

10
NOVEL



Adachi and Shimamura

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STORY BY Hitoma Iruma ART BY raemz

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"I saw you looking at me,
so I thought maybe you
wanted something."

"Huh? Um...no, YOU were
looking at ME."

"But you were looking at
me too."

"No, I wasn't!"

"But...we made eye
contact and everything!"

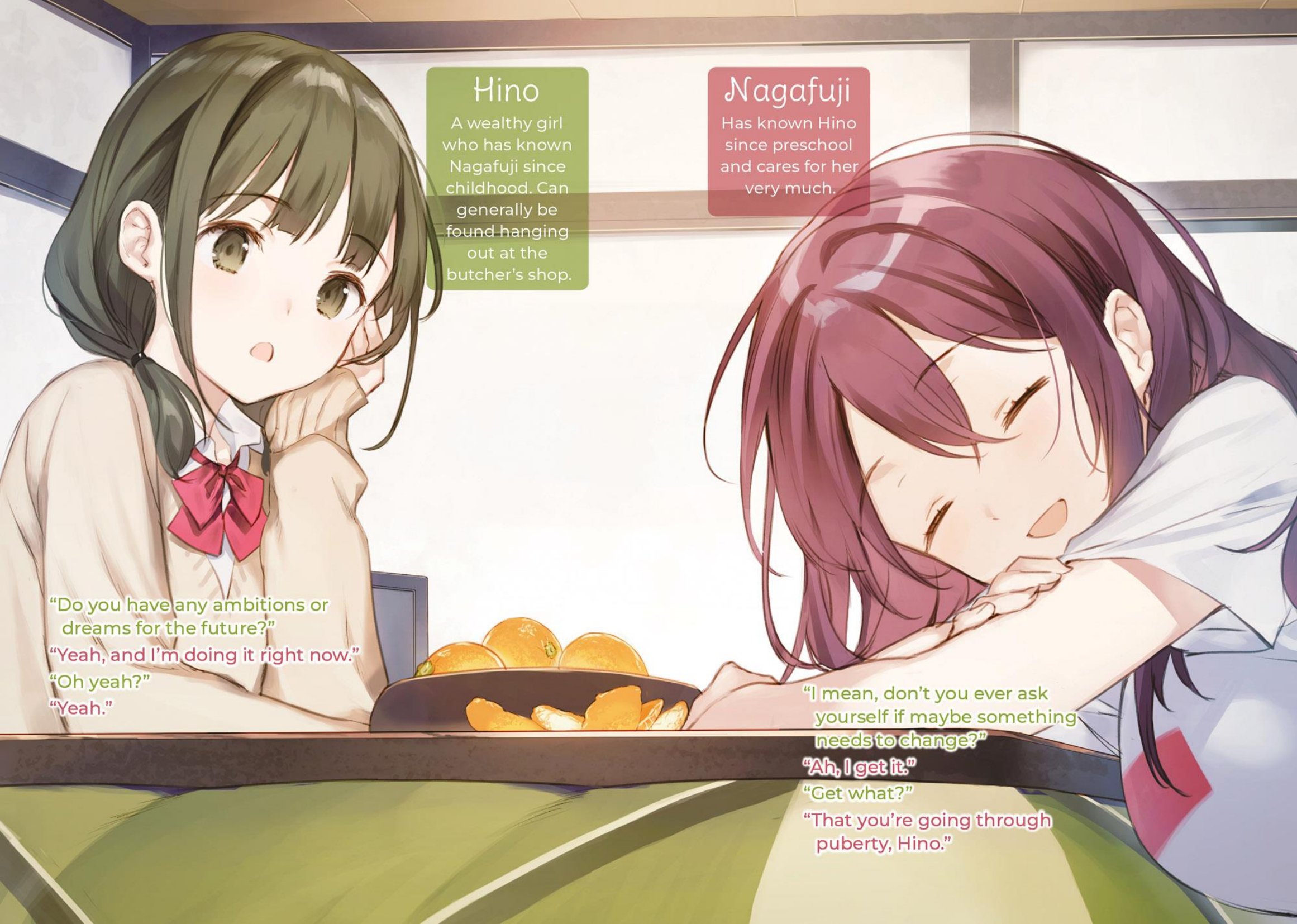
"Well, yeah, but... Ugh, I
give up. I can't think of
anything else to say."

Shimamura

A high school student
who sometimes cuts
class. Lately, she's
started to get a slightly
better grasp of how to
approach Adachi.

Adachi

A high school student
whose crush has
finally borne fruit. Still
doesn't quite know
how to actually "date"
Shimamura.



Hino

A wealthy girl who has known Nagafuji since childhood. Can generally be found hanging out at the butcher's shop.

Nagafuji

Has known Hino since preschool and cares for her very much.

"Do you have any ambitions or dreams for the future?"

"Yeah, and I'm doing it right now."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah."

"I mean, don't you ever ask yourself if maybe something needs to change?"

"Ah, I get it."

"Get what?"

"That you're going through puberty, Hino."



"It is Valenton's Day!"

"I get chocolate from you, too?"

Yashiro

A self-proclaimed alien who emits little blue motes of light. Often appears out of nowhere at Shimamura's house.

Little

Shimamura's little sister and Yashiro's playmate. Gets jealous whenever she sees Adachi getting buddy-buddy with her big sis.

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ADACHI TO SHIMAMURA VOL. 10

© Hitoma Iruma 2021

Edited by Dengeki Bunko

Illustrations by raemz

Character Design by Non

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Adachi and Shimamura Production Committee

First published in Japan in 2021 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

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Seven Seas press and purchase enquiries can be sent to Marketing Manager Lianne Sentar at press@gomanga.com. Information regarding the distribution and purchase of digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell at digital@gomanga.com.

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PRODUCTION MANAGER: Lissa Pattillo

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis

ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER: Adam Arnold

PUBLISHER: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-63858-698-2

Printed in Canada

First Printing: January 2023

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Adachi ^{and} Shimamura

NOVEL

10

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ILLUSTRATED BY

raemz



Seven Seas Entertainment

**Chapter 1:
Fantasy Sister**

“**I**T’S A *shuriken!*”

“Whoaaa!!!”

She grinned at me smugly, dressed in her middle school uniform. “And now it’s a *kusudama!*”

“That’s so cool!”

She thrust out her chest proudly as she folded each origami shape. “This one can be a gift for Hanako.” Then she reached over to where the dog sat enjoying the electric fan beside us and gently placed the blue helmet atop his head.

“His name is *Gon*, you know.”

“Wa ha ha ha ha!”

She was certainly...very sister-like.

“So anyway, let’s see, uh... Well, I’m back home now, but it’s been kinda hard, you could say! They tell me it’s ‘no big deal’ whenever I check in, but I still haven’t sold much... Waaaaah, I just wanna go home! But this *is* my home! Ga ha ha! Anyway, I should be back in two days. Hopefully, Gramps will drive me! So anyway—Man, I keep saying ‘anyway,’ but anyway, when I get back, wanna meet up? It’s funny, ‘cause, like, whenever I see you, some part of me is like ‘Aaaaahhh!’ Or maybe more like ‘AAAAHHH!’ Does that make sense? No, of course it doesn’t. Wait, maybe it kinda does? Awesome, awesome. So anyway... Uh-huh... Yeah, yeah... Wha? Your b—wait, wait, wait, you’re going to let...let me touch ‘em? You are?”

Really, really? I mean, you know I...uh...you could say I...like boobs, I guess? But...uh, er, M-Miyabi... Agh, my stomach just did a flip! I've hardly ever called someone by their first name, so I'm not used to it! Are you *sure* we're the same age? Right. Ah, gotcha... So the exact number is a mystery. The plot thickens! Huh? Getting off-topic? Right, where were we... Squeezy squeezy squeeeeezy! Whenever I touch 'em, it feels like my ears are gonna pop off. It's kinda scary! They're so warm, it makes me wonder if my hands will melt, and my mind goes all fuzzy... No, no! But, uh...yeah, totally, let me feel 'em. Pretty please with sugar on top! Byeeeeeeee!"

After she ended the phone call, she suddenly burst out laughing, her voice cracking. She seemed like she was losing the plot a little. Then she turned, and the second she laid eyes on me, she jumped out of her skin, her derp smile becoming even derpier.

"Hhggpph!"

This was the older neighbor girl I used to play with over the holidays whenever I visited Grandma and Grandpa's house. Years had passed since those halcyon days, yet she hadn't changed a bit. Seriously, she still looked like she was in junior high school—I used to call her "big sis," but honestly, that would just be weird now. She hadn't grown an inch. Not only that, but she was inexplicably wearing a TRAINEE badge as a hairpin. Now it felt like *I* was the older one.

It was my seventeenth New Year's holiday, and just like every year, my family had chosen to spend it visiting my grandparents. I suspected she and I must have slipped away from the night's festivities for similar reasons...and now here we were. With the warm glow from both houses at our backs, we froze. Not that *I* had anything to be embarrassed about, of course; all I did was walk outside.

Then I heard a voice, but it was too late to go back in, so I just kinda stood there and listened. Considering the subject matter, however, perhaps the kindest gesture I could offer would be to pretend I hadn't heard any of it. Though I'd argue she shouldn't have been talking about that stuff out in her front yard in the first place. And so the air grew tense between us.

"You're...Tsukiyo-chan, right?" she asked, craning her neck up at me.

Not even close, but sure, whatever.

"You look different," she continued, tilting her head in confusion.

Well, that makes one of us.

She glanced at the phone in her hand, then groaned and facepalmed. Her gaze peeked out at me through her fingers, darting restlessly left and right. She clearly had the energy to fidget, yet the conversation itself went nowhere.

"Uhhh..."

"Kkhhhh!"

"Huh?"

"I don't want you to get the right—wrong impression!"

"The right-wrong impression?"

"You see, that was, um... Basically, I was just on the phone!"

"Right..." You know, I think maybe this girl doesn't know how to talk to people.

"Did—did you overhear my conversation?"

"I did—did indeed."

"All of it?"

Silently, I cursed my reflexive honesty. I should have pretended to be clueless and retreated back inside. "Uh...like, half of it?"

“Which half, though?”

Admittedly, the start of the conversation was *very* different from the end. “The, uh...the first half, yeah.” Logically speaking, if I’d only heard the *first* half, I wouldn’t still be standing here. But never mind that.

“Just the first half? So, I got lucky?”

Don’t ask me that. “Lucky” was not a word I would have used to describe her evolution from kindhearted neighbor girl to...whatever this was.

“Sooo...a-are you having a good life?!” she asked, her gaze darting even faster.

What a bizarre question to ask. Did she honestly think this was a clever way to change the subject? Feeling mildly concerned, I paused to consider it, if only half-seriously.

“Mmm, pretty decent, I’d say?” Especially since I got to celebrate another holiday with that old hound. Truth be told, *pretty decent* was underselling it; I could tell from the way my nose was starting to sting.

“Well now, glad to hear it!” Spinning like a top, she tried to run back into her house.

“What about you, sis?” I asked, reflexively reviving that old nickname again.

She stopped in her tracks, turned back, and struck a pose. Then, with both hands, she snapped her fingers—or tried, at least. It didn’t make much of a sound. “Yeah!”

That doesn’t answer my question.

She fled into the house, and a moment later, I heard a high-pitched screech reminiscent of a wounded woodland creature—not to suggest I had spent any time around woodland creatures, wounded or otherwise.

“I guess she’s got her own struggles to deal with,” I thought to myself aloud. From the sound of things, she now had a girlfriend of her own: Either that or she was the sort of person who went around groping her friends, which would be a lot more concerning, truth be told.

A girlfriend... If I’d told her “same here,” how would she have reacted?

“Oh, now it’s my turn, apparently.”

My phone buzzed and I checked it. *My* girlfriend always dutifully emailed in advance to ask for permission to call me. To me, it hardly seemed necessary, but maybe she needed to make sure I would answer the phone to soothe her anxiety or something.

So when I answered Adachi’s call, the first thing I asked was: “Hey, are you having a good life?”

“Huh? Wha...uh...well, as of right now, I’d say it just improved dramatically!”

Well, now, glad to hear it.

Chapter 2: Astray from the Sentiment

I DIDN'T HAVE ENOUGH STUFF in my bedroom to warrant agonizing over what to take. Almost everything I owned was either clothing or trinkets of sentimental value. Bit by bit, I stripped away all traces of life from the drab and dull room I had called home for so many years. Once I stuffed it all into cardboard boxes, there really wasn't much left.

I sat down on the edge of what would only be “my” bed for one final night. My mind was filled with the most trivial of memories: the time I ran home from Shimamura's house and screamed into a pillow; the time I knelt on my bed in front of my phone and tried to work up the courage to call her; the nights I tossed and turned, too excited for tomorrow to get any sleep.

On second thought, maybe these memories weren't so trivial after all. Each one was tied to Shimamura, almost like I didn't have a life at all before I met her. Frankly, I was such a different person back then, it felt as though I had been reborn into someone entirely new. In which case, I was arguably still a baby and thus would need Shimamura to take care of me for a good, long while.

...Arguably.

Having lost any lived-in qualities it once had, the room was now an endless void of white. I flopped back onto the bed and breathed in the empty air. Just yesterday, this room was occupied, but now it suddenly felt dusty and untouched by human hands. Evidently my heart was already living in our new apartment.

It was about 70 percent springtime in our town: tomorrow I would be leaving this house for good to move in with Shimamura. The two of us were all grown up now—physically, anyway. No more

school uniforms, our hair was a little longer, study was replaced with work, and we could legally drink.

Then again, in Shimamura's case, that last one was generally a bad idea; her body couldn't process it or something. She tried it for the first time during her twentieth birthday party, and well...disaster ensued. Long story short, she turned into a *Shima-lion*. "Guess I take after my mom," she said to me the next day, shaking her head at herself.

All drunken antics aside, I was inclined to agree with that assessment. There was something similar in the way they described things, or maybe their energy in general. It was a warmth that drew people in.

Likewise, I was pretty sure I took after my own mother in all sorts of ways. I just wasn't sure if that was something to be proud of. Sometimes I felt like there was something else—something *more* we could have done. But no amount of contemplation would change anything now. Our relationship had solidified over the years, and there was no time left to start anew.

Now there's a convenient excuse: *no time*. To be blunt, considering what it would take to achieve the "ideal" mother-daughter relationship, we both saw it as too much effort.

"...Now I sound like Shimamura."

I shouldn't have been happy about this.

And yet.

I checked the clock, then left the room. My footsteps felt no different than they did when I was in high school. When I mentioned this to Shimamura, she said, "Lucky you," but I didn't understand what was so lucky about it.



I could hear sounds coming from the first floor, so I peered into the living room and spotted my mother sitting on the couch, staring into space. Then our eyes met, and she looked me up and down. “Will you be eating dinner here tonight?” she asked.

“No, I’ll eat while I’m out.”

“Okay.”

With that, she faced forward once more; likewise, I headed for the front door.

Are all families like this?

Would Shimamura’s house still be full of merriment tonight, her final night there? Or would they all turn solemn for a change? How would her little sister react to her looming departure? Since she and I were somewhat alike, chances were high she’d start crying or beg her big sister not to go. Would Shimamura be able to simply shrug it off?

Once again, my thoughts were focused not on my own family but on Shimamura’s. Family never meant much to me, and if I had to guess, it didn’t mean much to my mother, either. Most likely, we would never tell each other how we really felt.

How did parents feel when their babies left the nest? I would probably never have kids, so I had no way of knowing. Instead, as with most things, I chose to leave the question unanswered.

After I fled from my mother’s house, I saw the lights were on at my destination and heaved a sigh of relief. I hadn’t checked in advance, so if the place had closed down, I might have ended up wandering aimlessly through the streets.

Painted in bright red and yellow, the building stood out from the others that surrounded it—just as I remembered. Honestly, when it came to attracting attention, a place like this needed all the help it could get. I slipped between the parked cars and peered inside the restaurant. How long had it been since I last entered from the front?

“Welcome in, welcome—oh?” The manager perked up as she recognized me. “So, today you are customer, huh?”

She strode over to me, arms folded. We hadn’t seen each other in quite a while, but you wouldn’t know it from the way she acted. Her Japanese hadn’t improved, either.

“Good evening.”

“Hiya! Welcome.”

“Also, in case you forgot, I don’t work here anymore. I quit a while ago.”

The day I graduated high school, in fact. I hadn’t visited at all since then, and now that I was moving out of the area, I’d probably never see this place again. I didn’t care about the food enough to go out of my way.

“Anyway, I just wanted to pop in and say goodbye because I’m moving tomorrow.”

“I see, I see,” she nodded. Then, after a beat, “Wait, moving? Sayonara bye-bye?”

“Uh...yeah, something like that.”

“Ah, I’ll miss you.”

“...You will?”

“On second thought, not really. *Ha ha ha!*”

That’s what I thought. Honestly, considering how many years had passed, I was kinda relieved to know that the restaurant was still in business, its manager still feisty.

“What you having? We have everything on menu.” *Ha, good one.* “I take you to your seat.”

She walked me to the table closest to the door, and it reminded me of my days as a server here. Supposedly I looked great in a *cheongsam*—not that I ever cared what other people thought, with one notable exception.

“Smoking or non-smoking?”

“You’re supposed to ask that *before* I sit down, you know.” *Also, there’s no smoking section.*

“As usual, you are no fun.”

“Thanks for the compliment.”

I ordered the daily special, and the manager disappeared into the back. In her place, a part-timer walked out—but she was wearing the regular employee uniform, no *cheongsam*, no skin showing whatsoever. I put my chin in my hands and wondered whether regulations were starting to crack down on that sort of thing these days. Personally, I was fond of that dress.

But only because Shimamura liked it.

In the end, Shimamura was everything. I mean, not *literally* everything, but yeah. Considering how much of my life hung in her orbit, it was hardly an exaggeration for me. Shimamura was a way of life for me.

I suspected I must have arrived ahead of the dinner rush, because I was the only customer in the building. The part-timer just stood there idly, the same way I always did whenever I ran out of things to do. I could remember thinking to myself how silly it was that I got paid the same regardless of my productivity level.

I closed my eyes and breathed in the nostalgic scent of the restaurant. It was my last night in that house, yet here I was, spending it elsewhere. Not that I was *avoiding* the place—I was just

searching for something I knew I wouldn't find at my childhood home. Sniffing around for any elusive feelings of affection that so rarely took root in my chest.

Apparently I was in the mood to wax sentimental. I couldn't explain it, but part of me hoped to find something that would touch my heart. Perhaps this was what it felt like to get cold feet before a wedding...not that I'd ever been married. Then again, I was about to build a new home with my partner, so maybe it was something similar. *Sure hope we don't break up*, I thought to myself prematurely.

Before long, my order arrived at my table—carried not by the part-timer, but the manager herself. Fried rice, a small bowl of ramen, a meager dessert in the form of brightly colored grass jelly, and lastly, a veritable mountain of chicken karaage that threatened to spill over the sides of the plate. Each piece was crude and misshapen, like a rocky islet. It certainly brought back memories, but at this point I wasn't sure I could finish it all.

“Was the daily special always this...robust?”

“Sometimes!” Laughing, the manager headed back to her usual perch. “You better wear *cheongsam* while you still can! Ha ha ha!”

Doing my best to smile—though I knew it was stiff—I nodded in response to this final, uh, warning. *While I still can, huh?* Personally, I didn't see why the dress needed to have an age limit, but I suspected perhaps that wasn't what she meant.

At least, that's what I chose to believe.

Having eaten entirely too much, I walked home rubbing my aching sides. As always, that restaurant had served a far larger

quantity than was reasonable for the price, and there was only so much that I could ingest on pure nostalgia alone. By the end, I couldn't even *taste* the chicken anymore.

With a full belly, my legs felt like lead. My head drooped, and my hair fell into my face; sweeping it away, I looked up at the starry sky high above. The only thing that hadn't changed was the smell of night. I would never see those people or take this road again, but I didn't look back.

Walking down this same street in high school, I never would have imagined that my future would look like this. And knowing what was finally within reach, I would never feel any desire to go back in time.

"Oh, it's Ada-cheechee!"

"Chee-chee!"

I heard (a facsimile of) my name, so I turned around to look. Sure enough, it was Hino and Nagafuji. So many years had passed; I couldn't actually remember when I last saw them. At a glance, they hadn't changed at all. Hino had a fishing pole slung over her shoulder, and Nagafuji was wagging her index finger at me for some reason.

Then, inexplicably, the trio started to circle me—wait, *trio*? It was the weird blue-haired girl, squealing in joy as she joined in. I wasn't sure what to do, so I just stood there, frozen in place. After about five laps around me, Hino and Nagafuji stepped back, grinning.

"Just wanted to say hi. See ya, Chee-chee. Give my best to Shimamura."

"Fare thee well, Chee-chee!"

"Until we meet again!"

"Oh...okay," I replied, but they were already gone. No idea if they heard me.

Now that I thought about it, there was a possibility—a considerable possibility—that this was the last time we’d ever see each other, and yet they were so casual about it. Then again, my friendship with the two of them was never much more than that—a simple friendship. I was an ice queen; I never took a serious interest in other people, so it made sense that they would feel similarly toward me. But if that was the real me, then who was this Shimamura-obsessed version of me? I asked myself this question from time to time.

Anyway.

“Good evening!”

The blue-haired girl was still standing next to me. I couldn’t remember her name offhand. She was wearing a weird outfit, too—pajamas in the style of a platypus, its bill protruding sharply from the hood, demanding my full attention.

“Um...hi...”

“Ho ho ho!”

“So, uh, you’re not going with them?” I pointed at the receding figures of Hino and Nagafuji in the distance.

“Why would I?” the mysterious creature asked, tilting her head. “I just wanted to join the fun and games.”

“Oh.”

She refused to leave my side. I stared at her for a moment, then took a step forward. Soundlessly, she followed suit. Next, I took three big steps forward; she hopped after me. When I stopped, she stopped. It was almost like we were playing Red Light, Green Light.

We must have looked so ridiculous to the passersby, both of us frozen mid-stride. As I stared at her in bewilderment, and in return, she chuckled innocently. *God, I seriously can’t handle you.*

I didn't know how to interact with kids. I knew I had a tendency to be hostile with people, but I couldn't be myself around children without feeling a little guilty. Was it some kind of instinctual thing?

"What's the matter?" she asked.

You tell me! Why are you following me? "I just...don't know what you're thinking."

"Ha ha haaa! Of course not. It's not possible to tell what *anyone* is thinking," she replied offhandedly.

For me, this was kind of an epiphany of sorts.

"Whoa... Maybe you're right." *I didn't know this pontificating platypus was such a visionary.* Then I gazed at its long bill. On second thought, maybe not.

It wasn't often I saw this girl by herself. Usually she was glued to Shimamura's side—*my* Shimamura. I scowled at her; she responded with a bright smile. "I like you, too, of course."

"Uhhh...thank you?"

This was a sentiment I wasn't used to hearing, except from Shimamura. In fact, this was quite possibly the first time in my life anyone else had ever said it to me. If my parents felt any affection for me whatsoever, they certainly never told me to my face.

Of course, I knew firsthand just how hard it could be to talk about feelings—and yet this child made it look so easy. She was a mystery in every conceivable way. How did she have blue hair? Or blue *fingernails*? Shimamura didn't seem bothered by it, so I didn't know how to go about asking.

"It's good to like everyone, isn't it?"

"Huh? Yeah, I guess," I responded without thinking.

Wait a minute.

I imagined what it would be like if Shimamura liked everyone—if she smiled at all of us in exactly the same way. Perfectly equal

treatment all around, with nothing extra or special for me. Frankly, I hated the thought. So my honest opinion was actually...

“No, not really.”

“Hmm, I see.” She neither agreed nor disagreed.

Together, we walked side by side. I started to wonder where she was headed, so I asked her, but she said she didn’t really care. I could tell she actually meant it from the way she shrugged and simply stared straight ahead.

“As long as I keep walking, I’ll get somewhere eventually.” The way she said it, she seemed wise beyond her years.

“Just that simple, huh?”

“Indeed it was.”

Was? Why the past tense?

“That reminds me—long time no see, Adachi-san.”

“Uhhh...yeah...?”

“The last time I saw you was...the year 7199 or thereabouts?”

“Wh-what?”

But she ignored my confusion. “Ho ho ho! I’m glad to see you’re in good health.”

Her smile was meek to the point of flavorlessness.

When I arrived back at home, my mother’s voice rang out at an unusually loud volume—or was she always this loud, and I simply never noticed? She was talking to someone. Unsure whether to interrupt, I walked in. Then she sensed me and looked over. Her lips curled slightly.

“Welcome home.”

“Thanks.”

It was a bland exchange, but perhaps it was the last one we’d share in this place. I kept walking.

“Oh, my daughter just got home, that’s all... What? *Why?*” After a beat, my mother held the phone out in my direction. Reflexively, I stopped in my tracks.

“What?”

“She wants to speak to you.”

“She *who?*”

My mother sighed loudly, as if to say, *Take the damn phone and you’ll find out.* I walked over, took it, and held it up to my ear. One thing was for certain: I couldn’t think of any relatives who would call our house.

“Hello?”

“Heyo, Adachi-chan!”

“Oh, Mrs. Shimamura...”

When I heard her voice, I immediately recognized her as Shimamura’s mother. The energy in her voice was particularly unique, after all. At some point our mothers had developed a friendship of their own; Shimamura seemed to know something about it, but now that I thought about it, she had yet to tell me the details. Whenever we were together, my mind was distracted by a dozen other things, so I never remembered to ask.

All that aside, why did this woman want to talk to me of all people? Was it about her daughter?

“It’s me, Shimamura’s Mom A!”

“Uh, what? Okay.” *Is there a Shimamura’s Mom B...?*

“Hmm, hmm. I see, I see.” *See what?* “You both talk with the same cold, rude voice.”

It didn’t take a rocket scientist to guess who she was comparing me to. I snuck a glance at my, uh, *vocal twin*. She was standing nearby with her hands on her hips, looking uncomfortable.

“How’s it going, *friendo*?” she asked.

“Um...doing just peachy...ah, *friendo*...”

I thought back to when Shimamura first asked me that same question. To this day, she still made me do the pose and everything. *Ugh*.

“I gotta say, you both have weird taste.”

“...Huh?”

“Hougetsu’s not great at adulting, so you’ll need to be prepared to pick up her slack. Never on time, half-asses her chores, absolutely pathetic at cooking...”

Shimamura’s mother listed them off one by one like she was counting on her fingers. But from my perspective, Shimamura seemed fully in control at all times. Clearly we were seeing her from different angles. Perhaps Mrs. Shimamura could only see the forest of her daughter for the trees, whereas I had an easy view of the full picture.

“Are you a master chef, Adachi-chan?”

“I’m not a master.”

“A mistress, then?”

“I don’t really cook, no.” I didn’t care about food, so I had no motivation to learn. “Oh, but I’ve made *okonomiyaki* for Shimamura before.”

“Ah, yes. That.”

“Huh?!”

“No clue what you’re talking about.”

“Oh...o-okay...” *Ugh, I can’t handle you, either!* Not to suggest I disliked her, but there was a strong sense of discomfort present, and I suspected my mother felt similarly. “Well, um, even if Shimamura *does* suck at adulting”—an entirely hypothetical premise on my part, because I refused to insult her—“I’ll just have to do my best to support her.”

And in return, Shimamura would help me with the things I struggled with.

Probably.

Hopefully.

“I see! Very cool.”

“Th-thanks...”

“If she ever sleeps through her alarm, just give her a hard kick in the tuchus, okay?”

“Huh...? Wh-what if she’s sleeping on her back?” Okay, so admittedly, this was a dumb question for me to ask.

“Well, flip her over first, *then* kick her!”

Why was this woman so dead-set on kicking her daughter? To be honest, I had zero confidence I could do such a thing. I couldn’t even *picture* it. I had no weapon to wield against Shimamura. It felt like an unbreakable curse, or an inalienable contract—a little too intense to reframe into something positive.

“Anyway, you get the picture?” she asked.

“Uhhh...” *What picture?*

“Mmm, well long story short, have fun with my dippy derpy daughter.” Was it just me, or was she starting to speak a little faster out of embarrassment?

“Oh, um, yeah, absolutely. Likewise,” I told her. *Likewise what? I hope she has fun with MY daughter? That can’t be right.*

“Just have fun and keep rockin’.”

“Will do.”

“Take that to heart.”

“Uh, okay...?”

“Good.”

She sounded satisfied...which meant the conversation was apparently over. While I kinda understood why she called, nothing Mrs. Shimamura said made much sense. Was Shimamura really able to parse this woman? Sure, they were mother and daughter, but there wasn't a ton of crossover between them, to put it bluntly.

With a grunt, my mother held out her hand, silently demanding the phone back. When I acquiesced, she returned to the sofa.

“...Wait, is she still on the line?” She put the phone to her ear quizzically, then immediately grimaced. “Oh, shut up. I have nothing more to say to you—Excuse me?”

I could tell this phone call wasn't going to end anytime soon, so I quietly went back to my room. As for the alien, she suddenly ran off somewhere, her dazzling blue hair lighting up the night sky as it streaked behind her. It was so surreal, I thought maybe I was dreaming. But the weight in my stomach informed me that no, this was reality.

Upstairs in my bedroom, before I turned the lights on, I stopped and checked my phone. I had emailed Shimamura to ask if I could call her, but she still hadn't responded, which meant she was quite possibly asleep. In the past, the lack of reply would have driven me insane with anxiety: and honestly, to this day it still kind of put me on edge. But over the years I had learned to put more faith in her.

Shimamura would never outright ignore me; she always answered my messages eventually. Deep down, she was a kindhearted person, and in recent years, she had stopped hiding it

out of shame. Was it arrogant to think that perhaps *I* had inspired this change in her...?

I switched on a dim lamp, then climbed onto my bed and leaned back against the wall, stretching my legs out in front of me. All that remained was to rest up and wait for Shimamura. Today was normal, but tomorrow was a brand-new frontier. It was proof of how much progress I'd made. None of my effort had gone to waste. But now that my goal was right in front of me, oddly enough, it almost didn't feel real—instead, it felt like a dream I could reach out toward but not quite get hold of.

A while later, my phone buzzed. It could only be one person. The email read: *"So sorry! I was asleep!"*

"Figures," I muttered aloud, feeling a smile creep up on my lips. Then, a beat later, I answered her call. "Hello?"

"Hiya, Chee-chee!"

"...Is that a new trend or something?"

"A new trend? Where?"

"Forget it." Resting my full weight against the wall, I looked up at the half-functional light bulb. The weak glow drew my gaze in. "Anyway, good evening."

"So, did you—actually, knowing you, you probably *didn't* need anything, huh?"

"Nope. Just wanted to hear your voice."



Shimamura chuckled. “You know we’re going to be seeing each other every day from now on, right?”

Her words lit me up like a candlelit paper lantern, warm like a refreshing spring day. “Right...I guess we won’t be calling each other much anymore.”

“I guess not...unless you want to! We could go into different rooms or something.”

“Maybe we could make a tin can telephone.”

Truth be told, I had never even *used* one, much less made one; I just knew they existed. How would it sound? I wanted to hear every iteration of Shimamura’s voice, to complete my collection and summon them from memory whenever I felt like it. Then, when I started craving the real thing, I could always go and retrieve it from my mind.

“Hee hee hee...hee hee hee...”

On the other end of the line, I could hear her giggling faintly to herself. Perhaps she, too, was feeling giddy, given the circumstances. Granted, we’d seen each other at least once a day almost the entire time we’d known each other, but starting tomorrow, we’d be sharing our whole *lives*. There would be new discoveries to make. The passage of time wasn’t always a bad thing.

“Starting tomorrow, it’s just you and me, Ada-cheechee...”

“...Is that a bad thing?”

“If it was, I wouldn’t have looked at so many apartments with you. It’s just...”

“Just what?”

“When I think about how much unpacking we’ll have to do, it makes me feel all...*hrrrkkk!*”

“Hrrrkkk?” I repeated, trying but failing to understand it. At the very least, I sensed that she wasn’t excited about that part. “Well, if we do it together, it’ll be fun, probably...”

My voice petered out as I realized I couldn’t make any guarantees. This “dream come true” came prepackaged with all the mundane realities of a new home—boxes to unpack and furniture to move. In fact, there really wasn’t much dream left. The canteen was empty, and I was parched for something that didn’t exist.

“I’m so excited, I don’t think I’ll get any sleep tonight,” I murmured.

Par for the course for me, honestly. Sometimes I’d stay up all night out of fear, or nerves, or regular old insomnia. It wasn’t healthy, and yet somehow I kept going. Maybe it was Shimamura who kept me fully charged and functional. This certainly seemed like a plausible theory. Saying her name replenished an unknown organ in my body.

“The Shimamura and Adachi residence...”

“Pfff ha ha ha!”

“Wh-why are you laughing?”

“Sorry! I was gonna agree with you, but it was so funny...”

How? What was funny about it? Shimamura was still such an enigma to me.

“The way you said my name first instead of yours is, like, peak Adachi energy,” she explained.

Really? Did most people say their own names first? Not in my experience, at least.

“Well, you’re the whole reason I’m moving,” I told her. That was why I said her name first. To me, everything started with Shimamura—even my own identity. Was there a contradiction in that? Yes. But right now, it made me happy.

“Same. Without you, I don’t think I would’ve moved out of my parents’ house.”

“...Right.”

Unlike me, she was comfortable living with her parents, yet she was choosing to move in with me anyway. Words could never fully express my gratitude. But of course, every time I tried, she would tell me I didn’t need to thank her. She’d smile softly and tell me she made this decision of her own free will.

“So, did you talk to your family?” I asked.

“What, today?”

“Yeah.”

“My family’s not really that sappy... Well, maybe a little. But a *certain someone* can’t read the room to save her life, which helps balance it out. Actually, maybe that *is* her way of reading the room...? Hmm. Hard to say.”

No idea what any of that was supposed to mean. At least they talked about it.

“The fact that you asked makes me think *you* probably didn’t talk to yours, huh?”

“Nope...not at all.”

“Not at all?”

“Not at all.” Zilch. Almost like I had ceased to be part of the family anymore. It didn’t change much in my day-to-day life, and...well...now it was night. “I guess it’s pretty weird, huh?”

“Yeaaah,” she agreed sleepily, without trying to coddle me. “But you’re a weirdo, so it works out.”

“What?”

“*Ahem!* Okay, all jokes aside...”

Personally, I wasn't sure that comment was something I should let slide, but her tone sounded serious, so I didn't press the issue. I was feeling really proud of my newfound ability to keep my cool while talking to her.

"It's weird, but it's not, if that makes sense."

"Uh...it doesn't."

"What I'm saying is, mother-daughter relationships take just as much work as all the rest. If you wanna understand someone, you gotta put yourself out there, put in the effort, and open your heart. At least, that's how I see it lately, especially when I think about the past. So it's totally understandable that you don't have a relationship with your mom."

"Right." This was more or less the way I felt, which was reassuring.

"But it's not necessarily a bad thing to not have that foundation, you know? I mean, you and I were strangers once—just two kids at the same high school. We weren't neighbors or lovers in a past life. At least, I don't think we were? Ugh, *past lives*. Cringey, I know. But my point is, we never would have gotten to know each other if we thought we needed a *reason* first."

"Yeah...maybe so."

The two of us met purely by chance. Neither of us were *forced* to go up to the gym loft. But we both made the choice to put in the effort, and now here we were. In fact, I was so focused on Shimamura, there was no effort left over for anyone else in my life. As it turned out, I was a surprisingly uncomplicated person.

"As long as I have you...I don't need anything else." My world was complete with just Shimamura. As long as my heart wanted her, I had nothing else to lose.

"If that's enough for you, Adachi, then it's enough for me."

“Okay.”

Her voice was as soft as a lullaby. I could feel myself relaxing, curling up, clutching my knees to my chest. Then I heard her yawn. “How am I still sleepy after all that...?”

“Wanna end the call?” I offered.

“Whoa. Who are you and what have you done with Adachi?”

“Well, if we keep talking now, we’ll run out of tomorrow to look forward to.”

“No we won’t, silly!”

It was rare to hear her shoot me down point-blank, and it made my heart race. She was right—from now on, we would have tons of time to spend together. I leaned back against the wall and imagined she was there on the other side. “Let’s talk again tomorrow.”

“I’m sure we will.”

With this promise, my future was soft and warm, just like Shimamura.

For my final meal in the house that was no longer my home, I wasn’t alone. My mother started cooking breakfast early that morning, then sat down across from me at the table. After a perfunctory “Good morning,” neither of us attempted to strike up an additional conversation.

Looking mildly perplexed, she reached out. “Eat up,” she said, her chin propped on her elbow.

“Okay.”

I picked up a slice of toast, and once she confirmed that I’d taken a bite, she tucked into her own identical breakfast, joylessly

eating her salad. She made no comment on the food's flavor. If I had to guess, it was a mirror image of what I looked like when I ate.

The meal progressed at a snail's pace, probably because both of us were having trouble swallowing. The gears that once turned with ease were now rusty with age, too difficult to replace, and therefore, were left to rot. There was no time to fix our present: once breakfast was over, I was leaving this house for good. I wasn't sad about it, but I did feel a sort of emptiness, like a piece of me was missing.

The room was uncannily bright, as if all the world's sunshine was streaming in. I used that as my excuse to avert my eyes. And somehow, without looking at her, I sensed that my mother wasn't looking at me, either.

She finished her meal in silence, then rose from her chair and walked off to the sink to wash the dirty dishes. Was there any point in us eating together if we weren't going to talk? Maybe it was only coincidence that we ended up at the table at the same time...

No, that couldn't be. What was she thinking when she sat down with me? I couldn't read her at all. But of course I couldn't, since we'd barely spoken to one another all our lives. Then I realized: *that* was what I should have told her. I should have tried to talk it out with her until we reached an understanding.

What if we started now?

I looked up and saw my mother standing at the sink with her back turned. She wasn't that far away—if I reached out, I could touch her. But like a kid in an antique shop, I was afraid I'd damage something just by moving. My body and mind both refused to take that step, almost like there was a hand at my throat.

It was the last chance I'd ever have, so I glanced around, searching for a foothold somewhere. I was rapidly running out of toast to eat. Then, after I swallowed, it sank in: this was truly a final

goodbye. Not just for one or two things here and there, but everything in this room.

And someone like me who had taken it for granted would never feel differently.

When I finally spoke, it wasn't the start of a conversation, but merely a platitude. "Thanks for the food." It was over in a single breath.

Likewise, my mother's response was curt. "Of course."

And with that, our bond was severed. I no longer had any reason or excuse to stay in this house. So I brushed my teeth, washed my face, put on makeup—one task at a time, like I always did—and then I headed for the door. There were no pit stops left to make.

"I'll be..."

I looked over my shoulder and started to speak, but the words floundered in midair at my lips. All my life, I made sure to say it regardless of whether anyone was home to hear it—I was saying goodbye to the house, really. But *I'll be back later* was a lie now. What else could I say instead?

The only option that came to mind was one phrase.

Farewell.

Silently, I walked to the door and put my other shoe on, averting my gaze as I tried to remember where I bought these. My legs were so powerful. They were about to carry me to my happy ending. One time, Shimamura massaged them as a joke, but I was so overwhelmed at the time that the memory was a total blank.

As I grinned at my own idiocy, my mood started to lift, and my body felt lighter. It was time to go see Shimamura. And from here on, we would walk a new path *together*.

"Sakura."

When was the last time my mother had called me by my name? I turned back, fingertips tingling, and found her with a hand on her hip, looking at me. She wasn't wearing makeup, and her head was lowered. The dark shadows made her look a lot older than I remembered. In an instant, my memories of craning my neck up at her were overwritten with the present day.

She scratched her forehead, eyes narrowed, and forced herself to speak. "Sakura..."

In response, my only option was to nod and wait. "Yes?" In the past, I wouldn't have answered at all, so perhaps this was proof that I'd matured a little. I could feel something cold and damp on my neck, like morning dew, except that didn't make sense.

My mother closed her eyes and let out a long breath, like she was trying to adjust her emotions. Then she looked back at me with her usual steely expression.

"See you."

She must have settled on those words after a lot of consideration. After all, *Come home soon* was Shimamura's right to say now, not hers.

"Yeah."

I finished putting my shoes on. Then, concentrating on my heels and exerting pressure in every step, I marched out of the house without looking back. The *tap, tap, tap* of my footsteps chased after me, nipping at the ends of my hair from behind. I had yet to feel spring's warmth against my skin.

With this, I was putting a lot of things behind me.

In the same way that I always biked to work with my brain switched off, I could walk great distances without ever feeling a thing. I was *empty*; that much was obvious from the stark lack of sentimentality I never found at home or anywhere else in this town. I didn't feel regret or longing.

The realization made me want to cry.

I didn't hate her, but to this day, this very moment, I still didn't know if I loved her. If I had to describe her, I'd say she was just my mother, and knowing her, she'd say the same. So why would I...why did I...?

My voice and heart ended there, ragged as a frayed rope. It would take a lot of time to pick up where it left off. Meanwhile, my legs kept walking, and the distance between my former home and me grew. I had no reason to linger, so my feet had no reason to dawdle. And after walking for what felt like an eternity, I returned to the town like I was crossing over a threshold.

A spark ignited, and I could feel a breath of relief. Gravity rested on my shoulders as foreign smells met my nose. Then a hint of spring brushed past my cheek, and the half-welled tears ebbed away once more.

After all that walking, I could finally find the right words. Technically, it wasn't too late, since I'd never be able to tell her to her face anyway.

I know we really screwed this up, Mom, but I'm going to live my life the way I want. So I won't contact you, or meet up with you, or ask you for help. And this way, I'll prove to you, not with my words, but with my actions, that I'm fine just the way I am.

Chapter 3:
Be Yourself

“I FELT LIKE I screwed something up.”

“When?”

“The day my daughter moved out.”

“Huh.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, am I *boring* you? In that case, why don’t you run along home?”

“Noooooooo! Don’t get mad at meeeee!”

“Why are you even here?”

“Because *my* daughter moved out, too!!!”

“That might sound like a good reason to *you*, but in reality, it isn’t.”

“But we’re friends! Total besties!”

“Whatever you say.”

“Want me to cheer you up?”

“Now how would you do that?”

“Sing a song?”

“Don’t.”

“*Tell me why! Ain’t nothing but a heartache—*”

“Go to hell.”

“So what’d you screw up, anyways?”

“Could you stop changing the subject out of nowhere? And anyway, it’s too hard to explain.”

“Fair, but warning, my brain can’t process anything too complex.”

“Like I care! I can’t put it into words even if I wanted to. All I know is...it hit me that Sakura was never coming home again, and obviously I couldn’t tell her ‘Come home soon,’ so I was trying to think of something else, but...that was the moment I realized just how badly I failed to connect with her over the years.”

“Well, look at that! You put it into words just fine!”

“You’re right. I guess it was easier than I thought.”

“Feeling calmer now?”

“...I suppose so.”

“Do I sound like a psychologist or what?”

“More like a *psycho*.”

“Ha ha ha! I get that one so often, I’m not even surprised.”

“You seriously walk around asking people if you sound like a shrink...? Anyway, what about you?”

“Me? Mmm, I dunno. I saw it coming, so it didn’t blindsides me. And my youngest still lives at home, anyway.”

“Right.”

“Oh, but it reminded me of when Hougetsu was younger, and then it hit me just how old I’m getting, and I kinda zoned out...”

“Time passes the same for everyone, doesn’t it?”

“Do you regret how things turned out between you and Adachi-chan?”

“I wouldn’t say I *regret* it... I’m just a little unsettled. Like I’m missing a bone in my body somewhere.”

“Missing a bone is only *mildly* unsettling to you? That’s impressive.”

“Maybe so.”

“Well, I don’t think you screwed up at all. Your kid’s a good egg, you know.”

“Is she? Because I can’t tell. And that, to me, is *proof* that something went wrong.”

“You raised her to be strong enough to leave the nest on her own. Don’t you think that’s enough, mama bird?”

“...”

“Besides, if she won’t come home, then all you have to do is go see her yourself.”

“Oh, for crying out loud!!!”

“What?”

“If your daughter doesn’t come home, don’t you think maybe that’s a *hint*?”

“Yeah, a hint that I should meet her in the middle now and then.”

“Forget it.”

“Awww, don’t forget meeeee!”

“Sometimes I actually feel *jealous* of you. Imagine how pathetic that makes me feel.”

“Tch! Rude!”

“No matter how I try, Sakura and I will never be able to make it work... Perhaps distance is what’s best for us.”

“Then I guess you’ll just have to suck it up! Ha ha ha ha ha!”

“Oh, don’t rub it in. You piss me off.”

“Ha ha ha!”

“What in the world is so funny?”

“Gonna spend the night drinking your problems away?”

“No, I will not.”

“Smart-aleck.”

“At the very least, I refuse to drink with *you*.”

“Lucky you, I can’t drink a single drop!”

“Yes, and I should have believed you when you told me the first time.”

“Probably!”

“The memory still infuriates me, you damned Shima-lion...!”

Chapter 4: Sakura's Ark

RESTING MY CHIN in my palm, I vaguely ruminated on Valentine's Day in the middle of class. I could kinda-sorta remember feeling similarly last year, too. Then, when I glanced over at Adachi seated ahead of me on my right, I found her looking back at me. We gazed at each other as our teacher droned on in the background.

As usual, Adachi's gaze wavered restlessly, but she didn't break eye contact. Bold of her to turn all the way around in her seat during class, if I'm being honest. I wanted to tell her to pay attention like a good girl, but it was hard to convey through hand gestures alone. If I gestured away from myself, she was liable to interpret it as *go away*. And if I broke eye contact, she might start to worry that she did something wrong.

Adachi was a sensitive girl, and sometimes, I felt the temptation to keep my hands to myself and simply watch her from a distance. This was the thought on my mind as we stared blankly at each other.

"The end."

Of the school day, I mean.

The bell rang, and as my attention turned to the window, I contemplated how *long* the day had felt. For some reason it felt like the nights were longest during December. Maybe Santa needed the extra time or something.

As I gazed thoughtlessly at the pale golden light mostly untouched by the scarlet hand of sunset, I...well, I felt sleepy. I liked pitch-black darkness as much as the next girl, but there was something about sleeping in dim light that made me feel secure.

In the past, I would have headed straight to basketball practice after this. As I sat there reminiscing about the old days when I

actually had energy to do things, I sensed a presence and turned to look. It was Adachi, obviously, and either I would go to her desk or she would come to mine.

Holding her bookbag, she looked at me hesitantly, her head tilted downward. "I saw you looking at me, so I thought maybe you wanted something."

"Huh? Um...no, *you* were looking at *me*," I argued for no real reason.

"But you were looking at me too," she muttered, her lips concealed behind her bag.

"No, I wasn't!"

"But...we made eye contact and everything!"

"Well, yeah, but... Ugh, I give up. I can't think of anything else to say."

The best I had was *I was sleeping with my eyes open*, which was completely unfunny. At this, I could feel Adachi's utter confusion, so I laughed and shook my head as if to say *your guess is as good as mine*.

"Don't worry about it," I shrugged with a smile. She fixed me with a hard stare from behind her bookbag. "What? Are you mad?"

"No," she replied, shaking her head. "But you reminded me of your mom just now."

"What?!" That was something I did *not* want to nod along to; I could feel my lips forming a pout. "Do you think so?"

"...Are you mad at me?"

"Not at all. I mean, we *are* blood-related. Of course we have stuff in common."

Adachi resembled her mom, too, especially from the side. But if I pointed it out, she probably wouldn't be too happy about it, so I decided to return to the subject at hand.

“Let’s just say we were both looking at each other.”

“Okay.”

Now that we were in agreement... “Wanna go somewhere on the way home?” The conversation would inevitably end up here sooner or later, so I cut to the chase.

She lowered her bookbag, revealing a bashful smile. But right as she started to speak, she froze, her eyes wide in realization: “I have to work today!”

“Oh, okay. Let’s walk home, then.”

I promptly rose to my feet, and the air circulating around my nose changed with the altitude. It was warmer when I was sitting down, or maybe just stuffier...or maybe the air above me had more motivation rushing around in it. As I headed for the classroom door, however, I felt some resistance behind me and looked over my shoulder. There, I could see Adachi hanging her head like a sulky little kid.

“Adachi?”

“Aren’t you gonna at least *pretend* to be disappointed?”

“I’m sooooo disappointed, you have no idea!”

“Grrrrr!”

“Ow!”

She pinched my back fat through my clothes! Can you believe it? I mean, not that I have back fat to pinch. She had to try *really* hard to pinch me.

And it hurt.

“You wanna talk about disappointing? *This* thing.” I rapped my knuckles on my noggin as we walked down the hall side by side.

“Huh? What about it?”

“I really ought to memorize your work schedule by now.” But because it didn’t directly affect *my* life, it flew in one ear and out the other. Adachi had revealed so much of herself to me by this point, it was honestly a wonder that there were still new things for me to learn about her. “That reminds me—you said you’re just working there for the heck of it, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m proud of you.”

“You don’t *sound* proud,” she replied in a withering tone, then laughed to herself.

“Well, the fact that you’ve kept it up for so long proves that you’re, uh...patient! Good job!”

I reached out and stroked her hair. At first she seemed to like it because she started to smile—but then she shook her head aggressively. “It...it’s not nice to treat me like a kid, y’know.”

“I’m not! What kind of kid could hold down a part-time job?” *Not me, that’s for sure.* “So you’re actually really mature, and I’m saying it’s cool.”

Adachi was like the higher air, rushing around all over the place, and at times it was refreshing. But we were the same age, so where had I misplaced the energy needed to keep up with her?

Then we arrived at the school gates, and it came time to say goodbye. At some point she had grabbed my hand, and now, she was refusing to let go. I took several big steps sideways until our arms formed a tidy little bridge between us.

“Adachi...”

I looked pointedly at our joined hands. She followed my gaze and seemed to have an epiphany—then closed the distance between us. *Not what I meant!*

“What? That wasn’t it?” She cocked her head in confusion.

“Did you seriously think it was...?”

Embarrassed by the misunderstanding, she turned redder than the sunset. It was the perfect color contrast to her hair... *Gah, this is no time to wax poetic! Seriously, why are we just standing here in the middle of the walkway?!*

“You know, Adachi...”

“Wh-what?”

“If you were a food, you’d be natto.”

“...Huh?”

And so I peeled myself out of Adachi’s sticky grasp and headed home alone. In all sincerity, though, I *was* impressed with her for working a shift right after a full day of school. At first glance she seemed fragile, but as it turned out, being soft made you more flexible and harder to break. That was the sort of strength I could respect.

“Now if only she could loosen up a little more,” I laughed to myself, knowing full well I was the source of her tension.

Was I really that intimidating, after all this time? I certainly used to be back in junior high, but let’s be real: these days I was like wet cardboard. Then again, maybe it was the unpredictability of a halfhearted attitude that was so nerve-wracking for her to encounter. Still, I felt I was being fairly transparent with her...or trying to be, anyway.

As for Adachi, she didn’t *need* to be transparent; her thoughts and feelings were all immediately obvious. In the past, her behavior would confuse me, but these days, I had learned to take a step back and look at the bigger picture in order to understand. Perhaps this was a rare talent for a girl on the cusp of eighteen.

Walk straight for long enough and eventually you’ll start to curve—now Adachi’s trajectory had intersected with mine.

What if she had met me while I was still in my bitchy phase? Sometimes I thought about it, just for fun. Keep the encounter, but remove the gymnasium, the stifling heat, the cicadas... From what I'd seen of this empty world, chances were high nothing would have ever come of it.

"Well now, if it isn't Shimamura-saaaaan."

Out of nowhere, I heard a familiar voice overhead and flinched. Then, before I could look up, sparkles started to rain down. And so, with a sigh, I grabbed the gremlin on my head and lowered her to the ground. Only one person in my life was capable of hitching a ride on my shoulders without me feeling it, and I suspected I'd never find another person like her anywhere in the entire world.

It was Yashiro. Today she was wearing a fish onesie...or was it pajamas? I didn't recognize the species offhand since I'd spent most of my life only ever seeing them in meat form. Same with pork and chicken, actually. Wild to think there was a whole vibrant world out there that I had yet to discover.

"Hello there!"

"Yes, hello. Could you *ask first* before you go jumping onto my head?"

"What for?"

Uhhh...good question.

"Little enjoys when I do it," the little fish explained, wagging her fins as she walked on dry land.

"That's because she loves all things sparkly and glittery." My sister often called Yashiro a fairy, and admittedly, the shimmering glitter-dust she exuded was a point in favor of that theory. Was it more or less realistic than her being an alien?

"Incidentally, I am a skipjack tuna," Yashiro continued.

"Cool."

“I saw an Earthling wearing this, so I used them as a reference.”

“Are you sure they were an Earthling...?”

What if it was a fishman? Well, okay, that's not fair. Fishmen are Earthlings, too...right?

“Today, I have business with you and your family.”

“Oh, really?”

This was a surprise, as was the explanation that followed.

“Regarding the holiday known as Valenton’s Day...”

“Welp, I know where this is headed.”

It was nowhere near “Valenton’s Day” yet, but Yashiro never seemed to pay any mind to the calendar. She likely had no grasp of time, being hundreds of years old—allegedly. Come to think of it, Adachi and I hadn’t made any plans yet. Was I the only one who was looking forward to it? The thought made me a little bashful.

And so the two of us toddled home together. The road felt colder than usual, possibly because I was hanging out with a fish. Or maybe the weather was simply getting colder these days.

When we walked in, I noted the absence of a certain pair of shoes. “Looks like my sister’s not home yet.”

“Oh, dear.”

“Kids these days have busy schedules, it seems.”

“So it seems!”

The not-so-busy quasi-kid kicked off her sandals without a care in the world. With a sigh, I straightened them for her, since I knew she wasn’t going to. Then she strutted right up to me, her dorsal fin gliding through the air.

“I have enough for you, and Little, and Mama-san, and Papa-san, too.”

As she spoke, she pulled four rigid-looking boxes of chocolate out from inside her onesie—uh, where did she have space for them...?—and stacked them on her palm.

“Wow. So...you *bought* these?” I asked, just to make sure.

“Hah hah hah! I saw them on television yesterday, so I used that as a reference, of course!” the little fish declared.

“A reference for what?”

“Hah hah hah hah hah!”

“No, seriously.”

“I molded them,” she explained, pantomiming a squeezing action with both hands.

“You...*molded* them?”

That was not exactly the word I would choose to describe handmade chocolates. It almost sounded like she was crafting them from nothing. Upon further examination, the ribbons on the boxes had a little fold in the exact same spot on each of them, as if they were duplicate copies.

“Hmm...”

These “chocolates” are like zero percent cacao, aren’t they...? Oh, well. Not much different from that alien guy’s ice cream in JoJo’s Bizarre Adventure, right? No big deal.

“I bet my sister will be stoked.”

“Aren’t you?” Yashiro asked, innocently tilting her head.

“Umm, I mean, yeah! I guess I am.”

I started to wonder why I always evaded sensitive topics, so this time I didn’t, just to see what would happen if I allowed myself to delight in a gift from a friend. Why was I always so ashamed to let my emotions show? If anything was embarrassing, it was the inability to function like a normal human being.

“This is really great. Thank you.”

I gave her a pat on the head—er, the *fish* head, that is. The sparkly fish beamed back, flopping her tail. (It was a heartwarming moment, so I decided not to ask how she was doing that.)

“Now then, I would like some chocolate, please!” She held out her empty hand expectantly.

“I see you have a better grasp of Valentine’s this year.” *Who’s been teaching her? My sister?* “Well, I don’t have any on hand, so let me think...okay. What if we go buy some once my sister gets home?”

“Wahooooo!”

As she bounced up and down in her onesie, she reminded me of a baby shark, doo, doo, doo, doo—*gah, stop!!! Am I seriously going to walk to the store with her in this getup?* But just then, my mother came running out into the hall.

“Where *were* you two? I’ve been hiding around the corner for the past five minutes, waiting to scare you! Now you’ve ruined the moment!”

“How are you somehow more immature than my actual little sister?”

“Guess I’m a kid at heart! Ha ha ha!”

Once she started laughing, I quickly gave up any hope of chastising her. It was my father who taught me never to put too much faith in her. The tricky part was that if it ever became obvious that I was ignoring her, she would only start trying harder. I *really* hated that back in junior high. We fought constantly.

Back then, I could be *shockingly* caustic; the memory ached like an old wound. Perhaps it was that small, lingering guilt that kept me from ever truly taking her to task.

“Hello there, Mama-san!”

“What’s up, Sea World?”

“This chocolate is for you.”

“Oh? What brought this on?”

“It is Valenton’s Day!”

“Well, aren’t you thoughtful on occasion!” Like me, my mother reached out and patted Yashiro’s fish head. She was the perfect height for headpats. “Well then, I’ll buy you a cheap candy bar as a return gift, how ’bout that?”

“Hooray!”

Hooray...? Well, if she’s happy about it, then I guess it’s fine. “It’s the thought that counts” and all that.

From there, Yashiro ate dinner with us, took a bath, and went to bed with my sister, as usual.

Human beings could adapt to just about anything; our idea of “normal” only expanded over time. We forgot the old and acclimated to the new, ripping our scars wide open over and over until we learned to live with the pain.

Late that night, after my family (plus one) had gone to bed, I began to grow weary of doing homework. I set my mechanical pencil down and stretched, but the drowsiness clung to my eyelids. So I flopped down over the *kotatsu* table and contemplated my next move though arguably, I had already lost the battle of willpower.

As my mental battery dropped below 50 percent, I debated whether to just go to bed. Then my phone rang, shining its light into my skull. I fumbled around for it without looking up, relying purely on the sound.

“That you, Adachi?”

She didn't usually call this late at night, though...and by the time I finally found my phone, I remembered that she would never call without asking for permission first. If someone called me without any advance notice, it was almost certainly—

“Taru-chan?”

Strange, I thought at first, but on second thought, it wasn't *that* strange. Just...not something that happened much lately. It reminded me of our first year in junior high, when we ended up in different classes and kinda stopped hanging out.

Tarumi and I had reunited about a year ago, but we'd only hung out a handful of times since then. Now we were once again drifting apart. *Maybe friendship just isn't in the cards for us*, I thought to myself as I answered her call. Somehow the connection felt flimsy, like a tin can telephone.

“Helloooo?” Unlike with Adachi, I felt myself hesitate when taking the first step with Tarumi. *I'm being so weird*, I scolded myself silently. Hadn't I known Tarumi longer?

“Whassup?” she replied.

“Uh, heya.”

“Sorry, were you sleeping?”

“I was *studying*. Aww yeah.”

“You are so lying.”

Afraid not, I thought to myself, glancing at the open notebook on the table. If she was here in person, I would have thrust it in her face. Gazing at the empty space at the top corner of the page, I waited for her to continue.

“Shima-chan?”

“Huh? What's up?”

“Well, you went kinda quiet and all...”

“Just waiting for you to state your business, milady.”
I straightened my posture and adjusted my house robe.

“Oh, uh, I see. A thousand pardons, madame.”

“Of course, darling. *Ho ho ho!*” My laugh came out sounding like Yashiro’s. *No more of that*, I scolded myself silently.

After a pause, Tarumi sucked in a breath like she was winding up for a pitch. “Well, I don’t really—okay, maybe I do. Yeah, uh, let’s hang!”

“Right now?”

I didn’t need to check the clock to know it was past midnight. Real delinquent hours. Come to think of it, was Tarumi still doing that sort of stuff? According to my mother, who often spoke to hers over the phone, Tarumi was a good girl who did all her chores on time. Hard to picture her as a rebellious girl, honestly.

“I mean, if you were up for it, I wouldn’t mind!”

“Regrettably, I am not. I am a sleepy Shima-chan.”

“Yeah, I figured... Soooo, wanna hang out after you get some sleep?”

That’s what this is about, huh? Of course it is. “Hmmm...”

In the past, I would have shrugged and said *sure, why not*. But now my mind went straight to Adachi, who I knew would be vehemently opposed to it. That was just the kind of girl she was—a miserable little pile of emotions. Easily hurt, easily provoked. As ephemeral as a flame and every bit as scorching.

I looked around, hoping to find some trinket from Adachi so I could wax sentimental, but none were close at hand. Instead, what I found was my seal plushie—what was it doing here? I stroked its soft belly and steeled myself.

“I would need to, like...I don’t know, *get permission*, I guess.”

“Permission?”

I pressed a finger to the side of my nose and contemplated whether to give her a brief rundown. There were three wolves inside me: part of me wasn't sure she needed to know, part of me wanted to get it out of the way, and part of me was simply annoyed at the hassle of it all. But for starters, I could safely eliminate the annoyance from the running. As a natural-born sloth, it was my instinctive reaction to *any* action I took.

"Mmm..."

"Shima-chan?"

Tarumi was a good girl; that much I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt.

Screw it. I'm gonna tell her.

"I'm seeing someone. A girl, actually, not a guy."

"...What?"

She was dumbfounded. This was my chance to go all-in. "Yeah, so like, I'd feel kinda guilty if I was hanging out with other girls behind her back, you know? Ha ha ha..."

I needed her to understand ASAP, because if this conversation lasted much longer, I was liable to falter.

"...Ha ha ha."

There was a certain awkward tension in the air, and the longer Tarumi remained silent, the more I kept laughing into the void. It was a page from Yashiro's playbook; I paused to note just how much that mysterious life-form had influenced me. Anything to distract me from this nightmare, really.

At long last, Tarumi's voice began to spiral. "For real?"

"For realsies." A year ago I never would have imagined it would turn out this way, but here we were.

"So she's your...g-girlfriend?"

“Yep yep yeppers!”

Come to think of it, at one point Tarumi asked me if I had a boyfriend, to which I’d said no. I didn’t have a boyfriend—but I *did* have a girlfriend. Funny how life worked out. Or was it all set in stone the moment I crossed paths with Adachi?

When did she start having feelings for me, anyway? I wondered belatedly, in the middle of an unrelated conversation with someone else.

“I...”

“Yeah?”

The rest of the sentence didn’t come. *You what?* As I gazed into my now-empty cup and breathed in the lingering fumes, my imagination filled in the blanks, until finally...

“I see.”

On paper it was a neutral response, but I could hear the barely concealed shock in her voice. Of course she was shocked—maybe even a little weirded out. Part of me was starting to think I shouldn’t have told her. But she was my friend, and if possible, I wanted to be open and honest with her.

“So Shima-chan’s got a girlfriend. Wow. C-cool...”

“You don’t have to be chill about it. It’s okay if you aren’t.” I wasn’t feeling very composed myself, so why not freak out together? I swayed lazily from left to right.

“Th-that’s so...so progressive!” she squeaked, her voice breaking.

“Yeah, you know how it is with us teen girls. Always on trend.”

“Wow, a girlfriend, huh?”

It sounded like she was talking through closed lips, and it was hard to parse, which made it hard to respond with anything more

than silence. Stroking the mysterious seal plushie, I forced myself to exhale.

“So, setting all that business aside,” she continued.

“Uh-huh?”

“I at least want to see you one more time. Can we meet up?”

Her voice seeped into me like cold water.

“Okay.”

Piercing my fingers on the thorns, I accepted Tarumi’s restated invitation. We’d meet up and talk and...then what? What would come of it? I didn’t know, which was why I wanted to give it a try.

“How about tomorrow?” I suggested.

“Tomorrow?!”

“What, are you busy?” I had thought that tomorrow after school would be the perfect time, but maybe it’d be easier for one of us to visit the other’s house on a weekend.

“No, tomorrow works for me. But I feel like it’s hella weird that you’re actually proactive for once...”

“You think so...? Yeah, you’re right.”

“Not only that, but *tomorrow?*”

“Well, I figured the earlier, the better.” *Because the longer it takes, the more time I’ll spend thinking about it.*

“Yeah...I guess it’s in character for you.” Was it just me, or did her voice carry a hint of joy? “Okay, then. Tomorrow after school... Meet up at the station square?”

“Okey dokey.”

“Okay, then...” Her voice petered out, diffusing into the air and vanishing with our connection. It was Tarumi who ended the call.

“Hmm.” On the upside, I was now wide awake, but the drowsiness was replaced by a feeling of lethargy.

It was both an exaggeration and an over-eager misrepresentation to call this meetup a *showdown*, and yet the tension rolling around in the pit of my stomach was identical. I felt like an alligator who ate a rock. *Come to think of it, have I ever seen Yashiro dressed as a gator?* As I was ruminating on this pointless train of thought, I realized I had received a notif from someone else entirely.

“Oh, this time, it *is* Adachi.”

“*May I call you?*” This message had arrived a few minutes ago, and as I stared at the four simple words, I got another ping with the words, “*May I?*”

I recoiled sharply. Did she see the read receipt and take that as a sign to repeat her question? I pictured her sitting perfectly still, staring down at her phone, and shrugged it off. “*Sure thing...aaaaand sent.*”

The literal second I sent my reply, my phone started to ring. *Oh, Adachi.*

“Hellooooo?”

“Um, good evening.”

Her nervous formality made me chuckle. “Good evening,” I replied.

“Were you sleeping?”

“Nah, I’m in the middle of a huge cram sesh.”

“...Oh.”

“You people never believe me, do you?” Not only that, but they both assumed I was asleep. *What am I, a cat?*

“No, no, I know you work hard.”

“Thanks.”

“But you didn’t reply for a while, so...”

Oh, so that's why. "I was on the phone," I explained casually. To me, it was a fair reason for my delay. But what followed was cold silence. "Ada-cheechee?"

Was it just me, or did her breathing turn ragged?

"...Who were you talking to?"

"Just a friend." When she once again failed to respond, I continued, "Could you maybe stop giving me the silent treatment, my dear Adachi-chan?"

"But..."

"No buts."

"But..."

"He he he." She was acting like a sulky little kid, and it made me giggle.

"Th-this isn't funny!" she protested.

"I beg to differ. Listen here, Adachi. Hmmm, let's see..."

My gaze flitted around as I grinned stiffly. Unsure what to do, I flopped down on my back and listed out my options: joke about it, get mad, or take things seriously. In the past I mostly stuck to getting mad—what was it that bothered me so much? When I tried to reflect on it, junior high Shima-chan glared back at me and refused to explain. If I walked up to her with a derpy smile on my face, she was liable to throw her basketball at my head.

"It's really important to have friends... Oh, wait, you don't have any, do you?"

"Nope," she answered readily.

Right, I forgot. Now my attempt at persuading her had failed right out of the gate. From Adachi's perspective, friends and family were perhaps no different from passersby on the street. Which left me with...

“I feel like I already asked this, but...you never believe a word I say, huh?”

Did I really seem like an apathetic robot? From my perspective, I thought about Adachi an awful lot.

“I believe you, but...”

“Do you?”

“Well, when you have fun with other people, it makes me feel all...murky inside.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Like there’s mud piling up in my chest.”

“That bad, huh?”

“I don’t want other people to have the whole you.”

“Hmmm...”

I was okay with how wholeheartedly she loved me, but she was so *intense*. Her love ran deeper than the ocean, and if I tried to go for a casual swim, I’d probably drown in her depths. Poetically speaking, of course. Realistically speaking, Adachi was possessive.

The thing is, even if we COULD spend our whole lives just the two of us, it would be really hard, I thought to myself, gesturing impotently. Maybe if I could learn to only ever think of Adachi. But that wasn’t how being in a relationship was meant to work.

“I mean, I still think about you a lot, even while I’m talking to other people.” I wasn’t just saying this to be nice—it was true. Adachi had engraved herself in me somehow, sinking her little teeth into my flank, demanding my attention. “So it really hurts that you can’t trust me.”

I wasn’t the sort of person who got *involved* with people. I generally sought to avoid the mortifying ordeal of being known. So when someone without those walls—in this case, Adachi—started acting like this, I really didn’t know how to handle it. A wave of

misery would come crashing down over me, and I'd retreat into my shell.

It was like sitting on the beach alone at night; there was a sort of tranquility in it. And because of that, if I wasn't careful, I ran the risk of succumbing to the inertia. So I wanted Adachi to be the one who took me by the hand and pulled me back onto my feet.

"I'm sorry..."

"You don't have to apologize, Adachi. It's just...hard to get my feelings where they need to go."

If a message came across too heavy-handed, the recipient might question its legitimacy, but I couldn't think of a better way to go about it. On the other hand, I trusted basically everything Adachi said to me. She was an open book, really.

"I really do believe you, I promise," she pressed.

"Yep yep! That's why I wuv you."

"...On second thought, maybe not always..."

Whyzat?!

"Anyway, what were we talking about?"

"Uhhh-huh. I don't think we were talking about anything yet."

"Oh, right. Because you went straight to accusing me of infidelity."

"I-I wasn't *accusing* you...I think."

"Okay, all that serious stuff aside, feel free to start us off with something fun."

"Huh?!"

"Well, I figure you wanted to call for a reason, right? So let's goof off," I shrugged, looking up at the clock. Pragmatically speaking, there was no time for goofing; I needed to be in bed. Regardless, I chose to goof. "Goof!"

“Goof?”

“Sorry, got ahead of myself. Go for it, Adachi-san!”

I wanted her to filter all the mud out of her chest, but then what would happen to the dirty filter afterward?

“Oh, I know.”

“Yeaaaaes?”

“There’s this thing called Valentine’s Day next week...”

“So I’ve heard,” I joked. “If the rumors are to be believed.”

“Yeah, uh, the...the rumors are flying.”

You don’t have to play along with my dumb antics, I thought to myself, laughing, as I averted my eyes. “So, what *about* this so-called Valenton’s Day?”

“Well, you see, I was wondering if...if we were gonna do anything this year,” she replied, dropping the silly pretense altogether. I followed suit.

“Yeah, that sounds good. Let’s have ourselves another good ol’ Valen-time’s time.”

“Oh...okay!”

Even without a direct view of her, I could see her nodding eagerly. We humans were able to gather all sorts of small details to flesh out our mental images of other people. And if we were already capable of *that*, I could understand why some people believed in superpowers.

“Wanna go shopping again?” she asked.

“That could be fun. Last year’s chocolate was really good.”

Incidentally, the chocolates from Yashiro were also pretty good. They were shaped like little animals, save for one bizarre creature in the middle that none of us could identify—including Yashiro herself. *How very peculiar*, she’d told us with a grin, holding four cheap candy

bars between the fingers of her right hand. All in all, she seemed mighty pleased.

“This is basically our only excuse to go to Nagoya, huh?” I remarked.

“Yeah.”

“I wonder if we’ll get more opportunities after we graduate.” Or was I going to move out of my parents’ house and live on my own somewhere? Was I even capable of that? Reflexively, I looked up at the ceiling.

“Are you going to college, Shimamura?”

“Mmm...I don’t know.”

There was no particular subject I wanted to devote myself to studying, but at the same time, I couldn’t picture myself getting a job right after graduation, either. In my head I was a perpetual high school student, having fun with Adachi at school every day for the rest of my life. Tarumi had already tried to remind me that this wasn’t the case, but I was still entertaining the fantasy. My future was just too fuzzy at the moment.

“What about you?” I asked, evading the question.

“Haven’t even thought about it. I think I’ll just get a job.”

“You could be a master chef of Chinese cuisine!”

“I sincerely doubt it.”

The fact was, Adachi and I would both have to get jobs sooner or later. What would our relationship evolve to by then? I figured we’d probably still be together, but there was no telling what the future held in store for us. Maybe something would force us apart against our will...like a meteor crashing into Earth and wiping out our entire species. Somehow I got the feeling Yashiro would still walk away unscathed...

Okay, enough of that. Tomorrow's already going to be depressing as it is.

"Hey, so, going back to what we were talking about earlier..."

"Mmm?"

She didn't seem to know what I was referring to, so I decided to be forthright. "I'm going to be meeting up with her tomorrow. The friend I was talking to."

In response, my dear Adachi-chan went silent—that much came as no surprise. But when I couldn't even hear her breaths on the other end of the line, I started to lose my nerve. Her love for me was so pure, I was sometimes too afraid to touch it.

"I can never lie to you, Adachi, and that's...you know...how I *show my love, fam.*"

Last time I failed to tell her about me and Tarumi, it turned into an entire ordeal. Back then, I shook her off without having a real conversation, but frankly, it was a miracle I wriggled out of it at all. I mean, we were falling apart like waterlogged paper... Come to think of it, how *did* we recover from that...?

Adachi must be a wizard. It's the only explanation.

"So it's not Hino or Nagafuji?" she asked.

"Nope."

"Oh..."

There was a very long, very pregnant pause. Almost like she knew who I was talking about. Had Adachi already met Tarumi...? *No, not possible*, I thought to myself. *She'd be throwing a bigger fit if she had.*

"Can I come, too?" she asked.

"Hmmm. Wasn't expecting that."

I envisioned a mama duck with a little duckling waddling after it. *Ugh, Adachi would totally do that... No, c'mon, she's not a duckling,*

though! After flipping through a mental catalog of excuses, I decided my only real option was to stick to blunt honesty. I already promised never to lie to her, after all.

“Alas, Shimamura-san can’t have the conversation she needs to have if you’re standing right there,” I told her. Besides, if Adachi and Tarumi met face-to-face...yeah well suffice it to say, things would get real annoying, real fast. It would all spiral out of control. “I need to see her and talk it out with her, and I need you to be okay with that.”

It felt like I was breaking up with Tarumi, even though we never dated to begin with. And considering how many hoops Adachi needed me to jump through in order to get her blessing, it felt like she was engulfing me right down to the bones.

“Okay,” she replied reluctantly, her voice as hard as a pebble. Normally she would at least *try* to smooth things over with a *sure thing* or *no problem*, but not this time. For better or for worse, this was simply the kind of girl she was.

“As a reward for being so patient...is there anything I can do to make it up to you?”

Naturally, I tried to ply her with a bribe.

“Ah, I’ll think about it.” And naturally, she quickly caved.

And so I overcame one of life’s many trials.

“Feels like I spent the whole day resolving a love triangle,” I muttered as I set my phone down. My aching organs were a testament to how much I enjoyed it, which is to say, not at all. I sat with my knees tucked under my chin, hugging the seal plushie.

Having a girlfriend was...uh...complicated, apparently. It was hard to shield myself from a connection fostered at point-blank range. After trading blows back and forth for long enough, one of us was bound to run out of stamina sooner or later...and after a certain threshold of losses sustained, it would all fall apart. I had to pull my punches to a degree.

“Life sure is rough.”

I could have chosen the safe path, yet here I was, climbing Drama Mountain of my own free will. But even if it made my life harder, I wanted the closure.

At lunch the next day, I asked her the question that was on my mind last night: “Hey Adachi, when did you start having feelings for me?”

“Whajabffgh?!”



Shrieking in what could only be described as an alien language, she shrank into herself. Her cheeks were stuffed full of food—a rare sight for a girl who usually ate tiny bites in silence. All in all, it was pretty cute.

When she started turning blue, however, I hastily offered her some water. She drank it down in a single swallow, clearing the blockage without needing to cough, and by the time she could breathe again, her forehead was dotted with a volume of sweat befitting a much warmer season. She was so quick to heat up, winter didn't stand a chance against her. I gazed at her enviously, then snapped to my senses.

How could I have asked her such a thing right here in our classroom? Had she rubbed off on me? *Oh, well. Too late to take it back now.*

“Well? When was it?”

I was trying to be cute, but instead it came out sounding like a demand. *Ugh, this is hard.* Adachi stared wide-eyed back at me, her lips moving almost mechanically.

“It...it just sort of happened...”

“Wow, how romantic.” Apparently there was no single event that caused it.

On second thought, maybe it wasn't that romantic after all.

“Why?” she asked.

“Why *what?*” I asked in return, nibbling one of the *tamagoyaki* omelets in the corner of my bento box.

“Why did you ask that?”

“Oh, just curious.”

“*Ohk...*” Her response sounded like a cross between *oh* and *okay*.

As for my mother's *tamagoyaki*, she always flavored it on the sweet side, which was perfect for me. We were a whole family of sugar lovers. Maybe that was what drew Yashiro to us initially. Right as I reached out for another piece, however, I sensed Adachi staring at me and decided to reassure her.

"I promise, it was just a random question that came to mind."

"Oh, okay..."

"Nom nom nom...!"

"Wh-what about you?"

"Mm?"

"When did you first, ah...start to..."

Her eyes and lips began to tremble, and if I poked them, I knew all her Adachi-ness would come gushing out. *Adachi-ness?*

"Who, me? Welllll...! It's a secret."

"That's no fair!"

"It's not like you gave me a concrete answer, either!"

At the very least, it was safe to say she didn't especially like me when we first met. But looking back, I found it impossible to imagine. Surely I'd seen this version of her with my own eyes, and yet I'd entirely forgotten what she used to be like back then.

"I mean...*do* you have feelings for me?" She glanced furtively in my direction.

Sheesh, why don't you ever trust me?

"Don't be silly. I wuv you vevy vevy much."

Okay, maybe that's why. Well, whenever I try to say it loud and proud, my, uh...want-to-die-itis flares up. Sorry!

"Seriously, though, I really do love you," I added hastily as she fixed me with a withering look. But since when? For me, it was more

clear-cut: since the moment she told me she had feelings for me. It sounded cheap and lazy, but it was the truth.

In other words, it all started the night we saw the fireworks together last summer. In that sense, I'd loved her for a fairly long time already... I filled my mouth with flavors to distract from the embarrassment.

By the time we had both finished eating, Adachi's ears were still as red as vivid autumn leaves. But as I admired them...

"I, uh, I'm gonna go wash my face."

Having discovered the sweat on her forehead, she grabbed her sandwich wrapper and trotted out of the classroom. *Wait, but your makeup*, I started to say. But of course, it was already ruined by the sweat. In the middle of winter. Because of me.

"All because of me... I'm a bad girl," I scolded myself half-heartedly.

I closed up my now-empty bento box, and as I sat there zoning out, Panchos walked past in the direction of her desk nearby. The two of us hadn't spoken much since the school trip, and when our eyes met, it was clear she wasn't sure how to react. Honestly, she could have kept walking without another word. Like me, she was carrying a bento box in one hand.

"Hey."

"Hey, hey!"

For some reason it felt like she was making an effort (?) not to say the exact same thing in response. In contrast with her awkward greeting, she sauntered off to her desk; but then, after she set her bento box down, she came sauntering right back.

"So how's it been for you lately, Shimamura-san?"

“How has *what* been?” I was the kind of loser who wanted to hibernate all winter long, but I suspected that wasn’t what she was asking.

“Oh, just wondering if you were gonna tine your Valens.”

I feel like you said that backward just for the heck of it. “Yes, we are.”

“Oooooooh,” she murmured in admiration. Then she took a half-step forward and lowered her voice. “How was it last year? I mean, uh, if there *was* a last year.”

“Last year? Well, uh...we thumb-wrestled.” *As far as I can remember.*

She folded her arms and gracefully tilted her head. Anyone could see the question mark written on her face. “Is that a euphemism for something?”

“If it is, nobody told me.” I wasn’t smart enough to describe the world in metaphors.

She leaned over farther and farther until one foot lifted off the ground. I could only imagine the level of fitness required to maintain perfect balance on one leg. Then she gave up trying to understand and straightened up. “That’s deep.”

“Yeah.”

With both of us blatantly confused, she walked off. Then, a few moments after she sat down, she started trying to thumb-wrestle herself. As I stared at her blankly, I became convinced that she was a good-natured person, even if she and I weren’t exactly friends.

It was a strange state of being.

So yeah, that happened. As for Adachi, she didn’t return until right before lunch break ended. Her bangs were so wet, they clung to her forehead, but I wasn’t sure whether to point it out.

After school, I checked my phone, but didn't have any notifs, so I rose to my feet.

"Taru-Taru-Taru-chaan..."

Unfortunately, singing her name didn't make me feel any less sick to my stomach, which was admittedly a weird way to feel about meeting up with a friend. How did she and I first spark what we used to have?

Arriving at the shoe lockers, I looked back and spotted Adachi tailing me out of the classroom. She froze in place. *Stay, girl! I mean, uh...* "I'll see you soon," I told her, just in case she needed to hear it.

Her eyes were watery, and she began to whimper in frustration. For me it was nigh-on impossible to express my sincere feelings: how did she always make it look so easy? Of course, I knew I could never be her, no matter how hard I tried...but every now and then, I wished I could absorb a tiny piece.

"Come here."

I beckoned to her, and when she trudged up to me, I took her left hand and kissed it. Her fingers were cold; it felt as though they drained all the moisture from my lips. Then, I relinquished my grip. She clenched and unclenched her fingers, almost like a crab.

"Understand now?"

"Uh...wha...?"

She blinked back at me, but I ignored it and walked off. "Good day to you."

Realistically, her day probably wasn't going great.

Then, for some reason, I thought I heard Yashiro's voice: *Not half-bad, actually.*

So I shot back silently: *Nobody asked you!*

As far as *my* days went, they weren't all sunshine and roses. In fact, the good ones were few and far between.

Arguably.

The bookbag strap weighed heavily on my shoulder. On the bright side, the wind wasn't blowing too hard in my face. Still, it was so cold outside, it felt like my hair was frozen to my ears. Fortunately, it meant I could blame the winter weather for my dismal mood. How convenient.

I walked the long path from the school to the station square in chilly silence. Why did I feel this way? I was just going to meet with a friend, right? No...it was more than that. This "old friends" thing made it all so complicated—specifically the "If you don't want it to fade into the past, then do something about it" part.

Maybe that was why Adachi got so invested in everything all the time. Was she satisfied with the outcome of her hard work? Beneath her quiet, meek façade was a surprisingly greedy girl, so there was a serious possibility the answer was flat-out no.

These were the things I contemplated as I walked to the station. And as I walked, the percentage of thoughts dedicated to Adachi steadily increased. This was proof of my current emotional state.

As often as I visited this station square, I rarely ever had the opportunity to actually ride a train. I orbited the bus stop we had designated as our meetup spot, checking for any sign of Tarumi, then positioned myself next to the route map. "*I'm here,*" I messaged her.

"Almost there," she wrote back.

Where are you? I glanced around, looking for her. Then, a short while later, Tarumi arrived carrying a huge backpack. The streets were fairly empty, yet our footsteps were muffled and quiet as we drew near.

“Uh...’sup?”

“Hello there,” I greeted her, still acting like a well-mannered lady for whatever reason. I nearly said *good day* again, but it was a little premature to part ways since we’d only just met.

It’d be easier, though, said a voice in my head that I dearly wished would shut up.

“Wow, Shima-chan! You totally look the same!”

“No duh.”

Tarumi didn’t look much different either, except her hair was maybe a little shorter. I thought about asking if she got a haircut, but couldn’t picture it leading into a longer conversation, so I decided against it.

Well, now what?

These days, I was constantly agonizing over what to talk about whenever I met up with her. Was it because we didn’t have any common ground? Times like these, I started to realize just how important school actually was for socializing...though I knew I wouldn’t truly grasp it until well after I graduated.

“Wait, what the—?”

Once I started thinking about school, I realized Tarumi wasn’t wearing her uniform under her coat. Her plaid skirt was more reminiscent of autumn than winter. Did she run home real quick before coming here?

“What is it?” she asked. I pinched my own uniform to indicate my question, and she quickly took the hint. “Oh, I skipped school today to take care of family stuff.”

“Say whaaa?!” Once again, hard to say whether she was a good girl or a bad girl.

“I wanted to make time to see you.”

“Ohhh... Should I have picked a different day?”

If she wanted me to save it for the weekend, then she should have spoken up when we talked about it on the phone! Still, I felt guilty.

“No, it’s okay.” She shook her head softly, mercifully.

“I, uh, didn’t realize you *had* family stuff to take care of.”

“Mm.” *That’s not an answer.* “Not, like, anything major. Stuff came up,” she clarified, twirling a strand of hair near her ear.

I tried to remember what her house was like. I used to go there all the time as a kid, but it hadn’t left a lasting impression. I could vaguely remember her mom being nice to me, but that was years ago. Time had a way of passing. So the only thing I could say was...

“Gotcha.”

She smiled stiffly and shrugged it off. “Shall we get going?”

“Sure.”

As I spoke, I casually glanced over my shoulder, just in case. I was maybe a little paranoid that Adachi was tailing me in secret. I mean, would *you* put it past her? The phrase “too much effort” didn’t seem to exist in her vocab. As annoying as she could be, her drive was something to be admired...probably.

“So where exactly are we going?” I asked as I walked alongside Tarumi.

She was clutching the straps of her heavy backpack with gloved hands; a scarf was wrapped tightly around her neck. Was she really that sensitive to the cold? At first I thought she was headed into the station, but then she stopped short.

“First things first...this!” She made a beeline straight to the nearest vending machine.

“¿Por qué?” In my eyes, she was operating at a pretty high level (er, low level?) if she could find the fun in a vending machine.

She bought a single hot tea, then handed it to me. I took it, looked at her, then back at the drink.

“Oh, right. Here, take these, too.”

She pulled her gloves off and offered them to me. Again, I took them, followed by a question: “What’s all this for?”

“Don’t worry about it. Just stay toasty.”

I could practically feel her pushing me to comply. On the gloves went. “I mean, these *are* pretty toasty, but...”

No *buts*, apparently, because she then pulled off her scarf and wrapped it around my neck. The scratchy fabric against my skin sent a shiver down my spine.

“Very toasty.”

Apparently her first objective was to warm me up. *What are you, a microwave?* I was rapidly plumping up while she was steadily losing her layers. Then she pulled a pair of earmuffs from her backpack and put them on me without asking. Did she want to play dress-up or something...? While I appreciated that this didn’t involve me removing any clothing in the middle of winter, I was starting to feel overloaded.

“Want my coat?”

She started to pull it off; apparently she was willing to go to any length to keep me toasty. But with her coat, I would basically be wearing her entire outfit, so I declined. “I’m warm enough, I promise. Are you satisfied, Taru-chan?”

“Are you kidding? We haven’t even started yet!”

She promptly headed back the way we came. Evidently she had no business at the station square. Then why did we come here?

“I gave it some thought and decided on the river beach for the location.”

“The river beach?” The first thing that came to mind was a cookout, followed by a duel to the death. Neither of these seemed likely for our situation.

“I want to paint a portrait of you,” she explained, still facing forward.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” she repeated.

A portrait of me... Come to think of it, we did this same thing once before. “I get it now,” I mused as I looked down at all the winter gear I was wearing. Clearly she wanted to take good care of her art model.

“And when I’m done, I want you to keep it.” She smiled awkwardly as I walked up beside her.

“Me?”

“Yeah. It’d mean a lot if you did.”

What would I do with a painting of myself? Hang it in my room? My sister would almost certainly make fun of me if she saw it.

“Now that I’m thinking clearly, we probably should have met up at the river beach, huh?” she continued.

“Yeah...” *You only just now started thinking clearly? After twelve hours?* I snuck a glance at her face in profile, but her gaze was calm and level. If she was panicking, she was good at hiding it. *Now that’s talent.*

And so we headed to the river beach, a place packed with treasured memories—not *mine*, but somebody else’s, surely. Last time I was here, it was summer, and now the season was the polar

opposite. As for our friendship, well...good question. In my opinion, we were still friends, but something was palpably—and critically—different.

There were many different types of friendships. Because Adachi rejected the need for friendship altogether, she was never forced to learn how to navigate all the different types; in that sense, she was fortunate. Adachi would never walk to the river beach with a friend. That was the way she chose to live her life. And yet, though I was totally different in this respect, she still stuck by me.

Funny.

Tarumi and I didn't talk much on the way there. The whole point of this was to talk it out, yet we exchanged little more than a few forgettable pleasantries. Smoothing my hair, I committed myself to the road ahead. Our chemistry was fading beneath the sound of the passing cars, but we did nothing to stop it.

To the surprise of absolutely no one, the river beach was deserted in winter. I could only catch glimpses of pale, caramel sunshine. When I approached the water, the wind grew so moist that it practically soaked my ankles through my socks. Feeling the lumpy rocks beneath my soles, I followed Tarumi in silence.

“Let's do it here.”

She pulled a folding chair from her giant backpack, and I watched dazedly from behind as she busied herself setting things up. I would have offered to help, but I didn't know what she wanted. My body started to sway back and forth as I realized I should have worn more layers on my legs.

“Okay, go for it.” With a small smile, she gestured to the chair.

“Thanks,” I told her for some reason as I sat down. Then I put my bookbag on the ground next to me. Unsure what sort of pose to adopt, I set a hand in my lap.

“No parasol needed this time, eh?” she joked, and I laughed a little.

I felt oddly vulnerable, sitting alone in a chair at an empty river beach. Maybe it was because I hadn’t spent much time perfectly still in the great outdoors. The view was great; the sunlight made the water sparkle, as if the river was a shining serpent swimming past. I half-expected Yashiro to come floating downstream.

Once Tarumi had taken nearly everything out of her giant bag, she started to prep for the painting itself. “Are you cold?” she asked me.

“What about you?” I countered. Now that I was wearing all of her winter accessories...well, she still looked pretty warm in her long sleeves. *Guess she’s fine.*

“The cold doesn’t bother me.”

“Wow. You must be powerful,” I replied, without stopping to evaluate if it was a good compliment or not.

Old memories seeped into my mind like the paint from her brush. As a kid, I’d fill my palette with *every* color and mix them together as I went. Naturally, I would always have excess paint left over at the end, and as a result, I was scolded for being wasteful. But it was the only way I knew how to paint back then, so there was really no use wishing I’d done things differently. Sometimes there was no other option—like the way Adachi committed to a life of solitude, for instance.

In actuality, however, this was just a long-winded excuse.

In the past, when Tarumi and I used to doodle together, I was always drawing happy, energetic dogs. These days, maybe I would draw something else.

“You’re really good at art, huh, Taru-chan? You’ve improved a lot.”

“Yeah...”

Her response left a lot to be desired. Then again, perhaps that was to be expected when I was complimenting something I couldn’t even see. Was that my character flaw? Was that why Adachi still couldn’t trust me?

“What’s she like?” Tarumi asked from behind the easel, and though the question had been trimmed down to only the most necessary components, I still understood what she was asking.

I pondered for a moment, then answered. “Pretty aloof. Or at least, she was.”

“Was?”

“Yeah, for like, the first month or so.”

Cold, detached, occasionally a smartass. Sometimes she’d send me to buy lunch for her. That version of Adachi hadn’t actually gone anywhere; it was the version everyone else got. But when she befriended me, a new Adachi was born—pure, sincere, infantile. And it was *that* Adachi that I...

“And now?” Tarumi asked.

“Doglike.”

“I beg your pardon?” she shot back, clearly confused.

But I couldn’t think of a better adjective. Adachi was a good girl, a pretty girl, but those words were too commonplace. Besides, if I chose them, I’d sound like I was bragging.

“When she sees something she wants, she goes for the throat and never lets go.”

“Are we still talking about a human being?”

“See? Doglike, right?”

It was then that I remembered: we came here to talk about precisely this subject. Was this really the sort of thing she needed to hear? Surely I couldn't leave her with the impression that my new girlfriend was a wolf. But my worries soon proved unfounded.

"Aha," Tarumi murmured, as though it all made sense. *Wait, what?* "You always were a dog lover, weren't you, Shima-chan?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

I could no longer remember what sorts of conversations Tarumi and I used to have. In elementary school I was an open book with no barriers—yes, just like the alien who lived rent-free at my parents' house. Thus, as annoying as Yashiro could be, I could never bring myself to abandon her. And perhaps it explained why my mother spoiled her, too.

"Woof, woof." Tarumi made no effort to sound like a real dog. I wasn't sure how to react, so I just grinned.

As an aside, it was perhaps fairly unusual for two teenage girls to spend hours doing an art project at the river beach...or for *anyone* to do *anything* here, really. No one else showed up to partake in the melancholy of the winter sunset. That being said, it was a fitting backdrop.

I could see Tarumi peeking up over her canvas, staring at me intently. The look in her eyes reminded me of Adachi—specifically, the way Adachi looked at me. This was not a painter merely observing her model.

"Okay, so she's doglike. What else?"

Apparently the conversation wasn't over yet. Of course it wasn't—this was the whole reason we were here. But what would happen afterward? What did Tarumi want?

"You and this girl—er, should I say girl?"

"What do you mean?"

“Well, maybe she’s an older woman or something, for all I know.”

“Oh.” Technically it was within the realm of possibility, but I didn’t know any older women. Then I thought about the neighbor girl at my grandparents’ house... *Nope, doesn’t count.* “She’s the same age as me.”

“I see.”

What was it I saw in her eyes just now? It was hard to parse at this distance...both literally and figuratively. Her painting hand had fallen still.

“So what’s she like?”

She already asked me that question, but evidently it was still bouncing around in her head. How did she feel? Was she making some sort of comparison? With whom? What was she looking for?

“I guess I’m wondering what is it you like about her, I guess.” The words tumbled out flatly from behind her lower lip.

What was Adachi like? A little weird. Rather pretty. *Very* passionate. Somewhat needy. Fairly tall. Surprisingly smart. Decently responsible. Deeply jealous. Exceptionally loving. Completely dedicated. Sensitive. Bad at smiling. Unique outlook on life.

There were many sides to her, both good and bad...but most of all, she always gave me the motivation I needed.

“She’s the momentum that carries me forward.”

Me and me alone.

“And I want to see where she’ll take me. I want to see how far we’ll go together.”

This was my roundabout, poetic way of expressing my love. If Adachi heard it, she’d probably frown in confusion; the mental image made me bite back a laugh. As I was getting distracted, however, Tarumi’s eyes and lips began to tremble.

“Huh. So I see.”

“Yeah.”

“So you’re, like, crazy about her.”

“Well, I mean...yeah...” *Yeah.*

“So, um...so, like...uh...”

Something sparked in her eyes at high speed. But she was looking down, concealed behind the canvas, and the distance between us was too vast for me to catch it. Meanwhile, she kept muttering to herself.

“I can see that you’re, like, really happy, but...”

“Tarumi?”

“The farthest you’ve ever gone with *me* is, like, from one train station to another.”

Before I could ask her what she was talking about, however, she looked up.

“From here on, we’ll always be friends...won’t we, Shima-chan?”

Tarumi was crying—And it was my fault.

Something colder than winter rained down on my head, penetrating through my hair. If she was crying *because we were friends*, then...that would mean...

My head started to spin. *Oh, jeez, you too?*

I started to ask, but my throat went tight.

“Yeah.”

Everything she left unspoken flew at me on the cold river wind, pricking a pin-sized hole in my chest. My throat was bone-dry; my voice was frail.

From here on, we’ll always be friends. A beautiful sentiment that neither of us actually meant. But Tarumi said it anyway, because she

was just that much of a sweetheart. Knowing Adachi, she would sooner die than utter those words.

Shima-chan and Taru-chan were the best of friends in elementary school, attached at the hip, eating lunch together, holding hands, going shopping, buying matching accessories. But now part of me was starting to think that maybe I shouldn't have called after her that day at the train station.



Like the average person, I wondered where it all went wrong. But while it would terminate our friendship if I were to say this flat-out...these days, I liked Adachi more than Tarumi. That, and that alone, was the root cause.

Was that what she wanted to hear? Was that why we met up today? Or was Tarumi hoping something would magically change? What kind of something? A fever blazed behind the scarf around my neck as questions came to mind one after another.

Maybe Tarumi had secretly hoped for something more between us—a seed that slumbered under the surface without ever blossoming. But now our friendship was quietly coming to an end, and I was just...*watching it happen*.

Was I supposed to scream in protest? Call her name at the river this time? Was this merely a hurdle our platonic friendship was meant to overcome? Surely she wouldn't be satisfied with that. After today, she and I would likely never hang out one-on-one ever again. Whether or not our friendship survived, the end result would still be the same.

Somehow I knew it was over for us either way.

I knew what Tarumi wanted, and I knew how to achieve it. If I truly cared about her as a person, then staying friends was *probably* not the answer. But I couldn't offer her anything more than that. And so my only option was...to sit there.

Smiling without an ounce of joy, Tarumi kept painting, tears streaming down her face. I suspected she didn't know how to fix this any more than I did. So I sat there and watched as this unbalanced love triangle slowly fell apart.

I thought I heard a whisper—something like, “I wish we could have gone farther together.” But it was as distant as the roar of the river. And so, unable to think of anything I had done wrong leading up to this, I embraced the present moment.

In junior high I had experienced conflict. I had hurt someone with my words and felt bad afterward. But it was someone I didn't like, so they were functionally a stranger.

This, however, was most likely my first time ever hurting a friend.

Chapter 5:
Dream of Two

“**D**O YOU HAVE ANY ambitions or dreams for the future?” I asked on a whim.

“Yep and I’m doing it right now,” she answered without hesitation, blinking at me. She was slumped over the table with her glasses off, looking bored.

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

That was where the conversation ended, and the lukewarm air sapped me of any desire to continue.

We had reached our final year of high school, yet nothing had changed. Life was still just as comfortable as it ever was. Lately, however, I was starting to question things with increasing frequency.

“I mean, don’t you ever ask yourself if maybe something needs to change?” I asked again, after a pause.

“Ah, I get it.”

“Get what?”

“That you’re going through puberty, Hino.”

Nagafuji straightened up, raising her arms and her udders. As soon as we got here, she had immediately changed into an old, worn-out shirt with a hole in the armpit. It was a shirt she and I had bought together a few years ago—one for each of us. But I rarely had the opportunity to wear mine; it was folded up in my walk-in closet somewhere.

“It’s not about puberty. We’re third-years now, see? There’s a lot to think about.”

“Ah, I get it.”

“Good grief, she’s repeating herself...” Which meant she definitely wasn’t paying attention.

“I’m listening! Now, what thrilling tale will you share with me today?”

“It’s nothing really...”

She cupped a jaunty hand behind her ear. With a sigh, I reluctantly continued.

“Look, we’re both just sorta playing around for right now, and that’s fine. We still have time and all. But once you get a job, you won’t have free time anymore, so I won’t be able to spend all my time here, y’know? And at that point, well...things won’t be like they used to be anymore. And by the by, any *normal* person would stop and think about this stuff, just FYI...”

The words came out in a grumbly, sulky voice, but I couldn’t help it. It annoyed me to think I was the only one worried about the future. And sure enough, she only paused to think about it for a few seconds before she went right back to shrugging it off.

“Sure, there might be some issues, but we’ll just save it for later.” She pantomimed picking up an invisible pile of problems and throwing them away. Then she crawled around to my side of the kotatsu table. “With that stuff out of the way, I can focus on the girl right in front of me. Everybody’s happy!”

She clapped me on the shoulders three times, and I started to say something like *good lord*, or *give me a break*, but they never made it past my lips. Her argument was so absurd, it couldn’t even be reasoned with. Surely she had to know it wasn’t that simple.

“It must be nice, living in that fantasy world of yours.”

“Now, now. Dial it back or you’re going to make ol’ Nagafuji-san blush.”

It's no use. She doesn't get it. She's just too invincible, I thought to myself with a defeated laugh.

"Fantasy Nagafuji... I like the sound of that," she continued.

"That doesn't even make grammatical sense."

"Nagafuji Fantasy?"

"Flipping it doesn't help."

"We'll call it Nagafan for short."

I was tired of humoring her, so I looked off in a different direction. Meanwhile, she kept babbling about *fantasy this, fantasy that*. As I listened to her voice, I let out a sigh.

What am I doing with this nutcase? Why Nagafuji?

When I tried to put it into words, I could feel my body resisting, refusing to let my emotions get all sweaty.

"...All right, look," I said suddenly, without turning back. "I'm gonna try to stick it out for like, ten more years or so."

I wanted to be with her for the next decade, and to that end, I would need to take action. But knowing me, after ten years, I'd probably move on to something—or someone—new.

Though she was assuredly clueless, Nagafuji smiled softly at me nonetheless. "You can do it."

"I think you mean *we*."

You're part of this, too, missy! I thought to myself with a laugh.

Chapter 6: The Moon Cradle

HAVING SET OFF with determination in my chest, I soon learned what a nightmare it was to unpack. Truly, how naïve we were to think we'd be done by bedtime. For tonight, we decided to at least set up a sleeping area, then curled up under the blankets. After all, the mattress we had brought in was currently covered in open cardboard boxes.

Our makeshift bed must have looked like a rat's nest. When I looked over, I could see Shimamura resting peacefully with her eyes closed; I gazed at her for a moment, then looked back at the ceiling.

From now on, the two of us would spend every day together. I tried to picture it, but it was too fuzzy to feel real. Despite planning the whole thing out, moving in, and now unpacking, my brain just hadn't caught up yet.

Lying here, it felt like I was watching myself zone out from an outside observer's perspective—as though my feelings were divorced from reality. I tried to put them back together, but my mind was a swirl of white fog. I seemed to remember having a clear vision of the future when I left my mother's house, but it must've melted away while I was walking with Shimamura. Perhaps my brain just needed a little extra time to process my unbelievably perfect new life with her...

I looked over at her again. This time, her eyes opened, as if on command. "Can't sleep?"

"Huh?" Alarm shot through me at the sudden question—the sudden gaze.

"Your eyes are shining."

More like burning. My body was leaden with fatigue, yet my mind was racing needlessly. “Yeah, can’t sleep,” I confessed quietly. “I keep thinking about a bunch of stuff.”

“Hmm.” Her eyes wandered briefly; then she rolled over, turning her body toward me. Her smile was warm and comforting. “Wanna tell me about it? Just until you start to get sleepy?”

“...Okay.”

Swaddled in gentle acceptance like a baby nestled in a cradle, I felt myself start to relax. I used to be a lot more nervous around her, so for once, I could tell that I’d improved. Going forward, would my heart eventually grow numb to it completely? The thought made me a tiny bit sad.

Now that I was calm again, the drowsiness was quick to set in—but this time, I was fighting to stay awake. *Sheesh, make up your mind.*

“Go for it. I’m all ears.”

“Um...” Touching a finger to my lower lip, I scooped up my thoughts like pebbles from a river. “Maybe I was exaggerating when I said *a bunch*. First of all, it’s been sinking in for me that we’re really going to spend every single day together. Whenever it’s time to do something, you’ll be right there beside me. We’ll go places together, go home together...you’ll be there. And second of all...” When I put it into words, it all turned into one long string, like a spaghetti noodle. “Uh, on second thought, just the one thing,” I corrected myself.

Shimamura smiled stiffly. “This is nothing new, silly.”

“True. I just haven’t been able to sleep a wink ever since I met you...I think.”

One minute, I’d be lying in bed in the darkness, and the next, I’d find myself thinking of Shimamura. And when the sun rose the next morning, I’d *still* be thinking of Shimamura. Weird that I was somehow a completely different person when my brain was at least

95 percent Shimamura by this point. I probably thought about her more than *she* did.

“Terribly sorry to hear that, my dear Adachi-san.”

“Huh? Oh, no, don’t fine, I’m worry!” I babbled, caught off-guard. All these years later, and I was still so awkward. It was clear I had no talent for communication, yet for some reason, a lack of talent was rarely ever accepted as a valid excuse to stop trying.

“You know, your energy level’s pretty impressive for how little sleep you get.”

“You think so?”

“From my perspective, at least.”

She smiled and closed her eyes like she was reminiscing about something. In the darkness of night, I could faintly see her shoulders shaking with a suppressed chuckle. Curious though I was, I decided to let it slide. *At least she’s having fun.*

Problem was, the conversation was kind of over. *What now?* The answer, of course, was obvious: I was supposed to go to sleep. But how could I when Shimamura’s eyes were focused on me? *Think of a topic!* I told myself silently as I wracked my brain.

“Did you talk to your family?” I asked.

“Huh?”

“Before you left.”

“Ohhh.” Her gaze drifted upward, remembering. “It was pretty much the same version of me as any other day. I remember sorta spacing out, but maybe I was just sleepy. Oh, and...”

“And?”

“A little lamb was eating cabbage.”

“...What does *that* mean?”

“Don’t worry about it,” she laughed. I attempted to decode it, but ultimately gave up; I could tell no amount of me worrying about it would make it make sense. “What about you? Did you guys talk?” she asked, in the sort of tone used to address a child—something I didn’t appreciate. But the fact that she bothered to ask was, to me, proof that she already knew the answer.

“Not really.”

“Gotcha.”

Just like that, it felt like we were both back in high school. This was no uncommon occurrence when talking to Shimamura, and whenever it happened, it felt like a rush of clean spring water in my chest, refreshing and cold, filled with happy nostalgia. Evidently this was how I experienced my old memories.

“Okay, now it’s your turn to talk about something.”

“We’re taking turns?” I couldn’t remember if we’d actually gone in order, but at her prompting, I paused to think. “Were you thinking about something before you fell asleep?”

“Mmm, only halfway.”

“Halfway...?”

“Halfway sleeping,” she clarified. “I was picturing us living here until we’re both old and gray. It was a funny feeling.” She pinched a strand of hair between her fingers and gazed at its color. “So I guess I was thinking the same thing as you.”

“Oh...”

A line shot straight through my heart, as if we’d touched the tips of our index fingers together. Something tugged at it, up and down, making it reverberate with my emotions. Perhaps human language was designed precisely to seek out these fleeting moments of sync.

“Think we’ll get that old?” I asked.

“It’ll happen, trust me,” she replied in a singsong voice. After a chuckle, silence descended between us—but this time, it was peaceful and fulfilling. No need to panic. “Okay, wanna go to sleep now? For longevity’s sake?”

“Sure.”

“Good night.”

With that farewell, she shut her eyes. From the side, I spotted what looked like a small, contented smile on her face...or was I just seeing what I wanted to see? Not only that, but when I woke up, there would be a *good morning* inches from my face... The thought made my blood froth in my wrists.

“Good night,” I replied after a pause, then closed my own eyes.

Hard to say which of us was the first to fall asleep as the night deepened.

A soft voice flowed into my ears as I buried my face in my pillow.

“Adachiii...”

She shook my shoulder. My eyelids fluttered, and my mind turned its focus on my vision. The morning sun streamed in, sharply clipping the edges of my line of sight. Then, with a gasp, my brain powered on, and I jumped upright, recoiling. “Aaagh!”

“What was that?” Shimamura blinked, raising both hands in surrender.

“You scared me...”

“Yeah, well, you scared me, too!”

Brushing the hair out of my eyes, I glanced around. Then I realized: *right, we moved into our new condo last night.* “Wasn’t

expecting you to..." *Wake me up*, I wanted to say, but even my sentences couldn't finish themselves.

"What's so scary about me waking you up?" she asked with a pout.

"Because...because you're up so early..."



“I am, aren’t I?” She grinned in delight. “Feels like Christmas morning!” And with that, she left the bedroom. In the other room, I could hear her talking to herself: “Time for breakfast!”

Meanwhile, I stared into space. Shimamura was *excited*? About *what*?

One look around the room and the answer was readily apparent.

Then I made eye contact with her plushie lying forgotten on the bed.

“Hahgh...!”

Somehow I tripped up in the middle of a laugh.

I decided against changing clothes and headed straight for the living room, where I sat down across from Shimamura. As I flattened my unruly bedhead, I contemplated our new life together. I was awake, but somehow it felt like I was still asleep. Shimamura was smiling at me, just like I’d always dreamed of...

“Here you go.”

She handed me a sandwich and a carton of milk; I accepted, then popped my straw in. The perfectly chilled liquid cooled my body from the inside out. Only then did the haze of dreamland finally start to clear away.

“Once we get settled in, we’ll need to learn to make our own breakfast every day,” Shimamura mused.

“Yeah...”

“Seems like a lot of work,” she complained with a wry grin. It reminded me of that one phone call with her mother. At least I didn’t need to kick her this morning.

Obviously our unpacking hadn’t progressed since last night, hence we were eating corner store sandwiches for breakfast. We bought them on the way here from the train station yesterday, and I

was pleasantly surprised to find that the quality had survived the night. *That's bread for you*, I mused as I broke another piece off with my fingers.

"This bread is super good," Shimamura remarked.

"Uh, yeah," I replied flatly.

"Not that good?" she asked, smiling stiffly.

"No, it...it's great!" I corrected myself hastily.

"You don't *have* to agree with me, you know."

"I'm enjoying it, I promise. I just, um...kinda skip the explanation."

Because it's too much effort. But obviously I didn't say that out loud, since that would be rude. Still, she must have picked up on it anyway, because she was still smiling.

"You really don't care about food, huh?"

"That's not true... Well, maybe kinda..." *Only when I have to eat something I don't like. Wait, what food don't I like? I don't remember.*

"Eh, that's okay. Some people *only* care about food, so I'm sure it balances out," she nodded to herself, pinching her tomato slice as it threatened to fall out of her sandwich.

Were the two of us balanced, her with a normal interest in food and me with none at all? Surely we had to be, otherwise we wouldn't be together...right...?

"So you have no interest in food. I get it now," she murmured. Evidently the conversation was progressing in her mind, but I was feeling left out.

"What are you talking about?"

"Well, you know how you worked at that Chinese restaurant in high school?"

“Yeah...?”

“I realize now that it was a great fit for you, since you don’t eat when you’re bored. You were the perfect girl for the job!” she exclaimed in genuine awe, and the more I listened, the less I could taste of the sandwich.

“Shimamura...you’re really weird sometimes.”

“Huh?”

After we ate breakfast and brushed our teeth, it was time to resume unpacking—or so I thought. But then she sat down on the floor (we didn’t have a couch yet) and declared, “All right, let’s take a break until we finish digesting!”

Oh.

But when I sat down beside her, she started smacking my shoulder. “C’mon, Adachi, you gotta be the one to stop me from slacking off!”

“Wha?!”

“At this rate, I’m gonna fall asleep!”

Oh. “Um...n-no breaks!”

“Fine, fine I guess you’re right...”

She sprang up onto her feet and rolled up her sleeves. Why were we going through this charade? I had a lot of questions, but at the same time, I was kinda having fun.

We bustled all around the less-than-spacious condo, setting up our nest, occasionally crossing paths as we carried our belongings every which way. Once the breeze from the open window was no longer enough to negate the heat and sweat however, it started to remind me of the gym loft. That was where my time with Shimamura began, and as I gazed intently at the white walls, I realized just how far we had come since then.

“Taking a break, Adachi?” she asked as she passed behind me, carrying her clothes.

“Huh? Not this early!” I protested as a show of motivation.

Meanwhile, she walked into the bedroom and back. “Proud of you!” she shrugged. “Because *I’m* taking a break.”

Newly empty-handed, Shimamura was drawn like a magnet to the brand-new blue couch we had picked out together. She flopped down with her seal plushie and stared dazedly at the still-darkened TV screen. She had tied her hair back prior to unpacking, but now it was starting to come loose; a few stray strands were falling into her face. Unsure what to do, I stood there and waffled. The apartment was barely half-constructed.

“You know, I was thinking...” she began, staring up at the ceiling as she stroked the seal plushie, smoothing its fur.

“What is it?”

“Seeing as moving here has been one huge nightmare...”

“Yeah?”

“Ideally I think we should try not to move too much!” she exclaimed. With the seal plushie on her tummy, she grabbed her feet and curled into a ball. Then she stared directly at me.

“Good idea...?” I agreed half-heartedly, wondering if that was all she wanted to say.

She averted her eyes pointedly. “Ugh!” She set the seal on top of her face. “Adachi, I wish you wouldn’t bully me so much.”

“Huh?” I didn’t get it.

“Do I have to explain it? *All* of it?” she asked, her voice muffled by the plushie.

I bit back a confused grunt not unlike the bark of a real seal.

“Well, you *see*...”

“Yes?”

“I’m saying I want to live here for a long time and never have to move out.”

Behind the seal, her lips were downturned slightly. Warm water rose up through my body, submerging me. Now that I understood, my shoulders and face were oddly tense.

“Oh, uh, that’s what you meant?”

“Yep! Ha ha ha!” she laughed, as if shrugging it off.

I slid into her vision and knelt before her.

“Uhwaaaa?!” Startled, she sat up. Two pairs of eyes looked back at me—hers and the seal’s. *Ugh, forget about the seal!!!*

Just then, the question that had been looming in my mind suddenly lunged: Would it be just the two of us from here on out? Forever? On the spur of the moment, I whipped my head down into a sitting bow.

“I...I’m really looking forward to this!”

Shimamura sat up straight and set her seal plushie to the side. “I’m gonna need your help with a lot of stuff from here on, so I hope you’re prepared.”

With an impish grin, she gazed down at me, and I felt my battery charge up. Heat spread through every inch of my body, burning my cheeks and ears in search of release. *Of course* I would help Shimamura if she asked; how could I not? From my perspective, it wasn’t a favor, but rather, a mission sent to me from on high.

“First things first, let’s see you bring me a drink,” she commanded, arms folded.

“Sure!” I jumped to my feet and ran to the kitchen.

“Waiiit! I was joking!”

I knew that, but I went for it anyway. In truth, perhaps I was running from the shame of being a total lapdog.

Surprisingly enough, part of me was still a little scared to call this home. In the tub, I parted the water with my arms and watched it trickle back down as raw emotions glittered in my chest. It felt like the minimum threshold had suddenly been jacked up sky-high, and the small details had yet to be fine-tuned. My heart quivered as hope and panic welled up in equal measure. Starting today, Shimamura was my home. This was the same water she had just finished bathing in.

“Nnn...”

Ugh, stop whining! I decided to get out of the tub before I overheated.

After I wrapped my hair in a towel and put some pajamas on, I headed out to the living room, but Shimamura was nowhere to be seen. I could hear something, however. Tracing the sound, I found her in the bedroom, peering into the closet. Curious, I walked up behind her...and found her holding my old blue cheongsam. “Oooh,” she murmured, stroking the smooth fabric. And although I wasn’t presently wearing it, I still felt embarrassed for some reason.

“Wh-what’s going on in here?”

“Just reminiscing about the good ol’ days.”

“Hm.”

Come to think of it, that little dress had a lot of memories attached to it. Walking around town, throwing my boomerang...and so on and so forth. Good old days, indeed. At one point I was advised

to wear it while I could, but as you might expect, it wasn't the sort of dress I could work into my regular wardrobe.

Shimamura looked me up and down, then suggested, "What if you wore it again sometime? It's been a while."

"Huh?!"

"Oh, wait—you wore it last Christmas. Guess it hasn't been that long after all."

"Yeah, exactly..."

How it turned into a yearly tradition, I'll never know. I mean, obviously it was my decision. I could remember the first year I chose to wear it, but not the thought process that led to it. And every Christmas after that, the details only grew more fuzzy.

"Uhhh...I dunno, maybe *you* should wear it for a change," I muttered offhandedly, tugging on my sleeve.

"Hmm." She appeared to take my suggestion into consideration. "Welllll..."

Her gaze drifted upward—possibly imagining herself in it. Likewise, I dressed her up in my mind's eye... Was it just me, or did Shimamura look better in warm colors?

"To me, the China dress is *your* thing," she explained.

"Huh?"

"And I wouldn't want to steal that from you. So yeah."

With that, she closed the closet and headed for the couch. I didn't entirely understand—did it really matter? As I dried my hair, she sat with her legs stretched out and stared into space.

"Sleepy?" I asked.

"After the day we've had? You bet." She wasn't yawning, but her eyelids were drooping. It was cute, in a childish sort of way. "But

now that we worked hard to get it done, we can take it easy all day tomorrow!”

Her voice was growing softer the sleepier she got. *So cute*. Then again, I had yet to see a side of her that *wasn't* cute.

“Wanna head to bed?”

“Sure.”

We switched the living room lights off, then trudged to our room together. We had spent the entire day setting up the condo, and unlike yesterday, the bed was now fully functional. Just a single queen-sized bed for the two of us—my fingers tingled at the thought, and the darkness was making my head spin.

But Shimamura’s eyes were already half-closed. No sign of the slightest tension.

The beloved seal plushie now sat on a small table in the corner of the room, watching us. It had a derpy-looking face—did it have a name? Cuddled up beside it was the little teddy bear accessory that once hung from Shimamura’s bookbag. Was there a reason the two were placed next to each other?

She was the first to climb into bed. After she got in, she then started adjusting the pillows. “To be fair, you don’t *have* to go to bed at the same time as me,” she told me after I followed her, but I knew she was probably just trying to be nice—probably.

“But once you’re asleep, there’s nothing for me to do.”

“Good point.” After flipping her pillow, she rested her head against it and nodded in satisfaction. “Do forgive my sleepiness, won’t you, darling?”

“Huh? It’s not...I mean, uh, I-I’ll allow it.”

“Aww, thanks!”

Having bestowed upon me her superficial gratitude, she rolled over, curling the blanket around herself, and prepared to sleep.

Likewise, I slid into bed, but to tell the truth, I was nowhere near sleepy yet. My limbs were burning. With one leg poking out from under the covers, I shifted my head against the pillow.

“Tomorrow, we’ll need to go shopping and fill up that fridge,” she mused.

“Okay,” I replied. Just like that, it truly felt like we were living together. My mind went fuzzy, and I felt my freshly dried hair heat up all over again.

Just before I had fully closed my eyes, she looked over at me. “Night night.”

“Good night.”

Her gentle voice tickled my palms. Her soft breaths punctuated my own. I couldn’t help but peek at her as she lay next to me, still as a statue. Her hair had fallen over her ear ever so slightly, and with each minuscule movement, it slipped a little farther.

Inexplicably, my chest tightened.

“It still feels like a stage play,” I mumbled, but got no response. She was already sound asleep, her shoulders rising and falling with her breaths. I could remember her telling me it only took her five minutes to fall asleep every night, but apparently that was an understatement, because this was closer to three.

Conversely, as someone who tended to lie awake in the darkness, losing sleep over my relationship with her, I was the polar opposite. I could only hope to fall asleep while thinking of all the shopping we’d do tomorrow. Forcing my stiff shoulders to relax, I stretched my arms out and slowly exhaled.

With Shimamura lying right next to me, it felt like such a waste to just go to sleep without doing anything special. *But there’s always tomorrow*, I told myself as I rolled onto my back.

Tomorrow, and the next day, and the next day...and the rest of my life.

“Okay, Adachi, route us to the grocery store.”

“Uhh...go straight.”

“Good, good!” Her voice flew forward in pursuit of our destination.

We had looked around a bit when we came to tour the condo, and again when we signed the lease, but this was our first time truly exploring our new town. We chose this location based on the commute to each of our jobs. The buildings were a little taller here than they were back home. As we walked, the faces we passed all looked fairly young, possibly because of the proximity to the local college. Together, we progressed up the gently sloping hill. Unlike the road home from high school, however, we would never need to part ways. Our hands were joined like it was the most ordinary thing in the world, and Shimamura’s palm carried a warmth that surpassed spring well into early summer.

From here, our hometown was about ninety minutes away by train—hardly an insurmountable distance, but far enough that our parents’ voices were out of earshot, and there was no chance of encountering a familiar face. Together we would go out, and together we would return home, just the two of us. Our pace was perfectly matched.

“So what do you wanna get?”

“Huh? Oh, uh...bread.”

“Right, gotta have bread. Anything else?”

“Uh, water...?”

“I *knew* you’d say that!” she exclaimed, as though her dream had come true. It was a stupid suggestion, yet it made her so happy; I wasn’t sure how to feel. “You’re like a plant that eats bread,” she giggled.

“What?” Apparently I talked about water too much. I envisioned a flowering shrub munching away on a baguette. “That sounds terrifying.”

“And yet somehow you grew up healthy! What a mystery.”

She put a hand on my head. Our height difference hadn’t changed since the day we met, with me ever so slightly taller. Yet from my perspective, I was a little baby compared to Shimamura.

“Well, that’s because...” My throat started to hurt.

“Because why?” she asked playfully. I could practically feel her stroking my cheeks and jawline, and I flinched, my hair falling into my eyes.

“Because, maybe...maybe my mom did a good job,” I fumbled slowly, like a pouty child. The woman wasn’t even here with us, yet I averted my eyes all the same. We kept walking for a moment, until I finally looked back at Shimamura—and when I did, our eyes met.

“Glad to hear it,” she told me, her eyes sparkling with what looked like pride.

And so we arrived at the supermarket and purchased the groceries we’d need for the short-term future. All I really did was follow Shimamura around and put items into the cart as needed. But she seemed to delight in the colorful fruits and veggies, and seeing her acting like a little kid was more than enough for me. This was what I always wanted.

Later, on the way home, we stopped by the corner store. Shimamura picked up a magazine, scanned the cover, and promptly bought it. She was by no means a regular reader, so after we got home, I asked her about it.

“I saw a friend’s name on the cover,” she explained.

Then, as we sat on the couch flipping through it together, she suddenly fell still, her eyes as round as saucers. I glanced over, but didn’t see anything out of the ordinary.

“It’s really her...”

There, on the full-color page, was a young girl somewhere in her teens. Her uniform was slipping from one shoulder as though she wasn’t accustomed to wearing it; her eyes were open wide, like she was a little nervous, and though it was a still image, I could easily envision those expressive eyes darting to and fro. She was short in stature, and her long, unruly hair was pinned in place with a strange-looking hairpin that read TRAINEE.

“So this friend of yours is a girl...?” I asked.

“What? Oh, yeah,” Shimamura giggled. *What’s so funny?* “I guess she’s way more famous than I thought.”

According to the article, this girl was a ceramic artist. Where on earth did she and Shimamura meet? And what sort of friends were they?

“Mnnnnn...”

“Whatsa matter, Adachi-chan?” She poked my lip, and I realized I was pouting.

“Where did you meet her?”

Surely Shimamura wouldn’t have had many opportunities to meet a girl that young. I was starting to fear that she had a secret.

She blinked back at me. “What do you mean where? I met her out in the countryside.” Then, after a moment, she seemed to realize something. “*Aha*,” she smirked, pinching my lips, and I flinched. “Gosh, it’s so obvious you’ve got the wrong idea, but at the same time, I’m kinda enjoying seeing you squirm...”

It felt like she had shoved my shoulder and my heart simultaneously. *What “wrong idea”?* I tried to ask, but my lips were being held shut. It sounds like a joke, but it was a surprisingly effective way of overpowering me.

“Trust me, it’s not what you think. Cheer up, buttercup,” she grinned. But she still wasn’t letting go, and I was starting to have trouble breathing.

“Mmm! Mm-mmh!” I protested.

“Oh, right. Sorry.”

She realized what she was doing, and the next moment, my lips were freed. But then she began to stare directly into my eyes, and it made me squirm. *What is she doing...?*

“You know, I think I’m finally used to seeing you in glasses,” she continued.

Oh. I reached up and touched my blue frames. At some point I had started wearing them at home whenever I needed to read something, and I chose blue because the fortune-teller always told me it was my lucky color—and I mean *always*.

Every single time.

Just then, Shimamura stole my glasses, put them on, and struck a pose.

“Looking good!” I told her.

“You’ve gotten better at social cues, huh?”

Chuckling, she returned my glasses; I took them and put them back in their case. Meanwhile, she closed the magazine.

“Starting next week, we’ll both have to leave for work,” she sighed, stretching her legs out. “Did you hear that? *Work!*”

“Huh? Yeah...?”

“I’ve had a lot of part-time jobs, but this is going to be even harder. So not excited.”

Shimamura had worked her way through college; likewise, I’d worked like crazy to build up a nest egg for our new life together in addition to my high school savings. Back then I never had anything to spend it on, but now things were different. At long last, those distant days of aimlessly working at the Chinese restaurant were finally worth something. In that sense, perhaps it was possible, if illogical, for the future to change the past.

“Good thing your salary’s higher than mine, eh? Keep it up, champ,” she told me as she patted me on the shoulder.

She and I worked at two different companies, and for good reason. For one thing, it was surprisingly difficult to land jobs at the same place...and for another, I wouldn’t get any work done if Shimamura was there.

“We’ll rake in the cash, and then, we’ll...”

“Travel abroad.”

“Yeah, we’ll do that!”

Her eyes were sparkling as though she’d found a diamond, and if I had to guess, mine were, too. We shared the same dream—an irreplaceable wish that tied our hearts together.

“You’re so much more talented than me, Adachi.”

“What? No I’m not!” I shook my head aggressively. I sincerely couldn’t think of a single area where I excelled. Compared to her, I was so clumsy, so helpless, so weak... It was a miracle she hadn’t given up on me altogether.

“You always got better grades than me—oh, and you’re gorgeous. I’m so jealous,” she continued, wagging a finger right in front of my nose.

Setting the subject of grades aside: “No, you’re way, way prettier.”

“Hee hee! Not sure about that.”

“I’m serious! I mean it!” Reflexively, I sat up straight—and nearly slammed my forehead into hers. Even at point-blank range, Shimamura was as beautiful as ever. So before my face turned red, I blurted out, “You’ll always be the prettiest girl in my eyes!”

“...Okay,” she nodded, her expression stiff. Was she...embarrassed? A rare sight. “Well, I can’t say I hate the sound of that. *Bee-you-tiful!*” she chuckled, sweeping a hand through her hair.

Then for some reason, she turned and stared intently into my eyes. Our cheeks were close enough to brush against each other two or three times. The ring of light at the center of my vision began to expand—and then she licked the lip of my nose.

“Eegh!”

It caught me so entirely off-guard, I flipped out a little. Her gaze wandered upward as if she was evaluating the flavor. “Huh, tastes like makeup.”

“Well, duh.”

I could feel a slight chill on the tip of my nose where her saliva formed a bridge between my skin and the air. She looked at my nose and chuckled, shoulders shaking in delight. And since she was enjoying herself so much, I decided I didn’t mind. Why would she do it, though? My fingers drilled against my foot like I was playing the piano.

As for Shimamura, she started to sway back and forth, relishing the moment. Then, suddenly, something pulled her back to reality, and she slowly looked over her shoulder. I followed her gaze through the half-open door, but all I could see was the front entrance.

“What is it?”

“Oh, it’s just... I’m so used to hearing the pitter-patter of little feet. I mean, my sister’s grown up now, obviously, but I spent so many years with a kid in the house, you know? But now that sound is gone.”

I could hear something low in her voice. Shimamura was a calm, laid-back person who rarely ever let her true feelings show, but over the past few years, I’d learned to sense these little changes in her. But I’d spent so much of my life ignoring those emotions, it was possible I’d never truly be as good at detecting them as the average person.

Did her sister bear a grudge against me? If I was in her shoes, I definitely would. Or maybe she hated me from day one. After all, it was *my* idea for me and Shimamura to live together. But...what if Shimamura herself never really wanted to...?

I looked over. “Do you miss her?”

“I wouldn’t go *that* far, though... okay, maybe a little. Yeah, I kinda do,” she admitted with a smile after nearly denying it.

“Even though I’m right here next to you?” Deep down I knew the question would make her uncomfortable, but couldn’t stop myself from asking.

“Yes, even though you’re here next to me, Adachi,” she answered honestly. “You and my family each occupy different places in my heart.” She patted the center of her chest, drawing my gaze—er, not like that. “I’ve got a lot of slots in here. You have one, and my family has one, and the rest are full of dogs and other creatures. I need lots because I’m greedy like that.”

She counted them all off on her fingers, and as I watched, I quietly extended just my index finger. As long as she and I were glued at the hip, like one half of an apple, I didn’t need anything else. But Shimamura was different: she was riddled with holes and scars, like the surface of the moon.

“Besides, you wouldn’t want to be my family, right?”

After a moment of consideration, I agreed. “I want to be your number one.”

“Ha! Some things never change, huh?” Her laughter was that of a much younger woman, like she’d gone back in time. After a pause, she pressed her fingers against my collar bone and pushed ever so slightly. “Yes, you’re still my number one, Adachi.”

Just like that, she stole my breath away—with her fingers, her lips, her aura, her sweetness, her whims, and perhaps, with her love.

“...Okay.”

“Eh, I’ll get used to the loneliness eventually. Humans are flexible like that.” She stopped looking over her shoulder and turned back. Then her gaze started to wander. “Now that I think of it, we might get a little visitor at some point whether we like it or not.”

She rose to her feet and walked to the fridge. When she returned, she was carrying two canned drinks, one of which she handed to me.

“Fair warning, I only just put these in there, so they’re not cold yet.”

I ran my fingers over the can; it was nearly as warm as human skin. Likewise, she held up her drink and flashed a toothy grin.

“I was thinking we could celebrate our new condo with a toast.”

“Ohhh.”

Now I understood why she bought a six-pack at the grocery store. When it came to booze, Shimamura couldn’t drink it and I didn’t especially want to, either. Fortunately, this was just peach juice. We cracked open our cans.

“What are you toasting?” she asked.

“You,” I replied without hesitation.

She giggled bashfully as the aluminum cans clinked together.
“Okay, then, I’ll toast to you, Adachi.”

Okay, then? What am I, an afterthought? But at the very least, she had said it back, and ultimately I decided that was good enough. I took a sip of the sweet juice, refreshing my throat like a sprinkler on a hot summer day.

“Do you like it?”

“It’s very sweet.” I thought this was a reasonable comment to make, but for some reason she burst out laughing. “What’s so funny?”

“You’re so weird!”

Huh? I looked at the can. Peach juice. Juice equaled sweet. Where was the lie?

“You can be so incredibly passionate, and yet you sound so *bored* describing food.”

“I’m not bored. Well, okay, maybe I am.”

“You answered a yes or no question with ‘It’s sweet.’ It’s just funny, that’s all.”

It is? I frowned in confusion. I didn’t get it, but she was right: I didn’t care. Still, I wanted to defend myself...but how? I wanted to touch her heart and make her blush...

“I...I’m only interested in *you*, Shimamura.”

“Yeah, I know,” she replied casually.

With her drink pressed to her lips, she stared back at me. Just like that, I could feel the sweetness on my tongue melt into a balmy heat that rose to my eyes and ears. If I kept the can at mouth level, I might spray juice everywhere. She observed this reaction and smirked in satisfaction. Not once had I ever won one of these lighthearted lovers’ quarrels.

After we finished our drinks, she patted her lap, and I laid my head there. Part of me protested against being treated like an oversized dog, but obviously I wasn't going to say no. As I lay there on my side, I noticed how long my hair was getting.

"You know..."

"Hmm?"

"I feel spoiled," I muttered as I buried my face in her thighs.

"Oh, don't worry. It'll be my turn tomorrow."

"Okay."

Her scent traveled up my neck to the tips of my hair, and I could practically feel its added weight. I shivered. Was this how it felt to have everything I ever wanted?

"Warm..."

"Well, it *is* springtime now."

"Warmer than spring." It felt like my snow was melting.

"Yeah, I'm feeling pretty warm, too."

As she stroked my back, she spoke in a soft voice. Was she comforted by this as much as I was? My racing heart gradually slowed to a steady rhythm. I felt like I could spend hours and hours just vaguely perceiving it without ever getting bored.

Who would have thought "forever" was so close at hand?

She didn't speak a word after that. I figured she didn't really need to, but then I started to crave her voice again, so I started to call her name, but when I looked up, I discovered the cause of the silence.

"...You fell asleep without me."

Her head bobbed as she sat upright on the couch. Much as I wanted to prop her up, I was already lying down, so I could only watch. And as I gazed up at the pattern of the ceiling glimpsed

through strands of her hair, I could feel my mind and vision growing fuzzy—not from drowsiness, but from fulfillment. She was a leaf, offering me shade from the sun, and I could feel a refreshing island breeze. I floated on the moment, rocked by the waves of eternity.

This was going to be my new normal: Shimamura when I woke up, Shimamura when I went shopping, Shimamura all day and all night. No matter what happened, she would be right there beside me.

“Nnnn...”

I said stop whining!

For lack of a fitting adjective, I quietly, deeply exhaled happiness.

“Nice.”

Later that night...

“What time are you going to sleep tonight?” Shimamura asked suddenly, as we were sitting and discussing the neighborhood amenities.

“Huh? Uh, a-anytime is fine.”

“Anytime?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, then, I’m going to bed right now!” she declared brightly as she marched off to the bedroom.

Do you really need my permission? And didn’t you already take a nap...? Nevertheless, I followed after her. But just then, she stopped short.

“I knew it! I knew you’d follow me!”

“Well, I don’t...”

“Have anything better to do? Really?”

“Nothing except...be with you.” It was my highest priority.

“Right, right,” she nodded offhandedly. “Well, once we start working, we might not have as many opportunities to sleep together, I guess.”

Exactly. To no one’s surprise, going to work meant less time spent as a couple. Thus, I wanted to do as much as possible while I still could. *That* was why I followed her around so much—*not* because I was a lapdog.

Probably.

Unlike last night, we were both climbing into bed fully awake, so now I was nervous for an entirely different reason. *Nervous about what, exactly?* My middle finger was starting to twitch. If I wasn’t careful, I was liable to start walking like a robot... Then again, at least I’d be walking at all.

“Oh, gotta run to the restroom.”

She suddenly changed course to the restroom near the front door. Left behind, I started pacing around the bedroom, unsure where to stand or wait. Ultimately, I decided to kneel on the bed.

For whatever reason—possibly our dominant hands—I naturally ended up sleeping on the right side of the bed, next to the window. I gazed at the closed curtains and envisioned the nightscape that lay beyond, speedy lights racing off into the distance.

“Why are you kneeling?” Shimamura asked as she walked in.

“Oh, I, uh, just felt like it.”

“You always have such good posture without even thinking about it! That’s my girl,” she croaked like a grandma as she climbed onto the bed and mimicked my sitting position.

But now that we were kneeling in front of each other, it kinda put certain thoughts and memories in my head, and I could feel myself getting dizzy. *It's nothing*, my burning ears whispered. Not me—my ears.

"I...I'm looking forward to this!" I blurted once I realized I hadn't thanked her for the opportunity to spend my life with her. She froze.

"Yeah, same here," she replied, looking a little weirded out as she pulled the covers back. And as she wriggled a leg underneath, I could feel a distance grow between us.

"I-I wasn't implying anything by that!" I sputtered stiffly.

"You sure...?" she asked, equally as stiffly.

"Very sure..." I mumbled, unable to speak another word.

"Oh, crap, I forgot!" She rolled back out of bed and hobbled over to the light switch. "Lights out!"

"Okay."

With a click, night descended over the room. I heard her footsteps as she returned to bed. Then her head sank into her pillow, and I observed a smile on her face.

"You sure look happy when you sleep, Shimamura."

"Do I? I've never slept in front of a mirror, so I wouldn't know." She pinched at her cheeks and frowned. Evidently she couldn't see it. "But I mean, isn't it comforting to climb into bed at the end of the day? Like, 'Ahhh, it's all over'?"

"I always get anxious thinking about tomorrow." I'd flail in bed, contemplating what I'd do with Shimamura the next day.

"Tomorrow, huh? Well, tomorrow we're gonna clean the house and do laundry. Ha ha haaaaa." Her mirthless laughter disappeared with her shifting gaze. "Plus we'll need to cook, go shopping, and then we'll have our jobs on top of all that. There's gonna be a lot more stuff we'll need to do to survive. Ugh, yeah, we're just gonna

have to try our best. Yup, we'll need to rest up tonight," she nodded. But she didn't sound motivated in the least.

We gazed at each other, almost like we were competing to see who would be the first to avert or close our eyes. I could see my reflection in her pupils, and likewise, mine reflected hers. There in the infinite mirror, we created a world all our own.

"Good girl." She reached out to stroke my hair, the shadow of her arm draped halfway over my vision.

"Wh-where'd *that* come from?"

"Well, you were staring at me, so I thought you wanted me to do that."

My first instinct was to pout, but I quickly thought better of it. "I didn't, but I do."

"You can be really cryptic sometimes, you know that? You're impossible," she whispered, her voice rippling like the surface of a pristine lake.

As we sank into the depth of night, I savored these precious few moments, trickling away like water. This was what it looked like to live with Shimamura. She was the soft comforter keeping me happy, warm, and safe...

Really? Is that the best metaphor I have? Soft like...tofu...or a dish sponge... Ugh, forget it. Where was I? Oh, yeah.

Her hand was still resting on me. We were connected. And I needed her like my lungs needed oxygen.

Of all the people I'd met in my life, almost none of them ever liked me. Mostly it was my fault; either they showed no interest, or if they did, they ultimately drifted away before I could figure out how to reciprocate. I didn't chase them—I just kept on walking. So the problem was entirely mine, and I would probably never fix it as long as I lived.

Because my dream had already come true. Maybe I wasn't a people person, but I couldn't live without Shimamura. She was a perfect match for my hopes and prayers and desires for the future. She was the missing puzzle piece in my life. I needed her, and I fell for her, and she had fallen for me in return. I was the luckiest girl in the world.

"Shimamura?"

"Yeeees?"

I...

"I love you," I whispered, feeling my blood reverse course in my veins.

Her eyes widened for a moment. Then she burst out laughing, and ruffled my hair like she was having the time of her life.

And so I ended the day bundled up in a cradle named Shimamura. I gently pressed a hand to my legs to thank them for carrying me all the way to my happy ending.

Chapter 7: Stage of Hope

WHEN I COME HOME, I find Mom resting her head in a giant squirrel's lap.

"What's going on here?!" I shout.

"Nnhuh? Oh, she's back. Wow, you were right..."

"Ho ho ho!"

Upon closer inspection, I realize it's Yachi wearing a squirrel onesie. Her curly tail is nearly as big as she is. Where does she keep getting all these onesies from?

She ruffles through my mom's hair.

Just then, Mom reaches up and points at Yachi. "Turns out this kid's only good for stacking dishes and pulling gray hairs."

"An incredible discovery!" Yachi announces proudly, her bangs poking out where the squirrel's nose would be.



“She’s so good at pulling grays, I don’t even feel it!”

“It is because I can adjust the length and girth of my fingers.”

“Wow, you’re so talented,” Mom shrugs.

I’m sorry, *what?*

With a flurry of little gray hairs, Yachi’s hands finally come to rest. “I have removed nearly all of them.”

“Whaddya mean, *nearly?*”

“If I were to remove all of them, there wouldn’t be a next time!”

“Trust me, they’ll grow back! *Keh!*”

“Will they? In that case, I shall finish the job properly.” Sliding her hands over Mom’s head, she deftly pulls out the last of the gray hairs.

“Good job, kiddo.”

“Now then, Mama-san, my promised reward?”

“Here.” Mom pinches something between her fingers and holds it up to Yachi’s mouth, where it’s quickly devoured.

“Nom, nom.”

“What was *that?*” I ask.

“A caramel.” Mom sits up and hands me one.

“Nom, nom.” I mimic Yachi. I can taste a hint of almond flavoring mixed in.

“Your turn, Little,” Yachi says with a bright smile, patting her newly empty lap. With her legs stretched out, I can see that her toenails are the same shade of blue as her hair and fingernails. If I touch it, will the blue seep into me, too? I think about this a lot.

“I don’t have any gray hairs.”

“Well now, how lucky for you!” For some reason, Mom gives me a noogie through my hat.

“Knock it off!!!”

“Ah, youth. Hey, share some with me, all right?” Then, with a final pat, she lets me go and walks off.

I don’t know why, but kids just don’t get any gray hairs. My grandma and grandpa are white all over, though. I guess hair gets old, too. I wonder how many gray hairs my sister has...

“*Hurry up, please,*” Yachi insists in a robotic voice, like she’s talking into an electric fan. I finish my caramel and try to decide what to do. Meanwhile, my heart and mind focus on those fingers of hers...

“Well, okay. Since you offered.”

“Be my guest.”

I set down my backpack and hat, then flop down at Yachi’s feet. It feels like I’m in a fairytale about a giant squirrel. The air around her is always nice and cold, all year long. It’s different from the winter air—and weirdly comfortable.

Up above me, I can see Yachi’s sparkles. They’re beautiful and translucent and blue, and looking at them always makes me feel kinda sad. They rain down on me like snow as Yachi gazes down at me from above.

Just then, she giggles. You see, I realized recently that Yachi has different types of laughs that mean different things. And this one means *I want treats*.

“Just so you know, I don’t have any caramels for you.”

“Noooo!” She slumps her shoulders. With her, everything is straightforward and simple...yet full of mysteries at the same time. “Ho ho ho, just kidding. Your first visit is free of charge.”

“Yay!” Heh heh heh. Good thing my next visit won’t happen for a long time!

“Now then, as for your grays...”

“Whoa!”

Her fingers ruffle through my hair, more roughly than they do at the salon. “I cannot find any.”

“Told you!”

“What a shame.”

Her gaze wanders for a bit, but then she blinks like she’s had an epiphany. Her eyes shine like bona fide stars, swirling with all the colors of the galaxy. And I’m sure I’ll never find anything more beautiful than those eyes.

“In that case, I shall pull them for you once you are all grown up.”

“Okay! Hee hee hee, can’t wait!” I blurt out before my heart can catch up. I’m just so excited at the thought of her still being around by then.

Behind her, her big curly squirrel tail sways happily.

Chapter 8:
Cherry Blossoms for the Two of Us

ASSUMING WE'D CELEBRATE it again next year...

“Next year...”

The whisper traced an arc through my mind, and when it landed, it formed a stepping stone.

It was surprisingly difficult to come up with brand-new plans every single year—for *Valenton's Day*, I mean. If this was going to keep repeating every year ad nauseam, I was worried I'd run out of ideas by my fourth attempt. Adachi would probably get all flustered every year regardless, which was fine, but I would never be able to find that level of energy. I could scarcely make it out of bed some days.

The drowsiness was setting in like the pale light of dawn. Compared to sinking into the darkness, it would be much easier to wake up this way. When I closed my eyes in the blinding light, it would be morning before I knew it. And since I was having a lot of these days in a row, clearly I was on a roll. I knew what was causing it, too...but instead I giggled and pretended not to see it.

Anyway, where was I? Oh, yeah, *Valenton's Day*.

If this was going to be an annual occurrence, then the most cost-effective method would be to buy each other chocolates and leave it at that. There was no LED display promo this year... I kinda wished I hadn't inadvertently raised the bar so high for myself on my first try.

“Hmmm...”

Under the futon next to mine, my sister was cuddled up with an alien. With the lights off, it should have been pitch-black in here, but Yashiro's bodily glow illuminated the room. Not too brightly, of course, since people were trying to sleep. It was a dim blue

luminescence, kinda like a nightlight—or the bottom of the ocean. And although I had no sentimental attachment to it, looking at it for too long made my gaze tremble.

Truth be told, I envied her ability to glow in the dark without having to put any effort in. Anyone could look cool if they lit up the night simply by existing. *Maybe I should try it*, I joked to myself as I closed my eyes. The soft light rose up to illuminate my field of vision through my eyelids, engulfing me completely.

“Bleggghhh...”

From then on, whenever I had a quiet moment, I would think of Tarumi. It set in slowly over time, and it was a bit too serious to shrug off with an *oh, well*.

At the end of our hangout, she gave me the painting, and then...we went home. That was it. We didn't even walk side by side—there was a distance between us. And I'd surely never forget the feeling of a heavy weight being lifted from my shoulders, piece by piece, as I stripped off all those winter accessories to return them to her.

At the time, there was nothing I could have done, and I knew that full well. Still, I couldn't help but at least *consider* whether there might have been a better way. If one of us was to blame, well, it was probably me. I could tell Tarumi was trying her best, even if she didn't often succeed.

To be fair, it wasn't like I didn't put any effort in myself. But looking back, whenever I was with her, everything was fuzzy, like our conversations were all a dream. Maybe my mind was too confused to tell the difference between past and present. It was too surreal to

feel realistic, and by the time I felt any weight at all, it was too late, and our friendship was over. So perhaps it was only natural that our connection would come to an end.

“We were so close, though... What happened...?”

“What is the matter, Shimamura-san?”

“Mmm, just teenager stuff. You know how it is.”

“Yes, yes, I went through a similar phase myself.”

Liar, I thought to myself with a laugh. *All you care about is food.*

“It is very healthy to have worries.”

“You think so?”

“It is proof that you are taking things seriously.”

Wow, that actually sounds smart—for once. “Yeah, maybe so.”

“For instance, I am very serious about what to have for lunch today.”

“Yeah, yeah. Whatever you say, sweetie.”

But as I was laughing and rolling my eyes, it suddenly hit me. I lifted my chin from my palm, straightened up, and looked around. *I was in the middle of class.* Who was I talking to?

I quickly scanned my surroundings, but as far as I could tell, there was nothing out of the ordinary. No heads of blue hair, nobody giving me weird looks: was I asleep just now? I thought I was doing better about that.

“Did she develop telepathic powers or something...?” Maybe Yashiro was just that bored. The thought was kind of reassuring.

Just then, Adachi walked over, though our break period was swiftly coming to an end. “Is something wrong?”

There was indeed something mildly wrong, but I wasn’t sure I should tell her. “Was someone trying to talk to me just now?” I asked, just in case.

Her gaze quivered in confusion. “Well...yeah? Me?”

“Right.” I had a feeling she’d say that, so I wasn’t surprised. Granted, it wasn’t a helpful answer, but it *did* make me feel better.

“You were zoning out, but you looked at me, so...”

I hadn’t asked her to explain, but okay. Apparently I was swooning in her general direction. Hopefully she didn’t see my mouth moving... But hey, at the very least, I got a conversation with Adachi out of it, so it wasn’t all bad.

“I was just thinking about what to have for lunch,” I told her.

“Your mom didn’t pack you something?”

“No, she did.”

I watched in real time as the gears in her mind hitched and sputtered. “So, what are you going to have?”

“Whatever my mom packed.”

At this admittedly stupid exchange, Adachi furrowed her brow. “Shimamura, you can be really confusing sometimes.”

“Hee hee! I’m an enigma.”

“...You really remind me of your mom right now.”

“Urgh!”

Then the bell rang, and Adachi hurried back to her desk with small but speedy steps. After she sat down, she looked back at me, so I waved. She waved back harder, so I waved again, even harder, knowing she would outdo me again.

This girl was always one step ahead of me. In fact, sometimes she would run a full ten steps ahead, then realize I wasn’t chasing after her and walk all the way back. Those were the moments when I wanted to stroke her hair.

“Ha ha ha...”

I could feel it in the laugh that slipped from my lips. Every exchange with Adachi left an impact on me. Admittedly, sometimes that impact was a little *too* intense, but I could recognize that it was there. She had the power to make me care.

Just like that, I found myself thinking about nothing but Adachi. And when the time came to open my textbook, I thought I caught a glimpse of blue sparkles floating out from between the pages.

“Shimamura!”

Accompanied by the sound of my name, Adachi shuffled over to me. This always happened after school let out. “No work today?” I asked. She shook her head.

The way she waited patiently at my side gave me major puppy-dog vibes. She’d deny it if I pointed it out, but if you asked me, she might as well grow dog ears and a tail.

“Wanna go somewhere? Or to my house?”

“...Both.”

“Wow, greedy.” But I was fine with that, so I rose to my feet.

Just then, I made eye contact with Panchos as she headed out into the hallway with Sancho and DeLos. For a moment, she paused; then she made a gesture with her hand like she was flicking an invisible rubber band in my direction. Before I could ask, however, she grinned and skipped out of the room. Guess I never realized what an oddball she was.

“Shimamura?”

“That’s my name, don’t wear it out!” I answered on autopilot.

I shooed Adachi out into the hallway, then followed suit. The walls and floor exuded cold air like we had stepped into a walk-in deep freezer; the slightest movement caused an icy chill to slap me in the face. Winter was a hostile season, and even with all these layers, it was hard to fight back. Perhaps I didn't give Adachi enough credit, considering she kept going all year round.

"Shimamura, um, how was the *thing*?"

"Thing? What thing?"

"The...you-met-up-with-a-friend thing...thing," she blurted, her eyes as wide as saucers.

Unlike me, Adachi never tried to avoid the annoying stuff. If something was on her mind, she went for it, full speed ahead.

Hope she doesn't get herself hurt doing that. That would...you know, suck. For me.

"Oh, that. Welllll..."

She stared back at me in silence, waiting. *Welllll.*

"It wasn't fun, I can tell you that," I answered honestly. It would be rude to Tarumi to pretend otherwise. After all, there was nothing fun about making her cry. "So I probably won't hang out with her anymore."

Not a great place to use the word *so*, but I knew it was what Adachi wanted to hear. Sure enough, she looked up at me with dubious eyes. How was it that she always seemed to be looking "up" at me when I was shorter than her?

I gestured silently back at her to allay her suspicions. When had I ever lied to her? If there was ever something I didn't want to admit, I just changed the subject. Sometimes I even did that for the things I *did* want to admit.

Hmm, that's not good. I should work on that.

So this time, I looked into her eyes and admitted: "You are fun."

“Huh?”

“Happy, happy, joy, joy! Ha ha ha!”

That was the long and short of it. Widening my stride, I practically skipped off—and when I watched Adachi try her best to imitate me in spite of her visible confusion, I only became more convinced of it.

“Shimamura, um...”

“Yeeees?”

“I’m fun? Don’t you mean being with me is fun...or something?”

“Nope! La la la!”

Honestly, any iteration would have worked just as well. With Adachi, I could roll with anything—and in fact, maybe that was what I liked about her. Cruel and heartless as it might sound, I suspected no one else would suffice.

“Uh...I-la la la...”

“La laaa laaaaa!”

Singing, we headed down the stairs. Whatever we were doing right now, it was a blast.

At home, as I set out my study materials, I told myself I was “taking a break” while thinking about Valenton’s Day and everything it entailed. I wanted to do something at least a *little* different—you know, keep things from getting stale. Very important. Dates, places, circumstances... Tons of things changed over time, so it’d be weird if we didn’t.

These were the sorts of thoughts I had—or at least, tried to have—as I sat at the *kotatsu* table, chin in my hands, battling with

the heat. It wasn't going well. It was getting late, and the world around me was growing heavy: my eyelids, I mean. That's what was growing heavy. The scope of my world was entirely determined by my vision, and with my eyes closed, it all vanished.

We humans have grown so accustomed to seeing with our eyes that we now struggle to see with our hearts. I think I read that in a book somewhere.

After school, I tried planning stuff out with Adachi, but it wasn't very conclusive. She seemed satisfied with just the bare minimum effort, which was weird considering the level of effort *she* typically put in was so far beyond that.

At this rate, I was melting faster than any chocolate ever could. Just then, my gaze landed on my bookbag, still full of textbooks. The teddy bear strap smiled calmly back at me, never averting its eyes. I flopped down and reached out to pull it over.

"Hrrrgh!" Got it. Agh, my side hurts.

I removed the strap and held it in my palm. This cute, whimsical bear was something Tarumi and I had bought together. We went shopping, and we were happy, and now it was less than a year later and everything had come to an end.

I tilted my palm and the bear slid off, dangling from the side. I watched it sway until it finally came to a stop.

Would Tarumi continue to treasure her bear? Personally, I wanted to keep mine. Sure, maybe I was just trying to delude myself into thinking I was a good friend by treating the strap the way I should have treated Tarumi herself. But at the end of the day, our friendship was at one point real. The present day would never change the past, and as long as I held onto the memory, it would never be lost to time.

Admittedly there was a lot of awkwardness between us. Was it because Tarumi secretly wanted something more than friendship? If

we were truly “just friends” the whole time, would we have stayed happy? Pointless to think about, I know. But still...

I flopped over the table, my hands reaching for the thought bubble floating overhead: *Maybe I can fix it.* But no matter what I did, no matter how long the charade went on, it would never be what Tarumi really wanted. Thus I returned to the conclusion that this was the end.

The end...?

“Hmmm...”

If only it was all a huge misunderstanding on my part—I’d probably die of embarrassment, but at least then there would be a solution. Unfortunately, it most likely wasn’t. Because her eyes sparkled at me just like Adachi’s did.

“Mmm...”

I couldn’t even remember how Tarumi and I grew apart the first time around. One minute she was there, and the next minute she was gone, just like that. Junior high Shima-chan didn’t like to reflect on the past any more than I did, apparently, because there were a lot of gaps in my memory around that time.

I once asked my sister what I was like back then, and she told me my voice was louder. But she didn’t seem bothered by the memory of it, so I took this to mean I was still a good sister to her. That part was fine; the rest wasn’t.

In elementary school, though, I was the polar opposite—*way* too carefree. I could remember a decent amount from back then, but it all made me facepalm at myself for being so reckless. I was curiosity incarnate, invading people’s personal bubbles with no fear or consideration. Was that what Tarumi used to like about me?

These days, I was a happy medium between the two: relaxed, but not *too* relaxed. For better or for worse, I could shrug most things off with “Eh, whatever.” But I never would have imagined all

that shrugging would lead me *here*, to Adachi. I thought dating her hadn't really changed anything about my life, but now I could think of something: Tarumi. Because I was dating Adachi, I would never see Tarumi again.

“Classic Adachi...”

Adachi had burrowed so deeply into my life, she'd even wormed her way into my feelings about Tarumi. Go figure. She had the power to make me think only of her. But this ability didn't seem to work on anyone but me—almost like she was born with the skill required to captivate me specifically and had lived her whole life dedicated to that goal.

Lately it had started to feel like maybe destiny really *did* bring us together. We met by chance, but perhaps that random chance was itself predetermined a long, long time ago... I dunno, just a feeling I had. *Feels like fate*, as the saying went.

Now I was starting to sound like a blind idiot who could only see her relationship through rose-tinted glasses. Maybe the heat from the *kotatsu* was melting my brain.

Anyway, where was I? I completely lost track of my train of thought. My mind tended to switch to a new topic without finishing the first. Was it an attention deficit issue? The sleepiness probably wasn't helping, either. Laziness flicked me in the forehead, and I flomped backward—but before I hit the floor, I landed on something.

“Gurk!”

“Huh?!”

I straightened up and craned my neck around to find Yashiro holding the seal plushie that I was planning to use as a pillow. Both of them were now squashed flat. I gave them each a pat, and they popped back into shape.

“The heck are you doing, you little weasel?!”

“I was sleeping, thank you very much.”

“That’s not what I meant!”

I had seen her downstairs earlier, so when did she get in here? Wouldn’t I have noticed her walk in?

“Did you make sure to use the door?” I asked, even though it was a totally ridiculous question to be asking in the first place.

She froze for a moment. “Yes, of...course.”

“What was that pause?”

She sprang up, still cuddling the seal plushie. Apparently she’d taken a liking to it. Incidentally, she was dressed like a bird—a crane, maybe, based on the colors—and for some reason, this struck me as fitting. No matter what problems a bird encountered, it could always fly away: a perfect match for Yashiro’s carefree spirit.

“Ho ho ho.”

“What’s so *ho ho ho* anyway?”

“There is even more happiness in store for you, Shimamura-san.”

“Huh?”

She set a feathery hand on my shoulder. “I think you should live your life with more confidence.”

Evidently Yashiro was trying to give me some advice. Was my problem so readily apparent that even a cryptid like her could parse it from the look on my face? *Hm*. I scrutinized her expression, sandwiched between the upper and lower halves of the crane’s beak. She looked both happy and sleepy, not much different from usual. What did she see with those otherworldly blue eyes of hers?

“Well, I hope you’re right,” I told her.

“Hah hah hah!” she laughed thoughtlessly, and for once, this actually made it *more* convincing. Maybe because she didn’t pause to question it. “Now then, I shall be going.”

“Okay.”

With that, she zoomed off, probably to go find my sister. Made me wonder why she bothered coming up here at all. It was hard to find a motive in her behavior that wasn’t hunger or boredom.

“Wait...” I just realized: she kidnapped my seal plushie. “Eh, whatever.” I could lend it to her for tonight. Maybe when she gave it back, it would glow blue.

Speaking of which, it was bizarre to have a bioluminescent creature living in the house like nothing was out of the ordinary. Last weekend I saw her watching TV with my dad and realized just how deeply she had embedded herself into my family. They were talking about going fishing together—can you even imagine?

If my parents ever took Yashiro to the authorities, it would turn the whole entire world upside-down. It’d be like the moon landing times a hundred. But my family didn’t care about any of that, obviously. Tomorrow I was sure I’d find her sniffing around our kitchen.

Also, as an aside, why did she always call my sister Little? What was *that* about? Nobody else in our family called her that... *Well, I guess kids always come up with nonsensical nicknames*, I thought to myself fondly.

Not me and Tarumi, though. In my case, people always started with Shimamura and put their own special spin on it. Nobody ever tried to make something cute out of my first name, probably because it was so rare and kind of hard to say.

“My first name... That’s it...!”

Oddly enough, this was my answer to a different question. In our culture, first names didn’t get much of a spotlight; the only

person I referred to by first name was, like, *Yashiro*. But that made first names all the more special and so, after a lot of twists and turns, I solved the problem I originally started with.

Which could change more readily: us or the world? The answer was obvious. And if we wanted something to change, it didn't have to be dramatic. All we needed was to take a step back and change our perspective.

I looked down at my study tools, none of which had been remotely touched since I painstakingly set them all out. Then I slid them all over to the corner of the table, pulled out my cell phone, and typed up my idea to send to Adachi:

“For Valentine’s Day this year, let’s call each other by our first names all day long.”

I could comprehend that my alarm was ringing, but my arm refused to reach up for it. My head was empty, and it was oddly comfortable just coexisting. I tried to tense my core muscles, but my fingers couldn't bridge the gap. If I held my breath, I was sure I'd fall asleep again...and yet I couldn't move.

“Zzzzz...”

“Rrgh!”

I could see my sister's legs straddling me. *Hey, knock it off!* I thought, but still couldn't move. Ultimately, she ended up turning my alarm off. This happened a lot.

“Nee-chan, I’m starting to think there’s no point in you even having an alarm.”

“Thannoddrue,” I mumbled, but my lips refused to cooperate, so I couldn’t even protest. She ignored me and went back to her study desk.

I grabbed my phone lying forgotten on the floor and checked the time. My alarm was always punctual.

“First, ugh...guess I’ll brush my hair...”

By the time I was touching my hair, my drowsiness had evaporated. Through the half-open curtains I could glimpse a cloudy sky, and for some reason—the coloration, maybe—staring at it made me shiver, like someone had stolen one of my blankets. And even though the heater was on, it felt like a breeze was blowing in from somewhere.

For the time being, I rose to my feet and started getting ready to leave. The instant I stepped foot outside of my bedroom, my heel froze to the floor like it had turned into a hexagon. It was way too early to be hopping around, but nevertheless, I bounced down the hall to the bathroom. Then I battled with the cold water to wash my face and wake up.

Despite how long I slept, I didn’t see any cowlicks on my head whatsoever. Equipped with a comb and spray bottle, I set about making myself look presentable. Once I was done, I had gained the brain function necessary to realize I should have waited until *after* I’d gotten dressed, but it was too late now.

Once I got my hair looking acceptable, I went back to my room. My sister was still quietly sitting at her study desk—working on homework, probably.

“Proud of you!” I called out to her casually.

“That’s not a compliment coming from you,” she snarked back. So I made sure to flick her on the forehead, which felt a little higher than I remembered. *Huh*. I looked down at her head.

Then, as I was picking out my clothes, my phone beeped. This time it wasn't my alarm. I crab-walked over to the table and grabbed it. For a moment I entertained the possibility that it was someone else, but sure enough, it was Adachi, my study—er, *steady* girlfriend who I was getting ready to meet up with.

“May I call you?”

“Sure!”

By this point, it was customary for us to start all our conversations this way. Then the phone rang, so I answered it. “Hellohell!”

“Hello...hell?” she replied back, perplexed. *She's so pure.*

“So, what can I do for you?”

Did something else come up, so she needed to cancel? If so, that would be a first. There were plenty of times I declined her invitations, but I couldn't remember her ever saying no. *It's okay to have priorities, you know,* I thought to myself. Then I remembered: I was Adachi's priority.

“Don't worry, I'm awake,” I offered, in case she was worried I'd be late.

“*Barely,*” said a haughty voice to my left, but I pretended not to hear it.

“Th-that's good,” Adachi replied.

“Yup.”

After this lukewarm exchange, she broached the main subject: “So, um, about the whole...calling each other by our first names...thing...”

“Yeah?” Why, yes, that was indeed my suggestion for the day.

“When does that start?”

What an odd question. I looked up at the calendar and checked the date. Sure enough, it was the 14th. “Uh, today...?” I answered slowly, but it didn’t seem to fit.

“No, I mean what time? Like, do I have to start now, or...?”

Personally, I didn’t really think it mattered, but I figured it would be more fun if we waited until we met up. “Let’s save it for in person.”

“Okay, then, um...I’d like to say a day’s worth of Shimamuras while I can.”

“Huh?” I failed to grasp what she was saying. Evidently my AQ (Adachi Quotient) was still quite low.

“Since I say Shimamura every day, I don’t want to break that streak...I guess?”

“.....”

“Shimamura?”

“*Bah hah hah hah!*”

I burst out laughing—so loudly, I heard her flinch on the other end of the line. Likewise, my sister whirled around to look at me in alarm, but I waved her away. *Don’t worry about it.*

“Adachi, you really are something else. I can’t even imagine how you come up with this stuff!”

I wasn’t being sarcastic, either; it was a compliment. Part of me honestly wondered if she came from a different dimension. She was just so...well, *different!* She existed in a space that was viscerally different from mine. She was an alien—a girl from Planet Adachi—and she was *awesome*.

I could hear her murmuring, so I waited, and then at last, she spoke.

“Well, I only ever think of you.” Yes, this Adachi-ling was dutiful to a fault.

“Ohhh, I get it. That explains why I’d never think of that.”
Frankly, Adachi probably took me 200 times more seriously than I took myself, because I really didn’t think about myself much at all. That being said, I *did* think about *her* a lot, so...yeah, probably a good balance. “Okay, then, go ahead and get it out of your system.”

If calling my name was all it took to make her happy, then it was a bargain.

“Shimamura.”

“Yeah?”

“Shimamura.”

“Uh-huh?”

“...Shimamura.”

“Mmm?”

Was I supposed to say something? She kept saying my name, and I didn’t have time to think of something in between. Each of her Shimamuras was unique and one-of-a-kind, quietly reverberating in my heart like ripples on the surface of a pond. And after she was finally done...

“Feel better?” I asked.

“...Yeah.” Her curt response had a firmness to it. Her hunger was sated.

“Okay, then, see you real soon.”

“Okay.”

What was the point of that? Laughing, I hung up.

“Now then...”

I got ready, and then...

“I’m headed out! Be back in time for dinner!”

“Sure thing!” my mother called from the kitchen, so I walked to the shoe rack to pick out a pair. But then, as I was choosing, she

walked out into the hallway. “Another date with Adachi-chan?” Clinging to her side was a little koala, munching away on cabbage. But enough about Yashiro.

“Date?” I repeated. And how did she know I was going to see Adachi?

“Well, it’s the perfect day for a date...”

What do you mean? It’s cloudy!

“C’mon, you *are* going to hang out with Adachi-chan, right?”

“...Well, yeah...”

I didn’t like the way she phrased it. Knowing her, she didn’t mean anything by it, but I still felt guilty. I mean, I wasn’t really “guilty” of anything, but it was the most fitting adjective to describe how I felt.

“I swear, it’s always you and her. Don’t you have any other friends?”

“Maybe I do, maybe I don’t.” Shrugging her off, I put on my shoes.

Just then, a blizzard of blue sparkles rained down on my feet, so I turned sideways. There, I found a head of koala hair—well, Yashiro hair, but you know what I mean—inches from my face. At some point she had hopped off my mother and walked over. On a whim, I reached out and stroked her hair; she grinned, her mouth full of cabbage. *Guess she can’t talk when she’s eating.* Now I understood why people in this house kept her so well-fed.

Then my mother started kicking me lightly in the butt, almost like she was knocking on a door. At first I ignored it, but eventually, I got so fed up that I turned to look at her. She stood directly behind me, peering over me like she was trying to make our shadows overlap. Then she put one hand on her hip and started looking me up and down.

“Well now... Well, well, well...”

“Yep!” I answered flatly without taking the bait. I made for the door.

“I see you’ve put a lot of effort in.”

Against my better judgment, I stopped and turned back.

“Here and there and *there*.” She pointed to her face and neck, then pinched her clothes. *What?*

Then I realized what she meant and started to protest, but my face felt hot. And before I could do anything, she started waving goodbye with a smirk on her face. Likewise, the koala waved its paws, still busily chewing away.

“Have fun, all right?”

She acted like she could see right through me, and it made me uncomfortable. I just nodded at her and left the house. *What effort?* I started to scratch my head, but stopped myself and faced forward.

“Brrrr.”

The first thing I had to come to terms with today was the chill of winter. The clouds above were paired with frigid winds clawing at my skin. On a day like today, the smarter move would be to stay home...yet my feet carried me forward all the same.

Clearly I had to be stupid.

“Hey.”

“Shima—” Adachi began, then froze, remembering today’s rule. Her shoulders and hips turned boxy, like a robot. “Hou...hetsu?”

“Close, but no cigar.”

Apparently she'd tripped over her own tongue. Then she started pounding on her chest like it was a drum. *That's one way to reassure yourself, I guess?* Once she finally organized her thoughts, she straightened up. "Hougetsu."

I could feel the heat of her embarrassment in my cheeks. In other words, I was blushing just as hard as she was. The point-blank intensity hit like a ton of bricks. "Uh, hi," I blurted out for some reason.

Unable to endure it a moment longer, Adachi's fingers and feet started to fidget. "This is too weird."

"Yeah, my face is really itchy now." Reflexively, I reached up to scratch it.

Only now, at this late stage, did the bashfulness truly sink in for me. Looking back at everything she and I had done together, it was probably weird that *this* was somehow my tipping point, but nevertheless, I couldn't help but squirm. Who knew there were still new feelings to be discovered between us? This relationship never ceased to amaze me.

"Well, uh, I-let's get going...Hougetsu," Adachi prompted me—so stiffly, I could practically hear her joints creaking.

"Yeah, let's go!" I lined up beside her, hoping to give her rigid shoulders the push they needed.



We met up at the train station—my second time doing so this month. Last time, I headed outside; this time, we walked around inside. Both times were with girls, too. The only difference was...well...

Like last year, we were going to Nagoya to buy chocolates. What about next year, though? We'd be third-years, busy studying for college entrance exams. Would we even have time to make the trip?

This station was never too crowded, so walking around was a breeze. That said, if we traveled a few stations down, we'd get crushed like sardines. But hey, one of these days I'd probably need to take that plunge...right? Or would I spend my whole life here?

"So, Adachi—oops, my bad. So, *Sakura*..."

I hadn't really thought of anything to talk about; I just wanted to say her name. She flinched visibly. Suddenly, it felt like we were so much closer... I didn't know how to look at her anymore.

"Wh-whud?"

"Oh, I was going to ask if you just bit your tongue."

"That doesn't make any sense..."

Cupping a hand over her mouth, she paused to regain her composure—and while we waited, I could feel my spine tingling. Hougetsu and Sakura... Why did it feel like we were talking about two strangers? We were so used to Adachi and Shimamura, anything else felt as alien as an alternate dimension—like a familiar town with its roads all remixed. My mind kept racing uncontrollably.

"Hou...Hougetsu-san...?" She hastily added an honorific, as if it would somehow make this any less embarrassing.

"What is it?" I responded as we headed upstairs to the turnstiles.

Up close, I watched as her lips parted and pressed together. Did she wear extra makeup today? I surreptitiously scrutinized her face. *I mean, not that I...* The excuse petered out in my head.

“I need to think of what I want to say,” she mumbled, hanging her head, and I couldn’t help but cackle.

Passing through the turnstiles, we headed for the platform, checking the LED timetable board as we went. Judging from the number of people moving at high speed, the train’s arrival was imminent. Didn’t this happen last time, too? Adachi and I exchanged a glance, then broke out into a run.

Running wasn’t something I spent a lot of time doing over the course of my life, and it made me breathless—uh, with excitement. Not because I was out of shape or anything: just excited. When we arrived at the platform, sure enough, the train was already stopped there. We dashed all the way into the nearest open doorway.

On the other side, through the windows, I could see the dismal gray sky hanging between us and the buildings in the distance. Then again, if this wasn’t Valentine’s Day weather, what *was*? Snow was more of a Christmas thing, and clear skies didn’t seem to fit, either. The only thing that *did* fit was night—probably because that was when my strongest Valentine’s Day memories took place.

Perhaps it was proof of the importance of beginnings.

The train car was actually fairly empty, with plenty of spots for two people to sit next to each other. Was it because we’d arrived after the lunch rush? I sat down by the window, and Adachi quickly magnetized to the seat next to me.

“Hougetsu?”

The literal instant I sat down, Robo-Adachi called my name. That was the only way to describe the combined speed and stiffness with which she turned her head.

“Are...are you excited?”

Even her choice of topic was stiff. It was so painfully obvious that she didn't know how to make small talk.

"Yeah, totally."

"You don't sound serious..."

"Who needs *seriousness* when we're having fun?"

Fun had the power to make me forget the weight of daily life. Really, *anything* that captivated my attention could lift that burden, whether it was fun or not—the same way dreams consumed half of every day, regardless of their content.

"Hougetsu."

"That's me."

She repeated my name over and over like she was trying to get used to it. I was pretty sure we'd be back to "Adachi and Shimamura" by tomorrow, yet here she was, putting 120 percent effort into this single moment. Looking at it that way, I was willing to endure the burning in my cheeks.

Then the train jolted to life. Giddily, I swayed my head with the motions.

"Wanna do something? While I keep thinking of conversation topics?"

"Hmmm... Okay, then, let's thumb-wrestle." I held out my non-dominant left hand. *I'm giving myself a handicap just for you, Adachi! Teehee!*

"What for?"

"It's our tradition!" *At least, that's what I told Panchos.*

"Uh...okay."

Timidly, she extended her left hand. Gripping it firmly, I extended my thumb. For some reason, thumb wrestling was the

perfect activity for Valenton's Day—two stops' worth of fun on the long, boring train ride to Nagoya.

As I pinned her thumb beneath mine and started counting, I could feel my voice rising and had to hastily stop myself. When I chased her, she would often seemingly change her mind and come straight back. *Her personality really shines through in this game*, I thought to myself as I pinned her again.

And so we wasted time doing a whole lot of nothing—but by the time we stopped playing, Adachi's smile was much more relaxed. It took her a while to warm up to that point, and it was moments like these that afforded me a glimpse of the life she'd lived. Would that start to change from here on?

"Okay, I'm done. Talk about something, Shimamura."

"....."

"Shimamura?"

"....."

"Oh, right...H-Hougetsu."

"Okay, let's see..."

I turned away and ignored her until she called my first name, then turned back. For some reason, Adachi brought out my impish side. *Gee, why is that?* I pretended not to know the answer as I resisted the joyous urge to sing.

"Okay, then...let's talk about *Adachi's Ark*," I declared solemnly, hoping it would get a confused reaction. But when I glanced over at her, I found her pouting her lips. *What is that, duckface?*

"Wrong name," she grumbled.

"Oops." This time I messed up. I'd let my guard down and gone back to normal—my normal life with Adachi. "Sakura," I called, like a test drive. Likewise, Adachi clenched her fists and practiced endurance.

“Anyway...what’s this about an ark?”

“I’m saying you’re my boat, Sakura,” I explained, purposely choosing to speak in metaphor. Her gaze darted around for a moment as her cheeks lit up—what was she picturing just now? “You carry me to all the places I want to go.”

Without Adachi, I wouldn’t be on this train. Without Adachi, I would see Tarumi again, and we’d still be friends. For better or for worse, I chose to be with Adachi—and not just physically, either. My feelings carried me into unknown, uncharted territory.

“So yes, I’m excited. Excited to see where you take me next.”

I knew Adachi wore her heart on her sleeve, so I worded it clearly and firmly. That way even a total moron like me could say it with ease. She paused to contemplate this, staring down at her wrestling thumb as she wiggled it up and down.

“What you’re saying is too complicated for me to understand, Shimamura.”

“Shimamura who?” I pointed out.

She pursed her lips, then continued: “Shimamura *Hougetsu*, if it makes you happy, then...then I’m excited for it, too!”

I could tell that she was struggling to find the right words, her voice barely breaking through her tightened throat. *These* were the things language was truly meant to convey, and Adachi was a master of her craft. She was so clumsy, yet so very strong and pure at her core. And this was the first time she had ever said my full name out loud. It felt like she had touched every part of me from head to toe.

So, to take back that power and flip everything on its head...

“.....Adachi Sakura.”

“Wh-what? What?”

“Nothing.”

“Hey, come onnn...”

I turned away, my gaze fleeing into the cloudy sky outside. I wished I could take wing and fly right out of my seat.

Then, at long last, the train rolled up to our destination. When it came to a stop, the doors opened as if to say *get going, girls*. Adachi was the first to rise, so I hurried forward to overtake her. And right before we walked off the train, I turned back.

“Hey, Sakura? Let’s go.”

I reached out to take her hand. I didn’t normally initiate this; in fact, maybe it was the first time I’d ever felt this way. It was actually surprisingly vulnerable to reach out without a shred of subtlety. But my heart refused to take any detours. Something flowed through me, burning hot, and my pulse raced after it.

At first, Adachi’s eyes widened, as if shocked that I’d stolen her job. But she quickly noticed my fingers and smiled, perhaps *too* widely, her eyes shimmering. Like she was caught between laughing and crying.

“Let’s go, Hou...” Leave it to Adachi to trip up at the most crucial moment. Then, after a breath, she finished: “Hougetsu.”

She took my hand firmly in hers. Holding hands with me was one of her favorite things; it made flowers bloom in our chests. And in this moment, not even the winter chill could touch our cherry blossoms.

Together, we can go anywhere.

Chapter 9: Hear-t

E_{VERY NIGHT} when we climbed into bed, Shimamura spent a few minutes stroking my hair. When her fingertips brushed the edge of my ear, it made me flinch slightly, and now that my eyes had somewhat adjusted to the darkness, I could see that she had paused in response to my reaction. Her arm was a bright bridge hanging between us.

“Were you asleep?”

“No, my eyes were open.”

“So you were sleeping with your eyes open then,” she declared, laughing.

I paused to think for a moment, then placed my hand on hers. Now there were two hands on my head, gently pressing me into the soft pillow.

“Shimamura, you really like to play with my hair, huh?”

“Hmm? Mmm, yeah, maybe so,” she whispered as she gazed at our hands. “It’s soft and...soothing.”

“It is?”

“Don’t you find it comforting to touch something?”

“Uhh...not really.” Whenever she touched me, my heart went crazy. No matter how much time passed, she always surpassed my expectations with something new.

“Hmmm...” She closed her eyes, and the corners of her lips curled. “You and I tend to disagree on a lot of stuff, huh?”

“Yeah...”

“I like that.”

“You do?”

“Because it’s fun to disagree.” Even with her eyes closed, her smile persisted. “We each have our own unique voice, and I like that a lot.”

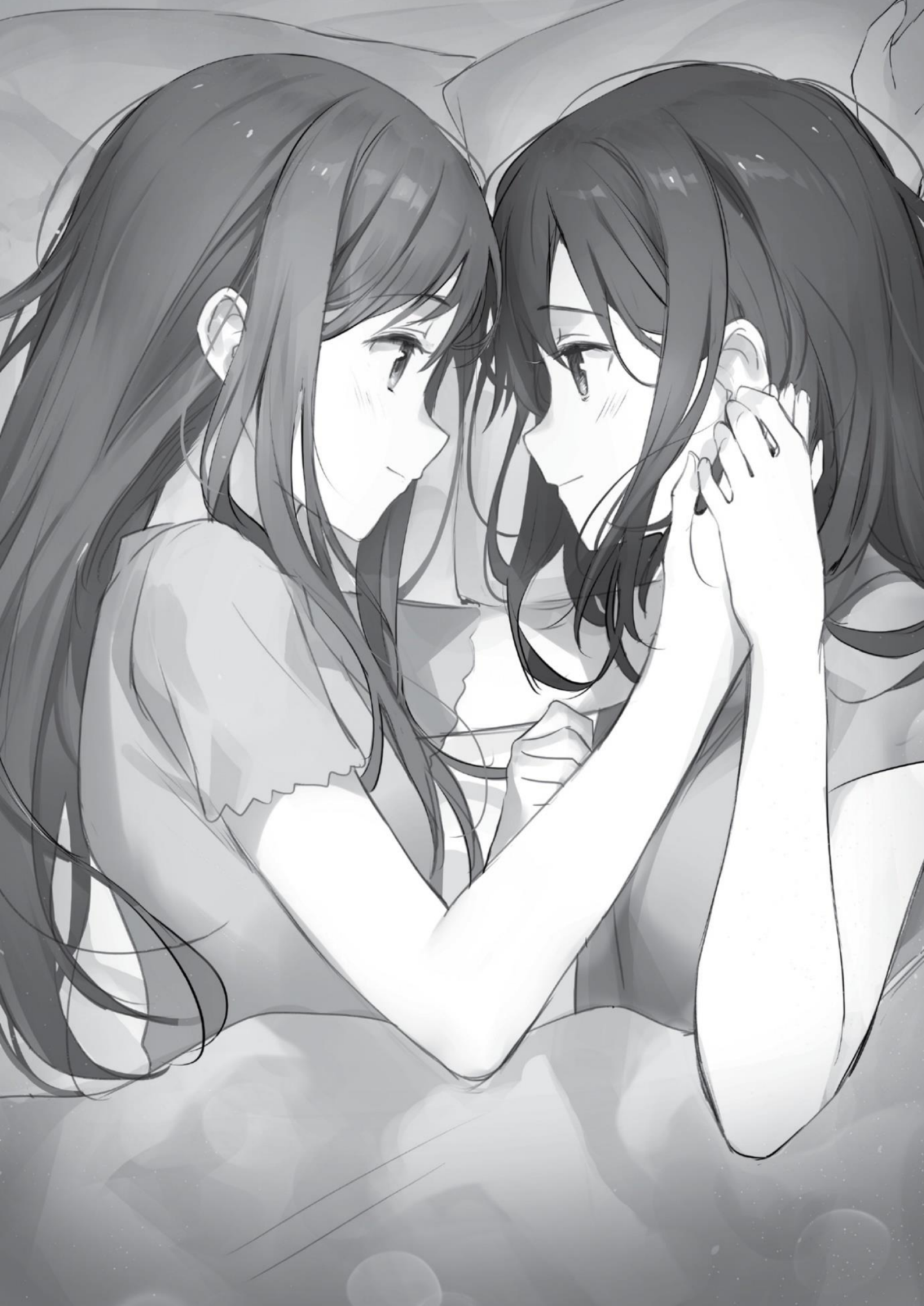
The words danced out of her giddy lips, and she opened her eyes again. Somehow, she glittered in the darkness, her light shining directly into the depths of my eyes, and it made my blood pump harder. My body was screaming. I was alive. And my heart could not be stopped.

I used the bedsheets as a foothold and pushed my body toward her. She noticed this and watched me intently. I could feel myself start to lose my nerve, but nevertheless, kept crawling across the bed, chasing after the hand she withdrew. Then, once our noses were literally touching, I took that hand in mine. The warmth of her palm made me shiver.

“...Is *this* soothing?” I asked.

“Well, no... Okay, you win. Sometimes touch can be nerve-wracking.”

Our voices mingled, our breaths rustling each other’s bangs. And as she smiled stiffly, I leaned in just a tiny bit closer...and heard our heartbeats fall into sync.



Afterword

A_{ND THAT}, my friends, was *Adachi and Shimamura* Volume 10. Double digits, baby! Truth be told, I didn't think this series would last this long. No, seriously: I owe it all to my readers and their impeccable taste. Thank you, Planet Earth!

For the record, I've got plans for at least two more volumes. Why, you ask? Because I already have an 11-volume series.

I gotta say, *Adachi and Shimamura* sure has history now, doesn't it? I couldn't remember how many years ago Volume 1 came out, so I looked it up just now: 2013! It came out before I turned 30. Ah, those were the days. Back then, everything was...exactly the same as it is now, actually.

Hello there, Hitoma Iruma here. In recent years, *Adachi and Shimamura* have casually transcended time and space, but as I wrote in the past, Volume 8 is the canon ending. So everything from Volume 9 onward is sort of like a long, rambly after-story. But I wouldn't think about it too hard if I were you. Just sit back, relax, and enjoy the ride, I beseech you.

As I was writing this volume, I listened to "Star-t" from a video game called *ALTDEUS: Beyond Chronos*. In fact, I haven't stopped listening to it since I bought the soundtrack. It's a lovely song, so if you ever have the chance—wait, no. Get out there and find that song right now and listen to it! Opportunities are sooner created than waited for.

What else is going on lately? Mmm...I can't think of anything. Isn't it wonderful to lead a boring, peaceful life? Sometimes, I find myself wishing it'll last forever.

That reminds me, we got another new illustrator. Is this *Adachi and Shimamura's* third form...? Fifth, actually, if we include the

manga artists as well. They'll go Super Saiyan any moment now so, please don't stop reading. I swear the hair color changes back after a while...!

Thank you so much for buying this book.

—Hitoma Iruma



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