put on a brave face around me. Still, I saw the swollen redness around his eyes whenever he looked at me.

We'd both taken some time off from school ever since our mother's passing. Not because we had family business to attend to or anything; really, we were just lying around and letting the time

pass us by. But it was a necessary mourning period—we needed to give our grief some time to mend, or else we might never feel okay again.

"Man, I'm so bored."

I was sitting with my brother on the living room couch, watching two-hour reruns of *Tuesday Suspense Theater*. I was only in the third grade at the time, so of course all of the drama and suspense was lost on me. But there was nothing better on any of the other channels; they didn't show any good programming for kids on weekday afternoons.

With a great big yawn, I looked over at the calendar on the wall. It was already October. The thought filled me with a sudden wave of dread, and I leaned over to rest my head on my brother's shoulder.

"Wonder if my class is already practicing for the fall concert," I said.

"Probably, yeah," said Ushio, keeping his gaze locked on the TV.

I sighed. "Maybe I should start thinking about going back to school soon…"

"Do you feel like you're ready for that?"

"…I dunno. All I know is I don't feel like doing anything right now."

"Yeah, I get you," my brother said listlessly. "I feel the same way."

There was something about these few simple words of commiseration that made me feel like things were ultimately going to be okay. Nothing would negate the grief of losing an irreplaceable loved one, but as long as I had my brother by my side, I knew I'd make it through. I wanted to be there for him too. Like our mother always said, siblings were supposed to support one another.

"Hey, big brother?"

"Yeah, what's up?"

"Don't ever leave me, okay?"

My brother plopped his hand atop my head. "Don't worry, silly. I'm not going anywhere."

His comforting words were like a warm, fuzzy blanket, enveloping my entire body in a layer of calm. I softly closed my eyes to let them sink in—but just as I was about to nod off, the doorbell rang.

My eyes shot open, and I bolted upright. It wasn't like anyone could have seen me resting my head on my brother's shoulder, but the unexpected interruption made me feel embarrassed to lean on him nonetheless. My brother stood up and went to check the screen on the intercom panel.

"…It's Sakuma," he said.

*What, again?*

He'd been coming by the house virtually every day for the past week.

"Are you gonna answer it?" I asked.

"I mean, he came all the way over here…" My brother scratched his head as he walked over to the entryway. I snuck after him, peeking out into the hallway from the living room as my brother opened the front door.

"Hey there, Ushio!" said Sakuma. "How ya feelin' today?"

"Same as yesterday, I guess…"

In the past, my brother would've been wagging his tail like an excited puppy at a surprise visit from Sakuma. Things were different now. If anything, my brother seemed almost depressed by the sight of him. Ushio probably just wanted to be left alone—but Sakuma was much too thickheaded to realize that.

"Kinda surprised to see you answer the door, actually," said Sakuma. "Figured it'd just be your dad again, heh."

"Right, yeah…" said my brother. "It's because my dad went back to work today."

"Ohhh, gotcha. Makes sense. Can't just stay cooped up at home forever, after all."

I got the feeling that this was Sakuma's way of not-so-subtly telling Ushio he needed to come back to school. It seemed my brother took it that way too, as he kind of clammed up before changing the subject. "I take it you have some schoolwork for me?"

"Hm? Oh, right." Sakuma took off his backpack, pulled out a sheet protector, and removed a couple of worksheets to hand over to Ushio.

"Thanks," said Ushio.



"It's social studies homework today," said Sakuma. "We're learning how to read the world map in class right now. I swear, I still always get longitude and latitude mixed up. Do *you* know the difference, Ushio?"

"Lines of longitude are vertical, and lines of latitude are horizontal."

"Dang, not bad… Kinda crazy that you've got a better handle on it than me when you're not even coming to class… Have you been doing some of those mail-order learning booklets or something? I love the little comics they put in those, heh. My mom had me on one of those programs for a little while, but I dropped off it pretty quick."

"Listen, Sakuma," said my brother, presumably gearing up to sever this line of conversation. "I appreciate you bringing me my homework, but you really don't have to do this on a daily basis. It's got to be a little annoying for you too, right? Going out of your way to swing by after school every single day…"

"Nah, not at all! I mean, we live right down the street from each other, so you're never more than a short jog away."

"But I'm sure you'd rather be hanging out with the other kids after class…"

"It's fine, I said. Besides, it's no fun when you're not there anyway. Least you can do is let me stop by to say hi!"

"Well, suit yourself, I guess."

Sakuma grinned from ear to ear.

As I watched from afar, I couldn't help but feel like maybe my brother was being a bit too lenient with Sakuma and needed to stop letting him overstep his boundaries—but then Sakuma and I made eye contact. *Aw, shoot. I blew my cover.*

"Oh, hey!" he exclaimed. "How's it goin', Misao-chan?!"

I quickly hid my face; I was definitely not in the mood to have a conversation with someone as chipper as Sakuma right now.

"Sheesh, no need to be so shy…"

It wasn't a matter of bashfulness for me, but I didn't have the willpower to refute him, so I relegated myself to staying hidden and eavesdropping instead.

"So hey, do you guys have a globe at home?" Sakuma asked Ushio.

"Huh? No, I don't think so."

"Oh, well, we've been using one in social studies a *lot* lately. Thing is, I've got one back at my house too! Maybe I'll bring it over sometime, and we can study with it or even play 'round-the-world bingo!"

"O-okay…"

"Anyway, yeah! Guess I'll see you tomorrow, then!"

Sakuma took his leave at last, and the house was quiet again. My brother returned to the living room with an exhausted look on his face, then let out a sigh and sat back down on the couch. I took a seat beside him.

"Hey, big brother?"

"Yeah?"

"What's 'round-the-world bingo?"

"Heck if I know."

Apparently, he couldn't care less. Perhaps Sakuma really was little more than a nuisance to my brother now.

"If he's annoying you, you should tell him that," I said.

"He's not bothering me, really. I just, I dunno…" My brother trailed off, humming to himself as he grasped for the right words. "I feel bad, I guess."

"Why's that?"

"Because he's wasting his time on me."

*Hm.* My best guess as to what my brother meant by this was that he had no intention of going back to school, no matter how hard Sakuma tried to convince him otherwise. But I couldn't say for sure, so I cocked my head curiously.

"I'm sure you can relate to this, Misao," he said. "But it's like…I know what I *should* do right now, obviously. I should try to get back on my feet and head to school as soon as possible. I realize that, and I know that's what Dad wants too. Still…" Ushio hung his head as if in defeat. "I guess I'm just not ready yet."

I could totally understand what my brother was going through. Mainly because I felt the exact same way. "There's no need to rush, you know."

"…Thanks, Misao."

As siblings, my brother and I were in this together. We shared the same blood and had suffered the same wounds. For as traumatic as these past few weeks had been, I also felt like our bond as brother and sister had grown stronger than ever through this experience. It was the one and only glimmer of hope I'd found in these darkest of days.

To the surprise of absolutely no one, Sakuma continued coming over to our house pretty much every day after that. My brother neither welcomed him nor made any real attempt to push him away, and I was happy to follow suit.

Come to think of it, I'd been taking nearly all of my cues from my brother lately; I was tired of having to think for myself when I was in so much pain. If he was going to be cold and distant to Sakuma, then so was I. And if he was going to let his friend's impudence slide, then I supposed I'd keep my mouth shut too.

Still, surely even a nimrod like Sakuma must have realized that we were both giving him the cold shoulder. But it did nothing to

dissuade him from these little house calls. In fact, he was even visiting on the weekends now and inviting himself up to our room.

"What exactly are you trying to do here, Sakuma?" said Ushio, visibly irritated.

Today, Sakuma had stopped by after school and insisted on playing a fighting game with my brother up in our bedroom, to which he reluctantly agreed. I sat with my back leaned against the bed, spectating. After about three rounds, though, my brother had lost his patience, paused the game, and set his controller down.

"What do you mean?" asked Sakuma. "I was trying to hit you with a meteor smash."

"I'm not talking about in *Melee*," said my brother, turning off the GameCube.

"Aw, man… Why'd you have to do that when I was about to win?"

"Are you trying to get me to come to school? Or do you just wanna hang out?"

"Both, duh! Also, well…I wanna help cheer you up too, if I can."

"Not gonna happen, sorry."

Ushio was being uncharacteristically blunt today, though I'd noticed his patience with Sakuma starting to wane in general. He was making no effort to hide his disdain.

"You don't understand how hard it is to move on," my brother said, "because you've never lost a family member."

"I…" Sakuma began, but then lowered his gaze, seemingly at a loss.

No matter how hard Sakuma tried, he'd always be an outsider in this regard. It didn't matter how many times we welcomed him into our home or how close he got to us—he'd never be family. I figured that after what my brother had just said, he'd read between

the lines and back down. Instead, he lifted his head right back up, as if he'd conjured up all the resolve he needed.

"You're right, yeah," said Sakuma. "I don't know what it's like. I can't even imagine how hard it is for someone who's always been there to just…be gone forever one day. And I get that you and Misao-chan must be in a lot of pain right now… But at the same time, you can't live like this forever, y'know?"

"Again, what makes you think *you're* in any position to tell *us* that?" said my brother.

"Because it's already been two months, Ushio. You can't just hole yourselves up at home like this for so long. Sooner or later, it's gonna make you fall apart."

This time, my brother was the one rendered speechless. He narrowed his eyes and bit his lip, like Sakuma had hit him where it hurt. Honestly, I couldn't help but grit my teeth as well; two months *was* a long time. And even though we had a totally valid reason for holing up inside by ourselves, there was no denying what Sakuma said about how we couldn't live like this forever. But it wasn't that simple.

"…I don't need your help with this," said my brother, averting his eyes. "Just leave me alone already."

"But, Ushio—"

"I don't want to go back to school. End of story."

With that, he turned his back to Sakuma to show that the conversation was over. Sakuma pivoted to me, as if hoping I might offer some assistance, but there was nothing I could say. If my brother was done putting up with him, then so was I.

"All right," said Sakuma. "Sounds like you don't really wanna talk to me right now, so I'll just go."

As Sakuma got up and walked out of our bedroom, I noticed there was something almost lonesome in his gait. Truth be told, he was probably right in everything he was saying, but that didn't mean

my brother was wrong. He just needed time. And I was convinced Sakuma would understand and respect that.

Sakuma didn't visit the next day. All afternoon, I was waiting on pins and needles to see if he would, but the doorbell went unrung all the way up until 6:00 p.m., when our father got home and started getting dinner ready. We were up in our bedroom at the time, and before long, I caught a whiff of something tasty being cooked downstairs.

"Looks like Sakuma-kun decided not to come over today," I said.

"Good," said my brother. He was working through a sheet of math problems on his desk. Despite not going to school, he was still diligently doing all of his homework. "I'm sure Sakuma has better things to be doing with his time anyway, so it's for the best. For both of us…"

So he said, but I could tell from his voice that he was feeling pretty down about this. While he kept saying it was "for the best," something told me he was trying to convince *himself* more than anything. I'd seen how restless he'd gotten as the day wore on—how often he'd checked the clock or looked out the window.

Despite what he might say to the contrary, I knew my brother wasn't really capable of being all *that* cruel when it came to Sakuma. So when he'd said "just leave me alone," it was probably at least partially a bluff. I'd been spending almost every waking hour with my brother these days, so I felt like I had a decently good read on these things and could pick up on even the slightest shift in his emotions. I wished he wouldn't be so fussy and could be honest about how he felt—not that I was one to talk.

As I watched my brother from the bed, I heard footsteps coming up the stairs, followed by a knock on our bedroom door.

"Is it dinnertime already?" I asked.

"Nope," our father said, coming inside. "But there's a letter for you, Misao."

"Wait, huh? For me?"

"Yep. Figured I'd come give it to you. Dinner should be ready in another ten minutes or so."

He handed me the letter, then headed back down the stairs.

"Oh!" I exclaimed upon reading the envelope. "It's from Himeka-chan!"

I ripped open the seal and pulled out three sheets of folded-up stationery—all covered in Himeka's signature bubbly handwriting. In the letter, she apologized for not writing me sooner, offered some condolences and words of encouragement, and included some updates on what was going on in her life and what she'd been up to lately.

"Ugh, that was really sweet of her…"

I felt so happy, I almost wanted to cry. As I read through her letter over and over, I was reminded of how nice it felt to have friends who cared about you—even if that should've been a no-brainer. Despite everything I'd said about how I felt like I'd be okay as long as I had my brother to support me, it was still nice to have friends.

Just like my brother always had Sakuma up until now.

I wondered how he might feel if Sakuma really did stop coming over to our house for good. Would he spiral into an even deeper pit of depression than the one he was already in? A sort of creeping apprehension gripped me at the thought.

The very next day, Sakuma came to visit the Tsukinoki household once more. It was almost anticlimactic, really; I felt stupid for getting anxious about it in the first place. But it was still a relief, and for once, I found myself feeling awfully grateful for Sakuma and his dogged perseverance.

"Yeah, sorry I couldn't make it over yesterday," Sakuma said as my brother led him up to our bedroom. "I was just kinda busy, that's all."

"I mean, it's fine…" said Ushio, clearly feeling some residual awkwardness after where they'd left off. Sakuma, however, seemed to be in supremely high spirits—a slight uptick from his usual chipper, easygoing attitude.

"So get this, you guys," he said. "I did some digging, and guess what? I've got something to share that I think you both'll wanna hear!"

"Wait, this has to do with me too?" I asked.

That was a surprise. Usually, I was little more than a third wheel in their hangouts and discussions. What's more, Sakuma was acting unusually serious about whatever this was—to the point that even my brother, who usually let half of what Sakuma said go in one ear and out the other, straightened up in bewilderment. The three of us sat in a circle on the rug, facing one another.

All of a sudden, I got a bad feeling in my stomach. What if he was about to share some school regulation about us needing to go back to school soon, or else we'd flunk out or whatever? If this was going to turn into some kind of lecture about how we both needed to hurry up and get over it, I couldn't see that ending well. But as I sat there, heart pounding, I never could have imagined what came out of Sakuma's mouth next.

"Turns out, you guys don't *have* to come back to school after all!" he said, with such perfunctory glee that my brother and I were taken completely aback. "Had to do a little asking around, but as it turns out, since elementary school is 'compulsory education' or whatever, the school still has to make accommodations and let you graduate even if you can't physically attend! Can you believe that?! I was like, 'Whoa, that's crazy!' I mean, obviously you have to be able to keep up with the curriculum somehow, but I'm sure that won't be a problem for *you*, Ushio. And I bet he'll be happy to help you out if

there's anything you need extra tutoring on, Misao-chan. So basically, what I'm saying is…" He broke into a broad smile, presumably meant to reassure us. "If you guys really don't feel up to going to school again, then you don't have to force yourselves to do it!"

I wasn't sure how to take this. Was it some weird form of payback or hazing? A way of mockingly telling my brother off after he said he didn't want to go back to school? By feigning kindness while telling us it was okay to live the rest of our lives as social misfits? If it wasn't something petty like that, then he was either much more simpleminded than I thought, or his priorities were way out of whack.

I cast a nervous glance at my brother. He didn't seem entirely sure how to interpret this "good news" either.

"Let me guess," said my brother. "Was this why you didn't come over yesterday? Because you stayed after school to look into that for us?"

"Yeah, you got me, heh…" Sakuma sheepishly scratched his head. "Went around the whole school asking a bunch of different faculty members about it. Some of them seemed a little concerned about the idea, or gave me weird looks when I asked… But I'm 99.9 percent positive you guys can get away with it if you want to!"

"And you genuinely believed we'd be happy to hear this?" asked Ushio, in such a threatening tone of voice it even made Sakuma flinch.

"W-well, I mean…obviously, *I* think it'd be better if you guys just came back to school… But I also realized it was kinda wrong of me to try to force you, so I wanted to do some research to see if there were any other options. And when I found out there were, I figured I'd let you know… D-did I do bad or something?"

Sakuma's eyes darted anxiously around the room. He really *had* thought he was acting with virtuous intent and doing us a favor here. What an utter bonehead.

My brother made an inscrutable expression and thought to himself for a good, long while. After no less than ten excruciating seconds, he let out a deep and heavy sigh as if to vent all his pent-up conflicting emotions and simply asked, "Why?"

Sakuma was confused. "Huh?"

"Why do you care so much about me and my life?"

"Well…because we're friends, duh."

"Why *me*, though? Don't you have plenty of other friends?"

Sakuma pursed his lips as though he felt offended by this question. "Yeah, but…they're different. You're not just *any* old friend, Ushio." He averted his gaze. "You're my *best* friend…"

It was a very Sakuma thing to say: respectably earnest, if a bit cringeworthy. My brother scrunched up his face in discomfiture, and a long, awkward silence ensued.

"Good grief," my brother finally said, like he couldn't bear it any longer. Then his crinkled expression slowly broadened into a warm, amused grin.

It was the first time I'd seen him smile since our mother died.

"…You just don't give up, do you, Sakuma?"

Sakuma's eyes lit up with excitement.

Immediately, the tense atmosphere in the room dissipated, and soon things felt almost bright and cheery again. This might have been the first time in my entire life that I'd seen two human beings, who were so seemingly at odds a moment prior, come to such a perfect resolution and agreement with one another. I might have felt a bit touched by the sight of it, if not for how weirdly left out it made me feel. I even caught myself thinking some unpleasant thoughts, like, *Hmph. Best friends, my butt. That's nothing compared to our sibling bond.* But I also knew how to read the room, and I wouldn't dream of trying to ruin such an important moment. For now, all I could do was resign myself to the role of spectator and warmly watch over the two boys and their newly rekindled friendship.

One week after that, my brother started going back to school again.

And then, always the straggler, I followed suit shortly thereafter.

***

SEVEN YEARS AGO

The pungent smell of disinfectant filled the air as my brother and I walked through the inpatient ward, all the way down to Room 304 at the end of the hall. I opened the sliding door and immediately saw my mother in her bed by the window. She was reading a book in her white pajamas, her silvery hair glistening in the sunlight. Seeing her like this, she almost looked like a fair princess from a foreign land. For a moment, I completely forgot about our visit, content to simply stop and stare at her from the doorway. But that only lasted all of a single second, as the elation of getting to see her filled my chest.

"Mom!" I shouted, despite my brother's repeated warnings to keep my voice down while we were in the hospital.

"Oh my goodness! Misa-chan!" said my mother, looking up from her reading to greet me just as loudly. "And Ushio too! It's so good to see you!"

"You too, Mom," said Ushio, setting the insulated tote bag containing the lunch we'd brought on her bedside table. "But you both *really* need to keep your voices down, or the nurse is going to come by and yell at us again."

"We knoooow…" my mother and I said in unison, then exchanged mischievous grins. My brother and I each pulled up a

stool.

Originally, they were only supposed to keep her here at the hospital for about three days or so, but that stay had extended to well over a month. As a result, we hadn't been able to spend much time with her at all over summer vacation—something that would feel downright devastating to just about *any* little girl in second grade.

From what little I'd been told, my mother wasn't in very good health at the moment. She was suffering from a fairly severe illness and had undergone some major procedure in an attempt to address it—but even that hadn't fully healed her, so they were making her stay here at the hospital to keep an eye on her.

My brother and I had been coming to visit her every single day after school. Each time, I asked her when they were going to let her come home—until a week or so ago, when I noticed she always seemed a bit troubled by this question and never seemed to have a good answer, so I'd stopped bringing it up.

"Wait a moment," said my mother. "Where's your dad?"

"He's talking with the doctor," said Ushio. "Told us to go on ahead without him."

"Oh, I see… Huh, maybe they're having a tough talk or something."

I wasn't sure why she said it as though it had nothing to do with her. Even at my age, I knew they had to be talking about my mother's condition. I leaned forward in my stool and placed my hands on her soft bedding.

"You're not getting sicker again, are you, Mom?" I asked.

"Mmm… Well, I don't *think* so, but it's not like the doctor's been telling me I'm doing a whole lot better either… Oh, that reminds me!" She clapped her hands together. "I've got treats in the fridge. We should all have some!"

It felt like she was dodging the subject again, but I didn't want to make things any more awkward for her, so I let it go.

As my mother tried to stand up and walk over to the fridge, my brother stopped her and suggested we have something a bit healthier instead. He retrieved a plastic container from our tote bag and pulled back the lid to reveal an array of apple slices.

"I peeled these back at home earlier," my brother said.

"Wait, really?!" said my mother. "You mean you learned how to peel an apple all by yourself?! That's *amazing*, Ushio!"

"It took a little practice, yeah… Though I don't think they turned out very well."

"No, these look great! Heck, I didn't learn how to properly peel an apple until after your dad and I got married! You're gonna grow up to be so handy, Ushio, I swear!"

"It's really not *that* big a deal, Mom…" my brother said, though he couldn't hide the glow of satisfaction in his expression.

This was but one of the many fruits of my brother's recent efforts to learn how to cook. Our aunt had been coming over to help out with some of the housework, and she was giving him a few pointers in the kitchen. He kept saying (with great pride) that he was going to cook a whole meal for our mother once she got out of the hospital.

"Well, then… Don't mind if I do." My mother reached out and picked an apple slice from the container. But just as she was bringing it up to her mouth, it slipped and fell from between her fingertips.

Had this happened even a year ago, my brother and I probably would have just laughed it off as our mother being a klutz. Now we wouldn't dare. One of the primary symptoms of our mother's illness was slowly losing voluntary motor function in her arms and legs. I was worried that what we'd just seen might be a sign that her condition was getting worse after all—but I was too afraid to know

the answer, so I didn't say a word. My brother seemed to share my concerns, judging from the way he stiffened up.

Whether our mother could tell we were nervous or not, she flashed us a lighthearted smile. "Whoops, dropped it! Sorry about that!" She leaned over to grab the apple slice off the floor before popping it straight into her mouth. "Mmm! Sho juishy!"

My brother and I were appalled by this behavior.

"You really shouldn't be eating things off the floor, Mom," said Ushio.

"Aw, who caresh! It'sh jusht one little apple shliche!"

"Ugh… Well, don't come crying to me when you get sick."

Our mother gulped down the chewed-up apple and smiled. "What, are you kidding?! There's no way I'd get sick from an apple that was lovingly peeled by my sweet little Ushio!"

"I'm not sure the floor germs will agree with that." My brother still looked concerned but touched by the sentiment all the same. I knew he wanted nothing less than a full recovery for her—as did I, obviously. But I figured my brother probably had even stronger feelings toward her than I did, just by virtue of him being older and thus having had her as a mother for two years longer.

"Anyway, tell me how school's been going lately, you two! Have you been keeping up with the material in your lessons? Made any new friends? Enjoying the cafeteria food?"

My brother and I answered our mother's barrage of questions one by one, until eventually our father finally showed up to the hospital room. The conversation only grew even livelier from there.

The setting sun out the car window dyed the western sky a deep shade of crimson. After saying goodbye to our mother at the hospital, we'd hopped back in the family sedan, and now our father was driving us home. According to him, the roads were a little busier

than usual because most people were getting off work around this hour. Not him, though.

Our father's work situation was a bit complicated. He flew around the world having business meetings with people from all sorts of different countries, so he spent most of the year overseas, occasionally taking one or two weeks off to come home to Japan and spend some quality time with us.

That pattern had come to an end as of late. Ever since our mother was hospitalized, he'd been staying in Japan full time. Right now, he was on a temporary leave of absence, which he apparently intended to keep up until our mother was discharged. I was glad to have him around for such an extended period of time—but more than anything, I desperately wished for our mother to be able to come home ASAP.

I looked up at my father's face in the rearview mirror. His expression was ever so slightly foreboding. I wanted to know what he and the doctor had talked about for so long, but I didn't have the courage to ask. The fact that he wasn't telling us was indication enough that it couldn't have been anything pleasant. Even at my young age, I was smart enough to read between the lines on that.

"So, what do you guys feel like having for dinner?" our father asked while we were stopped at a red light. "Your aunt's too busy to come over tonight, so we'll have to eat out. Happy to go wherever you two like, though, if you can agree on something."

This was a rather common occurrence. Our aunt had her own family to take care of, so she couldn't stay at our house full time. In the past, simply getting to go out to eat was enough to get me excited all on its own, but by now the prospect had kind of lost its luster.

"What do *you* feel like, big brother?" I asked.

"I'm good with whatever," said Ushio. He was sitting beside me in the back seat, gazing absentmindedly out the window. He didn't

seem all that enthused by the prospect either, which didn't do much to inspire any ideas from my taste buds.

"Yeah, same," I said. "I don't really care."

"Well, okay…" said our father. "Guess I'll just pick one of our usual sit-down places on the way home, then."

"Sure, yeah," I said as the light turned green again. "That works."

"Oh, right—that reminds me." Our father gently stepped on the gas. "Guess what, kids? Sounds like your dad's gonna be staying here in Japan for good."

"Wait, what?" The unexpected announcement snapped Ushio out of his window-gazing. "But what about your job?"

"Not an issue. I'll be taking over the family business from your grandpa instead. No more red-eyes and jet lag for me. I'm gonna be taking it nice and easy here at home."

A look of concern crept onto my brother's face. "I thought you and Grandpa weren't even on speaking terms."

"Wha…? How do *you* know about that?"

"Mom said something about it a while back."

"Oh, she did, did she?" Our father made a pained expression, meaning this was a sore subject for him. "Well, your grandpa and I made up recently, so everything's A-OK in that regard. It won't have any impact on you two, don't worry… Unless you're saying you *liked* not having your mean ol' dad around for half the year—is that it?" he teased.

"I mean, no, that's not what I was saying…"

Obviously, I didn't feel that way either; I was glad to have my father around more often. But it was also hard to feel all that happy about it when the impetus for him spending more time at home was our mother being hospitalized. And if he was now telling us that things weren't *ever* going back to the way they used to be, then

what did that imply about how our mother was doing? A dark, ominous cloud billowed in my chest.

"Dad?" I said. "Mom's not going to die, is she…?"

*"Misao!"* my brother said sharply. "What are you saying?! Of course she's not going to die!"

"O-okay, sorry… Jeez…"

I hung my head; it had been a long time since my brother yelled at me like that. Honestly, I was more in shock about it than I was sad. But he was right that I probably shouldn't have said that—all it did was plant a seed of doubt in our minds.

"She'll be just fine, you two," our father said in a warm and reassuring voice. "Your mother's a tough cookie, you know… Things'll work out somehow. I'm sure of it."

I really, *really* wanted to believe him.

"Oh, right! Silly me," our father said as though he'd just remembered something, and then pulled a U-turn. He drove back the way we came and pulled into the hospital parking lot once more.

*Wait, why are we back here again? I thought we were getting food.*

"Did you forget something, Dad?" I asked.

"No," said our father. "I just figured your mother might like to come with."

"What?! Is she even allowed to?"

"Of course. Besides, a little fresh air ought to do her some good."

My father hopped out of the vehicle and came back a few minutes later with our mother in tow. She was still in her white hospital pajamas and only wore slippers to cover her bare feet. But she didn't seem to mind it one bit.

"Misao!" she exclaimed. "So nice to see you again so soon!"

"Is it really okay for you to just leave like this, Mom?"

"Yes, it's totally fine! Now c'mon, scooch over!"

My brother and I scooted down, and our mother climbed into the back seat with us. Our father closed the door behind her, jumped back in on the other side, and turned the key in the ignition. Our mother looked downright giddy as we pulled away.

"Gosh, it's been so long since the four of us had the chance to eat a proper meal together!" she said. "I'm really looking forward to it. Aren't you, Ushio?"

"Yeah," he said. "I'm glad you could come."

He and my mother smiled at each other, and I could see my father grinning in the driver's seat. Everyone seemed to be so excited for this that I couldn't help but get swept up in their enthusiasm. It really *had* been a long time since we'd gotten to eat together as a family, so I tried to set my minor concerns aside and enjoy the spontaneity.

We drove straight down the road from the hospital for what seemed like ages as evening slowly turned to night. Just when I wondered if we'd ever reach our destination, the car finally came to a stop, somewhere on the far outskirts of Tsubakioka.

"Okay, folks," said my father. "We're here."

By this point, I was so eager that I practically leapt out of the car…only to find myself standing in the middle of a vast, empty parking lot. It was so large, you'd think it was meant to accommodate an amusement park, yet there wasn't a single other car in sight. All I could see was a single, small building right in the center of the lot—but the lights weren't on, and I couldn't even tell what sort of establishment it was.

It was a cold, desolate place. I got a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach.

"Dad…?" I said, turning around. "Where are we?"

But our car was nowhere to be found. It had vanished without a trace.

I couldn't see my brother, or my mother, or my father anywhere either.

Almost like they'd never been there in the first place.

"Huh?"

I looked everywhere, yet there was nobody but me for miles around.

Only an eerie, all-encompassing silence.

I'd been left behind.

The thought was so suffocating, it made my throat feel like it was going to cave in on itself, and a wave of fathomless dread washed over my entire body.

And then, just as I was about to break down and cry…

"Wha—?!"

I shot up in bed, and everything was still, with only the soft orange glow of my night-light illuminating the room. As I caught my breath in the darkness, I tried to match the rhythm of the clock, slowly etching out each remaining second until dawn.

*Oh, thank goodness… It was only a dream…*

Even so, the mere memory of me standing all alone in that bleak, empty parking lot was enough to send chills down my spine. Or maybe it was just the cold sweat on my back that I was feeling.

I wasn't too surprised I'd had a nightmare after all the intrusive thoughts plaguing me throughout the day. Clearly my fears regarding my mother's condition worsening were taking a toll on me in more ways than one. Even now, my heart was still racing; the fact that it had been a dream wasn't enough to make the fear go away.

Glancing at my bedside clock, I saw that it was midnight—much too far from morning to set my heart at ease. Hugging my pillow close to my chest, I crawled out of my bed and crept over to my brother's as if tiptoeing toward a flame in the dark.

"Big brother…" I said, ruffling his comforter. "Hey, wake up…"

He groaned, twisting his head from side to side. "What's wrong?"

"I can't sleep…"

My brother rubbed at his heavily lidded eyes and drowsily gazed up at me. "Why, did you have a bad dream or something?"

In all honesty, I felt pretty embarrassed to admit that I needed my brother's help to fall back asleep after a nightmare at my age—but I was way too scared to worry about that. My brother huffed an amused sigh and smiled at me, then slid over and pulled his comforter back a bit.

"All right, all right," he said. "C'mere, you."

I climbed into my brother's bed and tugged the sheets all the way up over my head while still clutching my pillow. The sound of my brother's steady breathing helped to slowly calm my nerves. Unable to resist the urge to cling to him for comfort at this distance, I pressed my forehead into his chest and nuzzled deep.

"Okay, now you're gonna keep *me* from sleeping…"

"Eh heh heh… Sorry." I pulled my head away and closed my eyes. Although the imminent fear I'd felt a moment ago had gone, I still couldn't fall asleep. I wriggled upward to poke my head out from under the covers. Right there in front of me was my brother's sleeping face—his long eyelashes so beautifully arranged, you'd think it had to be someone's job just to keep them that way.

"You still awake?" he asked softly, sensing my gaze.

"Yeah. Tell me a story or something."

"What? Misao, I'm tired…"

"Pleeease? I don't care what it's about."

"Oh, for goodness' sake… You're so needy, I swear. But okay, fine…"

I did a little fist pump in my head, then closed my eyes and opened my ears.

"So there's this teacher in my grade who everyone's afraid of, right?" he began. "Anytime someone forgets their homework or talks during class, he'll practically shout at them at the top of his lungs. So even the *least* well-behaved kids in our class always shape up and pay attention during his class."

"Uh-huh," I said.

"But there was this one time when he came into class with a cigarette behind his ear—and it was still lit. And then he started teaching class the same as always. I'm pretty sure *all* of us noticed it, but nobody pointed it out. Probably in part because we were afraid he might yell at us like he always did—but also because we were morbidly curious what might happen if we just let it burn all the way down. And so nobody said a word, though a few kids *did* start snickering a little bit."

"Uh-huh."

"It was like everyone in the whole class was in agreement that we weren't gonna say anything… But then out of nowhere, Sakuma went and told him anyway."

Sakuma was my brother's closest friend. His was a name I heard all too often around the dinner table or even when we were hanging out in the living room. I had to admit, I wasn't all that thrilled this had turned out to be yet another Sakuma anecdote, but I certainly wasn't going to be choosy about it when *I* was the one who asked for a story.

"He raised his hand and said 'Teacher, you've got a cigarette behind your ear'… And the teacher just kinda did a double take, then

went to throw it away before moving on with the lesson like nothing happened. So I guess he really *did* just forget it was there."

"…Uh-huh."

"I remember being really impressed with Sakuma for that. Like, all he did was raise his hand and let the teacher know…but that was something that nobody else was willing to do, y'know? Not me, not even our class representative—just Sakuma."

I didn't say anything.

"I wasn't sure if maybe he couldn't read the room and didn't realize what we were trying to do, or if he was genuinely worried about the teacher getting a cigarette burn or something like that… Probably a little bit of both. Sakuma can be a bit dense sometimes, but he's a good kid at heart. That was one of those moments that made me go, 'Yeah, I'm really glad to be friends with this person.'"

"You sure do like Sakuma-kun, don't you, big brother?" I said, being ever so slightly facetious—but my brother didn't seem to take it that way.

"Yep. Hope I can be just like him someday… I feel like life would just be so much more fun if I could be as open and honest as he is… Though to be fair, that honesty of his *does* get him in hot water sometimes. Definitely don't wanna be like him in *that* regard, ha ha ha…"

As my brother chuckled to himself, I found myself starting to feel more and more jealous, so I decided I should just get some sleep already. I sank beneath the covers once again and curled up into a ball. My brother wished me good night, and the two of us were quiet after that.

Still, I clung to the hem of my brother's pajama shirt so as not to let Sakuma take him away from me. And so as not to let my brother suddenly disappear again, leaving me all alone like he had in my nightmare. I listened closely to his breaths, counting them like sheep until at last I drifted off to sleep.

There was another day, when we'd gone to visit our mother at the hospital, that remained vivid in my memory. The way the setting sun pouring in through the window seemed to coalesce into puddles of light on the linoleum floor. My brother and I sitting by her bedside, talking about our friends and schoolwork as always. Our father had been there up until a few moments prior, but he wasn't in the room at that point, as he'd gone down to buy a few things from the hospital convenience store.

"Well, shoot, you guys…" my mother said, gazing out the window. "Looks like summer's finally coming to an end."

Though it had been blisteringly hot for months, this week was markedly cooler than the last. No longer could the crying cicadas be heard off in the distance—only a choir of bell and pine tree crickets chirping softly through the night.

She stretched out in bed. "Hard not to feel like you're wasting away a little bit when you've gotta spend the whole season cooped up indoors."

"Well," said my brother, "at least we got to watch those fireworks together, right?"

He was referring to the local summer festival back in August. Our mother wasn't well enough to leave the hospital, so we'd gone up to the roof of the building as a family and watched the fireworks show together from afar. It was a little hard to make out the individual shapes at such a distance, but for someone like me who couldn't really handle all the loud noises and booming vibrations, that was perfectly fine.

"Yeah, I'd like to do that again sometime," I said, and my brother nodded.

"Agreed. Even if we have to watch them from the rooftop again next year, I don't mind. It beats having to deal with all the crowds."

"Ooh, we should get Dad to buy those little bite-size sponge cakes again too!"

"Definitely. And maybe next time we can even bring some takoyaki or taiyaki or something. Maybe we should ask Dad when he gets back so we don't forget?"

"Uh, I'm pretty sure Dad's not gonna remember if we tell him *that* far in advance…"

"Then I guess the three of us will just have to remember ourselves, won't we? So no forgetting, okay, Misao?! Okay, Mom?! … Mom?"

Wondering where his excitement had gone, I followed Ushio's gaze.

And when I saw what he had, my eyes went wide.

Our mother was crying. No, not just crying but weeping profusely. I'd never seen a grown adult sobbing their eyes out like this before. Not outside of TV dramas, anyway. The sight genuinely left me in a state of shock, and I had no clue what to do.

"A-are you okay?!" my brother frantically asked. "Should I call the nurse?"

"No… No, I'm fine, sweetheart." Our mother wiped away the tears with her sleeve, sniffling. "Ushio, Misao… Could you two come over here for a second?"

My brother and I exchanged a nervous look, then got up from our stools to approach our mother's bedside—at which point she leaned over and wrapped her arms tightly around us both. It was so sudden, I just kind of seized up; I had no idea what train of thought had inspired this tearful surge of emotion from her. And for some reason, I was a little afraid to find out. This embrace was far longer and far tighter than the loving hugs I was used to from her. In the end, I stood there in silence, letting her squeeze me like a teddy bear as I listened to the sound of her heartbeat.

It was my brother who ultimately broke the silence. “Don’t cry, Mom,” he said at length. “I’ll be okay even if we don’t get to watch the fireworks again next year.”

“Is that right?” our mother said. “You’re so mature, Ushio… My big, strong boy…”

“…Mm-hmm.”

Our mother squeezed us both even tighter.

And then she whispered the words—words I’d never forget.

“But Misao needs you too, you know. So promise me you’ll always be a good older brother to her, okay?”

When she finally released us, I felt a trace of lingering sweat around my neck, and the slight dampness made my skin feel like ice in the chilly hospital air. Our mother smiled at me, then at my brother, before mussing up our hair at the same time.

The sliding door rattled open. Our father had finally returned.

“Hey, sorry for the delay,” he said. “Was pretty crowded down there.”



In an instant, our mother regained her usual cheery expression and waved him over. The change in her demeanor was so quick, you would have never guessed she'd shed a single tear.

"Welcome back, dear!" she said. "Did they have Strawberry Pocky?"

"Yep. Bought a whole slew of other things too." Our father set the plastic grocery bag down on her bedside table before reaching in to pull out its contents. "So? What have you three been chatting about up here?"

"We were *just* reminiscing about how pretty the fireworks were a few weeks back!"

"Oh, yeah. The ones we watched up on the roof? That was pretty special, all right. One of those moments you wanna forever sear into your retinas."

"Ha ha ha… Now there's a colorful turn of phrase."

Watching my parents banter with each other, I thought back on the words my mother had said while she was clutching us close just a minute ago—the ones that had slipped past my eardrums and coursed through my entire being, seeping into every crack and crevice in my soul. They'd been primarily directed at my brother, of course—but I could tell that this soft, motherly request was also meant for me, in a way.

Her final parting wish to strengthen our bond as siblings.

*"Promise me you'll always be a good older brother to her, okay?"*

Six months later, she was gone.

***

NINE YEARS AGO

I gasped for air, and the stench of chlorine filled my nose. Today marked the beginning of my third month at the swimming school I'd started going to at the same time I entered elementary school.

Once I'd hoisted myself up out of the water, I joined the line of kids standing by the poolside. Though they were all elementary schoolers too, I was pretty sure I was the only first grader. I really liked swimming, but since my current class was filled with nothing but older kids, I did feel like a bit of a loner. We'd been practicing wall kicks for quite a while, and when I looked out the window, I could see a reddish hue spreading across the sky.

"Okay, that'll be all for today," said our coach. "Good hustle, everyone."

My soles plapped against the pool deck as I walked back to the changing room. The other classes must've just gotten out too because it was already chock-full of people.

As I wiped myself down in front of my locker, I heard a voice call out to me. "Mii-chan!"

"Oh, hey, Himeka-chan," I replied.

She waved at me through a small gap in the front of the towel she had draped around her shoulders like a cape. After kindergarten, Himeka and I had gone on to different elementary schools, but we had coincidentally signed up for the same swimming school, so we still got to see each other fairly regularly. And she was still a good friend of mine, even with this added degree of separation.

"Wow, so you're already doing wall kicks in the Penguin Course, huh? That's crazy."

"They're pretty easy. You literally just go underwater and then kick off the wall."

"Meanwhile, I still can't even do the jellyfish float… Maybe I really *do* need to lose some weight," Himeka said with a sigh, massaging her tummy. She'd definitely grown a bit plumper lately, and it seemed she was feeling a bit concerned about it.

"I heard fat people float better than skinny people, though."

"Wha?! H-hey, I'm not *fat*!"

"Huh? But didn't you just say you needed to lose weight?"

"I mean, yeah, I said that, but… Rrrrgh! Fine, Mii-chan! Be that way!"

And with that, Himeka stomped off in a huff.

"Yeeeah, no, sweetheart," said my mother as she drove me home. "Hate to say it, but you were definitely in the wrong there."

"But she *said* she needed to lose weight, Mom," I replied. "Isn't that the same thing as being fat?"

"No, not necessarily. If you work out an awful lot, you can actually gain quite a bit of weight without getting that much bigger. Because muscle weighs more than fat."

"Oh, really? Huh. I didn't know that."

*I guess I really did say something mean, then… Now I feel kinda bad.*

"Wait, no." I tilted my head. "She's been getting pudgier lately too, though, so I'm pretty sure she's just fat."

"Whether that's true or not, you should really never call someone fat—*especially* not to their face. Even if you might not think anything of it, or you find it cute for that matter, there's a good chance the other person feels self-conscious about it."

"But, Mom…"

"No 'buts,' dear. You need to apologize to Himeka-chan next time you see her, okay?"

"Fiiine…"

I still didn't feel like I'd done anything all that wrong, but I was too exhausted from swimming to argue with her any further. Leaning back against my headrest, I shifted to gaze out the window. A haze of late afternoon heat shimmered over the roadway. It would be summer vacation soon, which meant my father would be coming home for the week of Obon as well, though he couldn't stay any longer than that. I figured rather than feeling down in the dumps about it, I should just focus on making the most of what little time we had together as a family and try to stay positive.

After about a ten-minute drive, we made it back home, and my mother and I practically ran from the car into the house to escape the broiling heat. It was almost six o'clock, yet the sun was still beating down mercilessly. As we stepped into the air-conditioned living room, we found my brother there folding laundry.

"Oh, welcome home," he said.

He looked awfully mature for his age, kneeling there on the carpet as he diligently stacked and sorted all of our clothes. If he was already this responsible as a third grader, he'd probably be ready to join the workforce by the time he got to junior high.

"Oh my goodness, Ushio!" said my mother. "Thanks so much for doing that!"

"Don't mention it. I was just waiting around anyway."

Apparently, our mother hadn't even *asked* him to fold the laundry; he'd done it of his own volition. Impressed as I was, I couldn't help but feel a twinge of childish jealousy at hearing our mother praising him but not me.

"Here, I'll help too!" I declared.

I sat down beside my brother and picked some laundry from the pile myself. I was still pretty bad at folding clothes, so I stuck to doing the towels.

"Wow, you too, Misa-chan? Gosh, what did I ever do to be blessed with such perfect angels? Thank you both!"

"Just leave it to us, Mom!" I said. Our mother gave a satisfied nod, then headed into the kitchen to get started on dinner. "Oh yeah, big brother! Get this…"

As my brother and I worked away, I recounted to him the conversation I'd had with our mother on the drive home. He heard me out from start to finish, though not without snickering a few times at my expense. At the end, he concluded that I was entirely at fault, just like my mother had. This made me feel a bit peeved, but I was grateful to him for listening with an open mind, so I let it slide. Then, as I was about to move on to a different subject, something shattered loudly in the kitchen.

"Oh no!" our mother yelped. "Ugh, great… Now I've done it…"

She must have dropped something. Worried, I shot to my feet.

"Wait, don't come in here!" she warned. "Sorry—I dropped a plate, and now there's shards all over the floor, so no entering the kitchen until further notice!"

I could hear the sound of little pieces of porcelain being jostled around as my mother quickly set about sweeping the kitchen floor. I sat back down.

"Gosh, that scared me," I said, keeping my voice low so our mother couldn't hear.

"Yeah… No kidding," said my brother.

I giggled. "Mom can be such a klutz sometimes."

Yet my brother's expression remained eerily solemn. "I wonder if something's wrong with her."

"Huh?"

"Lately, she seems so tired all the time. She keeps dropping stuff for no reason and nodding off out of nowhere…"

While our mother had always been a bit of a butterfingers, it was true that she'd been having accidents like this more and more frequently. She'd broken a glass not even two weeks ago, if I recalled correctly. I remembered watching her open and close her hand several times after it slipped from her grasp, like she couldn't believe it had happened.

My brother was also right about her falling asleep in the middle of the day. Most days, we'd come home from school to find her napping on the couch. And even after we woke her up, she'd often go right back to sleep.

"You think she's got the flu or something?"

He shook his head. "No, I doubt it. I mean, she's not sneezing or coughing or anything like that… Might be heat exhaustion."

My brother seemed awfully concerned. I couldn't claim to know what was wrong with our mother, but now I had an idea as to why my brother was folding our laundry when we got home: He was probably trying to lighten our mother's load in whatever ways he could. That was my big brother for you, always paying close attention and picking up on little details I never even noticed. I assumed he was probably also trying to step up and be the "man of the house," as it were, in our father's absence.

"Well, if you really wanna look out for Mom," I said, "then I guess you're gonna have to shape up and stay healthy so you can support her!"

"Who, me? I'm doing fine."

"Oh yeah? Then how come you still can't get in the pool, huh?"

My brother's face tightened. "How do you know about that?" he asked, lowering his voice a bit.

I tensed up; maybe I'd chosen the wrong thing to tease him about. "W-well, um… It's just that I always see you sitting on the bleachers in your normal gym clothes whenever you're out there…"

The windows in Classroom 1-3 looked out over the school's outdoor pool, and I had a window seat, so even during lectures, I could always see the other classes splashing around out there whenever they had a swim day in PE.

"Do you…not know how to swim, big brother?"

"No, I can swim."

"Then how come you never get in the pool?"

My brother's face clouded over, his eyes wavering beneath a furrowed brow. This was not an expression I was used to seeing from him; he looked almost forlorn. "Because I get really bad stomach cramps," he finally said.

"Oh, got it… Yeah, that makes sense."

My brother suddenly rose to his feet. "I'll let you finish up the towels. I'm gonna go upstairs."

"Huh? Um, okay."

On that note, my brother left the living room in a hurry.

*Well,* that *was weird*, I thought to myself as I reached for another towel.

Before I knew it, it was the last day of spring semester, which meant it was also time for my very first summer vacation. I was still trying my best to adjust to being in elementary school, so it didn't feel like a much-needed reprieve, but I *was* definitely excited to have some additional quality time with my mother for a while.

"Come on, Misao-chan! Let's go home!"

As I sat there absentmindedly tallying the best possible marks on my report card, one of the classmates I always walked home with —a girl with two long braids—came over to fetch me. I stuffed the report card along with my parent-teacher correspondence notebook into my backpack and stood up from my desk to join her.

We chitchatted on our way through the hall to the main entrance. Several of our classmates joined up with us, and by the time we emerged outside, we numbered almost a dozen strong. We first graders would often commute in large groups like this; I assumed everyone still felt too nervous to walk home alone. We headed down the sidewalk, our voices brighter and the conversation livelier than usual—probably because summer vacation was afoot. Everyone was excited to share their plans for the long break or how well they'd done on their report cards.

"Whoa, look over there," one of the girls said as we were walking through the neighborhood. "Is that a foreign exchange student or something?"

"Oh, hey," I said, immediately recognizing the familiar mop of silver-blond hair, even from behind. "That's my big brother."

"Wait, really?!"

I nodded, and this came as more of a surprise to the other kids in my group than I expected. They crowded around me and asked all sorts of questions: How old was my brother? Why was my hair color different? Was he only half-Japanese? And so on and so forth. It was kind of overwhelming, but I didn't mind the extra attention; I was delighted to see people taking an interest in Ushio and more than happy to proudly boast about how great my big brother was.

"Well, that's cool and all…" said one of the boys in the back of our group. "But if he's really so special, then how come he doesn't have any friends?"

I stopped dead in my tracks. Now *this* was an utterly ridiculous assertion I simply couldn't permit. I whirled around and glared at the boy who'd slandered my brother. "He does too!"

"Sure looks like he's all alone to me."

"He has friends at school, though!"

The boy snickered. "You *sure* about that?"

"Yes, I'm sure!"

I didn't know why he was picking on me, but it was starting to tick me off—so I kicked him right in the shin, then turned on my heel and dashed away before he got the chance to cry out in pain.

"Big brother!" I called out as I ran.

"Misao?" said my brother, turning around in surprise.

I hadn't been able to tell from behind, but now I could see that my brother was carrying a medium-sized plant pot with both hands. In it was a beautiful Japanese morning glory, with big, luscious leaves and pastel-purple flowers climbing and curling like ivy around the wooden trellis that served as its support structure.

"I wanna walk home with you today," I said.

"I mean, s-sure, I don't mind…" My brother glanced back in the direction from which I came. "Wouldn't you rather hang out with your friends, though?"

"Nuh-uh. I'd rather spend time with you."

"Well, okay… If you say so, I guess."

He seemed a bit frazzled, perhaps due to my sudden appearance.

A cicada buzzed from a nearby telephone pole. It wasn't just us elementary schoolers walking down this residential street; there were kids in junior and senior high school uniforms as well, all let out early on this last day of the semester.

As we walked along, I nonchalantly peeked over at my brother. A bead of sweat threatened to drip from the tip of his chin. He seemed pretty uncomfortable; his hands were full, so he couldn't wipe it away. The chest, armpits, and collar of his shirt were all drenched with sweat.

"Is that heavy?" I asked, looking down at the plant pot.

"It's not too bad," he said, wiping his chin on his shoulder. "Just awkward, mostly. Doesn't help that my arms are getting sore."

"Here, let me carry it for a while."

"Pretty sure it'll be too heavy for you."

"I can handle it!" I insisted, then reached over and snatched the pot out of his hands. Unfortunately, it was way heavier than I expected, and the rim of the pot dug deep into my fingers. On top of that, the leaves kept swaying and brushing against my arms with every step, which was super irritating.

"You can just carry it until that next telephone pole," said my brother.

I felt a little pathetic that he could immediately tell I'd bitten off more than I could chew, but he was right. My arms already felt like they were about to give out, so I did as he said and hobbled with the pot up to the telephone pole a few meters ahead, then handed it back to my brother.

"Thanks, I really needed that break," my brother said, despite me only carrying it for less than a block. He really was so unbelievably kindhearted. There was no *way* a boy like him could possibly have no friends at all. Surely not, right?

"Hey, big brother? How many friends would you say you have?"

"Huh?!"

My brother was caught off guard by this, stumbling forward like someone had pushed him from behind. Finally, after a long, drawn-out silence and much vacillating, he responded uncertainly, "Maybe five or so…?"

"Oh yeah? Tell me about them."

"Uhhh…" His gaze darted back and forth as he fumbled for words. "Well, there's this boy named Sakuma-kun. We went to the same kindergarten, but I dunno if that makes us childhood friends… We're in the same class now too. And there was this one time we got pickled plums at lunch, which I hate, so he offered to eat mine for me. He's a nice kid, really fun to be around."

"Ooh, cool!"

I almost wanted to run back down the road and rub this anecdote right in that stupid boy's face. I had to admit, I was a little worried for a moment that maybe my brother really didn't have any friends, but I was glad to know those fears were unfounded.

"Sounds like you two must be pretty close!" I said, satisfied and relieved. But my brother's expression turned rigid at this.

"…I wouldn't say we're all that close, really."

"Wait, you're not?"

"Yeah. We've only talked, like, four or five times…"

*And you call that a friend?* I wanted to say, but I thought better of it and held my tongue. The conversation promptly died after that, and in its place, there was only the shrill crying of cicadas to fill the silence. Today was especially hot, the sun so blinding white that I was afraid to even lift my face to look up at the sky. I was fairly certain that if I stepped on a manhole cover, the soles of my shoes would probably melt right into it.

I glanced over at my brother. His cheeks had reddened like a ripe tomato, and his bangs were plastered to his forehead. He seemed to be struggling even more now than he was before. Not all that surprising, given that my brother had never been much of a warm-weather person to begin with. It was hard to watch him suffer.

"Hey, how 'bout we trade off carrying that?" I suggested, then took the pot back from him. Obviously, I couldn't carry it for very long, but I wanted to lighten my brother's burden at least a little bit. I flared my nostrils and arched my back in the hopes that this might make the weight a bit easier to bear, but to no avail.

My brother's expression softened. "You're a very good sister, Misao."

"No, *you're* a good brother!"

"Ha ha… I don't think I'm all that great."

"Nuh-uh! You totally are!"

My brother pulled out a handkerchief and wiped the sweat from my temples. "Well, I'm glad to have *you* by my side, at least."

A wave of pure, unbridled happiness washed over me from my head to my feet. I could feel a newfound strength brimming up from deep within me, like I could carry the plant all the rest of the way home by myself.

"Hey, big brother! Why don't you ask that Sakuma boy if he wants to hang out with you sometime?"

"What? I could never do that. Plus, it's already summer vacation…"

"So? You can just ask him in September, then!"

"Mmm… I still don't think it's a great idea. I mean, Sakuma-kun has enough friends as it is… He'd probably turn me down."

"No, he wouldn't!" I shouted, trying to snap him out of his pessimistic spiral. "I mean, you're a *really* nice guy! He probably wants to get closer to you too!"

"I doubt that…"

"No, I bet he totally does! Promise!"

Lacking the proper words to convey my certainty, I stamped my feet to drive the point home. My brother apparently found this behavior amusing, though, as he burst out laughing. And while I certainly hadn't been *trying* to be funny, it was nice to hear him laugh.

"Okay, okay," he said. "If you're so sure…then maybe I'll ask him in September."

"Yeah, you totally should!"

After finishing my mini-tantrum, I felt so tired that I nearly dropped the potted plant. Thankfully, my brother swooped in to rescue it.

"Here, I'll take over. Thanks, Misao."

"Eh heh heh… Don't mention it."

We continued trading the morning glory back and forth as we made our way home. By the time we reached our house, we were both covered in sweat from head to toe—but I felt weirdly reinvigorated all the same.

A few days after the end of summer vacation, I was sitting at home when I heard a little *click* from the entryway, followed by the sound of the front door creaking open. My brother was home from school. I'd been watching an episode of a cartoon I'd recorded in the living room, but I got up from the couch to go and greet him. When I walked out into the hallway, I saw my brother standing in the entryway, taking off his shoes.

"Welcome home, big bro—"

"Look out, comin' throooough!" someone bellowed in a loud, hyper voice—and then another boy burst through the door from behind my brother. His energy was so glaringly bright, it felt like I'd just seen the sun burst out from behind the clouds, and I froze.

"Hey, Misao," said my brother. "I'm home."

"Y-yeah, welcome back…" I said in a weak whisper, still dazed and unable to take my eyes off the mysterious boy my brother had brought home with him.

Who even *was* this kid? A friend? Of my brother's? I was so confused by this turn of events that I went wholly timid, unable to say another word.

"Why, hello there!" said my mother, coming in from the living room. "Are you a friend of Ushio's? It's very nice to meet you!"

"Hello!" said the boy. "My name's Sakuma Kamiki! Thanks for having me over!"

"My, and you have such good manners too! Well, come on in and make yourselves comfortable! Just give me one second, and I'll throw together a quick snack for you."

"Woo-hoo! Thanks, Mrs. Tsukinoki!"

My brother led the boy straight up to our bedroom on the second floor.

*Sakuma, huh?* I was pretty sure I recognized the name. He was the boy my brother had told me about before, wasn't he? The one he'd said he was going to ask to hang out sometime. Honestly, considering my brother had taken a liking to him, I was expecting someone a bit less…rough around the edges, to say the least. From what I could tell, he was practically the polar opposite of Ushio.

I was curious to know what was going on upstairs. What could they possibly be talking about? To a first grader like me, third graders may as well have been full-grown adults. Were they here to study together? As much as I wanted to go up and see, I knew I didn't have any justifiable excuse to go up there, so I plodded back to the living room.

"Gosh, I wish Ushio had told me he was bringing a friend over… I could have bought some little cakes or something in advance!" said my mother, talking to herself as she walked into the kitchen. "Oh well. First time for everything, I suppose!"

She arranged a small variety of snacks from the pantry on a tray, then poured two glasses of apple juice. This gave me an idea.

"I can take that up to them!" I declared.

"Oh… Are you sure you can balance it? There's juice on here too."

"I'll be fine!"

"Okay then… If you insist." My mother handed me the tray. I slowly carried it up to the second floor, taking care not to let any of the juice spill. When I made it up to the bedroom, I called out for my brother, and he opened the door.

"Oh, you brought all this up here yourself, Misao? Thank you."

"Don't mention it!" I said, striding casually into the room. Infiltration successful.

Sakuma was sitting on my brother's bed. As I set the tray down on the low table, he turned his gaze on me. "Right, Ushio mentioned he had a little sister! What's your name?"

This made me flinch, and I lowered my gaze. I didn't do well with loudmouthed boys. "M-Misao," I said mousily.

"Misao?" He laughed. "Sounds kinda like a boy's name!"

I could almost feel steam gushing out of my ears. Where did he get off being so rude to someone he'd only just met? He was no better than the boys in my class; how had my brother ever befriended such an irreverent oaf? I couldn't believe it.

"H-hey, not cool," said my brother. "She's really self-conscious about that…"

"Wait, for real?!" said Sakuma. "Oh man, I'm sorry! I've got a bad habit of saying stuff without thinking… But yeah, Misao's a pretty cool name, if you ask me!"

"Nuh-uh!" I said. "It's… It's perfectly normal!"

Even I wasn't sure what exactly I was getting at with this response, but I fled the room before he could say another word. Only then did I lose my temper. Who did this kid think he was, barging in out of nowhere and saying I had a boyish name? Why had my brother seen fit to invite someone like *him* over to our house?

*Um, wait. I guess I did kind of pressure him into it, didn't I? Well, whatever. Not like it matters.*

There was no way they'd remain friends for long. My brother preferred boys who knew how to behave themselves. Or at least, I was pretty sure he did.

Unfortunately, my assumptions in that regard were altogether quashed.

*"Hey, Mom, can I go hang out with Sakuma-kun?"*

*"Look, Sakuma-kun let me borrow one of his Gakken manga!"*

*"Man, Sakuma-kun's so cool…"*

*"You wanna know what Sakuma did the other day?!"*

*"Oh yeah, so Sakuma was telling me—"*

Ever since the day he first invited Sakuma over to our house, it was like my brother couldn't get the other boy's name out of his mouth. Anytime we were hanging out in the living room, or gathered around the dinner table, or even tucked into bed, it was always Sakuma this, Sakuma that… They'd grown so close in such a short period of time that he'd already transitioned from calling him "Sakuma-kun" to just "Sakuma."

This development really didn't sit well with me; it felt like my brother had been stolen away from me by some random outsider. And it was true, in a way. The more he hung out with Sakuma, the less time he had to spend with me. Which left me feeling pretty alone, more so than usual.

"What do *you* think I should do about it, Himeka-chan?" I asked.

"I mean, I don't know…" Himeka scrunched her brow. We were sitting together on the sofa in the lobby after swim practice let out, waiting for our mothers to come pick us up. "Isn't it a good thing that your brother and him are getting along?"

"I mean, yeah… But I think they're getting along a little too well. And this other boy's always snickering and joking around and stuff. I kinda feel like he's gonna hurt my brother's feelings sooner or later. Or at least be a bad influence on him."

"Mmm… But your brother really seems to like this Sakuma guy, doesn't he?"

"Pretty sure."

"Well, then I don't see a problem with it. He's allowed to choose his friends, right?"

"No, but see, you're not getting it. He's just…"

Despite being frustrated with my inability to adequately express my grievances, I was eternally grateful to Himeka for her patience and willingness to hear me out. I really hoped, from the bottom of my heart, that she and I could stay friends forever.

Before long, my mother arrived to pick me up, so Himeka and I said our goodbyes. Once we made it back home, I hopped out of the car—only to see Sakuma walking out the front door of our house. He and my brother had been hanging out yet again.

"Oh, hello, Sakuma-kun," said my mother. "Heading home now?"

"Yup! Oh man—so we've been playing this new video game, and Ushio *really* sucked at it at first! But he's been getting better and better, and he actually beat me for the first time today!"

"Ushio's certainly a quick learner, it's true. Sounds like you'd better start practicing up so you don't fall behind!"

"Yeah! That's the plan!"

"Take care on your way home now," my mother said, then walked into the house. I meekly followed after her, since I wasn't really in the mood to talk to Sakuma…and even if I *was*, I had no idea what we'd even talk about. So I tried to just rush past him.

"Oh, hey! Misao-chan, wait up!"

I stopped dead in my tracks, then fearfully turned around. "Y-yeah, what is it?"

"Here, I've got somethin' for ya. Thought I might have to wait until next time 'cause you weren't home… Good thing you guys showed up when you did!"

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small figurine dangling from a silver beaded chain. I recognized the chubby-cheeked fairy right away.

"Oh, hey… It's Mirmo…"

I adored the character; I even had all the manga volumes.

"Ushio told me you were a fan, so I figured I'd let you have him!"

"Wait, really? Are you sure?"

"Yeah, my sister's been collecting 'em, but she had an extra of this one. And, well…I still feel kinda bad for being rude to you the other day."

*Being rude to me?* Was he talking about the time he said I had a boy's name? I'd already pretty much forgotten about that, but it seemed Sakuma remembered. I was genuinely impressed by this well-meaning gesture. I took the keychain in the palm of my hand, and the miniature Mirmo gazed up at me with his signature dopey smile.

"Anyway, yeah…" Sakuma said nervously. "Hope you can forgive me for that."

For a moment, I was almost swayed, but I told myself I needed to stay firm and not be won over so easily. I still had concerns that needed to be addressed, after all.

"You promise you're not gonna take my brother away from me?" I asked.

"Wait, huh?" Sakuma blinked a few times. "Whaddya mean, take him away?"

"Like…you're not gonna run off with him, or teach him to do bad stuff…or never let him spend time with me, or anything like that?"

"Oh, *that's* what you meant?! Ah ha ha ha!"

Sakuma burst out laughing with his mouth wide open like an anime character. I hadn't been joking around one bit—yet judging from his boisterous reaction, I'd asked a bizarre question. The thought filled me with a sudden wave of embarrassment. Eventually, Sakuma calmed down from his hysterical high.

"Sorry, sorry," he said, wiping tears from the corners of his eyes. "I shouldn't laugh so hard, my bad. But yeah, don't worry—I'm not gonna take your brother away or anything like that. I just wanna hang out with him, that's all."

"You promise?"

"Yeah. I promise."

"…You *swear*?"

"Jeez, cut me some slack here! Do I really seem that bad to you?" Sakuma said with a strained smile. "I know, how 'bout this? From now on, whenever Ushio and I hang out, you can come play with us too."

"Wait… You mean it?" I said. "Like, *all* the time?"

"Sure, why not? That way, you'll get to spend a lot more time with your brother, and we can all have fun together."

Me, my brother, and Sakuma—all hanging out together.

It certainly wasn't the *worst* idea in the world. And it would probably do an awful lot to keep me from feeling so left out all the time. Plus, it wasn't like I *had* to become good friends with Sakuma; I could use this as an excuse to keep an eye on the two of them and make sure they didn't get up to no good.

"Okay, yeah," I said. "I think I can give that a try."

"Sweet!" Sakuma replied. "Sounds like we've got ourselves a deal, then."

All of a sudden, he shoved a hand in my direction. Unsure what to make of this, I just stared down at it like a deer in headlights.

"I'm saying we should shake on it!" he explained. "C'mon, gimme your hand!"

*Oh, right. Duh, that makes sense.* Timidly, I held out my own hand to grasp Sakuma's. He squeezed back with about the same amount of force.

"Cool!" he said. "See you later, then!"

And with that, Sakuma hopped on his bike and rode off down the street.

His grip lingered on my palm as I headed into the house.

From that day forth, I became the honorary third wheel in Sakuma and my brother's hangouts. At first, I was still quite wary of Sakuma, but after having the chance to talk with him a bit more, I eventually lowered my guard—or perhaps it would be more accurate to say I gave up on pushing him away. He was such an assertive, extroverted person that no matter how high I built up my walls, there was simply no way I could keep him out. Not to mention, it was pretty tiresome to stay on the defensive all the time with someone like that; I was starting to see how he'd won over my brother so easily.

"Ooh, hey!" Sakuma exclaimed. "Check it out, you guys!"

The three of us were on our way to a local park after school when Sakuma suddenly pointed to a bed of small pink flowers by the side of the road.

"Ever tasted these before? They've got *super* sweet nectar inside!"

Sakuma plucked one of the flowers from the bed and immediately started sucking on it. *Ewww… Did he really just put a random flower off the side of the road in his mouth?* The germophobe in me was utterly appalled.

"Come on, you two!" said Sakuma. "Give it a try!"

I shook my head rapidly. *How gross do you have to be to even* think *of doing such a thing…?* I thought to myself—that is, until my brother reached out to pick one for himself.

"Wait, you're actually gonna do it, big brother?" I asked. "But you don't know where that flower's been! It might give you a tummy ache!"

"Oh, please… I'm sure one little taste won't hurt," said Ushio.

"Nooooo! Please don't!"

My warnings fell on deaf ears as my brother brought the flower to his lips and gently sucked on it. Moments later, his eyes shot wide open with amazement.

"Wow, you're right!" he said. "That *is* sweet!"

"See, what'd I tell ya?" said Sakuma. "C'mon, Misao! You should try one too! Actually, nah—I guess if you *really* don't wanna, then I'm not gonna force you to."

Now it felt like he was talking down to me, and that just ticked me off. "Fine. I'll do it."

While I genuinely didn't want to do this, I was committed now. I scanned the flower bed for the cleanest-looking flower I could find, then plucked it, root and stem. I brought it up to my mouth, then gingerly attempted to lick out a teensy bit of nectar with just the tip of my tongue.

"Yeah, okay," I said. "It's really sweet."

"Ha! Toldja so!" Sakuma said proudly. "Man, I gotta say—it's really nice to see you starting to come outta your shell a little bit, Misao-chan! Gimme five! Woo!"

"W-woo…?"

And so Sakuma and I exchanged a very awkward high five for whatever reason. My brother watched warmly from the sidelines, grinning from ear to ear.

***

ELEVEN YEARS AGO

It was the beginning of fall, when the days were mild. The sun was still high when my kindergarten class let out.

"Looks like your mom's here to pick you up, Misao-chan!" said the teacher, and I took off running. Already, I could see my mother standing at the gates; she was much taller than all the other moms, and her snow-white hair made her stand out from afar. I ran right up and threw myself at her, clinging to her knees.

"Misa-chaaan!" she cried. "Were you a good girl today?"

"Mm-hmm!" I lifted my head as she tousled my hair and smiled down at me.

My teacher strode up beside us, wearing a smile of her own. "Yes, Misao-chan's very well behaved. She even stepped in to mediate a little tiff between two of our other students today, and she comforted the one who was crying afterward."

"She did? Wow, way to go, Misa-chan! That's my girl!"

My mother lovingly rubbed my cheeks; the cool touch of her bare hands felt nice on my skin. I stood there talking with her and my teacher for a while, then remembered I hadn't actually said goodbye to my friends yet. I excused myself and took a look around the kindergarten courtyard. Of the kids who had yet to be picked up, I spotted Himeka jumping rope by herself. I dashed over to her, and she stopped upon noticing me.

"Is your mommy here, Misao-chan?"

"Uh-huh. What about yours?"

"No, not yet… She's *always* late," Himeka said dejectedly.

"Awww… I'm sure she'll be here soon," I said to reassure her. Even at age four, I was emotionally intelligent enough to know this was the right thing to say.

"Your mommy's so pretty, Misao-chan… She's like a TV celebrity."

"Nuh-uh! She's way prettier than anyone on TV!"

"You think? Mmm… Yeah, I guess maybe she is." Himeka glanced between me and my mother. "Hey, how come you and your mommy don't have the same hair color?"

This was not the first time I'd been asked that question. In fact, I'd probably been the first one to ask it myself. So I knew exactly how to answer this.

"It's 'cause my dad gave birth to me, not my mom."

Himeka gasped. "Wait, he did?!"

Obviously, this was nothing more than a bald-faced lie my parents had constructed, but I totally believed it until I was well into elementary school. I figured my mother and father thought I was a bit too young to understand genetic inheritance, which was fair enough. I remembered feeling a little betrayed when I first found out they'd lied to me about this—but I got over that disappointment fairly quickly, all things considered. Just like when I found out Santa Claus was our dad in a big red suit.

"Anyway, I'll see you tomorrow, Himeka-chan!" I said.

"Okay, bye-bye!"

After bidding her farewell, I hurried back over to my mother.

We rode home from the kindergarten on my mother's bicycle, her pedaling while I sat in the rear-mounted kids' seat. I adored these rides home; I'd tell her all about my day at kindergarten as I watched her long silky hair flutter in the breeze.

Most days, we'd stop at the supermarket to pick up some things for dinner and breakfast the next day. When our groceries inevitably wouldn't fit in her bike basket, she'd ask me to hold on to the extra bags, warning me to be careful not to drop them. And every time, I'd confidently declare that she could count on me.

Once we made it home, I washed my hands and changed out of my kindergarten uniform and into my comfy clothes. Then, right

when I thought it was about that time, I heard the sound of the door opening from the entryway. My brother was home.

I walked out into the hallway and spied his black leather backpack. He was in first grade now, so he was old enough to walk home alone, unlike me. As he sat on the raised wooden step unlacing his shoes, I crept closer—then tackle-hugged him around the neck from behind. He cried out in surprise, then twisted his head to face me.

"Oh, it's just you, Misao. Gosh, you scared me."

"Welcome home, big brother!"

"Thanks, yeah." He offered me a gentle smile. "Good to see you too."

His silvery hair—the same color as our mother's—brushed against my cheek. It was so soft and thin, it looked like it might drift away in the wind like dandelion fluff, but it was gorgeous all the same. For whatever reason, I couldn't resist the urge to blow a puff of cold air against his hair and neck—which made my brother wriggle and squirm.

"Hey, that tickles!"

"Eh heh heh… Sorry, couldn't help myself."

"You're such a twerp… Here, payback time!"

My brother tossed his shoes aside, then brusquely mussed up my hair, leaving it utterly disheveled. I squealed in protest, but it was purely performative. I absolutely loved getting this kind of attention from him.

As we messed around, our mother poked her head in from the living room.

"Oh, Ushio!" she said. "You're home!"

"Yeah, hi, Mom." My brother took a moment to neatly arrange the shoes he'd cast aside before standing up.

"You're just in time. I'm about to make a batch of pancakes for an afternoon snack, so go wash up!"

*Pancakes?!* I was over the moon; Ushio smiled and gave an excited cheer too.

My mother's pancakes were one of my all-time favorite treats, and I was pretty sure my brother felt the same. They were so great when slathered up with butter and drizzled with the perfect amount of honey. I especially liked the extra crispy parts along the edges where they were a teensy bit burnt.

We watched as our mother set about making them. Eggs, milk, and pancake mix all got stirred up into batter in a big bowl, which she then poured into a hot frying pan. The delectable, cakey scent wafted into my nose almost immediately, and tiny bubbles formed on the surface of the batter.

"Hey, Mom! Can you do the thing?! Please, please, please?!" I begged.

"Ah ha ha, okay, okay." My mother chuckled bashfully. "Watch closely, now…"

She gripped the handle of the frying pan with both hands, then gave it a quick snap—and the pancake soared into the air. It reached as high as my mother's head and did a full rotation before plopping back down into the pan on the opposite side.



"Whoaaa!" I cried out. "How do you even *do* that?!"

Getting to see my mother's pan-flipping skills in action was one of the biggest reasons I loved when she cooked pancakes. I knew she wasn't the best chef in the world, but she *did* know how to put on a good show for us.

"Oh, I can do better than that…" said my mother. "Watch *this*!"

Now in the mood to strut her stuff, she flipped the pancake even higher—so high that it nearly touched the ceiling.

"Holy cow!" I said. "Can you go even higher than that?"

"Are you kidding? Of course I can! Come over here!"

Frying pan in hand, she walked out into the living room with its vaulted ceiling. I was downright giddy, but my brother looked awfully concerned.

"A-are you sure this is a good idea?" he asked her.

"Oh, don't worry, sweetie. I won't drop it, I promise."

"Yeah!" I chimed in. "Mom's never dropped a pancake once in her whole life!"

"Are you sure about that?" my brother said.

Actually, on reflection, I *did* vaguely recall a couple of times she'd screwed up and made a big mess in the past…but I couldn't properly remember at this point. Either way, my mother was clearly determined to challenge her limits and break new ground today; this would be the first time she'd ever flipped a pancake out here in the living room. My brother and I swallowed hard and watched with rapt attention.

Our mother took a deep breath—and then her eyes shot wide open with fierce determination. She swung the frying pan upward with enough force to flip a coffee table, sending the pancake soaring to new and unprecedented heights with never-before-seen velocity. She took two steps backward, then a third, and caught the falling pancake right in the center of the pan.

"Woo-hoo!" she cried out. "That's a new record, you guys!"

"Wow, that was incredible, Mom!" I hopped up and down, sharing in her excitement.

My mother huffed proudly and turned to face my brother. "You see that, Ushio? Told you I wouldn't drop it."

"Yeah, and you weren't kidding," he replied. "That was *really* cool, Mom!"

Now even my brother, who'd been so doubtful, was wearing a smile again. How could he not, after this sensational performance from our mother? For someone who'd grown up in such a cold and desolate part of the world, she had a warmth and radiance about her that almost made me wonder if she had a tiny sun burning bright within her chest. Anytime I fell and cried, or I was in a bad mood because my brother and I had bickered about something, that maternal warmth of hers could always melt my heart and get me smiling again. I couldn't imagine having to live without that sun; a world without my mother would be like night without day.

"All right, let's see if I can almost touch the ceiling this time," she said.

"Wait, what?" my brother and I blurted out in unison.

"You're gonna go even *higher*?" I asked.

"I mean, we're here now, right? Don't you guys wanna see just how high I can get it out here in the living room?"

Honestly, I was fully satisfied after that last flip, and my brother looked like he wanted to hurry up and eat a pancake. But it was hard to tell our mother no when she got so eager about something like this.

"Okay… Maybe just one more, yeah," I said.

"That's what I like to hear!" my mother exclaimed.

I was pretty sure the poor pancake was already cold by now, but it seemed my mother's love of challenging herself was burning

hotter than ever. And that was always enough to get me pretty hyped up too.

"Here goes, you two!" she said. "Watch *this*!"

Once again, my brother and I watched with bated breath. If she failed, she'd have to make the pancake all over from scratch. But if she succeeded… Well, nothing special would really happen, but it would probably be a nice ego boost.

Our mother bobbed up and down as if to find the perfect rhythm. She was really zoned in on this. Finally, in a soft voice, she counted out one, two, and then three—before swinging her arms out and upward with reckless abandon.

*Too* reckless, in fact.

The entire frying pan slipped right from her grasp, arced straight through the window of our living room, and hurtled into the yard, to an applause of shattering glass.

My mother shrieked, "Whaaaat?!"

I was too stunned to react.

And my brother simply said, "I was gonna eat that…"

In the end, no pancakes were had that day. After cleaning up the shattered glass, my mother called someone about replacing the window, then promptly collapsed in a heap on the living room couch. It was a real shame, but it seemed the shock of it all had killed her appetite—and I couldn't blame her.

My brother sat down beside her and attempted to offer a bit of moral support. "Cheer up, Mom. We can always make pancakes again another day."

"Ushiooo…" our mother wailed. "You're such a sweet boy…"

Eyes watering, she pushed herself up and proceeded to glomp my older brother. She squeezed him so tight, he winced in discomfort before his expression relaxed into one of tender

amusement. Though they both had roughly the same hair color, it was only at times like this, when they were embracing each other, that you could tell my mother's had a bit more of a golden tint to it. Not that my brother's silvery hair was any less pretty. I would've been thrilled to be born with either; I'd always been a little envious about it. Just like I was jealous right now that they were sharing in this tender hug without me.

"Hey, no fair!" I shouted, tugging on my mother's arms where they were wrapped around my brother's waist. "Me too, me too!"

"Okay, okay," said my mother. "Get in here, Misa-chan."

My mother opened her arms to create a spot for me between the two of them, so I clambered onto the couch and joined in the jumbled group embrace.

"Squeeeeeze!" she said, snuggling us in her arms.

My head quickly got buried in the deep softness of her chest. It was a bit warmer and harder to breathe than I was expecting, and she was holding us awfully tight. But I didn't mind the feeling one bit.

She rested her chin on my head. "Oh, my precious babies…"

Eventually, I literally couldn't breathe anymore, so I tapped my mother on the back, and she immediately released me. I came up gasping for air.

"Sorry, sorry! Guess that was a little *too* tight, huh?" She laughed. "But thank you both, really. You're very sweet. I feel so much better already!"

It seemed we'd successfully lifted our mother's wilting spirits. She shot to her feet and walked off to get started on dinner with renewed resolve. Still on the couch, my brother and I looked at each other and exchanged jubilant smiles.

The window repairman couldn't make it out until the next day, so as a slapdash solution, we taped a thin sheet of cardboard over the new hole in our wall. But whenever the wind picked up that

night, the cardboard rumbled in the breeze—and our mother's smile grew a bit thinner as she was reminded of her folly.

Luckily, there was a silver lining to every cloud, as later that evening we were graced by some truly happy news indeed. It came shortly after we'd finished dinner and the ending credits rolled on the seven o'clock episode of *Doraemon*. As our mother was washing dishes in the kitchen, the phone rang.

"Could one of you go see who that is?" she said. "My hands are wet."

I got off the couch and ran over to the landline on the shelf, then stood up on my tippy-toes to read the caller ID on the answering machine. The moment I saw the name on the little alphanumeric display, I lost all interest in the upcoming episode of *Crayon Shin-chan* I'd been looking forward to.

"It's Dad!" I cried, then grabbed the receiver as fast as I could. "Hello?"

*"Oh, it's you, Misao,"* said my father. *"How was kindergarten today?"*

"Pretty good. I got to cheer up my friend Himeka-chan after she started crying. And then I helped Mom do her shopping on the way home."

*"Wow, sounds like you've had a pretty eventful day. Well, just remember, sweetie: when you do nice things for others, they're sure to remember that, and they'll be more likely to do nice things for you in the future. Make sense?"*

"Yep, I know!"

*"That's my girl. So hey, are your mom and brother around?"*

"Yeah, they're here."

I pulled the receiver away from my ear and turned to find that my mother and brother were already standing right behind me, both looking eager for me to hand over the phone. My mother had come over in such a rush that there were still suds around her wrists.

My father spent most of the year going all around the world on business trips, so he didn't have the chance to come home very often. Thankfully, he called to check up on us regularly—and since we all loved talking to him, these phone calls would often go on for quite a while. Which, come to think of it, probably racked up a pretty steep phone bill, given that he was always calling internationally. But as far as I could recall, my father had never once tried to rush us or end the conversation early.

I held the receiver up to hand it to my mother—but my brother let out a disbelieving "Ah…" that told me I should probably let him talk first instead. And so I gave the phone over to him.

"Hello, Dad?" said my brother. "It's me, Ushio."

Even after handing it off to my brother, I leaned my ear in close to his so I could still hear our father's voice, and our mother crouched down to do the same. It was a fairly common thing we did—the three of us, all huddled close around the receiver.

*"Hey, kiddo. How've you been holding up lately? School going okay?"*

"Yeah… It's a lot of fun. I got a hundred on my math test the other day."

*"Well, I'll be darned! That's wonderful, son. Just addition and subtraction, I take it?"*

"Uh-huh. We're learning how to calculate stuff on paper now too. One time, the teacher put up this *really* big equation on the board, and I was the first one to solve it. Everyone in class was so impressed."

*"Wow, sounds like you're shaping up to be a real smart cookie. Me, I was never any good at math as a kid, so maybe you take after your mother."*

"Nope, I was a pretty bad student too!" our mother chimed in, and Ushio handed the phone over to her. This was our standard

operating procedure for whenever our father called: handing the phone back and forth in quick succession like a round-robin match.

"Have you gotten your schedule for the rest of the year yet?" my mother asked. "They're still going to give you some time off before Christmas, right?"

*"Yeah, so about that…"*

My mother's face tensed up.

*"Turns out, they're letting me take the whole month of December off. Looks like we'll be spending Christmas together as a family this year."*

"Wait, really?! Oh my gosh!"

My mother's face lit up brighter than any star in the night sky, her lips broadening into a giddy, effervescent smile while my brother and I cheered out hoorays.

Last year, my father had been so swamped with work that he hadn't been able to come home for Christmas at all. Being the small child that I was, I didn't understand that grown-ups simply had more important things to attend to sometimes, so I spent most of December bawling my eyes out—which no doubt caused my mother an awful lot of grief, especially since she had to have missed her husband during the holidays as well.

But this year, we'd get to spend Christmas as a family. Not only that, but we'd be together the entire month of December too, according to my father. I was already thinking up a fully loaded itinerary of all the things I wanted to do with him and all the places I wanted us to go. I couldn't *wait* for winter now.

"Ooh, ooh, ooh!" I exclaimed. "Dad, I wanna go skiing!"

*"Hey, that's a great idea. I'd love to go on another family ski trip. You sure did love going down the slopes with your mother last time, didn't you?"*

"Yeah, but this time I wanna learn how to actually ski, all by myself!"

*"Sounds great, sweetheart. I look forward to seeing that."*

The phone call with our father was longer and far livelier than usual, due in no small part to the good tidings he had to share. But as always, it was our mother who ended up talking to him the most. She pulled up a chair to sit by the phone long after my brother and I had gone off to do other things. When her voice started growing a bit soft and sad, that always meant it was almost time to hang up.

"Mm-hmm." She gently twirled the cord with her finger. "Mm-hmm, yeah… I know… Love you too. Mm-hmm… Okay, good night… I'll talk to you later. Mm-hmm, bye."

Finally, our mother returned the phone to its cradle and let out a melancholy sigh. But it only took her another moment to pick herself back up again.

"All right!" she said. "I've gotta go finish up the dishes, but I think it's time for *you* two to hop in the bath!"

"Okaaay!" my brother and I said in tandem. We got up and chased each other down the hall and into the bathroom.

Sitting there in the bathtub, I couldn't help but stare as my brother shampooed his hair. I didn't know why, but there was something weirdly relaxing about watching him lather up his silvery hair into a big ball of suds, which then went smooth and glossy like a mirror the moment he dumped warm water over his head to rinse it all away.

"Okay, move over, Misao," said my brother as he climbed into the tub with me. After lowering himself into the bathwater on the opposite side of the tub, he shook his head like a dog, spraying water droplets all over my face.

"Eek!" I cried, screwing my eyes shut.

"Oh, sorry. Did I get water in your eyes?"

"Nah… I think I'm okay."

When I opened them again, I saw my brother's striking, ash-gray irises staring back at me. Our mother's eyes—yet another unique trait of hers he'd inherited and I had not. At times, it felt like he'd taken all the most beautiful things about her and run off with them when he was born, leaving nothing for me.

"Your hair's so pretty, big brother…" I said with a wistful sigh.

"You think?"

"Yeah… I wish mine was the same color…"

I sank into the tub, submerging myself up to my nose, and started making grumpy bubbles on the surface of the water. Seeing this, my brother grabbed a nearby hand towel and dipped it in the bath. Then he made a ring with his thumb and forefinger and pulled the towel through so it expanded in the shape of a balloon.

"Look, Misao," he said. "It's a jellyfish."

He was trying to cheer me up, or at least change the subject.

"Waaah! I want hair like yours, big brother!"

I smacked the bulge in the towel-turned-jellyfish, and it squelched before limply sinking to the bottom of the tub.

"I think your hair's pretty too, though," said my brother.

"But *I* wanna have the same hair color as Mom!"

"Well, I'm sorry, Misao… But we don't get to decide this stuff."

I knew perfectly well that it was unreasonable for me to throw a tantrum about this. But sometimes I couldn't contain myself when it came to things I felt really passionate about—a problem that had been even worse when I was really little. I'd lose control over my emotions and end up taking out my frustration on my brother or our mom.

"If it makes you feel any better, though, there's definitely been a bunch of times when I wish *I* was born with black hair too."

"What? No way," I said, not buying this for a minute.

"No, I'm serious. I mean, pretty much everyone has black hair, you know? Or, well…I guess there's a few kids with brown hair too… But literally *no one* has hair like mine," he said, then softly lowered his gaze. "Sometimes I just…wish I could be normal like everyone else."

It was rare to hear my brother sounding so defeatist, so heartbroken—to the point that even at my young age, it filled me with a sense of responsibility. As his only sister (and more pertinently, the one who'd inspired these depressive thoughts via my own jealous tantrum), I had a duty—no, a moral imperative—to make this right. To do whatever I could to make sure my brother never had to feel down on himself like this again.

"Okay then… How 'bout this?!" I leaned forward in the tub so emphatically that it sent a mini-wave crashing against my brother's chest. "If you wanna be normal so bad, maybe I can help you out!"

"And how exactly are you gonna do that?"

"Well, since *I* know what it's like to be the same as everyone else, I can just tell you whenever you do something that's wrong or weird or different, and then teach you the right way of doing things! That way, you can learn how to fit in like I do, and you'll be just like everyone else before you know it!"

"You really think that'll work?"

"No, I promise it will!"

In that moment, I was so brimming with confidence, so determined to do whatever I could for him, that I even held out my pinkie finger to make it official. After a long, hesitant pause, my brother timidly held up his own pinkie and interlocked it with mine.

I never wanted to see my big brother so sad.

Back then, that was really all there was to it.

Or at least, all there was *supposed* to be.

When at last we unlatched our fingers, I flashed him a great big smile. “There! See? Now you’ve got nothing to worry about!”

CHAPTER EIGHT

# *Moon Shimmering in the Snowgleam*



# Chapter Eight:
# Moon Shimmering in the Snowgleam

WHEN AT LAST USHIO FINISHED speaking, she let out a long, long sigh. Sitting beside me at the edge of the bed, she leaned back, bracing her arms against my comforter for support. I couldn't blame her for feeling exhausted after all that talking. Slowly but surely, the tension in the air subsided. Her story was finally done.

At once, a bitter chill whooshed through me. I'd been so absorbed in what she was telling me that it felt like I'd only just been transported back into my own body after existing in some incorporeal state of reminiscence. It was pitch-black outside the window, and the clock now read 6:00 p.m. Not an unusual time for it to get dark out, here at the tail end of November. Although I'd risen briefly to turn the lights on in the middle of her account, I had yet to close the curtains. I stood up to go and do that, taking a moment to stretch out my back while I was at it.

It had been a long story. And it all started with a hug.

After Ushio requested an embrace from me, and I obliged, I felt like the time was right to finally ask her why she'd fallen for me in the first place. From there, she launched into a meandering series of anecdotes plucked from the entire course of our relationship—from the moment we first met until that night I found her in the park wearing her sister's school uniform. She'd tried to explain as best she could why each of these moments stood out to her, and I'd listened carefully so as not to miss a single word. But even now, after she was done talking, I still didn't have a clear answer for my original question: When exactly had she first developed feelings for me?

Was it when I offered to eat her pickled plums for her? Or when I'd warned our teacher that he had a lit cigarette behind his

ear? When I first called her my best friend? She'd certainly recounted plenty of little moments that seemed like they might have had something to do with it, but none stuck out to me as a clear delineator for when her feelings of friendship first developed into something more. Yet she'd said it hadn't been one isolated thing, so despite my pesky desire for a more concrete answer, I figured I should just let it go. And so now, a heavy silence hung over us yet again.

Still, there was *one* thing I'd been able to glean, about which I had no doubt: Ushio was completely serious about me, and she was doing her very best to be 100 percent open about how she felt. She'd even included quite a few moments in there that I was sure must have been uncomfortable to talk about, ones most people probably would have preferred to keep to themselves. I could tell she felt ready to bare her entire heart before me.

"You could at least say something, you know…" Ushio pressed.

"R-right, sorry," I said, snapping out of my inner monologue.

I walked back over to the bed and resumed my seat beside her. There was a hint of fatigue in her expression. That didn't surprise me, really, considering she'd been going more or less nonstop for longer than your average feature film.

"Well…sorry, I know this is kind of secondary, but I guess the first thing that sticks out to me is…damn, I was really different back then, wasn't I?"

"Yeah, I might be looking at it through rose-tinted glasses too, admittedly," said Ushio. "Probably made you sound a bit cooler than you actually were."

I chuckled at that. "Gee, thanks for the ringing endorsement…"

Ushio let out a little cough, rubbing her neck as she cleared her throat. "I think I definitely rambled too long. My throat is killing me…"

"Want me to go get you something to drink?"

"No, that's okay. It's getting late anyway. I should just go home."

She stood up from my bed, and I followed suit.

As we left my bedroom and headed downstairs, I tried to think of the right words to say to her after all she'd confessed. But what *was* the "proper" way to respond to such a clear and unapologetic statement of affection? This wasn't even the first time she'd expressed romantic interest in me either—and while I couldn't deny that I'd been pretty evasive about it up until now, I felt like I owed her a genuine answer this time around. It was high time I took her feelings as seriously as they deserved.

When we reached the main floor, I could smell dinner cooking down the hall.

"Hold on a sec… Is that you, Ushio-kun?" asked my mother, poking her head in from the living room. She was scurrying back and forth from the kitchen, judging from the way she had her hair tied back and her sleeves rolled up.

I groaned internally; this was not a reunion I was looking for right now. My mother and Ushio probably hadn't interacted, even in passing, since we were in elementary school. Which meant it was entirely possible my mother was oblivious to Ushio's current identity—though with the way word traveled around town, you never knew.

"Oh, hello, Mrs. Kamiki. Long time no see."

"You can say that again! How've you been, hon?"

"Doing all right, thanks…"

Ushio awkwardly looked away and hunched her shoulders a bit. Perhaps she was feeling a bit self-conscious as to how my mother might perceive her wearing a girls' uniform. It seemed best for me to step in and sever this conversation ASAP.

"Ushio was just heading out, Mom. Getting pretty late."

"Oh, is that right? Careful on your way home, then. Dark out there."

I signaled Ushio with my eyes, and we continued down the hall. But just as I was putting on my shoes to see her out to the street, my mom called after us again.

"Actually, hold on! Why don't you just stay and eat dinner with us?"

"Huh?" Ushio was thrown for a loop by this unexpected offer; I found it pretty surprising too.

"I mean, we're just having curry, so there'll be plenty extra. Not gonna twist your arm about it if you've got other plans! Just thought I'd offer."

"Uhhh…"

It wasn't as if Ushio had never stayed to eat dinner at our house before—but again, that was back when we were in elementary school. This was far too sudden.

"You can't ask someone to stay right as they're walking out the door, Mom," I said. "And yes, I'm sure the Tsukinokis are expecting Ushio home for dinner too."

"Mmm… Okay, guess you've got a point." My mom was standing down; her invitation appeared to be nothing more than a spur-of-the-moment impulse.

"Well, let me call home and ask, at least," said Ushio, pulling out her cell phone. Honestly, this disoriented me a bit. Knowing Ushio's personality, I'd expected her to politely decline right away. "Yes, hello? Yuki-san?"

Ushio summed up the situation to her and then, after a few one-word responses, hung up the phone and looked at my mom.

"It sounds like they haven't started on dinner yet," said Ushio. "So I'd love to stay."

"Oh, really? Glad to hear it! Why don't you kids make yourselves comfortable, then, and I'll give you a holler as soon as it's ready?"

With that, my mom headed back into the kitchen.

This was quite the last-minute change of plans. Not that I minded having dinner with Ushio, but I couldn't help but worry if she'd feel awkward or pressured in any way, knowing my family would be there too.

"You sure about this?" I asked.

"Yeah," said Ushio. "Wouldn't want to turn down an invitation."

"Well, okay. As long as you're cool with it, I guess."

We headed back up to my bedroom to wait until dinner was ready. But halfway up the stairs, my mom walked back into the hall like she'd forgotten something.

"Oh, right! I meant to ask," she said. "Should I call you 'Ushio-chan' now, then?"

*Probably a good idea to clarify that right off the bat, yeah.*

For a moment, Ushio looked dumbfounded, then let out a little chuckle. "If you don't mind, then I'd appreciate that, yes."

"Got it! Okay then. Dinner'll be ready in a few, Ushio-chan!"

On that note, she retreated into the kitchen once more.

Judging from how gracefully she'd asked this question, my mom already had some basic awareness of Ushio's current identity. *I* certainly hadn't explained the situation to her, so she'd probably heard about it through the grapevine. That being said, I was pretty impressed to hear her go out of her way to ask how Ushio would like to be addressed; the only other person I could remember being that considerate was Hoshihara. Though the thought of my mother having personality traits in common with a girl I'd been crushing on *did* make me feel all sorts of weird…

"Were we going upstairs, or…?" Ushio said.

"Oh, right! Sorry," I said, snapping out of it. "Yeah, you go on ahead. I'm gonna grab myself something to drink. Throat's feeling real dry."

"Okay, got it."

Ushio nodded and continued up the stairs, while I walked down the hall and into the kitchen. It was weirdly chilly even though I knew the heat should be on. Immediately, I had a hunch—and sure enough, I found my mother smoking a cigarette directly below the ventilation fan, which was running at full blast.

"What happened to making dinner, huh?"

My mom blew a wispy spiral of smoke up into the fan, then jerked her chin toward the microwave. "Just heating up the rice now."

"I see… Well, don't smoke while you're cooking."

"Aw, it's fiiine. It's not gonna make the food smell, I promise."

"It's not just that. You're making it freezing cold in here too."

"It'll warm right back up, don't worry. And I swear I'll only have one, all right?" She punctuated that with a cutesy little wink that belied her years. I frowned at her as disapprovingly as I could, and she pouted back at me. "Look, I'm just nervous. Gonna be my first time talking to Ushio-kun—I mean, Ushio-chan—in years… Gotta calm myself down while I can, or I might end up running my mouth and saying something stupid at the dinner table. And you wouldn't want that, now, wouldja?"

"God, you're such an addict." I sighed, not appreciating this thinly veiled threat. "Okay, fine, whatever. But you'd better keep it to just one."

"Nice! Thanks, hon," my mom said, sounding genuinely grateful.

I walked over to the fridge, grabbed a carton of Calpico concentrate, and poured it into two glasses before adding some water.

"You already knew about Ushio, huh?" I said as I stirred one of the drinks with a straw.

"Well, yeah," said my mom. "Small town, y'know. Hard *not* to stay in the loop."

"Gotcha."

At times, it really did feel like the parent-to-parent intelligence network here in Tsubakioka had a vast array of underground cables or something to keep each other up-to-date on all the latest gossip. There was certainly no consideration for other people's privacy in that regard. Hell, it was entirely possible that my mom knew more about the Tsukinoki household than I did.

"So why'd you invite her to dinner like that?" I asked.

"Why, should I not have?"

"I mean, no, that's not what I was trying to say…"

"I've heard she's had some complicated family drama going on lately, so I figured she might appreciate an excuse to get outta the house. No other reason than that." My mom blew another puff of smoke into the ventilation fan. "You ought to take a little initiative and try to be more considerate of these things too, y'know."

"Trust me, I know." I grabbed the glasses of Calpico and turned my back to her. "Anyway, just make sure the food doesn't smell like smoke, okay?"

"Yes, deeear…" my mom called out wearily.

About ten minutes later, my mom called up to us. Dinner was served.

"Ready to head down?" I asked.

"Yeah, sure," said Ushio.

We walked downstairs and into the living room, where the table was already set with side salads and bowls of egg drop soup for four.

"You'll have to come ladle out the curry for yourselves over here, kids," my mom said from the kitchen.

Ushio and I nodded. As we made our way over, I took a surreptitious sniff; thankfully, my nose didn't pick up any hint of cigarette smoke. My mother had been careful after all. I let Ushio serve herself before I grabbed my own plate. While she was at the stovetop, I heard a voice coming down the stairs.

"Ugh, I'm so hungryyy…"

It was my little sister, Ayaka. Despite being an eighth grader rapidly coming into the prime of her youth, she always trudged around the house looking like a hunchbacked zombie in a baggy sweat suit. When she reached the foot of the stairs, she took a couple sniffs, then stuck her tongue out and made a noise of disgust.

"Didn't we just have curry last week?" she said. "I'm so sick of it…"

"Oh, come on, now!" said my mom. "Curry *never* gets old!"

"Yeah, I'm glad *you* like it…" Ayaka grumbled as she walked over to the kitchen. But the moment she spotted us, she stopped dead in her tracks, and her eyes went wide with shock. "W-w-wait, Ushio-san?! I thought you went home already!"

"Nope," said Ushio. "Your mom was nice enough to let me stay for dinner. Hope you don't mind the extra company."

"O-o-of course not! If anything, I feel bad… Sorry all we have to offer you is boring old curry…"

"Nothing to apologize for."

It was cute to see Ayaka all flustered—a testament to how much she adored Ushio, despite what a brat she was to me.

"Hey, Ayaka," I said. "Why don't you go ahead and pour everyone some drinks while your hands are free?"

"Uh, what? Why is that *my* job?" she said, glaring at me. I really wished she would extend her poor brother even a fraction of the affection she showed to Ushio. Still, she did as I asked and

grabbed some tea from the refrigerator, then took it along with a few glasses out to the table.

Once we were all finished serving ourselves some curry, we sat down to eat, gave thanks for our food, and then grabbed our respective spoons to dig in.

"Boy, it sure has been a while since you last ate with us, hasn't it, Ushio-chan?" said my mom.

Ayaka immediately did a double take at her using the name "Ushio-chan."

"It sure has, hasn't it?" said Ushio. "Probably not since elementary school, I think…"

"Why, I still remember you coming over all those nights during summer vacation, and I'd make fried rice or somen noodles for you two… Ahhh, such nice memories."

Ushio nodded along with what my mom was saying. Then she tilted her head, finding something odd, and swept her gaze around the room. "Is Mr. Kamiki still at work, then?"

"Oh, no," said my mom. "He's just eating in his room, that's all."

"Huh? Oh, I see… Right, sorry."

"No, no! It's not your fault, dear. He always does that. You're not stealing his seat or anything, don't worry."

"Ah… W-well, okay then…"

Ushio accepted this explanation and went back to her meal. Then it was quiet for a while. And *very* awkward.

"S-so, um…" Ayaka began, nervously rekindling the conversation. "Does this mean you *would* prefer that I call you 'Ushio-chan' after all?"

"No, it's fine. You can call me whatever feels natural."

"A-are you sure? Then…you wouldn't mind if I called you 'Ushio-senpai' either?"

"Nope, not at all." Ushio smiled at her, and Ayaka beamed back.

"It's just that, well…I'm hoping to get into Tsubakioka High too, you see… So I figured, 'Wow, it'd be kinda cool to be able to call her that, like she's my upperclassman…'"

"Oh, nice. Yeah, hope you get accepted, then… Though I guess I'll already have graduated by the time you'd be starting school there."

"Nah, don't worry about it! The gesture alone is more than enough for me! Even if I fail my entrance exams, I won't mind—as long as I still get to call you Ushio-senpai!"

"Now, now, sweet pea…" my mom cut in with a smirk. "Let's not go failing any entrance exams, all right?"

"But, Mom…it's actually kind of a tough school to get into, for our area…"

"So? Doesn't mean you shouldn't still try your best. Heck, even *Sakuma* got in, remember? Don't write yourself off so quickly, hon."

"Hey, whaddya mean, 'even Sakuma'?!" I said. "I'll have you know I studied my butt off for that exam! I'd suggest you take it seriously too, if you *really* wanna get in."

"Okay, I don't need any extra pressure, thank you very much!" Ayaka retorted, glaring at me across the table. "I know how to study too, for your information."

"Yeah? Then stop saying you 'won't mind if you fail' and just put in the work."

"I was just exaggerating, obviously! Jeez, stop taking everything so literally!" She proceeded to kick me under the table (she wasn't wearing shoes, though, so it didn't particularly hurt).

Out of the blue, Ushio chuckled. "You two sure are adorable."

"No, we're not!" Ayaka and I cracked back—with such perfect comedic timing that it only made us that much more frustrated.

Ushio seemed to get a kick out of this as well.

The conversation continued all throughout dinner, with even Ayaka (who was usually a girl of few words) being quite talkative for a change. She was even going a bit easier on me than usual due to Ushio's presence, which was great as far as I was concerned. *Maybe I should invite Ushio over for dinner more often*.

Ushio seemed to be having a good time, for the most part—though every so often, I did spy the slightest hint of melancholy in her expression. It was only a tiny shift in her demeanor, but it didn't get past me. And I had a pretty good idea as to where that lonesome look in her eyes was coming from. Though at the time, I didn't think too hard about it.

By the time we finished our meal and cleared the table, it was just after 7:30 p.m.

"Thanks so much for having me," Ushio said, bowing her head politely to my mom in the kitchen. "The curry was really great."

It was well past time for her to head home. She had offered to stay and help wash the dishes, but my mom was quick to refuse.

"Anytime, hon. Hope you can join us for dinner again sometime. You're always more than welcome."

"I'd love that, yeah." Ushio turned to Ayaka (who was apparently aiming to impress, as she actually stayed to help with the dishes for once instead of instantly retreating to take a bath or go to her room). "And thank you too, Ayaka-chan. It was really fun chatting with you."

"Yeah, you too!" said Ayaka. "Seriously, feel free to come back anytime… Give me a heads-up, and I'll make sure we have something actually decent to eat next time too."

"Ah ha ha… You don't have to worry about that. The food was delicious."

After saying goodbye to my mom and Ayaka, Ushio grabbed her schoolbag from my room, and I walked her out to her bike. The night air was freezing cold, and the stars shone brightly down on us. Ushio's hair looked more luminous than the moon in the sky as it reflected the light from the streetlamp overhead. The metallic *clunk* of her raising her kickstand echoed throughout our sleepy neighborhood. It was quiet all around, but if you listened closely, you could hear signs of life in every home: people's voices, a baby crying, the evening news on TV, something sizzling on the stovetop… Soft and fragile sounds that all quickly melted away in the evening air, like snow on skin.

"I had a really good time today," said Ushio. "Your family's fun to be around."

"Trust me, they're not usually that talkative," I said. "Pretty sure they were just trying their best to entertain because we literally *never* have dinner guests."

"Yeah, but still…it was a nice atmosphere. I kind of envy that."

I wondered if perhaps this was related to the melancholy look I'd spied in Ushio's eyes a handful of times over the course of our meal. While I had no idea what dinners at the Tsukinoki household looked like these days, something told me they probably weren't all that convivial. I hoped things weren't *too* awkward with Misao and Yuki, but—

"Anyway, I should get going," said Ushio, lifting one leg to straddle her bike.

"Wait, no! Hold on a sec."

Ushio lowered her leg and turned to face me. "Yeah?" she said, wary yet expectant. "What is it?"

"I guess I just wanted to say…thanks for telling me all that stuff today."

"You don't have to thank me."

"No, I've been kinda thinking it over ever since we finished talking, and I guess I realized that…you've always been super assertive and open with me about how you feel, even when you know it'll make you that much more vulnerable to being hurt. Makes me feel like I need to stop being so wishy-washy and evasive with my own emotions…"

An icy gust cut through the neighborhood. I caught myself trying to stuff my hands in my pockets, but instead I squeezed them until my knuckles went white. The cold was the least of my concerns right now; I needed to focus.

"You mentioned envy just now," I went on. "The truth is, back in junior high, I felt like I was the one who couldn't stop being envious of you. Especially after you really started coming into your own, outperforming me and everyone else in anything you set your mind to. Whether it was school or sports, it felt like you succeeded at literally everything you tried—and at first, I was really proud of you as a friend. But after a while, it started taking a major toll on my self-esteem…and that's the main reason why I stopped talking to you. And I feel really bad about that. And I'm sorry."

Ushio and I had never sat down and truly talked about what happened between us back in junior high. Even so, I was well aware that pushing her away had hurt her pretty deeply.

"Yeah, it's okay," she said, like she'd already made her peace with it. "I was pretty inconsiderate back then too, so I don't think you deserve all the blame. Honestly, I might have done the exact same thing in your shoes. Though I have to admit…" Ushio adjusted her grip on the handlebars of her bike as she lowered her voice, narrowing her eyes ever so slightly. "It does still piss me off a little, when I think back on it."

"Yeah, I bet… Sorry, Ushio." It was a paltry apology, but I meant it.

"Was that all you wanted to say?"

"Yeah, more or less… Oh, actually, hang on—give me ten seconds, I'll be right back!"

I spun around and rushed back into the house, practically sprinting up the stairs to my bedroom. I dug through my dresser drawer and quickly unearthed the navy-blue scarf I was looking for from beneath a pile of clothes. I snatched it and hurried back out to Ushio, who'd put her kickstand down and was gazing absentmindedly up into the night sky. As I ran over to her, she let out an impatient puff of air.

"You're five seconds late, you know."

"Sorry, sorry!" I held out the scarf. "Here, you can borrow this. Don't want you getting cold on your way home."

"…Well, thank you. That's very thoughtful."

Ushio politely accepted the scarf and wrapped it around her neck; it was big enough for her to nestle in up to her chin. Only then did I realize I'd made a small oversight.

"Shoot, my bad. I should've grabbed a pair of gloves too…"

"Don't worry about it. It's not *that* cold outside."

"Ah, okay. I forgot you've always had a pretty high cold tolerance…"

"Not particularly. Pretty sure the kids at school just started saying that about me because I'm half Russian, but I've given up on trying to correct them at this point."

"Wait, for real? Dang, I had no idea… Sorry."

"You really need to stop apologizing so much."

She seemed to be in a bit of a bad mood, and not just because I'd made her wait for fifteen seconds out in the cold. No, I was pretty sure I knew the real reason; I could tell from her tone and the look in her eyes. It wasn't a scarf or gloves that Ushio was looking for—she wanted me to hurry up and give her an answer. She was

itching for me to tell her what I wanted us to be. And she knew I was smart enough to pick up on that.

I couldn't keep putting this off forever. That wouldn't be fair to her. I'd made her wait long enough already, and she'd made her feelings for me abundantly clear more than once, and in no uncertain terms. It was high time I told her how I felt about her. Especially since trying to remain in this vague state of indecisiveness with her was starting to take its toll on me as well. There was a sort of guilt there, like I was constantly lying—not just to her but to myself. The only way out was to make my feelings clear.

*And yet…*

"So are we done here?" Ushio asked.

While I knew I owed her an answer, I couldn't quite bring myself to take that final step; I hadn't summoned up the nerve to cross that boundary just yet.

"Yeah, sorry. I think that's it."

"…Okay then." Just two little words, yet they carried such deep disappointment that they pierced me like needles through the heart. "See you around, I guess."

Ushio turned her back to me and raised her kickstand once again.

Right then, my guilty conscience—in close collaboration with how much I loathed myself for being so pathetic and only thinking of my own discomfort, even after all this time—gave me that last, gentle push I needed.

"Actually, wait up! Just one more thing."

"Sakuma, *please*. It's freezing out here."

"You should let me take you out on a date sometime."

There was a loud *clatter* as Ushio dropped her bike on the pavement. She stood there, rooted to the spot. I walked over to pull

her bike out of the street so it wouldn't get run over by a passing car, then set it upright.

"And, well, since it's almost December…I figured maybe we could go do something together for Christmas? Not saying I already have an itinerary in mind or anything, but…I'll try to think of something special we could do between now and then."

Ushio's lips were trembling; I could see the turmoil in her expression. "You…want to go on a date with me?"

"Yeah."

"You *do* realize what that means, right?"

"Yes, Ushio. I know what a date is."

"And you're sure you want that?"

Ushio stared straight at me, her eyes full of apprehension, like she was searching for the catch. She seemed desperate to understand what I was trying to tell her through this invitation. While a part of me wished she could take it at face value, I knew I only had myself to blame for her hesitancy, given my previous penchant for indecision.

"Of course I'm sure," I said. "Wouldn't be suggesting it otherwise… Though if *you're* not interested, then that's a different story."

"No, it's not that, I just…" Ushio trailed off, her gaze wavering restlessly. But this hesitation only lasted a few seconds before she let out a weary breath. "I guess I'm feeling a little anxious, is all… It's so hard for me to tell what you're really thinking."

"I'm thinking I want to learn how to love you."

These were the very first words that came to mind, yet I felt like they actually summed up my current feelings surprisingly well. Because at the end of the day, I really *did* wish I could feel the same way about Ushio as she felt about me. If that was even a remote possibility, then I felt like it was worth pursuing. And if we could pull

it off, and things ended up working out in the long run, that would definitely be the ideal scenario.

That being said…just because it was an accurate description of how I felt didn't mean it was necessarily the right thing to say at this particular moment in time. Naturally, telling her I *wanted* to learn how to love her was akin to admitting that I *didn't* love her right now. At least not in a romantic sense. I loved Ushio as a friend, but did I fantasize about us going out on dates and doing couple-y stuff together? Honestly, I couldn't say I did. And there was no getting around that, unfortunately. But I was willing to give it a shot, at least—assuming Ushio was okay with that. For now, all I could do was wait on tenterhooks to see how she would respond.

"…Oh," she said at last. "I…I see…"

As she pulled the scarf up to cover her nose, I caught a glimpse of her lips broadening ever so slightly. *Hang on… Was that a blush I just saw?!* Of all the possible reactions I'd been envisioning, this was not among them, but I was glad to see she'd apparently taken my words as earnestly as I'd intended them. This momentary relief was quickly overcome by a wave of embarrassment, however, as I realized only belatedly the sheer audacity of what I'd said. I had never asked someone out on a date before, much less expressed an open desire to become more romantically intimate with them.

"You're so unfair, Sakuma…" Ushio said, scarf still covering her mouth. The tips of her ears were tinged red. "You make me wait all this time, and say all these things, and then somehow you *still* manage to leave me hanging in this weird state of flux where neither of us know if things are going to work out or not…"

"Urgh… Yeah, sorry…"

"Wait." Ushio's eyes went round. "So you *admit* you're just stringing me along, then!"

"Well, not intentionally, of course! I…I meant what I said before. I really *do* want to get to know you better and see where this goes."

"Oh, was *that* what you said?" Ushio teased.

I was caught red-handed; she'd seen right through my cowardly attempt to avoid having to restate my original sentiment verbatim. But now she left me no other choice.

"Sorry, I mean, uh…" I fumbled. "I'd like to learn how to love you, Ushio. Really."

A giggle snuck its way out from beneath the scarf. "All right," she said. "I believe you."

Then, as if to set all jokes aside, Ushio stood tall and looked me square in the eye. I followed suit and straightened my back as well. She reached up and pulled the scarf down to reveal a bashful, uneven smile of subdued excitement.

"Okay then… I'll be looking forward to our date."

"Yeah. Likewise."

The wind picked up ever so slightly—and for just a moment, Ushio's hair glimmered like golden lamé as it rippled in the breeze.

***

The next morning was *brutally* cold. Having to pedal the whole way to school kept my body temperature up enough to make it almost bearable, but as soon as I parked my bike in the bike lot, I practically raced into the school building. My neck was suffering the most; because I'd lent my scarf to Ushio the night before, I had to resort to using an old neck warmer I'd gotten back in junior high. It was now way too small to keep the wind out from under my collar during my brisk morning commute.

Hands shoved as deep as they could go into the pockets of my uniform jacket, I made my way down the hall past a cavalcade of students who were all similarly hunched over, looking just as miserable as me. When I finally made it up to Classroom 2-A and

into an enclosed space warmed (slightly) by the presence of other breathing bodies, I could finally relax my shoulders a bit from their permanent shrug. But god, did I ever wish these classrooms had actual heating for days like this.

Weaving through a few groups of classmates engaged in their usual morning chitchat, I headed straight to my desk—only to find that my seat was ice-cold, and my pants did woefully little to lessen the chill. As I cursed my negligence in not thinking to bring a pair of hand warmers or something, an old friend of mine wearing a white face mask trudged over to greet me, his arms folded in a futile attempt to ward off the cold.

"'Sup, Kamiki," said Hasumi.

"Hey, man. Feels like I haven't seen you in a while."

"I was gone for literally one day, dude."

"Yeah, how's that cold treating you?"

Hasumi was one of many students who'd called out sick over the past week or two now that the weather had taken a sharp turn for the colder. His absence had struck me as more unusual than most; despite the relatively lethargic vibes he typically gave off, Hasumi almost never missed school.

"Fever went down, at least," said Hasumi. "Still coughing like crazy, though."

"And you came to school anyway? Damn… You're a nobler man than I."

"Trust me, if finals weren't coming up, you bet your ass I'd be home in bed."

"Okay, fair."

There were less than two weeks left before our end-of-semester exams. Which did still feel like a decent ways out, but these tests would be covering more material than ever, supposedly, so you didn't want to miss a single lecture or review session.

"Been studying at all?" he asked me.

"Yeah, a little bit."

"Gonna shoot for first in our grade this time too?"

"Nah… Think I might literally die if I tried to pull *that* off again."

I'd only studied my ass off for our previous end-of-semester exams to keep Sera from winning the bet he'd made with Ushio, and it had taken a massive toll on my health. It was a little weird to think that all happened only a few short months ago; it felt like ancient history by now.

Superstitiously, I cast my gaze up toward the front of the classroom. Perhaps I was thinking that with my luck, I might have accidentally summoned Sera just by thinking about him, and he'd come waltzing in any minute now. Thankfully, I was spared. Instead of Sera, I spotted two people I actually *liked* walking into class: Ushio and Hoshihara.

The pair were almost immediately greeted by a nearby student—and once the rest of the class caught wind of their arrival, quite a few people stopped what they were doing and walked over to say hello or good morning, or to comment on the cold weather, or the lack of heating, or our upcoming exams. A handful stuck around beyond the expected niceties in the hopes of roping them into a more involved discussion.

It was a sight I'd gotten used to by now. Before Ushio's standout performance at the school culture festival back in October, I'd been one of very few people who actually made an effort to go over and talk to her so she wouldn't feel completely isolated in our class. But with her newfound popularity, it was honestly a bit hard for me to feel like I could even approach her anymore. Not because I felt she'd outgrown me, or I wasn't good enough to be her friend, or anything defeatist like that; I just always felt like the odd man out whenever I tried to insert myself into larger friend circles.

As she and Hoshihara waded through the crowd, Ushio's ash-gray eyes locked on to mine, and she changed course to my desk instead. Hoshihara was quick to follow.

"Oh, hey, Kamiki-kun!" said Hoshihara. "Morning, Hasumi-kun!"

"Morning," Hasumi and I said in unison.

"Gosh, it's cold out today, isn't it?!" she said—and quite convincingly too, given how bright red the tip of her nose was. "Makes me wish I didn't have to bike to school, blegh!"

"Agreed," I said. "They should send out buses on days like this."

"I was literally just thinking the same thing! Who would we even have to talk to if we wanna suggest something like that, though? The student council, I guess?"

"Doubt it. Pretty sure they don't have that much authority."

As Hoshihara and I made small talk, Ushio reached into her schoolbag and pulled out my scarf. "Here, Sakuma. You can have this back now. Definitely helped keep me warm on the way home, though—thanks again."

"Hey, no worries," I replied, taking the scarf from her. "Glad to hear it."

"Wait, huh?!" Hoshihara interjected, looking back and forth between me and Ushio as if in cartoonish disbelief. "When did he lend you *that*, Ushio-chan?"

"Just last night," said Ushio. "Right, sorry—after we said goodbye to you yesterday, we ended up heading over to his place for a little while."

"Oh yeah? To do what?"

Ushio hesitated, likely trying to gauge how much she should say. Obviously, it would be pretty unwise to tell Hoshihara she'd asked to come over for the sole purpose of requesting a hug from me. For a moment, I considered chiming in to rescue her with some

halfway believable excuse, but I knew answering for her would only seem more suspicious. I also didn't want to lie to Hoshihara if I could help it. And so I put my faith in Ushio's judgment and waited for her to find her voice again.

"Just to hang out for a bit," she answered timidly. "But then I got invited to stay for curry, so I didn't end up heading home until after that, and yeah…"

"Whoa, back up!" said Hoshihara. "He asked you to stay for dinner too?!"

"No, no. His mom did."

"What?! Okay, how the heck did *that* happen?! You've gotta give me the whole play-by-play, c'mon!"

"Uhhhhh…"

As Hoshihara leaned in with eyes aglitter, Ushio faltered and took a single step back—before doing an about-face and fleeing to her desk with astounding speed.

"Oh, no you don't!" said Hoshihara, swiftly giving chase.

*Welp. That's* one *way to start the morning, I guess.* I watched my friends warmly from afar, chuckling to myself in amusement—and for the briefest of moments, I almost thought I felt the school's nonexistent heating system kick on.

"Man," Hasumi said from beside me. "You three sure have gotten close lately."

I grinned. "Heh… Yeah. Pretty great, isn't it?"

"Okay, no need to be all smug about it, dick."

After enduring a full day of lectures in a classroom that was only a few degrees above inhumane, I banded together with Ushio and Hoshihara like always, and the three of us braced for our arctic expedition home. As the setting sun dipped down to kiss the horizon, a bitter, blustery wind tore across the road through the

paddy fields. These perpendicular gusts were especially brutal. You couldn't even hear what the person walking next to you was saying, and sometimes sand came blowing right into your eyes.

That said, Ushio seemed to be struggling with it far more than I was. She kept reaching up to fix her disheveled hair in vain, while also occasionally having to hold her skirt down whenever the wind threatened to lift it up, while *also* pushing her bike at the same time. She was starting to get visibly irritated, and it was pretty hard to watch.

"Ugh, I *hate* this," she grumbled; that I could hear her complaining despite the deafening gale was a testament to how annoyed she was.

"Yeah, I know," said Hoshihara. "Strong winds are the *worst*… Always screwin' up your hair and makin' your skirt flap around like crazy…"

Despite her attempt to commiserate, Hoshihara appeared to be doing just fine. I'd seen her adjust her bangs once or twice, but she didn't seem that fussed by the wind on the whole. Ushio cast a puzzled glance in her direction.

"…You don't seem too worried about *your* skirt," said Ushio.

"Oh, yeah, 'cause I've got shorts on underneath. Helps me stay warm, and it keeps my dignity intact even *if* the wind tries to mess with me!" Hoshihara said proudly.

I found my gaze being curiously drawn to the hemline of her skirt. Whatever these magical shorts were, they had to be pretty short, as *I* certainly hadn't noticed them before. But did she really expect us to believe that she'd be totally fine and not embarrassed at all if the wind made her flash everyone, just because of one extra skintight layer? Somehow I doubted that, but maybe… *Man, why the hell am I even thinking about this? I need to stop.*

"Do you guys wanna just say screw it and ride our bikes home today?" I proposed, given that the weather was making it awfully hard to enjoy our usual walk.

Neither Ushio nor Hoshihara were opposed to this suggestion, so we all hopped on our bikes. Right as I was about to kick off and start pedaling, though, Hoshihara wheeled up next to me and leaned in to whisper in my ear, "Meet me at the Joyfull by the station after this."

Startled, I snapped my head over to face her—but she held a finger to her mouth to shush me. Apparently, this invitation was to be kept secret from Ushio. But why? Had she caught me glancing down at her skirt a moment ago? Surely she wouldn't call me out to meet at a diner just to rebuke me for that, would she? Then again, this was Hoshihara. I figured I shouldn't read too far into it, as it was probably something totally innocuous—even if I *did* feel bad for keeping secrets from Ushio—so I nodded obediently.

We rode our bikes for the remainder of our usual homeward commute. After parting ways with my companions—first Hoshihara, then Ushio—I changed course and rerouted myself to the station. I knew Hoshihara would probably beat me there, as her usual turn was much closer to it than mine, so I stood up on my pedals and rode faster so as not to keep her waiting. When I stepped inside our neighborhood Joyfull, I quickly spotted her in a booth near the back of the restaurant.

"Hey, Hoshihara," I said as I approached. She'd already ordered a fountain drink and was sipping her cola through a straw, but she sat up straight as soon as she saw me.

"Oh, hey, Kamiki-kun! Sorry for dragging you out here with zero notice."

"Nah, it's cool. Not like I've got anything else going on today."

I set my bookbag down, went to the self-service beverage bar to pour myself some hot coffee with milk and sugar, then joined her in the booth.

"So," I said, taking a sip of my coffee, "have you been studying for finals?"

Seeing no reason to make her cut to the chase, I figured we could start things off with some lighthearted small talk—but it seemed my choice of topic was less than optimal, as Hoshihara's face twitched like I'd hit a sore spot.

"No, I haven't even started yet… Man, what am I gonna do?"

This was bad; I'd deflated her enthusiasm in one fell swoop.

"W-well, hey, there's still plenty of time left," I said, trying desperately to salvage the conversation. "No need to be so hard on yourself about it. I'm sure you'll do fine."

"I'm glad you are, because *I'm* not! Especially since they'll be covering all of the curriculum for the whole year… I just don't wanna fail anything…"

"Right, yeah… 'Cause then you'll have to take supplementary courses over winter break, right? Feel like that'd be extra annoying with how far you live from campus."

"Exactly. If only I had an Anywhere Door like in *Doraemon*… Actually, no, just give me a piece of Memory Toast I can copy all the answers onto…"

Now she was spiraling hard into escapism. I needed to get us off this subject ASAP.

"Anyway, what was it you wanted to talk about?" I asked.

"Oh, right, right!" Hoshihara took another long sip of her soda as if to calm and reorient herself, then leaned over the table and asked, "So tell me…how have things been going between you and Ushio-chan lately?"

I'd had a feeling it was going to have something to do with Ushio. Though this was a pretty broad and loaded question, so I couldn't quite make out her precise implication.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you lent her your scarf yesterday, right? And when I tried to ask her how that happened, she totally clammed up, which I

thought was a little fishy. Not that I'm, like, dying to know or anything—just kinda got the impression that there must've been a reason for that. Plus, she seemed kinda antsy and out of it the whole day."

"And that's why you called me out here? To ask me what was up?"

"Mm-hmm! I mean, I guess a phone call would've worked too, but I figured you'd have a harder time being evasive about stuff if we met up face-to-face."

"Don't think I have any reason to be evasive, but all right…"

This was a bluff, admittedly. Quite a few things happened yesterday that I knew I'd have an awfully hard time explaining to Hoshihara. I wasn't sure how much was even safe for me to divulge. Based on what she'd said, I didn't get the sense that Ushio had shared anything except that we'd eaten dinner together.

"Okay, then how'd she end up staying over so late?"

"Uh, I dunno… Just kinda the way things played out."

"See, look! You're being evasive already!"

"No, seriously, though… We were just hanging out, but right when she was about to head home, my mom asked if she wanted to join us for dinner. And so she did. That's literally all that happened."

"You suuure…?"

She still wasn't buying it. Which didn't surprise me, really—Hoshihara had always been extremely good at reading the room and at picking up on the slightest changes in people's vibes and energy. I knew trying to brush her aside would probably be a bad idea, especially when she could already tell something was up just from Ushio's demeanor. And so while I was still fairly hesitant to reveal too much, I figured I should be as honest with her as possible.

"Well, the reason she came over in the first place was because she and I kinda made a deal…that if she could beat Noi in the race, I'd owe her some sort of reward. And when we were walking home

together, after saying goodbye to you, she told me she wanted to cash that in. But all she wanted to use it for was to come over to my house and say hi to Ayaka, for some reason? Er, sorry—Ayaka's my little sister."

"Oh, huh. Are those two close?"

"Mmm… It's a little one-sided, honestly. But Ushio knows my sister adores her."

"Wait, but then why would she pick *that* as a reward?"

"Yeah, I thought it was weird too, ha ha…"

In retrospect, I was relatively sure that the Ayaka thing had been a pretext, since obviously there'd been something else Ushio *really* wanted from me. But I wasn't entirely sure I should talk about that—at least not without getting Ushio's permission first.

Suddenly, I noticed Hoshihara staring at me with distrust. "You are so totally hiding something."

"Wh-what? No, I'm not."

"Aw, come on. It's written all over your face."

She sounded all but convinced. Why did I have to be so easy to read? I felt a cold sweat trickle down my back, and I chuckled awkwardly. Hoshihara heaved a sigh.

"Well, if you really can't tell me, that's fine too, I guess," she said, backing down. But right as relief began to set in, she put on a considerate smile that made me feel even worse. "I mean, I know we're friends and all, but sometimes you just wanna keep things private, and that's okay. Wouldn't want you to feel pressured to betray Ushio-chan either… Sorry for being so pushy, Kamiki-kun. Didn't mean to make this an interrogation."

"Nah, it's okay… You don't have to apologize."

"No, I think I definitely overstepped my boundaries here. I really need to work on that. It's kind of a bad habit of mine…"

I watched as the cheer drained from Hoshihara's face.

*God, now I feel horrible!* I could deal with being yelled at or given the cold shoulder, but actually making someone feel down on themselves filled me with such guilt that I thought my heart might split in two. Immediately, my brain went into panic mode—and after much internal discord, my neurons ultimately agreed that there was only one way to salvage this situation.

"Okay, so the thing is…"

"What?!" Hoshihara shouted. "A *hug*?!"

"H-hey, keep your voice down!" I hissed.

In the end, I'd spilled all the beans. Well, almost. I didn't mention the rambly, two-hour explanation as to why Ushio fell for me in the first place, but I assumed it was okay for me to leave that part out. Hoshihara leaned over the table and looked at me with her eyes wide open and trembling furiously.

"Okay, but what kind of hug are we talking about here?!"

"Wh-what do you mean, 'what kind'?"

"Well, there's a bunch of different types, right?! Like, was it one of those handshake back-slap things athletes do with each other to say 'good game,' or the type of hug you'd give your mom or dad, or what?"

While I could definitely picture the former, I wasn't sure how exactly I was supposed to envision the latter. I was not in the habit of exchanging hugs with my mom and dad under any circumstances, really, but it sounded like Hoshihara probably was. Good for her.

"I dunno… I guess it was a bit more of an affectionate hug rather than a friendly one? We were kinda holding each other for a while there…"

"Like how long?"

"Uhhh… Probably more than five seconds, at the very least…"

"And about how tight, would you say?"

*Okay,* now *you're just being nosy*, I wanted to say, but I held my tongue. After all, Hoshihara was a good friend of Ushio's and only wanted the best for her, despite the one-sided feelings she'd previously harbored for her. Perhaps being as open as possible about this would actually be a kindness to Hoshihara in the long run—even if it *did* kind of feel like I was answering a bunch of truth-or-dare questions.

"Pretty tight," I said. "Enough that it was a little hard to breathe, and I could feel her heartbeat, at least. And then she stepped forward and slid one leg in between mine…"

"Sheeeeesh!" Hoshihara gaped at me, clapping both hands over her mouth. "I dunno… That sounds a little raunchy for a plain old 'hug' to me."

"I-it wasn't raunchy!"

But despite my reflexive denial, it actually had felt like things might take a much more intimate turn for a moment there; just thinking back on it made my face feel hot.

"All right, enough about the hug! I'm done talking about it!"

"Whaaat?!" Hoshihara whined. "But I still have so many questions…"

Really, I probably shouldn't even have shared this much with her without asking Ushio's permission. It also seemed like Hoshihara was only asking for the juicy details to satisfy her curiosity at this point, so there was no need for me to oblige.

"Seriously, though, Kamiki-kun," Hoshihara said, her demeanor changing in an instant.

I gulped; whatever she was about to say, I could tell she was done joking around.

"You *have* to know how Ushio-chan feels about you, right?"

"Of course I do. I'm not that clueless."

I'd known for quite a while now. For a long time, I'd been trying to avert my eyes and not think too hard about it—but now I'd decided to give Ushio's feelings the respect they deserved… No, maybe that made me sound too noble. More than anything, I'd just gotten fed up with my own wishy-washiness.

"Then what's your answer?" asked Hoshihara.

"I told her I need a little more time to figure that out."

"So you're putting off the hard decisions until later, basically?"

"Not proud of it, but…yeah, essentially."

Hoshihara hummed pensively, her arms folded and her brow creased. "I think that's gonna be really hard on Ushio-chan, if I'm being honest."

"You're probably right."

There was no denying that. All I could say in my defense was that I was determined to move things forward now, one way or another.

"I still don't know when I'll be able to give her a proper answer. But for what it's worth, she and I will be going out to celebrate Christmas together."

"Oh, shoot! You two are going on a date?!"

"I guess…you could technically call it that, yeah…"

In fact, I'd called it that myself when I first asked her out. For whatever reason, I was feeling kind of shy about it now. Hoshihara didn't let me get away with it, though.

"Yeah, no—I don't think so, buddy. If you're taking her out on Christmas, then that's a straight-up date. I don't care *what* you say. You've gotta at least be able to call it what it is, or else you're not giving Ushio-chan the respect she deserves!"

*D-dang… Is it really that serious? Now I feel kinda bad.*

I straightened myself up and looked Hoshihara in the eye. "I will be taking Ushio out on a date this Christmas."

"Yes, good. Much better."

She flashed a little smile, like a teacher praising a student for spelling a vocab word correctly. As I took another swig from my mug of coffee—which was now lukewarm enough to drink without worrying about scalding my tongue, thankfully—I thought back on the first time she and I had come here for a chat, almost half a year prior. She'd wanted to get my take on the situation with Sera after he asked Ushio out. Our relationship had developed quite a bit since then, but one thing hadn't changed: She was still looking out for Ushio's best interests.

"Is there another girl you like, Kamiki-kun?" asked Hoshihara, blindsiding me so hard that I nearly spit out my coffee.

"J-jeez, where'd *that* come from?! Wh-why do you ask?"

"Well, I figured that if you already had a crush on someone else, I guess I could understand why you'd want a little more time to sort out your feelings, is all… Wait. So are you saying there *is* another girl you like, then?"

"No, there isn't," I assured her, though my voice did crack a bit.

To be clear, I wasn't lying to her. It was just a bit of a shock to be asked that question by someone who, at least for a while, I actually *had* been pretty infatuated with. But right now, I could say with absolute certainty that this was no longer the case; she was still a beloved friend of mine, but I had no romantic feelings for her whatsoever. You could even say I felt she was "off-limits" in that regard. I wouldn't dare to put the friendship we'd built at risk after everything we'd been through together these past few months—and right now, it was my relationship with Ushio I needed to be focused on, not Hoshihara.

She and I would never be an item. And that…was okay.

Hoshihara eyed me skeptically for a moment, then relented and lowered her gaze back down to the table.

"All right, then," she said, then took another sip of her cola. Once she reached the bottom of her glass, she swirled her straw around and loudly sucked out the last few drops before looking back up at me with a smile. "For the record, I'll still respect whatever you end up deciding here. Obviously, I care a lot about Ushio-chan too, but I also want you to do what's right for you."

"Thanks," I said. "I appreciate that."

I polished off the last of my coffee.

Outside the window, it was pitch-black.

***

The days passed by quietly, and soon enough, it was December. Once again, the three of us were walking home from school together. Thankfully, the windchill hadn't been too bad, but the cold was growing deeper every day as we drew closer to winter. The handlebars of my bike were so icy now that they numbed my hands even through my gloves.

"Oh, right. I meant to tell you guys something," said Ushio, and Hoshihara and I turned to her. "Yuki-san wanted to invite you both over for dinner sometime, if you're interested. No pressure, though."

"Wait. Dinner at *your* house?" asked Hoshihara.

"Yeah. Seems like she got the idea in her head after I had dinner at Sakuma's the other day. Now she wants to have you two over so she can treat you to a home-cooked meal too, since you've been such good friends to me… Her words, not mine, but yeah."

"Sounds good to me," I said, seeing no reason to refuse.

Ushio's expression turned ever so slightly tense. "Do you actually *want* to come, or are you just saying that?"

"Huh? I mean, sure I do. Seems like it'd be a nice time."

"Got it… Okay, yeah. Fair enough, then."

She didn't sound all that enthused, and it took me all of about three seconds to realize why that might be. If we were having dinner at Ushio's house, then her sister, Misao, would likely be dining with us. And all three of us were well aware of just how abysmal their sibling relationship had been lately.

Hoshihara looked over at Ushio with concern. "Are you worried about Misao-chan being there?" she asked, having reached the same conclusion as me.

"Yeah… A little bit, I'm sorry to say. I just really don't want things to get painfully awkward again like last time."

I assumed she was referring to when her stepmom had given us a ride home from school on that rainy day. Things had definitely gotten almost unbearably tense from the moment Misao got in the car; you could just *feel* the contempt she had for Ushio. It was pretty sad because back in elementary school, she'd always looked up to her older sibling with so much respect and adoration. But it seemed this one determination of Ushio's had been enough to throw all of that out the window for her. That, combined with Misao going through a bit of a rebellious phase—and likely a fair bit of plain old teenage hormones to boot—had created the perfect storm in which Ushio had to bear the full brunt of her animosity.

"Well, I guess it probably won't be *as* bad as last time regardless," said Ushio. "Misao is usually on her best behavior when our dad's around."

"Ooh, why's that?" asked Hoshihara. "Is your dad pretty strict with her?"

"Huh? No, not at all."

"Oh… Then how come? Is she a real daddy's girl or something?"

"Mmm, I wouldn't say that… It's kind of hard to explain. Basically, she tries pretty hard not to make things difficult for him.

There was a period of time when she and I caused him a good deal of unnecessary stress, like back when we weren't going to school for a while, and yeah… There's a lot of history there."

"Ah, gotcha…" said Hoshihara, her voice turning meek. It seemed she could tell this wasn't something she should pry about any further.

"So what about you, Natsuki? Do you want to come over for dinner too?"

"Honestly, I'd love to! But I think I'll have to pass."

"Wait, what?" Ushio sounded almost crestfallen. "Why's that?"

"I'd just feel kinda weird accepting Yuki-san's hospitality when I really haven't done anything all that special to deserve it, y'know?"

"You're so good at livening things up, though… I'd really appreciate having you there to make things less awkward."

"Ha ha, thanks, you're sweet… But I'm pretty sure me just being my usual chatty self won't make a huge difference. Didn't seem to help all that much last time."

"Sure it will! I know I can count on you to be more sociable than *Sakuma*, at least."

"Gee, thanks, Ushio…" I grumbled.

Hoshihara hemmed and hawed a bit, still on the fence. I was a little surprised by this; I'd totally been expecting her to pounce on the invitation. I wondered if she was only saying no out of some misguided attempt to give Ushio and I more "alone time" together—a thought that gave me a bit of déjà vu. I felt like this same exact thing had happened when we tried to hang out over summer vacation. And while I appreciated her wanting to be considerate, it was wholly unnecessary in this case.

"I'd feel a lot better with you around too, honestly," I said.

"See? Even Sakuma agrees."

"Mmm, I dunno, you guys…" Hoshihara said with a conflicted look on her face. She seemed so tempted yet determined to stand her ground, I could practically see steam rising from her head like her brain had short-circuited. There was really no need to stress herself out so hard about this. Still, I couldn't help but crack a smile at how very like Hoshihara it was to treat something so trivial like it was a matter of life and death.

"Yuki-san's a *really* great cook, you know," said Ushio.

"Huh?"

"It's, like, her biggest hobby. And anytime we have guests over, you can be sure she'll pull out all the stops and make something absolutely to die for."

"Are you seriously trying to lure me in with food right now?"

Ushio promptly broke eye contact at this accusation, and Hoshihara sighed; she'd hit the nail on the head.

"Come on, Ushio-chan. Do you think I'm such an easy mark that I'd fall for an obvious ploy like that?"

"No… Okay, maybe a little bit."

Truth be told, I thought it was a pretty viable tactic myself. I still remembered the night we went to the diner before the culture festival, when she ate *twice* as much as Ushio did. The lunches she brought to school were always pretty hefty too.

"Look," said Hoshihara, "just because I have a slightly bigger appetite than your average girl doesn't mean I'm a total *pig*, all right? And I'll have you know I don't tend to cave once I've made my mind up either. Sheesh, I can't believe you think I'm that shallow… I'm frankly a little offended."

"Okay, okay… I'm sorry," said Ushio. "I'll tell her you can't make it, it's fine."

"Oh, no. I'll be there. Don't you worry."

*Well,* that *was quite the one-eighty… The hell was all her grumbling about, then?*

"I mean, uh…" Hoshihara cleared her throat. "It'd be awfully rude of me to turn down such a generous invitation, y'know? Never look a free lunch in the mouth when it's served on a silver platter, as they say."

Not only was she doing a completely shameless about-face—she'd bastardized, like, three different idioms at the same time. Yet Ushio didn't make a single quip and instead thanked her politely. It had been a ridiculous exchange, but at the end of the day, I knew Hoshihara's presence would be way more reassuring, so whatever.

"So did you have a particular date in mind, or no?" she asked Ushio.

"Yeah. We were thinking next Friday, maybe. Thought it would be better to wait until after finals and all."

"Next Friday, gotcha. That'll be the very last day of exams, won't it?"

*Correct.* Something nice to look forward to at the finish line, I supposed.

"Oh god…" said Hoshihara, as though she'd just remembered something dire.

"What's wrong?" Ushio asked.

"I just realized…I haven't started studying at all!" Hoshihara hung her head so low, I thought she might bonk it on her handlebars. "Ugh, I'm doomed… Just kill me now…"

Ushio chuckled. "At this point, I feel like that would be the easy way out." Maybe she felt a little bit bad about that, as she swiftly followed up with, "If there's anything in particular you need help understanding, I'd be happy to explain it to you."

"Wait, you mean it?!" Hoshihara jerked her head up and beamed at this unexpected life preserver she'd just been thrown.

"Oh, that'd be awesome! God, you're so good to me, Ushio-chan! What'd I ever do to deserve a friend like you?!"

Now she was laying it on thick—and right after moping like her entire life was over. Her emotional whiplash was getting a little out of control today.

"Hey, I know! What if we had a little study session this weekend?! We'd get a lot more done that way, and it'd be tons more fun too!"

"I don't think a study session is *supposed* to be 'fun,' Hoshihara," I teased.

"Well, it should be!" she replied, puffing out her cheeks. "I dunno about you, but I remember things way better when I'm enjoying myself. I mean, you probably memorize the names of all the new Pokémon in each generation a heck of a lot faster than you memorize your new English vocab words, am I right?"

"All right… You've got me there, I guess."

Granted, I did feel like that was comparing apples to oranges… But on second thought, maybe the underlying principle was more or less the same.

"Where do you suggest we have this study session, then?" said Ushio, turning her gaze on Hoshihara. "Just at the diner again?"

"That's an option, yeah… But wouldn't you rather go somewhere different for a change?"

"Like where?"

Hoshihara smiled and said somewhat bashfully, "Well, I dunno… How 'bout my place, for example?"

***

And so it was decided that we would pay a visit to the Hoshihara residence for the first time. After meeting up with Ushio

at Tsubakioka Station, followed by a rickety, ten-minute train ride, we arrived at the station closest to Hoshihara's neighborhood. It was Saturday, and the plan was to meet up at one o'clock, so both Ushio and I had already eaten lunch. As we walked down the residential streets, our backpacks crammed full of notes and textbooks, I heard quite a few kids playing outside—probably because it was a pretty nice day for December. I got the impression that this part of town was a lot livelier and more affluent than the area Ushio and I lived in.

"It was right around here, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, we should be there any minute."

We knew approximately where Hoshihara's house was, as we'd seen it from the street on the day that Yuki gave us all a ride home from school. Hoshihara had also given us the exact address via text for today's meetup.

"Man, I'm actually getting a little nervous here," I said. "Feel like maybe we should've brought a box of those fancy cakes or something as a gift."

"There's no need for that, silly. We're not visiting her at the hospital or anything," said Ushio, shaking her head at my cluelessness. (I was half joking, for the record.)

"Have *you* ever been invited over to Hoshihara's house before, Ushio?"

"Yeah, just once. Though Marine and Shiina were there too."

"Oh, dang. Sounds like she has people over pretty often, then."

"I don't know about that… I doubt she would invite just *anyone* over to hang out. Only her really close friends, from what I can tell."

"Gotcha, okay…"

Hoshihara and I had developed a certain level of trust over the past several months, to be sure, but the thought that I was now

considered a close enough friend to be welcomed into her home made me feel pretty darn special.

"Oh, hey," said Ushio. "Here it is."

We came to a stop in front of a big, modern-looking house with a large nameplate on the outside that read "HOSHIHARA." Before stepping up to ring the doorbell, I took a moment to marvel at the three-story abode from the sidewalk once again. The walls were pristinely white, as though the house had only just finished construction, and the lawn was immaculately trimmed. While I didn't feel like my house or Ushio's were anything to sneeze at, Hoshihara's was on a whole 'nother level. As I stood there gawking at the place like an envious neighbor, Ushio took the initiative and rang the doorbell. After an electronic *ding-dong*, Hoshihara's voice came in over the external speaker.

*"Hey, I'll be right out!"*

When she emerged from the front door only a few moments later, she was wearing a bulky knit sweater and some comfy-looking shorts with leggings underneath. This was by no means the first time I'd seen her in something other than her school uniform, but it was enough of a rarity to feel novel.

"Why, hello there, friends! Glad you two could make it." Hoshihara waved us inside. "Come on in!"

Ushio and I thanked her in unison, stepping through the front door and into the house.

"Sorry to drag you guys all the way out here," said Hoshihara as she led us up to the second floor. "I know it's pretty far out of your way."

"No, don't worry about it," said Ushio. "It's not every day we get to come over to your place."

As we ascended the staircase, I looked out into the first-floor living area; it was every bit as spacious and clean as I'd expected

from the exterior. It *was* a bit quiet in the house, though, so I assumed her parents were out at the moment.

"Yeah, well, I just figured you're having us over for dinner soon too, y'know? Didn't want it to be a totally one-sided thing," Hoshihara said, then frowned with uncertainty. "Though it's not like I can offer much in terms of hospitality, and I know it's a bit of a hike to get here, so maybe it was a little selfish of me…"

"Not at all," said Ushio. "Always nice to be invited back… Honestly, I'm excited to have the chance to browse your manga collection again."

"Wait, really?! Then you'll be glad to know my repertoire's only gotten bigger since the last time you were here! I'll have to show you some of my more recent pickups. They're all *really* good!"

"S-sure thing, yeah. As long as we get some studying done first…"

We made it up to the second floor. As we followed our host through the door at the end of the hall, a sweet, flowery fragrance tickled my nose.

Hoshihara's bedroom was bursting with decorations. She had shelves full of cutesy little knickknacks and a bed lined with cutesy little cushions. A big corkboard covered from top to bottom with pinned photos of her and her friends, like a wall of memories. It was, by all metrics, your stereotypical "girly" bedroom—and that alone was enough to fluster me. I was definitely out of my element here.

"Feel free to sit wherever," said Hoshihara. "I'm gonna go grab some drinks."

"Cool, thanks," said Ushio.

She and I sat down at the low table in the center of the room. There was a fluffy rug laid out beneath it, which made for a pretty comfortable seating arrangement. As Ushio unpacked her textbooks and set them on the tabletop, I took another curious glance around

the room. There was a large bookcase beside one shelf of knickknacks. Scanning the lineup, I saw that it was primarily filled with manga, but there were a surprising number of novels mixed in as well—including more than a few books I'd personally recommended to Hoshihara. It made sense for them to be there, of course; she had told me she'd bought them, and given me her impressions as well. But actually seeing them in her collection made me feel strangely moved, to the point that I couldn't help but let out an awestruck "Ooh…"

"Sakuma," Ushio said disapprovingly. "I know you have a bad staring habit, but *please* try not to make weird noises while you ogle, at the very least. You're just going to creep Hoshihara out."

"R-right." She had a point there. "My bad, sorry."

"You don't have to apologize to *me*."

Another fair point.

I stopped surveying the room and started unpacking my study materials. Hoshihara wasn't back yet, but I figured it wouldn't hurt to get started without her. First on the docket: physics. Ushio pulled out her own physics textbook to match, and I quickly set about running down the list of vocab words I'd written in my notebook with a red memorization marker, using the matching red filter sheet to hide the definitions as I quizzed myself on them. I didn't get very far before I realized my brain wasn't ready to switch into study mode quite yet, perhaps due to the unfamiliar environment. But we still had the whole afternoon, so maybe we could afford to indulge in a bit more small talk to help us settle in and get comfortable first.

"You ever think about decorating your room, Ushio?" I asked.

"How do you mean?" she replied, looking up from her work.

"Well, just look at all this random cutesy stuff Hoshihara's got in here, for example. The cat tissue cover, the teeny-tiny cactus, the little jar with the sticks poking out of it…"

"You mean her scent diffuser?"

"Yeah. That thing."

"Not really, no." Ushio ran her hands disinterestedly along the table. "Think I'm more of a minimalist in that regard. Too much stuff and I start to feel a little claustrophobic."

"Oh, right… I guess you *have* alluded to that before. But didn't you *use* to have a bunch of games and manga and whatnot in there, though?"

"What, you mean back in, like, elementary school? Sure, but I've grown up a lot since then. And I was also sharing a room with Misao back in those days."

"Ah, yeah… That's true."

It seemed Ushio could tell I wasn't ready to start studying. She stood up and walked over to one of the shelves to take a closer look at Hoshihara's collection of knickknacks—as if to placate me.

"I suppose I wouldn't mind having a *little* decor," she said. "Wouldn't want friends or whoever to think I'm a totally boring person with no hobbies or interests when they come over and see my bedroom."

"Is that really a thing people would assume?"

"Pretty sure it could be, yeah. A person's bedroom can tell you a great deal about who they are as an individual."

Perhaps this was true, now that I thought about it. Hoshihara's bedroom certainly gave a fair bit of insight into her personality: bright and cheery on the whole, with plenty of comfy, soothing adornments that would make just about anyone feel welcome… Okay, maybe I was stretching it a bit, but still.

"Well, if you *had* to redecorate your room, how would you do it?" I asked.

"Mmm, not sure…" said Ushio, mulling this over. "It's a little hard to say when you put me on the spot like that…"

"Hey, sorry for the wait!" said Hoshihara, coming back into the room with a tray in hand. "Took a while 'cause I went ahead and made us some tea."

She padded over and set the tray down on the low table. On it were three cups of piping hot black tea, along with a few servings of some sort of custard pudding that looked halfway between flan and crème brûlée.

"Wait a minute!" said Ushio. "Isn't this the oven-baked crème caramel from that ritzy new bakery in the city everyone's been talking about?"

"Oh, you recognize it?" said Hoshihara. "Yeah, my mom went out and bought some after I told her I was having friends over, heh… Haven't tried it yet myself, so I've been really looking forward to it! Feel free to dig in, you guys!"



I was about to ask why we weren't saving these treats for a three o'clock snack break or something, to reward ourselves with after we'd actually gotten some work done—then thought better of it after realizing what an anal-retentive loser I'd sound like. I reached out and grabbed one of the fancy desserts as Ushio walked back over and took a seat.

"Okay, so first you want to take the integral of this function…"

Hoshihara bobbed her head at Ushio, listening. "Uh-huh, uh-huh!"

It had been about two hours since we started studying, and I was taking a moment to let my brain refresh itself after feeling my focus wane a bit. Overall, the session was turning out to be quite productive. Occasionally, Hoshihara would reach a question she didn't understand, and either Ushio or I would help explain it to her. Usually it was Ushio, though, just because she was a much better tutor than me. Right now, she was walking Hoshihara through a particularly involved math problem.

"Once that's done, all we have to do is substitute our two in and subtract."

"Ooh! Okay, I think I get it…"

"Yeah? Great, so what's our answer here, then?"

"Twenty-six over three!"

"Nope, not even close."

"Bleeeegh…" Hoshihara groaned, then fell backward and covered her face with both hands before going completely motionless.

"What happened to 'I think I get it'?"

"Look, it's just hard, okay? I already feel like my head's about to explode…" It sounded like she was really struggling. Not that I blamed her, really—integrals and derivatives were tough.

Ushio scratched her cheek contemplatively, then glanced at the clock on the wall. “Maybe we should take a little breather.”

“Yes, please,” Hoshihara said from the floor. I had no objections.

Ushio plucked a volume of shojo manga from the bookcase and began to read. Sensing that neither of my companions were in the mood for conversation, I pulled out my phone and idly played around on it. Hoshihara kept her eyes closed and went totally quiet; she could’ve passed for sleeping. I assumed it was to give her poor brain a rest.

It was funny how quickly I’d grown accustomed to being in her room after how nervous I felt solely from walking in at first. It had been a long time since I’d been over to a friend’s house, silently coexisting in their bedroom. Not that I didn’t enjoy chatting and playing games and stuff too—but there was something to be said for simply being comfortable relaxing in someone else’s presence.

After a short while, it was Ushio who eventually broke this restful silence. “So, Natsuki…” she said candidly, without looking up from her book. “Have you decided where you’d like to go to college?”

Come to think of it, I hadn’t asked Hoshihara about her higher education plans. I assumed that sort of thing might be a stressful subject, so I rarely took the initiative in bringing it up.

“Not yet, no,” said Hoshihara, still lying flat on the ground. “I mean, I guess I filled out the little questionnaire they gave us and stuff, but you’re right… I should probably get on that, huh?”

She sounded almost depressed as she said this. But it was true; we were fast approaching the point where she’d have to make up her mind one way or another. And considering Tsubakioka High had a pretty high reputation for our area when it came to students getting into prestigious universities, the entire faculty was always reminding us how important it was to have a solid higher education

plan laid out well in advance. I assumed she was under a lot of pressure from Ms. Iyo in that regard too.

"Well, I also think it's okay to take your time thinking your options over," said Ushio. "It's an important life decision, after all."

Hoshihara sat up straight and stretched her back out against her bed with a great big yawn, then sleepily opened her eyes and looked over at me and Ushio.

"You two still planning to go to college in Tokyo, I take it?" she asked.

"Wait," I cut in. "How do you know that?"

"Ushio-chan mentioned it a while back."

*Oh, fair. I guess that would explain it.*

"Why do you ask?" I said. "Thinking you might wanna do the same?"

"Mmm, I dunno about that… I do wanna move out on my own, but I wouldn't say I have any deep desire to live in Tokyo specifically. Though I guess there are way more options there, just in general, so it might be the smart move."

"Yeah, there's an absurd amount of universities in Tokyo. It's kinda crazy."

"One thing I *can* say for sure, though," she added emphatically, "is that I don't see myself staying here."

There was an unwavering quality to her words.

I didn't get the impression that Hoshihara had a deep-seated hatred for her hometown or anything like that. But she still had to know, like all of us did, that there were next to no opportunities for personal or career growth in our neck of the woods. It was one of the main reasons I wanted to get the hell out of here too.

Ushio closed the volume of manga she was reading. "All right. Let's get back to it, shall we?"

The three of us powered through the remainder of our study session without any major hiccups or distractions. From experience, I'd initially been a bit worried that we might end up horsing around too much to get a whole lot of work done, but even Hoshihara stayed surprisingly on task and made a real effort to wrap her head around the material. I assumed part of the reason for this was that she didn't want Ushio's kindness in tutoring her to go to waste—though it *did* also seem like she was feeling genuinely way more stressed out about these upcoming final exams than our last ones.

Once five o'clock rolled around, the neighborhood chime rang out to announce that it was time for all good little boys and girls to start heading home. The sun had already begun to set, and it was growing darker and darker out the window.

"Yep, there you go," said Ushio. "You got it right."

"Heck yeah!" Hoshihara exclaimed with a fist pump. Her tone was ecstatic, but her face was etched with fatigue. "Now I shouldn't have to worry about math at all, right?!"

"You should definitely get a passing grade, at least, yeah… As long as you don't forget anything I just taught you."

"Urgh… Okay, guess I'll just have to keep reviewing, then…"

I agreed with Ushio; as long as Hoshihara kept up the hard work, it was highly unlikely that she'd flunk, barring extenuating circumstances. Not that I was really in a position to give a proper assessment, since Ushio was the one actually walking her through things.

"Anyway, I think we've reached a good stopping point," said Ushio, "so maybe we should think about wrapping things up for the day."

"Mmm, yeah, probably so," I said, closing my notebook.

Hoshihara didn't seem especially eager to dive into another subject right now, judging from how she immediately started tidying up her notes as well. We gave the room a quick once-over to make

sure we weren't forgetting anything, and then Hoshihara walked us down to the front door. But as we were descending the stairs, there came a noise from the entryway.

"Oh, dang it…" Hoshihara said. "They're home…"

Given that she was an only child, I assumed "they" had to be her parents. After walking down the hall a short ways, I spotted a man and a woman taking off their shoes by the door: Hoshihara's father and mother. They each had an arm around the other's shoulders—almost as if her dad was trying to help her mom stand upright.

"Nattchaaaaan! Theeeeere's my sweet li'l angel!" Hoshihara's mother slurred as she kicked off her shoes, then tottered over. Despite her overcoat, I could tell she had a slender, youthful body type, and the resemblance between her and her daughter was plain to see. Though for some reason, her complexion was a lot…redder.

"Ugh, did you two go out day drinking *again*?" said Hoshihara.

"Just a liiittle bit!"

*Ah. That explains it.* On further inspection, her legs were wobbling as well.

"A little, my butt… You're drunk as a skunk," said Hoshihara. "Go chug some water right now so you don't get hungover again."

"Aww… You're so sweeeeet, pumpkin," said her mother. "What'd I ever do to deserve a daughter like you?"

I could see where some of Hoshihara's little mannerisms came from.

Just then, Hoshihara's mother practically threw herself at her daughter, nuzzling up to her in such an open display of familial affection that it startled me. For a moment, I wondered if maybe this was just the norm in their household—but no, Hoshihara seemed pretty weirded out by it as well.

"Wha…?! Hey, knock it off! Mom, you reek of booze!"

"But I looooove youuuuu…"

"Yeeeugh!"

*Now* there's *an interesting family dynamic.*

As Hoshihara peeled her mother off of her, she looked to her father for help; he was still over in the entryway tidying up the shoes.

"Ugh! Dad, could you please get her under control?! You guys *knew* I was having friends over!"

"Sorry, hon," said her father, coming to collect his wife. "Come on, dear—let's go."

"Okaaaaay. Wait… Sweetie, your friends are here? Oh, hi there! Make yourselves at home, everybodyyy…"

"They were just leaving!"

And so the man and woman of the household hobbled down the hallway and into the next room, leaving the slight stench of alcohol lingering in their wake. Hoshihara stomped over to the front door in a huff; Ushio and I warily followed.

The second I stepped outside, my body was swathed in bitter cold. Already, the first stars of evening had made their appearance. Hoshihara walked us out to the sidewalk, then spun around. I could tell even in the dim light that her cheeks were bright red.

"Ugh, sorry about that… My mom can be *so* embarrassing."

"Seems like she loves you an awful lot," said Ushio, with no hint of sarcasm.

"Nah, she's just an affectionate drunk, that's all. Does your mom—er, I mean, does Yuki-san drink at all?"

"She, uh…" Ushio's expression clouded over. "She drinks from time to time, yeah. Never seen her actually get drunk, though."

"Ah, gotcha. Well, good on her for being a responsible adult," Hoshihara grumbled. "All things in moderation, I say—that's the way to do it."

I could definitely agree with this, although *my* mother's only real vice was tobacco. She didn't drink much, but the principle still applied.

Once we'd said our goodbyes to Hoshihara, Ushio and I headed back to the station and caught the next train, which was more packed than usual for a Saturday. We stood side by side, gripping the ceiling straps, waiting for the train to deliver us home.

"I feel like I understand how Natsuki can be so sweet," said Ushio.

"Sorry?" I replied, not sure where this was coming from.

"I heard something on TV a while back…about how people are only as kind to others as their parents were to them in childhood."

"Oh, yeah… I've heard that sort of thing before too."

"You can tell Natsuki must've been *really* loved as a child, I feel like… And now she's paying it forward."

To me, this seemed like a pretty drastic oversimplification. On top of that, it struck me as an overly careless or even dismissive way of viewing the world. But judging from her tone, it seemed Ushio was totally convinced that this was a perfectly rational explanation for a truth that (at least to her) was self-evident.

In the end, I opted to share my perspective rather than nodding vaguely in agreement. "That's…kind of a depressing thought, don't you think?"

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, doesn't that sort of imply that a child's whole personality is determined by how well or how poorly their parents raised them? So how exactly is a person whose parents *didn't* love them enough ever supposed to grow up to be a good person?"

"By getting that love from someone else, probably."

"Gonna be pretty hard for someone who never learned how to be kind."

Ushio went silent for a moment, then let out a soft, half-hearted chuckle. “I suppose it might be, yeah.”

“See? Pretty depressing when you think about it that way.”

The train let out a *ka-thunk* and swayed beneath our feet.

What the hell was this conversation? We were a couple of high school kids, for crying out loud; debating nature versus nurture was well above our pay grade. I wondered why Ushio had brought this up to begin with. Taking care so as not to be conspicuous, I cast a furtive glance in her direction, but she was simply gazing out into the darkness. Actually, no, maybe she was examining her own reflection in the window? Did she feel like maybe *she* hadn’t been loved enough? But it only took me half a second to realize what a ridiculous notion that was.

Of course she had. There could be no doubt about that.

“Don’t worry, Ushio,” I said. “You’re already a really good person.”

“Where’d that come from? I mean, thank you, I guess… But I wasn’t particularly thinking about myself.”

“Wait, you weren’t? Isn’t that the whole reason you brought it up, though?”

“I mean, no?”

“Man, seriously? Great, now I feel like an idiot for worrying…”

Ushio giggled. “Silly.”

Shortly thereafter, the announcement of our arrival at the next station crackled in over the intercom.

***

“Okay, pencils down! Everyone pass your answer sheets forward.”

With this decree from our teacher, the last of our final exams was over. All at once, the tension in the classroom air evaporated as my fellow students became exalted by a sense of liberation or collapsed on their desks in defeat. Me, I fell somewhere in the middle; I was pretty sure I'd done decently well for myself, thanks in no small part to the study session we'd had at Hoshihara's house. But how had *she* done, I wondered?

I glanced over to see Hoshihara draped over her desk, like she was in the latter of the two aforementioned camps. As such, I couldn't gauge her expression—but I didn't get the sense that this boded well for her results. Ushio seemed similarly concerned as she got up and walked over.

"You still alive down there, Natsuki?" she asked.

"…I wish I wasn't," said Hoshihara, lifting her head. She looked utterly exhausted.

"Not feeling too confident about your test?"

"I mean, I filled in all the blanks, at least… But I still feel like I was totally guessing on almost half the questions."

"Hey, you studied hard. I'm sure you did better than you think."

"Yeah, could be… Actually, yeah! Maybe you're right! Okay, I'm officially not gonna think about it anymore. What's done is done!"

She slapped both her cheeks a couple of times to pump herself up and break out of this negative spiral. I'd always found it really impressive just how quickly she could turn her mood around—and pretty adorable too.

The two of them started packing their bags. I crammed my writing implements into my bookbag and stood up to join them. It wasn't yet noon, but since our finals were over and none of us had practice or club meetings to attend, we were free to go home. There were only a few days left until winter break, and then Christmas.

But before any of that, we had dinner plans at Ushio's tonight.

It was six o'clock when Hoshihara and I arrived outside the Tsukinoki residence, right as the last vestiges of the early evening sunset were being blotted out by the dark of night. Since it had been a half day at school, we'd each gone back to our respective homes for the afternoon and gotten changed into more casual attire.

Hoshihara's expression was awfully stiff. She looked as nervous as she'd been the first time the two of us paid a visit to Ushio's house. Not that I blamed her. It wasn't like we'd been invited over for a playdate; we were going to have dinner with the entire Tsukinoki family. We had to mind our manners, try to make a good impression, and all that. I was right there with her.

"Okay," said Hoshihara. "I'm gonna do it."

She rang the doorbell, and a few moments later, Ushio came out to greet us. "Hey, guys. Come on in."

"Th-thanks, yeah…" Hoshihara stepped warily through the doorway. I gave Ushio a little nod and walked into the house as well.

Immediately upon stepping up into the hallway, I caught a whiff of something awfully delicious. My stomach growled to remind me that I'd only eaten a very light lunch this afternoon to ensure I'd have enough of an appetite to finish my plate tonight. Ushio led us into the living room, where the table was already set with large platters of salad and carpaccio. It seemed the main course wasn't quite ready yet, as Yuki was still hard at work in the kitchen.

"Welcome in, you two!" she said. "Food'll be ready in just a sec, so hang tight!"

"Sure, take your time!" Hoshihara said cheerily. "It smells really good. Can't wait!"

Yuki flashed her a pleasant smile as we followed Ushio out to the couch, where we were apparently expected to wait in the meantime. I glanced around the vacant living room. The television was turned on to the evening news.

"Where's Misao-chan?" I asked. "Or your dad, for that matter?"

"Still in their rooms, probably," said Ushio. "They'll join us when the food is ready."

"Oh, got it. Man, I'm feeling kinda nervous all of a sudden…"

"Just be your normal self, honestly. Don't worry about Misao. She'll behave, I think."

So she said, yet Ushio seemed more anxious about this than any of us. She'd told us that Misao tried not to cause any problems when their father was around, but that knowledge hadn't entirely assuaged her concerns.

"So hey…" Hoshihara leaned in close, like she was telling Ushio a secret. "Should I not ask Misao-chan any questions at all, do you think?"

"Mmm… I feel like ignoring her *completely* would probably rub her the wrong way too, so maybe just whenever it feels safe and natural to engage her, I guess. Same goes for you, Sakuma. Don't worry too hard about including Misao."

I nodded in understanding, though I couldn't help but feel like we were being a little cold and calculating when it came to Misao here. Still, if it would help prevent any incidents at the dinner table, I figured we should take Ushio's advice.

"Okay, sorry for the delay!" said Yuki. "Dinner is served, everyone!"

Ushio got up and beckoned us over to the table. At the same time, Yuki walked into the hallway and called out to let the rest of the family know the food was ready, so I assumed Misao and Mr. Tsukinoki would emerge to join us shortly. Ushio, myself, and Hoshihara (in that order) sat down on one side of the rectangular dinner table. We were close enough that our shoulders were nearly touching, yet it didn't feel especially cramped. Not long after we took our seats, I heard two pairs of feet coming down the stairs as Misao and her father finally joined us in the living room.

"Hey, folks," said Mr. Tsukinoki. "Thanks for joining us for dinner tonight. Feel free to loosen those belts and eat your fill, all right?"

I'd met Ushio's father a handful of times when we were little, though he was rarely at home back then. His name was…Arata, if I recalled correctly? Yes, Arata Tsukinoki. He'd always struck me as an accommodating, mild-mannered man—almost like a butler, in a way—and it seemed he hadn't changed in that regard. The years had left his hair a bit grayer than I remembered it, but it looked good and well-kempt.

Misao, meanwhile, looked as dour as always. She didn't say a word, nor did she make eye contact with any of us as she walked over and sat down across from Ushio. Mr. Tsukinoki took the seat opposite mine.

"Sorry, could one of you help me carry this over?" Yuki said from the kitchen.

"Oh, I'll get it!" Hoshihara exclaimed, making to rise from her seat.

Ushio stopped her. "No, you're a guest." She then stood up and walked to the kitchen herself.

A minute or two later, the table was fully set. On the menu this evening was a lavish seafood pasta with consommé on the side, in addition to the aforementioned Caesar salad and sea bream carpaccio. It genuinely looked like the sort of spread you might expect at a legit Italian restaurant, as trite as that comparison was. Hoshihara gazed at the meal before us, awe plain on her face. *No, wait. That's just drool.*

"Okay!" Yuki clapped her hands as she sat across from Hoshihara. "Dig in, everyone! Hope you enjoy!"

We all took a moment to praise her efforts and give thanks for the meal before taking our utensils in hand—all of us except Misao, of course, who started nibbling on her food without a word.

*Goddamn, this is good!*

These were my only coherent thoughts as I smacked my lips and twirled up another forkful of pasta. Ushio had touted Yuki as being a fairly proficient chef, but I certainly hadn't been expecting anything *this* delectable.

"Well? How do you like it?" Yuki inquired; Hoshihara and I both bobbed our heads up and down in approval, our cheeks stuffed with food.

Hoshihara offered glowing praise with her mouth full. "Ish *sho* good, oh muh gawd…"

Despite this display of poor manners, Yuki was delighted. "Oh, good. I'm so glad! Don't think I've put this much effort into a meal in ages… There's plenty more soup left in the kitchen, by the way, so if anyone wants seconds, just let me know!"

"Yesh, ma'am…"

Hoshihara promptly forgot how to speak again, fully engrossed in her meal and how quickly she could inhale it. I wondered what had happened to the ball of nerves she'd been just a few minutes prior—though I supposed it was tough to stay on one's toes when faced with this level of deliciousness. While Yuki had actively cooked to entertain, her sheer culinary prowess made the sort of food we typically ate at my house look like second-rate slop. Even the store-bought *iced tea* tasted better here, I thought, polishing off my glass.

Just then, I made eye contact with Mr. Tsukinoki.

"Here, Sakuma-kun," he said. "Let me refill that for you."

"O-oh, thanks." I held it out for him. Now it *really* felt like I was getting the royal treatment; I'd have to remember to offer him a refill too later, if I got the chance.

"Nice having you over again, by the way," he said as he lowered the pitcher. "Wanted to ask you how you've been. High school treating you okay? Enjoying it, I hope?"

"Yeah, for the most part…"

"You'll be studying for entrance exams soon, right? Hope the grind isn't too brutal. You know, I happen to be pretty fluent in English, so if you ever find yourself struggling with that, say the word and I can give you some pointers. Oh, that reminds me—have you decided where you want to go to school yet, or no?"

"Uhhh…"

"Dad, you're suffocating him," Ushio said.

"Whoops, there I go again!" Mr. Tsukinoki said playfully. "It's just been such a long time, I guess I couldn't help getting a little excited! Sorry about that, Sakuma-kun."

"No, not at all. If anything, I feel bad for accepting all this hospitality when I've done so little to deserve it."

It was hard to find the right balance between formal and candid when talking to a best friend's parents. I wanted to sound more engaged, but I couldn't think of any good responses, which made me feel like I was coming off as inauthentic or disinterested. Honestly, I worried my own social awkwardness might be making things feel awkward for *him*—but judging from the gentle smile that adorned his face, he didn't seem to mind.

"Nonsense," said Mr. Tsukinoki. "You've done plenty for our family, son. And I'll always be grateful to you for that."

"Please, it's really no big deal," I assured him, all the while thinking about how the corners of his eyes crinkled the same way as Ushio's when he smiled. It wasn't just his appearance either; I picked up on little figures of speech and mannerisms he used that I recognized in Ushio as well. And though this was perhaps a somewhat cruel thing to say, it was these little common idiosyncrasies that really hammered home how he and Ushio were related by blood—but Yuki would never be.

I glanced nonchalantly in Misao's direction. She still hadn't said a single word since dinner began; she just kept moving her fork up

and down like some sort of automaton. It seemed what Ushio had said about her behaving herself was true. That was great for our purposes, but I couldn't help but feel a bit bad, watching her emotionlessly consume her food like this. She looked positively forlorn.

*Meanwhile, on the complete opposite end of the spectrum…*

"Ugh, thish ish to *die* for," Hoshihara gushed, ecstatic.

Not that there was any problem with enjoying one's meal, mind you—but I felt like she could at least take a moment to read the room and see that not everyone was having as great a time as her. I mean, wasn't *she* the one who'd asked Ushio how cognizant we should be of Misao in the first place?

"You sure do seem to be enjoying it an awful lot, Natsuki-chan," said Yuki. "That's always nice to see… Makes all the effort and prep feel worth it."

This time, Hoshihara actually chewed and swallowed before answering. "It's super delicious, yeah. You're an amazing chef, Yuki-san! If you opened a restaurant, I'd go there every week."

"M-my, and you know how to flatter a woman too! You're going to make me blush, dear!" Yuki was grinning from ear to ear; I could tell Hoshihara meant it, so Yuki probably could too. "Well, be sure to save a little room for cake!"

"What?! There's dessert?!"

"You bet there is! I went out and picked up a few different kinds, just for tonight."

"Oh my gosh, you're kidding! Is it actually my birthday?"

Hoshihara had surpassed overjoyed and gone straight into trembling with disbelief. I was pretty taken aback myself, though not to the point that I was literally shaking. Still, I certainly hadn't expected *this* level of hospitality. Even Ushio looked surprised to hear about this, having apparently not been briefed in advance.

"Wait, you actually bought cake?" she asked.

"Sure did," said Yuki. "I mean, we haven't had guests over like this in a long time. So I figured why not go all out, you know?"

"…You really didn't have to."

There was definitely an undertone in Ushio's voice that was meant to send a message, but Yuki didn't appear to pick up on it. "You know, Natsuki-chan," she went on blithely, "I'd be more than happy to have you over for dinner again sometime, if you'd like!"

"Oh, man… That's a really tempting offer, but I dunno…"

Hoshihara seemed less conflicted than she was bewildered. Her heart probably wanted nothing more than to try as much of Yuki's home cooking as she could get, but I figured she didn't understand what she possibly could have done to deserve this generosity. Regardless, it wouldn't be right to impose on them repeatedly.

"Come on, no need to be modest!" said Yuki. "I've never met a girl who's praised my cooking so much, and it's really nice for a change! Honestly, I wouldn't mind having you at the dinner table every night. And Sakuma-kun too, of course! The more the merrier, I say! Honestly, this is exactly what a nice family meal *should* feel li—"

Yuki's voice was interrupted by the loud *screech* of Misao's chair against the floor as she shoved away from the table and rose to her feet. More than half of her pasta still sat on the plate, and she hadn't even started on the salad she'd served herself. But now she was already getting up to leave, abandoning her food at the table.

"Wait, Misao," said Ushio, confronting her. "Where do you think you're going?"

"To my bedroom," said Misao.

"What about the rest of your dinner?"

"Just throw it out. I'm not hungry anymore."

Her tone was blunt as she turned her back to Ushio and started walking off.

"I said *wait*," Ushio demanded, rising from her chair as well. "You've hardly even touched your food. Yuki-san worked hard on this meal, so you'd better finish it."

"I already told you, I'm not hungry. And who cares how much effort she put in? I'm not congratulating anyone for wasting that much time on a weeknight." Misao turned her sharp gaze on Yuki. "Also, you're making Hoshihara-san uncomfortable, in case you didn't notice. Just because she's being polite doesn't mean you have to wheel out the expensive cake and insist she come over again and again. All you're doing is making her think you're some sort of psycho who's desperate for any amount of validation."

"Misao!" Ushio shouted.

*Oh man… This doesn't look good. They're probably gonna start fighting at this rate… Wait, who am I kidding? They totally are already.*

While Misao could definitely be pretty caustic when it came to Ushio, it was never in these moments that Ushio lost her temper and fought back. Only when Misao directed her ire at someone else did Ushio step in and take her to task. But once she crossed that line, Ushio could be pretty damn ruthless in her own right.

"Why are you so determined to ruin this dinner for everybody?" she said. "We were all just enjoying a nice meal, and then you started up with this… Could you *please* just behave yourself for once?"

"Don't talk to me like I'm a little kid," said Misao. "You're the one who got up and started throwing a fit when I was only trying to excuse myself. If you really wanted to enjoy your little dinner party so badly, you should've just let me leave."

"No, I'm not letting you isolate yourself from the rest of the family. Both Dad and Yuki-san want you to be a part of this, and they haven't done anything to deserve this kind of disrespect from you. Why is that so hard for you to understand?"

"I never *asked* to be a part of this in the first place!"

"Okay, calm down, you two," said Mr. Tsukinoki, with the tone of a schoolteacher stepping in to stop a physical altercation before it began.

Both Ushio and Misao held their tongues after this, dropping their gazes to the floor with chagrin. Suddenly, I felt like I had a pretty good guess as to who maintained the power balance within the Tsukinoki familial hierarchy.

"Misao?" he said gently. "It's okay to stop eating if you're too full, but let's not be rude to our guests either. You should stay and join us for cake, at least. I'm sure you can make a little room for half a slice, don't you think?"

Misao looked *extremely* unhappy with this suggested "solution," but nevertheless returned to her seat in resignation.

"And Ushio," their father went on, "I'm glad you care so much about keeping the family together. But when you talk to your sister so harshly, all you're doing is driving us further apart. So let's try to be a bit more understanding, all right?"

"…Yes, Dad," said Ushio, nodding apologetically.

With the conflict somewhat resolved, it was now time for us to resume our meal, so I warily reached out and twirled a few more noodles around my fork. But while it seemed Mr. Tsukinoki had successfully convinced Misao to stay, I feared that the pleasant atmosphere was now dead beyond revival. Granted, I'd had a feeling the evening might play out this way from the start; I'd known Ushio's family situation was pretty unstable for a long time now. This wasn't such an unexpected mood-killer that it completely ruined my appetite or anything, but it did leave me with an awkward discomfort in the pit of my stomach.

Misao seemed determined to stick to her word, refusing to take another bite of her food and instead fiddling with her cell phone at the table. Which was preferable to her starting up another argument, I supposed, but at the same time…

I cast a furtive glance across the table to see exactly what I suspected: The spark of joy in Yuki's eyes, which had been glimmering so brightly a few short minutes ago, had been completely extinguished. She now seemed so crestfallen, it almost pained me to look at her. I couldn't really blame her after the sorts of things Misao had said… But, man, did it hurt to see an adult you respected reduced to new emotional lows.

"H-hey, uh…Misao-chan?" said Hoshihara, the first to break the silence after the incident. "Um, if you're not gonna eat the rest of that, do you mind if I have it?"

*And here I thought she might actually say something of substance…*

In fairness, as much as it sounded like a bad sitcom punch line, perhaps Hoshihara was simply trying to clear the air and lighten the mood in her own clumsy Hoshihara sort of way. Misao didn't say a word, though—merely acquiesced and slid her plate across the table to the other girl before looking back down at her phone.

"There's no need to force yourself, dear… It's okay," Yuki said, still trying to be considerate despite how down in the dumps she was.

"Oh, I'm not forcing anything, believe me!" Hoshihara said. "I'm just a girl who loves to eat, so I can handle another plate or two, no problem!"

As she puffed out her chest and smiled proudly, I could see the slightest hint of a smile crack its way onto Yuki's face. *Nice one, Hoshihara.* I considered trying to help break the awkward silence myself, but I ultimately got cold feet for fear of saying something stupid that might set Misao off again. For the time being, at least, I figured I should keep my mouth shut and stick to my role as a quiet observer.

Once we finished eating dinner, Hoshihara and I both put our palms together and thanked the Tsukinokis for the meal once again.

I felt totally satisfied—full, but not bloated. I had to admit, I'd been a little worried that Ushio and Misao's little spat might put a damper on the whole rest of the evening, but after some dogged perseverance from Hoshihara, we managed to get the meal more or less back to its original convivial atmosphere again. It was little wonder how she'd earned her reputation as perhaps the most well-liked girl in our class. Yet her charms were wasted on Misao, who remained stubbornly determined not to partake in any of our conversations. Even when we all got up to clear our dishes, she sat there like a decorative table ornament, clacking away on her phone.

Finally, after boiling some water and preparing a few cups of black tea and coffee, Yuki brought out the box of cake from the fridge. "I bought a whole variety, so pick whichever one you like!"

She opened the box to reveal several different slices of cake, which she then dished out one by one. Luckily, our preferences didn't overlap, so we all ended up getting the flavors we wanted; I chose the chocolate gâteau, Ushio took the cheesecake, and Hoshihara nabbed the strawberry tart. Upon receiving her plate, Hoshihara—with her seemingly bottomless stomach—stabbed her fork in with eyes aglow and shoved a big honking bite into her mouth.

"Mmmmm! It's so *yummy*!" she said, licking her lips to savor the sweetness.

Yuki looked on with a smile of utmost fondness. It really was incredible how Hoshihara's mere presence was capable of lifting the spirits of an entire room. At the same time, it made me wonder just how dismal the vibes had to be at the Tsukinokis' dinner table on literally any other day. The thought terrified me a bit.

"I feel like it's been ages since I had a good slice of cake," Hoshihara went on. "Probably not since the after-party at the school culture festival, if I had to guess…"

Not a second later, I noticed a sudden twitch from Ushio as her fork froze briefly in midair. It was so slight that I almost thought I'd

imagined it, but it certainly *seemed* like it was in reaction to something.

"Right, the culture festival. Your class put on a play, didn't they?" said Yuki.

"Yep! God, Ushio-chan was so beautiful as Juliet!"

"Wait, *Juliet*?!" Yuki gasped, then immediately shot a glance at Ushio—who was already facepalming with a beleaguered sigh. "Ushio, why didn't you tell us you were playing the leading role?!"

"Because I knew if I did, you guys would have tried to come…"

"Yeah, obviously! Why wouldn't we want to see you in the limelight?!"

But while Yuki was practically jumping up and down with excitement, right beside her, Misao wore a look of utter disbelief.

"*Ushio* played Juliet?" she said, blinking at Hoshihara. "You're kidding, right?"

"Nope, it's true!" said Hoshihara. "Here, one sec…"

She pulled out her cell phone and, after pressing a few buttons, set it down in the center of the table for all to see. The picture displayed on its tiny screen was of Ushio in her Juliet costume, standing onstage in the gymnasium. Her three family members leaned in to get a better look at the photo.

"Oh my gosh!" said Yuki. "Sweetie, you look *stunning*!"

"Yep, that's my Ushio," said Mr. Tsukinoki. "Always been a looker."

In stark contrast to her parents' pride, Misao looked downright flabbergasted. "You weren't kidding…"

"Nope!" said Hoshihara. "And she got rave reviews for that performance too, let me tell ya! Her popularity at school pretty much skyrocketed after that!"

"O-okay, I wouldn't go *that* far…" said Ushio, downplaying it as if all this praise was making her uncomfortable. But Hoshihara

wasn't exaggerating all that much, and Ushio had to know it as well as anyone. I assumed she was feeling a little embarrassed, more than anything.

"This is just… This is just wrong," said Misao, giving Hoshihara a stern look. "I mean, a *boy* playing Juliet? Didn't anyone at school take issue with this?"

"Mmm… Well, there was one girl who definitely did. But everyone else was totally in favor of it, so it didn't matter. And even that girl grew to accept it in the end."

I assumed she was talking about Nishizono. She wasn't wrong there; while Nishizono had still been vehemently opposed to Ushio's transition at the time of the culture festival, she'd apologized for her behavior since then.

"You're lying…" Misao's eyes wavered as she refused to accept what she was hearing. "I mean, I take it the person playing *Romeo* was a boy, right?"

"Huh? Oh, well, yeah!" said Hoshihara. "In fact, it was—"

"And you expect me to believe *he* wasn't grossed out by it?"

"Misao? Stop it, dear," Yuki warned her, recognizing this choice of words for the blatant attempt to hurt Ushio that it was.

Yet Misao was undeterred. "I mean, *Romeo and Juliet* is a love story, right? Obviously, I don't know if your class made any major changes to the script or whatever, but… Aren't there, like, *several* deeply romantic scenes throughout the play? Surely even if everyone else was willing to look the other way and let my brother masquerade as a girl, the guy playing Romeo must have secretly been disgusted deep down, no matter what he said."

Misao was clearly getting a bit desperate at this point. She truly didn't want to believe that just about everyone in the whole school was totally okay with Ushio playing Juliet—or, more broadly, with her transitioning to living her life as a girl in general. I didn't know *why* she was so determined not to accept this, but I got the

impression it wasn't as simple as her "going through a rebellious streak." There was something much deeper going on here, but that wasn't my responsibility to diagnose; I needed to be *Ushio's* ally in this, first and foremost.

"I'm afraid you're wrong there too, Misao-chan."

Immediately, Misao turned to glare at me for butting in. "And how could *you* possibly know that, Sakuma-san?"

"Because I was Romeo."

Misao's eyes went wide.

"Sure, it took a little getting used to," I said. "But I definitely wasn't 'disgusted' or even weirded out by any means. Hell, if anything, *she* was the one carrying *my* sorry ass through the whole performance… And as someone who was actually up there onstage with her, I can tell you this much: Your sister made a *damn* good Juliet. And just about everyone in our entire school agrees she knocked it out of the park."

"Wha…? No, that's not… That can't be right…"

Even with all of the facts laid out before her, Misao couldn't bring herself to accept it. Hoshihara snatched her cell phone off the table and clicked over to another photo to show Misao—this time, one of Ushio at a local diner, surrounded by a bunch of other girls from our class. Ushio herself didn't seem to realize that the picture was being taken, simply enjoying her chat with everyone.

"This one here's from the little shindig we had after the recent sports festival," Hoshihara explained. "Ushio-chan was the star player on our volleyball team. We didn't end up winning, unfortunately… But everyone was *really* supportive of her!"

"Ngh…"

After glaring down at the photo for a short while, Misao shot to her feet without warning and raced out of the living room like a spooked animal.

"Misao!" Ushio called after her.

But Misao showed no signs of stopping. Her loud footsteps as she ran up the stairs echoed from down the hallway. Mr. Tsukinoki got up to go and check on her.

"No, Dad," said Ushio, rising in his stead. "I'll go."

As Ushio hurried up the staircase after Misao, Hoshihara and I were left alone in the living room with Mr. Tsukinoki and his wife. An awkward silence fell over the dinner table. Hoshihara reached out to take back her cell phone, then furrowed her brow.

"Gosh, now I feel bad," she said. "Maybe I shouldn't have shown her those photos…"

"No, you've done *nothing* wrong, dear," Yuki said immediately —and so adamantly that Hoshihara seemed a little taken aback. "And even if she might not have appreciated it, her father and I are certainly grateful you shared them. We've been left almost completely in the dark when it comes to how Ushio's been doing at school, so we really appreciate those little glimpses. Please don't beat yourself up about it."

"Not to mention, you were only trying to stick up for Ushio in the first place," said Mr. Tsukinoki. "I'm glad to know she's got good friends like you in her corner. Thanks for being there for her, Natsuki-san."

The two parents proceeded to bow their heads to Hoshihara, who was so flustered by this unexpected show of gratitude that she whipped her hands up and frantically waved them back and forth.

"Oh, no, no, no! It's no big deal, honestly! I was just trying to explain to her how things really are!" Hoshihara assured them, then slowly lowered her gaze. "But I guess maybe I should've known that would be a hard pill for Misao-chan to swallow…"

Evidently, Hoshihara was feeling guilty for cornering Misao to the point that she felt she had no choice but to run away. There was nothing we could do about that, really. Standing up for Ushio in that situation inherently required contesting the toxic vitriol Misao was spewing. There'd been no option not to pick a side—and it seemed

the parents of the two siblings were well aware of that, judging from the way they regarded Hoshihara with appreciative concern.

After a few seconds' silence, Mr. Tsukinoki was the next to speak. "I mean it when I say that Ushio's lucky to have friends like you. Something tells me she might still be suffering through an awful lot of agony and mistreatment if she didn't have you two around to support her."

"Ushio's stronger than you think, sir," I said.

Mr. Tsukinoki's eyes widened a bit at this, then his expression relaxed. "I see. Well, I suppose you'd know better than I would, Sakuma-kun. But Misao, though…" He trailed off, glancing over at the slice of shortcake she'd left on the table. "Can't help but wonder sometimes if she never managed to recapture that spark of hope she used to have inside of her… Especially since I don't think she has any good friends like you two to call her own. Hard not to worry about that sort of thing sometimes."

He wore a grave countenance as he spoke. Nobody else said a word.

"Whoops, sorry," he said with a strained, awkward smile after a few moments. "Definitely wasn't planning to delve into *that* kind of emotional territory tonight."

I wished there was something, anything I could do to help the Tsukinoki household work through this. At the same time, I knew it was safer for an outsider like me to tread lightly when it came to family matters of this variety.

*Tread lightly.*

Suddenly, a peculiar thought occurred to me: When exactly had I begun to think this way? Because in retrospect, I'd been pretty darn forceful when it came to sticking my nose into the Tsukinokis' affairs back in the day. I used to go with Ushio to visit their mom in the hospital, and I'd invite myself over to their house every day in a ham-fisted attempt to cheer them up after she passed, no matter

how many times they told me to go away. What happened to that version of me? When did that change?

*Oh yeah. Now I remember. It was back in seventh grade.*

There'd been a time when I told a classmate of mine about how my father never left his room except to go to work. Explained how he even ate his meals separately from the rest of us. And the other kid gave me this look of genuine concern. Said that wasn't normal, and that it sounded like my dad probably was really depressed or something.

Meanwhile, I'd only been sharing it as a mildly amusing anecdote they might get a chuckle out of—a little quirk about my family no weirder than, say, "My brother eats his cereal with water instead of milk." But to this classmate of mine, this was so obviously out of the norm that it made me feel embarrassed for never thinking much of it before, and that wasn't a fun feeling at all.

From that point on, I stopped talking about those kinds of things with other people almost entirely. I didn't want them judging me or my family, and I didn't want them to feel uncomfortable or like I was judging them for theirs either. Yet there was no denying that I'd helped Ushio through her grief by sticking my nose into her family's affairs. So maybe a little interference wasn't the worst thing in the world.

"Well, I can be Misao-chan's friend too, if she needs one." The other three all turned their gazes on me. "Uh, not that I don't consider her a friend already, of course. I just mean that I'm willing to try to reconnect with her, if at all possible."

"Yeah, me too!" said Hoshihara, leaning forward in her chair. "Like, I haven't known her for very long, but I'd really love to be friends with Misao-chan too!"

"That's very kind of you kids," said Mr. Tsukinoki, eyes crinkling as he gave a meaningful nod. "Thank you. I'd really appreciate that."

Really, it was the least we could do for the family after they'd welcomed us into their home and treated us to such a lovely meal.

To say nothing of the fact that Ushio and Misao were very important people in my life, people I'd known through thick and thin.

Slowly, the somber atmosphere in the room abated. When Mr. Tsukinoki picked up his fork again, Hoshihara saw that as her cue to resume eating her own cake as well. Only Yuki still seemed a bit pensive, as she kept her gaze trained firmly on the tabletop. There was a hint of doubt in her eyes.

"What's wrong, dear?" asked Mr. Tsukinoki.

"Oh, sorry… I think I'm just, I don't know…"

Yuki hesitated, apparently struggling to find the right words. It felt very bizarre to see this uncertainty from someone who was typically so bright and well spoken. We waited patiently, curious to hear what she might have to say.

"I guess I'm just wondering if that'll really be enough," she admitted anxiously.

Just then, Ushio walked back into the living room, and we all looked over at her—but she simply shook her head.

"No good," she said. "Wouldn't even talk to me."

Misao had completely closed herself off for the time being. As much as I couldn't condone any of the things she'd said tonight, the thought of her cooped up all alone in her bedroom, convinced everyone else was crazy, did sadden me a bit.

Ushio returned to her seat and took a sip of her coffee. She wore a bitter expression on her face, and I assumed it wasn't merely due to the lack of sugar. Yet she didn't say another word about Misao and got to work on her remaining cake instead. The rest of the evening was interspersed with chatter here and there, but it all felt superficial. And so it was that our little dinner party at the Tsukinoki residence came to a close, leaving a sour aftertaste in all of our mouths.

***

Most years at Tsubakioka High, winter break began on Christmas Eve. This year, the 24th fell on a Saturday, meaning our break would instead begin on Thursday the 22nd. It was the Monday after finals week, so we'd only have to come to school two more times before the year was out.

With our exams completely out of the way, there was an almost jovial air in the classroom as we sat around and waited for our test results to be handed back. This was the one Hoshihara had been dreading most: math. And it seemed to have proven a grueling obstacle for the rest of our classmates as well, judging from the groans of agony all across the classroom as people saw their scores. The moment class was over, Ushio got up and walked over to Hoshihara's desk.

"How'd it go, Natsuki?" she asked.

I was curious to hear this too, so I casually eavesdropped on their conversation from afar. Hoshihara hadn't shown any visible reaction upon getting her test back, and I couldn't gauge her expression from where I was sitting. Had she managed to secure a passing grade, or had she failed like she feared?

"Yeah, so about that…" Hoshihara said despondently and slowly reached down—then flipped her answer sheet right side up in the blink of an eye. "Boom, check it out! I actually passed! Seventy-one out of a hundred!"

"Hey, congrats!" said Ushio, giving her a round of applause.

Hoshihara puffed out her chest with pride—and rightly so, considering that the class average had been 56/100, which actually made hers a pretty impressive score. The group study session had paid off after all. I'd have remember to congratulate her later when I got the chance.

"How 'bout you, Ushio-chan?"

"I got a ninety-one."

"Oh, nice…"

This took the wind right out of her sails. *A word to the wise: Never compare yourself to Ushio.* It was a one-way ticket to feelings of inadequacy.

Incidentally, I'd gotten an eighty-five. Not as good as Ushio, but decently good by my standards, especially for one of my worst subjects. Who knew, I might even have cracked the top ten students in our grade again.

I packed up my things to head home. But just as I stood up from my desk and slung my bookbag over my shoulder, Ms. Iyo poked her head in through the classroom door and made eye contact with me.

"Hey, Kamiki—could I have a word?" she asked, beckoning me out into the hall.

Unsure what to expect, I let Ushio and Hoshihara know that they should probably head home without me, then stepped out of the classroom.

"Sorry for the sudden callout," said Ms. Iyo. "Could you come with me to the staff room really quick? I promise it'll only take a minute."

"Okaaay…"

I had to wonder what this was about. Probably nothing bad, but still. Reluctantly, I followed Ms. Iyo down the hall and into the staff room. Once there, she grabbed a sheet protector that was lying on her desk and held it out to me. It was filled with a variety of qualifying application forms.

"I can't say for sure just yet, but I think you might have a real shot at getting an endorsement to your first-choice university."

"Wait, are you serious?!" I blurted out.

*A school endorsement slot?! I thought only overachievers qualified for those!* Still, if Ms. Iyo claimed I had a shot, then I was more than happy to take my chances.

"I mean, your academics are great, and your transcript's not too shabby either," she said. "Your lack of extracurriculars is going to be a big point against you, but that's why I went ahead and prepared this." She glanced down at the sheet protector she'd just given me.

"Are you saying that if I qualify for any of these, they'll boost my chances?"

"Right, exactly. And I picked out a good handful that I think might be well within your reach. So maybe just give it some thought over winter break, okay? Not a whole lot of time left, after all."

"Ms. Iyo? Since when have you been the coolest teacher of all time?"

"What are you talking about? Forever, of course."

I slid the forms into my bookbag. Though I had a lot of extra work to do all of a sudden, a renewed sense of hope burgeoned in my chest. I really owed Ms. Iyo a debt of gratitude for this.

"So tell me," she said, "how's life been treating you lately?"

"In what regard?"

"Things still going well between you and Ushio?"

I had to admit, I was a bit blindsided by the bluntness of this question—though after a moment of discomposure, I realized she was probably just asking out of curiosity and not because she suspected anything romantic. Ms. Iyo had been a staunch ally of Ushio's ever since her transition, so I saw no reason not to be (mostly) up-front with her.

"We're doing all right," I said. "Had dinner over at her house the other night."

"Ooh, hey! That's good to hear. Always nice to have dinner over at a friend's house… Good to form a bond with the whole family when you can swing it."

"Yeah, unfortunately it was a little awkward. Ushio and her sister haven't really been getting along all that well recently."

It was only after the words left my lips that I realized I probably should have refrained from sharing this last part. It wasn't my place to be sharing another family's business so openly with a relative stranger; my elation about the university endorsement thing had to be affecting my judgment. Luckily, Ms. Iyo didn't seem to particularly latch on to this admission as something to dig deeper about.

"Oh, that's too bad. Remind me—her sister's in ninth grade, isn't she? That's a tough age, for sure… Wouldn't surprise me if she's been feeling stressed about a ton of other recent changes too. You see that a lot with teenage siblings." She ran her fingertips along the backrest of her chair and added somberly, "But hey, every family's a little dysfunctional in one way or another, right?"

"Yeah, I guess so." I cast a sidelong glance at the door to signal that I should probably get going. Thankfully, Ms. Iyo picked up on this and wrapped it up.

"Okay, that's all from me!" she said. "Good luck with that stuff."

"Thanks. I'll see you tomorrow, then."

As I walked out of the staff room and down the hall, I thought back on my answer to Ms. Iyo's question about me and Ushio: *"We're doing all right."*

It had been the truth. We *were* doing pretty okay—for the time being, at least. Whether it would still hold true a week from now was the real question.

Only a few days remained until our date on Christmas Eve.

Something told me that would be a major turning point for us.

***

I sat up in bed and stretched. I felt pretty well rested. According to the digital clock on my bedside table, it was ten in the morning—three whole hours after I'd woken up early and gone right back to sleep. My mom must've come in to open the curtains at some point in the interim, as the sun was shining straight in through the window. I quickly rubbed the chill from my shoulders and hopped out of bed, then grabbed the fleece jacket that was hanging over my desk chair and threw it on before heading downstairs.

It was the third day of winter break—Christmas Eve.

This meant it was finally the day of my date with Ushio. We'd agreed to meet up at five in the afternoon, and I already had an itinerary more or less ironed out. But in terms of mental preparedness, I definitely wasn't there yet. Not that I wasn't looking forward to it or anything; I just knew it was going to be a big first for the both of us, in more ways than one, so I was pretty nervous I might screw things up somehow.

When I made it down to the living room, I found Ayaka doing schoolwork at the table; it was probably some assignment she had to do over winter break. It was nice to see her hitting the books so early in the morning. I headed to the bathroom to wash my face.

"Hey, Sakuma," she called out. My ears perked up; it was awfully rare for her to address me as anything other than a pejorative nowadays.

"Yeah? What's up?"

Ayaka kept putting pen to paper as she stated her business: "Mom said we're eating out tonight."

"Oh, really? Where at?"

"Dunno."

"Ah, okay… Well, I've already got other plans tonight, so I'm afraid I won't be able to join you guys."

"Wait, huh?" This finally got her to look up from her notebook—and in wide-eyed disbelief, no less. "But it's Christmas Eve,

though."

"Yes, I'm aware."

"So who's the unlucky lady?"

"You are *so* rude to me, you know that?"

There was such a thing as playful ribbing, but that was just cruel.

"Besides," I added, "what difference does it make to *you*?"

"I mean, none, I guess…"

"Unless, hold up…were you secretly hoping to spend Christmas with your big brother? Is *that* it?" I teased.

"Ew! You wish, creep!" said Ayaka, scrunching up her face. "Drop dead, loser!"

I really thought the "drop dead" part was a bit much, but alas.

Upon heading into the bathroom at last, I splashed some cold water on my face to fully wake up. Come to think of it, this was going to be the first time I'd be spending Christmas Eve with someone other than my family, wasn't it? Maybe Ayaka's surprise was warranted in that respect. For me, it had never been anything more than a day on which I got to eat a slightly fancier meal than usual. But this year, I was going out on a date—the quintessential way to spend Christmas Eve in Japan, yet not one I'd ever imagined myself getting to partake in up until now. *What a concept.*

I could feel a giddy burst of excitement coming on.

There was something I wanted to say to Ushio today. But even more important than that, I needed to focus on having a really good time with her tonight. It wouldn't do me any favors to be on pins and needles the whole day. Luckily, it was pretty warm for the end of December, so I figured it might be a good idea to nap away most of the afternoon so I didn't give myself any chance to overthink it. I headed back up to my room, crawled into bed, and curled up with a nice volume of manga.

I awoke to the sound of my cell phone vibrating.

After taking a moment to rub the sleep out of my eyes, I reached over to grab it from my bedside table. The caller ID read "USHIO TSUKINOKI." *Huh. What could she be calling about?*

"Yeah, hello?" I said groggily.

*"Oh, hey, Sakuma…"*

There was something slightly off about Ushio's voice, almost like she was feeling awfully depressed about something…

*Wait a minute. Oh god!*

I immediately shot up in bed and checked the clock. Nope, it was only 3:00 p.m. *Right… Okay, phew.* Really, I should have known I hadn't slept in; I'd set my alarm clock and everything.

"What's up?"

*"Sorry, but I don't think I can make it to our date today…"*

My momentary relief was replaced by a wave of dread. "Wh-why, did something happen?"

*"Yeah, it's Misao…"* After a hesitant pause, she added, *"We can't find her anywhere."*

I biked to the station as fast as I could, cutting through the cold, wintry air. Ushio was apparently there, searching high and low for any trace of Misao.

*"We can't find her anywhere."*

As I pedaled like my life depended on it, our phone call from a few minutes prior played back inside my head.

"Wh-what do you mean, you can't find her?"

*"We think she…might have run away. She hasn't come home, and she's not answering any of our calls. My dad filed a police report*

*already, but we have no leads whatsoever. It's possible she's already gone somewhere way out of town…"*

Ushio's breathing was haggard, and through the phone I could hear her pounding footsteps as she ran down the street. I could only assume she was frantically searching for Misao, even as we spoke.

"Are you sure she's not just staying over at a friend's house or something?"

*"We don't know."*

"What do you mean, you don't know?"

*"None of us know anything about Misao's friends!"* Ushio cried, the desperation in her voice ringing in my ear. *"Not me, not my dad, and not Yuki-san either. I mean, I do know one girl, I guess, but I already called and she's not with her… And I don't know a single other person she's even particularly close to, or she hangs out with at school… I'm totally at a loss. That one friend I mentioned offered to help us look for her, but she couldn't come up with anything at all… I don't even know what to do or where to look anymore…"*

It was downright painful to hear Ushio at the end of her rope, but I also didn't have any ideas as to where Misao might be. That said, I still knew exactly what it was I needed to do.

"Where are you right now?" I asked.

*"Huh? I'm over by Tsubakioka Station, why…?"*

"Okay, I'm coming straight over there. I'll help you look for her."

The rapid footsteps on the other end of the speaker ground to a halt. *"…Thanks."*

"Don't mention it."

After that, I hung up the phone, got changed, and headed out —bringing us right back up to the present. I shifted up a gear and pressed down even harder on my pedals. Obviously, I was

concerned for Misao, but I was worried about Ushio too. While I had no idea what had made her sister run away from home, I could only assume it had something to do with their recent bouts of sibling strife. I hoped Ushio wasn't blaming herself for it, at the very least.

Running away from home wasn't the most unprecedented thing for a junior high schooler to do. Hell, I'd done it myself at that age, albeit only for a very short span of time. But just because it was relatively common didn't mean it wasn't still a cause for concern. The running away was just a symptom; it was the underlying cause we needed to address.

I wished I'd taken the time and initiative to try to talk things out with Misao sooner. I felt like a goddamn fool for assuring her father I'd try to be a better friend to her, then doing diddly-squat. I was furious with myself. I just hoped she was okay.

Right as I was about to cross the wide river that ran through town, I got stopped at a traffic light. The station was just on the other side of the bridge. As I waited for the signal to turn green, I glanced restlessly up and down the riverbank. I could see some volunteer workers mowing down the unruly grass along the floodplain; I was a little surprised to see them still hard at work, even on Christmas Eve.

The second I swept my gaze back to check the signal again, I spotted a young girl sitting up high on the sloped embankment on this side of the river, her legs hugged to her chest as she gazed listlessly down into the water. Then I realized something: Her shoulder-length bob of black hair looked awfully familiar. I gasped.

I changed course and sped down the riverside road, pedaling faster than ever before. The closer I got to the girl, the more my hunch turned to absolute certainty. And when I finally slammed on my brakes as I pulled up alongside her, I called out her name.

"Misao-chan!"

Misao's shoulders jerked, and she sprang to her feet in fright. "Sakuma-san…" She hung her head in shame, or perhaps defeat.

I hopped off my bike and hurried down the embankment. Who would have thought I'd find her so close to home? What's more, she seemed totally unharmed aside from looking a little bit weary. I was relieved to see that she was okay.

After leading her up to the road at the top of the embankment, where it was flat, I stood to face her. "Where have you been? Your family's looking all over for you."

Misao's head snapped up in surprise; apparently, she hadn't expected them to notice she'd run away so soon. "Why do you even care, Sakuma-san?"

"Why *wouldn't* I? We're friends, aren't we?"

"We were, maybe. Like, years and years ago…"

*Pretty sure we were still hanging out when I was in seventh grade, so that'd be, what… Four years ago? Wait, who cares about that? I've got more important things to do right now.*

"Actually, hold on. Just give me one second." I pulled out my cell phone and called Ushio.

*"Hello?"*

"Hey. I found Misao-chan."

*"What?! Where?!"*

I quickly gave her the rundown and our location.

*"Okay, I'll be right there!"* she said, then hung up the phone.

Misao stood there, waiting obediently until the call was over. I breathed a little sigh; it felt a bit anticlimactic, but I was glad to have found her so soon.

"Did you spend the night at a friend's house, then?" I asked.

"No," she replied.

"Then where did you sleep last night? Not outside, I hope?"

"…Train station," she mumbled.

"Wait, what? Which one?"

"This unmanned one with a waiting room over in Gunma… Couldn't actually fall asleep, though."

*All the way in* Gunma*? God, no wonder they couldn't find her.*

On closer inspection, I could see big dark circles beneath Misao's eyes. She definitely didn't seem to have gotten much rest.

"That's really dangerous, you know," I said. "I mean, I'm glad you're all right, but a junior high school girl shouldn't be spending the night alone in a place like that… What would you have done if some creeper came by and tried to kidnap you?"

"Am I getting lectured now?"

"Yes, what did you expect? I mean, do you have *any* idea how worried Ushio was about you? I hear your parents have been searching all over town too… Why in the world would you just run away from home like that?"

Misao heaved a sigh, then pressed her fingers to her brow as if she had a headache. "There's no point in explaining myself to you. Not when you didn't even do anything to stop my brother from turning out this way."

"You're still refusing to accept Ushio for who she really is, huh?"

"It's *not* who he is, though," she said with a nasty glare. "How would you feel if one of your family members randomly told you they were a totally different person than who you thought they were your whole life? I highly doubt you'd just go along with it."

"You're overthinking this way too hard, Misao-chan. Just because someone comes out as a different gender, that doesn't mean they're a totally different person. Ushio's still Ushio—that's never going to change."

"But that's where you're wrong. He already has. You wouldn't know because you haven't been living with him like I have, forced to see all the little changes up close… The way he talks, the way he eats, the way he sits—it's all been changing, little by little. He's not

the big brother I grew up with anymore… He's turning into someone else…" Her voice trembled as a sob escaped her. "Why can't any of you understand that?"

There was a brutally earnest sincerity in her words, perhaps stemming from their sibling connection, that rendered me speechless. I watched as she bit her lip with chagrin, then turned on her heel to make a break for it.

This was bad. What was I supposed to tell Ushio if I let her get away? I had to stop her at all costs; it was nonnegotiable.

"W-wait, Misao!" I said, lunging forward to grab her by the arm.

"Let me go!" she shouted, writhing as she tried to wrest herself free.

Yet for how violent her reaction was, her thrashing was surprisingly ineffective. Afraid I might be hurting her, I almost let my grip go slack. But no, I refused to let go until either Ushio arrived or Misao stopped trying to run away. As I stood there restraining her, though, I heard someone approach us from behind.

"Just what the hell do you think you're doing?" the person said.

*Wait a minute… I recognize that voice.*

Still gripping Misao by the forearm, I spun around to see a haughty-looking girl in a windbreaker and a baseball cap, her bleached blonde hair tied up in a ponytail.

It was none other than Arisa Nishizono.

What in the world was *she* doing here? And why the hell was she dressed like that? Her windbreaker was spattered with dirt and mud, and she had work gloves on. It almost looked like she'd been on her knees doing some weeding, or—

*Oh, right. The community service gig.*

She'd been expelled after her violent assault on Sera a few weeks prior, but the faculty had granted her a probation of sorts to see if her behavior improved, ordering her to take part in volunteer work in the meantime. Still, I was kind of amazed to see her actually following through with it—and on Christmas Eve, no less. It seemed people really *did* have the capacity to change.

That aside, why was she looking at me like I was some sort of criminal? *Oh, wait… Duh.* As soon as I realized how my current predicament must have looked to an outside observer, it was easy to see why anyone would suspect I was up to no good here.

"Hey, you," Nishizono said to Misao. "Want me to call for help?"



Misao was flustered by this total stranger's address. "Wha…? Oh, uh…"

I knew I had to say something; I couldn't let this turn into a big scene. "Hold on. It's not what it looks like, Nishizono. I'm just—"

"I wasn't talking to you," she said, glaring at me even harder than Misao had a moment ago. This shut me right up. She was as scary as ever. "Hey, kid. Are you in trouble right now? Is this guy bothering you or not?"

"Um, no…" Misao said timidly, caving to her imperative tone. "I'm fine, sorry…"

"Oh. Well, okay. Then what *are* you doing, Kamiki?"

Finally, I'd been granted an opportunity to speak. "This is Ushio's younger sister, actually. She ran away from home, and I literally just found her here. But then she tried to make a break for it, so I stopped her. That's all."

Sensing that there was no more risk of her running off, I let go of Misao's arm. This was enough to mollify Nishizono, as the wariness faded from her eyes. A look of surprise and mild curiosity took its place.

"Wow… So you're Ushio's little sister, huh? Wouldn't have known it from your hair color."

Misao averted her eyes from Nishizono and looked back at me, still a bit unnerved. "Wait, Nishizono?" she murmured under her breath. "Isn't that the name of the girl who sent that one transfer student to the hospital?"

Normally, this would have sounded like the sort of rumor that had been wildly embellished as it spread through the town, but she was almost underselling it.

"Yeah, that's her," I said.

"Oh, I see…" Misao swallowed hard, then turned to face Nishizono again as if she'd mustered up her resolve. "I take it you

know my brother?"

"Yeah, what about it?" said Nishizono.

"Is it really true that everyone at school is just…totally fine with him dressing up as a girl now? All I keep hearing is that he's been getting more and more popular, and everyone's super supportive… Is there really nobody at all who thinks it's gross, or weird, or anything like that? What are people *actually* saying about him?"

*Man… Of all the people she could've asked…*

Fate certainly had a cruel sense of irony, it seemed. I turned to gauge Nishizono's reaction to this; her face was just about as cold and emotionless as always, but I did pick up the slightest hint of pity for Misao in her expression.

"For what it's worth, there actually *were* a lot of people who treated Ushio like an outcast at first… Avoided all contact, made jokes out of earshot… There definitely weren't a ton of kids who accepted it right off the bat."

Misao listened with rapt attention.

"But then as more and more time passed," Nishizono went on, "that slowly started to change. Ushio *did* start getting really popular again. And our classmates *are* really supportive now. Obviously, I can't claim to know what any of them really think about the situation, or if it's all just performative or whatever… But at the very least, I don't think you'll find a single kid in school who'd dare to openly make fun of Ushio now."

"How can that be, though?" Misao's face fell in disappointment, like someone had pulled the rug out from under her. "Why would everyone up and change their minds like that?"

"If I had to guess? Probably because it's a lot easier to accept someone for who they are, at the end of the day," said Nishizono. "I mean, it's not like Ushio's hurting anybody. And it gets pretty exhausting to hate someone for no good reason after a while."

She was right about that. And while I could tell from her tone that she was still a bit reluctant to admit it, when I considered everything that had happened over the past few months before she reached that epiphany, I got a little emotional.

"Why do you ask? Do *you* hate Ushio or something?"

Misao held her tongue at this, but the angst was written plainly on her face. Seeing this, Nishizono seemed to recall something—then reached into her pocket and pulled out, of all things, a wrapped piece of hard candy.

"Here, they just gave this to me," she said. "You can have it."

"Oh, uh… O-okay…" Confused, Misao held out both hands to accept it.

After handing the candy over, Nishizono smiled broadly at the other girl. "Man, you look beat. He mentioned you ran away—does that mean you haven't slept? In that case, you should head on home and get some rest."

She was being awfully sweet, I assumed in part because she knew this was Ushio's little sister, but maybe she also felt a kind of sympathy toward Misao. After all, Nishizono had also stubbornly refused to accept Ushio for the longest time—longer than anyone else in our class—and she'd burned a lot of bridges as a result. Maybe she was trying to show Misao a little kindness as a way of expressing that she had her own regrets, and she hoped Misao wouldn't make the same mistakes. Nishizono might even be just the person who could get through to her.

"Anyway, I should get back to work," said Nishizono.

"Wait… You're leaving already?" I asked.

"Yeah. Got lots of cleanup left to do."

"Aw, but, like…isn't there anything else you could say to her before you go?"

"Like what?"

"I dunno… Some final words of advice, maybe?"

Nishizono's eyes turned frigid once more as they slid over to me. "Nope, sorry. There's nothing a random outsider like me could possibly say to solve their family issues for them. They've gotta do that themselves."

She kind of had a point there, much to my dismay. Even so, there had to be *some* nugget of wisdom she could impart to Misao, given that she was going through the same sort of thing with Ushio that Nishizono had not too long ago…

Just then, I spotted a sedan coming down the road up ahead. We stepped to the side so as not to get hit, but the car gradually slowed down before stopping right beside us. Only now did I recognize the vehicle: It was the Tsukinoki family car. The door burst open, and Yuki jumped out of the driver's seat.

"Misao!" she exclaimed as she ran over, then placed her hands on her stepdaughter's shoulders. "Oh, thank goodness you're okay…"

Misao dropped her gaze in discomfort.

Ushio stepped out of the passenger seat, but unlike their stepmom, she didn't rush to Misao's side. Instead, she cast a suspicious glance at Nishizono. "Arisa…?"

Her tone was somewhat threatening; perhaps she was trying to deduce if Nishizono had something to do with Misao's disappearance. I figured I should clear up that misunderstanding right away, as she definitely didn't deserve it.

"We just happened to bump into her," I said. "She's got nothing to do with this."

But even after I explained, Ushio continued to eye her warily. I couldn't tell if she was still suspicious of the other girl, or if she merely had thoughts about Nishizono's current getup. Either way, I assumed Nishizono would say something in her own defense—but for whatever reason, she kept her mouth shut. Ushio didn't say a word to her either and eventually turned to face me instead.

"Thanks for finding Misao."

"No need to thank me," I told her. "Happy to help."

Ushio walked up to Misao. She didn't yell at her or convey just how worried she'd been. All she said were three little words: "We're going home."

With that, she grabbed Misao by the hand, and the two of them got in the back seat of the car together. Misao didn't put up any resistance whatsoever. Before climbing back into the car, Yuki came to greet me. Her face still looked haggard from worry, and her hair was slightly disheveled. It said a lot about the kind of day she'd had.

"Thank you, Sakuma-kun," she said. "I don't know how we can ever repay you…"

"There's no need—really. I'm glad I could be of assistance."

Yuki then turned to face Nishizono. "Oh, sorry. Did you help out too?"

"Nope. Just happened to be here," said Nishizono. "Don't mind me."

"Ah, I see…"

Yuki let out a sharp sigh, as though the exhaustion from searching all day had finally caught up with her all at once. She pinched her brow for a moment before her expression regained its usual composure.

"Okay," she said. "Guess we'll be on our way, then."

I said a quick goodbye, and Yuki got back in the driver's seat. As the car revved to life and drove away, I stood there with Nishizono and watched it go.

"All right," said my former enemy, walking off. "I'd better get going too."

"Wait, Nishizono!"

She grumpily turned back around. "What is it now?"

"You did good back there, I think. Nice idea with the candy thing too."

"…Cool. Anyway."

Nishizono headed back down to the floodplain and rejoined the other volunteer workers. As I climbed back onto my bike, I cast a quick glance back over my shoulder—but the Tsukinoki family car was already completely out of sight.

***

The atmosphere in the vehicle was stifling. Neither my brother nor Yuki had said a word since we got in the car. They hadn't asked me where I'd been, or why I'd run away, or any of the other questions that were no doubt gnawing at their brains. It was a little eerie, honestly. I wished they'd just scream and shout at me and get it over with.

I wondered what would happen once we made it back to the house. Would we have a family meeting about it or something? My dad must have stayed home today too. We'd probably sit there uncomfortably in the living room for hours, talking things over again and again—just like we had after I caught my brother wearing my school uniform.

I really hated family meetings. I didn't know why it was so stressful having to talk things out with the whole family, but it was. And this time was sure to be even worse than the last, since *I* was the one who'd done something wrong—not my brother.

*God, this sucks. And we're almost home too.* I wished I'd never run away in the first place. Either that or no one had ever found me, and I'd just kept going until I made it somewhere far, far away. *Ugh, someone just hurry up and kill me now…*

"I don't wanna go home," I muttered despite myself.

It was only after the fact that I realized I'd said it much louder than I'd expected, and I was suddenly mortified at the thought that my brother or Yuki might have heard it. Hopefully, between the hum of the engine and the heat on full blast, my words had been swallowed up amid the white noise and gone completely undetected.

Yuki flicked on her blinker and took a right into the parking lot of a nearby convenience store. My brother sat forward in his seat and peered at her curiously. "Are we stopping to buy something?"

"Nope." Yuki looked at me through the rear view mirror. "Tell me, Misao. Is there somewhere you *would* like to go? Because we can go there instead."

This question caught me totally off guard. Did this mean she'd heard me say I didn't want to go home a moment ago? It had to, right? *Ugh.* I wished she would have just pretended not to hear it… Why did she have to stick her nose into everything?

"Anywhere at all," Yuki added when I didn't respond. There wasn't even a hint of flippancy in her voice, and that only made me angrier. I wasn't about to let her try to get on my good side with a cheap offer like this. Now I just wanted to peel back her fake "loving mother" facade and prove that she was nothing more than an impostor. So I chose the most outlandish thing I could think of.

"I want to go skiing."

"Uh, what? No way," said Ushio, immediately vetoing the idea in Yuki's stead. "Maybe sometime over winter break, but we're not going up into the mountains right now."

"No, I want to go *now*."

"Misao, for crying out loud…" I could tell my brother was losing his temper, though it was Yuki I'd been hoping to annoy. "Do you have any idea how worried we were? You're fifteen years old, so stop acting like a selfish baby. At least try to show a hint of remorse, whether you mean it or not."

"Hey, I just answered the question she asked me. If you've got a problem with that, you can complain to her about it."

"Yuki-san was only trying to be nice and clear the air with you, obviously. It wasn't an open invitation for you to start making demands, and you know it."

"Yeah? What was I supposed to say, then? That I wanted to go get food or something boring like that? Or was it a trick question, and there was never actually another option? Because if so, I'd rather just go home and get this over with. Don't waste my time."

"Waste *your* time? After we spent the whole day running all around town looking for you? You've got some nerve, you know that? All you do is cause problems for the rest of us, and you don't even have the decency to apologize… Grow up, already. If you want to go skiing so bad, you can walk there yourself. Maybe this cold weather will help you cool off a little bit… Assuming you don't freeze to death, that is."

"Great, sounds good! I think I'll do that, thanks. Bye."

But right as I reached for the door handle…

"Okay, sure. Let's go skiing," Yuki said.

I froze, gaze flicking to the driver's seat as Yuki turned to show me something on her phone screen.

"Look, this resort has night skiing all the way up until nine o'clock. If we leave right now, we'll still have more than two full hours on the slopes before they close."

I recognized the resort she was showing me; we'd been there as a family back when I was a kid. And I still remembered that it was a *very* long drive to get there from Tsubakioka.

My brother gaped at Yuki as though he'd begun to question her sanity. "Yuki-san… You can't be serious, right?"

"Sure am," said Yuki. "They'll let us rent all our gear at the resort, and we've got all-season tires on this car. We'll be just fine."

"I mean, great, but that really wasn't my main concern…"

My brother seemed just as bewildered as I was. Just what in the world was Yuki thinking? Surely she wasn't *actually* planning to drive us all the way up into the mountains right this second. Even I wasn't really that interested in going skiing right now—but it was too late to take it back. So I kept my mouth shut and watched as Yuki put her phone away, then immediately started fiddling with the car's in-dash GPS system.

"What do you say, Ushio?" she asked as she tapped in our destination on the touch screen. "Are you in or not?"

My brother grimaced. "…I guess I'm in."

"Great! Then let's get this little road trip started."

Yuki turned the car back down the road we'd just come in on.

Were we actually doing this?

Sometime later, we took the interchange and got onto the expressway. The sun had already begun to set, and the linear constellation of road lights lining the highway stretched far into the distance. According to our GPS, we still had an hour and a half left to drive. It would be long after nightfall by the time we arrived at the ski resort.

Aside from the brief pit stop we'd made early on at a roadside convenience store to buy a light meal and some drinks for the road, there'd been almost no conversation whatsoever for the duration of the trip. Yuki was completely focused on driving, and my brother seemed content to gaze listlessly out the window. A muddled mixture of fatigue and drowsiness permeated the air, akin to what you might feel on the bus ride home from a field trip. Though in our case, we were still en route to our destination and had yet to even begin the excursion.

Our father had opted to stay home, per our phone call with him along the way. Apparently, he'd made a lot of calls around town

and filed missing person reports and whatnot about me, and he was now in the process of retracting them one by one. It had sounded like he really wanted to join us, but my brother told him not to spread himself too thin.

I pulled out my own cell phone. It had been my only source of entertainment the night before, so the battery was dead by now. I tucked it back in my pocket, set my elbow on the armrest below the window, and dropped my cheek in my palm.

My skin felt a little rough, probably due to lack of sleep and because I hadn't bathed last night. As soon as I realized this, I started to feel a bit gross; I wanted nothing more than to take a nice, warm bath and then curl up under the covers in the comfort of my bedroom. Why in the world had I suggested a ski trip, of all things?

As a kid, I loved skiing—specifically going down the slopes together with my mother. The way she held me tightly and supported my waist made me feel like I wouldn't fall down no matter how fast we went, and it allowed me to focus on the thrill of the experience. Nowadays, I could ski all by myself, but I did miss that childhood sense of whimsy and exhilaration. And I was sure that if my mother were still alive, we'd be going skiing together to this day.

*Mom…*

I could feel a sniffle coming on as I teared up. Why did simply remembering the good times have to be so painful? I needed something to distract myself with, if only a little bit… *Oh, right.* I reached back into my pocket and pulled out the hard candy that Nishizono girl had given me. I unfurled the wrapper, then popped it into my mouth—and the artificial strawberry flavor spread across my tongue. The dark clouds of anxiety that had been billowing in my chest slowly began to clear.

As soon as my emotions had calmed, I was overcome by a sudden and powerful urge to sleep. Understandable considering there was no discussion going on, I couldn't use my phone, and

there wasn't any scenery aside from the unchanging black void outside the window. More than anything, my body was probably telling me I should catch up on the rest I'd missed out on the night before.

But I didn't want to fall asleep in the back seat right next to my brother either; I felt like that would be making myself too vulnerable in front of him. So I resolved myself to keep my eyes open as long as I possibly could, and only fall asleep if I absolutely couldn't help my—

"…sao. Misao."

My brother was calling out to me.

*Where am I? What was I doing again?*

For starters, I sat upright. My head felt heavy and my mind was murky, like someone had replaced my brain with swamp water. *Wait, why am I in the car? Oh, right. We were on our way to go skiing.* I'd totally passed out and even fallen onto my side in the back seat at some point during the drive. I felt more than a little embarrassed to have been woken up in such a childish position.

"Look, we're here," said my brother, opening the car door.

A bitter, icy gust surged into the vehicle. It knocked the sleep right out of me and made my whole body stiffen up like a board. I didn't want to move a muscle, much less go outside—but Yuki and my brother were already out there, so I didn't have much of a choice in the matter.

Tensing my core to brace for the cold, I stepped out of the vehicle. The thin layer of fallen snow in the parking lot crunched beneath my feet. It was the dead of night, and the windblown specks of powder only sapped my body heat even further.

"God, it's f-f-freezing out here!" I said.

It was so cold, my head throbbed in pain. The altitude and the fact that I'd just woken up probably didn't help.

"Brrr… Yeah, it's pretty chilly, all right," said Yuki. "We'd better get moving!"

"Wait, Yuki-san," said my brother. "The gear rental shop is this way."

"Oh, got it… Right, you mentioned you two have been here before, didn't you?"

"Many, many years ago, but yeah."

Ushio led the way, and Yuki followed. Cursing my big mouth yet again, I hunched my shoulders and hurried after them. We walked into the gear rental shop, which was about the size of an average mini-mart on the inside and featured an old oil stove right in the middle. The warmth from this was enough to allow me to relax my shoulders a bit.

While we had been to this ski resort before, we'd always brought our own gear in the past, so I had never set foot in this building until now. A few other skiers stood around the interior, all wearing knitted ski caps and goggles with a light dusting of snow on their coats. I could only assume they were here to return their gear and head home; we were no doubt the only people crazy enough to show up and get started this late in the day. Yuki approached the customer service counter.

"Hold on a minute," said my brother.

"What's up?" said Yuki, turning around.

"Are we *actually* going skiing?"

"I mean, I was certainly planning on it…"

Both Yuki and my brother turned to face me. Their gazes seemed to be asking if I was truly committed.

Frankly, I wasn't in the mood to go skiing at all—I just wanted to go home and collapse into bed. But after making us drive all the way out here due to my own childish bluff, I felt too guilty to turn around and leave without doing anything. All I would have done in that case was waste Yuki's time and money, so I figured I should at

least do a few runs to make it seem like there'd actually been some point in us coming out here. I knew it might be a little late, but I felt like that was the least I could do to show my remorse.

"…Yeah, let's do it," I said.

Yuki nodded, and my brother sighed. The three of us walked up to the counter, and Yuki called out to the apparent receptionist on duty.

"Excuse me. We'd like to borrow a few sets of skiing equipment…?"

The clerk, a young woman with highlights in her hair, looked up from whatever it was she'd been writing on the counter. "Sure thing! Just need you to fill out these forms for me real quick."

She handed us each a clipboard with a sheet of paper that asked our respective sizes for each type of gear, as well as a few boxes to check and terms to agree to before we signed at the bottom with the attached pen.

"Sounds like the weather might get pretty bad tonight," said the clerk. "If it turns into a real blizzard out there, be sure to head back down as soon as possible, okay?"

"Right, okay," said Yuki.

I finished filling out my form, then handed it back to the clerk with the highlights. She bent over to get down to eye level with me. "That goes for you too, kiddo. Don't stray too far from your mom, now, all right?"

"Oh, no—she's not my mother," I answered reflexively.

*Wait, I mean, uh… Shoot, dang it…* I hadn't even said it to be cruel; it was purely force of habit. Not that there wasn't a kernel of truth to it, of course, but I still felt pretty bad for making things awkward in front of this random stranger.

"Uh, my mistake…" said the woman. "Your, um…relative or guardian, then?"

As she stood there flummoxed, Yuki tried to laugh it off with a forced smile.

My brother elbowed me in the gut. “Sorry, don’t mind her. You had it right the first time.”

“Oh, is that right?” said the woman. “Phew! Scared me there for a second…”

Even with this explanation, she continued sizing up our trio with open curiosity—most likely thinking we didn’t look all that much alike. And I couldn’t blame her; my brother and I had totally different hair colors, and Yuki had no blood relation to us at all. Eventually, the woman walked into the back room for a while and came back with our boots and skiwear rentals.

“Well, here you go!” she said. “The dressing rooms are right back there.”

“Ah, shoot, uhhh…” Yuki trailed off as she turned to look in the direction the woman was pointing. At the far end of the shop were three small booths partitioned off from the rest of the store by privacy curtains; they looked more like fitting rooms than proper dressing rooms.

The clerk cocked her head at Yuki’s uncertain reaction. “Something the matter?”

“Oh, no. I think we’re fine, thanks!”

With that, Yuki padded over to the dressing rooms.

Come to think of it, which locker room did my brother change in at school nowadays? And which bathrooms did he use, for that matter? I’d heard he performed really well at the school sports festival, but had they made him play on the boys’ team or the girls’ team? I didn’t know the answers to any of these questions, as I hadn’t given them much thought before. Or rather, I’d been content not to know.

Despite how quickly gossip traveled in our small town of Tsubakioka, I’d had no idea my brother played Juliet at the culture

festival, or that he'd regained so much of his old popularity, because I'd been deliberately avoiding anything remotely related to him for the past several months. I'd been *afraid* to know these things. But now—

I snapped out of it, realizing my brother and Yuki had already gone into the dressing rooms. Scrambling, I gathered up my gear and headed over as well.

The ski lift let out a constant low rumbling sound as it carried us onward and upward. With massive floodlights shining down on the silver slopes, the powdery snow shimmered brightly in the darkness. Occasionally, a skier or snowboarder passed beneath our feet. Most people left on the mountain at this hour seemed to be savants rather than casuals—but then again, it *was* Christmas Eve. Perhaps it made sense that only the most passionate of winter sports enthusiasts would be spending the holiday out here on the slopes.

As our chairlift swayed with a loud *ka-thunk*, our skis knocked against one another. My brother was pretty good at snowboarding as well, but he'd chosen skis tonight to match Yuki and myself.

"Look, you guys!" Yuki exclaimed. "Doesn't that sky look gorgeous?!"

She lifted one of her ski poles and pointed at the heavens.

I lifted my gaze skyward and couldn't help but let out an awestruck, "Whoa."

Thousands upon thousands of stars twinkled in the night sky overhead, more dazzling and spectacular than any I'd ever seen outside of a planetarium light show. It really *was* gorgeous; I had no idea there were other stars aside from Betelgeuse in the constellation of Orion that could burn such a brilliant shade of red. When I glanced over to my side, I could see my brother gazing up in wonder as well.

"Wow…" he marveled, his breath turning white as it ascended into the cold night air.

"Yeah," Yuki said in agreement. "You know, I feel like we've already gotten our money's worth for coming out here, just by getting to witness this view alone."

"I think you might be right," my brother softly replied.

Listening to this exchange, I got a rather uneasy feeling in my chest. I wasn't sure how to react to what the two of them were saying. At the very least, I knew it would feel wrong for me to puff out my chest and proudly take credit for having come up with the idea. I kind of wished I could be simpleminded enough to throw away my principles and enjoy the moment for what it was. Yet if I were capable of doing that, I'd probably be on much better terms with both my brother and Yuki already.

The station at the top of the ski lift came into view. I adjusted my grip on my poles, getting ready to disembark as we decelerated and drew closer to the ground. My skis touched the snow at last, and I slid a little ways forward until I hit a large, flat patch of ground overlooking the slope.

"All right," I said. "Last one down's a rotten—wait, Yuki-san?!"

Without stopping, Yuki zoomed right past us and went bombing downhill. At first, I was almost floored by her boldness—but within seconds, her body bent at a worrisome angle, and she lost her balance before wiping out spectacularly.

"Oh, man… Are you okay?" my brother called out, hurrying down to her side.

"Ah ha ha… Well, *that* was a rough start," said Yuki, laughing sheepishly as she picked herself up. She fixed her off-kilter ski cap and hobbled to her feet. She looked awfully unsteady on her skis, but she followed my brother anyway as he continued onto the run proper. This time, however, she made a wedge shape with her skis—effectively braking the entire time as she slid downhill at a snail's

pace. She was skiing like an absolute beginner, I realized, just before she fell and wiped out again.

My brother made his way over to her once more, walking sideways along the slope, and helped her up. I couldn't bring myself to ignore this and continue on without them, so I headed down to where they were as well.

"Do you…not know how to ski, Yuki-san?" my brother asked, and Yuki's shoulders dropped apologetically.

"I could definitely ski a little bit back in high school… Gosh, it's scary how fast age catches up with you."

My brother seemed unsure how to respond to this. Sensing that she'd made things awkward, Yuki frantically waved both hands back and forth to assure him that everything was fine.

"I-I'm sure it'll all come back to me in no time! Here, watch this!"

She took a few deep breaths to hone her focus, then headed downhill once more…but it was the same refrain as last time. Right on cue, she lost her balance after only a few meters. The only difference was that she managed to stay on her feet somehow, instead slowing to a very awkward stop.

"See?" she said. "Practice makes perfect!"

*Uh, I wouldn't call that "perfect" by any means, but okay…*

I was starting to wonder if Yuki just wasn't a very athletic person in general. She'd never invited us to take part in any sort of strenuous physical activity before, now that I thought about it. All her hobbies were fairly indoorsy, and I couldn't recall her mentioning being on any sports teams or anything in the past.

If that was the case, then she was the exact opposite of our real mother, who'd been so active and energetic back before her health took a turn for the worse that even a rambunctious kid like me couldn't keep up. She had loved to ski, and she'd been great at

badminton, and she would play catch with us all the time… Not that she hadn't been clumsy in plenty of other ways, of course.

"You two can feel free to go on ahead," said Yuki. "Don't let me slow you down and keep you from having a good time."

"No way," said my brother, rejecting this selfless brand of thoughtfulness. "I'm staying right here with you. Skiing can be pretty dangerous when you don't know what you're doing. Who's going to drive us home if you get injured somehow?"

"Urgh… Okay, you make a good point."

"Look. You have to stabilize yourself by shifting your center of gravity forward. Like this, watch."

My brother proceeded to ski a little ways down the hill to show her the proper technique. Yuki watched him carefully as he went, paying close attention to his form.

From there, an impromptu coaching session ensued. My brother would show Yuki an example of a given skiing concept, which she would then imitate. Rinse and repeat. Meanwhile, I stayed a good distance behind them and watched this play out from afar, as we all gradually made our way down the mountain at a truly yawn-worthy pace.

Yuki fell over so many times, I quickly lost count. For someone whose name was literally the Japanese word for "snow," she certainly didn't seem to have any natural aptitude for winter sports. On top of that, she had extremely low stamina and needed to stop and catch her breath after nearly every attempt.

Honestly, it was pretty pathetic to have to watch. Anytime another skier or snowboarder passed us by and looked over at Yuki, I got secondhand embarrassment. She was undoubtedly the absolute worst athlete out on the slopes tonight. I wished she would just give up and get it over with—before my mental image of her as a capable woman who could do literally anything crumbled any more than it already had. Even as someone who wasn't her biggest fan, it

still hurt to see her falling down over and over, then stubbornly getting right back up again every single time.

That said, this had to be hurting her a lot more than it was me—albeit from a physical standpoint rather than a mental one. Especially since the snow was getting a lot less powdery the farther down the mountain we went. With it still being so early in the season, there wasn't much snowpack on the ground, so taking a nasty tumble didn't feel all that different from falling on asphalt. My brother seemed pretty concerned about it as well. Thankfully, the midway lift station soon came into view; we could use that to get straight back down to the foot of the mountain.

"You want to just take the chairlift the rest of the way, Yuki-san?" asked my brother.

"Sorry, but I think I'd like to ski a bit longer. I feel like I'm *this* close to getting the hang of it…"

I skied down to where Yuki was standing. Her bangs were slicked to her forehead with sweat, and the zipper of her jacket was pulled down partway. She had to be burning up. Meanwhile, I still felt pretty cold; she was clearly exhausting herself.

"Just give it up already," I said, and both my brother and Yuki turned to look at me. "This is getting hard to watch. Surely it can't be that much fun for you to keep falling over and over."

"No, but that doesn't matter," said Yuki. "I still want to get better at it."

"Why, though?"

"Because *you* love skiing, don't you, Misao? And I want to be able to love and enjoy the things you care about too."

At this point in my life, I wouldn't say I "loved" skiing all that much anymore. But when she looked at me with those earnest eyes, it was hard to want to fight her on this, so I just kind of clammed up.

"Okay," said my brother. "Let's keep going, then."

"What?" I cut in. "You're seriously going to let her ski the rest of the way?"

"Yeah. It'll be fine, she's slowly getting better and better already. I'm happy to hang back and keep an eye on her too, so you can go on ahead if you want, Misao."

That…would make me feel kind of bad. If there was no talking Yuki out of this, then I supposed I had no choice but to stay here with the two of them. Besides, going on ahead would only mean I'd have to wait for them down at the bottom anyway.

And so I watched as my brother's next coaching session began.

"Ughhh… I'm *exhausted*, you guys…" Yuki plopped herself down on the bench in front of the old oil stove and hunched over, her head hanging low.

We were back at the gear rental shop, and we'd already changed back into our normal clothes. In the end, we'd only managed to fit in a single run down the mountain. The weather had taken a turn for the worse, and Yuki's stamina had reached its absolute limit. I hoped she'd still be able to make the drive back in this state.

"Will you be all right, Yuki-san?" asked my brother.

Yuki slowly lifted her head. She looked completely and utterly spent. As she combed back her matted bangs, she blinked sleepily at my brother a few times. "Good question… Not sure I can make it all the way home tonight…"

Well, *that* was concerning. And she didn't seem to be joking around either.

Yuki stood up and hobbled over to the counter on unsteady legs. "Um, hi—could I ask a quick question? There wouldn't happen to be anywhere we could stay the night around here, would there?"

The employee at the reception counter was the same one who'd rented us our equipment—the young woman with the highlights. There were no other customers aside from us left in the building, so she'd already begun cleaning up and getting ready to close for the night.

"I mean, there are a few places, yeah… But I'm guessing they're probably full up for the night. Christmas Eve, after all."

"Oh, I see… Well, shoot. What are we supposed to do now?"

Yuki sounded feeble and crestfallen, as if she didn't even have the strength to keep up the guise of cheerfulness anymore. For someone I'd always known to be so bright and optimistic, this filled me with an eerie sense of dread. What *were* we going to do if we couldn't find a place to stay tonight? Just sleep in the car? I didn't want to have to go two days in a row with neither a bath nor a proper bed. *Ugh, anything but that…*

"Actually, you know what?" said the clerk. "My family runs a guesthouse not too far from here. I could call and check with them, if you like."

"Wait, you'd do that for us?!" said Yuki, a tiny glimmer of hope returning to her eyes. Honestly, I'd be happy with just about any lodging arrangement at this point.

"Sure, it's no trouble. Though I can't guarantee there'll be any open rooms…"

"No, that's more than enough, thank you. Oh, but what's the bathing situation like at this guesthouse, just out of curiosity?"

"Bathing situation? I mean, there's no big communal bathing area like at a traditional-style inn, if that's what you're asking. Just a little shared bathroom that everyone has to take turns using… So don't get your hopes up for much in that regard."

"No, no! That's perfectly fine, actually. Thank you."

With that, the woman behind the counter pulled out her phone and made the call right there on the spot. I saw that the name tag

on her shirt read "Shiba." Interesting name. From her somewhat flashy appearance, I might have expected her to have a bit more of an ostentatious character, but she seemed like a really good-natured person—just like that Nishizono girl from earlier, who supposedly had a pretty bad reputation. It seemed you really couldn't judge a book by its cover.

"Yes, hello?" said the woman named Shiba. "Hey, so I've got a few people here who are looking for a place to stay… Yeah, three of 'em. Mom and two kids."

After a quick exchange, she hung up the phone and turned back to Yuki.

"Looks like you guys lucked out. There was a last-minute cancellation, so they've got one room available."

"Oh, thank goodness," said Yuki. "Really, we can't thank you enough…"

She bowed her head repeatedly to the other woman.

About twenty minutes later, all four of us walked out of the gear rental shop. Shiba had been nearly done for the night, so we'd waited for her to lock up so we could all head to the guesthouse together. After climbing into our respective vehicles in the parking lot, we followed her down the winding, snowy mountain road. There was a convenience store on the way, which Yuki had requested we make a quick stop at. We hadn't come prepared whatsoever for an overnight stay, so it seemed she wanted to pick up some toiletries and other basic necessities.

We walked into the store, and Yuki chucked three toothbrushes into our shopping basket right off the bat. I turned away, then stopped as soon as I saw the display with all of the ready-made meals. Only then did I remember how hungry I was; it was well past my usual dinnertime. I *had* gotten a small bite to eat at McDonald's for lunch, but I was definitely feeling pretty famished by now. As I rubbed my stomach in an attempt to massage the pangs away, Yuki

and my brother walked up to me. They gazed down at the shelves of prepackaged lunches and sides.

"You guys okay with just having bentos for dinner?" said Yuki.

It was obvious from her tone what kind of answer she was hoping for—probably because she didn't have enough energy left to go hunting for a place to eat after this. I was feeling pretty tuckered out myself, and definitely not in a position to demand anything more luxurious, so I nodded wordlessly.

Making her way over, Shiba saw us poring over the slim pickings they had on offer. "Oh, have you guys not eaten yet?"

"Afraid not, no," said Yuki. "Kind of lost track of time."

"Then you should let us whip something up for you back at our place. I mean, it's Christmas Eve! I wouldn't want you to just show up and crash for the night without enjoying any of our usual hospitality. It'll be a small extra fee for the meal, but yeah."

"You'd really accommodate us like that? Oh, that'd be *incredible*, thank you." Yuki bowed to Shiba so deeply, you'd think the young woman had offered her a glass of water in the middle of a desert.

"Okay, great!" said Shiba. "Sounds like a plan, then."

Yuki took our basket to the register and checked out, then we exited the store.

After following Shiba's car down the road for another ten minutes or so, we arrived at our destination: a large, fairly antiquated house. The exterior didn't look all that different from an ordinary home, aside from the signboard denoting it as a privately owned guesthouse. We walked inside, and Shiba showed us to our room.

"Here we are!" she said.

It was a Japanese-style room, lined with tatami mats and featuring a small sitting area by the window with a table and some chairs. My expectations had been pretty low, to be quite honest, but

it was actually a pretty nice room—about on par with what you might expect to see at a traditional inn or hot spring resort.

Once Shiba had given us a quick rundown on the bathing arrangements and checkout procedures, she informed us that our dinner would be ready in about thirty minutes, then saw herself out. My brother took a seat on one of the floor cushions at the room's central table, so I followed suit. Finally at ease, I threw my head back and ran a hand along my scalp—but my fingers got caught in my sticky, brittle mess of hair.

*Ugh, I need a hot shower ASAP…* According to Shiba, there was only a one-person bath everyone had to share, and the other guests had already reserved the next several time slots, so we'd have to wait for at least another hour for a chance to bathe. I supposed it was better than nothing, given that we'd come completely unprepared—but boy, did it suck to sit here caked in my own sweat.

"Blegh… God, what a day…" Yuki groaned, collapsing face-first onto the tatami mats as soon as she set her bags down. She didn't move a muscle after that, so I assumed she'd passed out on the spot. She must have been feeling completely exhausted—and I couldn't blame her one bit. After spending all morning running around town looking for me, then driving all afternoon before stubbornly throwing herself at the wall over and over to learn how to ski, she'd probably gained at least a few gray hairs in the course of a single day.

*Great, now I feel guilty again. Maybe I should sleep too. I don't wanna think about anything right now.*

Eventually, Shiba came up to let us know our dinner was ready.

When we finished our meal, we returned to our room. Finally, it was our turn to use the bath. Shiba had told us that all of the other guests were done using it for the night, which meant we were free to bathe for as long as our hearts desired.

"Okay, folks… Who wants to go first?" asked Yuki.

"Why don't you go ahead, Yuki-san?" said my brother. "Misao and I can wait."

I'd been hoping to go first, but I also recognized that Yuki probably needed it most from a purely physical exhaustion standpoint, so I yielded.

"All right, I think I'll take you up on that." Normally, she would've insisted that she was fine and been happy to wait. But it seemed she was too tired for modesty at the moment, as she quickly got up and left to soothe her weary muscles, leaving my brother and I alone in the room.

"Well, then," said Ushio, looking at me. "Want to lay out the futons while we wait?"

"Aren't the maids supposed to do that for us?"

"This is a guesthouse, not an inn. I'm pretty sure we have to do it ourselves."

*Oh, is that how it works? Guess I've only ever been to fancier inns before. I should've known, though, based on the weird bathing arrangements…*

We got up, pulled the futons out of the linen closet one by one, and spread them out across the floor. The sheets smelled strongly of detergent, and the pillows felt pretty stiff, but not intolerably so.

I sat down on my own futon, then stretched out my legs and started massaging my thigh. Even though I hadn't gotten to ski to my heart's content by any means, it was still my first time going in ages, so my muscles were definitely feeling a little sore. My brother, on the other hand, seemed totally fine as he stood by the windowsill gazing out into the night. It made sense that he was more physically fit than me, since he went out running every single day.

We didn't talk much after that—just sat there sharing in the silence, letting the time pass us by. Eventually, Yuki returned to the

room.

"Oh, you even laid out the futons and everything!" she said. "Thanks, you guys."

Yuki plopped down on the futon nearest the door, then promptly fell backward onto her pillow. She let out a long, long sigh, as if venting all the air from her entire body, and then gently closed her eyes. My brother walked back over from the window.

"You should go next," he said. "Since you didn't bathe yesterday either."

"Wait… How did you know?"

"I can tell just by looking at you."

*Oh god. Do I really look that filthy?*

Suddenly feeling very embarrassed, I hopped up and hurried out of the room.

"Oh, Misao?" said Yuki, stopping me right as I was about to walk out the door. Raising only her head from the pillow, she looked at me with tired eyes. "I picked up a few things at the store just in case. You might want to take a look."

Her gaze slid over to a plastic shopping bag lying against the wall—one of the ones from the convenience store we'd stopped at with Shiba. Curious as to what she meant by "just in case," I padded over and knelt down to take a look. Inside, there was a new pair of underwear and some socks, among other things. I was feeling pretty self-conscious already, but this unrequested consideration from Yuki piled on a fresh layer of humiliation.

*Ugh, she really shouldn't have… Whatever. I guess I'll take them for now. I can always just throw them out later if I don't end up liking them…*

I snatched up the entire shopping bag and scurried out of the room.

After meticulously scrubbing myself clean, I headed back to the room, and then it was my brother's turn to bathe. When I sat down on my futon, Yuki rustled under her own covers to turn and face me.

"Misaooo…" she mumbled drowsily. "Did you have a fun time skiing?"

*Augh, just go to sleep already.* I didn't understand how she could still be awake. Unless I'd woken her up when I came back into the room, that is.

"It was all right, I guess."

"Just all right, huh? Well, okaaay…" Yuki sounded so sleepy that I wondered if she was only half awake, or at least dozing off. Her eyes were closed, at any rate.

*Maybe I can actually get an honest answer out of her right now.*

Maybe, in her current state of haziness and fatigue, I could get her to drop the whole "selfless mother" act and tell me how she really felt deep down.

I swallowed hard and tried my very best to sound casual. "So hey," I began, gripping my bedsheets with one hand.

"Mmmmm?"

"Doesn't this ever…start to wear on you at all? Like, I know I'm not the most well-behaved kid. All I ever do is treat you like crap, and act up, and make you worry about me… I mean, look at what happened today. I literally ran away from home, then made you drive us all the way out here to go skiing, just because I felt like being difficult… That *has* to be pretty draining, right? Don't you ever feel like you'd rather just…give up and run away from it all? I know *I* definitely wouldn't be able to put up with that."

"…Of course it wears on me," Yuki answered softly, her eyes still closed. "And yeah, it's a lot to put up with. But no…I don't think I'd ever dream of running away."

"Why not?"

"Because I already made up my mind, silly. Not like I didn't… know what I was signing up for… Just gotta…put in the work…"

As her words went from merely mumbled to outright unintelligible, I didn't catch the last of what she said. Then, after a few moments' silence, she began softly snoring, and I knew she was fast asleep.

I didn't understand. What exactly had she "made up her mind" about? What was she saying she needed to "put in the work" to achieve? I didn't feel like I'd actually gleaned anything of value from her answer just now. But weirdly enough, I *did* feel like I'd gotten my very first glimpse of the woman behind the invincible veneer. That was the real Yuki I'd been talking to just now, and she'd answered honestly—I had no doubt about that.

*God, what the heck is her deal, though?*

I felt so unsatisfied. It was like I'd finally managed to pin down an elusive truth I'd been speculating about for ages, only for it to crumble to dust between my fingertips and reveal itself to be something completely formless and incomprehensible, yet stupidly simple at the same time… But that was somehow fitting for a woman like Yuki.

A short while later, my brother came back into the room. "Is she already asleep?" he asked in a whisper; I nodded.

He walked over to the shopping bags lying against the wall and pulled out a box of Almond Crush Pocky we'd picked up at the convenience store on the way to the guesthouse. He carried it to the sitting area by the window and took a seat in one of the chairs, then popped open the box and tore open one of the packets of Pocky inside.

"You want some, Misao?"

"Sure," I said, standing up to join him.

"Oh, but turn the lights off first, would you?"

I flicked the light switch by the door as instructed, and the room went dark. Then I heard a *click* as my brother turned on the overhead light in the little sitting area, and a dim orange glow illuminated the narrow space.

After tiptoeing around Yuki, I took the seat opposite my brother and grabbed a couple sticks of Pocky. For a time, the only sound was the soft crunching of crushed almonds between our teeth. I didn't know how it was so quiet despite the strong winds; maybe the snow was dampening the sound, or the windowpanes were particularly thick. All I knew was that I couldn't hear any sign of the storm raging outside.

"So you're…not mad at me, then?" I asked nervously.



"I was," said my brother. "But I'm over it now."

"Are you sure?"

"I mean, if you want me to yell at you, I guess I can."

"No, that's okay." I reached for another stick of Pocky.

Outside, snowflakes whirled like petals dancing in the breeze. With no sound to accompany it, though, it almost felt like I was peering into a massive, three-dimensional screen saver. There was something weirdly entrancing about the thought, like I could sit and watch this snowstorm for hours and never get bored.

"I think tomorrow," Ushio said, "I'm going to start calling her Mom."

This declaration came completely out of nowhere.

Yet it didn't surprise me all that much.

Even though it probably should have.

"Why now?" I asked.

"I guess it just kind of hit me while we were out there today. Realized that if she ever got herself hurt somehow, I'd feel awful for never even saying it once. And I don't think I can live with that kind of guilt."

"So it's really for you, then. Not for her."

My brother nodded with absolute certainty. "Yeah."

His complete and utter lack of hesitation was enough to make me feel like I was in the wrong for even suggesting this was bad. And to be fair, maybe I was.

"Did you know she drinks in the middle of the night sometimes?" my brother went on. "She'll start crying, then try to drown her sorrows with a bottle of alcohol."

"Wha…?!" I gasped, caught off guard by this second reveal.

"I know. I couldn't believe it either, the first time I saw it. I'd never heard a grown adult just completely weeping their heart out

like that before. I still remember what song she was listening to and everything… Miyuki Nakajima, I'm pretty sure."

"I mean, who cares what song it was, but…really? *Our* Yuki-san?"

"Yeah. I think she must be struggling a lot more than she lets on. So you really need to stop giving her such a hard time, Misao."

I didn't say anything to this.

My brother snapped a stick of Pocky between his teeth. "She might be a strong woman, but that doesn't mean she's invincible. She's still going to die someday, just like you and me."

"I realize that, thanks."

*No need to get all morbid, jeez…*

"Look, I'll…" I hesitated. "I'll call her Mom too, if it ever feels right… Okay?"

"I feel like that's a pretty big 'if,' in your case," my brother said with a chuckle.

*Ugh. And here I was actually trying to be sincere for once.*

"What more do you want from me?! Should I—" I drew back, then softened my tone just a bit. "Should I start calling you 'big sister' too?"

"Huh?"

My brother gaped at me.

It seemed he could tell I wasn't joking around, though, as he then narrowed his eyes and asked pointedly, "Is that what *you* want to call me, Misao?"

"No," I answered right away. "I want to call you my big brother—just like I always have, ever since we were little kids. Because that's what you've always been to me, and to our *real* mother too. You promised her you'd always be a good older brother to me, remember? When she was in the hospital? She called you her big,

strong boy… How am I supposed to just…turn around and think of you as a *girl* all of a sudden?"

All at once, my emotions welled up from deep within my chest.

"Plus, I mean, aren't people at school going to start picking on you for wearing a skirt and everything?! You remember those two guys who lived together in that shabby little house on our way to school when we were little, don't you? I don't want you getting bullied and laughed at and treated like a weirdo just like everyone used to do to them… People in this town can be downright cruel to anyone who's even a little bit different from everybody else… That's why I wanted you to stay a boy. That's why I wanted to make sure you never changed. But now…"

The tears streaming down my cheeks felt hot enough to scald my skin.

"Now all I keep hearing is that you're more popular than ever, and everyone at school loves you… And that just makes me go 'Wow, was I actually the one in the wrong this whole time? Was this all just one big selfish tantrum on my part because *I'm* the one who's afraid of change?' And that thought scares me so bad, I start having trouble breathing, and…and…"

*Ugh, I can't keep talking about this… I'm just gonna start bawling at this rate, and then Yuki-san's going to wake up and ask what's wrong…*

"Misao."

My brother got up from his chair and crouched beside me, then took my hand and squeezed it tight. His fingers felt cold and smooth against my skin. He didn't say a word—just stayed there, holding my hand in his. And when I finally stopped sniffling, he looked up into my eyes with nothing but genuine concern.

"You gonna be okay?" he asked.

"…Yeah."

Yet even then, my brother didn't let go of my hand. "I remember that day at the hospital too, Misao," he said softly. "Believe me, I do. Everything Mom said… The promise I made to her… I still haven't forgotten any of that. Not even for a second. Those words, they… They've weighed pretty heavily on my mind over the years, if I'm being honest."

He squeezed my hand even tighter.

"At the same time…I don't want to take them so literally that it feels like we're bound to them forever, like…like some sort of curse, you know? You and I both know Mom wouldn't want that. And we can honor the sentiment behind that promise without it feeling like this horrible cross we have to bear. Because we're still siblings, at the end of the day, and I guarantee she'd love us unconditionally regardless."

"Yeah," I said. "I know she would."

My brother smiled at me, then got up and returned to his own chair. He grabbed the opened packet of Pocky off the table, but there were no sticks left inside, so he tossed it in the nearby garbage can.

"I'll tell you what," he said. "If it really means that much to you, then you can still call me your big brother."

My eyes went wide. "Wait… I can?"

"Sure," he said. "If it makes things more comfortable for you, then you can refer to me however you like. I promise I won't be offended by it."

I wasn't sure if it was safe for me to take these words at face value. Despite my misgivings, I swallowed my nerves and said timidly, "Well, okay then…big brother."

"Okay then, little sister," he said back.

"Big brother?"

"Yeah?"

"Big brother…"

"Wh-what is it?"

"Thank you."

My brother did a double take, then sheepishly scratched his cheek.

"We should probably get some sleep," he suggested.

"Yeah, okay," I said.

We stood up, got our toothbrushes and towels, and walked out into the hallway to get cleaned up for bed. In the bathroom, we stood side by side, sharing the sink as we brushed our teeth together. I made sure to wash away the tearstains from my face too.

That night, I had a dream.

A dream of the distant past.

I was lying atop a big, comfy blanket, having just woken up from a nap. Beside me, I could see my mother's slender arms moving briskly back and forth as she folded a pile of laundry. Then I felt something poke my cheek, so I turned to my other side and saw a young boy peering down into my face.

"Misao," the boy said, poking my cheek again, then again, as though he found it amusing. I rubbed my eyes and strained to focus on the boy's face. One by one, his features grew clearer: his full lips, his protruding ears, his eyes the same shade of gray as my mother's. He tumbled down onto the floor beside me and smiled gently before saying it again. "Misao."

Each time he called my name, I felt something tickle me deep inside. A burst of energy coursed through me as my sleep-addled brain cleared like a sky after a storm, and I was filled with a powerful desire to play. I kicked off the blanket, sending it flying out from under me as I threw myself at the boy and crawled up onto his chest.

"Big bwudduh…" I tried to say, rubbing my nose in his tiny chest. There was no softness there, and I could feel the bone underneath. But he was warm all the same, and he smelled just like my mother.

It was my earliest childhood memory.

***

"Mmmnnngh…"

At last, Yuki rose from her eternal slumber and sat up in her futon. Her hair was an absolute mess, given that she hadn't wrapped it or let it dry before going to sleep. Scratching her back with one hand, she reached for the phone on the floor beside her pillow—then tossed it callously aside. Dead battery, I presumed.

This might actually have been the first time I'd ever seen her wake up, mainly because she always got up well before I did. I'd always figured her for a morning person, but it seemed I was sorely mistaken.

"What time is it?" she asked with droopy, half-lidded eyes.

"It's 9:30," said my brother. He and I had already woken up and washed our faces, and now we sat in the chairs by the window, ready to leave the guesthouse at a moment's notice—or as soon as Yuki crawled out of bed, at least.

"When did she say we had to check out by, again? Ten o'clock, right? Shoot, guess I'd better get up…"

Yuki stood and stretched as far back as she could go. When she couldn't hold her breath any longer, she let out a satisfied sigh, then dropped her arms and rolled her shoulders in circles.

"Morning, you two," she said. "Wow, you're both up so *early* today!"

"No, Mom—I think *you* just woke up late," my brother teased.

"Ah ha ha, yeah, sorry about that. Let me go wash my face, and then we can—"

For a split second, Yuki went completely still.

Then she started moving again as if nothing had happened. Almost like she was trying her very best to act normal and not draw any attention to it. She proceeded to walk straight out of the room without even turning to look in our direction.

"Oh, wait," said my brother. "She forgot her towel."

"Here, I'll take it to her."

"Hm? You sure? Okay, thanks."

I took the towel in hand, then made my way across the tatami floor. Before I exited the room, I stopped and took a deep breath.

*Okay… I'm gonna apologize for running away, and then…*

"All right," I said, pumping myself up. "Let's do this."

I strode out into the hallway like a girl on a mission.

And in all fairness, I was.

I had to go give my mother her towel.

# *Interlude*



# Interlude

"SO YOU TWO ARE basically cool now, then?" I asked.

"Yeah, more or less," said Ushio, nodding as she ran.

It was just before dawn, and the stars were still shining in the blue-black sky. Ushio and I were on our way to a hill at the edge of town to greet the first sunrise of the New Year. We'd initially planned to bike there, but then I remembered how much I enjoyed accompanying her on her morning runs and suggested we jog there instead—both of us.

Truth be told, I was kind of regretting that now. We had nearly three kilometers to go, and already my sides were killing me. The piercing cold would have been bad enough on its own; each time I sucked in the frigid morning air, my throat shriveled up a little more and my lungs cried out in protest.

"Things are still a little weird, admittedly," Ushio went on. "And it's been a struggle for sure, but I think we'll ultimately be stronger for it. Hopefully now she'll be able to focus on her high school entrance exams without any distractions."

"What about you, though?" I asked, unwilling to swallow this resolution even as every uttered word burned my throat. "I mean, she's willing to call Yuki-san her mother, but she refuses to accept you as anything other than a brother? Seems kinda messed up that you have to sacrifice your comfort for the sake of hers."

I'd been withholding my opinions in this regard, as I knew it was a touchy subject. Now that the floodgates were open, I felt myself getting more and more indignant on Ushio's behalf. Yet she didn't seem fazed in the slightest.

"It's not that big a deal to me," she said. "I mean, it *is*, obviously… But I also kind of get it. That's all she's ever thought of me as, and it's a pretty big change—one I'm still adjusting to myself,

to be totally honest. If she's not ready or willing to accept it at this point in time, then there's not a lot I can do to force her."

So it wasn't that she didn't care, just that it wasn't a hill she was prepared to die on, since they had to live together regardless. That was fair enough, I supposed. Ushio had clearly given this a lot of thought, so maybe it wasn't my place to judge.

"Plus, I mean…worst-case scenario, I'll be moving out after graduation," she said. "It's not like I'll have to put up with it for very long."

"Right, yeah."

It was true. Assuming Ushio got into one of her Tokyo universities of choice, and didn't have to move back home after college for whatever reason, then there'd be nothing forcing her to coexist in the same living space as Misao ever again. It actually struck me as a bit of a cold thing to say, by Ushio's standards—but it was also a healthy, rational mindset to have for someone in her shoes. To be sure, no one should ever have to feel like they were shackled to somebody for life just because they were family.

People often liked to tout that there was no bond more sacred than family, or that family should always come first. In some cases, maybe that was true. But at the end of the day, you had to look out for yourself first and foremost because only you could ever truly understand your own needs. And when there was a truly unbridgeable divide between what you knew was right for you and what someone else thought you needed…no sense of familial obligation would be enough to resolve that disparity. There had to be a mutual desire to understand each other as two distinct yet equally valid human beings—and that took genuine love and connection.

"Well, I'm glad you managed to bury the hatchet, at least," I said. "Maybe I should come over and hang out again one of these days."

"Definitely," said Ushio. "I'm sure my mom and Misao would love that."

It sounded like things were going to be relatively peaceful over at the Tsukinoki household for the time being. But as much of a relief as that should have been, Ushio seemed a bit anxious as she glanced down at her wristwatch.

"Not sure we'll make it at this rate," she said.

"Wait, huh? What do you mean?"

"We'd better pick up the pace."

Ushio broke into a full-on sprint, and I scrambled to chase after her. She'd been kind enough to match my pace up until now, but we were at risk of missing the sunrise if we didn't hurry it up a little. I was already struggling pretty bad as it was, but I dug deep and did my best to keep up with her. I cursed myself for not doing even a tiny bit of training to prepare myself for this in advance.

This whole thing had been my idea, after all. I'd suggested we ring in the New Year by finding a nice spot to watch the sunrise together. More than anything, I'd been looking for something quick that could make up for the date we'd had to cancel on Christmas Eve, at least until we could reschedule it properly. Thankfully, Ushio had been totally on board with the idea, but she'd requested that she get to pick the location. Apparently, she knew just the place.

We panted rhythmically in time with one another, each warm, white breath quickly dissipating into the tranquil morning air. A brisk breeze grazed my cheek, but it wasn't enough to keep my body temperature from rising nor the sweat from running down my back. Then at last, after focusing all of my willpower on simply putting one foot in front of the other for some indeterminate amount of time, our destination came into view. There was just one small caveat: We still had to actually make it up the hill. And my legs already felt like they were on the verge of giving out.

"Just a little farther now!" said Ushio. "Hang in there!"

With her encouragement, I wrung the last few drops of stamina from my muscles and booked it up the hill. Once we were about halfway to the top, Ushio stopped at a little overlook on the shoulder of the road, one just wide enough for a single vehicle. There was no one else around but us.

"Is this it?" I asked, placing my hands on my knees as I bent over and gasped for breath. *M-man, what a workout…*

"Yep, this is it. Here, let me get you a towel."

"Oh, thanks, yeah…"

Ushio unzipped her waist bag and pulled out a little sports towel, which I gratefully accepted. After wiping the sweat from my face, I stood up straight, and a cool wind blew back my bangs. I looked out into the distance over suburbia as far as the eye could see. As twilight crept up from below the horizon, a whiteness bled into the eastern sky, threatening to swallow the stars at any minute. The break of dawn was nearly upon us.

"Looks like we made it," said Ushio.

"Yeah… Just in time too."

Ushio and I stood there together, waiting for the sun to show its face. We watched with building anticipation as the skies grew redder and redder—until at last came first light: fanning out its spectrums as it cascaded down the distant peaks, then draped itself over the land like a blanket of color.

"Oh, wow…" I breathed, completely spellbound by the sight.

I'd never known a simple sunrise could be so gorgeous.

Capable of such dazzling, kaleidoscopic majesty.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" whispered Ushio.

"Yeah… Yeah, it sure is."

I could have described it using a million different words, but in the end, she'd summed it up in only one. Everything else felt

superfluous right now, so we simply basked in the glory, watching the morning sun carry on its ascent.

When it was about halfway over the horizon, I turned to the side.

"Ushio."

"Yeah?"

"I've made up my mind. And there's something I'd like to say."

Ushio turned to face me as well, her steady eyes bearing the slightest hint of trepidation as she held me in her gaze. In truth, I'd been hoping to say it on Christmas Eve—but like much of our relationship, things hadn't gone as I originally planned.

And so I'd say it now, before I had the chance to get cold feet:

"Let's do this," I told her. "Let's go out with each other."

# Afterword

EVER SINCE I put out my first book four years ago, it feels like I've done nothing but write stories about family. And it's always broken, dysfunctional families too—far from the harmonious households our society loves to prop up as the ideal norm. It's almost gotten to the point of self-parody now, I feel like. And yet, believe it or not, I actually find these sorts of things a bit upsetting to write about. Whenever I realize that I might be touching on topics that could dredge up real-world trauma for some readers, or make them feel a kind of sadness they're not looking for when they pick up a book, I always have to stop myself for a moment and consider why I even write these kinds of stories to begin with.

I suppose I could say that it makes for an easily relatable teenage protagonist, as our relationships with our families tend to feel most volatile—and the struggles therein most inescapable—when we're at that age… And that would probably sound nice, but it would be a bald-faced lie. In reality, I think it might just be the sort of drama that comes most naturally to me as a writer. My apologies, I don't fully understand it myself. But I can't deny that I *do* feel like I have a lot to say when it comes to family.

But hey, so does everyone, right? And I feel like people on average tend to have much more polarized and hard-set opinions when talking about "what it means to be a family" as opposed to, say, "what it means to be friends" or "what it means to be lovers." But of course people's values are going to differ on things like that—even among members of a given family, for that matter, because we're still individual human beings at the end of the day. Perhaps the tricky thing about family specifically in that regard is that it's a type of bond which, by its very nature, tends to make us *forget* that we're all unique individuals and often discourages true mutual

understanding in favor of a sort of tribe mentality—and one that operates on a different set of rules and logic for every family.

Obviously, I know there are plenty of warm, healthy households out there just like the ones you often see in TV sitcoms, and I'm not saying that the sense of unity that's engendered by that mentality and those values is always a bad thing. But I also feel like there's not a single family in the world that isn't broken or dysfunctional in one way or another (though some to a lesser degree than others, of course). And yet, there are still so many movies and songs out there that paint this impossibly idyllic picture of familial love and what a family should be… Perhaps it's that blatant disparity that inspires me to write about these things.

Although in recent years, I do feel like our society's rose-tinted glasses when it comes to "traditional family values" have slowly started to come off a bit. You see plenty of works of fiction nowadays featuring parents who are just *wretched* human beings (I know, I know—I'm one to talk, right?). And perhaps that's kind of tragic in its own way, at least in terms of what that shift seems to suggest, and maybe we could even stand to give the good parents a little more credit, even if everyone's got their flaws…

And wow—here I am, giving you my own biased and opinionated takes on family, just like the people I mentioned above! Honestly, I kind of feel like this whole thing just turned into one big, barely intelligible rant… But what's the point of getting an afterword, I suppose, if I can't even do a little incoherent rambling? I'm sure it's probably fine.

Time for the usual acknowledgments, then.

To my editor, Hamada-sama: as I see the number of comments and corrections from you go down with each successive volume, I feel proud of how much I've grown as a writer, but also just a little bit lonely. Not that fewer mistakes is a bad thing, of course.

To the ever-talented KUKKA-sensei: Thank you for yet another set of wonderful illustrations. Though I still hope to work with you

for many years to come, please do be sure to take care of yourself as well.

And to my faithful readers: Thank you for sticking with me and this humble story of mine through four entire books thus far. I hope we can meet again soon.

This next volume will be the last.

MEI HACHIMOKU
DECEMBER 2023

## Mei Hachimoku

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

You ever apply pressure to your wrist until the joint pops? Can’t do it all the time, but it’s honestly one of the most satisfying sounds ever.

## KUKKA

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Lately I’ve been having a blast picking out all sorts of cute winter outfits for my firstborn. Always struggling to decide what types of baby food to buy, though.

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