

9
NOVEL

The cover illustration depicts two anime-style characters in a winter setting. On the left, a girl with long, light grey hair and purple eyes is shown in profile, wearing a red and orange plaid scarf and a dark blue coat. On the right, a girl with short, dark blue hair and teal eyes looks towards the viewer with a slight blush, wearing a teal scarf and a dark blue coat. The background is a bright, hazy sky with soft clouds and a few falling snowflakes. The title 'Adachi and Shimamura' is written in a large, stylized, pink-to-red gradient font with a white outline. A small white flower icon is positioned above the 'i' in 'and'.

Adachi and Shimamura

WRITTEN BY
Hitoma Iruma

COVER ILLUSTRATION BY **Shizue Kaneko**
CHARACTER DESIGN BY **Non**

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Adachi and Shimamura

STORY BY Hitoma Iruma ART BY Non

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CHARACTER



Shimamura

A high school student who sometimes cuts class. Has no interest in most people, with one notable exception: her girlfriend, Adachi.

Adachi

A high school student whose crush has finally borne fruit. She's ecstatic to spend as much time as possible with her girlfriend, Shimamura, who's been making more of an effort in their relationship lately.



Nagafuji

A well-endowed, nearsighted girl whose family runs a butcher's shop. She's known Hino since preschool and cares for her very much.

Hino

An upbeat, outspoken girl who has known Nagafuji since childhood. Her family is super rich and old-fashioned, which makes her home life complicated.



Yashiro

A self-proclaimed alien who came to Earth in search of her compatriot... allegedly.



"You know, now that I think about it..."

Belatedly, I became aware of just how much time I spent thinking about Shimamura. But how much time did she spend thinking about me? Five minutes a day? Ten minutes? Maybe an hour, tops, if she was in a good mood? Then again, I couldn't imagine she had a whole hour's worth of things to think about where I was concerned. I felt so...unnoticed.

But whenever she was around, I always got so nervous—I'd bite my tongue, my eyes would dart all over the place, my vision would go fuzzy, and my mouth would kinda move on autopilot. In that sense, maybe I was pretty noticeable after all. Still, panic attacks were not the same thing as having a personality. It was clear to me that I needed to work on keeping my cool around Shimamura.



Adachi's world was infinitesimally small. But that wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Small worlds were easy to keep clean, easy to keep track of, and... maybe that was enough. If she only needed one thing for her world to be complete, then that one thing was probably me. Gosh, I'm so flattered, I thought to myself with a snuffle. Meanwhile, Winter skipped merrily through the town.

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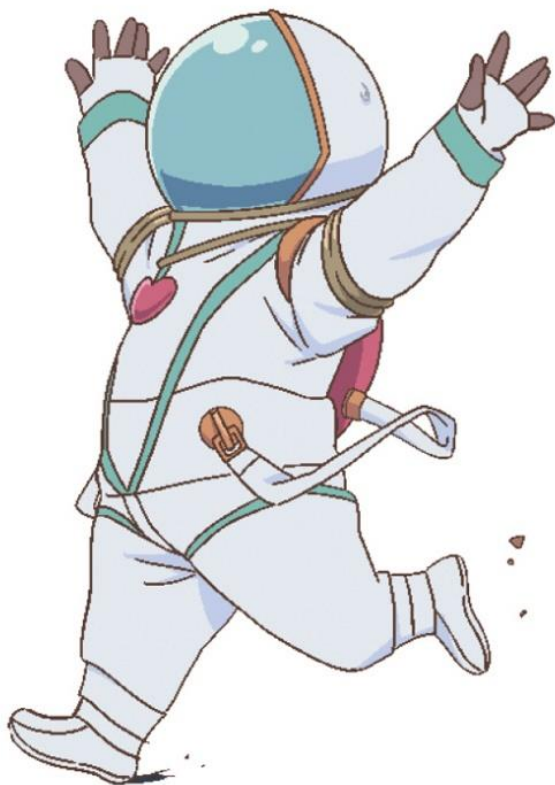
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ADACHI TO SHIMAMURA VOL. 9

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Edited by Dengeki Bunko

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TRANSLATION: Molly Lee

COVER DESIGN: Nicky Lim

LOGO DESIGN: George Panella

INTERIOR DESIGN: Clay Gardner

INTERIOR LAYOUT: Karis Page

COPY EDITOR: Meg van Huygen

LIGHT NOVEL EDITOR: Mercedes Clewis

PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Melanie Ujimori

PRINT MANAGER: Rhiannon Rasmussen-Silverstein

PRODUCTION MANAGER: Lissa Pattillo

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Adachi ^{and} Shimamura

NOVEL

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STORY BY
**Hitoma
Iruma**

ILLUSTRATED BY
non



Seven Seas Entertainment

Chapter 1:
Young Shima, No Mura

“OH, IT’S SHIMAMURA-SENPAI!”

“Hmm?”

On my way home from school, I heard someone call my name, so I looked over my shoulder and saw a younger girl astride her bike. When I came to a stop, the icy wind drilled impatiently against my bare thighs, reminding me it was, indeed, wintertime.

“Hey, there, teammate,” I greeted loftily.

She raised a hand in reply. “Sup?”

I recognized her from my old junior high basketball team. Her name was...uhhhh... Well apparently, I wasn’t great at remembering people’s names.

Pretty sure it’s Yama-something. Yama...gawa? No, that doesn’t sound right. Yamada...? Yamanaka...? Whatever. “Teammate” it is.

“You live this way?” she asked.

“Yep.” One glance at her uniform told me she went to a different high school.

“Still play basketball?”

“No, not at all. I don’t do anything after school these days.”

“Roger that. I’m still doing it, but like, I’m chill about it, y’know?”

“Gotcha.”

I chose basketball because, unlike baseball and soccer, there was a girls’ team and that caught my interest. I almost picked volleyball, but in basketball, you were free to dribble the ball as much as you wanted. Normally, the teachers would get mad at you

for making all that noise. And so it was the freedom from societal norms that tipped the scales.

Looking back, it struck me as a weird incentive. These days, if someone told me I could be as loud as I wanted, I'd find an excuse to turn them down. *Sorry, waaay too sleepy.*

I stared blankly up at my former *kouhai*, noting the height difference between us. "Man, you've gotten tall!"

She laughed it off. "Ha, yeah, I guess! And *you* seem like you've softened up," she replied, her hands on the handlebars.

"You think so?"

"The old you would've kicked my ass for being 'disrespectful to an upperclassman' or something!"

"That's a lie!" I was never brave enough to resort to violence. Yes, it took *courage* to lash out. Impossible for someone like me with all the willpower of a wet noodle.

"Okay, true, but you'd never pass the ball to an underclassman you didn't like."

"Now *that* I can attest to...*maybe.*" I chickened out at the last minute. I wasn't proud of who I was back then, and the memory was embarrassing.

"I'm getting a different vibe from you now though. Did you find someone special?"

"Huh?"

"You know what I mean!" Smiling, she raised her middle finger at me.

"...You wanna catch these hands?"

"Oops, wrong finger! Which one means 'boyfriend' again?"

She went through each of them, one by one. Frankly, I was impressed that she could extend her ring finger all by itself. When I tried, it protested shakily—but I digress.

“Oh, so *that’s* what you’re talking about.” If I told her I had a girlfriend instead, would she look at me like I’d grown a second head? “I guess you could say I’ve matured as a person.”

“Nice!” she remarked, mildly impressed—or was I misreading her? I wasn’t, was I?

Standing in the wind, the winter chill traveled up from my legs. My *kouhai* saw me shivering and took a hint.

“Well, have a good life!”

“Will do. Bye-bye!”

With a wave, the two of us parted ways. She was always the considerate type; I could remember talking to her quite often during basketball practice. *Thanks again, uhhh...Nakayama...?*

Then I caught a whisper, carried to me on the wind: “Which finger is it supposed to be, anyway?”

If I see you again, I’ll tell you. But I doubt I ever will.

Living in a world as small as ours, these little reunions weren’t unheard of—in fact, perhaps there could be more of them in the future. But most likely, they wouldn’t go well. I had a bad attitude back then, so barely anyone from junior high actually liked me.

“I was young and dumb...”

Back then, I was always seemingly in a hurry, but on the other hand, at least I used to have some kind of *drive*.

Based on what I’d heard from other people, however, Adachi would most likely never have any of these “reunions” at all. Adachi’s world was infinitesimally small. But that wasn’t a bad thing, necessarily. Small worlds were easy to keep clean, easy to keep track of, and...maybe that was enough. If she only needed one thing for

her world to be complete, then that one thing was probably me. *Gosh, I'm so flattered*, I thought to myself with a snuffle. Meanwhile, Winter skipped merrily through the town.

“Boom!”

As I mused to myself, someone purposely slammed their shoulder into mine. As I staggered, I looked to see who it was.

“Well, well, if it isn't Shimashima, my same-classman!” exclaimed Nagafuji in mock surprise. The impact had knocked her glasses askew: she casually adjusted them. Personally, I was surprised to see her out in my neck of the woods.

“Were you watching us?”

“Just the part where she slammed into you and picked a fight.”

“That's not *remotely* what happened.” *Should I be worried about your eyesight? Maybe you need a new glasses prescription. Or maybe it's something new glasses can't fix.*

That aside, it wasn't often I saw Nagafuji wandering around without her other half. She must have sensed what I was thinking, because she promptly started to explain, complete with hand gestures to indicate an invisible Hino. “She said she had family stuff and tossed me out on the street.”

“Wow. It's not nice to litter,” I joked.

“Exactly!” Nagafuji agreed, nodding sagely. *Uh, what?*

Anyway, “family stuff” seemed to be a common occurrence for Hino. She was never one to flaunt her status, so I myself rarely paused to think about it—but her lifestyle was three or four levels above the average person's. It made sense, then, that Hino had some obligations to deal with in exchange. But apparently, Nagafuji was perfectly happy to show up on her doorstep with no consideration given to any of that.

“So, with nothing better to do, I’ve just been wandering around,” she continued.

“Sounds like you, all right.” Setting aside whether it was actually any fun to wander around some random neighborhood, it was completely in character for Nagafuji to take action without thinking too hard about what it was she wanted to achieve.

“Jingle, jingle!” She pretended to ring an invisible bicycle bell. Why was she imitating my old teammate? She even repeated the girl’s observation: “You’ve gone soft.”

“How so?”

“Ummm...” She pinched my bicep. *Hey!!!* “On second thought, maybe you haven’t.”

“Damn *right* I haven’t.”

“For that matter, I don’t even know what you used to be like, Shima.”

You sure don’t.

“So tell me, Shimama...”

“Not to be rude, but do you even remember my name?”

“Tell me, Shima-chee...”

I knew it. She doesn’t remember the “mura” at all!

“Umm...ummmm... Nope, I’ve got nothing!”

“...Yaaaaay.”

What a completely meaningless conversation. Did Hino have to tolerate this crap every single day? But on the other hand, what did a “meaningful” conversation even look like? It’s not like the conversations I had with Adachi were any different.

“If I think of something, I’ll let you know.”

“Roger that,” I replied, inadvertently imitating my underclassman.

Then Nagafuji toddled off down the street—but after a few steps, she stopped and called me an entirely different name. “Oh, I forgot! Hey, Shimamama! Waiiiiiit!”

“Yeeeeees?”

“Woouoooo!!!” Gleefully, she flipped me the bird.

After a moment of hesitation, I returned the crude gesture in kind. “Woouooo.”

Nodding in satisfaction, she turned and trotted off without another word.

“What was *that* about...?” Was she really just that much of a ditz? Because the nuance felt a little...*different*.

Now that I thought about it, if I’d met her in junior high, I probably would have hated her guts. Back then, I had no patience for jokesters like her. But of course, now that I was the lovable, sleepy Shima-chan, the most her antics got out of me was a chuckle.

Anyway, now that that was over and done with... “Man, I’m tired.”

Talking to people consumed a lot of calories, and that was my second chat in a row. You’d think all this mental exercise would help me drop a few pounds, but alas and alack.

My head drooped as my mind shrank into itself. I was a hibernating bear, buried beneath the icy mire of winter’s cold kiss.

Alternatively, a less poetic description: the cold made me super sleepy. That was the main point I wanted to get across. Beyond a certain temperature threshold, my body would just kinda shut down, like I was a cold-blooded lizard or something.

This time of year, I was still freezing cold, even long after I arrived home and started changing my uniform. The heater in my room was just as lazy as I was. When I looked around for my sister, I spotted her *randozeru* backpack, but saw no sign of the girl in question. Upon further contemplation, I vaguely remembered her cleaning her fish tank. How could she bear to plunge her hands into that biting cold water without complaint? *That kid is powerful, if I do say so myself.*

“I’m so proud of you,” I mused aloud in her absence. Then I shivered hard. Meanwhile, my phone was shivering, too—a new message had come in. I suspected it was Adachi, and when I checked the screen, sure enough, it was. Part of me didn’t understand how she could possibly have more to say after that long conversation we had just before heading home, but hey, sometimes people forget things. “Let’s see here...”

“We should do something for Christmas.”

It was a rather vague request. I checked the date. *Yeah, I guess Christmas is coming up soon, huh?* So I wrote back, *“Sure.”*

Then it occurred to me: this would be our second Christmas together. What I remembered most vividly from last year was the color blue.

“So, what are you going to wear this year?” I asked. I hadn’t seen her China dress in a while, and I kinda missed it.

“Any suggestions?” she wrote back. Knowing her, she’d wear anything I asked her to... For some reason, a truly humiliating outfit came to mind, but I didn’t dare joke about it aloud lest she take me seriously.

“No need to dress up. Just wear your normal clothes.” And with that, I set my phone down. *“Now, then...”*

If I huddled under my comforter to wait until the heater kicked in, it was patently obvious what would happen next...and yet I found myself drawn to it, nonetheless.

“Zzzz...”

And so my consciousness floated away well before the warmth could reach me.

By my own estimation, I wasn't asleep for long. When I awoke, before I could check the time, I became aware of a weight on my stomach. Someone was using me as a pillow—and she was lying facedown. *Sure you're not suffocating, little lion?*

“Zzzrk... Zzzrk...”

Okay, those snoring sounds are so obviously fake. “Hey, there, weirdo.”

“Who, me?” Yashiro promptly raised her head.

For a split second, I was almost impressed at her level of self-awareness, but... “I guess you *are* the weirdest person in our family, huh?”

By this point, I was ready to acknowledge her as one of us. She practically lived in our house, and my mother had started bringing home snacks just for her. In fact, I got the sense that she was Mom's favorite. She probably saw Yashiro as a dog who could talk.

And eat a lot.

And sparkle.

Mom and I had a whole conversation about it once, actually: “When I asked her where she lived, she said, ‘On another planet.’”

After that, I gave up trying to drive her home. I don't have the gas for that!"

"And that's your *only* problem with this situation?"

"What other problems could there *beeeee*?"

"A *looooooot*."

"I mean, she's not a bad kid. One look at her and I can tell!"

"You shouldn't judge a book by its... Well, okay, in this case you probably *should*, but..."

"See? Now *there's* a bad kid if I ever saw one!"

"Did you know that a lot of people tell me I take after my mother?"

Later that same day, when I briefly bumped into my father, he shrugged it off with a simple "That girl sure hangs out here a lot, doesn't she?"

Long story short, my family was just that chill, I guess.

"I guess I'm the only sane one," I mused to myself.

"Ha ha ha ha ha!"

What's so funny?

"So, why were you using me as a pillow, hmm?" Not that it was especially unusual. Hell, I once caught her sleeping at the foot of the stairs like some kind of cat. *First a dog, then a cat, and she's a lion? Talk about multitasking.*

"You looked plump and warm."

"Wh... Hey! What's that supposed to mean?!"

I stretched her cheeks out, but she kept right on chuckling. As usual, her skin was cool to the touch. Strange—you'd think it would have warmed up a little since she was lying facedown against me. *Clearly I must not be that plump, then. Obviously.*

“I wash intending to play wif Little, but she shaid she hash to take care of the other petsh firsht,” Yashiro explained, her cheeks still stretched to their limits.

You do get the implication there, right? And you’re fine with that? Also, belatedly, what’s the deal with “Little,” anyway? Don’t you know what her name is?

I released her cheeks, and her face promptly regained its normal shape. Then I pushed her lion hood down, revealing her sky-blue hair. Now that I thought about it, how often did I get to see something so sparkly up close?

“Now, then, let us resume—”

“I mean, it’s a lot warmer *under* the covers, you know,” I cut in before she could rest her head against me.

“Oho, is that so?” She flopped down and rolled under the comforter, right up next to me. “Ah, yes. It’s downright *tepid* in here.”

“All thanks to me. You’re welcome.”

I glanced over at the heater and realized something: it wasn’t even switched on. I had forgotten to hit the button. Now I *really* couldn’t get out of bed. As I stared blankly at Yashiro, her relaxed ambience made my eyelids start to droop.

Would Adachi get mad if she found out about this? I wondered idly as the warmth melted me like butter. I couldn’t exactly leave, though—Yashiro’s face was squished flat, and when I looked at her, all this worrying started to feel like a waste of energy. *Maybe I’m turning into Nagafuji...*

“Eh, whatever.”

“Wa ha ha!”

I ruffled Yashiro’s hair, scattering little sparkles in every direction. In actuality, they weren’t sparkles but some kind of fungus

or spore, and breathing them in brainwashed everyone into liking her and letting her get away with anything! Just kidding. That was a little headcanon I came up with just now.

“Alas, dinner seems an eternity from now,” she lamented.

“You really love to eat, huh?”

“And *you* really love to sleep.”

“True that.” Both of us made a hobby of indulging our basest desires.

“You need to have fun while you’re young or you’ll regret it,” she cautioned me firmly, though her expression was anything but. “That’s what they said on the television.”

“I had a feeling that’s where you got it from.” I sometimes spotted her sprawled out in the living room, watching TV with my mother.

“Aren’t you still young, Shimamura-san?”

“Mmm... Maybe not as young as you are.”

“Keh heh heh! That’s what *you* think!”

“Yeah, and I’m probably *right*.”

Being older than Yashiro was nothing to be proud of, exactly—not that youth was the be-all and end-all. *What’s so great about being young, anyway?*

“So, what sort of Earthling was young Shimamura-san?”

“Meaning back when I was but a wee babe?”

Setting aside the whole “Earthling” thing, I still felt pretty young to this day. As I lay there, bundled up in the comforter, the line between past and present began to blur. Funny, since none of my memories were remotely this warm and inviting.

“When I was in junior high...”

Back then, I was all over the place. At the very least, I ran a lot more often back in those days... *Ah, maybe that explains it.*

“On my first day of junior high, when I saw everyone gathered in the gymnasium in their new uniforms, I was instantly uncomfortable. It felt like I walked headfirst into a concrete wall. Nevertheless, with no recognition of what I was feeling, I assimilated into the collective. So began the long, boring opening ceremony full of long, boring speeches.

It was April, and yet the gym was freezing cold. The position of the building had blocked out the sun’s blessed rays. At my feet ran a strip of tape that gave shape to a basketball court. Idly, I crushed it beneath my shoe. For some reason, this only heightened my instinctive desire to rebel.

For a while, I stared up at the teacher standing at the podium...but before long, I decided I wanted *out*. Pretending to need the restroom, I stepped out of line. With no clear understanding of why I wanted to leave, my discomfort grabbed the wheel and steered me away. Deep down, I knew it was wrong, but I couldn’t stop myself.

Alone, I headed out of the gym.

Yes, I was all alone now—no sign of Tarumi, my once-best friend with whom I used to be so inseparable. Somehow, I could tell that I’d probably never see her again. No matter how close we used to be, it was all in the past now. Gone. Irrelevant to the present day.

No friendship was truly unconditional. These connections existed only with a clear purpose. In the end, sentimentality was just another excuse.

Outside the gym, my fear deepened with every step that followed.

“I’m gonna get in so much trouble...”

How could I misbehave on my first day here? I was a half-peeled scab, quavering in the breeze. Rethinking my scheme, I looked back over my shoulder at the gym. If I went back in, the fear would probably go away, but...

My eyes narrowed in disgust at the rows of uniformed students with their backs turned. Cookie-cutter clones, all of them—and I was not amused. Besides, it was *cold* in there. I couldn’t stand the cold. It always seemed to weigh me down.

There I stood, zoning out, staring at the sky. The sakura trees had nearly lost all their blossoms by this point, but beyond them, I could feel warm rays of sunshine clapping me on the back. At least for now, I could pretend I felt at peace.

And so, in junior high, I rejected community and fought to carve my path alone. Like taking the *mura*—village—out of *Shimamura*.

“Oh, *heeey*, it’s Senpai!”

A younger student peeked into the gym, having already changed out of her basketball uniform. I ignored her and wiped the sweat off my face while she took her shoes off and walked in.

Beyond the half-open door, I could catch glimpses of other sports teams packing up for the day. The sunset served as a clock, its red rays hinting at the time as they seeped across the athletic field.

What’s her name again? Ike-something. Ike...hata? No, that doesn’t feel right. Mizu...kawa... Whatever. “Teammate” it is.

My second year of junior high had just started, and now I was a *senpai* to a whole batch of fresh-faced *kouhai*. Arguably, I could be forgiven for having forgotten her name.

“What are you up to in here?” she asked.

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“Let me guess: top-secret special training?”

Nothing as glorified as that. But I couldn’t correct her with my throat so parched, so I took the shot. The ball hit the hoop and bounced off; I ran after it.

“Do you do this every day?”

“Just whenever I feel like.”

Instead of leaving, however, my teammate took a seat at the edge of the court. What could possibly be so interesting about watching me suck at basketball?

“You’re staying?” I asked, hoping to imply her presence was unwelcomed. But she just shrugged it off.

“I just want to watch for a bit and then I’ll get going.”

“Well, okay.” Not like it would impact me either way.

“You’re like a dog playing Frisbee all by itself.”

“Sounds like a talented dog, then,” I shrugged. The hoop rattled.

Normally, I could get at least a couple baskets, but I suspected maybe the live audience was throwing me off my game. Always quick to blame someone else, wasn’t I? After another missed shot, my teammate called out to me again.

“You never try this hard during practice, so why stay behind to run drills?”

As I crouched down to grab the ball, sweat dripped into my eyes. “No amount of effort I put into practice is gonna make us start

winning games.” After a full year of doing this, I could see the skill ceiling—both for the team as a whole and myself as an individual.

“Okay, so...why do shooting drills?”

“Got bored of dribbling.” Anything could get stale after long enough, hence I decided to switch gears and focus on throwing the ball around. I had yet to grow tired of jumping—thus far.

The ball arced through the air, hit the front of the hoop, and bounced off. Again.

“Wow, that ball really hates you,” my teammate remarked, enjoying my spectacular failure.

“Yep. Just like everyone else.”

“Hey, I wasn’t going to go *that* far...”

But you were thinking it, right? I smiled a little. “They hate me, so I’m benched forever.”

“Well, you never pass the ball, so I can’t blame them!” Her laughter came as freely as her honest observations.

“Yep,” was the only response I could find.

“So why don’t you ever pass to anyone?”

“Because it’s more fun when *I*’ve got the ball.”

“Wow, selfish much?”

Yes, my selfishness had earned me the appropriate treatment in return. This much I had come to accept. “I realize now that it’s just not my style.”

“*It...?*”

“Team sports.”

I didn’t enjoy doing things for others and vice versa, but I *also* didn’t enjoy trying to hide my discomfort to the point that I resented everyone else. This was an epiphany I’d had fairly recently. Maybe it

was a good idea, then, to quit the team. If I stuck to shooting drills, the ball would only ever leave my hands to rattle the hoop.

“Wow, you’re really good at hitting that one spot over and over and over. Are you doing that on purpose?” she asked.

“No,” I answered flatly as I retrieved the ball again. “Maybe I’m just not throwing hard enough.”

“If you jumped higher, I bet it would go straight in,” she suggested casually. Was it that easy? If I could just jump a little higher, could I finally shake off this weight on my shoulders?

If I miss the next shot, I’ll call it a day, I told myself, took one more shot, and missed completely. Game over. I wiped the sweat from my nose and caught my breath. Then I glanced over at my teammate, still seated. “Hey, I’ve got a question,” I told her.

“What is it?”

“Did you know I can see up your skirt?”

“Whoops!” She hastily adjusted her sitting position to one more guarded. “Why didn’t you warn me, Senpai? Are you a *perv*?”

“Don’t be stupid.”

“Can you guess what color I’m wearing?”

“Probably not,” I shrugged, and set about putting the equipment away.

As I worked, I shot a few hopeful glances in her direction, but she made no move to help me. *Smart kid. She knows I don’t deserve respect,* I thought to myself, clucking my tongue. Still, she waited patiently until I was done, suggesting she wanted us to leave together.

“Personally, I like you just fine, Senpai.”

“That’s sweet of you. Thanks.”

As we walked home, we exchanged meaningless niceties. After a few minutes, I turned around to face her. “What about me do you like?”

“Huh? I don’t know. You’re...easy to talk to?” She didn’t sound that invested. “You’re not exactly *friendly*, but that’s no problem for me.”

“How am I ‘easy to talk to’ if I’m so unfriendly?” I couldn’t imagine it being very fun for her at all.

“Weeeelllll...” She turned away as she mulled it over. “I just...don’t expect you to care, I guess? It’s a lot easier that way. Like, we aren’t *friends*, so it doesn’t really matter what we say to each other—we can just fully be ourselves. Believe it or not, I value that a lot.”

“*Value...* Right.”

If I thought about it in terms of a classroom, where interpersonal relationships were king, then it all made sense. The moment one of your friends turned against you, there was a chance it would spread to all the rest; that was the danger of sitting in close proximity for hours and hours every day. But I had no connection to anyone, so if I hated someone, it wouldn’t extend past me.

I was alone.

“Don’t you ever wish you could just *talk* without having to read between the lines?” she continued.

As someone who couldn’t remember speaking a single word to this girl prior to today, her proposal was certainly enticing...though I couldn’t help but suspect the link between “easy” and “ideal” was not quite so straightforward as she let on.

“Well, see you.”

“See you tomorrow, Senpai.”

Our houses must have been relatively close, because she ended up walking with me almost all the way to my neighborhood. When it finally came time to part ways, I gave her a thoughtless goodbye and turned away. After a few steps, however, I caught sight of a glimmer in the corner of my eye and thought of something. “Hey!”

“Yeeeeees? What is it?”

When she turned back, I pointed at the sunset. She looked up at it blankly.

“Uh, yeah, it’s really pretty!”

That wasn’t what I meant. The most important part was... “The *color!*” I shouted, still pointing.

“What about it...?”

She still didn’t get it—that is, until she looked at it a second time.

“Wait...!” The ruddy sunset spread across her cheeks as her gaze drifted down to her skirt. Then she shouted back, her voice dancing with glee: “I can’t tell if that’s poetic or just plain sexual harassment!”

“You’re the one who asked me to guess!”

Cackling cheerfully, my teammate ran off. I didn’t see what was so funny, but...

“Well, whatever.”

Once I graduated, I would probably never see her again. She didn’t *matter*. And because of that, she was pretty comfortable to be around.

From then on, I continued to interact with her from a measured distance—just enough so I didn’t remember her name. We never got any closer, but neither did we drift apart, and the next thing I knew, it was graduation day. Perhaps it was that mindset that influenced the person I became in high school.

“...And there you have it.”

“Ah, I see.”

After I finished my tale of days long past, I took a breath. Honestly, it was a miracle I remembered the whole thing... Then again, junior high was only two years ago for me, so maybe it wasn't that big of a deal. These twelve months with Adachi were all so eventful, the past felt farther away than it really was.

For better or for worse, Adachi tended to leave an impression that painted over all my other memories. Perhaps one day, she would be all I could remember.

“Zzzzz...”

“Were you even listening?”

“I heard the entire story, for the record,” the alien replied ever so loftily with her eyes closed.

“I'm glad I didn't meet you back then.”

Back then, I *despised* happy-go-lucky creatures like her...and yet here I was today, cuddling with her in bed. You could call it a coincidence, but in this case, I knew better.

“It is destiny.”

“Destiny indeed,” I agreed lazily.

As I lay there, eyes closed, my consciousness melted away, and I could feel myself hurtling full speed toward peaceful slumber. As someone who notoriously loved to sleep, perhaps I experienced this feeling more often than the average person... The thought made me happy.

Somewhere in the distance, I heard my sister open the bedroom door.

Intermission:
Mrs. Adachi and Mrs. Shimamura

I WAS ON MY WAY OUT when I recognized a name that came up fairly often back at home. I stopped at the exit and looked back over my shoulder.

Near the pool was a middle-aged woman with dark hair: someone had just addressed her as “Adachi-san.” At first I figured it was a common surname, but then I took another look at her face and thought to myself... *They really look a lot alike, don't they?* So I wandered over, just for the hell of it.

My bare feet pattered against the floor as I headed to the pool, gazing at the woman's swimsuit from behind. Hilariously, she didn't sense my presence whatsoever, so I decided to tag along on tiptoe. As we entered the chlorine-scented pool area, I remained undetected; in fact, it was only once we reached the shower stalls that she finally noticed yours truly. She whipped her head over her shoulder and glared at me suspiciously.

I straightened my posture and examined her up close. “Hmm...”

At this, her brow furrowed even harder. “Who are you, and what do you want?”

“You're Adachi-san?”

“Yes, and?”

“You look like the kind of woman who has a teenage daughter,” I ventured, once I was sure my hypothesis was accurate. They were too similar *not* to be related—they even exuded the same vibe.

Her glare softened slightly. “You know my daughter...? No, you're too old for that.”

“I know her, all right.” *At least, I think I do.*

“Oh really? Then I take it you must have a son or daughter of your own.”

“Two girls, yep!”

A bratty one and a slightly less bratty one...for now, anyway. Hougetsu went through a rebellious phase once she hit junior high; in a few years, perhaps my youngest would turn into a full-blown brat like her sister.

“Hmm...?” Suddenly, it was her turn to ogle me in kind. *Get out of my face, lady! Are you nearsighted or something?*

Then this woman, the Adachi-chan lookalike, scowled at me from point-blank range. But because the Adachi-chan I knew was the shy, taciturn type, this erased a lot of their resemblance... *Eh, fine by me, really.*

“Whaddya want?” I asked.

“You look like someone I’ve met here before.”

“Oh, that was probably my daughter.”

She and Hougetsu must have crossed paths the day I brought her here with me. She still had bleached hair back then, didn’t she? *Yeesh, that looked awful.*

“Really, now... Then I was right.”

Mrs. Adachi stepped back out of my personal bubble, scratching her cheek. *Right about what, lady?* She then intuited my question from the look on my face.

“I’m just glad to know Sakura has a friend, that’s all,” she sighed.

I nearly asked, “Sakura who?” before realizing it was Adachi-chan’s first name. *Oh, yeah, she told me that before...didn’t she? Or maybe she didn’t?* I wasn’t the best at remembering people’s names. But hey, I could usually get along just fine without ‘em.

“So...did you need something from me?”

“I just noticed the resemblance to Adachi-chan, so I tagged along, that’s all.”

That was my entire motive for following her, and yet she remained silent like she was waiting for something. *There you have it*, I told her with a hand gesture. She frowned.

“What? You need more than that?” I scoffed.

“I most certainly do. So far you seem like an exhausting person to be around.”

“How could you say that about me?!”

I get it a lot, though. Especially from my kids. And my hubby too. One time, I asked them to explain where the problem was, and they all told me my jokes were “obnoxious.” Rude, I know.

“So...how long are you planning to stand there?”

“Huh?”

“I’m trying to take a shower!” She shooed me away with one hand, holding a shower nozzle in the other.

“Eh, that’ll only take a minute. Want me to join you?”

“What?! Are you even more of an imbecile than I took you for?”

Just like that, she kicked me out! What more was she planning to do besides a quick rinse in some hot water? With no other choice, I settled for the stall next door and turned on the water...

Just then, a brilliant idea came to me, and I directed my shower nozzle into the neighboring stall, full blast. *Krrrsssshhh!!!* But I didn’t get a reaction right away, so I waited for a while.

“...I’m gonna *kill* you.”

“Eeeeeek!!!”

She got a lot angrier than I thought she would, and I valued my life, so I decided to turn the water down.

After I left the shower room, a mysterious and beautiful woman followed me out, glaring daggers and dripping wet from head to toe. Strands of hair clung to her cheeks. Overall, she looked like something out of a horror movie.

“What is your *problem*, woman?!” she spat.

“One in three people tell me I have a ‘class clown’ personality.”

“Well, I’m sure not laughing.” Indeed, she wasn’t.

Just like her daughter.

“So, I hear Sakura visits your house fairly often.”

“Huh...? Yeah, I see her now and then.”

Now that Hougetsu was in high school, Adachi-chan was the only friend who ever came around anymore. I used to see Tarumi-chan practically every day, but at some point, she stopped showing up. Why was friendship somehow both fun *and* fleeting? Weird how the world always worked like that—but kind of funny, too.

“So I see,” Mrs. Adachi replied brusquely, as if to cut the conversation short.

“What, don’t you have more questions? Go on, ask away!” I gave her a little pat and a pinch on the bicep.

“*Knock it off!*” she hissed. “I just...don’t understand much about her. I can’t grasp how she feels or how her mind works.”

“Wha? If you don’t understand, then why not just *ask* her?” Hell, I told my kids my thoughts and opinions whether they asked or not! That was partly why they found me so annoying. I understood this, but I just couldn’t stop myself from blabbing away.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Adachi’s eyes widened in surprise.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“...No, it’s nothing.” She turned her body away from me. “I’m going to the sauna.”

“Bye-byeeeeee!” Like hell I was going to set foot in that sweltering nightmare. Instead, I waved goodbye.

“You’re so bizarre...” she informed me without batting a lash. Then, with a slight smile, she said, “I’m Atsuka.”

“The name’s Shimamura Yoshika!”

Now that it was time to part ways, we finally introduced ourselves...but I wasn’t confident I would remember it the next time we met. *Oh, well, “Mrs. Adachi” it is.*

“Small world, huh?”

I’d spent years at this gym, but there were still so many things I didn’t know. *Maybe I’ll tell Hougetsu about this when I get home.*

Chapter 2: Akira

“YOU AREN'T that important.”

It all started during my first year of junior high, and my initial reaction was: *Uh...okay.*

“I mean in terms of maintaining the Hino family legacy, to be clear.”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it.” I was old enough to understand how my family operated and my place within that well-oiled machine.

“Besides, you’ve got all my brothers, anyway.”

Four of ’em, too. Enough to take up a whole hand when counting on my fingers.

“Indeed,” my dad nodded brusquely as he sat across from me. He was a man of few words, but he still let his emotions show on his face, so he was a far cry from stoic.

He didn’t say a single word after that, and I didn’t have anything of my own to contribute to the conversation, so the end result was perfect silence. It didn’t help that I was on my way to take a bath at the time he flagged me down, so overall the whole thing felt forced and awkward.

“Good,” he nodded again, and with that, he left the room.

Was that it...? Silently, I watched him go. “Geez, he’s such an enigma.”

I could see that Pops had a lot on his mind, and yet he didn’t try to express a word of it. At least he was gone now, though. Alone in the room, I waited for a moment, then flopped down on the tatami. The trademark scent of the bamboo rose up from beneath me; I closed my eyes and breathed it in. Then, once I became conscious of my stomach rising and falling with my breaths, I muttered...

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to do with that information.”
Other than feel generally perplexed, of course.

“So in other words, I guess they don’t really need me at home!”
I concluded aloud as I sat at the *kotatsu* table.

“Awwwww...” Nagafuji lamented across from me. “But I *love*
your house!”

“God, *why?*”

“It’s so big!” She stretched an arm out to indicate this...except
her arm was pointing straight up, and my house only had one floor.

“Don’t you mean *sideways?*”

“Huh?” She didn’t seem to understand. As usual.

Every weekday after school, I generally went over to Nagafuji’s
house instead of my own. I felt at ease in that little butcher’s shop.
So what if the *kotatsu* practically took up the entire living room? That
suited me just fine! I liked small spaces, and my own house had none
to offer. Why did they have to go and make even the *bathrooms*
huge, too?

Nagafuji must have gotten cold, because she lowered her arm
and buried herself deeper under the *kotatsu*. Her face was always a
bit on the derpy side, but whenever she was warm, her derpy
quotient got about 30 percent more derpy. Or maybe it was the lack
of glasses that made her look more reminiscent of her younger self.
After all, it wasn’t until this year that she started wearing them.

I saw them sitting folded on the table, so I took them and put
them on. Instantly, the whole world went fuzzy. *Jeez, is her vision*

really this bad? “What was it that made your eyesight get worse, anyway?”

“Heh! Too much studying.”

“Liar.” Though she *did* always manage to outscore me on tests...somehow.

“I’m afraid you don’t look good in glasses, Akira-chan.”

“No?”

At her prompting, I took them off; she smiled in satisfaction. Then, when I folded them up and set them back on the table, she reached out and flicked them away. They nearly went flying off the edge.

“Whoops!”

What’d you do that for, dummy? I chuckled, and something in my chest grew as warm as my legs beneath the heated table.

It was my thirteenth winter on this planet, and I was adjusting to being in seventh grade. These days, I was either “Akira-chan” or “Hino”—a development that only started after elementary school. Likewise, my bestie here was either “Nagafuji” or “Tae-chan,” depending on the person or place. Was this what it meant to grow up?

“Your dad’s still working, huh?”

I could hear the hustle and bustle of the storefront, and I was mildly impressed. When the Nagafuji household got busy, it was in a much different fashion compared to mine. Plus, there was something comforting about the way the whole house smelled like frying oil—once you got used to it, of course.

“Shouldn’t you be helping or something?” I asked.

“He already deemed me useless.”

“Smart guy.” Honestly, what would Nagafuji be able to help with? Though she seemed at first glance to be suited to customer service, she *really* wasn’t. “Hmmm...”

I gazed at her as she watched TV. Like usual, her eyes were dull and sleepy. But because of the insane things she would say, people got the wrong idea about her—a *lot* of wrong ideas. And some right ideas, I guess.

Then her mom peeked into the room. “Akira-chan, your ride is here.”

“Aw, man. They didn’t have to send somebody,” I sighed as I looked up. “I swear, I was gonna head home in a couple minutes! Right?”

But when I looked at Nagafuji for confirmation, she blinked back at me in surprise. “You were...?”

Ugh, you really ARE useless!

“Don’t worry, I was only half-joking,” she continued.

“Well, you better work on the other half!” I swear, she never takes responsibility for the crap that comes out of her mouth!

As I got to my feet, I shot a glance at the clock over the TV. It wasn’t even six o’clock yet! Another aggrieved sigh left my lips.

Likewise, Nagafuji wriggled out from under the *kotatsu*. Ever since last year, I had started craning my neck up to make eye contact with her. While *I* was still the height of a grade-schooler, somehow *she* was already a full-fledged seventh-grader.

“What’s the matter?” she asked, sensing my gaze.

“Nothing,” I lied.

Suddenly it was her turn to stare at me, and as she bent down, I felt the full brunt of our height difference. Then, as we held eye contact, I realized: she still hadn’t put her glasses back on. Maybe

she didn't need to wear them at home or something. I'd never once seen her take them off at school.

"Whaddya want?" I demanded.

"Just wanted to look at you, Hino." She gazed deep into my eyes, unblinking, and I knew she meant every word of it. It made me a little bashful.

Nagafuji walked me to the front, and as we passed through the hallway to the storefront area, I spotted a familiar car idling at the curb outside. I thanked her dad for having me over, then walked out; she toddled along after me.

"Brrrrr, it's cold!"

"You know you're *not* getting in the car with me, right?" I cautioned her. Sure enough, she stopped short.

"I figured I should spend the night at your house!" she protested.

"No, you should *not*!"

I tried to push her away, but she barely budged. *Grrr, you brat! This used to work on you!* Instead—"Hyah!"—she grabbed me and picked me up. She made it look easy, too!

"Hey, let go!"

"Hmmm....Hino, did you lose weight?" she asked, tilting her head. Considering the rabbit food they served at my house, I might have, but I knew that wasn't really what she meant. "Or did you just get *smaller*?"

"You wanna fight, punk?!"

YOU got BIGGER, you jumbo dumb! I hissed internally. It felt like this conversation was going in circles, so I hopped into the back seat.

"See you tomorrow!" she called.

“See ya!”

Without turning around, she slowly backed away toward the butcher’s shop. *Please just cross the street normally before you get yourself killed.* Naturally, when she made it to the front door, her old man started chewing her out. It made me laugh.

Then I turned to the driver waiting silently for me. “I was gonna come home, I swear.”

“Yes, well, it’s already dark.” Our longtime servant, Enome-san, was sitting in the driver’s seat, still wearing her maid’s apron, her hair tinged red beneath the glow of the streetlamps. “Now, then, young madam...”

“Nooooo!” I covered my ears. At some point—not sure when—the term of address had become unbearably cringey to me. “*Pleeeeeease* don’t call me that.”

“Then what shall I call you instead?” she asked as she pulled away from the curb.

“*Anything* else!”

“How about Lady Akira?”

“...You’re just messing with me, aren’t you?”

I could see her grinning in the rearview mirror. With a smile on her face, she looked like a much younger woman.

“Mom sent you, didn’t she?”

“Correct, she did,” Enome-san admitted readily. “The lady of the house requested that you have a chauffeur at this hour.”

“It’s not even six o’clock!”

“Correct, but it gets dark earlier in the wintertime.”

Granted, yes, the sky beyond the windshield was pitch-black. And as we turned the corner away from Nagafuji’s Meats, the streetlamps began to dwindle one by one until eventually, we were

plunged into a veritable sea of darkness—so thick, in fact, I thought about rolling down the window and trying to touch it.

“...I’m not a kid anymore, you know.”

“For the next five years, you most certainly *are* a child.”

From the perspective of someone more than twice my age, I could maybe kinda see her perspective, especially since she had taken care of me my whole life—and even played with me when I was a little kid. Hard to argue, really, so I decided to change the subject. “I’m surprised you knew where to find me.”

“Is there anywhere else you would really go?”

“I guess not...”

Enome-san could read me like a book, and it didn’t make for a very fun conversation. Still, I had to admit: there was no point in going anywhere else if Nagafuji wasn’t going to be there. One could say that was the extent to which she had embedded herself in my life.

Looking back, the two of us had known each other since preschool. What was it about her that made our personalities so compatible? When did it all start? I tried to remember, but couldn’t think of a time when I didn’t see her at least once a day. Except for family trips, I guess. The years all blurred together—impossible to tell apart.

“So I have no choice but to go back there, huh?”

Perhaps *that* was the biggest indicator that adulthood was still beyond my grasp. I didn’t have a home of my own. I was just a guest in my parents’ house.

“Oh? You don’t want to?”

The car rolled to a stop at a red light. If I admitted that I didn’t want to go, would she toss me out onto the street and drive off? Then I’d go back to Nagafuji’s house, and...eventually, her parents

would kick me out themselves. Reality wasn't going to conveniently give me another place to belong.

"I was told I'm not that important to the Hino legacy, anyway."

At this, Enome-san looked over her shoulder at me. "By whom?"

Stoplight or not, keep your eyes on the road, lady. "Father Dearest himself."

"Oh, my." She promptly faced forward once more.

"But obviously, I know he didn't mean it like *that*."

"Hmmm. Are you sure about that?" She smiled evasively.

Uh, shouldn't you try to reassure me? I'm at a tender young age, remember?

"Well, we can all agree that the master of the household is a bit too *concise* for his own good."

"You can say that again."

I didn't need him to explain every thought that crossed his mind, obviously, but sometimes he talked like he was reciting a vocabulary quiz. One that he didn't even bother grading afterward. There was no tacit understanding between us. If I wanted to take tests, I'd just stay at school, for crying out loud.

"Once we arrive, I'll serve dinner," Enome-san continued warmly, veering away from the subject at hand.

"Oh, crap, that's right. I meant to eat at Nagafuji's before I left."

"You don't like the food, either?" she asked, despite knowing the answer.

"I'm not a fan of that style of cooking." It was just so *weak*. Not entirely flavorless, but barely there. It was like chewing air: too simplified for my tastes.

"I apologize, dear, but your mother doesn't care for strong seasonings."

“...I know.”

Incidentally, my brothers were all fully trained to enjoy the mild cooking. What about my pops, though? He would always eat in silence until he cleaned his plate, then leave the table without a moment’s delay. Not once had I ever heard him comment on the food, be it positively or otherwise. Regardless...

“You know, Enome-san, it kinda seems like you only ever take orders from Mom.” This was something I observed periodically.

“That’s not true,” she replied coolly, and that was the end of that.

For the rest of the car ride, I sat there in a soporific daze, and when at last we finally arrived, I hopped out onto the gravel driveway.

The first thing that even a child could observe about my house was its above-average size. Going by the acreage alone, it was even bigger than the hotel that just opened near the train station, and it was furnished like a Japanese-style garden. How many Nagafuji’s Meats-es could we fit inside? If I asked aloud, Nagafuji would probably start looking for the measuring tape. Or a ruler, knowing her.

The mental image made me laugh, and as my cheeks moved, the winter air grazed over them. I shivered in the cold.

Enome-san walked up to the front door, then turned to face me. “Welcome home.”

“...Glad to be back.”

At age thirteen, it was all I knew to say.

The next day, as I ate lunch in the cafeteria with Nagafuji, I pondered the small miracle that she and I had wound up in the same class for seven years running. Assuming someone wasn't intentionally messing with us, what was the probability of this happening? In grade school, we had changed classes every two years, so there were four shuffles total thus far... Maybe the chances weren't as infinitesimally small as I first thought. Would I be sitting through lectures in the same room as her next year, too?

"Hino!" she called, waving her chopsticks at me. "Snap out of it or you're going to bite right through your chopsticks!"

"Only *you* would do that."

"No need to be rude!" she scoffed. Then, two seconds later, she went back to her food like the whole exchange had never happened.

In the classroom, we were still the same Hino and Nagafuji. The only thing remotely mature about us was our spiffy new uniforms.

"So, are you going to take over the butcher's shop when you grow up?"

"Huh?" Right as she was about to take a bite of her baguette, she froze. Then, after a beat, she started to think. "Hmmm..." I could see her eyes wandering, so I knew her brain was working; it was generally pretty easy to tell if it wasn't. Then, finally, she looked back at me. "Good question."

"...I mean, you don't have to make a decision right this second or anything." I wasn't fishing for a deep, introspective answer. Just making small talk, really.

"Hmmm..."

She resumed taking a bite of bread. Likewise, I reached for my own. Then I spread on the little packets of margarine and jam that came with it and savored the processed, fatty goodness. To me, this was peak deliciousness.

After we finished our food and started cleaning up, she asked me, “If I *did* run the butcher’s shop, would you come by every day to buy something?”

“Well, let’s see... Yeah, I’d buy the croquettes, maybe?”

“Okay, then, maybe I *will* take over.”

Her straightforward thought process made me laugh.

Hours later, after school, she walked up to my desk. “Let’s go hooooome!” She was oddly chipper, but I knew better than to read too deeply into it.

“Sorry, but I can’t.”

“Can’t wait? Me either!!!” She started tugging on my arm, trying to haul me to my feet.

“No, that’s not what I mean!” The two most difficult things in the world: Nagafuji and the Japanese language. I flailed my arm, trying to free myself from her grasp. “I have family stuff to take care of, okay?!”

After I got home yesterday, my mother insisted on me coming straight home today. This happened with some frequency, so Nagafuji wasn’t too surprised to hear it, nor did she look disappointed. Like a still lake, she was at peace. “Family stuff, huh?”

“Yep. Trust me, I’m not excited,” I sighed. *Family stuff* never actually involved me. It was only ever a ginormous waste of my time.

“In that case, I guess I’ll go do club activities for a change.”

“...You’re in a *club*? Which one?”

“It’s a secret.”

“Okay, then. Later.”

I started to walk away, but she stopped me, grabbing my back fat through my clothes. “Hey, c’mon, be a little curious!”

This, too, was a giant waste of my time, and I knew it. After debating how to respond, for some reason I settled on: “Fine, whatever... Oh, my golly gosh, *pleeeeee* tell me, Nagafuji-chan.”

“Hmmm... Some other time, maybe.”

“I’m gonna punch your lights out.”

And so, after some fun hijinks, I headed straight home. The setting sun draped the bamboo stalks in vivid orange as I walked, deepening the green and making me feel as though I’d wandered into a forest by mistake. Mixed with the winter air, the smell of the bamboo was crisp and cold.

When I arrived at the house, I saw several unfamiliar cars parked out front, plus a moped in need of a good wash. Who the heck rode in on *that*? Most of my family’s clientele wouldn’t be caught dead astride one of those.

After I weaved my way past the vehicles, it was my brother who first greeted me. “Well, now, I see you actually came home early like you were supposed to.”

Of my four siblings, only the fourth son, Goushirou, still lived here with us. He was many years older than me, but at least he was *somewhat* close to my age. Heck, my eldest brother was practically old enough to be my father. He had already moved out by the time I was born, so I barely knew him. And if I had to guess, he barely knew me either.

Man, my family is weird.

As usual, Goushirou was dressed in a kimono. “Once you’ve gotten changed, please make your way to the sanctum.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever.”

As soon as the message was delivered, without even waiting for me to take my shoes off at the door, he strode off somewhere. Evidently, it was a busy day.

Goushirou was well-suited to handling all this family stuff. He was elegant and graceful, with a posture so perfect, you'd think there was a stick up his butt. He and I weren't exactly on bad terms exactly, but we weren't friendly enough to make small talk either. To me, he was just...someone else who lived at my house.

Back at my bedroom, I tossed my bookbag to the floor and exhaled. "Uuuggghhhhhh, this *sucks!*"

I pulled off my socks and flung them at the wall. With fewer layers on, the chill in the air made me shiver. I knew what I was supposed to do, and yet I still found myself wandering around my room. My brain was barely functional—in fact, everything from the shoulders up was plagued with an unpleasant sense of restlessness.

So, once I got all gussied up, I headed over and quietly sat myself down in a corner of the sanctum. In this outfit and this position, I felt like one of those dolls you see on Girls' Day. As for the reason that the whole family had to be present and accounted for...well, we were entertaining a bunch of hoity-toity adults I'd never seen before. To my eyes, they were dressed like the cultured elite; at the very least, they were wearing clothing that cost thousands of yen. Growing up in this family, you quickly learned to recognize these things.

But unlike me, these clients were actually important to the Hino legacy.

In times like these, even my ordinarily reticent father made more of an effort to carry the conversation. He couldn't tell a joke to save his life, but he would at least listen to what was said and respond accordingly. I watched him out of the corner of my eye, and whenever the conversation turned to me, I just smiled and nodded. Piece of cake.

If I'm not important to this family, then why do I have to be here at all? My skull quivered like it was about to tumble off my neck.

Of the guests, there was one person on the younger side. Unlike me, she sat in the center, wearing a scarlet kimono that was too long for her short stature. But while she looked young, in actuality, I knew she had to be older than me.

Wait, why are her eyes closed?

Then her little head started to bob. She was dozing off. And upon further inspection, she wasn't wearing a kimono at all. It was just a cheap summer *yukata*.

Meanwhile, everyone else pretended not to notice, and the conversation carried on like everything was fine. But in my case, it all went in one ear and out the other. This was somehow even *more* boring than going to school. Every word was just noise to me, like the buzzing of a fly, or maybe worse.

UGGGGGGGGGGGHHHHHH!!!

I nearly groaned out loud, but barely managed to hold it in. After that, I spent the rest of the time zoning out, eyes unfocused. Likewise, the scarlet yukata girl slept almost the entire time.

When I finally returned to my bedroom, I immediately loosened my *obi* sash and started to take off my kimono. But I was too tired to find anything else to wear, so I gave up and flopped down on the floor. The air was cooler down here, and it eased the dusty layers of what felt like fatigue weighing me down. Still, I lacked the energy to get up again.

Earlier, I had caught myself having the silliest thought: *I want to go home*. But this was literally my house. Where else was I hoping to go?

A few minutes later, Enome-san opened the door and observed me lying there. "How very picturesque," she mused.

“Huh?”

“Your loose kimono, slipping from your shoulders. It reminds me of an *ukiyo-e* painting.”

“Cool,” I replied halfheartedly.

Instead of leaving, however, she walked in and opened the wardrobe in the corner of the room. I watched her out of the corner of my eye, then spoke up.

“Hey, Enome-san?”

As she fetched me a change of clothes, she turned to look at me.

“Aren’t you the same age as my mom?” I asked.

“Yes, I am.”

Apparently, after the two of them graduated from school together, Enome-san decided to work for my mother as a live-in maid. They were close friends, and Mom was delighted that they wouldn’t have to part ways, or so I was told. To this day, I often saw them chatting in the hall—like old friends, not employer and employee.

“What made you decide to start working here?” I asked next.

“Because I knew your mother could pull some strings for me,” she declared with a smile.

“Liar.”

“The truth is, the lady of the house personally asked me to stay with her,” she continued every bit as firmly.

“She did?”

“It really meant a lot to me.” Her eyes sparkled wistfully, as though she was reliving the memories in her mind. It reminded me of an expression I’d seen on someone else recently, but couldn’t place who or where.

“So where are the guests?”

“They left.”

I replied with a disinterested grunt, even though I was the one who asked in the first place. I had met them myself in person not long ago, but already I couldn't remember what their faces looked like. Time and time again—yes, with every passing day—I became more and more convinced that...

“I'm not cut out to be part of this family,” I admitted aloud.

“You don't think so?”

“Nope.” I raised my arms in the direction of the ceiling and watched as my kimono sleeves slowly slipped down. “I don't know how to describe it, but...I don't feel comfortable in my own skin. I try to hold my breath, but I still stick out. I'm suffocating.”

And as long as I lived under this roof, that feeling would never go away.

Wrapping my loose kimono tightly around myself, I sat up. “Can I ask for a favor?”

“What is it, hmm?” Her voice sounded extra warm and gentle. Probably just my own selfish interpretation.

“I want to run away from home for a day,” I continued, confessing to her a desire I had suppressed off and on for years. No sooner had the words left my lips than I found myself wondering: *Wait, why did I tell her that?* Looking back, however, it was proof of the unique relationship we shared.

There was a certain closeness between family members, and a different closeness between friends. Each type of relationship required its own language, its own gifts, its own blind spots, its own willful disregard... Okay, maybe that's not really relevant to my point. Basically, Enome-san wasn't family, nor was she my friend. She existed outside of that framework, and I suspect that was why I sought her advice.

“You want to run away?”

“Yeah.” It was a childish, immature wish, and I was embarrassed to have a grown-up judging me for it.

Then she slapped her knee. “Well, then, let’s get going.”

“What?”

“First things first, we’ll need to ask permission.”

“*What?!*”

Now I was well and truly confused. Naturally, she ignored me and strode from the room. I was picturing something along the lines of a secret escapade, and this was quickly turning into...*not* that.

“Who the heck asks *permission* to run away from home?”

As usual, the Hino family was bizarrely abnormal. And so...

“I don’t get it, but all right,” said my brother, who happened to be present at the time. He stood with his arms folded into his sleeves. “If you only wish to leave the house for leisure purposes, then I don’t foresee a problem with that.”

“Okay.”

“Is there a day when we need you...? Ah, yes, Thursday next week. Any other day would be fine.”

In other words, he was asking me to run away from home on *schedule*. The hilarity of it made me laugh, even though I knew he wasn’t joking. He cocked his head at me in sincere confusion.

“Again, I must admit I don’t really understand...”

“You don’t have to.”

“All right then,” he nodded promptly, and I could see the family resemblance.

“I shall go and inform the lady of the house,” Enome-san told me in passing as she ran around arranging my escape. I knew Mom would worry herself sick no matter how I tried to phrase it, but

perhaps it wouldn't be so alarming coming from Enome-san instead. Besides, the thought of having to talk to my mother about my *feelings* made me cringe.

"Then that leaves..."

"Mm-hmm."

She smiled but made no offer to talk to him in my place. As usual, she showed a clear preference for my mom. And so, reluctantly, I hunted him down myself.

"I'm gonna run away from home," I informed my father.

"*Huh?!*"

He was sitting hunched over on the porch, trimming his toenails. His expression was blank, but I could sense that he was...surprised-ish? This was unusual for him. But of course, it didn't take long for him to recover.

"I see," he concluded, and that was the end of that. Quietly, I kinda wished he would have at least *tried* to ask me about it.

Later that evening, the getaway was about to begin. The car was packed, and I gazed out at the sun as it drifted beneath the horizon, all the while trying not to question whether this even *counted* as running away from home.

"HEEEEEY! HINOOOOO!"

"Ugh..."

Just then, Nagafuji came jogging up to me, wearing a backpack. She didn't look like she was here to hang out—she looked like she was going on a trip somewhere. And obviously, I hadn't told her about this plan whatsoever.

"You're not invited."

"Yeah, I'm not invited!" she yelled angrily for some reason. "Oh, wait, I lied. I actually was," she clarified with a straight face.

It was certainly within the realm of possibility for Nagafuji to show up at my house unannounced, but there was no way she could have arrived with such perfect timing unless someone had told her when we would be leaving. I had one particular candidate in mind, so I looked over; Enome-san smiled back at me, dressed in her maid's apron. "I merely made arrangements for us to leave."

"*She's* part of the arrangements?"

"The most important part, I suspect, where you're concerned."

My heart jumped like someone had reached out and shoved it. Then a streak of rebellion flashed through my mind, bending at a perpendicular angle. I started to cave to it, but quickly realized it wouldn't do more than root my feet to the dark earth, so I decided she might be right and fell silent instead. Being a teenager was complicated.

Of course, Nagafuji didn't understand any of this whatsoever. She just smiled smugly and patted my head, which pissed me off.

Okay, but seriously. "Y'know, this *really* doesn't count as running away from home anymore."

"Don't you think it'd be more fun to go on a trip instead?" Enome-san asked casually. I started to respond on reflex, but once again, I decided she might be right and silently climbed into the car.

And so, with my family's help, thirteen-year-old me set out on a journey.

There I was, on a spontaneous trip with Nagafuji, the likes of which I hadn't experienced since...elementary school, probably. The last field trip we went on took us to Kyoto, but that was a little too far to travel by car.

“Where to, ladies?” Enome-san asked as she was driving. *Wait, where are we headed right now?* The view through the windshield was still the same cityscape.

“Good question...”

I didn’t really have a concrete plan in mind. *Honestly, when I said I wanted to run away from home, I wasn’t expecting it to happen so fast, or...well...any of this,* I thought to myself as I looked over at Nagafuji, who was in the process of removing her glasses.

“Where do *you* wanna go?” I asked her.

“Um...your house?”

“No, dummy!”

For some reason, she was *obsessed* with my stupid house. I was really starting to think maybe we were switched at birth. But at the same time, it pained me to think of Nagafuji acting like a Hino, with perfect posture and poise at all times. She just wouldn’t be the same girl anymore.

Change scared me, but whenever things stayed the same for too long, it felt dull and bleak. *Life sure is complicated.*

“Okay, look. Would you rather go to the mountains or the beach?”

I knew I wasn’t going to be able to decide on my own, so I left it up to her. Fortunately, she didn’t hesitate for long. “Beach.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Beach balls!”

Didn’t pack any, sorry. “She said she wants to go to the beach,” I told Enome-san.

“Can do,” she replied with a chuckle.

Look, I get it. I knew it was silly to have Nagafuji decide where I wanted to run away to. Especially since she and I were already

practically glued to each other. “Is it okay for you to drive us, though? Don’t you have other work?” I asked.

“There are other maids, you know. Besides, the lady of the house said she would pick up the slack in my absence.”

“Oh, really?”

“Wow, that’s a big deal!” Nagafuji cut in. *Excuse me?*

“I didn’t know Mom could do chores,” I continued.

“She can’t. *Keh heh heh!*” I could hear Enome-san cackling to herself in the driver’s seat like she was having a ball.

“*Keee hee hee!*” Nagafuji joined in.

“Don’t you start too!” I hissed.

She went back to a straight face and looked out the window. Outside, the scenery was still familiar. How far would we have to travel to get away from the Hino influence?

“So how will we even get to the beach, anyway?” I asked curiously. From here, we’d need to drive in a straight line, either north or south.

“I know a place we can stay. But I didn’t call in advance, so I hope they haven’t closed down since last time.”

“What, like a hotel?”

“A lodge I stayed at in the past. It’s right on the water.”

“Huh.” A *lodge*. I liked the sound of that. But... “What’ll we do if it’s closed?”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” she replied, her smile unwavering.

Eh, I guess it’d be weird to have it all planned out, anyway. With that thought, I leaned back and rested my full weight against the seat. Enveloped in darkness, I could feel drowsiness seize me by the arm.

Long story short, the lodge was still open.

“Ugh, they *changed* it!” Enome-san lamented. Apparently, the place had been remodeled recently due to its age.

The two of us sat in the lobby, watching her reserve our room at the front desk. Nagafuji wore a stupid grin on her face the entire time.

“Having fun, are you?” I asked.

“It’s nice!”

That...wasn’t exactly an answer to my question. Par for the course with this girl, unfortunately.

Then, after we dropped off our luggage in our room, we decided to go for a walk and get a peek at the ocean before it got too dark. It was my first time going to the beach in winter. In my mind, I associated it strongly with the color blue and, of course, summer; neither of those was present. The only thing out here was Nagafuji’s blunt observation:

“My legs are cold.”

She was wearing a skirt, and I could see her trembling. It didn’t help that the sun had almost fully set. Nevertheless, she seemed to find some enjoyment in the sound and feel of the sand beneath her feet, because she started running around like a little kid. Obviously, I elected not to join her. As for Enome-san, she gazed out at the dark water.

“I wanted to think about family stuff for a while, and I can’t bring myself to do it while I’m under that roof,” I confessed to her, though she hadn’t asked.

If I tried to scrutinize it from up close, I'd only see all the things I didn't like and come away with a negative reaction. Thus, I needed to breathe some different air for a while and get my head in the right mindset. That was my only motive for coming here. But I could already tell I wasn't going to get my wish.

"With Nagafuji here, I don't have time to think about that crap."

She was your classic case of no thoughts, head empty, and yet she had absolutely *zero* chill. Whenever I had to deal with her, it sapped me of all my patience—not at all conducive to calm, rational reflection. *But maybe it's for the best that she's here with me*, I decided as I gazed out at the dark, shadowy sea. Alone, my train of thought would derail itself off a cliff into the ocean and sink to the bottom.

"Why don't we call it an early night and take a nice, hot bath?"

"Sounds good."

Blankly, I watched as Nagafuji ran around like a dog without a leash.

"So."

"So-so?"

"What are you doing in here?"

Our lodge room featured a private bathroom complete with a beautifully crafted tub. Not as big as the one at my house, obviously, but I digress. There were two occupants in the room: me and Nagafuji.

"What's the harm? It's big enough for two."

Did this answer actually explain anything? I tried to think about it, but my mind was fuzzy from the steam, so I gave up.

She had given herself a pitiful half-assed scrubbing and beaten me to the tub, and now, Nagafuji was melting in the heat. She sure loved taking long soaks; whenever she spent the night at my place, she'd always get overheated and end up on the floor in the corner of my room.

Behind me, I could hear her doggy-paddling or something, making waves in the water. This was a childhood habit of hers, and evidently it wasn't going away anytime soon.

"So tell me, Akira-chan..."

"Huh? What is it?"

"Do you hate your house?"

You only just now noticed this? I wanted to say. Then I remembered this was Nagafuji I was talking to. "Uhhh...well, I don't like it much, I'll tell you that."

"Huh."

Right away, I knew she didn't have anything of value to say in response. Not that I blamed her, of course—it wasn't her business.

"Interesting," she continued.

"Stop. You don't have to say anything. It's fine." If I forced her to think critically right now, she'd probably pass out from brain overload.

Just then, I heard her get out of the tub. When I looked over my shoulder, I saw her walking toward me. Then, before I could react, she sat down directly behind me in the shower area. Her warmth and height and smell crashed over me all at once.

"I'll wash your hair for you."

"What for?"

Instead of answering, she dug her nails into my scalp.

“OW!” I screamed, partly out of surprise and partly out of genuine pain.

“Oops. I thought your scalp would be deeper in.”

“What does that even *mean*...? And where did this come from, anyway?”

“Don’t worry about it!” She started running her hands all over my head—a visual representation of the confusion she caused me on a daily basis.

“Man, you really suck at this!”

“It’s not easy when it’s someone else’s head!”

When you put it that way, I guess so. Admittedly I had never tried to wash someone else’s hair before. In that sense, perhaps a little trial and error was to be expected. But then I saw our reflections in the mirror in front of me and realized...

“Wait, you’re just ruffling it around! Use shampoo or something, dingbat!”

“Oh. Oops. I forgot!”

She started pouring on the shampoo like it was water. I could feel it dripping down my part, and when it started to streak a line down the center of my forehead, I instinctively closed my eyes.

“Damn it, you...!”

“Are you itchy anywhere?”

“My eyes!!!”

“If it hurts, just raise your hand, okay?”

“Enough! I’m sick of this!!!” Will you ever learn to stop voicing every single thought that crosses your head?!

After that, Nagafuji demonstrated a careful amount of restraint as she played with my hair. The soap suds formed a soapy cloud

around my head—whenever there was a particularly large bubble, she would gleefully pop it with her finger.

“So...why are we doing this?”

“Mmm, no real reason. Just wanted to.”

“Ah, right. Forgot who I was talking to for a sec.”

Fine, whatever. I decided to let her entertain herself. After all, if it made her happy, then chances were high it wouldn't be so bad for me, either.

“You're really weird, Nagafuji.” *It's weird that you can make these decisions about my life and it doesn't even bother me.*

“I notice you've switched to 'Nagafuji' now, huh, Akira-chan?” she replied as she rinsed my hair.

I waited for the water to fall silent, then answered, “...You already call me Hino in public anyway.”

“Yeah.”

Were we growing apart, or had we simply grown sensitive to societal norms? My gloopy emotions were starting to solidify. Maybe once they took on an immutable shape, I would finally find the words to describe how I felt about her.

“I *do* try to think about things, you know,” she continued.

“Do you?”

“Okay, maybe I haven't always, but I definitely did just now!”

“Better late than never.”

Our laughter echoed off the walls. I combed my wet bangs out of my face and shook off the excess water. And when I wiped my eyes, I could feel the built-up murkiness start to clear away. Meanwhile, she had yet to continue her train of thought.

“Well? What did you think about?”

We made eye contact in the mirror. She blinked at me for a moment, then got up and went back to the bathtub.

“Hey!”

“I forgot. Let me calm down and think it over again.”

“It’s gone. Just give up.”

“I think it had something to do with fish...or birds...”

“*You’re* the only birdbrain I see around here.”

Rolling my eyes, I nevertheless settled in next to her in the tub. The warmth of the water felt like a metaphor for the connection between us.

The next morning, I awoke to the sight of Nagafuji hanging over me, staring into my face, holding a tomato.

“What is it...?” I groaned. Was I referring to her or the tomato? Probably both.

“This is your wake-up call.”

“Didn’t ask for one.” *Fine, whatever.* I tried to sit up, but she was in the way. “Hey!”

“What is it, hmm?”

“Your face is in my face!”

At this rate, our noses were going to smoosh into each other...and yet she didn’t move a muscle from the spot. With no other choice, I tried to dodge around her, but then she chased after me. “Wheeeee!”

Ugh, you piss me off. “Save your little game for later. I’m not even awake...”

“I’ve been waiting forever for you to wake up, and I’m *bored!*”

“Sucks to be you.”

I shooed her away, and she rolled off. Finally, I was free to get up. Judging from the light streaming in through the window, I could tell it wasn’t especially early.

“Oh yeah, Hino!”

“What?”

“You might think this is a tomato, but guess what? It’s Mr. Apple!” Smirking, she flipped it around to reveal a pair of googly eyes. “Hi, kids!” she greeted me in a cartoonish voice.

“Stop.”

“My name is Nagafuji-san!”

“You’re supposed to say Mr. Apple...”

After we got dressed, I started to wonder how the heck we were going to entertain ourselves until it was time to leave, but an answer quickly presented itself.

“Why don’t we go fishing?” Enome-san suggested as she walked into the room, returning from who knows where.

Fishing? I glanced at the ocean. “I don’t know how to fish.”

“I do. And I’ve even eaten a fish that I caught before!” Nagafuji bragged, but I ignored her and kept mulling it over. Then I saw the smile on Enome-san’s face and decided that was reason enough to give it a try. Not like I had much else in mind.

Belatedly, it hit me: *Why did we come here in the first place?*

After we ate breakfast, Enome-san led us out toward the breakwater. On the way, Nagafuji realized she’d forgotten her glasses, but then she looked at me and decided she didn’t need to go back for them.

Unlike yesterday, the weather today was only partly cloudy, but the chill was ever-present. As we approached the water, the breeze started to bite—so hard, I half-expected the wind itself to freeze into icicle streaks and stab us. Of course, the fishermen never took a day off, and several of them were already out here, standing stock-still and staring out at the water. I, too, found my eyes drawn to our deep blue neighbor.

In the distance, I could see a little fishing dinghy floating along, rocking on the waves. I had surely never seen anything like it, and yet somehow it felt like a scene out of a time long past. Then, once we reached a more deserted area, Enome-san handed me a fishing pole and patiently taught me the basics of how to hold and use it.

“I didn’t know you were a fisher,” I mused.

“Oh, I’m not. I’m just repeating what I was taught years ago,” she replied, holding her hair down as it flailed hither and thither in the wind.

Years ago, hmm? Perhaps she first tried her hand at fishing right in this very spot back when she last came here.

I moved several paces away from my fellow trainee Nagafuji, then cast my line. I had a bucket of water at the ready, but sincerely doubted I was going to catch anything. Still, on the off-chance I somehow *did*, I was planning to take it home and eat it. After all, it struck me as a bizarre waste of effort to throw it back after I caught it.

“If I catch anything, I hope it’s a conger eel!” Nagafuji announced as she pointlessly swished her pole around. If I had to guess, she couldn’t see a thing out there.

“Conger eels? Are they native to Japan?” I looked down at the ocean from the edge of the breakwater. It was far deeper than any river, and I couldn’t begin to detect any life signs lurking within.

“...Okay then, I’ll settle for a Japanese eel!”

“...I think I’m seeing a pattern.” *But I don’t think you’re going to get your wish.*

Ten minutes later, Nagafuji had grown bored of standing still, so she handed her fishing pole back to Enome-san and started wandering around—exactly as I predicted she would. Instead of casting it, however, Enome-san remained at my side.

“It seems the girl has rather less patience than I anticipated,” she mused.

“I dunno...” *Impatient* wasn’t quite the right word to describe it, but I couldn’t think of anything better to say.

In the distance, I could see Nagafuji crouching down to pick something up. *What is that, a broken ventilator?* Upon further scrutiny, I could see what looked like the blades of a fan... *Oh, it’s a boomerang!* Someone must have left it here by mistake.

I watched as she picked it up and held it *really* close to her face. *Wow, she’s as blind as a bat without her glasses, huh? What’s she planning to do with that piece of junk, anyway?* Once she had confirmed what she was holding, she dusted it off, then ran over to an empty section of the beach and flung it with a deft snap of her wrist.

Alas, it fell straight back to the ground. Maybe there was some kind of trick to it. Then she ran over to fetch it like a dog playing Frisbee. *Eh, she’ll be fine.*

“Aren’t you cold?” Enome-san asked, her whole body shivering.

“Yeah, but I don’t really mind it. I’m kinda used to it now.”

“How nice for you,” she joked.

Oddly enough, she looked quite picturesque herself, standing here at the ocean’s edge while dressed in a maid’s apron. Her jacket hung from her shoulders, flapping in the breeze. She looked like the

protagonist of a story I wanted to read. But her eyes weren't fixed on the fishing pole—they were chasing the boat in the distance.

"Last time you came here, were you alone?" I asked. I didn't know much about her history, but I knew she wasn't currently married.

"I was with your mother. It was about a week before the wedding, so that would have been...many, many years ago." She gazed out at the horizon, recalling the memories that floated on the ocean waves.

Her and Mom, huh? I knew it. "Was it your idea to come here?"

"No, it was hers."

"Huh, that's surprising... Well, not really. She *does* love to travel."

To my mother, practically every extended break from school was an excuse to plan a family trip abroad. And when I say family, I mean the *whole* family—all my older brothers and all their wives and kids. Anyone who saw us traveling together probably thought we were on a package tour. Honestly, the noise and hectic energy drove me crazy, but knowing my mother, she probably enjoyed it.

"So you guys came out here and went fishing?"

"The lady of the house wanted to give it a try."

"Did you catch anything?"

She slowly shook her head. "Nothing was biting, and it was getting cold, and we couldn't risk her getting sick before the wedding, so we called it quits early on."

"Huh."

"Then we went back to the lodge, ordered the fried fish, and pretended we'd caught it ourselves."

"I guess that...*kinda* counts...?"

Frankly, it sounded like something Nagafuji would come up with. Perhaps her level of ditziness was more common than I thought. *She still takes the cake, though.*

“With a fishing pole in your hands, I must admit, you really do look just like her.”

“...Do I?”

My mother was a fair bit older than the average parent, and in my view, the age gap between us was slowly eroding all the physical traits we had in common. When I looked at her, I didn’t really see any likeness. But perhaps the same couldn’t be said for an outside observer like Enome-san.

In the past, she and my mother probably used to call each other by name. But “the lady of the house” always came so naturally to her, you’d never suspect a thing.

“Enome-san, are you happy you chose to live with my mom?”

My fishing line was as still as the grave; I wiggled it in frustration. Meanwhile, she shifted her gaze from the boat to me. As she tilted her head, her long hair spilled down.

“Of course I am. Why do you ask?”

I wasn’t sure whether to tell her. I hadn’t condensed it perfectly in my head, and if I gave her the full version, she might not know how to answer. Ultimately, however, the words found their way to my tongue, given wing by the brisk winter wind.

“Well, I don’t know how to explain it, but...it feels like...if Mom and Dad hadn’t gotten married...”

Everything in my head was utterly disjointed. Mom and Enome-san were inseparable—they were *special* to each other. Then Mom married Dad and started a family, but Enome-san was still around... Almost like if Nagafuji suddenly started spending all her time with someone else instead of me... But my feelings were an impenetrable

fog, and I couldn't grasp them. I couldn't put them—and subsequently, my question—into a tidy little box.

“I see,” she replied.

Could she honestly understand my question when even *I* was still having trouble parsing it? She pressed a hand to her cheek, her veins glowing prominently beneath her pale, dry skin.

“We talked it out, and we decided this was the most realistic option if we wanted to stay together forever.”

All at once, I felt a tug, like my fishing line was connected straight to my heart.

“The lady of the house was unable to make a life for herself outside of the Hino family, and if she wanted to remain part of it, she would need to uphold certain traditions. These things were required of her long before we ever met.”

A wistful smile alighted upon her lips, as though she were reliving that first day. Their friendship must have been picture-perfect, with nothing but happy memories to reflect upon. Because whenever Enome-san talked about my mother, or *to* my mother, she always wore this same smile.

“This was a decision she made as a daughter of the Hino family. But I know for certain that she wished to spend her days with me, and that alone has meant the world to me. So yes, I'm happy with the way things have turned out.”

“...Gotcha.”

For some reason, Nagafuji's face briefly came to mind before I responded. All I had to do was turn my head slightly to see her in person, and yet somehow she had invaded my brain, too. *Settle down, punk*, I thought to myself with a chuckle. But my breath quickly turned cold and dark.

“Well, that may be how it was for Mom, but...”

“Yes?”

“Unlike her, *I’m* not needed to carry on the Hino family legacy, apparently.” My four brothers already had it covered.

“Right.”

“So who *am* I?” Of all the kids in my family, I showed up dead last. What exactly was keeping me tied to the Hino household at all?

“The answer will change depending on who you’re with,” she answered promptly, without a moment of contemplation. “For example, from *my* perspective, you are the daughter of someone special. Thus, I want to be good to you and take care of you and build a positive relationship with you... Is that not enough?”

“I mean...” I couldn’t think of anything to say; my voice faltered in the wind.

Enome-san remained calm, but she spoke loud enough that even the roar of the ocean couldn’t drown her out. “You don’t have to think too hard about your identity, because everyone else in your life will come to their own conclusions about you. But, if ever you decide you don’t like it, then that is the moment you must take action.”

“...Huh...”

Just like that, she solved my teenage angst in one shot. *Grown-ups are invincible*, I thought to myself, impressed. Then again, the difference between her and my father was like night and day. *Okay, maybe not all of them.*

“Enome-san, you’re really good at giving advice, huh?”

“Compared to the master of the household, practically anyone would be superior.”

“Point taken.”

Just then, Nagafuji came jogging back over. “Didja catch anything?”

Had she waited for this exact lull in the conversation? *Nah, couldn't be.* She wasn't that sort of girl. Incidentally, she was still holding the boomerang.

"Let's take a look," she mused aloud as she peered into the blue bucket at my feet. Nothing but water, naturally. She gave it a shake, then clapped a hand on my shoulder. "Practice makes perfect. You'll get there!"

Now *this* was the Nagafuji I knew. "Shut it or I'll stick your foot in the bucket."

"Wow, you can do that?" She sounded sincerely impressed. *You're joking, right?* Then she crouched down next to the bucket, stared inside, and experimentally dipped her right index finger into the water. A split second later, she withdrew her hand, her finger quivering. "It appears this water is ice-cold, so I've changed my mind."

"You're unusually smart today, huh?"

"The fish must be really hard workers if they can survive in water this cold."

"...Smart *and* compassionate, I see."

Nagafuji was immune to sarcasm, so she didn't react at all. Instead, she straightened up and started entertaining herself—by playing with my hair, smacking my back, and shoving my shoulders.

"Stop that."

"Well, you look really bored right now. I thought I'd help!"

"You're physically incapable of grasping the concept of fishing, aren't you?"

Not that I understood it much myself. In the end, I never caught any fish, but I got the feeling my hook had reeled in something else. Then it came time to leave, and we departed from the beach like the tide itself.

With the passage of time, the same exact place could feel completely different. To me, this described the way I had always felt toward Nagafuji.

“Shall I drive you to the butcher’s shop?”

“Oh, no, thank you, ma’am!”

On the way home, Nagafuji was being unusually modest for a change, and I was mildly impressed. “You don’t have to be so polite, you know.”

“Huh? I’m not,” she replied, wide-eyed, like she hadn’t the faintest idea what I was referring to. I could tell we’d gotten our wires crossed somehow, but that was hardly uncommon with her, so I shrugged it off.

Then, when we arrived at my house, it all became crystal clear.

“Okay, now to spend the night at Hino’s house!”

“No, you’re going home!” But she ignored me and got out of the car. “Ugh, are you serious...?”

“Couch-surfing, baby!”

Why did she sound so *smug* about it? I couldn’t comprehend it. Meanwhile, Enome-san stood off to the side, listening to us with a smile.

“...Fine, whatever.”

It was a Sunday, and I didn’t have anything better to do anyway. Thus, the three of us entered the house together. Upon our arrival, however, the person who greeted us was the most unlikely candidate of all: my father.

“We’re home,” Enome-san announced to him.

He lowered his head. "We need to talk. Come with me for a minute." Then he walked off without so much as a *hello*. Even his footsteps were quiet and reserved.

"Uhhhhhh..." This felt like *déjà vu*. "Guess I'll be right back," I muttered, glancing at Enome-san. To be fair, he probably wasn't mad about the trip or anything, since we expressly asked permission. Still not sure why we did that.

"I'll take your luggage to your room, then," she replied.

"Okay."

I slipped off my backpack and handed it over. Then, with the burden on my shoulders relieved, I took off my shoes. My hair was still damp from my morning shower, and when I faced forward, the cold strands tickled my cheek.

"Interesting," said a second pair of footsteps behind me.

"You're *not* coming with me," I told her flatly. With Nagafuji around, the conversation wouldn't go anywhere...for a variety of reasons. I pushed a hand against her stomach. Then Enome-san crept up and put her in a full nelson.

"Aaaagh! I'm innocent, I tell you!" She flailed fruitlessly as she was dragged away. Ultimately, the luggage was left behind. *Sorry for the extra hassle.*

"What's the matter with her, anyway...?" She was like a mascot character, except she was really bad at her job.

As I was recovering from...whatever just happened, I followed my father into the room at the end of the hall. Like last time, I found him sitting on the tatami with perfect posture, waiting for me. Using only his eyes, he gestured for me to join him.

Be it intentional or otherwise, my brothers all visibly resembled my father. But as for me, I didn't look much like my mother at all. Was it because she was a purebred Hino, and I wasn't?

When I sat down, my father made a rare attempt at small talk. “Did you have fun?” This surprised me, since he generally didn’t mince words.

“Yeah, I did.” Though I didn’t get to explore much since I was too busy bickering with Nagafuji. But in the end, maybe *that* was what I wanted more than anything. It was what I was accustomed to.

“I see.” Despite initiating the conversation, he didn’t try to continue it. No “I’m glad to hear that,” either—not that that would have kept the conversation going much longer.

“So...what did you want to talk about?” I couldn’t keep sitting here forever. Nagafuji was waiting for me. Not that I’d asked her to.

“Right...” He nodded to himself, eyes narrowed. “Your mother is upset with me.”

“...What?”

“Apparently, er...I didn’t explain myself properly.” For once in his life, he showed his more vulnerable side, closing his eyes in defeat. Times like these, he looked a lot like Goushirou. “So I’d like to do that now.”

“Okay...?”

“Of all our children, you are the most similar to me.”

To be quite frank, this wasn’t a better explanation. If anything, I was now *more* confused as to what exactly we were talking about. Granted, after a moment of reflection, I was inclined to agree, but still...*what?* “You think so?”

“Like me, you’re a black sheep who doesn’t quite fit in,” he clarified, without any sugarcoating. My spaghetti straps nearly fell down my shoulders, but he didn’t seem to notice. “I forget if I’ve ever told you, but...I wasn’t born a Hino.”

“Right. You were adopted into Mom’s family, weren’t you?”

“Something like that, but not exactly... Anyway, the details don’t matter.” Admittedly, I could see a familial likeness in the way he quickly grew tired of explaining things. “For better or for worse, I’ve lived my life in service to the Hino family, and I’ve resigned myself to it. The back problems, the *flavorless food*, the awkward pleasantries... Miserable as it is, this is the path I’ve chosen, so I can’t complain.”

His normally flat tone audibly hardened when speaking of the food, and I nearly burst out laughing. But we were having a serious conversation, so I suppressed it.

“Thus, I wish for you to find a path that makes you truly happy.”

It was a clumsy, blunt lecture, the kind any parent would give their kid, and I suspected my father must have thought long and hard to formulate it in his head. So in return, I wanted to give it the respect I felt it deserved. “You got it, Dad.”

“Good,” he replied, his voice a bit lighter than before. “That’s all I wanted to say.” He rose to his feet, scratching his head. “Now, be sure to tell your mother that I gave you the full explanation.” And with that, he promptly vanished from the room.

“Tell her yourself,” I muttered under my breath. “Ugh, good grief...”

I slumped my shoulders in exhaustion. This man wouldn’t know what a “full explanation” looked like if it punched him in the face.

“I get it, though,” I added quietly. “So who is it that I take after: my dad or my mom?” But no sooner did the words leave my lips than I realized: the answer was *both*. Obviously, I would resemble both of them—I was their kid.

I was a child of the Hino family.

I nearly flopped down on the spot, but as my body tilted, I quickly thought better of it, using my abdominal muscles to keep myself upright. Someone was waiting on me. As I left the room, my

hasty footsteps provoked a scolding from someone, but I ignored them and kept running.

“Oh, welcome back!”

Back in my bedroom, Nagafuji was going through the contents of her backpack. Apparently she had packed a change of clothes for tomorrow...which meant she had planned to sleep over tonight from the very beginning.

“Was your daddy mad?”

“Nah, not really. Honestly, I’ve never actually seen him get angry at anything.”

He also never laughed. His emotions were tamer than most...which made it all the funnier that he secretly hated the food here.

In her relief to see me, Nagafuji pulled off her glasses; upon further inspection, I noticed her cheek bulging slightly. “Whatcha eating?” I asked.

“Candy. She bribed me to stay in this room, and I agreed to the terms.”

“What are you, a child?”

Technically, yes. At thirteen, we were both powerless, helpless children. We had problems that matched our grade level, and we were expected to find our own answers. But perhaps that was the one challenge *all* humans faced, regardless of age.

“Hey, Nagafuji?” As I sat down, I gazed at her with her one cheek puffed out.

“Mmm?”

“Do you wanna...” *Spend the rest of our lives together?* The thought of saying it aloud made me so deeply embarrassed, I quickly swallowed the second half of the question.

“Do I wanna *what?*”

She pressed me with her words and the look in her eyes. We used to be the same height, but now she towered over me in more ways than one. Would I have to spend my whole life craning my neck to look up at her? She was always right there next to me...

Gee, how poetic. Too bad it doesn't stick the landing.

"Do you wanna...y'know, play a game or something?"

"Oh, that."

I could see the candy rolling from cheek to cheek to cheek to cheek. *Sheesh, how many do you have in there?*

"Okay, then, I wanna mess with you!"

"What?"

"Lemme play with you, Hinooooo!!!"

She lunged at me; naturally, I jumped backward to dodge. Then she lunged a second time. This time, I ran. This continued until we were practically bouncing around the room. I thought I heard someone yelling at us, and I laughed.

If this was the path I wanted to choose, then it was already a total joke. But this was what I was used to, and I hadn't come across any other options. So why not commit to the gag? I turned to face Nagafuji—and reached out to pinch those bulging cheeks.

"You're in for it now!"

From now on, I was done worrying.

Chapter 3:
Taeko

“**H**_{MMM}... Yes, the great Nagafuji has had her share of shenanigans, too.”

“Oh, really...”

“Like that one time, and that *other* time...”

“Let’s hear it, then.”

“Come on, haven’t I had some shenanigans?!”

Hino sat buried deep beneath the *kotatsu* table. She waved a dismissive hand. “No, you really haven’t.”

“That can’t be true! Come *onnnnn*!”

How can I have lived this long without any bona fide shenanigans?! And yet, at the same time, I can’t remember any... It’s amazing how we manage to keep living in a world with so many mysteries...

“You know, I think I might be a poet.”

“I’m falling asleep...”

“Well, pay attention while you sleep, then!”

“Sure, sure, whatever...”

Once I made sure Hino’s eyes were all the way closed, I continued: “It feels like *something* in my teenage life is supposed to be *something else*, you know? Like, the things I felt in the past have shaped my present, and stuff like that. But I can only remember last night’s dinner at most... Wait, what *did* we have last night? Uhhh...something with potatoes for sure... Curry? No, not curry; I’d remember the smell. What *was* it...?”

“Zzzzz...”

“Are you listening?” I shook her shoulders.

“Lemme *sleep!*”

“Any ideas yet?”

“Give up already!”

“Hrmmm...!”

Considering how well Hino knew me, perhaps I honestly didn't have any bittersweet memories after all. Just a regular old sweet life, then. That suited me fine.

“Okay, then, never mind. I take it back.”

The end...

Interlude:
Let's Try Again: Taeko, the Wild Child

THE DAY I LAID EYES ON HINO, it felt like I'd discovered a soft, round ball of light—cozy and comfy.

“My name's Hino Akira!”

When we first met at preschool, we were the same height. Well, she might even have been a bit *bigger* than me actually. She wore her hair in low pigtails—the same hairstyle she kept to this very day.

“Akira? Are you a boy?” I asked, confused.

“I'mma *girl!!!*” she shot back instantly. Maybe she got this question a lot.

Next, it was my turn to introduce myself. “My name's Nagafuji Taeko!” I said with a smile. But Hino scowled and stormed over.

“Don't copy me!”

“I'm not copying you!” I just used hers as a reference, that's all.

Then we started smacking each other, but the teacher quickly stepped in, picking me up and whisking me away from Hino.

“Wheeeee!”

It was so much easier to be carried than to have to walk on my own two feet. And that, my friends, was the day I learned the joy of laziness.

As the hours passed, I noticed I was getting yelled at a bit more frequently. At the time, I never once stopped to wonder why that might be, but looking back, I understand: for some reason, people took one look at me and assumed I wasn't paying attention. I continued to catch flak for this well into elementary school.

Oh, but when I mentioned this to Hino the other day, she scoffed darkly and said, “Trust me, that’s not it.” So... what was the truth?

Anyways.

After the teacher finished yelling at me, I came back to the big room to find that everybody else was outside playing. The only other kid still in the room was Hino, who had gotten in trouble, too. Feeling left behind, I gazed out through the window at the scenery...and I suspect Hino must have felt the same way. As I gazed at her from behind, I noticed something.

“Hey, Akira-chan.”

When I called out to her, she flinched, whirled around, and scowled. “Whaddya want?!”

“You’ve got a bug on your back.”

“*Wha?!!*”

Panicking, she backed up close to me. Naturally, I jumped away.

“Get it off me, get it off me!”

“But...I can’t touch that...”

“C’monnnnn!”

My parents always told me not to touch stuff, and I was trying to do as I was told. Besides, it was *clearly* a bee—what if it stung me? So instead, I joined in on the panicking.

“Shoo it away with something! Use that! Or that!!!” Hino pointed at random objects within reach. Apparently, she wanted me to use a tool to chase the bee away.

“But what if I squish it on accident? Your shirt will get yucky!”

“*Urk!*” She froze. “Mom and Enome-san will get mad at me...!”

“See? I told you.”

“Rrgh, you think you’re *sooooo* smart...” She started crab-walking sideways. Then she picked up one of the building blocks, walked back, and turned her back toward me. “Okay, where is it?”

“Ummm...in the middle... Oh, it’s moving!”

“Where?!” She bounced from left to right.

“Th-the right! Wait, is it your right or my right?”

“Ugh, forget it!”

She took the block, pressed it to a spot on her back, and slid it around randomly. Annoyed, the bee took off; I watched in a daze as it flew around and around. But then it hit me: *we needed to run!*

“Aaaiieeeee!”

Together, Hino and I ran around the room. When we opened the door, the bee charged after us, and the three of us exited the building. At last, the little insect set off on its journey into the sky without so much as a second thought.

Hino and I stood side by side and watched it go. Then she glanced at me and said, “You were *useless!*”

“Yup, yup!” I sincerely agreed with her opinion.

She glanced all around, then shrugged it off. “Oh, well.” With her spirits renewed, she turned to me and continued, “Wanna play?”

“Yeah!”

“Um...Tae-chan!” She remembered my name right away, and it tickled me pink.

“Akki!”

“Who?”

“It’s a nickname I made up for you just now.”

“Don’t just *make something up!*”

Once again, we started flailing our little fists. And so the two of us imprinted on each other within a matter of hours.

“Hey, I wanna go to Tae-chan’s house!”

Unlike my mom, Hino’s mom arrived by car. I ran my hands over the paint job as she was talking to the lady in the kimono.

“Hey, stop that!” Mom grabbed me by the scruff of the neck.

“Wheeee!” And so I was carried away from the car.

“Is this ‘Tae-chan’ your new schoolmate?” the lady asked.

For some reason, my mother froze in confusion. “*Schoolmate?* Really?”

“One moment, please.”

The kimono lady stepped away for a phone call. Meanwhile, I watched Hino’s back.

“Any bugs?”

“Nope!”

“Yay!”

Together, we celebrated while my mom watched us with a smile.

“She’s been given permission to visit. Can I entrust her safety to you?” the lady asked as she put her cell phone away.

“Er...yes, of course,” my mom stammered.

“I can go?!”

“Yes. Everyone hop in, please.”

Hino gleefully leapt into the backseat, then scooted over to make room.

“Come on in,” Kimono Lady told me with a smile.

I looked up at my mom to make sure it was okay.

“I don’t know where you live, so it would be most helpful if you joined us,” Kimono Lady continued.

“Oh, that makes sense,” Mom nodded. “Pardon our intrusion, then.”

“Not an intrusion at all! Please, make yourself comfortable.”

And so my mom climbed into the back of the car, too. But she kept looking out at the other parents and kids like she was worried about something—at least, until the door was shut.

Then the kimono lady hopped into the driver’s seat. “I’ll be counting on you for directions,” she told my mother as she pulled away from the curb.

Our house was so close to the preschool, even I knew how to get there. But my family hardly ever drove anywhere, so I was enjoying the novelty of the ride.

“Your family drives a car, huh, Akira-chan?”

“Yeah.”

“We should start driving more, too!” I declared.

“Not happening,” Mom replied flatly.

Kicking my legs, I wondered what was so different about Hino’s family compared to mine. Then, before I knew it, we had arrived.

“I shall come to collect her later today, so please look after her until then.”

“Oh, yes! Of course!” My mom bowed frantically. The kimono lady bowed back, then hopped in the car and drove away. After she was gone, Mom exhaled like she just got done carrying something *super* heavy. “It’s a small house, but you’re welcome to join us.”

“Okay!” With encouragement from my mom, Hino ran into the store.

“Calm down! It’s really small and boring in there!” I shouted after her, but Mom gave me a little smack.

“Stop that!”

What? You said so yourself!

Then Mom looked up at the sign out front and muttered to herself: “The Hino family... The bamboo trees are so thick, you can’t even see what their house looks like.”

But I didn’t really understand what she meant.

When we walked in, I found Hino introducing herself to my dad. “I’m Hino Akira.”

“Hello there,” he replied, wearing his best customer service smile.

“I’m Naganaga Fujifuji!”

“It’s not a competition,” Dad sighed in annoyance. *Hey, where’s MY smile?!* “So, you’re Taeko’s little friend?”

“Yes, sir!”

Hino and I both raised our hands in agreement. Dad smiled at this, then paused and cocked his head. “Wait...*Hino...?*”

Something about this gave him pause, just like it had with Mom. When I looked at Hino, she seemed as confused as I was. But in actuality, I was even *more* confused.

Then, as we were standing there rooted to the spot, Mom called out: “You two run along to the back and play. We have to run the store right now, so try not to come out front, okay?”

“Okey dokey!” I stopped thinking too hard, shrugged off my mom’s nagging like always, and headed into the living area with Hino.

After we tossed off our backpacks and bright yellow preschool hats, she smiled. “Your house smells *real* good, Tae-chan.”

“Heehee! It smells like fryer oil.”

Specifically, it was the smell of the croquettes and ground meat cutlets that we sold out front. It had permeated all the walls, and while I was used to it, it was powerful enough to make me hungry whenever I breathed it in.

“My house is a butcher shop!”

“I like meat!”

We cackled in delight: harmlessly, pointlessly, innocently.

“What kinda shop is *your* house, Akira-chan?”

“Ummm...I dunno...” She looked away, thinking hard. “A tea shop...? A gardening shop...?”

“Gardening?”

“It’s cuz we have a really *big* backyard.”

“Ooooh! *Lucky!*” That got me excited. “I wanna see it!”

“Okay! Next time you can come to my house, Tae-chan!”

“Yaaay!”

I rejoiced over what was functionally an empty promise. After all, the thought of a big backyard put so many ideas in my head. Only problem was, I wasn’t confident I would still remember them by the time I actually got there. Sure enough, I didn’t linger on the same topic for long, instead shifting focus to something else: the little face in front of me.

“What’s wrong? Another bug?” Hino smacked her nose, just in case.

“No bugs,” I reassured her as I closed in. “You sure are pretty, Akira-chan.”

“Huh?”

It was my honest opinion, formed upon close scrutiny of her face. When I admitted it to her, she gazed back at me, blinking. “You’re pretty too, Tae-chan!”

“Hooray for being pretty!!!”

We complimented each other, jumped around, ran around. In our tiny living room, you could only take about five steps before smacking into a wall, but right now, this was *our* space, just for me and her.

Looking back, Hino was the one who taught me the meaning of friendship. My happiness, my identity—all of it came from her. Everything I learned was seared into my brain through the lens of Hino, and so it remained to this very day.

One minute we were having fun, then we flopped down, and the next thing I knew, I was out cold. When I awoke, I saw Hino bundled up like a burrito in the blankets that my mom must’ve draped over her; I stared at her blankly for a minute until I realized she’d stolen the one meant for me. But the rest of my body was still asleep, so I just lay there with my eyes wandering.

“The daughter of the Hino family... *Wow*. Why’d she wanna come here?” I heard my dad ask from somewhere out front.

“She and Taeko are friends now, apparently,” my mom replied.

“Aha... So they go to the same school?”

“Mmhmm.”

“I thought girls like her got sent off to private school.”

“I thought so, too, but we don’t have one here in the neighborhood.”

They were talking about Hino. My name was mentioned, too, but I couldn't parse much more than that.

"Rrgh... If only they weren't both girls!"

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"If we had a son who could marry into their family, we'd be...well, you know...we'd be set for *life!*"

"Oh, for crying out loud..."

"I'm just messing around, honey. Anyway, I can't imagine she likes it here in our cramped little house. We're just a butcher's shop, after all."

"You know children don't care about those things."

"You sure about that...?"

"Personally, I'm just relieved that our ditzy little girl finally found a friend."

"You can say that again!"

By this point I was sleepy again, plus I was kinda cold. I tried to tug my blanket away from Hino, but she wouldn't let go, so my only option was to slide under it, right up beside her. The fabric felt scratchy against my face, and Hino's clothes carried a scent I didn't recognize—a sharp odor that seemed to grate on my nose.

Ah, I realized. This must be what Hino's house smells like.

After spontaneously dozing off for the second time in a row, it was my mom who came to wake us. "Akira-chan, your ride is here."

"My ride...?" Sleepily, she pushed herself up. Then she saw me cuddled up next to her and shrieked in surprise. This gave me the jolt I needed.

I sat up, still swathed in blankets. “You’re going home now?”

“Uh huh.” She put on her yellow hat and pulled her backpack onto her shoulders. “I hafta go home or my mom will get real worried.”

“That’s not good.”

“And so will my dad and my big brothers.”

“You have big brothers?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she nodded. “They’re *reallllly* big.”

“Wow.” For some reason, my competitive side flared up. I wanted to get even bigger than them.

We walked Hino out to the curb, where the lady in the plain kimono was waiting.

“Enome-san!”

Kimono Lady stepped out of the car and bowed deeply to my mom. “Thank you so much for looking after her.”

As for Mom, she was totally flustered. “Oh, of course not! Er, I mean, of course! Ho ho ho!”

Meanwhile, I put my sticky little hands all over their shiny car.

“Now, now, that’s enough of that.” Kimono Lady hoisted me up and jovially carried me away.

“Wheeeeeee!!!”

“I’m so sorry about her...”

“No apologies necessary.”

And so, I was returned to my mother’s arms. I tried to wrest myself free, but she held on tight. “*You*, little space cadet, need to learn to calm down!”

“See you later, Akira-chan!”

I waved from within my mom's grasp; beaming, Hino waved back. To tell the truth, she was better-behaved than I was. Then she, the kimono lady, and the car all headed off together, leaving behind a sad and desolate block of concrete buildings.

"Oh, I'm so happy you made a friend!" Mom exclaimed gleefully, as if it was something she'd accomplished herself.

"You better be."

"Don't you get all high and mighty with me, missy." She pinched my cheeks.

"Leggooooo!"

With that, we went back inside, pinching still in progress.

"That sure was a fancy car they sent over," my dad commented with a grin as he stood behind the register, scratching his head. *Fancy?* All I noticed was that it was shinier than ours. Prior to me touching it, at least.

"Akira-chan said she likes our house," I announced.

"Well, now. Perhaps it's the novelty that she likes."

"And she said I can go to *her* house next time!"

"Hmmm... Think she can handle that?" Dad shot a look at Mom, who shrugged.

"Handle what?" I asked.

"Well...minding your manners, for one...and I *really* don't want you breaking any expensive vases, okay, pumpkin?"

"Oh, god, I didn't think of *that*..." Mom murmured.

They both turned to look at me; I looked around the room, then thought of the perfect response. "Just leave it to me!"

But my mom put her chin in her hands, resting her elbows on the display case. "...I don't think she can handle it."

“We do not have any decorative vases in the house.”

“What? Oh, well, then, that’s wonderful news! Ha ha ha! We really lucked out!”

For some reason, my mom picked me up and spun me around like we’d won the lottery. Despite my confusion, however, I was glad to see her in high spirits, so I celebrated right along with her. “We sure lucked out, Daddy-o!”

“I’m not your daddy-o, little girl.”

“The master of the household feels they would pose a hazard if they were to shatter, you see.”

“A hazard to our bank account, that’s for sure!” Giddily, Mom danced in circles with me. Then, suddenly, she thought of something and froze. “What about any traditional hanging scrolls?”

“We do have a few of those around,” Kimono Lady replied with a smile.

“Are they expensive?”

“Somewhat.”

The lady’s smile deepened; likewise, I smiled back. Mom was the only person who didn’t join in. Instead, she leaned really close and pressed a finger to my nose. “Don’t you *dare* touch their hanging scrolls, got it?”

“What’s a hanging scroll?”

“Oh...er...” Her gaze wandered as she tried to think of an explanation, but she quickly gave up and turned to the kimono lady. “Please don’t take your eyes off her, okay?”

“Understood.”

And so Mom handed me over to the other lady. “Wheeeee!!!” Just like that, I was deposited into the backseat of the car.

It was the day after Hino came over, and we were on the way home after preschool. Hino herself was already waiting for me in the car when I got in.

“Living at your house must be hard, huh, Akira-chan?”

“Huh? Is it?” At first, she stared at me in wide-eyed confusion, but after a beat, she seemed to vaguely agree. “Umm...maybe. They always yell about my bad manners when I’m eating.”

“Same!”

Usually, they’d tell me to stop staring at the TV and eat my food. Problem was, the food would be there when I was ready for it, but the TV shows only lasted for a certain time before they were gone, hence I gave them priority. But when I tried to explain this to my mom, the only response I got was a flick to the forehead.

“So, it’s the same way at *your* house, too...?” Hino mused.

“Uh huh,” I nodded, and she smiled. But why did she look so relieved?

After Kimono Lady finished saying goodbye to my mom, she hopped in the car. Apparently, she was going to drive me home afterward, too. This seemed to come as a disappointment to my mom—I guess she wanted to see Hino’s house for herself.

“Well, then, off we go!”

“Okey doke.”

Then, after the car pulled away from the curb, I suddenly remembered a question I thought of just yesterday. “So...are you her mom?” I asked, clinging to the back of the driver’s seat.

“What? No, not at all.”

“Oh.” I sat back in my seat and looked at Hino.

“Of course not, dummy,” she replied, swinging her legs.
“Enome-san is our maid.”

“What’s a maid?”

“They help with lots of stuff around the house.”

“Wow...!”

In that case, a maid sounded really useful to have around. Did my mom count as one, since she was always helping my dad? Was it possible for her to be both a maid *and* my mom? Now I was getting confused.

“Uh oh! Your eyes are spinning in circles!”

“Mnnn...I just don’t get it...”

“What’s not to get?” Kimono Lady tilted her head slightly.

“Can you help run our store, too?” I asked her, just for fun.

“Certainly, whenever I have some free time.”

The fact that she didn’t refuse my request, in my eyes, meant she was *definitely* a good person. My sense of judgment was pretty cut-and-dried at this age. These days, I figure this probably made things easier for everyone involved, but who knows. Naturally, I didn’t remotely consider it back then.

Hino’s house wasn’t too far from our preschool. In later years, I would learn that it wasn’t far from my own house, either—and in elementary school, I would find it all too easy to wander over there of my own accord. But at the time, I hadn’t the faintest inkling that such a marvel was practically on my doorstep. In preschool, the butcher’s shop was my entire world. And so, for the first time in my young life, I ventured outside those narrow confines.

“It *is* huge!!!”

I jumped out of the car, took one look at the sprawling backyard, and started running. The place was so vast, I couldn’t tell where the backyard ended and the driveway began...or where the

house began, for that matter. It was all so brand-new to me! The air here was starkly different from the city, too—it was fresh and pure. Surrounded by nature, I could practically hear the babble of a brook.

As I ran around to the back of the house, I could feel the pleasant crunch of the gravel underfoot. *What's that? What's THAT?* With each step, a new discovery awaited me. How many butcher shops could fit in this space? I had half a mind to run around counting, but instead, I came to a stop and breathed in a lungful of the gentle breeze. Something inside me started to spin in circles, roaring to life.

“Huh?”

Before I could start dashing around again, however, my feet left the ground. Kimono Lady had grabbed me from behind and picked me up. “I was asked not to let you leave my sight, I’m afraid,” she explained.

“Oh, right. Wheeeee!!!”

And so she carried me back to the front of the house, where Hino was waiting like a good girl. From her perspective, that huge backyard must have seemed pretty ordinary. But instead of putting me down, Kimono Lady must have decided it would be easier to carry me all the way inside.

The front entrance was as big as our living room. I gazed into the big shoebox sitting there, unsure how any family could possibly need so many shoes. Then another kimono lady came to greet us, about the same age as the first. Her kimono was jet-black, nearly a perfect match for her hair, which was tied back in a bun, affording her a regal air. With every step she took, I caught glimpses of red fabric on the insides of her long sleeves.

Hino took one look at this lady and bowed humbly. “I have returned.”

“Welcome home, my darling,” Kimono Lady #2 replied warmly—and that was when I realized that this was Hino’s mom. Her gaze drifted from her daughter to me.

“Thanks for having me!” I greeted her as Kimono Lady #1 set me down. “I’m Naganaga Fujifuji Taetae!”

“What a very long name you have,” Mrs. Hino replied amiably without batting a lash. “Akira told me all about you when she came home last night.”

“Good things?”

“Of course, my dear.” She smiled at me, then looked at Kimono Lady. “I’ll leave it to you.” And with that, she disappeared into the house. At first I wasn’t sure what “it” was, but then it hit me: *Oh, she meant ME.*

As I took my shoes off, I breathed in the natural scent of the wood. It was just so *nice* here. The air felt good, like it was purifying me from the inside out. Hard to believe this paradise existed on the same planet as the rest of the world! Everything about it was just so *different*! That was the moment I first realized: *Gosh, Hino’s amazing.*

I tried to follow Mrs. Hino to see what the rest of the house was like, but Kimono Lady grabbed my shoulder and redirected me. Bored, I straightened my posture and pretended to walk like a princess. Then Hino copied me, and we laughed. Above me, I could hear Kimono Lady chuckling, too.

From there, I was led to Hino’s bedroom. Again, it was bigger than my family’s living room. I could run around in here all day and never bang my shin on the *kotatsu* table! I was so excited, I started jumping up and down and up and down...until Kimono Lady stopped me and made me sit down.

“Akira-chan, it’s so cool that you get your own room!”

“Wait, you don’t have one?”

“Nope!” I thrust out my chest proudly. My parents said they were planning to clean out one of the rooms upstairs and give it to me someday, but for now, I spent my whole life on the first floor. There were only two or three small rooms up there.

To me, Hino traveled to preschool from a whole different world.

“Okay, then, this can be your room, too!” she exclaimed, spreading her arms wide. “We can share it together!”

“You mean it?”

“Sure!”

I was the luckiest girl in the world to be given a piece of paradise, and she the most generous to offer it to me. I gazed around at the walls and the vaulted ceiling. My body trembled in delight at the thought that it could be mine... A whole world just for me and Hino... Frankly, I was on the cusp of forgetting about my old home altogether. To me, this wasn't just a house—it was a place that spoke to my very *soul*.

“Yaaay!!!”

We threw our hands in the air and celebrated. Then I noticed Kimono Lady watching us with an awkward smile on her face. I fixed her with an inquiring look, and she replied, “It’s funny how quickly you two have warmed up to each other, considering you only just met yesterday.”

Hino’s pretty eyes, carefully sheltered from the impurities of the world beyond this house, gazed deep into mine. “Yeah, we really have.”

“Yeah!” We had only known each other for a day, and yet our friendship was already beyond question.

“Does it scare you?” the lady pressed.

Scare me? I looked down at my hands and shook my head. No, the emotion that had taken root inside me was much more mellow: “Akira-chan makes me feel all fuzzy.”

“Fuzzy?”

“Warm and fuzzy!!!”

I could feel a silly smile creeping up on my face as I spoke. I admit, it wasn’t a very clear explanation, but evidently it was enough for Kimono Lady, because the concern vanished from her face—replaced by a smile.

“Well, then, that’s a very special feeling. You must always treasure it.”

I could almost see *past* the expression on her face, through to whatever she was reminiscing about on the other side. But at that age, I was still too young to repackage it in my own words. So instead, I shrugged and said, “Okay!”

“Okay!” Hino chimed in.

“Oh, yeah, where are the hanging scrolls?” I asked.

“Why, pray tell, do you wish to know?”

“Ho ho ho!” I tried to laugh off her question.

“*Not happening,*” she cautioned me with a bright smile.

“Wheeeee!!!”

“No, I’m not going to pick you up.”

“Wheeeee...” I promptly gave up. But then an idea struck me, and I looked over at Hino. “Do *you* know about the hanging scrolls, Akira-chan?”

“No...”

“Then let’s go find ’em!”

“Yeah! Treasure hunt!”

We rose to our feet and toddled off down the hall. Kimono Lady hastily followed after us. “It appears this will be more challenging than I anticipated...” she muttered wryly.

As for Hino, she grinned at me from ear to ear. “With you here, Tae-chan, my boring old house is fun again!”

And when she smiled at me like that, it felt like I’d discovered a soft, round ball of light—cozy and comfy.

“...Remember? That all happened, right?”

“You remember it *way* too clearly for it to be real.”

“Oh. Good point.”

Just like that, I accepted defeat and retreated beneath the *kotatsu*.

Interlude:
8/11/2033
21:47:22

W_{HENEVER} I'm in a dark spot, the sparkle always catches my eye—the sky-blue butterfly tied to my index finger. It never dulls or gets dirty; it just keeps glowing faintly. When I wiggle my finger, it flaps its wings, almost like a real-life bug. And even though it's really just a strand of Yachi's hair tied in a bow, I can practically see little sparklies filling the gaps, coloring in the outline.

It's already getting dark here in the hallway, so I stop to admire its glimmer for a while. Then, I open the bedroom door. Inside, *Neechan* and Yachi are cuddled up in bed. The heater's off, and it's freezing.

"Mnn...? Little?" Yachi opens one eye—though according to her, her "eyes" are just sky-blue marbles that don't actually see a thing.

"Yachi, if you keep sleeping all the time, you'll turn into *her*."

"Who, Shimamura-san? Hmmm..."

She shoots a sidelong glance at my sister, who's still sound asleep. During the winter, she sleeps a *lot*. But Mom just laughs and says she doesn't have to deal with her this way.

"In that case, I shall attempt to exit the bed."

In *what* case?

Yachi wriggles out from under the comforter, and I see she's wearing her usual lion pajamas. We're lucky to have such a cute lion in our house—wouldn't want an ugly one.

"Can you see my future, Little?" the lion asks innocently.

"Huh? Wha...? Oh." She must have thought I was serious when I said she'd turn into my sister. Sometimes Yachi interprets things way

too literally, it feels like. “I was always told that nobody can see the future.”

“Well, *I* can see it.”

“What?!”

“Let’s see... Very well. I shall make one prediction about your future.”

“A *prediction*...?” The word makes me think of that one fortune-teller I see on the street sometimes. But she has nothing in common with Yachi... “You sure you can do that?”

“Very sure!”

She proudly thrusts out her chest, exposing her smooth, pale tummy. I give it a poke: it’s soft and squishy.

“What year is it right now?”

“You don’t *know*?” Sometimes I’m not sure Yachi understands a single thing about our world.

She starts counting on her fingers. Even her nail beds are faintly blue; I stare at them for a while, admiring how pretty they look. It makes me forget the chill in the room. Then, when she finishes, she announces smugly: “Tomorrow, you will eat donuts with me. Heh heh *heh!*”

It takes me a minute to realize what she means. “...You just want me to buy you donuts, don’t you?”

“Ho ho *ho!*” She clearly doesn’t feel bad about it, either.

Well, I guess since I don’t have school tomorrow...

“We must go to the donut shop together. Not to worry—I have my own money!” She pulls a 500-yen coin out of who knows where and shows it off.

“Is that your allowance?”

“Er...yes! My *allowance*. Exactly,” she replies a little too quickly. But as I squint suspiciously at her coin, she continues, “Very well, then, how about one more?”

“Huh?”

Smiling, she says, “Approximately sixteen years from now, you will make a very important discovery. And when that time comes, the Earthlings...”

As she speaks, for some reason, it looks like my finger butterfly is flapping its wings. I can’t make out the rest of what she’s saying. I can only vaguely hear her voice, but...it sounds completely different, and...and...

“Yachi—”

“Hey, kids! Who’s in the mood for a snack?”

“Yaaaay!!!”

At my mother’s voice, Yachi runs off with both hands outstretched in front of her, not once pausing to look back. Now hold on a minute!

“You got me curious, dang it!”

As for my stupid sister, she’s still sleeping like a baby.

“Grrrrr...”

I poke her unguarded cheek, and she rolls over to get away. Then I poke her other cheek, and sure enough, she rolls back. But she refuses to wake up. Fine, whatever! I don’t have time to be messing with her *anyways!*

“Hmmm... Well, it’s just Yachi, I guess...”

She’s the kind of girl who says, “I’ve discovered a wonderful treasure!” over a single measly piece of candy, so maybe her “prediction” isn’t really that big of a deal. Maybe it’ll be a big cake. Or a really big cup of pudding.

When I chase after her, I find her eating a *polvorón* that Mom gave her.

“Ha ha ha! This kid wouldn’t know modesty if it hit her in the face!” Playfully, Mom flicks her forehead.

“Yoink!” With no hesitation, Yachi takes a second *polvorón* in her other hand.

“Or maybe she’s just downright spoiled...”

“Tastes like *destiny!*”

And as I watch her soft cheeks plump up full of shortbread, I get the feeling I won’t be getting any more answers out of her.

Chapter 4: Tempest (Yuletide Sakura)

THIS WAS MY SECOND CHRISTMAS with Shimamura. I say “was,” but for me, it was still very much present tense.

“I gotta eat dinner with my family, but I’ll be free during the day,” was the reply I received when I asked about her Christmas plans. I vaguely remembered her saying something along those same lines last year, too. She seemed to care about her family an awful lot... Then again, that was probably true of most people. *I* was the anomaly—not her.

Personally, I didn’t care about mine much at all. I mean...I didn’t really understand how to interact with them. All my life, I had never tried to learn, and that was probably a bad thing. But there simply did not exist a version of me that grasped these things, so my only option was to make do with the version that *did* exist in the here and now.

Family... What if I joined Shimamura’s family? How would I do that? Adoption? No, no, I don’t want that...I think... Now I was even more confused, so I decided to stop thinking about it. My main priority was to spend time with Shimamura.

Ever since I first met her, I had developed a bad habit of walking around my room in circles whenever I needed to think about something.

“Normal clothes, she says... What do ‘normal clothes’ even look like?”

I looked over at my closet, where my street clothes were hanging neatly. Last year, I could remember walking around the mall in my *cheongsam*... *Ah, that takes me back...*

“...Wait, why did I wear that?”

A *cheongsam*, of all things, on *Christmas*?! Looking back, I couldn't recall what led me to choose that particular dress. What was I thinking, borrowing it from my workplace? I resisted the urge to tear my hair out. It was only a year ago, and yet the old me was a total enigma. From an objective viewpoint, I must have looked like an absolute lunatic. And quite frankly, I was lucky that Shimamura was willing to be seen with me at all.

It was that open-minded tolerance that drew me to her...or maybe she just didn't care about what other people thought of her. I hoped she cared about what *I* thought, at least. But I didn't want to make a bunch of one-sided demands—I wanted to *earn* my special treatment. From that perspective, I was worried that “normal” clothes would only warrant a “normal” response out of her. So in that sense, I was smart to wear my *cheongsam* last year...hopefully.

During the wintertime in particular, Shimamura spent a lot of time with a derpy look on her face. She could zone out through the entire day if nobody stopped her.

“Well, okay, maybe not *derpy*... That's a little harsh...”

Just...really, really drowsy.

Y'know, that sort of thing.

“You know, now that I think about it...”

Belatedly, I became aware of just how much time I spent thinking about Shimamura. But how much time did she spend thinking about *me*? Five minutes a day? Ten minutes? Maybe an hour, tops, if she was in a good mood? Then again, I couldn't imagine she had a whole hour's worth of things to think about where I was concerned.

I felt so...unnoticed.

But whenever Shimamura was around, I always got so nervous—I'd bite my tongue, my eyes would dart all over the place, my vision would go fuzzy, and my mouth would kinda move on

autopilot. In that sense, maybe I was pretty noticeable after all. Still, panic attacks were not the same thing as having a personality. It was clear to me that I needed to work on keeping my cool around Shimamura.

I thought about her all day long: I would be mortified if she found out.

A little sparkly thing bounced up and down, punctuated by a strange word:

“Kissma!”

For someone who had just woken up, it was like looking into the sun.

“Good morning,” the lion cub greeted me, as though it were any other day.

“Morning,” I replied without moving a muscle. Belatedly, my brain tried to figure out what “Kissma” was supposed to mean. It wasn’t “kiss me,” was it?

Meanwhile, Yashiro hopped like a rabbit right beside my pillow. “Merry Kissma!”

“Oh, Christmas.”

The chill against my cheek helped to solidify my thoughts so I could organize them. *Wait, what time is it? I didn’t sleep in past noon, did I? I’m not THAT much of a sloth...right?* Unfortunately, there was no guarantee. Especially not on a winter holiday.

“Oh, good, I’m safe.” It was just past 10 a.m., and there was still plenty of time before I was supposed to meet up with Adachi. “That was risky. Should have set an alarm.”

“I see, I see,” Yashiro nodded absently as she peered at the clock with me.

“So what do you want? Something about Christmas?”

“I have just learned about the holiday known as Christmas for the first time. I didn’t know about it last year,” she declared smugly for some reason.

I pinched her cheeks to wipe that smarmy smirk right off her face. “Okay, I’ll bite. What have you learned about Christmas?”

“It’sh shelebrated by eating cake.”

“Well, you’re not wrong.”

“Yaaay!” she cheered at random, cheeks still stretched out, destroying my will to argue with her. “Oh, and Little shaid that Shanta Claush will give out preshentsh!”

“Oh, right... Yeah...”

Another year of my sister still believing in Santa. *Cute*. Logically speaking, however, if a creature as inexplicable as Yashiro could exist, then perhaps it wasn’t so unrealistic for a jolly, old man to own a team of flying reindeer.

I stretched her cheeks out as far as they would go, then let go. Her face stuck that way. I started to panic.

“Because I am a very good person, I’m eligible for a present.”

“Your baseless self-confidence is actually kind of inspirational, you know that?”

“Therefore, please present it to me now.”

Uh...you lost me there. I looked down at her little hands, held out expectantly in my direction, and scratched my head. Meanwhile, her cheeks had snapped back to normal. *Well, that’s a relief...probably.*

“You know I’m not Santa Claus, right?”

“Right. You are Shimamura-san.” Two very different names. “I’m told Mr. Claus arrives at night, while everyone is sleeping.”

“...So I’ve heard.”

“But you see, if I were to receive my present at night, I would have to brush my teeth *all* over again,” she whispered conspiratorially. “Hence, I would like to eat my present ahead of time.”

Apparently, she was under the assumption that her present would be edible.

“Well, like I said, I’m not Santa Claus.”

“Right. You are—”

“We’ve been over that.”

“I would be very pleased to receive my present from you instead, Shimamura-san,” she insisted with a bright, jovial grin. She was trying to play it off like some grand gesture, but really, her intentions were entirely self-serving.

“Well, I guess I don’t really mind...” Especially since our “Santa” probably hadn’t bought anything for Yashiro to begin with. “For personal reference, what sort of present would you want?”

“I’m fine with cake, but I also like donuts *very* much.”

“Right...” I was already planning to head into town today, so perhaps I could buy them while I was out...assuming I didn’t forget, of course.

“Christmas is a wonderful thing, isn’t it?” she sighed dreamily, as if she’d already received her gift.

I thought about Adachi and how flustered she became.

“Mmm...yeah, I’d say so.”

The whole world loved Christmas, Adachi and Yashiro included. Perhaps I needed to get a little more invested and find my holiday spirit. *Wooooo! Let’s goooo!*

...Go where, though?

“Kissma!” Squealing, Yashiro ran off down the hall. “I shall go brag to Little!”

“You...go do that.”

As always, she and my sister were the best of friends. What had my sister asked for in her letter to Santa this year? Last year, it was pet supplies for her fish, as far as I could remember. *Maybe this year it's pet supplies for Yashiro*, I joked to myself with a grin. *Now that I think of it, she DOES kinda remind me of a sea slug...*

“Christmas! Woooo!”

I raised both hands in the air, fulfilling my obligation to show Christmas cheer. It was always the same thing every year: dinner would be a little bit fancier than usual, Santa wouldn't show up, and it would be freezing outside. Surely, you can see why I couldn't bring myself to jump for joy like our pet mooch.

“Every year, like clockwork...”

I ran a hand through my unbrushed hair. Would I celebrate “Kissma” with Adachi next year, too? Next year we'd be pretty busy studying for college entrance exams... On second thought, I didn't know if Adachi even *wanted* to go to college. If I told her I wanted to, she'd probably tag along, and if I said I didn't, then she probably wouldn't go. She liked to match pace with me. In that sense, you could say she was a very dutiful person.

“So how do I feel...?”

In the past, I *despised* people like her. Part of me missed the old, bitchy me, while another part of me wanted to forget she ever existed. To her credit, she at least had way more energy than I did.

I zoned out, contemplating the yawn building up at the back of my throat. Meanwhile, Adachi and Tarumi took turns floating to the forefront of my mind.

In the end, there were only two options in this town: the local shopping mall or the station square. In wintertime, the park was out of the question—what would we even *do* there but freeze? I shot a glance at the boomerang enshrined in the corner of my room. I still didn't know why Shimamura thought to give me that last year. Once I finally understood the inner workings of her mind, would I be ready to graduate to the next level?

There were simply so many layers to Shimamura.

This was what I contemplated as I got dressed, checked my hair, and moved away from the mirror—only to repeat the process a second time. Then a third. It used to take me more than ten tries to achieve something I was happy with, so I felt like I'd finally gotten the hang of it. Probably.

I'd chosen my outfit well in advance, but now that the big day had rolled around, I was starting to have second thoughts... I glanced at the clock. I still had plenty of time, so why did I feel so rushed?

When I arrived at the living room, my mother walked in from the direction of the entryway, carrying the oversized bag she usually took with her whenever she went out. Her gaze met mine...and her eyes narrowed. I panicked.

"You're going out?"

"...Yeah."

"I see," she replied, disinterested. It was both uncomfortable and a reminder that we were related. But then she added: "Say hi to your friend for me!"

Then she disappeared into her bedroom—until a beat later, when the door swung open again.

“Is *that* what you’re wearing?” She looked me over. “Well, whatever.” And with that, she swiftly retreated back into her room. *Make up your mind.*

“My...friend?”

I wanted to ask her who she meant, but she was long gone. The only candidate I could think of was Shimamura. But at no point had she ever visited my house...except for that one time we parted ways on my doorstep, I guess, but my mother wasn’t around at the time. So where would they have met each other?

Granted, maybe my mother meant someone else, but my life was so dedicated to Shimamura at this point, I couldn’t even think of who else it could be.

“Oh well,” I shrugged, like I was imitating a certain someone. Then I left the house and hopped onto my bike.

Above me, the sky was clear and blue, with no signs of snow.

“Are you staying for lunch?”

“Nope, I’m headed out.”

“Aww, you’re such a good daughter! You even slept through breakfast, just for me!” my mother smirked as she patted my head.

“Stop! I said I’m headed out!”

She was ruining the same hair I’d only *just* styled. I thought about going back to fix it, but oh, well. The wind was probably going to ruin it anyway the second I stepped outside. Regardless, I smacked her hand away.

“So, you’re going out on Christmas? Is it a *boy*?” she asked, resting her head against the hallway wall, her eyes wandering.

“What?”

“My little Houge-choochoo is all grown up...!”

Houge-what? The stupid nickname bothered me way more than her nosy questions. “There’s no *boy*, Mom.”

“So it’s a *girl*, then!”

“That’s the only other option, so...?” *But yes, you’re correct.* “I’m just gonna hang out with Adachi for a bit.”

“Oh, so it’s *just* Adachi-chan.”

What do you mean, JUST Adachi? That’s still rude, even if she’s not here.

“You two sure are close, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, I guess,” I answered evasively as I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. Would there ever come a day when I confessed the truth about our relationship? My parents were both fairly chill, so I suspected they might embrace it the same way I embraced Adachi and all her idiosyncrasies.

My mother pulled away from the wall and folded her arms.

“So... Do you have fun spending time with her?”

“Fun? I mean, yeah...kinda...” Tilting my head, I tried to think of a more fitting adjective. That one conversation with Panchos came to mind... I didn’t have anything to hide, but how could I explain it? “It’s more like...I can tell Adachi enjoys hanging out with me, and I don’t need more than that.”

Ultimately, I ran away from my own personal feelings and settled on Adachi’s instead. If I had to guess, it was a passable answer, but less than stellar. *Oh, well. As long as it’s good enough.*

“So Adachi-chan has fun being with you... I see, I see...” Her tone was suggestive, but I knew from experience that she was just trying to mess with me. Sure enough, she promptly changed the subject.

“Her family doesn’t celebrate *Kissmas*, huh?”

Now I understood where Yashiro got it from. Why did they pronounce it like that?

“Not sure, but I’m guessing they don’t.”

Knowing the relationship between Adachi and her mother, plus both of their personalities, I strongly doubted they did anything together for the holidays. Come to think of it, she never mentioned her father...as far as I could remember, anyway. Of course, as much as I wanted to believe I wouldn’t forget a detail like that, my memory wasn’t the strongest. Considering he never came up, though, maybe he wasn’t in the picture...

And here I thought I knew pretty much everything about Adachi, but as it turned out, there was a big blank space in her life that I never noticed.

“Well, if she doesn’t have any plans for dinner, bring her home with you.”

“Who, Adachi?”

“The more, the merrier, right?”

My mother was always like this—assuming everyone in the same room would automatically get along. She never once considered that maybe, *just* maybe, not everyone enjoyed social activities. It was a trait I could never hope to imitate, but to her credit, I was sure there were quite a few people out there who stood to benefit from her optimism.

“Well, I’ll ask her, at least.”

“Good!” she nodded. Then she smirked. “I’ll ask, too.”

“...Ask who about what?”

“Issa secwet! Top secwet!”

“Ugh, *stop* doing that baby voice. It’s so not cute.”

My honest opinion was met with a less-than-humorous kick that grazed my shin. “Believe it or not, kid, I have friendships of my own! Consider it a fun surprise for later.”

“Uh, maybe don’t just skip over the part where you *kicked your child?*”

“You know, I’m impressed you managed to dodge that.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“Quite a *feat!* Get it? Feet?”

“Ugh, *shut up.*”

Then I heard the pitter-patter of little footsteps and saw Yashiro run into the kitchen, both hands outstretched in front of her as if drawn in by a magnet.

“Uh oh...” my mother muttered, and gave chase.

“*Gyah!*” A beat later, Yashiro tumbled out into the hallway.

“What a bizarre family,” I sighed wistfully.

Back in junior high, the shrieks and laughter would have grated on my ears like nails on a chalkboard, but these days, I didn’t mind it at all. The heater inside me had finally roared to life, affording me a warmth I never used to feel.

“Talk about a blast from the past...!” Shimamura muttered, chuckling as soon as she laid eyes on me.

The first thing I felt was a rush of joy to learn that she could remember what I wore last year. After all, she slept so much, I wouldn’t put it past her to have forgotten all those minute details from months and months ago.

The second thing I felt was embarrassment.

We met up at the Christmas tree in the plaza right by the entrance to the mall. Looking around, I could see all sorts of other people meeting up, like this was a train station or something... I could feel their heat, too. Some were families with kids, some were straight couples, and there were even a few same-sex couples.

“Is this what you always wear on your days off, my dearest Adachi-chan?”

“Look...don’t ask me to explain it. I don’t know how.”

Once again, I ended up wearing a *cheongsam* today. The only difference was that this one wasn’t taken from the Chinese restaurant—it was one I bought with my own money. Yes, after a lot of consideration, I had acquired a *cheongsam* of my own. *God, what was I thinking...?*

“I mean, it looks good. Besides, it’s a special outfit, so it matches the occasion.”

She scanned me up and down. Embarrassed, I wrapped my coat tightly around myself to hide it.

“Relax,” she scolded me, grabbing my wrist to gently stop me.

Now she was peering beneath my coat, which made it feel even *more* awkward and embarrassing. As usual, I could feel my eyes darting in all directions and my lips flailing uselessly.

“Besides, I was hoping I’d get to see it again.”

“Wha...?”

“*Whooooosh!*”

Suddenly, a finger slid up the slit in my skirt and I leapt out of my skin. But because she was holding onto me at the time, she leapt right along with me. We spun in a circle, almost like we were doing an awkward little dance. Then, after I recovered, she apologized with an amused half-smirk.

“Sorry, sorry. Did I scare you?”

“That’s putting it lightly...”

What was this scarlet energy that rose up from the depths of my chest? My heart throbbed loudly in my ears, deafening me. It seemed to travel upward, shifting partway into a migraine. Good thing I promised myself I’d have better composure *next year*, because I’d need a lot more than the final week of this year to practice.

“Hmmm. I really think you’re more interesting this way.”

“Interesting? Wh-what way?”

I didn’t understand what she meant. But instead of explaining herself, she just kept on smiling. If I had to guess, she didn’t mean anything by it—she was just enjoying the moment with me. So...was I meant to feel flattered, or...?

Unfortunately, I didn’t have time to stop and think about it right now. Instead, I chose to focus on the present.

“Say, um...could we please...hold hands?”

I pulled her hand from my wrist and held it up as I made my request. At last, I had learned not to snatch her hand in a blind panic, but rather to stay calm. *Yes, that’s it, just stay calm. No need to rush. She’s my girlfriend, and she’s here to spend time with me*, I told myself over and over.

“Sure.”

Like always, Shimamura readily agreed and took my hand in hers. Her fingers were cold, suggesting they hadn’t touched a single soul on the way here. This offered me some small sense of relief. Together, we set off in the direction she chose for us—toward the sparkle and allure of the restaurants.

But while part of me was overjoyed that holding hands had become so commonplace for us, part of me was...well...a little disappointed that it barely seemed to register. If anything,

Shimamura seemed more concerned about what she wanted to eat for lunch. Our joined hands hung limply in the space between us.

“...Shimamura, do you ever actually get embarrassed about anything?”

“Huh? Of course I do. Who doesn’t?” She paused. “Actually, I guess some people don’t,” she corrected herself quickly, as if someone specific had come to mind. “Say, is it cool if we swing by the donut shop first? I need to buy some before I forget.”

“What for?”

“A weird little gremlin requested them as her Christmas present this year,” she laughed stiffly, and somehow I already knew who she was talking about.

“Hm?”

Just then, she looked down at our joined hands for some reason. Of the two, mine was paler, and my fingers looked to be a tiny bit longer—all the better to hold hers with though. Had I squeezed her too hard? Whatever it was, she didn’t comment on it. Instead, she gazed around at the flashy Christmas decorations and the shiny red bicycle on display in the center of the walkway.

Shimamura was just observing the world, as usual. And as usual, I was observing Shimamura.

Shimamura this, Shimamura that. Get a grip! I thought to myself belatedly. And seeing as I had managed to achieve a little more self-awareness as of late, perhaps this was a sign that I was starting to calm down.

“Shimamura, how much do you think about me?”

“Huh?” Her eyes rolled like marbles in my direction, away from the store signage overhead. “What do you mean, how much?”

“I dunno... Would you say you think about me at least once a day?”

“Mmmm...yeah, sure.”

To me, this sounded way too casual—or was I just way too intense? “Okay, well...f-for how long?”

“Oh, so *that’s* what you meant. Gosh, I don’t know...” Frowning, she put a hand to her chin. “I mean, I’ve never really kept track.”

Her confusion was, upon further consideration, entirely understandable. A normal person wouldn’t see a distinction at all. It was obvious to *me*, of course, since she occupied so much of my day. To tell the truth, I wanted Shimamura to think about me just as much, but I knew I was being unreasonable. Life just didn’t work like that.

When we arrived at the donut shop, she asked, “Do I really seem like I don’t care about you?”

Yes, I started to say, but bit it back. Too late. She saw it in my eyes.

“Well, that’s no good. I’m really sorry. I’ll do better.”

Was she aware that her flat tone made her sound completely insincere? Regardless, perhaps this was simply part of her unique personality. Or was I a terminal case for defending her?

“No, you don’t...have to...” I shook my head vigorously. I could tell that she was doing her best.

“Hmmm... Okay, wanna sit down for a bit?”

She gestured into the donut shop with a tentative finger. Beyond the windows, the cheery interior smelled sweet and, at the same time, like Chinese food. Evidently, they offered a lunch menu; I normally never bought donuts this early, so I had no idea.

Shimamura bought a donut for herself, plus three more—enough for her little sister and that bizarre creature to have some, I figured. Once she received her order, she looked up suddenly, like she just remembered something.

“Wh-what is it?” I asked.

“I know I remembered last year, but this year...I forgot to buy you a Christmas present,” she admitted, smiling sadly and averting her eyes.

“Um, I didn’t buy anything either, so...” I was too busy thinking about what to wear, so it totally slipped my mind.

“Oh! Well, then, it works out perfectly.”

“It...it does...?”

“After we eat, we can go shopping together!”

“Oh, okay.”

At least now we had actual plans for the day, so perhaps it truly *was* for the best. Hanging out with Shimamura, I could never think of anything for us to do together...and yet I wanted to spend my time with her nonetheless. *That’s love for you, I guess.*

Trays in hand, we started searching for a place to sit. This donut shop was always fairly popular, but today, it was *packed*. Most of the customers were families with kids, and their little shrieks punctuated the air. Weaving our way through them, we somehow managed to secure two seats by the window.

A cold draft blew in from the emergency exit and lingered on my elbows and shoulders. Now I understood why these seats were empty. I didn’t mind, though. My palms and cheeks were already flushed, so I figured I could use some help cooling off.

“Now, obviously, I really like you, Adachi,” Shimamura continued once we were settled in, confessing her love as casually as a sip of water.

“That...that’s...that’s good to know,” I replied, trying my best to play it cool, but ultimately stumbling over my words. Twice.

“But if I’m not being clear about it, then I need to work on that.”

“Uhhh... Yes, please do...?” It sounded good to me, so I inadvertently found myself requesting it.

“You got it,” she nodded casually. Then she picked up her donut, peeled off a piece of the hardened chocolate icing, and ate it by itself. Wordlessly, her lips spread in a soft, contented smile, and as I gazed at her, I soon found myself smiling too.

“Shimamura, I think I would die without you. That’s how much I...” I ran out of steam partway through and started mumbling.

“Sorry to be a wet blanket, but what was that last part? I must’ve misheard it.” Her big, round eyes probed into me, her affable grin grilling me mercilessly.

“You’re such a bully...!”

“Awww, I just want to know what you said, that’s all!” Then, for some reason, she looked away. “Because sometimes...once you miss it, you can’t go back and ask,” she added quietly. “Go on. I promise I’m listening this time.”

She ran a hand through her hair, affording me a glimpse of her ear...and as I watched, it twitched all on its own. The surprise must have shown on my face, because she looked at me in confusion.

“What’s wrong?”

“I...I’ve never known anybody who can wiggle their ears.”

“Wait, really?” Her ears wiggled again, though it didn’t seem like she was doing it on purpose. “My sister can do it, too. Is it really that rare?”

“I think so...”

“So you can’t do it?”

Proooooobably not, I thought to myself. Nevertheless, I combed my hair back to expose my ear. But how was I supposed to know what muscle to flex? I focused hard in that general area. I could feel

the back of my skull tensing up, but it showed no signs of migrating to my ear. All I achieved was a stiff, flushed face.

“Interesting...” Shimamura mused, gazing at me as she took bites of her donut. “Well, I’m glad there’s at least one thing in the world I can do better than you can!” She grinned happily, and not just from the sugar.

What? Since when have I been better than you at anything?

After a moment, our ping-pong games in the gym came to mind. I vaguely remembered outscoring her more often than not. But other than that, she was far better than me at...well, *everything*, in my opinion. Considering how I spent the majority of my day thinking about her nonstop, she practically wiped the floor with me.

“Anyway, we’re getting off-track.”

“Right.”

“So, you would die without me because...?” she asked, looping back around with her half-eaten donut in hand. There was no getting out of answering...not that I really wanted to play coy when it came to her, anyway. I breathed in the noise and the sugary smell, sucking it in through my front teeth like I was trying to take a bite.

“Because...that’s just how much I love you.”

“Oh, I guess I *did* hear you after all. Sorry!” She grinned brightly, and I felt my lips curl into a pout.

“I knew it. You’re a bully.”

“Hee hee hee!”

Instead of denying it, she laughed it off, and the subtle way it revealed her more childish side was quite effective in very nearly getting me to forget all about it. She could be so crafty sometimes—but why did I find myself fascinated by it? Because it felt like a rare glimpse beyond the walls around her heart?

“I gotta say, it feels like I’m finally getting used to this.” She glanced around at our surroundings and mumbled, “So you love me... Right...”

“Wh-what’s that supposed to mean?”

“Oh, I’m not questioning your feelings or anything, obviously.”

I felt the blood drain from my face.

“You’re just so...so soft and beautiful and vulnerable and red...”

“Red...?”

Surely I hadn’t bitten my tongue since that festival...or had I? Knowing me, maybe I had. My soul flowed like blood, ravaging me from the inside out. However...

“The thing is, Shimamura...I know you’d be just fine if I wasn’t around, and...it makes me sink inside.”

“Sink...?”

It was the only way I knew how to describe my downward spirals. Shimamura was my whole world, and if I were to be fully cut off from her, then my only option was to fall. I was simply incapable of progressing straight forward on flat land.

“Hmmm,” she murmured, as though she couldn’t think of anything to say at first. But she promptly continued, “Yeah, I get that.” Instead of smoothing things over, she returned it with her full sincerity. “I used to have a lot of friends, but these days, I hardly speak to any of them. And yet, here I am, living my life like normal...and I can’t guarantee the same won’t happen for you and me.”

Slowly, she raised her right hand—the same hand that was holding mine moments prior. Her fingers grasped at empty air, started to spread...then closed tightly once more.

“So I just gotta try my hardest to keep us together, you know? I gotta learn to commit.”

“What do you mean?”

“I can’t just turn a blind eye to how I feel about people or the relationship I want to have with them—I gotta be more mindful of it. Because it’s *so* easy to be complacent. Before you know it, you won’t even notice when things start to fade...and that’s what hurts most of all,” she explained with a sad smile.

I could tell she was speaking from experience. And as I looked at her, I thought to myself: *I refuse to be yet another painful memory for her*. Instead, I would let my feelings drive me forward, right here and now, just as they always had, just as they always would. That was the chemistry between me and her.

I took her hands in mine—both of them, firmly. Her eyes widened at first, but then she smiled and shook her head in amusement. It was this same sisterly smile that made me sometimes forget I was technically taller than her.

“Sorry, but...holding both hands with you makes it kinda hard to eat.”

She jostled our arms pointedly. Personally, I didn’t care about my donut if it meant I could gaze directly into her eyes, but I could at least see where she was coming from. Once again, it felt like my priorities were way out of whack. But if I’d chosen to do nothing, I wouldn’t have learned that Shimamura’s hands were ever so slightly chilly...so instead, I convinced myself that this was the best course.

“I...I just wanted to...to contribute as much as I can right now.”

And later on, I would contribute whatever I was capable of at *that* point in time, too. That was the utmost I could manage. But if it was enough to ensure I would have even one more day with Shimamura, then I was grateful.

“...Adachi, you really try to live each moment to the fullest, huh?”

“You think so...?”

She made it sound a lot cooler than it was. In actuality, I didn't have many memories to look back on, and I didn't have much hope for the future, either. But Shimamura was *here*, in the present—at least, she was right now. Perhaps someday I could claim to have a history with her, but not today. Not until the memories of last year finally started to fade.

“You know, you tend to go out of your way to define things, and...” She fell silent, closing her eyes. “I was about to say I *kinda like it*, but no. That's not what I should say, is it?” she muttered wistfully. Then she looked directly into my eyes and continued, “I love that about you, Adachi.”

She giggled and averted her eyes in obvious embarrassment. It was this reaction, more than anything she said, that captured my gaze...and my heart.

“Oh!” Just then, she looked back at me, her eyes as round as saucers. “You're doing the Sakura face!”

“Wh-what does that mean...?” I asked, confused.

Smiling, she reached out, her fingers hot enough to melt me into a puddle. “Your ears...and your cheeks,” she explained, poking each in turn, “are as pink as sakura blossoms.”

Then a big, smug smirk crept up on her face, like she was having the time of her life...and somehow I knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that her comment had turned my face into a maelstrom of pink petals.

**Interlude:
Mrs. Adachi and Mrs. Shimamura and Christmas**

“**H**_{EY, HEY}, wanna go on a date?” I asked.

“Excuse me?”

“Okay, how about a party instead?”

“Tell me, what exactly is wrong with you? Is it your brain or your ears?”

“Rude much?” I paused to consider it. “Well...if I had to choose, I’d say the latter.”

“And why is that?”

“Because I’m not hearing a *yes!*”

“Oh, shut up.”

She reacted the same way as my daughter, and it made me laugh. A gust of heat brushed against my calf, making my skin itch.

“So why, exactly, did you call me?” she asked.

“Oh, right. Well, every year on Christmas, our family has a *slightly* fancy dinner...”

“How very nice for you.”

“...And I wanted to invite you to it!”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Cooked to perfection by yours truly, of course!” I bragged. My husband and kids never really commented on my cooking, and I wanted to get my dues, damn it.

I’d completely forgotten to tell Hougetsu about Mrs. Adachi, but eh, I figured I could just explain it over dinner. As I stood there, waiting to be showered in praise, I heard her voice lower even further.

“You know what you are?”

“Who, me?”

“You’re an *imbecile*.”

“I am?”

“Why on earth would you think I’d want to go to *someone else’s house* for a Christmas party?”

“It’s pretty normal in America, y’know.” Truth be told, I hardly knew a thing about their culture, but I was pretty sure those Bobs and Johns *loved* to party. “Besides, you won’t be alone!”

“I don’t need your company, thank you very much.”

She saw right through me. “No, I don’t mean me.”

“Well, that’s an improvement. But who else could it possibly be?”

“Little Adachi-chan.”

At the sound of her daughter’s name—er, *surname*—she fell silent. Was she still breathing? I stretched my arms wide as I waited for her to respond. She must have heard the subsequent grunts, too.

“*Explain.*”

“My daughter’s out spending time with your daughter right now.”

“Oh, right... Yes, I know about that.”

“And she’s going to come over and eat dinner with us, too...probably.”

“*Probably?*”

“Well, it’s not a sure bet, but I think she will.”

Hougetsu was relatively skilled at persuading people. Or at the very least, her invitations always seemed to work out in her favor. Perhaps she was just an innately charming person...despite, y’know,

all the derpiness. *We'll say she gets that from her father. Everything else she gets from me.*

"If my daughter will be there, then I see even less reason for me to go."

"How come?"

"...Are you honestly incapable of taking a hint?"

"Oh, right. You two are on bad terms or whatever. Well, then, here's the perfect opportunity to patch things up with her!"

Something sparkly streaked past, making a beeline for the kitchen; I reached out and grabbed it by the scruff of the neck.

"Waaaaagh!"

"Now listen here," Mrs. Adachi sighed.

"I'm just saying, this is foreign territory for Adachi-chan. That's why I think you should join us."

"Even if I went, there's no support I can offer Sakura."

"What? You're not going to support her? Are you evil incarnate?"

"Don't be so extreme! It's not that, but—wait a minute, why should I tell *you* of all people?!"

"I recommend you force a smile on that face and hold her hand, just once. You gotta train yourself to do it."

"I don't smile."

"That's why I said to *force* one!!!"

You'd be surprised what you can achieve if you try.

"C'mon, wouldn't it be nice to spend Christmas with your daughter for once? 'Tis the season!"

And I knew for a fact that they needed a little help to keep the tension out of the air, so...

"I'm offering to be your social lubricant over here!"

“.....”

“Wow, how generous! How kind! How flexible!”

“Are you having fun talking to yourself?”

“A fair bit, actually. So why don’t you give it a try?”

Easy way to start looking on the bright side, y’know.

“Besides, you don’t have to magically fix things overnight. What’s important is to have a nice memory to look back on.”

In the distant future, beyond the horizon, you’ll want something you can stop and think back on from time to time. That’s what matters most.

“...You’re not kind or generous in the least. You’re just completely self-serving, aren’t you?”

“Hmmm...I dunno...”

Admittedly, I wasn’t inviting her purely out of the kindness of my heart. I wanted to be surrounded by people whose company I enjoyed—the more the merrier! That was my entire motivation.

“You can bring your hubby, too, if you want,” I offered, and a split second later, I realized our dining table might not have room for him. *Especially with this little stinker around*, I thought to myself as I gave her a shake. She seemed to be having a ball hanging in midair.

“I don’t *have* a husband.”

“Oh, you don’t? My apologies.”

“It’s fine... Look, am I seriously supposed to show up tonight?”

“Don’t ask *me*, lady!”

“I don’t have the energy to decline, so you have to decide for me. Really, I don’t have the energy to even *think* about it...”

“Then come on dooown!” I shouted like a game show host.

“Come on!” the sparkly one chimed in, though Mrs. Adachi probably didn’t hear it.

She sighed. "I just have to go to your house and get it over with, right?"

"Hey, don't be so pessimistic about it! It's gonna be fun! For me, at least."

"In *your* case, I imagine you could entertain yourself just fine without me."

"Naw, that's not true! I'm actually a pretty lonely person."

"Oh, really..."

"So you better show up, got it? Dinner starts at seven o'clock sharp!"

"Fine, fine..."

Mission accomplished. I started to hang up, but I heard her hesitating on the other end of the line. "What is it?"

"I'm just kicking myself for giving you my phone number, that's all."

"Sucks to be you, huh? *Wa ha ha ha ha!*"

As I laughed, I heard her hang up on me. *Ah, that was fun.* Mrs. Adachi's brand of cold indifference was a bit different from her daughter's, and I found it highly entertaining.

"Oh, Shimamura-san will be home soon," the kid in my grip remarked, looking over at the front door.

"Wait, really?"

"I can smell the donuts."

"Hmmm... Well, I sure can't."

But of course, there were some things only other people could see. Likewise, Mrs. Adachi and I could look in the same direction and perceive two very different things. That was why we all needed other people in our lives. And so I carried the sparkly kid with me as I approached the front door.

“Oh!”

Sure enough, there came a knock—the same knock that always let me know when Hougetsu was home. And her dear friend was surely standing right beside her.

“Mama-san, are you Santa Claus?”

“Hm?”

“You have given Adachi-san a present in the form of her mother,” she explained, wriggling in my grasp.

“Ah, I see...” Now *that* was a beautiful way of looking at it! “You sure make some wise observations now and then, don’t you, little mooch?”

“I am a very good person, you see.”

And so, with my surprise present on the way, we opened the door.

“Welcome home, my daughters.”

I was too lazy to correct the record. *Oh, well. Easier this way.*

Chapter 5: A Relationship Undefined

“**B**UT...I’M NOT...”

“Aw, who cares? You can be my daughter if you want.”

The second we walked in, my mother started trying to adopt Adachi. Naturally, I was perplexed, and Adachi even more so. As I took my shoes off, I felt the lingering warmth of the hand I was holding until just moments before.

“You don’t mind, right?” my mother asked me.

“I don’t know,” I replied evasively.

If Adachi was adopted by the Shimamura family...what would happen? We’d have to stop dating...wouldn’t we? On second thought, maybe we wouldn’t. She wouldn’t literally turn into my biological sister, after all...though

it would still be awkward if anyone found out I was dating my sister, adopted or not... Then again, our relationship was already a far cry from normal, so a little extra awkwardness was hardly a deal-breaker.

That being said, I couldn’t picture my real sister accepting Adachi as one of the family. Knowing the two of them, they’d both probably turtle up. One thing was for sure, however: I would still be the oldest sister in the family.

“Don’t worry, Hougetsu. You can be my daughter, too!”

“I already am.”

“I know that, sillypants!” She prodded me with the tip of her fingernail.

“You’re *extra* obnoxious today, huh, Mom?”

“How could you say such a thing to your poor old mother?” Then she looked at Yashiro, who she was currently holding by the scruff of the neck. “Can you believe the nerve of this girl?”

Meanwhile, Yashiro flailed her limbs in midair, staring directly at the bag of donuts in my hand. *Very subtle.*

“Um...thanks for having me,” Adachi told my mother, head bowed timidly as she set her shoes neatly beside mine. Her polite tone was utterly incongruous with the family shenanigans happening around her.

“Of course, of course! Come on in, relax, and enjoy yourself,” she replied. This, however, was a tall order for someone like Adachi. Then she noticed what Adachi was wearing. “My, what a fetching dress.”

“Oh, I...um...I thought Shimamura would like it,” Adachi blurted out, eyes darting in every direction, completely oblivious to how it sounded.

My mother turned her attention to me. Now *I* was in the hot seat.

“Is this what you’re into, kid?”

“What I’m *into*...?”

“Well, I like it too, Adachi-chan! Good job!”

With her free hand, she gave a jovial thumbs-up. Adachi froze like a deer in the headlights, looking to me for help. But I didn’t know what we were supposed to do, either. So instead, I played along.

“Good job!”

I thrust a thumbs-up of my own in Adachi’s direction. Surrounded on two sides by validation, she started to panic. And as she backed away slowly, this mother-daughter pair—plus one extra—closed in. Soon, we had her cornered against the wall, where

she could only stare in horror at the encroaching, approaching thumbs...

“Guess I’d better go get dinner on the table!”

Just then, my mother dropped Yashiro like an unwanted toy and headed off to the kitchen. Newly abandoned, Yashiro landed smoothly on her feet and started orbiting the bag of donuts. *This little lion sure acts like a housecat.* As I kept the bag safely out of her paws, I spotted a figure at the end of the hall and beckoned her over. Hesitantly, she approached.

Once again, Adachi stiffened up, though in a slightly different way. “Um...hello,” she greeted timidly.

Of course, my sister was perpetually in Shy Mode around anyone who wasn’t family. “Good evening,” she mumbled in response.

“A good evening indeed!” the extra kid chimed in cheerfully. She was always like this, no matter who she spoke to. And her eyes were still fixed on my to-go bag. I waved it left and right, watching her eyes dart back and forth.

“Come and get it!” I teased, making her pounce left and right. Every time she moved, her butterfly hair scattered little motes of light, tracing an arc through the air. It was pretty to look at, sure, but at this rate, there would be no end to it. *Eh, that’s enough bullying for one day.* I gave in and handed it over.

“Wooooo!”

“There’s enough for *both* of you in there, so you have to share!”

“I know, I know!”

Raising the bag over her head, Yashiro toddled off. Hesitantly, my sister looked from me to Adachi. Then, after a pause, she turned and chased after Yashiro. Once they were gone, I felt the air settle,

and I let out a breath. Despite the hustle and bustle, the hallway was ice-cold, and it made my throat clam up.

“Sorry about all the noise and stuff.”

“Oh, no, that’s okay.”

If I had to guess, things were probably a lot quieter at Adachi’s house. I knew full well this wasn’t the sort of place she liked to be, and yet I had invited her regardless, hence my guilt. With that said, however, the world didn’t revolve around Adachi’s desires. I had a world of my own. She was part of it, but so were a bunch of other people.

When I peeked into the kitchen, I saw the dining table swathed in all my mother’s best dishes—food that appealed both to children and to my mother herself.

“Yachi, we have to save the donuts for later!”

“We do?”

“Otherwise we won’t have room for dinner... Well, *you’ll* still have room, I guess... I swear, you’re such a little handful!”

It was kind of funny to see my baby sister acting like a grown-up. The two of them sat side by side; once Adachi and I took our seats, we’d probably end up side by side, too. Sure enough, she chose the chair on the left, and I took the one directly to her right. Couldn’t be the other way around or we’d bump elbows—this was a lesson we’d learned over the course of the school trip.

As I sat down, the appetizing smells washed over me all at once, followed by a gust from the heater.

“...Wait, what the...?”

I counted the heads of everyone present and realized there was an extra chair at the table. Before I could ask, however, my father walked in.

“Goodness me! So many lovely ladies in here. I’m feeling a bit out of place!” he chuckled, empty cup in one hand.

“In that case, I shall be your friend for the evening,” Yashiro volunteered, raising her hand. She was already holding a plastic fork at the ready.

“Aww, you’re such a little sweetheart.”

“I am a very good person, yes!”

“...So, where are you from, anyway? Feels like you’re always here.”

“I came from next door.”

Congrats. That’s the least believable cover story I’ve ever heard.

“Next door? Next door... Hmmm... Next door? Sure, I guess. Next door, then.”

The way he shrugged his shoulders reminded me of myself. *That’s my dad, all right.*

“Th-thanks for having me,” Adachi told him politely once there was an opportune moment. Was this their first time having an actual conversation?

“Of course,” he replied in his usual easygoing tone. “So you’re Hougetsu’s friend?”

“Uh...yes,” she answered after a pause. I could only imagine the wild turn this year’s Christmas would take if she had corrected the record out loud in front of everyone. Maybe we’d all drink eggnog at the family intervention.

“Wait a minute... Oh, right! The girl from the Chinese place!”

Evidently her Chinese dress had jogged his memory. Adachi nodded.

“Hmmm... Must be nice to be so young. You kids can get away with anything.”

This was a rather generous interpretation of Adachi's chosen outfit.

"I get away with plenty of things myself, y'know. Does that make me young too?" my mother joked.

"Oh...uh...sure," my father answered—so absently, you might find it listed in the dictionary next to the word *hollow*. "Yeah, it's...it's weird, isn't it...?"

That last tidbit from him spoke volumes. Not a soul moved to vouch for my mom.

"Times like these," she pressed, "I'd appreciate it if you'd at least tell me I'm *funny*, or *charming*, or even..."

But just then, the doorbell announced the arrival of a visitor. Was it the delivery guy or something? I looked up at the ceiling, chasing the sound.

"*She's here, she's here!*"

"She *who*?"

"Let's just say you're not the only one who invited a friend to dinner!" Mom gushed giddily as she rose to her feet.

"What? What friend?"

I shot a puzzled look at my dad, but he was busy staring in confusion at my mom. Admittedly, my mother was a real social butterfly, but I couldn't think of anyone in her vast network of friends that she'd invite to Christmas dinner with the family.

"Settle down, settle down," my mother grinned as she skipped off to the door. A few moments later, she returned. "Ladies and gents, our special guest has arrived!"

"Huh...?!"

I heard someone exclaim in surprise, but whether it was me or Adachi, I honestly wasn't sure.

My dear mother had walked in escorting none other than Mrs. Adachi—and I use “escorting” lightly, since it looked a lot more like an attempted kidnapping. The woman’s already-deep scowl deepened even further when she laid eyes on her daughter. As for Adachi, she was frozen like a kid caught with their hand in the cookie jar.

“Um...what’s going on?” I asked on Adachi’s behalf.

“I told you, this is my friend!”

“Since *when*?”

“Since yesterday! Now, have a seat,” she told Mrs. Adachi, directing her to the chair beside her own.

“At least let me take my coat off first...” Mrs. Adachi muttered.

“Or would you prefer to sit next to little Adachi-chan?”

“*Huh*?!”

This time, the surprise was audibly Adachi’s; her voice cracked under the pressure. Meanwhile, her mother scrutinized her with cold eyes. Then she folded up her coat and let out a small sigh. “No, thank you.”

“You sure...? Okay, then, you can sit across from each other. C’mon, hurry up!” my mother pressed, smacking the chair like an impatient child.

Mrs. Adachi closed her eyes in a bitter grimace. “So obnoxious!” she spat as she took her seat.

Now both of our mothers were at the dinner table, sitting across from us. Was this some kind of prank? That being said, I could see how they must have met—through the sports gym. God knows how it must have happened, because my mother never mentioned a word of it.

Mrs. Adachi inclined her head in my father’s direction. “I’m so sorry for intruding.”

“No, no, don’t be! You’re, erm...this young lady’s mother?” he asked, glancing at Adachi. It must have been patently obvious, considering the physical resemblance and the uncannily similar vibes.

“Yes,” she answered curtly.

As for the *young lady* in question, she was shrinking into herself like a sad puppy.

“We go to the same gym,” my mother explained. “Her name’s...uh...Sakura, was it?”

“No, that’s my daughter,” Mrs. Adachi replied, pointing at her offspring, who hung her head and avoided all eye contact.

“Oh, right. *Your* name is...Mrs. Adachi!”

“That’s enough out of you!” A rather elegant way to tell someone to shut the hell up. But of course, my mother carried on regardless. Meanwhile, Mrs. Adachi’s eyes met mine. The room was now so warm, it felt like we were back in the sauna.

“Long time no see,” she told me.

“Nice to see you again,” I replied stiffly. I really wasn’t expecting to encounter her, least of all *here*.

Adachi observed this exchange, then fixed me with a look that demanded answers.

“It’s a long story,” I told her.

“Nothing important,” Mrs. Adachi chimed in.

Now it looked like we were both trying to hide something. In all honesty, it *was* a long story about nothing important, but I could see in Adachi’s eyes that she was having trouble believing us.

“I’ll explain later,” I told her. At least this way I could put it off for a while—not that there was much to explain in the first place. Long story short, I simply got stubborn and challenged her to sit in the sauna with me.

End of story.

“If she is the ‘special guest,’ then what does that make me?”

“Yachi, you’re *always* here...”

“A salient point. Wa ha ha ha!”

Meanwhile, the little gremlins were having a blast all on their own, and my father was watching them in amusement. This could be quite the heartwarming scene if we all agreed to forget that one of them was an interstellar alien thing.

“Here, try this. I made it myself!” my mother bragged, gesturing to one of the dishes. After some serious side-eye, Mrs. Adachi relented.

“...Certainly.”

Like her daughter, Mrs. Adachi was left-handed, and as we ate, she and my mother kept bumping elbows—something my mother in particular seemed to enjoy. She was always an upbeat person, but today especially so. Maybe she was excited to have made a new friend. As for Mrs. Adachi, she remained unenthusiastic, but at the very least, she stayed by my mother’s side...

By her side...

What if they weren’t merely friends, but secretly dating? Smirking at my own silly idea, I shot a glance at Adachi. *Ha ha ha, that’d never happen...except it totally DID happen for their daughters, though... Ha ha...ha...* I decided to abandon this train of thought for fear of where it might lead.

“You use too much spice,” was Mrs. Adachi’s first reaction to my mother’s cooking. “I can taste your dreadful personality in every bite!”

“Hearty, isn’t it?”

“It makes me thirsty.”

“Here, have some water.”

Her barbs bounced right off my mother like water off a duck's back. Defeated, Mrs. Adachi sighed and picked up her glass. "Also, I felt it would be rude to show up empty-handed, so I brought a little something."

"You did? You're a bigger softie than I thought you were! Ha ha ha!" Jovially, my mother clapped her on the back; in response, her brow furrowed even harder. "So what'd you bring us? Peking duck?"

"Don't be stupid, *you*—oh, I forgot your husband was here." Mrs. Adachi hastily fell silent, glancing in my father's direction.

As for my dad, he was in the middle of unboxing our cake. He sensed her gaze and laughed. "Don't worry about it. You're more or less right about her."

"*Rude!* Peking duck is *delicious*, I'll have you know!"

"That's not what I'm talking about!"

"Good, because I've actually never had it."

"Oh, for crying out loud...!!!" Mrs. Adachi let out a dramatic heavy sigh and buried her face in her hands.

From an outsider's perspective, the two already seemed like good friends, though whether they actually *were* remained to be seen. But be it her pushy personality or something else, my mother was a pro at building connections. Or maybe she just liked to strongarm people into doing what she wanted. My father once described her as a "swindler" in that regard.

"So, whatcha bring us, hmm? C'mon, what is it?"

"Alcohol and a few small snacks."

"Oh." Instantly, my mother's excitement was gone. "I can't drink alcohol at all. Not even one drop!"

She waved a dismissive hand, and only then did I realize I'd never seen her drink anything alcoholic. My father, however, brought home six packs of beer on occasion. What about me,

though? Would I be able to hold my liquor? I already seemed to take after my mother a lot more than I wanted to...

“But then again, I already act like a drunk most days, anyway! *Geh hah hah!*” my mother laughed. I felt my smile stiffen. Was *this* what I looked like to other people?

As for Adachi, I predicted that she wouldn’t be a lightweight—not if her mother liked alcohol enough to buy it as a gift, anyway. Indeed, though the two of us often played at being rebel girls, neither of us had ever tried a sip. Looking back, the only “rebellious” thing about us was that we liked to skip class. Which, I concede, was still a bad thing.

“Go on, have a conversation with your daughter,” my mother suggested to Mrs. Adachi. Her tone was so forceful, I could practically *hear* her grabbing the woman by the shoulders—so forceful, it made Adachi herself flinch.

“We don’t need to...”

“Just try it, okay?”

This time her words were soft and gentle. Perhaps it was this skill with the carrot and stick that made her a swindler in my father’s eyes. Unable to protest against my mother’s kindness, Mrs. Adachi faltered and pursed her lips...and in that moment, she looked identical to the girl I knew.

She set her plate and chopsticks back down on the table and looked across the table at her daughter. I could see one eye twitching faintly. As for Adachi, she sat straight up, her shoulders perfectly squared. It felt like I was watching a job interview.

“Well, um...” Mrs. Adachi fumbled for words, then cleared her throat and muttered to herself, “*Well, what?*” Evidently, she couldn’t find anything to say.

“Want me to write a script for you?”

“You sit there and be *quiet!*”

She clapped a hand over my mother’s mouth. Then Mom shot me a pointed look; if I had to guess, she probably wanted me to give Adachi some encouragement. But *how?* I sincerely doubted Adachi had anything to say to her mother, and trying to force any topic wouldn’t play out well for anybody. But at the same time, I got the feeling there was something more to it, so I decided the easiest course was to trust that my mother knew what she was doing.

I surreptitiously took Adachi’s hand in mine under the dinner table and told her, “Let’s wait and see.” She squeezed my hand, and I squeezed back.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Adachi stared down at her lap, her hand still pressed over my mother’s mouth. Eventually, without looking up, she said:

“You should wear warmer clothes during the winter.”

After all her thought and consideration, the message she settled on wasn’t gentle or affectionate. It was motherly concern, expressed in the most clumsy way possible.

“Okay,” Adachi replied, choking the word out as she gripped my hand tightly.

Long story short: this was the closest the Adachi family came to a conversation that night. But, judging from the grin on my mother’s face, it was enough. What about me? Was I grinning? I pressed my hands to my cheeks and vaguely found the answer.

Adachi had barely spoken a word all this time. When I looked at her, I found her gazing intently at her mother, watching her antics with a new friend. It was unusual to see her looking at someone other than me; the realization made me a little bashful, but at the same time, I found myself enraptured by the thought. Filled with uncertainty and raw emotion, her eyes sparkled like I’d never seen before, and they were beautiful. I couldn’t stop staring.

“Are you having fun, Adachi?” I asked gently, weaving my voice in between the noise and chatter.

“No, not really,” she answered honestly, voice soft, with no fake veneer. “This isn’t fun at all.”

And yet, to me, her tiny whisper carried an equally tiny hint of warmth.

Afterword

GOOD AND EVIL are two sides of the same coin.

—Hitoma Iruma



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