

Hitoma Iruma

Illustrator: Non

入間人間
イラスト／のん

安達としまむら

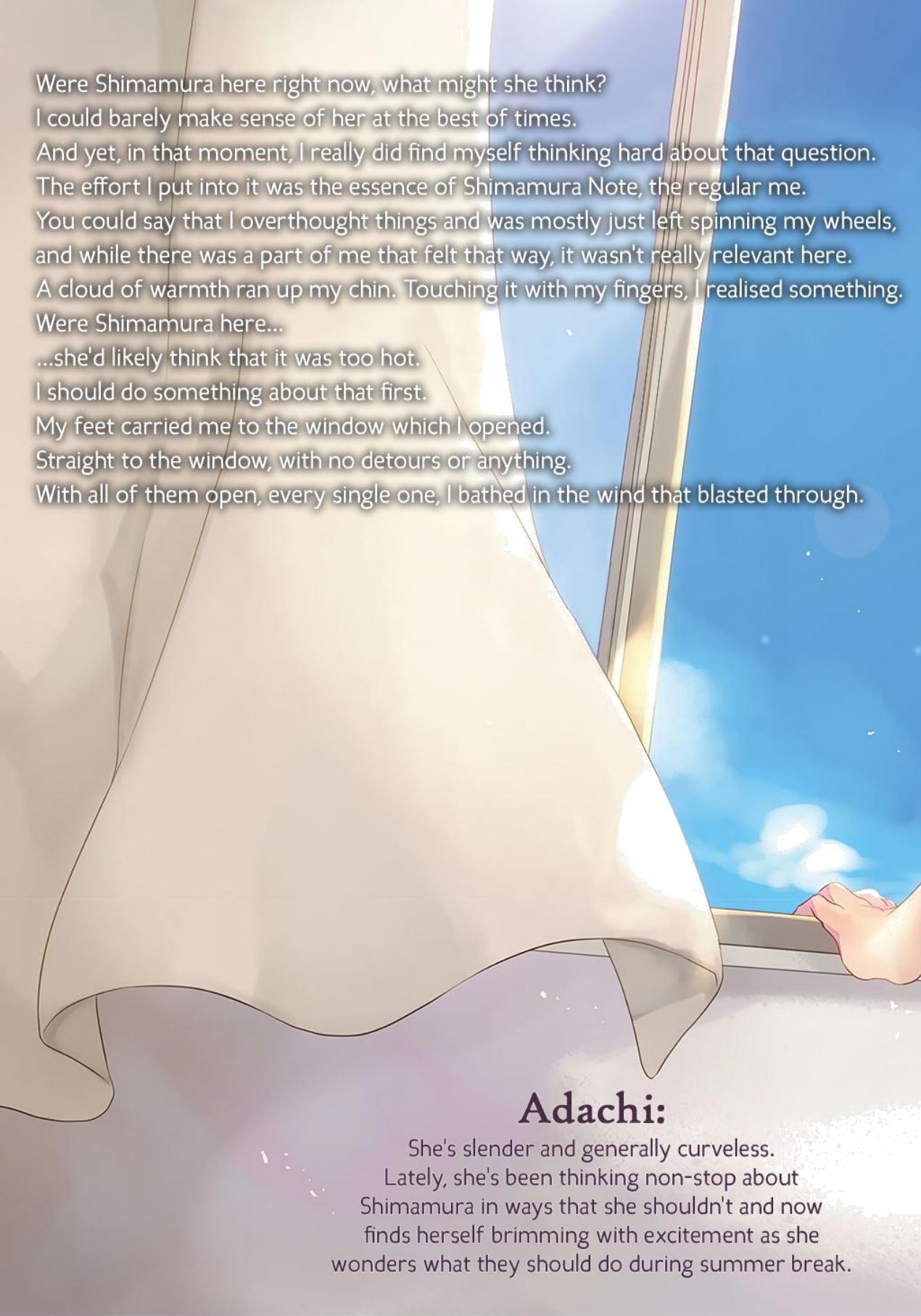
5

Adachi and Shimamura

5

DENGEKI
BUNKO





Were Shimamura here right now, what might she think?
I could barely make sense of her at the best of times.
And yet, in that moment, I really did find myself thinking hard about that question.
The effort I put into it was the essence of Shimamura Note, the regular me.
You could say that I overthought things and was mostly just left spinning my wheels,
and while there was a part of me that felt that way, it wasn't really relevant here.
A cloud of warmth ran up my chin. Touching it with my fingers, I realised something.
Were Shimamura here...
...she'd likely think that it was too hot.
I should do something about that first.
My feet carried me to the window which I opened.
Straight to the window, with no detours or anything.
With all of them open, every single one, I bathed in the wind that blasted through.

Adachi:

She's slender and generally curveless.
Lately, she's been thinking non-stop about
Shimamura in ways that she shouldn't and now
finds herself brimming with excitement as she
wonders what they should do during summer break.

Yashiro:

A self-proclaimed alien whose blue hair emits sparkly particles. Before anyone noticed it, she'd become a regular yet mysterious presence at Shimamura's house.

"Wanna try it too, Yachii?"

"I suppose it wouldn't hurt to learn about Earthling culture."



Little Sister:

Shimamura's little sister. Good friends with Yashiro. Loves her sister dearly, and at times has a tendency to grow jealous of the relationship between her and Adachi.



"I'm good. I'll just go there
wearing what I always do."

Shimamura:

A high school girl who remains the same way even during summer break. A bit of an airhead. Lately, people other than Adachi have begun showing attachment towards her, though personally, she doesn't appear to be especially aware of this.



"Could I get a comment?
Even a short one will do."

Tarumi:

Shimamura's childhood friend with whom she happened to reunite by chance. She calls Shimamura every now and then and invites her to hang out, and from the looks of it, what she wishes for is for the two of them to grow even closer.



"Ah, sorry about that.
You look radiant."

"Shimamura?"

- 010 If Everyone Was Little
- 028 I'll Come Meet You,
Even If You Say Nothing
- 045 Leaving Azure
- 165 Shimamura's Sword
- 196 Are Souls Shared?
- 299 Adachi Revival



Translated by sneikkimies

Quality Check:

-Gilgamesh, shadesofgreymoon

PDF/Epub Versions:

-<https://sneikkimies.github.io/#adachi5>

**Adachi and
Shimamura** 5

Hitoma Iruma

Illustrator: Non



If Everyone Was Little



Every child is different. Though they are mostly similar in terms of height, their personalities do not match at all, allowing you to tell them apart at glance. Furthermore, as children are in general adorable, most people find themselves wanting to protect them. That is how the world works; the weak are looked after until they grow strong. In a strange way, life itself felt like something I could manage relatively well back in those days.

And yet, the current me was far more unique as a person compared to how I used to be in my childhood.

There was a lot of variance between the kids in front of me; one girl had blue hair, and another child currently playing with her always wore a hat. Truly, they were all unique in their own way. Maybe not as unique as the girl and her strange hair, but still.

“Shima, wait.”

It was currently free time, and the hallway and class-room were both bustling with children running in all directions. The noisiest... or I should say, most energetic of the senior kids were Shima and Taru—the latter always chasing after the former.

With both of her hands stuck out in front of her, Shima continued running forward, her stubby feet mak-

ing an amusing sound as they repeatedly came into contact with the floor. The way she ran was as peculiar as ever. And yet, there was something strangely soothing about it. As for Taru, well, she could be found right behind her as was tradition, her hands in turn raised above her head. She too was weird in her own way, but also adorable. Both of them were.

As good as it felt watching the two have fun, there was a downside to it; you could never relax as there was no telling what high jinks they might get up to next. Shima especially was quite reckless, and though it was good that she didn't put up walls between herself and the other children, I do wish that she would've been conscious of the walls of the building. Why was it that running with her arms in front of her so often led to her bumping her forehead against things?

I watched as the girls ran through the centre of the classroom. Coincidentally, I wasn't the only one doing so. No, there was someone else too.

Shifting my attention towards her brought me face to face with a scene I'd grown quite familiar with; the girl in question was sitting silently all by herself.

Her hands were playing with clay, but her eyes fol-

lowed after Shima—the one running in the lead.

If I had to rank this year's senior class in terms of them being problem children, I would likely put her in the number one spot—"her" being Sakura. Don't get me wrong; it wasn't that she got into fights with the other kids or anything like that. She wasn't particularly bothersome, either. No, the difficulty with tending to her came about in a different way. She hardly ever talked, barely reacted to anything, and all in all, had a lot of trouble communicating with her surroundings. Based on the conversations I'd had with her mother, it seemed to be how she was home as well. *There's no making sense of that child*, the woman had stated with a pained smile on her face. Part of me wondered if that truly was so, though obviously, I'd been in no place to be making such objections.

Despite how she appeared at a glance, I actually found the way Sakura behaved while here surprisingly easy to comprehend. She didn't have anyone she was particularly close to, and though this did limit the interactions possible for her, there was one girl who didn't care; Shima. She approached her as she would any other kid, which in turn seemed to have led Sakura to hold a cer-

tain interest towards her. And yet, she never made an effort to talk to her herself.

Though she obviously wanted to play with Shima, she simply wasn't able to make the words come out of her mouth. And she really did want it; it was evident from the way she acted that Sakura wished for nothing more than for Shima to walk over to her, to play with her, to notice her. Rather than being too shy to do it, the impression I was left with was that she simply didn't know how she was supposed to go about talking to her. The more friends surrounded Shima, the further back she withdrew.

The two people who most strongly contrasted with Sakura were Akira and Tae, currently busy playing amongst themselves in the corner. As far as I was able to tell, this "game" of theirs consisted of one person wrapping their arms around the other and lifting them in the air. Or something.

Whereas Tae—the one being carried—smiled without much care, Akira—the one doing the carrying—didn't appear to share her enjoyment; the girl's face was practically bright red. This seemed to signal her being at her limit, and wouldn't you know it, it was only mere mo-

ments later that she collapsed on the floor, dropping the other child she'd been carrying. Tae quickly crouched down next to her.

"Well done."

"Yeah. Now, reward."

This request was met by Tae grabbing her hand and pressing her lips on her forehead. I could see Akira grin.

Those two really did get along. Honestly, it was more often that I saw them together than by themselves. Speaking of which, I'd actually been invited to Akira's house once by her parents, and let me tell you, that place was a real mansion. A bamboo grove between the streets, seriously? It had taken me more than a couple of moments to comprehend what was even happening.

To make matters worse, I'd mistaken the young person who came to greet me to be her father, only for him to politely correct me and let me know that he was, in fact, her older brother. Again, confusing.

Going from the pair of good friends back to Sakura, the girl was still staring at Shima, now playing with building blocks on the floor alongside Taru. The blocks connected like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle and were currently being used to form what appeared to be a half-

completed house. A moment ago, the girls had been running around, but the instant I took my eyes off them, they moved somewhere else entirely. No part of me envied the parents of these two rascals.

While that was good and all, the thought of leaving Sakura like this did cause me to hesitate, and ultimately, I was forced to conclude that it would be for the best if I gave her a hand.

It wasn't my desire to meddle with the relationships between the children. It really wasn't. And yet, she simply looked too pitiful to ignore.

"Shima, could you come here for a second?" I called out to the girl, completely absorbed in her little roof construction project. Gripping a building block in her hand, Shima ran up to me.

"I promise teacher, I've not broken anything today." Her hands remained placed on top of her head as she scanned my expression.

Wait, so she knew?

"Yes, and that's good. Now, it looks like Sakura would like to play with you as well."

I could see Sakura jolt in the corner of my eye as I said that. It appeared that was she listening.

“Okay”, Shima nodded obediently before turning around and dashing to where the other girl was cur-rently sitting. This prompted Sakura to jolt once more, this time with double the intensity.

Her head hung, she pretended not to notice. Shima didn’t care, however, and instead...

“Hey, come.”

...grabbed her hand without any sort of introduction and pulled her up on her feet. The clay she’d been play-ing with stayed on the floor. Confused, the girl looked at Shima, then at me, then at Shima again. The restless movements of her eyebrows indicated anxiety, but also happiness at the same time. Shima proceeded to drag her along, and Sakura, well, she pretty much just allowed herself to be dragged.

“Here, a block. Put it where you want”, Shima said as she handed her the building block she’d been carry-ing. With that done, she returned to construction work, picking up from where she’d left off. And yet, Sakura didn’t join her; all of the earlier joy had vanished from the girl’s face, and if I’m being honest, it looked like she might start crying any second now. Taking a slightly longer path than Shima had, she once again closed the

distance between the two of them before grabbing the other girl's hand and pulling on it.

"Huh? What?"

"L-Let's play over there."

By "over there", she was referring to the lonely spot where she'd been sitting all by herself earlier. Though brave, her attempt was met by failure as Shima showed no signs of moving, instead choosing to stare at her puzzled while holding up the block in her hand.

Desperately, Sakura yanked her arm again, this time harder. It looked for a second like she might end up being dragged along, but ultimately, the girl held her own.

"Let's play with everyone."

"That's right. Don't hog Shima to yourself", Taru followed.

The two girls appeared to be completely against the idea. Met by their reactions, Sakura's shoulders twitched. Oh no.

Tears began welling up in her eyes. Should I swoop in? Or not? Unsure how to proceed, I sat there observing the situation before me. It seemed that my attempt to do good had resulted in failure.



She wanted to play not with everyone, but by herself.
That was the kind of girl Sakura was.

Was one of those approaches more correct than the other?
I couldn't really answer that; making those sorts of value judgments wasn't something I wanted to be doing. At the same time, she was pretty awkward around others, wasn't she? That was the impression I was left with.

Part of me wondered, when she started going to school,
would she be able to make friends?

"Friends need to be cherished."

The sudden voice caught me off guard. I turned my head, and saw that it belonged to a girl who had at some point appeared next to us. Her blueness only added to the mystery.

Like the one playing on the other side of the room, she was yet another girl with blue hair. They both shone with the same soft light as well, and really, the only difference between the two was found in their hairstyles; the long hair of the closer girl was tied behind her head in the shape of a butterfly. The rest of it dangled straight down, giving off the impression of a waterfall. All in all, these factors combined to form a dreamlike whole,

and if not for the *onigiri* in her hand, it would've been difficult for me to believe she was actually real and not just a figment of my imagination.

From the centre of the triangular food item stuck out a piece of *kombu* seaweed.

“Everyone always says that, so it’s probably the way it is with Earthlings.”

The girl’s water bottle swayed at the end of a short string as she stated that. Considering the rain currently happening outside, it wasn’t hard to see why her choice of outfit appeared so curious to me; she almost looked like she was dressed for a picnic.

“Huh? Who are you?”

Shima seemed just as shocked by the girl’s sudden appearance as I was. Then, a few moments later, she proceeded to straighten out her back, almost as if planning to stand against her.

“Hehehe. Please. You’re no match for me at present.” With those words, she took Shima’s hand and started to spin. The two spun around together.

What was happening?

They continued for far longer than I would’ve anticipated, only stopping when the girl’s feet eventually grew

tangled.

“Ooh, ooh”, the now-released Shima exclaimed as she staggered around in an attempt to regain her balance, her eyes having turned into spirals.

“So, what do you think?”

In a similar manner, the girl also hopped about while asking her that. Just what was up with her?

“What are you doing?”

“Hehehe. This is the inevitable outcome when you do something like that without caring what happens.”

Despite the proud look on her face, she too appeared to be having a lot of trouble keeping herself from tumbling over.

“Of course, when you’re as strong as me, then it’s a different story.”

The girl went on to straighten out her back. Again, she was clearly still in the process of trying to steady herself, and looking at her from behind, it was easy for me to tell based on the way they were twitching that she’d had to force her feet to stop them from moving around. Assuming a slightly gentler tone, she then spoke.

“Nothing big can be done while you’re still not used to it.”

With those words out of her mouth, the girl turned to look at Sakura, prompting her to immediately hang her head; coming under the gaze of someone she didn't recognize was simply too much for her to endure. I wasn't sure why the girl chose to react to this by laughing wholeheartedly, but she did.

I was left shifting my attention between the two.

Shima's head moved in a similar manner.

I see.

While her choice of how to express herself was still a complete mystery to me, I now more or less got what the girl was trying to say.

So, how is it? That was the question her actions conveyed.

Shima turned to look up at her, and as if absorbing the blue shine of her hair and pupils, her own pure eyes once again grew tinged with a similar colour.

Following this, she then...

"I don't really get it, but okay."

...nodded her head.

"Today, I shall play with Sakura."

Her statement sounded oddly poetic and old fashioned for some reason. Was that something she'd picked

up from the kid who always wore a hat?

I wonder, who was he imitating with those weird expressions he occasionally mixed into his speech?

I'd almost managed to arrive at a conclusion when something else caught my attention; it seemed that Shima had figured out what it was that the girl was trying to convey to her.

She turned her head around, prompting Sakura's expression to brighten, even if she was still clearly holding back tears.

The corners of her mouth grew to be pointed up-wards, and in a similar fashion, her eyes opened wide.

"But, once you stop being flustered, let's play with everyone else too, okay?"

This statement of Shima's was met by Sakura slightly drawing in her chin. What she meant by it, that was any-one's guess. Regardless, she then grabbed her hand for a second time and pulled her to where the clay from ear-lier was sitting. All in all, it was a pretty amusing arrange-ment; Shima—the one always pulling others along—was now dragged by Adachi—the one with a tendency to act introverted. What wasn't amusing though was the unsat-isfied look on Taru's face, annoyed that her friend had

been taken away from her. Hmm, yes. It was difficult trying to satisfy everyone.

Were I to swoop in to comfort her, would she accept me or turn me down? As I was busy scratching my head over that, I found that the girl from before had at some point appeared next to me. She was laughing with her chest puffed out.

“In side-stories, I act as the mediator.”

Not only did her statement sound like total nonsense to me, the girl was also taller than all the other children. Had we always had someone like her here? She wasn’t on any of my lists, that was for sure.

“Whose kid are you again?”

The fact that she was munching on an onigiri was more than a bit odd too: we’d already had lunch by that point.

“Of course, this is not the proper past, but rather, a what-if scenario showing what might have happened were they to meet at this stage. Yes, yes.”

“Umm?”

“Would you like a drink?”

The girl’s question was followed by her presenting me with her water bottle.

“Huh? Oh... Thanks”, I replied before taking the bot-tle and pressing it on my lips. What flowed into my mouth was fermented milk, so sweet I couldn’t help but wonder if it was perhaps undiluted. It also kinda got stuck in my throat, though watching her drink it, that seemed to be a problem which only affected me.

“Still, it is unfortunate that Shou isn’t here.”

Having said that, the girl ran off. She was the kind of person who didn’t care for listening to others.

Sweet, yet suspicious. That was how I’d describe her. I wonder, was it really okay for me to just ignore her?

“What do you want to make, Sakura?” Shima asked while kneading the clay in her hands.

“What... What should we... Hmm...”

You could hear the girl’s voice waver ever so slightly as she responded. It was there that I really got a sense of just how susceptible she was to such acts of kindness. Then...

Albeit awkward, a smile appeared on Sakura’s face. That was it. All the anxiety that had been building up in my chest instantly disappeared, flushing down into the depths of my stomach.

She was a difficult child, yes. No doubt would her life

be filled with many hardships going forward. And yet. As long as she knew that, she'd definitely choose the right path.

As long as she knew how to smile, everything would be just fine.

I'll Come Meet You,
Even If You Say Nothing



It was for the first time in my life that I found my-self experiencing something akin to anxiety towards the approaching summer break. The long vacation meant that I was no longer bound by the same rules I was dur-ing school days, and though that did fill me with the same temporary sense of liberation I always felt when casting myself into it, this year, those feelings were far more discomposed than normal. There was something in the centre of them, something noisy. My arms and legs flailed around in a desperate attempt to try and find something, anything to support them.

Today marked the final day of the school term, the closing ceremony. I was currently in the classroom, star-ing at Shimamura who was also there. A yawn escaped my mouth, and just as I moved to wipe away the lone tear flowing down my cheek, our eyes happened to meet. I immediately turned my head away. I didn't have any-thing to be ashamed of, and yet, I always found myself staring at my feet like I did. What was up with that? Was I perhaps embarrassed to have her notice I'd been staring at her? If so, it was already far too late. Would it be better if I just kept staring at her then? No, but... Hesitating, I moved my head up and down, back and forth. I was so

embarrassed. So insanely embarrassed for some reason. A conflict of emotions raged wildly inside my head, while at the same time, lines of cold sweat ran down both my palms and neck.

It might well have been that I acted the most restless when in the classroom.

That, or to put it more simply, I was merely flustered. I put my bag in order while the teacher said her part-ing words, and then once that was over, immediately headed over to Shimamura's desk. She also turned to-wards me right away, almost as if she'd been anticipating this. Awkwardly, I lifted my hand and began to greet her.

However, before I could...

"You always turn your head away when our eyes meet, huh, Adachi?"

...Shimamura managed to sneak in a comment of her own. Having had their moment stolen, my lips were left to simply flop open and close. It was like I was speaking, but instead of words, what came out of my mouth was empty air. She took this opportunity to add:

"It makes me think of an animal running back to their nest."

I could see her giggle a little as she stated that. Was

I supposed to feel embarrassed here? Was I not? The true nature of the emotions raging about in my head escaped my grasp. Part of me figured it couldn't have been that bad of a thing if she was laughing, but at the same time, I also knew that getting laughed at meant you'd done something very much worthy of reconsider-ing. What should I do? What should I do? While I was busy agonizing over that, Shimamura went and lifted her bag. Deciding to omit the suggestion of us going home together, I lined up next to her.

“Ooh.”

A bizarre sound left her mouth as she stared up at me.

“Huh? What is it?”

“Nothing. I’m just surprised you’re wearing the hair-pin again.”

It wasn’t really what I’d expected her to say, and before I knew it, I realised I’d brought my hand up to my hair. Softly, my fingers stroked the flower-shaped ornament I’d received from her.

“You like it?” she asked, to which I replied by nodding my head up and down multiple times. This prompted Shimamura to smile once more.

We then began walking. My heart pounded intensely, not because we were running fast or anything like that, but rather, because I couldn't stop thinking about the ornament in question as well as its identical copy, the one that garnished Shimamura's hair. The stairs grew closer and closer with each step, and it was there that my senses activated, warning me of an impending danger; us drifting apart without a word seemed like a real possibility. Chills ran through my body, followed by lines of cold sweat.

"Ah, umm... Summer break, huh?"

"Yep, it sure is."

A step. Then another. What else could we talk about? The cicadas sure were loud, huh? No, that definitely wasn't going to lead anywhere.

"Might you have any plans for summer, Shimamura?" I decided to ask that in a slightly unusual way compared to how I would normally do it. In response, her back arched a little.

"No, no plans in particular."

She went out of her way to match my question in tone. My initial reaction was to feel embarrassed, although thinking about it a bit more, I realised what this meant

and lifted my head.

“In that case, is it okay if I text you and stuff?” “Sure thing. I mean, you always do that.”

“Right. Still, I might end up doing it a lot, so, umm...” “It’s fine, it’s fine.”

Compared to me, currently in the process of being filled with emotion, Shimamura showed no signs of any-thing of the sort.

At this point, I might as well go ahead and say every-thing I wanted to say, right? Though definitely greedy, that was the conclusion I reached.

“Also, if you’re free, do you mind if I come over every now and then?”

“Be my guest”, Shimamura replied before giving my chest a light tap. While reassuring, it also caused me to stagger... lightly. Stagger lightly.

Light certainly was a word I’d use to describe my cur-rent state. Hollow, even.

Oh, but don’t get me wrong; it wasn’t the case that being touched by Shimamura was making me tremble.

Of course not.

Rather, what it did was fill me with anxiety.

Even though school offered us a perfect point of con-

nection, it would sadly be going away with the beginning of summer break. No doubt would I be left feeling empty inside were the outcome of that to be us not doing any-thing together.

Cicadas put their whole being into their song. Why? Because they, too, wanted to leave behind a lasting mark, a mark which showed they'd been alive.

In more ways than one, that was something I needed to learn how to imitate for myself.

We walked down the stairs. There, gripping my shoes, I spoke out her name.

“Shimamura.”

“Hmm?”

She turned to look at me over her shoulder. A bead of cold sweat ran down my neck, disappearing inside my rustled collar.

The dimness of the shoe rack mixed together with the light shining in through the doorway, and it was there that I could see it, see the entrance leading to summer.

I felt a certain pull towards it, a pull which cleared my mind of the feeling that I was about to pass out, letting me instead focus on forcing my mouth open and state the following:

“I was thinking, it would be nice if we could use the summer break to grow even closer. Yeah.”

The second half of that sentence came out way faster than the first, and by the end of it, my tongue was barely even keeping up. Likewise, my forehead was left feeling like it might soon catch fire.

What had that “yeah” been about? Why was I agreeing to my own statement?

“Closer, huh?”

Shimamura chose to react in a reserved manner, almost as if she didn’t fully get what I was talking about. At least, that was how it appeared to me.

I wanted to explain it all in full detail. To tell her what I really meant. At the same time, I had to wonder, what sort of face would she make if I were to do that here?

Like for example, what if I suggested we go to the pool or something?

Walk around town. Go get tea at the cafe. Anything. Would she find it uncomfortable? Would she look at me funny and distance herself from me? It was far too sweet of a thought for me to even imagine that she might accept.

My chest heaved as I stood there in front of her. The

uncertainty acted as a driving force for my heart, but at the same time, caused me to shake to my very core. Though a very negative way of looking at it, I couldn't deny that there was a part of me afraid that she might brush off the hand I'd extended to her.

And yet.

What Shimamura gave me was a warm smile.

“Ah...”

“I don't think I really understand, but sure, I look forward to it.”

It was there, with that smile, that summer began that year.

A summer filled with anxiety, where every single day I wanted to start running.

Summer break was great. Name one good thing? Easy: The mornings. The fact that you didn't have to force yourself to get out of bed.

“And yet, here I am” I grumbled with the upper half of my body lying across the side of the dinner table. The clock on the wall showed that it was currently seven in the morning.

I'd spent a long time last night talking with Adachi on

the phone, and as a result, my eyelids were once again feeling heavy.

“I can’t be bothered to wash dishes, so this will have to do. If you’re feeling tired, then go to bed once you’re done eating”, stated the person responsible for me being awake—in other words, Mom—before handing me the bowl of breakfast cereal she’d hastily prepared. She then added milk, which in turn proved to be the final push I needed; giving in to the appeals of my dry throat, I pulled my body up from the table.

“You’re so pathetic in the morning, Sis. Really.” This piece of judgment came from my little sister, sounding really proud as she said it for some reason. That was the sort of person she was, energetic the second she got up from bed. The kind who’d get up at six in the morning and go do radio gymnastics. I wonder, did they still do those at the parking lot nearby?

Also, was it just my imagination, or did she sound less respectful than she had in the past when talking to me? If so, then I wonder when that trend had begun.

“This coco nut flavour is irresistible.”

Yummy, yummy, the girl next to me smacked her lips. As she did, glimmering particles floated off her hair.

It was Yashiro. Apparently, my sister had come across her during radio gymnastics session. Oh, and I didn't mean it like she'd picked her up and brought her back home or anything like that.

The completely nonchalant way in which she was munching cereal made it clear what her true intentions had been.

“Hmm...”

She sure seemed happy. That was the impression I got while staring at her soft cheeks.

For whatever reason, I found myself unable to look away.

It was difficult to put into words how I felt about Yashiro. We were effectively strangers, sure, but it just didn't feel right saying it like that. One of the reasons why was found in her behaviour: she acted much the same I had back in the day, and whenever I looked at her, I was reminded of the me that had once been. The way she ran with her hands held out in front of her was a good example; that was exactly something I'd done.

Even if it wasn't really the case, in a weird way, I almost got the feeling that I was watching over her.

Mom not saying anything, my sister taking a liking

to her, me seeing myself in her, they all likely played a part in making it so.

It wasn't always that I thought about things to such an extent, and as I sat there doing just that, something appeared in the back of my mind. Something dark, something clouded.

Through this and that, I ended up going through my morning routine; I ate breakfast, and once I was done with that, brushed my teeth and washed my face. I also watched as the two tiny girls cheerfully ran off outside, completely forgetting about homework. Now, what next? Back to bed? That seemed like a good idea, and mere moments later, I was once again lying on my futon, having not yet cleared it away. Though my sister had already switched to a mere towel blanket, myself, I always kept to the comforter, even during summer. Doesn't it get hot, you might ask, to which I'd say yes, yes it does. And yet, the thickness of it just felt so much more comfortable over me. There was something motherly about it, even.

I crawled under the covers and lay on my side, only for my phone to ring the second I'd gotten comfortable. My head instantly began to hurt; it really did feel like I

was being constantly interrupted when all I wanted to do was relax. Still, despite my groaning, it did feel wrong to just ignore the person calling me, and so, I sluggishly crawled out and grabbed my phone off the desk. The fact that I ended up hitting my arm against the table's corner certainly didn't make things better.

"Oh, not who I expected."

I figured it would've been Adachi, but no; the name displayed on the screen belonged to Tarumi. When was it that we'd last met? Two weeks ago?

That's how it was between us currently. Tarumi would call me every now and then, and we'd end up meeting somewhere.

Each time, I'd notice something new, but also some-thing that hadn't changed.

Getting that sort of stimulus in my life, it wasn't bad at all.

I picked up the call. Immediately, I heard Tarumi's voice on the other end.

"Hi Shima."

"Hi."

The greeting she'd chosen flowed smoothly into my name, almost making it sound like she was addressing

someone else entirely.

“Summer break, huh?”

“Yep. Well, I suppose it’s the same everywhere.” Being a student like I was, it only made sense that

Tarumi would be currently enjoying her vacation. Well, unless she was part of any school clubs. Was she? I couldn’t remember having ever asked her about that.

Wait, no. Had I? I wouldn’t be surprised; it did seem like a topic that would get brought up during the moments of awkwardness where neither of us knew what to say. Those were still quite common between us. Anyway, if that was the case, it made sense why it wouldn’t have left a mark in my mind.

Why did I feel it to be necessary to justify my own forgetfulness in this way? Made me resemble Nagafuji.

“How is it going?”

“Hmm, pretty okay.”

Though in truth, I was just about to go to bed for the second time, I found that difficult to tell her for obvious reasons. Instead, the reply I chose to go with was a dry laugh.

“Umm... How about final exams? How did those go?”

“Ahahaha.”

Oh you, Taru.

Cicadas began singing somewhere close by, prompting me to lift my head. There, I glanced towards my window, and saw that the sky behind it appeared dazzling, radiant. It was almost like someone had taken a bucket filled with light and turned it upside down.

Wherever I looked, all I could see around me were early birds. It might even be that I was the sole exception. And yet, when I went ahead and thought about what I might do were I able to muster up energy the same way they did, nothing came to mind. Only clouds. Clouds and haze.

“Hey, Shima. If you’d like... And I mean it, only if you’d like.”

“Huh? What?”

The amount of preface she was giving the upcoming question caused me to grow a bit stiff. It really did feel like something big was about to be imposed on me.

Something good, or something filled with malice? Whatever the case, it did seem like it’d be heavy.

I could sense Tarumi swallowing the saliva in her mouth. After that, she spoke the following words:

“Would you like to go see the fireworks display next week?”

It was there, with that proposition, that summer be-gan that year.

A summer which prompted me to look up at the azure and wonder, what was there beyond it?

Today's Adachi

Scribble, scribble, scribble. Let's erase that.

Scribble, scribble, scribble, scribble.

Scribble, scribble. Erase. *Scribble, scribble, scribble.*

Scribble, scribble, scribble, scribble.

And done. Well, more like I can't write any more.

-Chapter I-
Leaving Azure



I held the piece of paper in front of me. On it, you could see the results of two nights of work.

Stay over at Shimamura's house for a second time.

Go shopping with Shimamura.

Hold Shimamura's hand. Also, have lots of fun.

Visit the pool with Shimamura. Is the ocean too much work?

Too far away?

Shimamura.

It was a list of all the things I wanted to do during summer break. Most of them—or really, all of them— contained the word “Shimamura”.

I'd been too busy trying to decide what to write when making the list to notice, but now that it was all done and I looked at it again, I had to admit, it was a bit un-settling just how many times her name appeared. And embarrassing. Restlessly, my eyes jumped around the paper.

All the blank space available had been put to use. That was the reason why the last item had turned out the way it had; there was no room for an entire sentence, and so instead, I'd chosen to fill it with simply her name.

What it meant, I had no idea. The things I came up with when sleep-deprived continued to puzzle me.

Even so, I didn't think it was wrong or incorrect. Sum-mer break, Shimamura. While it was clear to me just how much of my mind those two things occupied, the threads weren't fully connected. As such, a part of me was se-riously worried that, were I not careful, my thoughts would end up growing dim due to the summer's heat, leaving me to wander aimlessly while things came to an end around me.

The only thing I'd be left with after summer would be a big pile of regrets.

I didn't want that. Sure, my summer days thus far had been nothing to write home about either, consisting mostly of me idling away, but between the two, this outcome felt far worse.

I at least wanted to get to see her. Now that summer was back.

It was for that reason I felt it to be important to keep myself organized and write everything out. Sure, build-ing the list had eaten up two whole days, but still.

We'd go somewhere and have fun. That seemed to be the essence of it. Then again, thinking about it a bit more, there wasn't really anything else we could do. Plus, going somewhere with just the two of us was a definite

sign of closeness. Maybe. Surely.

“A sign, huh?”

How nice would it be to actually have something like that? Were I ever to obtain one, I could easily see myself running around town, proudly showing it off to anyone I came across.

Take something that couldn’t be seen and make it visible.
Hmm... In a way, wasn’t that what a thermometer did?

I checked the time. It seemed that I’d soon have to leave for work, and so with that, I began changing my clothes after gently placing the list on the table. As I was doing so, however, a realisation hit me: I’d forgotten to eat breakfast this morning. Well, whatever.

There wasn’t much reason for me to still be working, honestly. I suppose it was better than doing nothing? Plus, having money saved up meant that I wouldn’t be in trouble if there came a time when I needed it, I guess.

Though that had been my motive originally, saving money, I still hadn’t found anything to spend it on.

Sure, going out with Shimamura did require that I wasn’t completely broke, but we hardly did that often enough for it to be a problem.

And yet, I wasn't able to pull the trigger; continuing to work there meant that it was possible I might get to witness Shimamura's family coming by again, and there was definitely a part of me eagerly waiting for that to happen. There were embarrassing aspects to it, sure, but at the same time, she had complimented how I looked in the China dress, leading me to think that perhaps it wasn't such a bad thing overall, letting her see me in it. The thought of her being able to pick up on my at...

att—attractiveness? Something like that—was certainly a wish which I harboured somewhere deep within me. I knew it was too much to ask for, but really, how nice would it be if she took some step towards me as well, and it wasn't always just me doing it?

Becoming close to someone wasn't a unilateral process. That was how I saw it.

There were many things no one had ever taught me and I'd had no interest in learning that I was now studying.

Would it be one of these days that I managed to over-come my late start?

“...”

I'd written down her name so many times.

I wonder, was it because of that I now wanted to hear her voice?

Maybe I should call her once I was back from work.

Yeah.

I didn't have anything to talk about, yet I still wanted to hear her voice. I would love to have been able to convey that to her somehow.

Sadly, I wasn't capable of that; doing so without growing completely incoherent in the process went far beyond my abilities.

I was so impatient. Always rushing things. Examining my behaviour, it was clear what a failure I was.

Really wish I would've grown conscious of that only after coming back from work.

Making sure that I had both my bike and house keys with me, I opened the door leading outside.

The air that hit my face wasn't cool in the slightest, and it was there that I remembered it: The heat wave from yesterday had been predicted to continue today as well.

Greeted by the cicadas, the heat encapsulated my body.

It truly felt like opening a door to summer.

Cicadas used the corners of their heads to sing. That was what someone had once told me. I'd also heard that it was the sound sunlight made when it plunged into them.

The buildings stood out clearly against the blue sky. Though not vivid, the difference in colour between them was quite deep.

The warmth wasn't something I was particularly good with, but even so, I did enjoy the scenery that came with summer.

"What are you doing, Sis?"

Apparently, me standing idly by the window had made my sister suspicious.

"Hmm, nothing."

I'd actually been reminiscing about last year's summer. The warmth of the soil I'd buried the cicada in had left a strong impression in my hands, and looking back to that time, I could still almost feel it.

A year had passed since I'd met Adachi. Honestly, it felt kinda surreal; had it really been that long? Before I knew it, I'd found myself being a second-year student, with only a year and half left till graduation.

I likely wasn't going to be attending university after

this. That left me to wonder, what was I going to do in the future? And where?

The only thing I knew for certain was that it'd likely be more annoying and tedious than my current life.

Just thinking about that stuff made me yawn. "Ah, Shimamura. And Shou."

Following after my little sister, Yashiro too entered the room. It was common for us to pass each other in the hallway, giving me the impression that she'd all but settled down here. She often ate dinner with us. She even used our bathtub. Even so, it wasn't the case that she was always around; regardless of how it felt to me, she did usually leave when the night came. Where did she go? I had no idea. In any case, when morning rolled around again, I'd often find her lying down somewhere within the house.

"Oh, right. Sis, look. There's a festival coming", my sister exclaimed while holding up the bundle of advertisements she'd been gripping. It looked like one of those things that got placed between the pages of a newspaper, or perhaps circulated throughout a neighbourhood. I took the paper and glanced at it, and saw that it was advertising a fireworks display. The same one I'd agreed to go

to with Tarumi. Why were they advertising something like this from door to door? Probably because of the food stands there, supplied by a handful of restaurants from the shopping district. That would be my guess. Next, I turned my eyes towards the date, displaying a night next week.

“What is this?” Yashiro asked, glancing at the advertisement from next to my sister. This was immediately followed by her tilting her head: “Firework display? Fire work?”

She didn’t know about fireworks? Wait, no. That wasn’t really surprising; considering her track record, it would’ve been more weird if she did know about them.

While her lack of grasp on things that were common sense did lead me to wonder if she was perhaps from a foreign country, her Japanese was really good if that was the case. There was a clear mismatch going on here; she was simultaneously way too ignorant and way too knowledgeable on stuff. I certainly got the impression that the path she’d travelled here wasn’t one you’d be able to walk were you to limit yourself to going horizon-tally along the Earth’s surface. Yashiro, if anyone, had a vertical dimension to her.

“Hmm”, the girl mumbled to herself, almost as if pretending to be thinking hard about something. Who did she think she was fooling? After that, she pinched her nose between her fingers and pulled on it.

“Ah, your nose. It’s stretching.” “I was wrong?”

Taking my sister on her word, she quickly let go. “Fireworks go like, boom! And they’re really pretty.” “I see, I see”, Yashiro nodded repeatedly, even though it was clear at glance she had no idea what she was talking about. I wonder, was she doing so to please my sister, to make her feel like she was doing a good job explaining?

“You want to go?”

“Sure, I can come with you if you want.”

Why was it that she sounded so proud of herself? And why did she only act like that with me?

“Hmm, I actually promised to go with a friend.” “Huh!?”

Her voice cracked. Her feet stretched straight, almost like she was standing on tiptoes.

“A friend... Huh!?”

She repeated herself after a short pause, the tone of her voice expressing great dissatisfaction. Act shocked

all you want, Big Sis has her own circumstances to worry about.

Not that I didn't get how she felt.

After all, unless she went with me, she wouldn't get to go to the festival at all.

No way were our parents letting her go outside by herself that late into the night.

Plus, I couldn't imagine them taking her there; they were the sorts of people who hated crowds, or really, anything that caused them inconvenience.

"I can come with you as well", Yashiro stated, with her hands on her hips, like she was here to save the day. She seemed even more proud of herself than before as implied by her upturned nose—still stretched from the earlier. As much as I appreciated her feelings, this didn't exactly settle anything. Really, it only made me more anxious.

Scratching my head, I stared down at my little sister, now puffing her cheeks.

It was always difficult to get her back in a good mood once she started doing that, started pouting.

"Alright then. Give me a second."

Would she be against it? Probably. Even so, I was still

going to ask.

I grabbed my phone. Navigating to the call log, I chose the latest name there and pressed the call button.

After approximately two seconds, she picked up.

“Shima? What is it? What’s wrong?”

Tarumi spoke in a rushed voice, making it sound like she’d run to her phone and answered as fast as she could.

“No, it’s nothing like that. No need to panic. Anyway, hello.”

“Hi. Don’t tell me, you can’t make it?”

Why was it that Tarumi always took everything so seriously? I wonder. Then again, I suppose that she was still calmer than Adachi.

While her footsteps were loud, at least she was moving forward. As for Adachi, well, it was more like she was stomping in place.

“That’s not why I called you, no. Well, it does have to do with the fireworks. Is it okay if my little sister and one other person come with us?”

Her response didn’t come immediately, and as I waited for it, a wry smile appeared on my face: *Knew she’d be against it.*

The fact that we were friends didn’t make attending

a festival with someone else's little sister any less weird. Regardless, I'd promised to Tarumi first, meaning that my sister would need to be the one to give up here. I was just about to turn towards her and tell her that when...

"Who is the other person?"

...Tarumi asked me that, sounding ever so slightly firm.

That was what bothered her the most? Clearly, we focused our attention on different things.

"Hmm, it's hard to explain. A friend of my sister's? Something like that."

Mostly accurate, although it had been me who'd met her first. It really was quite the bizarre relationship we had.

"Little sister? Right, you have one of those, huh, Shima?"

"Yep. She was still super little when you last saw her. You remember her?"

"Well, I know she exists, but nothing beyond that. I doubt she knows me either, huh?"

Right, I nodded. Back then, she'd always hidden in her room whenever Tarumi came over to our house to play. Wait... That wasn't really all that different from

right now, was it? In a way, I found that aspect of her sort of charming.

“So, how about it? If you don’t want to, then that’s fine too. Yeah.”

This was hardly going to be the only night festival held during summer, meaning that we could always go some other day. Although, they might not shoot fire-works; doing so had become far less popular as years went by, to the point where it was actually rare to hear their loud bangs echoing through any given night.

Well, I say “rare”, but they did shoot them around once per week at this time of the year.

“*That’s... That’s fine. Sure, it’s fine*”, Tarumi stated, sounding like that wasn’t necessarily what was on her mind.

Honestly, I was pretty surprised.

“Thanks”.

I hesitated for a few moments whether I should say “sorry” instead, but ultimately chose not to; there wasn’t really anything for me to apologize about.

“*No, it’s fine. Seriously. Like, why would I mind? I just wanna have fun with you, Shima. That’s all. Yeah!*”

“Really?”

There was no need for her to force herself to act this positive.

“Yeah. Of course. It’s fine, totally. I mean, she is your little sister.”

She’s my little sister... and what? While her comment did leave me puzzled as to what exactly she meant, I decided to not pay attention to it, choosing instead to thank her a second time before ending the call. Or at least, that’s what I tried to do; having possibly sensed my intentions, Tarumi quickly interrupted me:

“Oh, Shima, Shima!”

I returned the phone to my ear. The way she said my name there, repeating it twice in a row, reminded me of the old her.

“Don’t forget. I’m seriously looking forward to it!”

With that sharp statement, Tarumi at last ended the call, for real this time. Unlike Adachi, she never showed any hesitation when it came time to do that.

Still, I had to wonder, what was that thing just now?
A warning? A comment showing how excited she was?
Something in between? It was difficult for me to tell.

Was she perhaps afraid that I hadn’t been serious about going and might end up breaking my promise?

No way were my screws that loose. I mean, summer break had just begun. Nuh-uh. Thinking that to myself, I turned around.

There, ignoring whatever it was that Yashiro was do-ing with her nose, I spoke to my sister:

“So, yeah. Looks like you can tag along.”

“Ooh!”

That was the sound my sister made as her puffed cheeks caved in, pushing out all the air in her mouth through her lips.

“Still, what about you? Are you sure you don’t mind going with a friend of mine?”

She was the sort of girl who acted super distant to-wards everyone outside our family, even our relatives. Trust me, I’d know.

And yet, contrary to my expectations, she chose to reply by nodding her head slightly. Not that I was com-plaining; it was about time she overcame her fear of people.

If she didn’t, then... Hmm. I suppose Adachi wasn’t exactly afraid of people, was she? No, it was something slightly different with her.

“By friend, you mean the girl who stayed over the

other day?” my sister asked me. It had definitely been longer than “the other day”, but regardless, the person she was referring to was obviously Adachi.

“No, a different friend.”

“Hmph.”

The slightest bit of dryness could be heard in her voice as she groaned in response. Seriously, what was up with her attitude today?

“A friend of yours is a friend of mine, Shimamura.” “...”

Then you had this one, grinning without a worry in the world.

“A friend robo. Clack clack clack!”

What Yashiro was doing, I had no idea. Astounded, I stared at her, and as I did, my eyes ended up shifting somewhere else entirely. Somewhere distant.

An ocean appeared before me, the one beneath which the past lay submerged.

With it came a flood of things I’d bluntly stated back in those days. Re-examining them, I realised that a lot of those statements made the current me feel a bit un-comfortable.

I wonder, was it because they resembled me that I

was able to say that?

Or was it the other way around; was it the fact that I was able to say that which made me see the resemblance?

I plunged deeper into the sea as I searched for the origin of these layered vestiges.

A fireworks display, huh? Though I was currently working, I still couldn't get those words out of my mind.

Then again, despite what I'd just said might make it sound like, it was hardly going to be anything special; instead of staring at the sky filled with beautiful flashes of radiance, I'd be spending my time welcoming in cus-tomers.

The Chinese restaurant where I worked at—or “Cre-ative New Chinese Cuisine”, as the ridiculous sign outside put it—was going to be part of the festival in the form of having a food stand there, apparently, and wouldn’t you know it, I too had been asked to help out. My first reaction was to refuse, but as soon as I did that, the manager lady immediately started pretending like she didn’t understand Japanese. She was mean like that. In the end, I had no choice but to go along, not because I wanted to, but because I was forced to.

Would I even get paid for this?

At the same time, it was also true that fireworks displays—or really, summer festivals in general—were a blind spot of mine.

For me, the first things that came to mind when I'd thought about summer break were pools and the ocean. Not festivals. I hadn't even considered those. If I had to come up with a reason why, it likely had something to do with the fact that, while I had definitely visited a pool before in my life, I couldn't recall ever doing so with a festival. I just hadn't been able to form the kind of relationship with my parents where they'd take me to one. Intentionally putting that subject aside, I decided to focus all of my attention into wondering how it might be going to see fireworks with Shimamura.

It'd certainly be nice; summer sceneries were already dazzling, and would only be more so when accompanied by a flood of light. The two of us, swaying up and down on waves of warmth and sunlight. That was the image that came to my mind as I stared at the street outside through the blurry window. Though the way the world was normally didn't mean anything to me, right now, I was really able to take it in, put value on it. Having just

a single positive thought to push you forward certainly did wonders in terms of broadening your perspectives.

“So, make sure to come, okay?”

“Understood.”

I’d just finished working when the store manager—the one who walked like a penguin—thought to remind me.

If only this hadn’t happened, I would’ve been able to ask Shimamura to come visit the festival with me. What a bummer.

Then again, had it not been for work, I would never have learned about the existence of the whole thing. I was left in two minds: On one hand, I was certainly in a better spot now than I’d been before, but at the same time, I couldn’t deny that I found the matter a bit irritating. I often found myself daydreaming of how nice it would be were I somehow able to separate the bad outcomes from the good and live my life without them.

“By the way, what are we selling there?”

“Chicken.”

“Oh, okay...”

The woman was talking about the long, stick-like

pieces of fried chicken we always had on sale. Where they were made, I had no idea.

Next, I headed to the dressing room and changed back to my regular clothes. While cool air blowing from the air conditioner was certainly a nice change of pace compared to the heat outside, believe it or not, that wasn't actually the reason why I chose to sit down on the bench with my phone in my hand instead of leaving. No, there was something I needed to do first.

I was going to call Shimamura.

I usually texted her first to make sure it was okay, but this time, I decided to skip that step.

My fingertips began to tingle as I sat there, anxiously waiting for her to pick up. In a way, it felt kinda adventurous.

I ended up not having to wait for all that long; the call connected mere moments later, and with it, the stream of emotions flowing inside me reached its destination.

“Yes, hello?”

“Ah...”

It was Shimamura. I was hearing Shimamura’s voice. My shoulders immediately jolted.

Though parts of my body had been completely dry

just moments earlier, it now felt like there was water running through them.

Repeated waves of both pain and throbbing blew through me, and whether that was ultimately a good thing or not, they really did make me feel like I was rejuvenating.

“Hey!”

“Huh? What?”

That was the first thing she said to me—not a greeting, but a loud exclamation. I was left utterly confused, something Shimamura could likely tell by my voice as immediately afterwards, she offered an explanation:

“Sorry, it’s just this girl... Hey, don’t try to get on my head!”

Something appeared to be going wrong on the other end of the call. Who was this “girl” she was talking about? If not her little sister, then maybe that weirdo with blue hair?

Also, she was... clinging onto her head? Climbing onto her back?

Regardless of who the person was, that didn’t feel good to me. Or to put it more accurately...

“Stay put, alright?”

“Okay...”

Shimamura's words caught me off-guard, and against my better judgment, I ended up replying to them while drawing my head in.

"No, not you, Adachi. Well, I guess it does apply to you as well."

"Huh?"

"Just joking. So, why did you call?"

Gently, her voice filled my ears.

What should I say? I felt nervous, like I didn't know what to do. My eyes began to spin.

I used to act so cool around her in the past, but just look at me now. Really, where had the old me gone?

"Umm... I wanted to hear how you were doing?" While I'd obviously meant to talk about the fireworks display, not having it in me to bring up such a topic right away, I ended up going somewhere different with it entirely.

"Hmm, I'm doing fine. Like usual. I do feel like I might melt because of this heat, but that's pretty much it."

I could hear the sound of something bouncing against the floor. Likewise, the tone in which she spoke was quite stern, certainly conveying her being in good spirits.

"Okay then. How about you, Adachi?"

“I’m... doing fine. Yeah...”

Despite my attempts to mimic her, I was unable to muster nearly the same level of energy. The slight-est giggle—so soft it was almost like she was merely breathing—left Shimamura’s mouth, instantly turning my cheeks red.

“Have you been keeping up with the homework?”

“Huh? We had... homework?”

“*Nope.*”

Once again, I could hear her laugh a little. It was only after the fact that I realised she’d been treating me like an elementary schooler.

“I just finished at work.”

“Oh, really? Working during summer break? You sure are diligent, Adachi.”

Wouldn’t think you were a delinquent, she added as a joke.
I was a delinquent?

“So then... Well, it’s not really a topic worth a ‘so then’, but...”

“*But what?*”

It’s a weird thing to say about yourself, but seriously, how could someone be so bad at transitioning from one subject to the next? I needed something to glue

the different topics together, to bridge the gap between them.

Wait, no. It was actually the other way around; there was so much glue that I got bogged down in it.

Overall, I was just really clumsy when it came to segues.

I knew that. I knew that it made me look bad. And yet, I had to say something to be able to make progress.

“Some time... One of these days... Could we...”

“Yes?”

“Could we... go visit a festival? Together?”

If I had to grade my performance on objective terms, one easy piece of criticism would be the fact that the lead up really didn't have anything to do with what followed.

Shimamura didn't say anything. It was almost like she didn't know how to respond. Then, after a few moments of silence...

“A festival? Are you talking about that fireworks display?”

“Yeah. Oh, but, it's fine. I know it's sudden. We can... umm... visit some other one. Later on. Yeah.”

It wasn't like I could go there anyway. Well, more precisely, I couldn't go with her.

“I mean, summer break has only begun. Let's pick a

day that... works for the both of us. Or something." She hadn't even said if she wanted to go yet, and here

I was, already rushing ahead. I also noticed that I'd at some point lifted my bum up from the chair and was now hovering over it in an awkward, half-sitting stance. I remained like that as I waited for Shimamura to answer, all the while the breath coming out from my mouth continued to irritate my ears. It felt so rough, so gritty.

"Hmm... Okay. Let's pick out some other one and go there." A positive response. Before I knew it, my mouth had opened wide. That's just how happy her words made me.

I could feel something flowing through the area right below my chest and seeping into the very centre of my body.

"Sure. Yeah. Oh, but there doesn't need to be fire-works there. Just a festival. That'll do fine."

"Right, I figured as much."

"Huh? You... You did?"

Shimamura understood me? That was kinda trou-bling. Embarrassing. But, it also made me happy. Under-standing someone was one thing, but being understood yourself, that was something else entirely. Something

special.

We continued talking for some time after that, until eventually, Shimamura announced that it was time for her to go have dinner. This—unfortunately—put an end to our call. My shoulders were heavy with exhaustion, like I'd just run a marathon, but also with a certain sense of success. I sat back down, and with my head hung, gripped my phone tight.

I could tell by my shoulders and cheeks that I was currently smiling.

The expression on my face must have been com-pletely unsightly. Yeah, it probably was. And yet, ignor-ing the voice in my head telling me that, I decided to simply let my emotions run wild.

Every single day as of late, I always had my goals set on Shimamura. I was like a bird, circling around her with the aim of landing on her shoulder. Not a single moment passed where I wasn't looking for an opportu-nity to do just that. And then, once I did manage to land, I'd immediately start flying again, all so that I could soon return there.

She was what I was aiming for. Everything ended on her. Everything began from her.

While saying that I was living by her support might have been exaggerating it a little, there was no denying the fact that she was acting as my guideline for things.

The smile on my face, that was it in its essence. I knew it to be so.

“I’d like if you’d let me draw you, Shima.”

This was certainly not something I had expected Tarumi to say when I’d seen her calling me.

Then again, even the fact itself that she’d called me came as a surprise.

I wasn’t completely sure why, but for some reason, I’d kinda been under the impression that we weren’t going to be talking to each other till the fireworks display in three days. Not on phone or in person. It was for that reason I now found myself slightly perplexed.

Putting that matter aside, what the heck was she talking about?

She wanted to... draw me?

“Umm, okay. Feel free to.”

“No. No, no. I can’t draw you unless you’re with me.” Let’s meet, she added, pretending to sound casual. Was this her way of suggesting that we go out together?

“Umm, you mean drawing as in, drawing a picture?” “Yes, drawing.”

“Drawing me?”

“Correct.”

“Right now?”

“Yes.”

I glanced outside the window and saw that the sky was completely clear. With no clouds to block it, a tsunami of sunlight hit my eyes, prompting me to quickly close the left one.

Drawing a picture under this bright sun? It seemed that Tarumi too was quite aggressive in her approach.

“Phew...”

And with that, I ended up going. The place we’d agreed to meet at was under Kinka Bridge, near Na-gara River. While I could definitely remember passing the bridge multiple times and staring at the fishers down below, as for walking on the gravel which formed the riverbed here, how many years must it have been since I last did that? The rocks—tinted yellow under the sunlight—passed a dry sensation to the bottoms of my shoes as I stepped on them.

I could feel myself being roasted alive with each step

I took. Not even the backs of my knees were safe. Regardless, the temperature did drop as I walked deeper down the beach. I wonder, was it because I was near water that the wind felt so lacking in warmth? Wave after wave of air blew by, playing the sand like an instrument and wrapping my body. My head spun and my ears rang, and soon after, I found myself all but carried away.

I was surrendering myself to summer.

The sensations which had been exposed continued being burnt by the sun.

Walking forward, I shifted my attention into the distance. You could get a view of both Mount Kinka as well as Gifu Castle from this beach. I wonder, how old had I been when I last rode the cable car up the mountain? We hardly ever did that anymore now that my sister was older too—go out on a picnic with the family.

Tarumi was already there when I arrived, and by the looks of it, had spent the last however many minutes setting up a canvas on the gravel. All the doubts I'd had were instantly dispelled as I glanced at her work; the stand supporting the piece of paper was one you'd see a professional use, the kind with three legs, leaving me

with the impression that she was actually serious about this. And I thought she would just draw a quick sketch or something. Mixed feelings filling my mind, I gripped the brim of my hat.

Had I known that I was going to be made to act as a model, I would definitely have spent more time working on my attire. My hair too; the reason why I was wearing a hat in the first place was to hide the untamed mess underneath. As for makeup, well, I'd figured based on the intensity of the sun that I shouldn't even bother trying. Like, it felt like my face would get so sweaty it'd be washed away by the time I got there anyway. Even so, I did still kinda want to check my eyes for any crust.

"Ah, Shima", Tarumi waved at me, having at last no-ticed my arrival. Waving back, I circled around her and took a glance at the canvas. Naturally, there wasn't any-thing drawn on it. Yet. She was seriously going to do that, huh, draw my picture here? I found myself slightly embarrassed by the thought.

"Sorry for calling you so suddenly."

"It's fine. I didn't have anything to do anyway." Tarumi's skin was still perfectly pale, showing no signs of summer. Regardless, that didn't seem like it was go-

ing to be the case for long; despite having a coat on, she wasn't actually wearing a hat herself, giving me the im-pression that at least some parts of her fair skin were going to end up sunburnt by the time we'd be done here. For whatever reason, I found that to be kind of regret-table.

"Here", she stated while handing me a black parasol. "The sun is shining pretty intensely, so I figured I would draw you holding up this thing."

"Oh, how considerate. Thanks."

I grabbed the parasol—the pattern on it consisting of black lilies—and lifted it above my head.

If I'm being perfectly honest, it really wasn't that good at blocking the sun. I suppose that whoever had made it valued aesthetics higher than usage.

"Oh, I think it kinda matches you", Tarumi com-mented as I observed the device. Was this really a conclusion she'd come to in mere seconds? Felt kinda fishy.

"You think so?"

"Yep. Then again, as far as I'm concerned, everything probably matches you."

So, don't use me for reference, she added hastily before

returning to getting things ready.

Don't take it seriously, I'm just flattering you. Was that what she was trying to say?

"Ahaha."

I actually didn't dislike this honest side Tarumi had to her personality.

Now then, I guess I should get ready too. I began putting some distance between us, only for Tarumi to stop me in my tracks.

"Hey, where are you going?"

Turning my head I took a look around, and quite surprisingly, saw that she'd set up a folding chair right close by.

"It's just, I have pretty bad eyesight. I won't be able to pick out your subtle features unless you're close."

"Oh, is that so?"

My subtle features?

Although this whole thing did feel kinda suspicious, I ultimately chose to do as told and sat down on the chair prepared for me.

The position I assumed placed me facing the river, with the bank behind my back. I could see the dazzle of the water's surface being reflected in the corner of my

eye.

Ever so slightly, the old men wielding fishing poles in the distance caused that lump of light to waver.

“Chair and a parasol... If you’d dressed a bit more like a proper young lady, I think it might have made for an even better picture.”

Easier said than done, considering that I didn’t own such clothes. Hino might. Wait, no... I guess hers would all be Japanese style.

After a bit of fooling around, Tarumi gripped her paintbrush, giving me the impression that she too was ready. She then stared at me intensely through the can-vas. This was probably going to take a while, wasn’t it? We’d barely even started yet, and my neck was already feeling itchy. Making matters worse, I couldn’t even turn my head.



“Alright, I’m gonna paint you now”, she declared, almost like we were about to start playing catch or something.

“Bring it on.”

My reply was equally powerful, making it sound like I really had caught whatever it was she’d thrown my way.

Was this exchange too audacious for something preceding an indulgence in the fine arts? Possibly.

Regardless, it also felt fitting of the season—that being, summer.

It wasn’t really based on anything, but the impression I had was that summers were thick and winters thin.

Still staring at me, Tarumi began moving her hand. Could she really paint without looking at what she was doing? Our eyes immediately met as I thought about that, prompting her to quickly hide her face behind the canvas, as if pulling her head back. Just like how Adachi would do.

I couldn’t help but feel like these were the sorts of people who tended to gather around me.

Adachi, Tarumi, and also my little sister. With three of them in total, things would get pretty awkward if they all wanted to hold hands with me simultaneously.

I could only pray that a day like that would never come.

Observing the miscellaneous tools and bags placed by my feet, I decided to go ahead and say something.

“I never knew this was a hobby you had, Tarumi.”

“Hmm... I only started about a week ago.” I guess that explained it.

“Up-and-coming, huh?”

Was that the right term? I wasn’t sure.

“It’ll be fine. I mean, we used to draw together all the time.”

“Oh... Yeah, I think I remember. On the backs of fliers, right?”

I had a distinct image in my head of Tarumi only ever drawing birds. As for me, well, most of my pictures ended up being of sweets.

I wonder, was it in that difference that the foundations of our current personalities could be seen?

“Yep. Anyway, no need to worry about it turning out too miserable to look at. Or something.”

As she spoke, Tarumi took a glance at me—her model.

“That’s good.”

“Yes, lovely.”

We both laughed. While at it, I gave the parasol a quick spin.

The faint rays of light which passed through danced on top of my forehead. A short while passed, after which Tarumi shifted her attention away from the parasol and back to the canvas.

Even if your painting does come out horrible, you can't blame that on the quality of your model, Taru.

Now then, going back to what she'd said earlier, it had only been a week since she started painting? That was right when summer break began.

"Is this like, a summer project?" I jokingly asked, turning my eyes alone into her direction. I remembered those being a thing while we were in elementary school. Meanwhile, the river before me continued its silent flow. There was also a river near where I lived, although that one was quite a bit smaller. I wonder, was it because of the two straight days of clear weather that its bottom was now visible? Regardless, while that obviously wasn't the case with this abundant flow, there still were no clouds reflected on its surface.

Three more days, and no doubt would this area be bustling too. We'd disappear into that crowd of people,

and not just Tarumi and I, but Yashiro and my little sister as well. I was seriously going to have to keep an eye on those two if I didn't want them to get lost. I wonder, would I even get time to view the fireworks?

It'd been a while since I last saw any. They must've gotten so much more advanced since those days.

My sister grew bigger, fireworks got more flashy, I moved through high school.

I could really get a sense of the passage of time. Still moving her hand, Tarumi began talking. "Speaking of, I actually remembered something." "Huh? What?"

"It has to do with your sister. Well, more precisely, with you."

Her head peeked out from behind the canvas as she said this, the ends of her curly hair blowing in the wind.

"You'd already fully taken on the role of a big sister back then."

"Oh, really?"

"Yep. I remembered you treating her like she was super precious to you."

The gentle tone of her voice, sounding like she was looking at something adorable, caused the muscles in

the back of my neck to twitch slightly.

As nice as pleasant memories were, as long as you weren't able to share them with someone, the only thing they led into was embarrassment.

"Hmm, yeah, I guess it was like that..."

I couldn't remember. Treating someone like they were precious, what did that even look like?

My memories of the past were completely frag-mented, appearing to me like a torn photograph with all but one of the pieces missing. I did remember my sister, naturally, but in my mind, the reason why I'd looked after her was more so the fact that we were siblings than anything else. Why had I seen things that way? Was it something my parents had told me?

Value others. On a closer look, I wasn't quite able to tell what intuition that concept was built on.

After all, it was hardly the case that someone clinging onto you was what made them precious to you.

"Oh, do tell me if your throat gets dry."

Slouching forward, Tarumi grabbed a plastic bottle she had previously placed on the ground. On contrary to what it said on the label, the bottle itself appeared to be filled with barley tea, and from the bits of ice not yet

melted floating inside, I could assume she had frozen the drink first before bringing it here. Not only was the action itself very considerate, this was also exactly what I'd wanted right now.

Adachi was like that too, always coming up with ways to pay attention to me. Although, in her case, things often ended up working not quite the way she would've wanted. Was that a result of her overthinking everything? Maybe. That's how I saw it, at least. Not to say that wasn't entertaining in its own way.

“Hmm? Did I say something funny?”

“Huh?”

“You’re grinning.”

As if to demonstrate, Tarumi dragged the corners of her own mouth upwards with her fingers. No way was the expression I was making that strange. Probably.

“Oh, it’s nothing. I was just laughing at something I remembered.”

I kinda felt like this wasn’t the first time we’d had this conversation. Also, letting my guard down and making an unsightly face? Who was I, Adachi? I seriously needed to start paying attention.

Tensing up all of my muscles, I made a conscious

effort to remain as still as possible—like a model should. “Your face is getting red, Shima. I guess it really is hot.”

“Huh? No. I mean, yes.”

However, as it turned out, all that accomplished was causing her unnecessary worry. Hmm... I guess you could say it was because of the heat that I found it so difficult to move my head. There you go, it was actually the sunshine’s fault, not mine.

A lone child on a bike rode across the river bank. She wasn’t holding up a parasol or anything like that, making it apparent that her fair skin was about to be burned.

With every breath of dry, warm air I took in, I felt myself adapting to the summer which surrounded me.

Tarumi continued bringing up various topics as she painted, likely so that I wouldn’t get bored. She was actually pretty dexterous, wasn’t she, being able to move both her hands and mouth at the same time like that. That continued for a while, until at some point, I decided to ask her where she’d gotten the idea to randomly paint me.

This was her answer:

“Well, it’s like... a way for me to get closer to you.

I mean... *Ahem*. That's definitely one aspect to it. Yes. However, I also wanted to make something to remember you by, now that I have the chance. Like, who knows, we might get separated again one day. Obviously, I don't want that to happen, and I'm doing my best to make sure it doesn't, but still, there are situations where that isn't enough. Circumstances you can't do anything about. As such, if that ever does happen... I want to have something concrete. Something physical."

"Hmm..."

I could definitely see where she was coming from there.

Even if you were super close to someone, even if you never fought with them, you could still one day wake up to find the two of you having drifted apart.

An unbreakable bond might not actually be enough to hold people together. Given that, if something of the sort did happen to you, then how were you supposed to act? I often found myself thinking about what answer Tarumi might give to that question.

The worst thing that could happen was if I focused too much on what was in front of me and forgot what truly mattered—the past.

Memories. Memories were important.

Reciting that to myself, I turned my eyes towards the sun. Would we be done before it started getting dark? Probably; days were quite long during summer, a fact which filled me with confidence. Not that it had actually been all that long.

There was no clock in sight which I could use to check, but if I had to estimate, I'd say that we'd been doing this for around two hours, three at most.

Hmm, I guess that was pretty long.

"Okay, I might be done now."

A vague smile appeared on Tarumi's face as she spoke. Looking at her more closely, she was less smiling and more simply tensing her cheeks.

"Really? Can I take a look?" I asked out of morbid curiosity.

"Hmm, sure, I guess it's ready to be shown." "I'd hope so."

Was she just lacking confidence, or was the picture actually not ready? Hard to say.

Whatever the case, I was getting more curious by the second.

Don't tell me, it wasn't the sort of painting where I

had seven mouths or something like that, was it?

I stood up. Instantly, I could feel the warmth within my knees melt down, dissolve as it came in contact with the coldness surrounding my skin. Even so, this was no time to be complaining about that; it wasn't every day that I got to admire Master Tarumi's work. Circling around her, I turned my eyes towards the canvas.

“Huh?”

That was the only sound I was able to make. No other words would come out of my mouth as I stared in awe at the wholly unexpected level of workmanship before me.

“Is something wrong?”

“It’s just, I was thinking earlier how I was going to give you my honest opinion without hurting your feelings.”

“Seriously? How mean.”

“But, it looks I was worrying over nothing. This is actually really good.”

You could tell at first glance that this was supposed to be me. She’d also nailed my hairstyle. The parasol was there too, with its pattern perfectly replicated. Same for the chair. I went through the entire painting looking for mistakes, only to find none.

The texture of my hair, the length of the parasol, the shadow of the chair. Everything about the scene had been captured. No way did the doodles I drew during class even compare. Seriously, this was the level she was on? After only a week? My eyes narrow, I took a long, hard look at Tarumi.

“Are you actually some sort of genius, Taru?”

“Hmm, I wonder. Haha.”

Why was she laughing in such a grandiose manner? I might have spoken too soon, as immediately afterwards, she coughed and looked away.

“I have to confess. I’ve actually been doing this for longer than a week.”

“Have you?”

Awkwardly, Tarumi scratched her neck.

“I began practising when we met during winter. I had some photos from when we were kids, and I... painted stuff based on them.”

She then tilted her head downwards as if to say sorry. Was this the sort of lie that required an apology? As far as I was concerned, no, not really.

And yet, I could understand where she was coming from.

“I see. No wonder then.”

My eyes met with the painting—the other me. “No wonder what?”

“Hmm... The face you painted looks young.”

There was something about the innocent expression on her—or I guess “my”—face which made me think of Yashiro. She was open, defenceless, so much so that I couldn’t help but worry about her.

All in all, the current me would never make a face of this sort. Seriously, where had you been looking while painting, Taru?

Those questions continued to linger in my mind. And yet, the fact remained that this was an absolutely stunning piece of work. I shifted my attention away from the slightly-too-adorable version of myself and back towards Tarumi.

“Thank you for making me look so cute.”

Was this what they meant when they said that friends tended to see friends in a favourable light?

“Huh? N-No, nothing like that!”

With great speed, Tarumi shook her head from left to right.

“Are you saying that I’m not cute?”

“I’m not. It’s more that, like, the real you is... w-way more, extra-extra attractive? Right, yeah!”

It’s was difficult for me to interpret her statement given that she was staring at the ground, but I guess she was complimenting me?

Still... Extra-extra? What was that supposed to mean? “I’ll do my best to... get closer to that.”

Having now lifted her head, Tarumi opened her eyes wide. The way her jaw stuck out made her expression appear quite strange over all.

As if keeping up the momentum, she then took my hand and gripped it, covering it under her own.

“Can I ask you to act as my model again? I want to keep painting you for as long as you’re fine with it, Shima.”

Her request was very enthusiastic, so much so that I could feel the hand which she held start growing sweaty.

Something also welled up in my eyes. Tears, perhaps? Close, but not quite.

“Umm... Okay.”

Overwhelmed by her passion (was that the right word?), I ended up simply nodding my head. I kinda wanted to ask why me, but then again, I suppose that

would've been a little coarse.

The city was filled with many different things, both objects and people.

Out of all those, what Tarumi wanted to paint was me.

While I didn't fully understand what was going on here, I still had to wonder, was that really all?

As if having read the one thought on my mind—that being, "my hand burns"—Tarumi quickly let go.

"Why don't we get some ice cream? What do you say?" she then asked in a slightly shrill voice. Ice cream to cool me down? I suppose that made sense.

"Sure, sounds good."

I could feel my cheeks loosen and my face twist into a warm smile as I spoke. Seriously, why was I so happy about this? It made me seem like a child who'd endured through something unpleasant just to be rewarded with candy once it was done. Hmm... Not that far off the mark?

Having finished packing everything away, the two of us climbed up the riverbank, Tarumi and I.

All the while, the dazzling light of the sinking sun continued applying weight on my shoulders.

I spent the next couple of moments like that, indulging in this illusion which could only be felt during summer.

“Shima?” Tarumi called to me, having noticed that I’d stopped walking.

A few seconds passed. Then, I smiled. “I was just thinking, it really is summer.”

My arms spread open, I turned to look behind me. What greeted me was the blue sky, both dry in its colour, yet also vibrant at the same time.

I shook my spread arms, almost as if scratching its surface.

I could feel wind underneath my nails.

This right here, this must have been what it was like touching the sky.

It was at noon that day when I noticed I’d forgotten something in the classroom.

While not shocking enough to drain away all the blood from my face or anything like that, I did still find myself growing stiff as I went through my bag and re-alised it wasn’t there.

The item in question was a notebook. Sure, it was

kinda odd to bring school equipment with me when the only thing we had scheduled for the day was the end-of-term ceremony, but let me explain. This was no ordinary notebook. No, I was talking about Shimamura Note.

I'll give you one guess as to what was written on its pages.

Given that there was no reason for anyone to drop by the classroom during summer break, the chances of the notebook actually being discovered were extremely low. That is what I told myself initially. However, the more I thought about it, the more restless I grew. What if someone did see it? No, that didn't matter. I honestly couldn't care less what others thought. The question was more what would happen if through some cruel twist of fate Shimamura were to find the book. I'd probably die, that was my guess. Blood would shoot from my ears. My head would come clean off. Something like that might actually happen, I really did think so.

There was one thing there that was especially bad. So bad that simply the thought of it caused my heart to skip a beat. My eyes, having been opened wide, immediately grew dry.

The reason why I'd brought the notebook with me was because I knew Shimamura would be there, and ironically enough, that also ended up being why I forgot it.

Now then, what was I going to do? Should I go grab it? Or should I leave it there until school started again?

School premises were accessible for club purposes, but did that also extend to the building? I wasn't quite sure. Would I need to get permission from a teacher? Or would it be hopeless regardless of what I did? While busy thinking about that, I found that I had at some point stood up and gotten ready to leave. I guess I was going then. Rather than actually deciding to do so, I was more simply conforming to what was happening.

Now outside, I shifted my attention to something different.

My family had been nowhere to be seen when I left the house. Just like usual. I unlocked my bike, hopped on, and began pedalling.

A sense of regret immediately filled me as I basked in the sunlight; I really should have worn a hat. Seriously, how long was this heat going to last for? I guess that was a kinda absurd thing to say about summer, but even so,

it really was how I felt. Going outside during the night was far and away the better choice on days like these. Walking around the neighbourhood lit by festival lights, walking around with... Shimamura.

“...”

I decided to make a slight detour. No, this wasn't me taking a look in advance or anything like that. I was just curious, and since I was already here, I might as well.

Departing from the school road, I soon found myself pedalling past the river near which the fireworks display next week was going to be held. Various stands would soon litter the area, and I too would be helping out at one of them. Although not really the normal way to do it, this was going to be my first time in ages attending a festival of any sort.

The previous time had been with my family. I couldn't remember much anymore, but the few memories I still had of the event mostly had to do with the massive crowd of people there and how I'd felt like I was going to choke. As for the brilliance of the fireworks, that had left no impression on me.

Not because I didn't care, but rather, because the sparks of them simply had not reached me. Nothing

inside me had flared up.

And yet, here I was, having my heart shaken by the notion of a fireworks display. While it was certainly dis-appointed that I would have to wait till some indefinite festival after this for my dreams to be realised, my chest continued burning nonetheless. Like most things, this too was something brought upon me by Shimamura.

What would it be like if we really were to attend a festival together? Before I knew it, I found myself having stopped the bike to think about that question.

Ignoring the intense sunlight shining above me, I hopped off and onto the ground.

“Right here. Shimamura would stand here, like this.” My hand moved around as I painted her shape in the air. Following this, a series of food stalls rose before me with the river as their backdrop, forming a mirage of the night to come. That was quick. Maybe I should go see a doctor.

Shimamura and I would walk side by side. Not just that, we’d have to hold hands in order to avoid losing sight of each other in the sea of people. I’d probably be the one gripping hers, most likely. She’d laugh, com-ment on how hopeless I was, but ultimately, let me do it.

The sleeve of my *yukata* would be left rubbing against hers. I would feel blood pumping through every inch of my body, even the bottoms of my feet.

That was how I imagined us to walk down the night, with me occasionally touching my part of our matching pair of hairpins. Aiming for the dim lights hanging in the air, we would float along the river of people, not fighting back against the current but simply allowing it to carry us with it. There wouldn't be much space, and though that was bad in its own way, it also placed us a full step closer to each other than we normally were. Occasionally, my shoulders would come in contact with hers.

Shimamura's hair would be tied up in a bun above her head. That wasn't how she usually wore it, and while it would be kinda weird seeing the sides of her neck fully exposed, I also wouldn't be able to look away. Her mouth twisted into a slight smile, light would trace the outline of her portrait.

One after another, fireworks would shoot up, filling the sky.

The afterglow of each colourful explosion would paint over us two.

Truly, there was no greater makeup for Shimamura to wear on a summer night.

“...”

I could hear cicadas singing. Kinda strange, considering that there weren't any trees nearby.

I also noticed that I'd gotten all sweaty while lost in thought.

My eyes burned by the midday sun, everything before me now appeared tinged green.

Indulging in fantasy had left me to be fried by reality. Quickly, I hopped back on my bike.

Even now that I was pedalling again, the image of the festival remained stuck in my mind.

What should I wear? For a summer festival, a yukata would probably be the right choice, huh? Yeah.

I decided to drop by the mall on my way back to buy one. Like they say, there won't be anything to worry about if you're prepared. I'd love to see Shimamura wear one too, although then again, I could easily imagine her finding it too bothersome. If I asked her to do it for my sake, would she? Maybe? Maybe not? I guess it was a pretty strange thing to ask someone.

Alongside people fishing, I saw a girl with a paint

brush in hand standing on the riverbank. There was another girl too, her model apparently, although since that one was holding up a black parasol and had her back turned towards me, I wasn't really able to tell for sure. Quite the thing to do in this temperature. Paying no mind to them, I quickly shifted my attention away.



I kinda felt like I'd seen the girl standing before the canvas somewhere. However, as I wasn't able to recall her face immediately, I simply ended up giving up. She likely wasn't someone worth remembering anyway.

Come to think of it, how many people even were there that I truly needed to remember?

Quite few. You could likely count them with a single hand.

My hair burning after the detour I'd taken, I at last ar-rived at school. There, a series of shouts resembling the kinds you might make while performing club activities reached my ears, followed by the song of cicadas. I won-der, why was it that their symphony sounded so much louder here than it did at my home? Was it because of the trees growing within the school yard? Probably. Whatever the case, it really did feel like there was a cloud of them singing right above my head.

I entered through the main gate and headed towards the parking area. There weren't many bikes there— naturally—and although that did mean I could have left my bike right in the front, I still went out of my way to place it in the section reserved for my class. This was a pretty common occurrence, I'd noticed, for me to prior-

itize stability and custom over efficiency. Was that just the sort of person I was?

I hopped off my bike and walked along the side of the building, purposefully making it so that I couldn't be seen from the sports field. It wasn't like I was going to get in trouble if anyone saw me. Rather, I just didn't want it to happen. After a bit of that, I soon found myself standing before the front door. What next? I hadn't explained my situation to a teacher, but then again, what was the worst that could happen? With that in mind, I went ahead and gave the door a pull.

There was a certain weight to it. And yet, contrary to what I'd expected, it actually opened. Quickly, I grabbed the handle and pushed the door close.

I looked to my left. Then to my right. There was no one around. The only thing I could hear was the sound of cicadas singing.

Was it okay for me to go in? I wasn't sure. However, what I did know was that I could do so if I wanted to.

I decided against putting my shoes in the rack and instead held them in my hand as I walked up the stairs leading to the classroom. Before that came the landing, though, the windows of which I passed while crouch-

ing low to the ground. Just in case. It really made me seem like a thief, sneaking around like this with my shoes pressed against my side. No doubt would it lead to a massive misunderstanding were anyone to see me, which is exactly why I made an effort to walk as fast as possible.

Stairs, and then a hallway. I glanced through one of the windows as I silently walked past it, only to be met by a scenery which appeared practically artificial; the distant blue sky and white clouds really did seem like something you might see painted on a canvas.

As much as I hated having to work or be with others, I knew that school was, by its definition, a place where there were people.

It simply could not exist without them.

I proceeded forward barefoot, when suddenly, I heard a sound other than my footsteps. It was coming from another floor and sounded like students talking, which thinking about it, really made sense; the reason why the building hadn't been locked appeared to be so that members of cultural clubs could still gather like normal. Right. I continued walking. Maybe it was just our school that did that, but it felt pretty unsafe in my opinion; with no people around, something might sneak

in like I had. Not that there was anything worth stealing here.

Next, I entered the classroom. No sooner had I opened the door than the hot air packed inside hit my face, welcoming me. Summer instantly encapsulated my body in all of its density, to the point where it felt like were I to wipe my face, literal droplets would fall off. Adding to this, the difference in temperature between the room and the hallway was quite immense, doubly more so when you considered that the only thing sepa-rating them was a single door. Was it possible that the place might straight-up catch fire with enough time as more and more heat culminated? Maybe. Then again, there wasn't any real need to worry; summer would likely be long since over by then. While summer and its warmth did symbolize eternity, that was not the case in reality, and by the time you knew it, they'd both be replaced by the cool wind of autumn.

Passing through the empty room, I made my way to my desk and twisted over to look. Instantly, relief filled me; I had—in fact—left the notebook here. Shimamura Note was safe. Furthermore, it didn't seem like anyone had touched it.

With that out of the way, I flipped the book open and checked its contents, the very text which had caused me all this trouble.

Given that simply remembering what was written there was enough to make my heart skip a beat, it wasn't much of a surprise that for a moment, I seriously felt like I was going to pass out at the sheer sight of it.

What I'd said earlier was true; my head would literally come off were Shimamura ever to see this. The word "embarrassed" didn't cut it.

There was even a chance the outcome could be some-thing worse than that. Like what? Simple; Shimamura might start despising me, avoiding me. As far as the cur-rent me was concerned, that was the one thing I feared more than anything. It was possible I was even more afraid of it than I was of dying. It just felt like so much more realistic of a worry.

That was all to say, I would never again allow this notebook to leave my sight.

I shut it close.

Never again.

Swearing myself that, I quickly turned around and began making my way outside, only for my legs to come

to a full stop as I passed by where Shimamura sat. Had she forgotten anything herself? I peered inside her desk to check. As it turned out, there wasn't anything there, not even dust.

I lifted my head, and in that instant, a thought passed through my mind.

"Come to think of it..."

I remembered a conversation we'd had in the past on the sports hall's second floor.

Back in those days, I'd managed to be surprisingly forthcoming in the way I talked. Saying that the past me felt like a totally different person wasn't an overstatement.

Anyway, putting that aside, here's what Shimamura had said:

"I'd love to go to the classroom when there's no one there and do all sorts of mischief."

Although my response at that time had consisted of a single uninterested groan, were she to come out to me with something like that again, there simply was no way that I would be able to maintain my composure.

Reminiscing about the past, I crossed my arms. What might the "mischief" Shimamura had in mind look like

in practice? The most she'd ever done to me was place her jaw on top of my head while I wasn't looking, and that obviously wasn't something you could do by yourself—not unless either your scalp or chin were extremely stretchy.

Trying to reach a proper conclusion, I walked around the classroom, passing by all the different desks.

That was a habit of mine I'd lately become aware of; I often found myself walking in circles while thinking about something.

It was likely the case that, when my brain was left spinning its wheels, my feet felt like they should do the same.

That continued for a while until eventually, I was forced to stop as lines of sweat began running down my neck.

There was no reason to limit myself to the concept of mischief.

Instead, I could look at Shimamura more broadly, in her entirety.

Were Shimamura here right now, what might she think?

I could barely make sense of her at the best of times.

And yet, in that moment, I really did find myself thinking hard about that question. The effort I put into it was the essence of Shimamura Note, the regular me. You could say that I overthought things and was mostly just left spinning my wheels, and while there was a part of me that felt that way, it wasn't really relevant here.

A cloud of warmth ran up my chin. Touching it with my fingers, I realised something.

Were Shimamura here...

...she'd likely think that it was too hot.

I should do something about that first.

My feet carried me to the window which I opened. Straight to the window, with no detours or anything. With all of them open, every single one, I bathed in the wind that blasted through.

I suppose this also constituted for mischief. Two birds with one stone? Well, not that I was planning on leaving the place like this.

Distancing myself from the window, I moved to stand in the very centre of the classroom. All sorts of sounds flowed in from the outside, almost as if they'd been eagerly awaiting for the opportunity. I could feel it on my skin as the once-stagnant air stirred about.

There, I decided it. I was going to do one more thing I shouldn't.

I sat on my desk and stretched out my legs. This was something I could never do if there were people here.

My body sinking as if pulled down by gravity, a large sigh escaped my mouth.

I could hear my ears ring as blood rushed through them.

Were Shimamura here, would she find my current state ridiculous? Would she laugh at me?

The sun disappeared behind the clouds before I managed to find the answer to that question, and for a moment, it became almost dark. The light which had previously filled the classroom was replaced by shadows.

As if to bridge the gap between these two situations, the withered curtains began to waver ever so slightly.

Their message was simply: Wind. Wind had come. My arms spread wide open, I sat there, allowing the air to blow past me.

It still felt lukewarm. And yet, that wasn't all. There was more to it.

The wind was clearly not stuck in the present. Instead, its aim was in the future, future towards which it was

rushing. I breathed it in, praying that doing so would help me do the same.

It then came. The day of festival.

There I was, staring into the azure.

“No dinner for me tonight. I’ll just grab something while I’m out”, I proclaimed that morning, earning a “hooray” from Mom who’d been grating ginger to be used for noodles, coupled with a small dance.

Wait... We were having noodles again for lunch? Yes, I knew Dad had gotten a whole bunch of them as a gift, but that didn’t mean we had to eat them every single day.

“You’re going too?” Mom asked my sister. A strange groan left her mouth as she watched the girl nod. “It’s quite the thing, willingly going somewhere with that many people when it’s this hot outside.”

Completely agreed.

“Well, I mean, you can’t see the fireworks from our house.”

“True, but you can hear them. Alright then. Take care of her, will you?”

Having said that, Mom gave my shoulder a superficial tap. Was she doing this on purpose? Was I really that easy to see through? The answer to both of those questions was likely a yes.

Though my mother, the woman really did have a mean personality. Plus, lately, her shoulders had begun appearing quite burly. All those days of hitting the gym were paying off, huh?

“Speaking of which, will you two be dressed in yukatas?”

She spread the sleeves of her clothes as if to demonstrate.

“Yukatas?”

“It’s what you wear when you visit a festival, no?” “Oh, right. Yeah. Yukata. Hmm, I wonder.”

Going out of my way to change clothes felt like a step too far. I was also just reluctant to do it in general.

It was almost as if there was something behind me pulling me back. What was this sensation? I tried attaching a name to it, but didn’t manage to find any that fit.

“I want to wear one!” my sister exclaimed while raising her hand. Yashiro was here as well, and after a short

moment spent observing the situation, she too decided to hop onto the bandwagon, lifting both of her short arms high up into the air.

Seriously, where had she even come from?

“Just so you know, we aren’t talking about getting candy or anything like that.”

“Oh...”

Dejected, the girl drew her hands back in. “Do you even have a yukata in the first place?” “Indeed she does.”

The speaker this time was Mom, looking really proud of herself for some reason with her hands pressed against her hips.

“She can use my old yukata from when I was her age. I stored it away, so it should be good to wear still. I think.” Did she doubt herself? That seemed to be the case, as immediately after she was done speaking, the woman dashed away towards the room with the clothes cabinet. Then, a few moments later, she returned. Her feet really did move fast. I suppose this was yet another positive outcome of visiting the gym.

In her hands she was holding two yukatas folded on top of each other, one red and one pale cyan. They

were both patternless in their design, and as you might have expected, their colours appeared slightly faded with time.

“The insect repellent I sprayed on these before putting them away means that they should be good to go. Probably...”

“What’s with the constant self-doubting? Are you just trying to make everyone anxious?”

Ignoring me, Mom handed the yukatas to my sister. She spread the red one open at first, and immediately, you could see her entire face burst into a smile.

“What weird clothes”, Yashiro commented while observing the situation from the side. If anything, I’d say that the clothes she was wearing were the weird ones here. Not to even mention her hat. What was up with that thing?

The hat currently on Yashiro’s head was tall and narrow, and almost looked like it’d been woven from tree branches. Fresh leaves and vines peeked through the gaps between them, leaving me unsure whether I was looking at something artificial or an actual plant. Coupled with her already bizarre hair, she really did seem like she could be the main character of a children’s tale

or something. What was such a thing doing in our house, and why was she holding a rice cracker in her hand?

“Want to try it too, Yachii?”

“I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to learn about Earthling culture.”

Alright then, the girl followed and immediately began wrapping herself in the red yukata, prompting my sister to pull it away from her reach.

“I think the blueish one would match you better.” “I think it would not.”

“Nuh-uh. You’ll see that I’m right when you put it on. Now, come here!”

“Eek!”

Yashiro ran away, and spreading the cyan yukata, my sister ran after her. Neither of them seemed particularly serious. Instead, they were just goofing around, having some fun. Quite the thing to do when it was this hot even inside, I had to say. Personally, I felt like I was going to drown in sweat the second I left the sweet comfort of the electric fan.

An extremely exaggerated sigh left Mom’s mouth as she watched the two girls run off.

“Hmm? Is something wrong?”

“I was just thinking, the way that girl runs, it really resembles you.”

“Really? What part of it?”

“The way she holds her hands in front of her.” “...”

“I’m talking about the past. When you were way smaller. Don’t you remember?”

“No, I must have forgotten.”

That was a lie. I could feel my forehead growing ever so slightly warm.

“You used to be so cute back then.”

“Yes, yes. Sorry that I’m not cute anymore.”

“Yep”, Mom nodded, making it sound like she was agreeing to my statement. Really? How inconsiderate could a person be? “Do some soul-searching and see if you can fix that.”

Seriously, shut up.

“Now then, what about you? Do we need to find a third yukata?”

“I’m good. I’ll just go there wearing what I always do.”

Looking at it objectively, I was pretty similar to Mom in the way I approached things.

Plus, sitting idly in my own room, listening to fire-

works going off in the distance, that didn't seem bad at all.

Their sound alone allowed you to perceive their colourful flashes somewhere deep within your mind.

"Hey, girls. Come back here. We're eating noodles now."

"I'm back", Yashiro exclaimed, having instantly re-turned. It seemed like she'd at some point found enough time to wrap herself in the cyan yukata.

No kidding; the cold blue did fit her way better than the bright red.

Having walked into the kitchen, Yashiro proceeded to sit down at the dinner table, almost as if she was part of our family or something.

"Cold noodles are very good. I like them."

What? Why did she think we ate our noodles cold? While a simple statement, it raised a lot of questions.

I passed the next few hours watching the little red and cyan creatures do this and that, sometimes get-ting dragged in myself, until eventually, evening rolled around. I was now in the process of getting myself ready for the festival, and already, I could see a distinct bug bite on the side of my thigh. So much for the insect

spray. I went ahead and scratched it a little with my fin-ger, and immediately, the mark grew itchy. Fair enough, I suppose; poke the hornet's nest and you'll only have yourself to blame for getting stung.

The tireless song of the cicadas instantly filled my ears as I stepped outside. I looked up, and floating in the centre of the clear sky above, I saw the moon tinged blue. Given that the object let off no light on its own, it was possible to clearly make out all the individual craters and dents going along its surface. I continued staring, and soon, a realisation hit me; the moon—a common sight during the long summer days—appeared slightly closer than normal today, so much so that it kinda felt like it might start crashing down any second now. My eyes grew fixed on the potential looming disaster.

I really would like to visit space before I died. That was something I'd dreamed of when I was a child, and still felt strongly about to this day.

In that world of weightlessness, I'd sleep. Sleep to my heart's content.

How might it feel being freed from one of the things that normally bound me?

My body stuck under the oppressive, searing atmo-

sphere of heat, it was only my thoughts which managed to touch the moon.

Meanwhile, Yashiro—currently standing next to me—continued playing with my hand. She hadn't asked for permission or anything, making it seem like this was something she just assumed she could do if she wanted to.

I considered shaking her off for a moment. However, I ultimately decided against it; there was something about the softness of her hand that really appealed to the weaker parts of my heart, leaving me with no choice but to give in.

She was very affectionate, this girl. Innocent in the truest sense of the word. Touching her felt like placing my hand into a bowl of clear spring water—a metaphor which also matched her in terms of colour, I suppose. I wonder, had she ever touched the moon? She did say that she was an alien, so maybe.

Though one of my hands was taken by Yashiro, one was still free. I gave it a quick glance before sticking it out into the opposite direction of her. Just as expected, my eyes immediately met with those of my little sister, earning a response from the girl.

“What?” she muttered, clearly flustered. Her arms trembled, causing the butterflies printed on her red yukata to dance in place. Worth mentioning, she also had a new hairstyle; her usual long cut was now tied in a bun above her head, overall making her appear slightly taller than normal. Well, not that she was actually taller, not as far as her body was concerned.

I waited like that for a moment, with my hand stuck out, until eventually, she timidly gripped it. Wasn’t this kinda like fishing? Instantly, the image of Hino pulling up a massive fish from the pond came to my mind.

“I got a big one.”

Satisfied in my catch, I raised my hand up high, only for my sister to headbutt me in the, well, butt.

“You’re getting punished for that.”

“*Ugh.*”

How exactly did I punish her? Well, let’s just leave that part out. In any case, after I was done, the three of us began walking.

There was quite a long distance between our house and the river near which the fireworks were going to be shot. I might have considered taking the bus if we lived closer to a station, but as things stood, that wasn’t really

an option, unfortunately.

“Come to think of it...”

Hadn’t something like this taken place during winter as well? I certainly felt like I could remember that. Unless I was completely mistaken, I’d run into Hino there.

I wonder, what about the festival tonight? Would she come? If she did, Nagafuji would likely be there with her.

Those two truly were inseparable. Did they never get bored of each other? Bored of the other person’s face, their voice, their behaviour? Was there never a moment where one of them felt like having to deal with the other was just a massive hassle? No, never mind; on a second thought, it was likely just the heartless me who saw things that way.

You could obviously never get tired of your own family. Given that, I suppose it was fair to think of the relationship between Hino and Nagafuji as something similar, an extension of the same idea.

An extension of family? That was kinda incredible, wasn’t it, using relationships like that to grow its definition?

Hino and Nagafuji. The next person who came to my

mind was Adachi.

Maybe I should have asked her to come too? Thinking about that, I glanced at my sides.

“Hmm.”

Had I been alone, that would've been one thing, but with my sister, Yashiro, and Tarumi all here, I could hardly imagine her being interested in tagging along.

Even if it didn't feel like it had really been that long, the fact that I'd hung with Adachi for about a year now meant that I more or less had a grasp on her nature. As such, I could say with confidence that she wasn't a very co-operative person. Take someone like that and toss them in a group, and at the end of it, all you would've accomplished was making everyone involved feel un-pleasant. Given that Adachi herself was someone well aware of that fact, you could even say that she was acting conscientious by not coming.

That was the kind of person Adachi was. And yet, when around me, she often acted like a total baby.

Did that mean I was closer to her than other people? Why was it, I wonder, that she'd taken such a liking to me? I could ask her directly, but then again, the only thing I could imagine that leading to was her completely

losing her composure.

The thought of it kinda made me laugh.

Whether or not I invited her here didn't really matter; at some point, an opportunity would naturally arise for us to visit a festival together. We'd talked about it just the other day. Plus, summer was long. With those as my arguments, I decided to put the matter aside for now, trusting that it would sooner or later work itself out.

I was of the opinion that forming strict plans went against what school breaks were all about.

Especially considering that this one had just begun. Then again, I thought the same every year, only for the eventual end of it to catch me by surprise. It never stopped feeling sad when that happened.

As we made our way towards the river near which the fireworks display was going to be held, the different streams of people began merging into one. I was quite shocked to see just how many yukatas there were. Really, I'd even go as far as to say that most of the girls appeared to be wearing Japanese clothes. A mix of emotions passed through my mind as I glanced down at my own shabby getup. Then again, it wasn't like I was alone; there were plenty of people wearing just regular shirts

and shorts, probably even more than there would be normally considering how warm it was.

Putting all that aside, what really caught my attention was just how much more crowded the street was now.

“Make sure to hold my hand tight, okay?”

Having to look for them would be a massive pain were they to get lost. Well, my sister at least; the way Yashiro shone meant that you couldn’t exactly lose sight of her.

“I’m not a little kid anymore.”

“Grip, grip, grip.”

While the reactions of the two couldn’t have been any more different, both of my hands did ultimately end up being squeezed.

The stream of people continued its flow, first passing by a large hotel and then turning into the direction of the park. Given that there were no paid seats or anything like that, things were bound to get congested as everyone rushed to reserve a spot with a good, open view of the sky. Then again, most of those were likely taken already, especially when you considered that a not-insignificant number of people had elected to set up camp right in the morning. Personally, I had no intention of acting

that enthusiastic about it.

Fireworks wouldn't be shot high in the air if the way you were supposed to enjoy them was up close.

Speaking of, though we couldn't see anything yet, the distinctive sound of explosions did reach us.

"Ah, there she is."

Under the shadow cast by an apartment building, I saw her. Saw Tarumi.

She had her phone out and was currently fiddling with it. Was she planning to call me, perhaps, to see where I was?

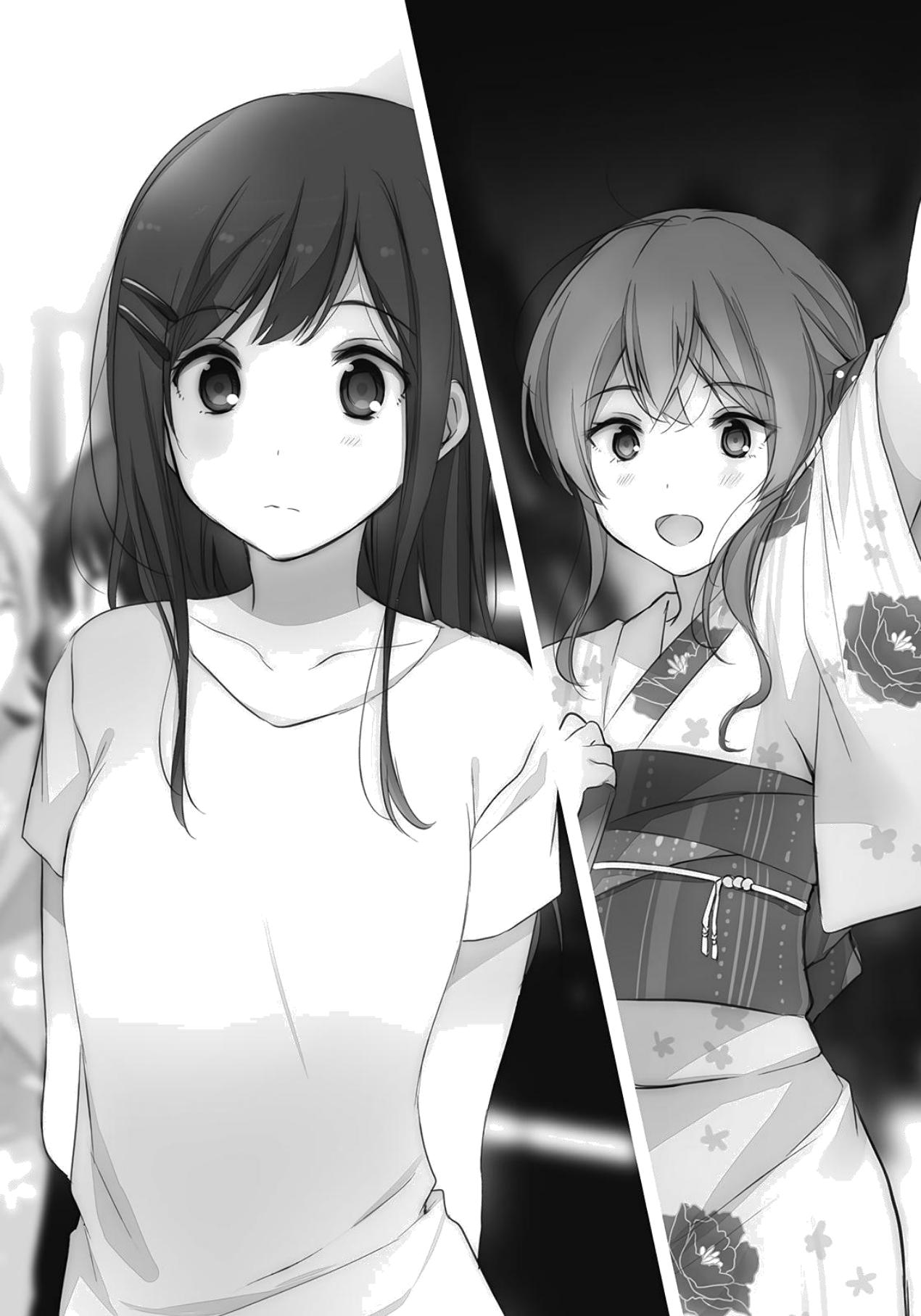
Something I hadn't considered earlier hit me as I stared at her; while we had, in the general sense, agreed to see each other at a specific time, as for where we were going to meet, that hadn't been decided. And yet, here she was. Had she known that this road led from my house all the way to the river and figured that I'd come by it? Smart thinking, Taru. Not that this excused us for not choosing a place to meet, because seriously, we really should've done so.

"Ooh, Shima."

Having at last noticed me back, Tarumi put her phone away and proceeded to wave at me. There, her hand still

in the air, she weaved through the crowd and closed the distance between us. Comparing her to the other people around her let me once again get a sense of just how tall she was.

“Shima.”



“Yep.”

Though already right in front of each other, we still continued waving our hands. Seriously, what was up with that? I couldn't help but smile a little, prompting Tarumi to immediately do the same.

Unlike me, Tarumi had actually put in the effort to wear a yukata, the peony pattern of which appeared quite colourful under the light of the lamps. Her long hair was also tied up neatly, all in all giving the same sort of impression as the people you often saw in fashion magazines.

That was certainly nice, although on the flip side, it did leave me as the odd one out. I almost felt like whereas everyone else was actually trying, I simply chose to wing it. Or better put, like I was a mere bystander, barely part of the group. So, like usual then? Hmm, yeah, I suppose.

“Umm, so... This one's your little sister, right?” Tarumi asked after spending a few moments comparing the hair colours of the two girls, ultimately turning her body into the direction of my sister. Reasonable guess. Really, it would've been quite strange if she'd gone with Yashiro instead. Abnormal, even. As for the girl in question, well, the slight change in both the angle of our

hands as well as the strength with which she gripped it let me know even without looking that she'd timidly taken a step backwards.

"It's been a while. Well, not that we really remember each other, I guess. Umm, I used to come by your home often when I was in grade school. So yeah", Tarumi stated, pointing at her own face all the while smiling in a very forced manner. The lack of reaction coming from my sister suggested that she couldn't remember her at all. "Ahaha. Anyway, nice to meet you. Hope we can get along."

"Okay", the girl replied faintly, the look on her face remaining perfectly meek. I couldn't help but giggle silently as I stared at her.

She was so good at putting on the facade of a good child that the mask seller at the festival might soon be out of a job.

It didn't take long for her to catch wind on how I was reacting based on the way my hand moved, prompting her to once again slam her head against my backside and—never mind, we can skip this part.

I just want to say one thing; handing out punishment with both of my hands reserved was quite the ordeal.

“So then, this is that other person you mentioned?” “I am, the other person”, she nodded in response:
“Yashiro Chigama”.

That was her full name? I’d completely forgotten.
I always just called her Yashiro, and as for my sister, well, she had her own nickname for her—Yachii.

“Wow... Your hair sure is something.”
Timidly, Tarumi placed her hand on Yashiro’s head. Had she really not noticed her hair earlier? Just what had she been looking at instead? Oh... Me?

While it was already far too late to be worrying about it, the thought did kinda make me blush.

“Now then, shall we get going?”
“It looks like it’s gonna be kinda tough, but sure”, I stated back, straightening out my body and scanning the road up ahead. Distinct walls of people had begun forming there. While that was quite the terrifying sight in its own right, what made it even worse was the way they slowly flowed forward, almost as if they were made of some sort of thick goop. For a moment, I found myself hesitating; were we really going to be taking part in this?

As far as mosquitoes were concerned, tonight was

likely going to be a real feast.

We began moving. Meanwhile, the largest of all the fireworks—the sun—continued growing distant. In its wake it left all the heat and warmth it'd brought about, exiting the stage that was the coming night by itself, alone. Good grief. Even children knew to clean away their toys once they were done playing. Smiling wryly, I sucked in the lukewarm air. In terms of the solar system, the sun was definitely the oldest adult, which was exactly why I would've liked for it to keep the concept of discretion in mind.

“Hmm?”

Tarumi turned her attentions towards my hands. Specifically the hand that Yashiro was squeezing.

“Is something wrong?”

This simple question was enough to make her flinch. What a reaction. I was immediately reminded of Adachi.

“I was just thinking, you sure do act like a big sister. Even now.”

“Oh?”

I kinda remembered Hino also pointing this out ear-lier. That my “big sister level” was very high, or some-thing in that vein.

Even so, I didn't really want to be Yashiro's older sister. That'd just be... awkward. To be completely honest with you, I personally didn't see myself being suited for that role. I simply wasn't like that.

"You feel so... adult now. Completely unlike how you used to be."

"Really? I get the impression you're just saying that." No sooner had those words come out of my mouth than my entire face twitched. I really needed to do a better job refraining from saying the first thing on my mind. Tarumi instantly looked away, although as I waited for a bit, she did soon enough turn her eyes back towards me. There, giggling a little as if to hide embarrassment,

she spoke:

"Your hands sure seem to be popular, Shima. Do you offer them out on like, subscription basis?"

"My hands... Oh, you mean this?"

I lift my hands slightly in the air and gave them a quick glance. Indeed, they were both taken already. Hmm... Was she perhaps disappointed?

Seriously, what was it about my hands that made everyone want to hold them so badly?

"Now I almost wish I would've come pick you up

at your house instead of waiting for you here”, Tarumi mumbled deeply, her arms crossed. The way her brows and the corners of her eyes crumpled together made it seem like this wasn’t meant as a joke.

That actually wasn’t a bad idea; meeting at either one of our homes would’ve made everything so much simpler and less complicated.

And yet, the thought of it hadn’t even crossed my mind. It was really there in that fact you could get a good sense of all the years that had gone by between us.

Hmm... It was hard to put it into words. We were both standing on tiptoes, stretching ourselves beyond our abilities? Something like that?

“In that case, allow me to lend you my hand.”

The speaker this time was Yashiro, swiftly pushing out her free hand into Tarumi’s direction.

I was kinda shocked to see her join the conversation. Honestly, at first, I’d thought she was just making ran-dom noises.

“Umm... okay. Thanks.”

Tarumi’s reaction was very typical of her; thought clearly bewildered, she didn’t hesitate for a moment to grab the girl’s hand.

As for Yashiro, well, with both her hands held high by people taller than her, she was kinda just left dangling there in the air.

The image reminded me of an alien being dragged away by men dressed in black, like in a story I'd once heard.

Awkwardly, I let out a small laugh, and so did Tarumi.

"Don't worry, she's not a bad girl. Even if she is a bit weird."

Well, probably; the impression I got of her was that she was less a virtuous person and more simply acting in accordance to what she'd been taught. You know, like "help people who are in trouble". The kind of stuff parents told their children. There was no consideration of loss and gain mixed in, no judgment of what was right and what was wrong.

Not even children were safe from the competitiveness that plagued the modern world, making people like her a very rare sight these days. An abnormality, you might say.

"Right. Still... I honestly didn't think you'd come, Shima."

I could practically feel the emotion in Tarumi's voice

as she said this, still holding onto Yashiro's tiny hand.

The sound of her exhaling was very noticeable as well.

"Why is that?"

"Well, it was one thing in the past, but these days, you always find everything so bothersome and... Oh, sorry. I didn't mean it like that."

Cutting her sentence short, Tarumi quickly slammed her hand in front of her mouth. Was she worried she'd said something that I might take offence to?

"What I'm trying to say is, you're very... lazy? Wait, no, that's not it either."

"Hmm."

It was honestly kinda interesting to see just how deep she would dig herself, which is why I decided to not say anything.

Still, I had to ask, was that really a fair judgment of my character? I'd agreed to pose for her painting just the other day, hadn't I?

"You're... non-committal? No, no. No. Hard to please? Someone who prefers to stay at home? Umm..."

Ah, dammit. I can't come up with a good way to put it." Lost in the maze that was language, Tarumi gripped her head with her one free hand. I found it very amusing

watching her do that.

As much as she doubted herself, the things she'd listed were all honestly pretty solid descriptions of me. At the same time, were I to go ahead and laugh innocently, I would probably be able to recall at least some of what made the past me the person I was back then, huh? I certainly felt there to be an opportunity there. The only problem was, I simply didn't have it in me to force myself to take the necessary step forward.

The concept of returning to the past, to the old days hardly seemed that appealing to me.

No matter how worn, how damaged, how chipped, if there really did exist something between us, something real, you should be able to see it even now.

“Ooh! Ooh, ooh!”

My line of thought was interrupted as all of a sudden, Yashiro began jumping up and down. How did she manage to do that when her feet were barely touching the ground?

“I can smell something sweet.”

The avenue with all the food stands was still quite far away, and yet, the girl already had her nose pointed upwards. She always acted so unlike how a regular per-

son would, even when it came to these sorts of small, insignificant interactions. Really went to show that it wasn't just her appearance that was suspicious; what lay beneath was very much so as well. I suppose you could call it fate, the fact that I was now here, heading towards a summer festival while holding hands with her.

Putting all that aside for a moment, my sister sure was behaving herself. I even had to check that I hadn't accidentally lost sight of her, but no, she was still there. While her eyes weren't pointed towards the ground or anything like that, she also wasn't saying anything. Rather, she was simply walking forwards in complete silence. This was how she usually acted around new people.

I went ahead and gave her dented cheek a quick poke.
This prompted the girl to frown at me.

"What?" she snarled.

"You aren't speaking, so I wondered if you were tired."

Wondered if you needed me to talk to you.

I didn't actually say that last part out loud. I wonder, what sort of face would she make if I did? Personally, I was of the opinion that duty was first on the list of things that you should never feel towards your family

members, and as such, I did often find myself wondering, was I looking after her just because she was my little sister? The order of things definitely did make sense there, it would've been a lot stranger if it was the other way around, but even so, I had to ask, was that really something that could last?

There were way too many people on the riverside road when we got there, making it so that we had to walk in a line to have any hope of passing through. And yet, neither Yashiro nor my sister let go of my hands. The position this put me in was awkward to say the least, almost as if both of my arms were being bent backwards. Naturally, walking like that, with my shoulders stuck out, left me constantly bumping with my surroundings. It wasn't very pleasant, I'll tell you what.

I was almost starting to view the whole thing a bit negatively, when all of a sudden, gold dust sprinkled down from the sky, as if shining light into my situation.

How long had it been since I'd last seen a firework go off in person? Years, probably.

"Look, Yachii. That's a firework", my sister explained to Yashiro, breaking her silence. She almost sounded a bit proud of herself.

“Ooh!” the girl exclaimed back, her eyes pointed towards the golden particles above and her mouth half-open in awe.

I wonder, how did these flowers blooming in the sky appear in the eyes of an alien? Was she able to see value in them?

Joking, obviously. At least in part.

As soon as the flash of the firework faded away, another one, equally vivid, was created in its place. It was almost as if the entire life cycle of a star, from birth to death, was compressed right there before me, this sequence repeating without an end closer than even the moon. Witnessing such a sight, even I couldn’t help but feel slightly moved.

We continued walking forwards, as if lured in by the fireworks. There, a tightly packed line of booths—standing by the roadside with no gaps in between—appeared in our sight, causing Yashiro to grow extremely excited.

“Ooh! Ooh!”

Clearly, this was far more important to her than the fireworks.

“Shimamura, Shimamura!”

“Yes, I know.”

The girl proceeded to yank my arm with far more strength than you might have expected from someone of her size. I decided not to resist, in part because—having skipped dinner—I was kinda hungry myself.

It was clear what we were going to be doing next. However, before that, I quickly turned towards Tarumi to confirm that she was okay with it.

“Do you mind if we go take a quick look?” “Sure, it’s fine. I haven’t had dinner yet either.” *Perfect timing, really*, she added, her eyes pointed at the stand. Staring at her face, a thought crossed my mind. She hadn’t spent the entire day waiting for me at that spot, had she? No way. I mean, we weren’t talking about Adachi here.

“The sweet smell appears to be coming from here.” Now standing in front of the booth—the large, paper lanterns hanging from which painted its red roof slightly orange—Yashiro’s nose moved up and down as she sniffed the air. Out of all the similarly coloured booths around it, this one had by far the biggest and most eye-catching sign.

“Good-luck Takoyaki? What’s that?”

My feet came to a stop as the bizarre text caught my attention. Right in that instant, a woman emerged from inside, dressed in what appeared to be a robe with long sleeves—a bad fit for the warm night considering its apparent lack of breathability.

Her red cheeks stood out against her pale skin, and looking at her, the image that came to my mind was more that of a candy apple rather than takoyaki.

“Welcome, welcome.”

“Hi.”

“Only one serving of our takoyaki in a pack of eight has octopus in it.”

“Umm, what?”

But, the sign, I tried pointing out, only for the woman to completely ignore me.

“The lucky person who finds themselves tasting octopus will get to take a fortune slip for free.”

Here, she added while emphasising the box set up next to her. It seemed like just a random pile of paper tickets to me.

“In addition, the person whose fortune slip grants them great luck will receive one palm reading session free of charge. Truly, they are fortunate.”

“...”

“Not only that, if the result of the palm reading is not to your liking, you are always able to change your fate by purchasing an extra pack of takoyaki and—”

“Okay, I think we’ll go somewhere else.”

“Ah!”

That was close. You could never be too careful as there are always people out there trying to trick you, especially at festivals like these.

“May I just tell you one thing, one piece of advice?” “Huh?”

The woman now stood next to me. But, how? When? I was sure she’d been inside the booth just a second ago.

Her plain face and getup made it difficult for me to imagine that she’d somehow managed to walk over to me while I wasn’t looking. And yet, that was the only explanation I could come to. I was left utterly bewildered.

I did have a second question too: Why was she following us?

“In your future, I can see... trouble with women.” “...”

The woman’s extended pointer finger drew a circle in the air before me.

Seriously, what the heck was this person doing, saying stuff like that out of nowhere? Hmm... Now that I thought about it, she had mentioned palm reading, hadn't she? Yeah. A fortune teller, perhaps?

"Umm, but I am a woman?"

"Trouble with men' isn't really something you hear people talk about when it comes to visions, is it? No. No it's not."

This answer of hers—if you can even call it that—left me just as confused as I'd been before. Slightly unsure as to what I was supposed to do here, I took a step back-wards.

Had I gotten myself involved with some weirdo? "...It says that on my face?"

"No, on your hand. I specialize in palm reading."

I looked down. Both of my fists were tightly clenched.
I looked back up. The woman was now grinning at me.

No doubt about it; this person was nothing but trouble.

"Thanks for the advice. Now, goodbye."

I quickly began distancing myself from the woman. Much to my surprise, she didn't chase me further. Instead, she simply waved in my direction, wishing me

well.

The river of people then swallowed us both, and soon, it became impossible for me to see her. What had just happened? I really didn't know.

“Trouble with women... huh?”

“That's what she said, yeah.”

For some reason, it was Tarumi who appeared the most bothered by this whole thing. Was she perhaps reminded of something she'd experienced personally?

“Ah, Shimamura. There's something good over there, I'm sure of it.”

What Yashiro pointed towards next was a booth sell-ing tiny sponge cakes. On its sign were written the words “contains: honey, eggs, milk”. Were you required to warn about those things if you wished to obtain a sales license? I could only assume so. Anyway, I glanced at Yashiro's face to gauge her reaction, and instantly, with no hesita-tion, I was able to tell that she wanted to try these sweets out. If only the questions on school exams were this easy.

Unlike at the previous booth, there were no special events or anything of the sort going on here, which thankfully meant that we were able to purchase what we

wanted without much hassle. Having to deal with stuff was just so tiresome, and in all honesty, I way preferred it when things were simple like this. Really, the only problem—if you could even call it that—was the fact that I had to be the one to pay.

My sister was naturally penniless, and as for Yashiro, well, I had no interest in trying to make sense of her financial situation.

Sounds of satisfaction filled the air as the latter of the two girls hungrily devoured her part of the cake they had split between them.

“That was delicious.”

“I’m glad.”

“Now, what about the chicken over there?” “Oh, you.”

Don’t go ogling at more food while your mouth is still full.

The way Yashiro was acting here almost made it seem like she was usually kept in hunger. I really couldn’t let her run loose, because if I did, there was no doubt my wallet would be left feeling mighty light by the time the night came to an end. The only thing heavy would be my feet, tired from walking around. With that in

mind, I gripped her hand tighter, pulling on it like a leash each time she attempted to head towards the next booth. Even so, that wasn't enough; the smells, the atmo-sphere, and—most importantly—her constant pestering eventually grew too much for me to endure, and ulti-mately, I was left with no choice but to cross the road with my head hung.

“Gyaah! Shimamura!”

“Seriously, shut up.”

Personally, I didn't really want to eat chicken right now. No, I was more in the mood for yakisoba. My throat hungered for noodles—specifically a type other than what we ate daily back at home.

“Wow, no kidding. You really are good at playing the role of a big sister, Shimamura”, Tarumi stated in a slightly teasing tone, now dashing after me.

That comment of hers didn't sit right with me. Not at all. Swiftly, I offered a rebuttal.

“Well, what can I say. I've had a lot of experience. I remember constantly dragging you along, back when we were little.”

I was honestly pretty shocked how smoothly the words flowed out of my mouth.

I'd felt no reluctance. It hadn't taken any time. I'd just... said it.

A second passed, and another emotion filled my mind: Embarrassment. Seriously, why would I blurt something out without putting any thought into it?

Tarumi instantly grew stiff. Was she perhaps shocked as well? Whatever the case, she seemed to recover far quicker than I did.

“...Right!”

A wide, childish grin appeared on her face.

With the faint festival lights shining behind her, the sight really did look like something straight out of a dream.

We continued much in the same manner from there on, doing this and that. Then, after some time, it began; I'd just finished slurping my noodles when the sound of fireworks hit my ears, marking the start of the show. I could hear people around us cheer as lights of all seven colours filled the sky.

“Pretty”, I went ahead and commented. While not the most original thing in the world, it was what came to my mind in the moment. Then, with that done, I turned my attention to my sister. “Can you see?”

“Hmm...” she muttered. In other words, no. Clearly, the tall adults in front of us were blocking her sight.

I guess I didn’t really have a choice then.

“Taru, could you take care of Yashiro?”

Having said that, I let go of the girl’s hand, placing both of mine under my sister’s arms.

“Huh? Wha... What?” she exclaimed, visibly shaken by how fast things were happening.

Although she was a bit heavier than I remembered, I did manage to lift her up without much trouble. There, holding her in the air, I repeated my earlier question:

“Can you see?”

“...Yeah.”

Now facing forward, the girl nodded her head in a surprisingly meek manner.

While I couldn’t say for sure what Hino had meant by the term “big sister level”, for me, it seemed well represented by the height at which I held my sister.

Yashiro—in turn held by Tarumi—sounded like she was really enjoying herself as well. Well, to be fair, when didn’t she?

“Can you manage?”

Is she too heavy? I went ahead and clarified.

“Yeah, no problem”, Tarumi replied, all the while awkwardly looking around. You could hear some bewilder-ment in her voice, bewilderment aimed towards Yashiro. “I’ll be fine. Or rather, what’s up with this girl? She’s so...

Umm... Fluffy. Like, super light.”

“Yeah, she’s weird like that.”

“I feel like you’re kinda weird too, Shima, for being able to ignore it so easily.”

Not that that’s a bad thing, she added quietly. Or at least, that was how it sounded like to me.

I hadn’t been expecting her to say anything. Com-bined with all the noise and people talking around us, it was really difficult for me to interpret the meaning behind her words.

She didn’t think it was a bad thing? Was that so?

“Hmm...”

I brought my face right up to Tarumi’s ear so that my sister—currently enthralled by the fireworks—wouldn’t hear what I was about to say.

Why did she act so startled as I did that? I wasn’t sure.

Regardless, I then began talking:

“Sorry about today. For bringing my sister along and stuff.”

While I had already apologized on the phone, I felt it to be necessary to do so in person as well. I was going as far as to force her to tend to Yashiro here, after all.

“Oh, sure”, Tarumi muttered at first. However, quickly after, she drew her chin in and did a second take. “No, I mean. It’s fine.”

The expression on her face didn’t appear at all forced. Rather, I was left with the impression that she really stood by her words.

Her eyes and cheeks—so smooth it almost looked like someone had gone and brushed them with sandpaper—became painted in the colours of the sky.

“Personally, I was thinking that I first wanted to have some good fun with you, Shima.”

“First?”

“Yep, first.”

Leaving the explanation there, Tarumi turned to look at the fireworks.

Those words of hers were clearly meant to represent something, and yet, they received no follow up.

Regardless, as I stared at Tarumi’s eyes, pointed to-wards the sky as if gazing into the future, a feeling of a certain type filled me. A pleasant feeling.

So pleasant that I could almost feel the non-existent wind blowing against my cheeks.

“I see.”

I did for a moment consider asking her to continue, but ultimately decided not to. Doing so just felt crude to me.

Fireworks might have been pretty, but you wouldn’t want them to last forever. It was similar to that. Them being fleeting was exactly what differentiated them from mere graffiti.

“So yeah, that’s that. Anyway, now, I know it’s super late for this, and it’s kinda whatever, but...”

A forced cough left her mouth. What was going on? Just as I was thinking about that, Tarumi—still holding Yashiro in her arms—took a step towards me. She then lifted her chin slightly.

“Could I get a comment? Even a short one will do.” I was initially left wondering what on earth could she have possibly meant by that.

However, after a bit more time spent watching her awkwardly and exaggeratedly shake the sleeves of her yukata, I finally got it.

“Ah.”

It seemed that she was asking for an opinion regarding her outfit.

Her ears were now bright red. Strange, considering that none of the fireworks were of that shade.

“Come on, Shima. Don’t make me literally spell it out”, Tarumi announced, her voice full of embarrassment. It sounded like she was both laughing and crying at the same time.

“Sorry about that”, I apologized, unable to help but laugh a little myself.

Was it or was it not a compliment saying that she looked like a girl straight out of a fashion magazine?

Struggling to find the words, I scanned her up and down with my eyes. Her left foot moved around awkwardly, and after staring at it for a little while, it finally came to me.

“You look radiant”, I stated frankly. It really was the way I felt. Still, I wonder, how was Tarumi going to interpret that comment? I was just thinking about that when all of a sudden, the strangest giggle left her mouth. Her expression was stiff, and her mouth now resembled a cream roll.

“Even... Even more so than the fireworks? Just kid-

ding. Ahaha.”

“Yep. You’re glittering”, I repeated, prompting Tarumi for some reason to cough in a very exaggerated manner.

So exaggerated that I couldn’t help but wonder, how was it that these comments appeared to her?

I mean, I wasn’t lying. She did shine.

The light itself was coming from Yashiro’s hair, sure, but we could just omit that part.

It was there, on a certain July day, that an old friend-ship was renewed under a sky filled with fireworks.

If I kept a diary, no doubt would this be what I wrote in it tonight. The thought kinda made me laugh.

“Shimamura.”

My voice trembled as I watched her walk into the distance.

The world around me began whirling, everything collapsing into a single vortex in the middle of which she stood.

Hearing the vivid voices of the three—four if you counted hers—caused me to grow unsteady. It was like I alone had been cut off.

For an instant, the lights of the fireworks above di-luted the darkness of the night, turning it azure.

Shimamura.

Bonus chapter: “Nagafuji: The Visitor - Part 1”

It was right in front of the store that I ran into Nagafuji, herself having just walked out.

She was carrying a large sack on her back, almost making her look like a burglar of sorts. Kinda strange, considering that it was her own house she was coming out of.

“Ah, Hino. Wasn’t expecting to meet you this soon.” An exclamation of glee left her mouth as she lifted her arms in the air. Compared to the cheerful tone of her voice, the way in which she moved her body seemed kinda unimpressed.

I took a hard look at both the sack as well as her reaction before stating the following:

“You were planning on coming to stay over at our house again, weren’t you?”

“Bingo.”

“Well, rejected. Turn back.”

Giving Nagafuji’s stomach a shove, the two of us re-turned inside. Her father was there. I found myself instinctively lowering my head as my eyes met with the

man's. Ever since I was young, I'd always called him Mister Meat. Apparently, the vertical line—almost like a tiny cut—that ran across Nagafuji's left earlobe was something she'd inherited from him.

Why did I know that? Well, it was something I'd noticed a while back as I was cleaning her ears after she'd spent the longest time pestering me to do so.

"Come on, it's fine, isn't it?" Nagafuji asked, placing her hands on my shoulders and pushing me back. The difference in physique between us made it difficult for me to stop her.

"No, it's not fine."

"I miss the sweet comfort of the air conditioner." "Listen, okay? Not today. We have too many guests." That was exactly why I had come here in the first place, to be freed from all that. We continued pushing each other back for a while, until eventually, I gave up on that and circled around her. I then rushed deeper inside the house before tossing off my hat and lying down on my side, making it clear that I had no intention of going anywhere. And yet, I still was in no position to let my guard down; knowing Nagafuji, I could easily imagine her deciding to go over to my house anyway, despite

me being right here. Though we had been together for years, that girl still managed to surprise me.

I wonder, what was the sack about? Why had she de-cided to go with that? Was it to match the old-fashioned atmosphere of our house?

Nagafuji continued orbiting around my head rest-lessly. The way she did it kinda reminded me of a cat who just kept on trying despite having been shooed away.

Hmm... I decided to do that, brush her off with my hand, only for her to actually go and meow like a cat. I have to be honest, it sounded pretty far off.

I was reminded more of the groan of a bullfrog. In any case, Nagafuji continued that for a while until even-tually sitting down next to me.

“Alright then. I guess not this time.”

“Why do you sound so proud of yourself?” I asked her, all the while turning the fan on using only my toes. I’d gotten pretty good at that.

The three blades began spinning, drawing a familiar shape of refreshment in the air. How many summers had it been in a row that I found myself face to face with it?

“Hmm, yeah. Right”, Nagafuji nodded in a very exag-

gerated manner, having now placed the bag down. "What?" I asked back, confused as to what it was she was responding to. Without answering my question, she lay down herself, securing a spot in front of the fan.

"I was just thinking, I see you pretty often during summer break, Hino."

"Huh? Umm, yeah."

All these years, and she'd finally figured that out? Seemed so. Then again, knowing her, it might be that she just kept forgetting. While I would never call Naga-fuji an idiot or anything like that, there were certainly times like these where I found myself questioning if there was something, how to put it, wrong with her memory.

"It's gonna be happening a lot more once the *Bon Fes-tival* rolls around. For work reasons. Wait, no... Family reasons?"

My big brothers were all coming back home, meaning that things were bound to get messy. While that by itself would've been fine and all, what made it extra annoying was the fact that they were going to be bringing their wives and—especially—children with them. Let me just tell you, there was no end to the annoyance that resulted

from me being made to interact with all of them individually. Were my big sister level as high as someone like Shimamura's, I might have been able to deal with it, but unfortunately for me, I happened to be the youngest child.

Anyway, for today, I'd left Goushirou to deal with them and myself run here.

He was the only one of my four brothers who was still single. I wonder, if he didn't find a wife soon, were our parents just going to pick one for him? Probably.

That was how our family was like. Personally, I didn't really care.

I took a look behind me and saw that the kotatsu had already been cleared away. It managed to last till June, but I guess everything has to come to an end eventually. Well, next year then. Speaking of, it sure had gotten hot in the meantime. The tips of my fingers felt like they were straight-up going to burn off as I fiddled with my hair. And yet, despite how it was right now, the blistering heat of the summer would eventually be replaced by chilling cold as winter rolled around. The fact that this cycle repeated itself every single year didn't make it seem any less surreal to me.

With each rotation, we grew older. Thoughts like those flowed through my mind as I turned my gaze up towards Nagafuji, once again orbiting around me. It was there that I noticed it; the massive shadow on my face was actually cast by her chest.

“What’s wrong? Were you looking for something but forgot what that something was?”

That happened pretty often with her. However, in the very next instant...

“Move! Out of the way!”

“Whoa!”

...Nagafuji came sliding in and crammed herself between me and the fan, like knocking me down. Was this a ramming attack? Or perhaps a body slam? I wasn’t quite sure; the angle made it hard to tell. Whatever the case, her forehead was left gliding across the tatami.

“Make way for Lord Nagafuji!”

“That’s quite the thing to say with your forehead bright red.”

With that done, she proceeded to sit down.

Flap, flap. That was the sound her limbs made as she tossed them about, bringing to mind the image of a fish stuck on land. Well, not that fish had limbs.

“Move already.”

“I’m bored. Let’s do something.”

“Yeah, no kidding you’re bored.”

“Also, I hit my chest when I did that, and now it hurts.”

“Come on...”

She only had herself to blame for that.

“In any case, what could we even do? It’s too hot for anything.”

Simply talking with her was tough this time of the year. And yet, it hadn’t always been like that; I distinctively remembered how back in the day, we used to cling to each other even during summer. Thinking about it now made my face turn slightly reddish. Brushing those thoughts away, I quickly averted my gaze. There, on top of the table, I noticed something. It was a flier. I reached for it and picked it up.

“Hmm? What’s this?”

The piece of paper was advertising a fireworks display, a common type of event during the season. Nearby restaurants were going to be having food carts there, and it was for that reason this flyer had been sent to Nagafuji’s house. As for our family though, I honestly couldn’t recall something like this ever being found in

the mailbox. We met with relatives all the time, to the point where just the thought made me nauseous, but never with our neighbours.

The one time I'd told my parents that I wanted to see fireworks, they'd taken me to a festival of a totally different scope somewhere super far away. It had been nice, yes, and while the fireworks were very pretty, I couldn't help but feel like something was missing.

Oh, but don't get me wrong. It was hardly a bad memory; on our way back, I'd been given shaved ice with adzuki beans to eat.

“Hmm... Tonight...”

We used to visit this particular festival every single year back when we were little. Not anymore, though; the line-up of sellers was always the same, and over time, I ended up growing bored of the whole thing.

As for the fireworks, you could see those through the window of Nagafuji's room.

“Festival, huh? Wanna go?”

I decided to ask her just in case. Done acting like she was hurt, Nagafuji now lay on her back, her eyes moving along the ceiling.

“Let's go once it cools down.”

“Sure.”

I put the flyer back on the table. Like I'd said earlier, the view from here was just as good.

“Oh, that reminds me”, Nagafuji stated hastily before leaping up. I gave her a quick glance, and after she was done staggering around, asked her the following:

“What now?”

“If I can't stay over at your place, then I have to make a dinner reservation.”

Mom, I could hear her yell as she ran off into the kitchen. “I'll have some too”, I yelled after her.

With Nagafuji out of the way, there was no longer anything blocking the air coming from the fan.

I watched as the piece of paper from earlier flapped up and down in its breeze.

For a second time, I picked it up and glanced at it. “Hmm...

Well, whatever. Nagafuji's room is way better anyway.”

There were no bugs here to bite me. No ocean of people to get stuck in.

Most importantly, I'd actually get to be with Nagafuji instead of having to spend the entire night looking for her after she got lost.

-Chapter 2-
Shimamura's Sword



She'd definitely picked up the call. I'd checked and made sure. And yet, for some reason, her voice sounded so distant. Unreal.

It was like right beside my ear, yet another spherical lump had been attached.

"So, even more silent today than normal?" Shimamura laughed in an awkward manner. I could practically feel her breath against my skin.

Just like normal. The tone of her voice usually never changed, and it was for the very first time here that I could pick up an emotion of this sort in it.

I'd been so irritated. The bottom of my stomach had grown stiff like an iron pan, and also just as hot.

And yet, I knew it made no sense to vent that anger on her. I'd done my best to push down the feelings boiling inside me, only for my mental state to completely crumble, my mind losing any resemblance of balance. Barely holding myself together as it was, I desperately searched for the right words to say.

For a thread of conversation which would see things proceed smoothly and calmly, have her tell me every-thing I wanted to know, and most importantly, free me from this horrible situation in which I found myself

trapped.

For something which I knew in the back of my mind didn't exist.

The soft blow coming from the air conditioner stroked my rolled back.

The sun was high up in the air, the gigantic clouds before it standing perfectly still as if that was where they lived, stirring up both the town and its people.

“Adachi? Seriously, what’s going on?”

She sounded genuinely worried about me.

I, too, wanted to ask her a question. Why? *Why?*

“Shimamura...”

Eight days had passed since I saw Shimamura that night.

Another large festival, second for the summer, had just taken place, and on the day following it, I—

This was what being dazed truly referred to, a state where the threads connecting your mind to your body had become loose, with your soul being left dragging behind you—assuming that was even something that existed. I still felt that way. That was how devastating the experience had been.

Shimamura had attended the festival with another girl. Stuffed in that tiny booth, I'd witnessed it with my own two eyes. Had she noticed me back? I couldn't imagine so. In any case, she'd been holding hands with her sister and that weird little girl with blue hair. Besides them, there had been one more person. A girl. A girl I felt I recognized from somewhere. Smiling softly, she'd walked alongside Shimamura, giving me the impression that the two knew each other. That they were close. What made it even worse was the name she'd called her.

“Shima.”

A nickname. She'd called her by a nickname. One so informal yet so perfectly natural at the same time. I still needed to call her “Shimamura” or else it sounded weird, but as far as that girl was concerned, she didn't. She was a step ahead of me. Just thinking about that, there being a person like that out there, her standing next to Shimamura, it made me feel like I was going insane. Like I was going to tear out my hair soon. Days had passed since then, and yet, all I wanted to do still was scream.

Were it not for the fact that I was working that night, I would have run after her. Well, I say that, but it was

very well possible that I might not have been able to do so anyway. That the sheer shock would've rendered me unable to move my feet. Or rather, to do anything at all.

There were definitely things like that out there, too devastating to fully take in.

The girl wasn't from our class. Shimamura didn't know her through a school club—she didn't participate in any. She also couldn't know her from work for the same reason.

Their friendship came from outside the part of Shimamura's life I was familiar with.

While I hadn't been looking for it, I'd now found an unknown side to her.

A similar thing had happened in the past. However, back then, the person she'd been walking with was Naga-fuji, and though the sight had definitely made me both super depressed and incredibly jealous, those feelings were nothing compared to the maelstrom I now found myself swallowed by. A thick cloud of haze—like the condensation of the summer's pleasant warmth—ate me up from inside. Imagine an extremely humid room which won't dry down no matter how much you lower the temperature. It was kinda like that. Nothing else

mattered anymore. Just this. Just this pain.

My body felt like it was dead, and it was only my mind which remained active, as if unable to forget the dazzling radiance of the fireworks.

I was so tired, so incredibly tired, and yet, I simply couldn't fall asleep. I suppose you wouldn't have been far off describing my current condition as insomnia.

Utterly incapable of making the time pass, I was left with no choice but to simply lay there, tormented by my thoughts.

Following the hands of the clock with my eyes didn't help me feel any less depressed, and eventually, I stopped looking at them altogether.

With my life having lost any resemblance of order, my days were now split into just two parts: daytime and night-time. Besides that distinction, the only thing etched into my mind was the time I was supposed to go to work. My body would get up automatically when the time came. There, I'd do the same stuff as always and then return home. I wonder, what did it say about my job that my efficiency went up when I stopped paying any attention? What did it say about me?

Was putting effort into things utterly meaningless?

Was it the case that I might as well not try?

Even as I lay there on my bed, I just couldn't stop thinking about my phone, currently sitting on top of my desk.

I really had hoped that she would call me.

That she'd offer an explanation. In some faraway corner of my mind, I had actually believed that, that we were somehow special. But, no. Shimamura hadn't called me. She hadn't even texted me. It was almost like I didn't have the right to check and see what was happening on the other side of the calendar. Just like my horrendous stomach pain, that had lasted for over five days now.

My face buried in my pillow, I could feel my eyes growing warm with tears.

I really had thought we were special. At least some-what.

In my hubris, I'd dared to think that she cared about me more than she did her other friends.

And yet, that wasn't the case. I'd been made painfully aware that all those assumptions were based on nothing but my own overconfidence.

As far as Shimamura was concerned, I wasn't special.

Not in the slightest.

I knew it was ultimately my own fault for getting my expectations up, I knew how selfish, how egotistical it made me look, but even so, I couldn't help but feel betrayed. *Fine, don't call me. See if I care.* In a stubborn fashion, I refused to admit my own mistake, instead finding myself harbouring a certain type of resentment towards her—resentment I knew wouldn't reach her, resentment I knew she would never even become aware of. Neglecting to charge my phone, I passed the time simply lying there, my mind void of any thought.

The list of things I wanted to do—none of which had been accomplished yet—fluttered in the soft blow of the air conditioner.

Truly, this summer break was horrible. And so was my complexion.

“...”

Three days passed before I was finally ready to give in.

Turning my back to Shimamura, living without her. That wasn't something I was actually capable of. It had never been.

There was also something else I'd realised: Take Shi-

mamura out of the equation, and my life suddenly became pretty hollow. Nothing ever happened, I never did anything worth mentioning. Really, were I to break my connection with her, the entirety of my remaining summer break could probably be summarized on a single essay paper without skipping past anything remotely meaningful in the process. If anything, you'd probably be left with tons of room.

Besides Shimamura, the current me had nothing. I was empty.

Were you to peel back my skin, you'd find not flesh and bones, but her. Shimamura.

And yet. *And yet.* I felt like I might start tearing out my hair soon. Simply allowing my mind to wander caused my eyes to grow wet with tears.

The fantasies I'd indulged in were not based on any-thing. I knew that. Even so. *Even so.*

Was it really that wrong, wanting to be rewarded?
Wanting your efforts to pay off?

Peeling my face off my pillow—now completely flat and crushed due to me spending the last however many hours lying on it—I reached for my phone, sitting on the corner of my desk as if forgotten there.

Did it even have any battery left? Unsure, I turned the device on before quickly navigating to the call log. It was empty. No one had called me.

The most recent name in the list belonged to Shi-mamura. Hesitating to click it, my finger remained just above the screen.

I did ultimately decide to click the button, but even so, I couldn't say that I'd done so with much confidence.

I wanted to back down, but it was already too late. All I could do now was wait for Shimamura to pick up.

“Hello, Adachi.”

The call immediately connected, bringing us to where we were earlier.

I was stuck. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't even bring myself to greet her back.

I still wasn't quite able to erase from my mind what the sound and light of the fireworks I'd viewed by myself had brought with them.

It all felt so, distant. It was like my eyes had become blurred, my ears stuffed.

“Shimamura, I...”

That girl, who was she. *Who was she.* I wanted to ask

her that. I wanted to know it. Why? *Why?* I wanted to ask her all these questions.

My mind continued rumbling like it was made of something combustible, like it might explode the second I let my guard down.

I decided to go ahead and stomp my right foot against the floor to see if that could help me relax.

“Yes? Oh, do you want to like, go hang out somewhere? Is that why you’re calling?”

It was so frustrating that my feelings weren’t conveyed to her over the call. So incredibly frustrating. I felt like I might soon scratch out my own throat if this kept up. To answer her question, I did. I did want us to go hang out somewhere. But, not now. Not before this. Placing my hand on top of my head, I squeezed my face tight, almost like embracing it. I could feel my mouth being filled with something bitter as I stood there, my face constricted by the boa snake which was my arm.

All the things I’d kept inside me were now pouring out, or at least a portion of them.

“You went to the festival, huh?”

I decided to go ahead and take a step forward, one which I knew could never be walked back. The insides of

my mind grew completely and utterly blank, as if visited by a flood of light.

I could barely see in front of me. Everything appeared blurry. My eyes weren't focusing on the same thing.

"With some girl who I don't know."

"Oh... You were there too, Adachi? Damn. I should've invited you after all then."

"No! I was, attending a booth. For the restaurant I work at. Chicken. We sold chicken."

It was only the palpitation of my heart which kept my voice in check. The surface of the ocean of emotion inside me had risen as high as it possibly could, and with each shake, more and more of its contents splashed outside.

I paused for a second. How was it that these incoherent thoughts sounded like to Shimamura?

"I see. Hmm, chicken... Oh, yeah. I remembered. Yashiro was totally charmed by the smell."

"You were there, with some girl who I don't know." I went ahead and repeated my earlier statement. Little by little, I was losing my focus, my ability to think. Only the most straightforward parts of my brain were

functioning at this point.

Like a child whose lexicon had run dry, I was left with no choice but to keep sobbing.

“Yeah, a friend of mine invited me. Umm, so, what about it?”

Shimamura’s words came out perfectly naturally. No guilt could be heard in them, no shame. She did hesitate a little, yes, but even so, it was clear that she was more trying to figure out how to accommodate my strange behaviour than anything else.

She wasn’t ashamed? Of course not. Why would she be?

From Shimamura’s perspective, there was no reason to think she’d done something wrong.

She’d just gone out with a friend. Simple as that. That was probably all she thought about it.

However, not me. As far as I was concerned...

No longer able to contain myself, all the things I’d tried to say but couldn’t began gushing out, dragging with them what lay in the very bottom of my heart.

“What about it? Well, why?”

“*Huh?*”

“Why? Who was that girl? Why did you go with her?”

Why didn't you tell me? Yes, I'm not friends with her, that's true, but even so, I do want to know more about you, Shimamura. I want to know you better than anyone else. I want to be close to you. Closer than anyone. So close. And yet, why?"

"Hey, Adachi, hold on—"

"I—I hate it when you laugh while I'm not there! I hate it when you hold hands with other girls! With someone other than me! I want you to be with me! The festival too, I wanted to go with you! While you were having fun, while you were laughing, I wanted to be there next to you! That's all I ever wanted! My head hurts while I keep thinking about you, always, it feels like it's going to explode! I keep waiting for you to call me, but you never do! Please, Shimamura. Can't you talk to me? Every once in a while? Can't you just call me? Why does it always have to be me? Don't you... Don't you care about me? Not even a little bit? Not at all? I'm nothing to you? Just a friend? Just a regular, normal friend? You don't want to be more than that, more than normal friends? Like, a whole step above it? I do. I do... Shimamura, please. Tell me what I'm supposed to do. Can you hear me? Are you listening to me? What's going through

your mind, what does my voice make you think about? Are you thinking about anything? About me? I don't care if you're worried, I don't care whatever it is, please, just think about me. I want it, I need it. Is it bad? Is it bad wanting someone to think about you? Shimamura! Shimamura... I need you, Shimamura. I don't have any-one else. I don't need anyone else... I only need you, Shimamura. Just you, just you. I'm not selfish. I don't care about anyone else. I don't need them. I want them to go away. So then, why? Why do you keep going away too, Shimamura? Please, come to me, come over my way. Stay by my side. Never leave me. I want to be by your side, me, me. Please, let me. That girl, I don't know her. And I'm scared of that. I don't want you to turn into someone I don't recognize. I want to know everything, all there is to know about you. Some things hurt to know, yes, but not knowing about them hurts even more. It hurts. Hurts, hurts... Shimamura. I wanted to invite you to hang out. I wanted to go to the festival with you. And yet, you went with her. That girl. Are you having fun with her? Are you two out somewhere right now? Shimamura, Shimamura... Hey, can you hear me? I'm the only one talking. It's been like that for a while now.

You usually talk a lot more. Why? Why isn't this like usual? Am I being weird? Well, yes. I know that I am. But, I can't help it. I want to know more about you, so much that it makes me act strange. I want to be with you, forever, wherever you go. I don't ever want to be separated from you. And yet, I know I'd start crying if I saw you. I am crying, right now. I can't stop thinking about that girl, about all the stuff you do with her. Hey, are you there? Are you listening? Do you like being with her more than you do being with me? Am I not good enough? What part of me? Tell me, and I'll change it. Please, tell me. Tell me. I promise that I'll change. I want to hear it, please. Shimamura. There are so many things that I do because of you, Shimamura. No way is there someone like you out there. I need you, Shima-mura. I need you. You. It has to be you. That's why I want to get closer to you. And yet... I want to talk about something else, something other than this stuff, but I just can't help it. I can't stop thinking about your smile. The way you smiled at that girl. I hate it, I hate it when you smile at other people. But, you don't hate me, right? Right? Shimamura, who do you like? Do you have a person you like? Is there someone who likes you? Do

you know it means, to like someone? Sometimes, I get really scared. I can't stop myself from thinking, why are you willing to spend time with me? Is it because we're friends? Friends. Yes, we're friends. We've reached that level already. When you think about me, do you see view me as a friend? Shimamura, Shimamura... Hnngh...

Please, let me hear your voice. I want to hear your voice. Shimamura, talk to me. I want you to, I want you to know everything there is to know about me. Things that no one else does. I want to know you, and I want you to know me. I want you to be the person closest to me, I want me to be the person closest to you. But, it's not so easy. Whenever something bad happens, I get totally crushed. No matter how minor. I don't have the will to keep going. It's just... It doesn't feel like... you even care about me, Shimamura. Like I'm not important to you. I know it's weird, it is, but I want to be important to you. That's important to me! I hate it when other people see you that way. I can't stand it. Please. Please...

Shimamura, do you ever think about me? We haven't met the entire summer break, yes, but have you thought about me at all, even once? Me, I can't stop thinking about you. I think about you all the time. You're the

only person, the thing I think about. You're the only thought in my mind. Please, Shimamura! Think about me too! Or what? Are we different? Yes, I know, we are, but still. But still... I keep waiting for you to call me. To text me. Anything. I waited, I waited, but eventually, I just wanted to call you myself. Even after you betrayed me, I still just wanted to call you. And I did. But now, I don't know what to do anymore. Tell me, Shimamura, what am I supposed to do? Shimamura? Are you there? Can you hear me? You're so distant, so far away. I want to see you. I want to see you in person. I want you to laugh, to pat my head, to tell me that everything will be alright. Where are you right now? Who is there with you? Is it that girl? Who is she? Who is that girl? Why won't you tell me when I keep asking you? Is she someone like that? Someone you can't talk about? What's your relationship with her? Are you two close? Closer than we are? No, no. I hate that. I don't want there to be anyone closer to you than me. Please, tell me it isn't so. Tell me that it isn't so! I think so much about you, Shimamura. Is it not enough? Do I need to think about you more? What should I do? I don't know. I have no idea. Everything I try keeps failing. Please, tell me, what do you want me to

do? I'll do it. I'll try my hardest. I promise I will. Really, I don't care about that girl. I don't. The Shimamura I want to see is different, I know that. It's just me who needs to change. Me. Only me. And yet... Shimamura. What are you thinking about right now, Shimamura? Do you think that I'm weird? That I'm strange? Talk to me, Shimamura. Talk to me. For once, you talk to me. It's always just me, me, me who's doing it. This is what happens when I have to do everything! I get like this! Shimamura, please. Please come to me. Do you hate me? No, no. Don't hate me. Please. I don't want that. Anything but that... Like me. Yes, like me. I want you to like me. Someone, please just like me. No, that's not it... Shimamura, do you... Do you hate that I like you? Do you hate me like Mom does? Will you stop talking to me? Will you look at me like you didn't know me? What should I say? What am I supposed to do? Should I jump up and down? Should I leap into the air? Should I take your hand? Everyone always does that, but if I do it, you won't look at me anymore. Tell me, what should I do? Tell me. Shimamura... Someone, anyone... I just want to hear your voice... Say something, make me feel safe. But, don't smile at someone else. I hate that. Smile at me. Me.

My head hurts. My stomach hurts too. I care about you, I cared about you so much, and yet, you wouldn't even call me. Please, think about me. I want to know more about you. I want to know everything about you. I... I know that I'm going in circles. That I'm just saying the same stuff again and again and again. But, I can't help it. I can't. You're the only thing I can think about. You're so important to me, so important. I don't want that to change. Look at me, please. It hurts me when you don't look at me. When you only look at other girls. I hate it. Are you going out with her again? Where are you going? Somewhere to hang out? Somewhere we used to hang out? With another girl? No. No! Don't erase me! Don't write over the stuff we did! I still remember, I remember it all, but if you write over it... then will it be different the next time? You look at something you know, but it looks different? No, no. No. No. Don't split the things we did together. It's not right. I'm not right. Not alright. I know that. And yet, I just can't get you out of my head. Even now, I just can't... Shimamura, Shimamura... Shima...

mura... Shimamura... Shimamura? Shimamura, Shi-mamura, Shimamura... I'm begging you, Shimamura. Please. Shimamura... Shimamura..."

The words just didn't stop coming out, and were it not for the tears which eventually filled my mouth, I really did feel like I would've been able to keep on talking forever. I'd taken a step down the hill, and it was now impossible for me to stop rolling. Even if we assume that Shimamura was waiting for me at the top, there simply was no way for me to get back to her.

I'd heard a voice inside my mind telling me that she was going to misunderstand everything. That she was going to start resenting me.

I was well aware of what this actually was: jealousy. Simple jealousy, nothing more than that.

I was jealous. So incredibly jealous.

I knew that getting angry at her wasn't going to accomplish anything, and yet, I just had no idea where else I was supposed to vent these emotions.

I'd fallen into a state of confusion where nothing made sense. All I could do was sob.

But. But. *But, but, but.*

"Sigh..."

I could hear a sigh on the other end of the call.

It was deep, a deep sigh. So deep it felt like my face had just been split into two with the sharpest knife in

the world.

And then, following that:

“What a pain...”

“Huh?”

A faint flash slipped past the arrows which were my words.

It was Shimamura’s sword. As if slicing through grass, she cut down my fervour in one, clean slash.

My head had been boiling mere moments earlier, but in an instant, it grew frozen, as if the season itself had changed.

Like rain, I could feel sweat running down my back. “*You kept talking on and on, so I just said, what a pain.”*

Shimamura’s plain, disinterested voice blew past me.

Though stiff at the best of times, it sounded even more so right now.

The droplets of sweat stopped. I felt almost detached from my senses, as if I could see in the corner of my eyes that my pupils were currently wide open.

My body wouldn’t do what I wanted it to. It was al-most like all the pain had caused my nerves to become

disconnected.

Leaving behind yet another large sigh, Shimamura ended the call. She hadn't said anything. She hadn't hesitated. No, she had simply ended it, like she couldn't be bothered to deal with me.

"Huh?"

Timidly, I pulled the phone away from my ear.

What a pain.

Shimamura's voice still lingered within the depths of my ears.

Meanwhile, the room before me continued swaying up and down.

My mind froze. I became unable to form any thoughts.

With both my eyes and tongue pointed in front of me, I just stood there, frozen.

My body had been shaking earlier, but even that stopped.

Everything stopped. I was dead.

Bonus chapter: “Yashiro: The Visitor - Part 8”

“Ooh, Shou. Where might you be heading?”

The first sound that reached my ears as I stepped outside was not the song of cicadas, but instead, the voice of Yachii. I quickly turned around.

It was extremely hot outside, so hot it almost seemed like even the outlines of the buildings were being warped. In the middle of it all, Yachii alone radiated with cool, blue light.

“Ah, Yachii.”

“Shou.”

Tap, tap, tap. We gave each other’s arms a series of quick taps. That was something we did always, no matter how warm it was outside.

Then, once that was done.

“I’m going to the pool”, I stated as a reply to her earlier question, all the while lifting the pool bag I was carrying high in the air. All this was met by Yachii simply tilting her head to the side.

“What’s a pool?”

“Huh? You don’t know? Well, umm... A pool is like,

when you have a lot of water and..."

It quickly dawned on me just how difficult of a concept this was to explain. Like, bathtubs were also filled with water, but those obviously were distinct from pools.

By the way, while we're on the subject, Yachii absolutely hated bathing, and whenever I suggested we go in, she'd always run away, forcing me to spend the next few minutes chasing after her.

I really liked washing her when we did eventually get in. It almost made me feel like I'd gained a little sister of my own.

"Are pools fun?"

"Hmm, yeah. They are. Fun."

I went out of my way to emphasize the last "u" there. Doing so almost made it look like I was smiling, and as if imitating me, Yachii grinned too.

Oh, I should mention, I was currently heading to my school. You see, they kept their pool open for the duration of summer. Well, I say that, but it was more like till mid-July—just before the start of the *O-Bon Festival*.

I remembered Mom saying that days were quickly running out.

"What about you, Yachii? Are you out? On a walk?"

I could see that she was carrying a water bottle with her. As for her outfit, she was wearing the same tall and narrow hat she often did, the one that looked like it was woven from tree branches.

Tiny leaves poked out through the gaps between them, overall giving the hat a pretty mysterious aura. I have to say, it went pretty well with her hair colour.

“Hehehe. Nothing that trivial, I assure you.”

“Going on a walk is trivial?”

“Compared to looking for my brethren, yes. That’s what I’m planning to do now.”

I’d completely forgotten, she added. Why was it that she sounded almost proud of herself?

“I should say, I’d originally planned to spend the next 300 years doing it, but since it’s so hot outside, I decided to shorten that to only three days.”

“Oh, really?”

The way she handled numbers really was all over the place.

“Now then, let us meet again.”

Tap, tap, tap. That was the sound Yachii’s feet made as she ran off into the distance.

She’d said what she wanted to say, and then left. Just

like usual.

“Hmm...”

Was she talking about like, a vacation? With her family? Must have been; I could hardly imagine her mom and dad being okay with her going somewhere for the duration of multiple days by herself. Not that I'd ever met her family or anything. I had never even gone over to her house to play.

There were still so many things that I didn't know about her. That was what I found myself thinking about as I stared at the strand of blue hair tied around my finger.

Often, I'd look at it when I was in bed at night. Seeing the faint light shining from it always made me forget about the flow of time.

I would also forget to breathe and even to blink. And yet, I didn't mind.

There was something about the slight twinkle which made it feel like I was being guided to stand before the aquarium.

A late wave of hot air surrounded me. As if to brush it off, I began walking forward.

“Three days, huh?”

I'd gotten used to seeing her every single day, and so, it made me kinda sad to think that I wouldn't be able to do so for some time.

I wasn't quite sure when it had happened, but at some point, Yachii had become an established part of my life.

Step, step, step.

"Ohh, Shou. Going to the pool again?"

Once again I ran into Yachii in front of our house. I wasn't sure why, but seeing her kinda made me feel relaxed.

Tap, tap, tap. Yep, it was Yachii.

Exactly three days had passed since I last saw her, and today, she was wearing a pyjama designed to resemble a lion. The hood was its head—albeit a bit spherical—and were you to pull it down, it'd look just like its fangs were being buried into your flesh. Wait, no; on a second thought, it was actually Yachii who appeared spherical.

"Yachii, you..."

You're being eaten alive.

"Did you buy that?"

"No, I received it."

Growling softly, she lifted both of her arms in the air

in an attempt to intimidate me. Hmm... While I was hardly a lion expert, I don't think this was quite what they sounded like.

Regardless, it was quite adorable.

"Although I wasn't able to find my brethren, I did come across a weird person who gave me this."

"A weird person?"

You must have been super weird for Yachii to call you that.

"Their head was all fluffy. Yes, very weird."

"Fluffy?"

"Like this."

Yachii went ahead and rotated her index finger in the air, as if expressing puffiness.

An afro?

"Hmm, hmm. A sheep person."

I was a little scared, but also kinda wanted to meet this person now. I mean, they couldn't be a bad person if they acted kindly towards Yachii, right?

Then again, like Yachii had said, they probably were weird.

I couldn't imagine Sis being for it were I to say to her that I was going to go meet a weirdo. Yeah, I think I'd be

better off not doing that.

Even so, I had to wonder, what was up with a sheep person handing out a lion pyjama?

“Those brethren or whatever, I’m sorry that you weren’t able to find them.”

“Yes, it certainly is regrettable”, Yachii nodded. “My brethren know very little about this world. I’m worried that they will be completely dried up by the time I find them.”

Again, you must have been super ignorant to have Yachii point that out.

“At the same time, it’s not all bad. Finding them does mean that I will have no choice but to return to space.”

“Hmm...”

At first, I simply ignored her remark, let it flow in one ear and out the other. I did that often. However, a mere second later, the gravity of it hit me. I hastily turned around.

“Huh? You... You have to go?”

“Correct.”

I wasn’t quite sure what she meant with going to space, but in any case, I got the feeling that Yachii would no longer be here.

“Well, in that case...”

It's good that you didn't find them.

While that was how I felt in my heart, I obviously wasn't able to say it out loud. Instead, I was left simply to shake my arms.

Yachii quickly did the same. Did she find it fun? Well, it wasn't fun. Not in the slightest.

There, under the scorching sun, I waved my hands in the air, the pool bag I'd been carrying having fallen onto the ground.

It took quite a while for the sweat to wash my mind clean.

-Chapter 3-
Are Souls Shared?



Everything I'd built up inside me had come out with force rivalling that of a landslide.

Wait, no, that was wrong; rather than being a natural disaster, it was me who had crumbled, collapsed. Exploded. That last description was especially apt considering that the whole incident had gotten its start in a single instant's time, almost like a firework going off. I'd been in the wrong. I knew that. Of course I did. Like-wise, I was also aware that it was me stepping over the line which had led to Shimamura pulling back and leaving me. And yet, I could only ask myself, what else was I supposed to do?

After all, none of what I'd said was untrue.

My cries, my actions, those were all things lurking in the depths of my being.

I knew that applying force only lead to friction, things getting out of hand. And yet, I couldn't stop.

In the end, this was how I was—a dirty firework.

Pick up the broken seashell fragments scattered all around and then let out a sigh. That was a pretty good description of what my days were like.

Once again I found myself sitting on my bed, my feet

stretched out, sinking into the ocean of heavy breaths.

I'd been doing that for three days in a row now.

While it was true that I was slowly starting to recover from the earlier disappointment, the pain of regret filling my chest, my heart, that had yet to go anywhere.

I'd not heard Shimamura's voice since then. We hadn't texted each other, either. I obviously didn't have it in me to contact her, and Shimamura, well, she hardly ever did it at the best of times. All I could do was lie there on my bed, my silent phone tightly in my grip.

It didn't seem like there was going to be an end to this; with every moment that passed, I felt myself falling deeper into the pit of melancholy.

Thinking about it, this was the very first time the two of us had fought.

Wait, no. Had we actually fought? Was I absolutely sure Shimamura hadn't just abandoned me?

That thought—the worst scenario I could ever imagine—had passed my mind multiple times, and yet, I still wasn't comfortable even entertaining the possibility. Quickly, I lifted my body off the bed.

No. Anything but that. Please.

Simply the thought of it caused my mind to scream

out and filled me with such a level of rejection that I felt like I might soon throw up.

Though the red line was being shredded, it still continued running from my head, as if being transmitted.

I needed to fix this. I needed to make peace with her. I wanted to do it. I wanted to return to how we'd used to be.

That meant that I had to call her. Or rather, text her. No, never mind; on a second thought, calling her was definitely the right choice after all. With every step forward I managed to take, I immediately took one back-wards. I found myself in a stalemate. I was stuck, unable to proceed.

And yet, I also knew that I couldn't keep on going like this.

Clouds flowed outside my window. I could also hear cicadas singing—even though there were supposed to be fewer of them around this year.

Time continued to flow even as I sat there, crouched down. While that was occasionally the right approach to take—to simply wait things out—I couldn't rely on it right now. You see, what time healed was sadness and pain.

Not love.

“Love...”

That concept, having randomly popped into my mind, immediately caused my cheeks to grow red. Calling it love was bit of an exaggeration. Or was it?

Valuing someone so highly that it hurt, yearning to know all there was to know about them.

I suppose you could call that love in the broad sense. Well then, in that case, yes, I was in love with Shima-mura. I loved her. No mistake about it.

Pushing back the indescribable levels of embarrassment filling me, I forced myself to look straight ahead. My neck was already starting to cramp.

It was this love (let's just call it that for now) which pushed me forward, telling me that I couldn't keep walking down this path, that I needed to do something.

Nothing was going to happen unless I stepped forth and talked to her. The keyword being “talk”; in the end, it was going to have to be a call.

My grip filled with determination, I began tapping the screen of my phone—slippery from the sweat which had dripped on it from my palms—pushing away all thoughts of hesitation as I navigated to the menu where

her number was displayed. Already, I was being eaten up from inside by tiny worms of anxiety; what if she had blocked me? What was I going to do then?

Would I be ready for the worst? Would I be able to give up if it came to it?

My mind was busy at work setting up defensive barriers as if to keep the resulting wounds to a minimum.

I swiftly tore them down, like brushing away spider webs.

Leaving the seventy or so messages I'd written but not sent behind to rot, I did it. I pushed the button.

I reached my hand out towards Shimamura.

Were she to reject me, turn me down, I wouldn't be ready for that. I couldn't guarantee that things would work out.

And yet, I had no choice but to go for it. There were many things in life like that, things you just had to be willing to do.

As far as I was concerned, Shimamura's presence was something I absolutely required if I wished to keep on going with my life—or at least my second year in high school.

Tortured by the beeping sound, I sat there, waiting

for the call to connect. I waited, waited and waited, until at last.

“Yes, hello?”

“Oooh.”

Before I knew it, both my eyes and lips had begun to quiver, pushing forth a wave of emotion which I really should have kept hidden.

My chest hurt. It felt like I was being crushed under an enormous weight, one which pushed me down against the surface of the bed.

While it was hardly rare for Shimamura’s voice to have such an effect on me, this time, the nuance behind it was slightly different.

My anxiety had gotten the better of me. The full lengths of both of my middle fingers were now numb, almost as if affected by a poison of some kind.

“Hello, Sakura. Are you there?”

No malice could be heard in Shimamura’s voice, no hostility. Taking not the slightest detour, she was speaking directly to me.

A wave of relief passed through my body. Though faint, it gave me just the reassurance I needed to be able to respond to her.

“H-Hello, umm, Shimamura. Yes, Shimamura.” “Huh?
What are you acting so stiff for?”

It was almost like I'd turned into a child and was now nervously examining the facial expression of an adult while talking to them.

Not exactly what was happening here, but also not far from the truth.

“N-Nothing... Shimamura.”

“*That's my name, yeah. So then, is something wrong?*”

Was something wrong? Yes, yes it was. And not just something, but a lot of things. I wouldn't have spent the last few days suffering otherwise.

And yet, as far as Shimamura was concerned, that appeared to be just enough time for her to stop worrying about it. Feelings of loneliness filled me as I was first-hand made to experience the gap between our understanding of the situation. With it also came hope; perhaps I would be able to do this after all.

I quickly readjusted the position in which I was sitting. The tightness I'd felt in my chest earlier was now starting to relax, leaving behind it the smallest cavity.

There was just enough room for my voice, my intentions to bounce around.

Act, I commanded myself.

“Shimamura.”

“Yes?”

If I’m being completely honest, I’d yet to stop thinking about the earlier events, the ones which had led us here in the first place. There were still so many things that I wanted to say to her. I was still brimming with anxiety. I still wanted her to explain it all to me. I knew acting like that was selfish, I knew that. And yet, there were times when I got angry. Times when I wanted to scream, cry, cling onto her, tell her to stop making me feel so scared. Times when allowing my mind to wander for even a second would cause my expression to crumble and tears to flow down my cheeks. I wanted to scold her, I wanted to learn to know her better, I wanted her to teach me about herself. In other words...

“I was thinking, I’d like to go hang out somewhere.” Despite the turmoil raging on in my head, what came out were those words.

Why was that? I didn’t know; having no experience in that regard, I was left guessing.

Honestly, looking at the situation at hand, it really was like I was begging my mother to take me somewhere,

wasn't it? I'd certainly begun to see it that way.

Gripping the phone tight, I waited for her to reply.

While earlier it had been just my palms, now, my entire body was covered in sweat.

"Okay, sure. I don't mind."

In complete contrast to mine, Shimamura's voice sounded both cool and relaxed.

She accepted my suggestion without any hesitation, like an electric fan leaving behind a breeze, like a person shaking their head and pulling away.

Huh?

Things were proceeding smoothly, far more so than I had ever expected. That was most certainly a good thing overall, no doubt about it, but even so, I couldn't help but now find the situation a bit eerie instead.

It was almost as if the events of the other day were being erased from existence, brushed under the carpet. My brain raced as it tried its best to make sense of what was happening here.

"So, are we going today?"

"Huh? Oh, umm... No. Tomorrow. Let's go tomor-row."

While there was a part of me that would have liked

nothing more than to see her straight away, I also knew that I needed some time to calm down unless I wanted to completely embarrass myself.

Aren't you always embarrassing yourself? I could hear a voice ask in the distance. I chose to ignore it.

"Hmm, hmm. Tomorrow, huh? Alright. Do you have anywhere in mind you'd like to go to?"

I did. I most certainly did. Reaching for my desk, I grabbed the list I'd written earlier. I then took a hard, long breath. Okay, this was it. This was what it had all been leading to.

"Umm, shopping. Shopping comes first."

"Okay."

"After that, the pool."

"Okay?"

"Then, I'll come over and stay the night at your house. If... If that's okay."

I proceeded to go down the list, reading off one item at a time. Oh, wait; I'd been so excited that I accidentally skipped over holding hands.

Whatever. I could simply add that later while we were doing the other stuff. Yeah, just watch me.

"This sounds so... structured. Like you were reading a list,

almost."

A very keen observation, I had to say; I did have a list in my hands, and it was in fact well-structured. Full marks on both accords.

Of course—and this went without saying—that didn't make my passion any less genuine.

"Going to the pool is fine with me, but are you sure that you want to stay over again? The room upstairs doesn't have an air conditioner."

"That's... That's fine. I'm actually good at dealing with heat. Yeah. Doesn't bother me."

Really? Was that the case? The words coming from my own mouth managed to shock even myself.

"Weird. I remember you always complaining about it when we used to hang out at the sport hall."

"I've, umm... grown since then. Right, I've grown a lot in the past year. I'd love to show my progress to you, Shimamura."

Hehehe, I added in a desperate attempt to smooth over my strange statement.

"Hmm... Well, I suppose it'll be fine. Your face does have a tendency to grow pretty red."

What exactly was that supposed to mean and why

had she felt it necessary to point it out? I didn't know; her words were as difficult to parse as always. Whatever the case, there was certainly truth to them; even now, I felt like I might start blushing at any moment.

While the road there had been a bit bumpy, ulti-mately, I'd managed to get Shimamura to allow me to stay over at her house. Feeling relieved beyond words, I gave the list I was holding a long, hard look. Putting it together truly had been worth the effort. There sim-ply was no way I would've gotten this far had I been stumbling from the offset. Honestly, I'd kinda expected that to happen, for me to fail. I wonder, why was it that everything was going so smoothly?

We went on to agree on where and when we were going to meet, and after talking for a bit more, I began to anticipate that Shimamura might soon end the call.

"Alright. Well, see you tomorrow then."

"Right. Oh, umm, Shimamura..." I mumbled, cling-ing onto her voice before it managed to grow distant.

"Yeah?"

She was back. Back to me.

"I was really happy to hear your voice. To be, err, able to talk to you."

It was my hope that telling her this would stop her from once again putting distance between us.

Would that work? No, probably not; the anxiety filling me made it impossible for me to imagine that things might go that well. And yet, I still couldn't help but do it.

"The pleasure was all mine."

With that comment and a short laugh which followed, she finally hung up, this time for real. The fact that she had trouble ending calls once again proved to be a positive.

That said, there was no denying that it made me hor-ribly sad to no longer be able to hear her voice.

I stayed like I was for a short while after the call, my arms fixed in place, unable to move.

Why? Because I was unsure if things had really gone as well as I thought they had. I lacked confirmation.

Everything had happened so fast that it just didn't feel real. One moment, we'd fought, and the very next instant, the matter had already been resolved without me actually doing anything. Making peace with someone normally required at least some amount of effort, and yet, with the way things were right now, it almost felt like we'd skipped straight past all of that.

Like we'd simply moved along from one topic to the next.

This flimsy foundation left me with nothing to place my confidence on.

Was this it? Had everything truly been taken care of? Thoughts like those flowing through my head, I found myself shaking my phone in the air.

“Seriously...”

I remained unsatisfied. In the back of my mind, there was this feeling, sensation that I'd overlooked something.

It was almost like I was staring at an exam paper which I'd returned blank, yet still managed to get full marks on.

I continued racking my brain over it for some time, but that turned out to be of no use; I simply wasn't able to make sense of the true nature of the discomfort I was now feeling.

“Ah...”

Going through the list of all the things I wanted to do before school started again, I realised something, some-thing very important: I'd forgotten to make concrete plans in regard to the whole summer festival situation. Even so, though certainly a big concern, that didn't ap-

pear to be the source of these feelings either. No, there was something else stuck in my throat.

Whatever the case, this was no time to be worrying about such things. I decided to shift my focus elsewhere.

To concentrate only on what I did know.

That being that tomorrow, I was going to visit the pool with Shimamura.

Immediately, I got up to go buy myself a swimsuit. I could feel my very cells overflowing with energy as I ran outside, too busy to even remember to take my wallet with me.

Shimamura was pouring life into me.

It'd taken me this long, but at last, I realised that really was the best way to put it.

There were few people out there who didn't gain joy from receiving things.

It was natural to want to be loved, to see someone else enjoy themselves.

Gifts were those feelings given form.

While I had managed to talk myself into it using those sorts of arguments, looking at it now, I couldn't help but wonder, was this really the right choice?

Just the act of moving my shoulders caused the sweet fragrant tinged with excitement to sail into my nostrils.

Grasping the bouquet, I stood there by the mall's entrance—the place we'd agreed to meet at.

It was currently the day after our phone call.

“...”

I'd ultimately settled on a flower bouquet after what felt like an eternity of struggling to reach a conclusion.

Simply looking at it caused lines of cold sweat to run down my back.

It was a pretty bold thing to do, wasn't it, giving a friend you were going out with a gift in the form of a bundle of colourful flowers? Really, there was barely need to think about it; this obviously went far over the line. I could see as much myself after calming down a bit, and yet, here I was. That was a pretty common occurrence with me, I'd noticed; I'd often plunge into directions which surprised even myself when trapped in the whirlpool of bewilderment.

Picking out the right path to follow was difficult to do when you were lost. I knew that to be the case, obviously I did. Even so, I had to say, it was quite the problem how far I tended to stray off course it at times. There

was something wrong with my sense of direction—or simply, my good sense.

The parking lot was full of cars that day. Was that due to it being summer break? Probably. Families and what looked to be groups of students walked in and out through the door next to me, occasionally giving me glances as I stood there by myself with a flower bouquet in hand. I wonder, from their perspective, did it look like I was waiting for someone famous, a celebrity? I suppose there were certain elements to that which weren't so far away from the truth.

I could only blame myself for buying the flowers, but besides them, there was also another source of worry which continued giving me trouble.

What sort of face was Shimamura going to make? While she'd sounded just like usual on the phone, that did little in the way of soothing my concerns. The surface of my chest was quickly being eroded by anxiety.

Was she angry at me? Would she act distant, treat me coldly?

I simply wasn't able to move my attention away from the issue. Assuming that the fault lay within me, what I needed to do was apologize from the bottom of my

heart. At the same time, I also kinda got the feeling that this had more to do with the mismatch between our values, how we saw the world. If that was the case, could the situation even be resolved?

Glancing at the corners of the parking lot to see if Shimamura had arrived, I was left with no choice but to pray that it could be.

The song of cicadas coming from the trees planted near the mall filled my ears. It was almost as if each and every one of them was its own musical instrument. They alone disturbed the stagnant heat brought upon by the blazing sun, taking the place of the wind which had long since stopped blowing. Listening to them, I could feel the backside of my tongue growing dry.

Shimamura was nowhere to be seen. That made sense; I'd arrived way earlier than what we'd agreed upon.

While this was certainly a common occurrence, the reason I'd done so today was slightly different from the norm. It'd been anxiety which pushed me forward, forced me to move.

As for happiness, well, I suppose that was on its way. Time continued to pass as I stood there, the sweet

fragrance of the flowers doing little in the way of sooth-ing me. How much longer would I have to wait for? I took my phone out and checked. As it turned out, the answer was thirty minutes. There were still thirty min-utes left till our agreed-upon time of meeting. I began putting the device away, but just then, I saw something, something which almost caused me to fall on my back-side; there was a person in the distance waving at me. Focusing my eyes on it, I could see that this figure be-longed to Shimamura, carrying not just the satchel she usually did but also an additional bag on her shoulder. How early. We weren't supposed to meet for another, err, thirty minutes. Right. And yet, she was already here.

I wonder, why was it that simply seeing her caused my heart to pound so fast? Why did it make me so excited?

There was quite a bit of distance between us, but even so, the instant our eyes met, my stomach grew tense. My shoulders became stiff.

Visibly nervous, I waited for her to walk to me, for-getting even to blink.

“Yo.”

“Hello...”

In direct contrast to Shimamura's light greeting, the

way I nodded my head was extremely heavy.

My already stiff shoulders tensed up even further. Now standing next to me, Shimamura lowered her hand before shifting her attention to the flowers.

“What’s that?”

“Huh? Oh, umm... Here”, I mumbled as I held them out to her. She appeared very confused, but even so, didn’t hesitate to accept my offering.

I had to say, compared to the nervous wreck that was me, the flowers matched her way better. They really did. I found it difficult to look away.

“Again, what’s this?”

How was I supposed to answer her? The individual words were all there in my mind, and yet, when I put them together, all I managed to form was this flower bouquet.

“Is it like, I’m being congratulated for something? But what? Did I hit my 2000th ball? Escape the gamble ship alive?”

“I... I figured we should commemorate the fact that we made peace, and so...”

A path forward at last unveiled itself in front of me. On the other side of the field of flowers, Shimamura

tilted her head slightly.

“Made peace?”

“Huh?”

Her reaction didn’t sound exactly favourable. Slouch-ing forward, I could feel a wave of cold sweat travelling down my back.

Could it be, had she not forgiven me yet? I stared at her for a few moments with my breath held, until soon...

“Oh.”

...a sound indicating that she’d figured something out left Shimamura’s mouth. Her eyes grew narrow in a slightly awkward fashion as she looked at me.

“Right. Yeah. I guess we did kinda have a fight of sorts, huh?”

Had she not been aware of it herself? That was the impression I was left with. Whether that was ultimately a good thing or not, I had no time to think about as soon, Shimamura continued speaking, the bundle held in a slightly upwards angle.

“Well, it’s all good now. Back to being friends.” “Right”, I nodded in a grandiose manner. It was the only thing I could do.

Just like that, the matter had been dealt with. It was

so... easy. And I didn't mean biting through a fresh salad leaf easy, but rather, easy in the dull way. Dull and dry.

"I think this might be the first time I've ever received flowers."

"Oh, really?"

"I guess there aren't many opportunities for that if you usually get along with everyone."

That was true. Personally, I didn't remember ever being given any either.

Still, Shimamura's first time, huh? I could feel the corners of my eyes sparkle as I thought about that.

"All I got after leaving the school club I used to be part of was one lame bottle of juice", she commented while lightly tapping the paper wrapped around the flowers.

"I see..."



“Now, more importantly, just look at you, Adachi. You’re all sweaty. You really should’ve waited inside.”

Want to use it? she added while offering me a hand towel. I accepted the offer, but instead of doing anything with the towel, I simply gripped it tight before opening my mouth:

“Shi—”

“Shimamura, yes, present.”

Swiftly, she reached in and stole the word straight out from my mouth. Was it really that obvious to tell? Did I always say the same things?

“I wanted to see you as soon as possible.”

I grew increasingly aware of my ears as I spoke. They were so warm at this point that they practically tingled. Honestly, I was kinda surprised that they could still keep getting warmer.

My head hung, I glanced up at Shimamura to gauge her reaction, only for her to state the following:

“As soon as possible? I’m not sure if being behind the door really would’ve made that big of a difference.”

“Every step counts”, I spoke quickly, as if interrupting her. My shoulders had become slightly elevated. “Every step counts...”

That's how badly I wanted to see you, I tried to add, but the words refused to come out.

Instead, my lips were left to tremble, forming an incomprehensible mixture of different sounds.

It was no longer possible for me to look at her straight. Quickly, I shifted my attention away. This turned out not to have quite the effect I'd wanted, however, as immediately afterwards, Shimamura began staring at me instead. I was left in a state of shock, prompting her to take back the towel she'd given me moments earlier and wipe my forehead for me. Naturally, this only made me even more flustered, and as I stood there all stiff with my mouth wide open, Shimamura moved down towards my neck, wiping it clean of sweat as well. My eyes were left spinning in their sockets, following suit with my voice in trying to convey an emotion but failing to do so.

Coupled with my complexion, I wouldn't blame any-one from thinking that I was currently suffering from a heatstroke.

"Oh, umm, speaking of... You came kinda early today, huh?" I decided to point out, completely ignoring the fact that I myself had done the same.

"Yep. I figured you'd show up early too, Adachi."

Once again, Shimamura had acted in accordance to what she thought I was going to do. She had been spot on like usual, yes, but even so, it kinda felt... wrong.

I was left with the impression that, rather than actually seeing what was going on inside my head and understanding my thought processes, she was merely scratching the surface.

This all went to explain why I wasn't trembling with joy at the present. No, I was only moderately happy.

"Okay, all sweat-free now."

"Thanks..." I mumbled as I lined up next to her, moving fast with tiny steps, almost like a chicken. This alone was apparently enough for Shimamura to guess what I was planning to do, and before I could even say anything, she lifted her right hand and held it out to me.

"Here."

How many days had it been since I had last touched her? The mere thought of that caused the insides of my chest to swirl.

"If only my little sister was this honest."

"Huh?"

"Nothing", she stated before quickly turning forwards.

Looking at her, the flower bouquet held against her

chest while her other hand was wrapped around mine, she really did seem like a person straight out of a painting.

I found it impossible to avert my eyes.

“Seriously, what is this?” Shimamura repeated her question from earlier. She wasn’t talking about the flowers this time, but instead, about herself, the entire situation at hand.

Softly, the bouquet swayed.

Did she not enjoy this? Was she feeling uncomfortable? Baseless worries such as those quickly began creeping their way into my mind. That didn’t last very long, however, as thankfully, a smile soon appeared on her face, bringing with it a wave of relief.

While I didn’t have the list of things I wanted to do with me, my fist still clenched tight as if gripping it.

We ended up dropping by Shimamura’s house real quick before going shopping.

Why? Well, after talking for a bit, she’d come to the conclusion that it would be for the best to get the flowers in a bowl before they went bad.

“It’d be a real shame if they withered away after you

went through the trouble of getting them for me. Also, if I'm being honest, it's kinda difficult to walk while holding them."

"Bu—"

"Don't worry, we've got plenty of time", she laughed, as if predicting what I was about to say. By reflex, my lower lip relaxed.

Shimamura had laughed at me.

An emotion of warmth filled me, warmer than even the abnormally hot summer. Were the concepts of "warm" and "hot" something that could be felt sepa-rately? I'd never really thought about it before. Just like that, my eyes had been opened to a new, mysterious aspect of being a human.

With Shimamura riding on the back of my bike, we headed towards her house.

Warmth wasn't the only thing I felt; occasionally, a droplet of cool sweat would roll down my skin as well.

"Ah, back already", Shimamura's mother greeted her in the entrance as she entered. The woman had been busy cleaning shoes by the looks of it.

I couldn't help but feel like this exact thing had hap-pened before. Pushing those thoughts aside, I walked in

after Shimamura and bowed my head slightly. "Oh my. Welcome."

"Don't get too excited. We only came to drop these flowers I was given."

"Flowers? By who?"

Shimamura pointed her jaw towards me in response. My eyes met with her mother's, and immediately, I felt like running away.

"Wait, today's not your birthday, is it?"

"Yep, it is. Now hurry up and give me my birthday money", Shimamura stated coldly while holding out her palm. This was obviously a lie, and instead of money, what she received was a bite mark on her middle finger; apparently, the woman had seen through her trickery and decided to respond accordingly.

"Eek!" Shimamura screamed as she quickly drew her hand back. As for her mother, well, I could hear her cackling to herself as she ran away, almost like a criminal escaping the scene of their crime. The way she moved had been extremely swift, giving me the impression that the two did this sort of stuff on the regular. Having now recovered from the shock of being bitten, Shimamura turned her attention to me while scratching her head

awkwardly.

“Umm, so... You get along pretty well, huh? You and your mother?”

“Really? Personally, I don’t think that we do most of the time”, she objected in a slightly stiff voice. Mean-while, her mother returned.

Instead of a dust cloth, what the woman had in her hands now was a blue flower vase with a long and narrow neck.

“Here’s the vase. I also put water in.” “Yeah, I’m not blind. Anyway... Thanks.”

With those words, Shimamura quickly took the vase and placed it on the nearby shelf.

“Oh, and so that you know, Adachi’s going to be stay-ing over tonight.”

“Hmm”, the woman mumbled in response before turning her eyes my way. Reflexively, I pulled my jaw in, prompting a smile to appear on her face.

“Help Hougetsu with her studies, will you?”

“Huh?”

What did she mean by that? Immediately, I looked over to Shimamura as if seeking answers.

Could it be, did her mother have a slightly wrong

impression of me?

“Come on. I’ve been better about that lately.” “Hahaha. Brat”, the woman laughed, giving but a glance at her daughter’s pouting face before dashing away from the scene. You could tell just by looking that Shimamura didn’t find the situation at all funny. Regardless, what she did next was undo the paper wrapped around the flowers and place them next to the vase.

There was something about her mother that was difficult to put to words.

The way Shimamura acted like a child in front of her, it really made it clear that she was her daughter.

Child to her mother, big sister to her little sister. I wonder, what sort of shape would she assume before me?

“Well, whatever. Let’s just take care of these flowers quick.”

“Right.”

Standing next to her, I watched as Shimamura took the flowers and inserted them into the vase. It didn’t take her long, and after she was done, I shifted my focus down the hallway; for a while now, I’d felt like someone was staring at me.

That someone turned out to be none other than Shimamura's little sister. Her gaze was not one that could reasonably be interpreted as being friendly, and as I stood there being pierced by it, I found that my neck had instinctively shrunk in. She was like a small animal, staring inside from within the darkness. I distinctively remembered feeling this exact sensation before.

Mainly in front of the mirror.

I stared at the girl for a moment, when all of a sudden, I noticed it; something flashy and blue could be seen behind her head, almost as if she was wearing a wig but only on the backside. Looking at it more closely, it actually turned out to be the hair of that weird creature I'd met a few times before.

"Hey, Yachii, that's no good. You stand out way too much", Shimamura's sister exclaimed while pushing the girl back, only for her to respond by doing the exact same. The efforts of the two cancelled each other out, leaving even their faces to become squished as they squeezed against each other. Even so, they just kept going, not really making any progress one way or another. Was this something kids did for fun?

"I'm not sure when it happened, but my sister really

has become good friends with that weirdo", Shimamura commented, all the while continuing to work on the flow-ers. Her head then turned as she shifted her attention from the girls to me.

Immediately, my body grew tense.

"I guess you could say the same about me."

With that short statement, she once again returned to the flowers.

It took me a few moments to process the meaning behind her words, but as the truth dawned on me, it really did take me by shock.

Did Shimamura see me as being weird? Did I fit the definition of a weirdo in her eyes? I mean, sure, I'll concede the point and agree that I was a little strange, but it wasn't anywhere near the level of that girl and her blue hair, was it? Flustered, I turned my eyes her way.

She was currently busy rubbing her soft cheek up and down against the face of Shimamura's sister. The cheeks of the latter were likewise puffed and her ears were red, making me wonder how dissatisfied she really was with the situation at hand. Quite the thing to do in this heat. Then again, if I was given the opportunity to do that, rub my face against Shimamura's, would I really care

if it was the middle of the summer? Hmm... Wait, no. What had we even been talking about?

“Okay, I’m done. Thanks for the flowers, Adachi”, Shimamura thanked me, now folding the paper the flowers had been wrapped in.

I tried my best to act cool. It was quite difficult to do so, as in reality, simply hearing those words come out from her mouth made me ecstatic.

“Right. Yeah, good. I’m glad. As long as you enjoyed them, then that’s all that matters.”

So much for “acting cool”... Then again, as far as I was concerned, I suppose it wasn’t a half-bad attempt.

“It was shopping first, right?”

“Oh, umm, yeah. But, it doesn’t really matter. We could go to the pool or whatever first if you’d like.”

Totally fine by me, I gestured by raising the bag which held my swimsuit. Extending her neck as if to circle around said bag, Shimamura took a long look at me.

“You sure are a big fan of the pool, huh, Adachi? It’s almost as if you had an obsession over it.”

“Huh? Well, it’s... It’s really warm outside. And the water is... cool? Yeah, I like that, that it’s cool.”

Not obsessed about seeing you in a swimsuit, no, I waved

my hand in the air.

It would make me look extremely suspicious were I to actually say something like that out loud. Even I knew that. It was the reason why I didn't do so.

Of course I didn't.

"I'm just wondering since you always fake being sick so you don't have to do sports in school."

"That's... different."

The fact that I was going with her was what gave it meaning.

While we were talking, Shimamura opened the door. She then stepped outside into the summer, and with her eyes glaring at the scorching sun, spoke the following:

"Well then, off to the pool we go."

"Right."

I went ahead and pasted a sticker on the mental copy of the list of all the things I wanted to do that I had stored in my head.

"Which pool are we going to?"

"Umm... Do you have any specific one in mind, Shimamura?"

While I had looked up pretty much every single pool in the entire town beforehand, I did want to hear Shi-

mamura's opinion as well.

"Do I have one in mind? Well, if you're fine with an indoor pool, then yeah, I do know a place."

Oh, but, she quickly added while glancing at me, her eyebrows knitted together. Why did she do that? I wasn't sure. It almost seemed to me like she'd remembered something.

"No, actually, I'm not sure. Is that a good idea after all? Should we really go there?"

What was she talking about? Again, I didn't really know, but based on the way she stared at me while re-peatedly doubting herself, I couldn't imagine that it was anything positive.

"I'm fine with anywhere you want to go, Shimamura." "No, no, that's not what I mean. Still... Whatever. It'll probably be fine."

It's cheap. And it's close, she listed as reasons. "You said you were fine with anywhere, right?"

A grin appeared on her face as she repeated my words from earlier back to me.

I really wanted to ask her what was up with the pool to make her hesitate that much. And yet, I couldn't; my mouth had been sealed shut behind a forced smile.

Shimamura sure was scary.

Through such a course of events, we began making our way towards the pool of Shimamura's endorsement. I was pedalling like usual, with her once again riding on the back. It really did bring me joy feeling her weight against my shoulders.

"..."

The bike moved forward as if nothing was wrong. There we were, Shimamura and I, travelling together under the summer sun. At a glance, everything looked the same as before.

Under the surface, however, I had so many things that I wanted to ask her, things that I couldn't stop thinking about.

For example, who was that girl she'd been with? Wait, no... Thinking about it some more, that really was the only question I had. There were detours and shortcuts to be taken, yes, but in the end, all of them led to the same point—to that question.

I wanted a confirmation. I wanted to make things clear. Regardless of what the answer was going to be, I just had to know.

And yet, I also felt like were I to start questioning

her with as much passion as before causing her to hang up on me again, then that would be it. For good this time. The two of us had yet to build a solid connection...

or something. We were like two islands, separated by the sea. Leaves floating in a river, overlapping by mere chance. We'd spent a pretty long while together, yes, but that didn't mean that it would last; the smallest change in current, the slightest gust of wind could easily push us apart.

That was the kind of relationship we had—one which never allowed me to feel safe.

It was exactly why I thought so fondly of the weight of Shimamura's hands on my shoulders.

For a brief moment, it connected me to her.

Having been guided by Shimamura, I now found myself standing before a sports gym.

A sign made of white and blue greeted us. I had to say, the colour scheme they'd chosen to go with certainly was refreshing. There were two parking lots, separated by a thin pathway, both filled to the brim with cars. Sunlight reflected off their roofs, making it so that wherever I looked, it always found a way to get into my eyes.

“My mom comes here often.”

“Oh, I see.”

Having just taken her bag out from the basket of my bike, Shimamura grew stiff for a moment. Then, she took another look at me before stating the following:

“My mom does.”

Why had she felt it necessary to repeat herself? I stared at her confused, unable to figure out the reason for it, only for her to respond with a short giggle.

“Let’s get going.”

Simply looking at her, I could feel blood tinged with both excitement and tension running through the backs of my hands.

I was being rejuvenated.

According to Shimamura, her mom was a full member here, meaning that she was able to buy pool tickets really cheaply. There was also another reason why she preferred this place, that being that not many people came here. I could certainly see the logic behind that; considering the time of year as well as the weather, outdoors pools must have been jam-packed with people. From that point of view, this did seem like the best choice.

We walked past the reception desk and headed right towards the changing room as indicated.

Immediately after the turn there was a glass window, behind which I could see the pool. My eyes had grown adjusted to the brightness outside, and while the lack of light did mean that I had to squint to do so, I ultimately managed to make out the figures of couple of elderly people swimming around in the darkness. Shifting my attention towards the back wall, I spotted a few more walking along it. Everyone I saw was either elderly or middle-aged, giving me the impression that young people were a rare sight around here. Then again, thinking about it some more, it was a regular weekday today. Yes, we students were free to enjoy the summer break, but normal people, they still had to go to work. As such, it was only natural for there to not be any young adults around; if any of them wanted to come from a swim, they'd have to do so during the evening.

“There’s a sauna in the back too. Well, not that we can go there with the tickets we have.”

I see, I nodded my head slightly. I wasn’t really interested in that anyway.

Simply walking outside already made me sweat like

crazy as was. Didn't need a sauna for that.

We passed by a vending machine, when all of a sudden, Shimamura pulled to a halt. Wondering if she was planning on purchasing something, I stopped too. That turned out to not be the case, and what she did instead was state the following:

“There’s a sauna too.”

Again, the words that came out from her mouth were an exact repeat of what she’d just said. What was up with her?

It felt like today, Shimamura was acting about 20 percent more odd than usual.

We then entered the changing room. Staring at the lockers, a certain fact resounded loudly within my head.

A fact which had chased me down, passed me, and then hardened up to form a wall which now blocked my way.

Was I really going to be changing clothes in the same room as Shimamura?

There shouldn’t have been any problems with that. It should have been perfectly normal. And yet, simply thinking about it, I couldn’t help but feel strangely self-conscious. I mean, if you were to ask me whether or not

I wanted to see Shimamura naked, then no, the answer would be no. I wasn't like that. I wasn't. Even so, I wonder, why was it that I felt so embarrassed? Why was I unable to grasp the real reason behind my body's writhing?

The keys we'd been given were nearly adjacent in terms of number, albeit separated by a single locker. This left me with little room to hide. Hide what? Neither of us could do it. Again, what was I talking about? My hands shaking, I turned the key and opened my locker.

I watched with the corner of my eye as Shimamura placed her bag down. Why? Why was I looking at her?

Where were these emotions running through me coming from?

Using this philosophical question as a segue, I attempted to focus my mind away from such worldly desires. And yet, I couldn't. My heart simply kept on pounding.

Shimamura pulled down her clothes. What was revealed underneath was a swimsuit.

“...”

It appeared that she'd already been wearing it under her clothes by the time she left her house.

“.....”

Currently in the process of putting a swimming cap on, Shimamura turned her eyes towards me.

“What is it?”

“Oh, nothing...”

I shook my head. I shook it real hard. I just kept doing it, purposefully making it so that it was hard to tell what exactly I was saying no to.

“Oh, are you thinking that it’s kinda childish to come already wearing a swimsuit?”

A vague laugh left Shimamura’s mouth as she read-justed the shoulder straps.

“No, that’s... I guess. I guess it kinda is.”

Yeah, let’s just go with that. Why not.

I could hear Shimamura laugh once more as she turned her eyes away, almost as if embarrassed. It was quite rare to see her act like that.

“Doing it this way is just so much easier that it’s kinda become a habit of mine.”

“Ahaha...”

Haha.

I was pretty surprised to see her wearing a school swimsuit. Wait, no; what I meant to say is, I wasn’t like

that.

Her goggles sitting firmly on top of her swimming cap, Shimamura now waited for me. Also, and I wasn't sure why she was doing this, but she had her arms crossed for some reason. A different gush of emotions rushed upon me this time: Was I really about to undress in front of her? Undress. In front of. Shimamura. My thoughts became disjointed and my face grew warm, almost as if I'd stuck my head into a cloud of hot mist.

I could feel my body becoming even more stiff as I stood there, gripping the hem of my shirt.

No. No, no.

There was absolutely no reason for me to feel this anxious. Forcing myself to believe that, I removed the top layer of my clothes before placing my hands on my underwear.

The image which appeared to me was that of a car shooting out sparks as its wheels scraped against the road.

My mind was being ground to dust.

“Hmph.”

This short reaction of Shimamura's instantly caused me to twitch.

Feeling even more anxious than before, I proceeded to pull down my underwear. Then, with shaky hands, I reached into my bag and took out my swimsuit.

I really should have gotten it ready beforehand. Seriously, how was I so bad at this?

“Ohh.”

I grew more and more anxious every second that passed, and by the time I’d managed to pull the swimsuit up, my mind had all but transformed into a ball of white mist.

“Ooh.”

Like a flower budding, all the tension met at the very top of my head.

Trying to focus my mind elsewhere quickly proved to be an impossible task, and as such, I was left with no choice but to boldly turn my head around to towards Shimamura.

I found her groaning to herself while facing the fan. As the fan rotated left, she moved left with it, and as it rotated right, she too changed direction.

“.....”

Swiftly, I hid my face behind my hands. *She has no idea. Shimamura has no idea*, I silently lamented.

The way she was acting here kinda made her resemble Nagafuji.

“Oh, are you done changing?”

“Yeah...”

“Wow. That sure isn’t a school swimsuit.”

“No...”

Considering the general atmosphere of the pool as witnessed earlier, the swimsuit I’d bought specially for this occasion really did stand out. Well, probably; it was a blue one piece, and compared to the one Shimamura was wearing, I suppose it wasn’t *that* different. Small fortune, I know.

“Kinda cute”, Shimamura stated in a light-hearted manner, now distinctively leaning forward towards me.

I was cute, or the swimsuit was? I almost wanted to ask her for a confirmation, but knowing that she’d likely give some super vague answer just to tease me, I chose against it. Whatever the case, the fact remained that she’d praised me. Couldn’t feel too bad about that.



Glance.

Contrary to the mix of emotions running through my mind, the disinfectant fluid my feet were now drenched in was relatively lukewarm. There was no water coming from the shower heads attached to the ceiling, and instead, a thick smell floated through the air, so pungent it felt like the insides of my nostrils were being scraped off. The fact that it took me more than a few moments to recognize it as that of chlorine really went to show just how long it had been since I last went swimming indoors. *Glance.*

With that out of the way, it was now time to enter the pool proper. My nose had already grown adjusted to the chlorine, and honestly, I barely even noticed it anymore.

The pool was split into six separate lanes, out of which we were apparently only able to use the one closest to us—number six. As for the other lanes, those were re-served for adults to swim in silence. This certainly didn't feel like a situation to be making merry in. Well, not that I could really imagine that, Shimamura and I messing around and having lots of noisy fun. *Glance.*

There were people passing along the lane meant for

water walking. Looking at them, I could see that they had their eyes pointed in our direction. Again, it was probably rare to see anyone of our age here, much less two at the same time. Shimamura appeared to be barely aware of their stares, possibly because she'd come here previously. That, or she was simply too busy to notice; her eyes moved almost restlessly as she glared deeper in, away from the pool.

“Are you looking for someone?”

Not that girl from the festival, right? Hopefully not. I had no reason to believe that to be the case, and yet, just thinking about it, I could feel the depths of my stomach start to burn.

Glance.

“Huh? Hmm... Ahahaha.”

Shimamura didn't answer my question, instead choosing to scratch her cheek almost as if glossing over the matter.
Glance.

“Hm?”

It was there that I noticed something—grew aware of what was really going on. The realisation shocked me greatly, yes, but pushing back those feelings, I decided to go ahead and follow the way in which my eyes were

moving.

Walk. *Glance*. Walk a bit slower. *Glance*. It was exactly as I'd thought. Instantly, I went pale.

My eyes were gravitating towards Shimamura's butt. I mean, no, it wasn't like I was staring at it long and hard or anything like that. Rather, I would glance at it, and then, a fixed period of time later, glance at it again. That had all happened subconsciously, and now that I was actually aware that I was doing it, my cheeks instantly grew warm, almost as if I'd submerged myself in a bathtub full of boiling hot water. My face transitioned from pale to red and then pale again, just like the tides of the ocean but way more intense.

I was especially focusing on the boundary between her butt and the swimsuit. Why? I had no idea; despite myself being the one doing it, the question proved to be impossible for me to answer. The only thing thinking about it led to was my head and cheeks growing even hotter than they already were. Droplets of sweat ran down my skin. I seriously had to do something to cool myself down. With that in mind, I took a look besides me, and wouldn't you know it, the pool was right there. Perfect. More falling than jumping, I dove in and pierced

through the soft wall of water. Once below the surface, I quickly sank the rest of the way down to the bottom before turning around and beginning to make my way back to the surface. I wasn't wearing goggles or anything, and though that did cause my vision to grow blurry from the chlorine, I was still able to distinguish the ceiling made of water above me.

I decided to stay beneath the surface until my head had fully cooled down. To do so, I emptied my lungs and once again began sinking. One by one, I could see the air bubbles coming from my mouth float up and break through the watery ceiling. I also saw that Shimamura had gotten in the water herself. Her goggles were now firmly planted on top of her eyes, and like me, she too was blowing bubbles. It took her little time to reach my slowly sinking body, my arms and legs spread out like a starfish. She then leaned over me, and instantly, my eyes turned towards the boundary between her armpits and the swimsuit. Again, not deliberately. I just found myself doing so. Why? Why did this keep happening? Questions like those ran through my mind, until a few moments later, I realised that I'd released too much air and had to hurry back to the surface before I suffocated.

"Kinda looks like you're already having fun." "Huh?"

Oh, umm, well..."

Ehehe, I laughed in an attempt to dodge her statement, all the while water dripped out from my nose and every single muscle in my face continued to cramp.

I'd been fooled; as it turned out, coming to the pool with Shimamura was far more dangerous of an act than I could ever have imagined.

After a few moments spent catching my breath, I went ahead and wiped my face using my hand. There at last, I was able to get a sense of the water's coolness.

Sinking a bit so that my shoulders were below the surface, I began swimming forward.

Now then, what should I do? I glanced over towards the lane next to us and saw that the person there was going super hard at it, giving me the impression that this was a form of exercise for them. Personally though, I wasn't really in the mood for that.

"Feels pretty good, huh?"

Shimamura on the other hand was merely floating in place, her jaw just above the surface of the water. It appeared that simply being able to escape the heat of the summer was more than enough to satisfy her. She was

kinda cute, the way she did it. Almost like an alligator.

Alligators were cute? Well, no, I just mean... Never mind.

“Oh, that reminds me”, she stated all of a sudden before swimming over to me, both her face and hands gliding above the water like those of a frog. I waited, and soon, found that she’d placed one of her hands on top of my head. I could feel her move it up and down slightly, almost as if she was patting me.

“Sorry about earlier. I shouldn’t have said that”, she apologized. It was the same way you’d apologize to a child. While I couldn’t deny that it did bring a lot of questions to my mind the way she was treating me here, those were quickly pushed aside by another sensation—that being shock. No part of me had expected her to just randomly apologize, and I now found myself at a loss as to how I was supposed to respond.

“Oh, yeah. You don’t need to apologize for it, Shima-mura.”

“Right. It’s not really like that, like either of us did anything wrong.”

A very Shimamura-esque reply, I had to say. If the four human emotions—joy, anger, grief, and pleasure—were the four seasons, then her voice invoked none of

them. Its temperature was fixed, its wind calm. You hardly noticed as it passed you by.

“Even so, I really did mean it, what I said. It wasn’t a lie or a joke or anything like that.”

I found great relief in the fact that, instead of making up excuses, Shimamura chose to walk down the path of honesty. It felt like she was always being sincere with me rather than hiding what was truly going on in her mind.

We spent the next few moments like that, her patting my head not like a big sister, but like a mother.

It was a shame that I was wearing a cap and couldn’t feel her hand directly. Even so, the sensation was still more than enough to calm me down. That was how I felt, calm, calm like the water. However, just then, Shimamura opened her mouth and stated the following:

“Hey, Adachi.”

“Huh?”

“I was just thinking, it might be good if you also tried making friends with other people. Different types of people.”

“Huh?”

Before I knew it, I’d turned my face all the way up. Softly, as if persuading me, Shimamura continued talk-

ing:

“I’m not saying that you shouldn’t be friends with me or anything, just that it wouldn’t necessarily hurt if you broadened your horizons a little. Don’t you agree? It might be more stable that way.”

My first reaction was to deny her words, stop them from entering my ears.

That turned out to not be possible; now done speak-ing, what

Shimamura did next was stare at me in silence. Like the surface of the water, my shoulders shook.

Then, they stopped.

I went ahead and actually thought about it. Considering the state I’d wound up in as a result of

growing too passionate about her, it made a lot of sense for Shimamura to suggest this. Really, you could even say that it was the single most normal, rational thing she could’ve done. Everything that had happened was my fault. Wait, no; the purpose here wasn’t to assign blame.

Just calm down a little. It felt like that was the core of her message, what she was trying to tell me.

There might have been truth to it. It might have been what I needed to hear. And yet, I couldn’t help but feel disappointed. It was as if Shimamura had pulled up her

defences against me.

As if she'd placed her hand on my forehead and told me to stop.

"I'll... think about it", I nodded, not because I meant it but because I felt like I had to. This was the best I could do at the moment.

"Sure. It's ultimately up to you what you value in life so I'm not going to try and force you more than is necessary, but still."

But still, I'm not sure how far I'm willing to go along with that. While she didn't actually say that last part, it felt to me like what was implied.

Right. Things had been going so well lately that I had almost forgotten the underlying truth.

Shimamura was not gentle, nor was she kind.

She was tolerant of others taking steps towards her, yes, very much so, but good luck if you ever wanted her to take one towards you.

Like being dipped head first into a tank of ice water—and this wasn't a joke about the pool's temperature—I felt the very core of my body freeze over. While it obviously couldn't be, I really did get the sense that my skin was colder than the water surrounding it.

There, at last, I realised something. Something that I'd failed to notice.

The matter which had brought me so much anxiety had been resolved just like that.

Based on the phone call yesterday and now this, I was left with the impression that Shimamura barely recognized the events which had taken place as us having a fight. In her mind, we'd been friends the whole time. It was for this reason that, despite all that had happened, despite the storm and waves, today and the day before remained strongly connected. However, you shouldn't let yourself be fooled; while it might appear at a glance that things were going steady, that was actually a mere illusion.

I couldn't help but shudder at the way she was treating me.

"Shimamura..."

I was right there next to her, and yet, she felt so distant. Frightened by the sensation, I found myself calling out her name.

"Hmm?"

Her reaction sounded carefree. Sluggish, even.
Just then...

I could see something moving behind her. It almost looked like bubbles rising to the surface. I'd just pushed my head forward to get a better look of what was going on when all of a sudden, Shimamura disappeared underwater; what I now recognized as a human figure had swam to her, grabbed her shoulders, and pulled her beneath the surface.

"Shimamuraaa!" I screamed, all the while watching the mysterious person make their escape through the water, loudly cackling to themself while swimming away. It felt like I'd heard this exact laugh not all that long ago. Whatever the case, I had to say, the person sure was going fast. They even cleared the partition which separated the lanes from one another with no trouble. The way they moved their feet was both wild and rough, and though I'd never seen a real one, I couldn't help but imagine that this was how a *kappa* would swim. Soon enough, Shimamura returned to me.

She wiped her face clean having resurfaced, her eyes remaining pointed into the direction of the water splashes.

Though faint, the corners of her mouth were pointed upwards, forming a distinct smile.

“Don’t grow up to become that sort of an adult, alright, Adachi?”

“Sure...” I replied faintly, all the while staring at her face as droplets of water travelled down it.

Shimamura was uncovering her emotions, laying them bare.

On top of that, unlike when she was angry, there was no malice to them this time.

No. This was the sort of thing you only showed to those closest to you. Deep down in my heart, I couldn’t help but feel jealous.

It might be that the expression currently on her face was the essence of the sort of relationship I’d been seeking.

Having exited the gym, we randomly ran into Shima-mura’s mother. Here’s what she had to say:

“Drop by the meat store and buy some croquettes.” “Hmm, I think you forgot to say something. Any idea what that might be?”

“Make sure you don’t get hit by a car.” “T h
a n k y o u.”

Observing this interaction from the side, I was once

again left with the impression that the two of them were really close.

Even I could tell as much.

Anyway, Shimamura then hopped onto my bike, and together, we began heading towards our new destination: Nagafuji Meat. Once there, we were greeted by a fairy with blue hair drawn by the entrance. What was such a thing doing there? I wasn't quite sure. Also, while I wasn't able to put my finger on exactly where, it really did feel like I'd seen this character before.

At no point did Nagafuji make an appearance while we were picking out our order.

“She shows up pretty infrequently, huh, that Naga-fuji?”

“You can say that again. She’s totally useless”, the man behind the counter—presumably Nagafuji’s father— replied to Shimamura’s question, all the while shaking his sweaty hand sideways.

The door in the back did tremble slightly as if there was someone behind it, but I’m just going to pretend like I didn’t see that.

Anyhow, I could now cross “shopping with Shima-mura” off my list.

Wait... I could?

With the side dish for the evening meal purchased, we returned back to Shimamura's house. It was only my second time staying over there, and yet, unlike previously, I now had my very own chair set up by the dinner table.

I did find it a little awkward how cramped my presence made things. All of our shoulders were rubbing together, and I could practically feel the warmth being released as a result. While certainly not something a person staying over at someone else's house ought to say, if I'm being perfectly honest, I wasn't a big fan of eating like this.

Or rather, I'd experienced it so few times that I had yet to develop the right type of antibodies.

Even the finest nutrition was poisonous unless you had immunity against it.

“Sorry for all the trouble...”

“No, it's fine”, Shimamura's mom stated.

“Don't worry about it”, the girl with blue hair added.

“Hey, you shut up.”

“Hehehe.”

The blue haired girl (I forgot her name) had shown

up to the dinner table almost like she was part of the family, going as far as to have friendly chit-chat with Shi-mamura's mom. Her dad and sister likewise appeared to pay no mind to her presence.

"Don't worry, don't worry."

The speaker this time was Shimamura herself, advising me with her mouth full of *miso* soup.

I wonder, was it growing up in a house like this which led her to become as bizarrely tolerant as she was? Wait, no, that wasn't quite the right word... Broad-minded?

Something like this could never happen over at our house. In the worst case, it'd be Mom calling people over.

"That's just how Mom always is."

Ah... Once again, I was made to realise just how peculiar Shimamura was.

At the same time, it was likely exactly that aspect of her which had attracted me to her in the first place.

I saw in the corner of my eye as her hair glistened, still a little wet from when we'd been swimming. It was so... nice.

Restlessly eating the food which had been prepared for me, I found my mind wandering back to the events

of the afternoon.

Everything was well between us. That really was a wonderful thing, wasn't it?

The way I saw it, a perfectly round stone could float steadily down the river of time without getting caught in anything along the way.

Wonderful.

That was how it should've been.

For some reason, the situation just didn't click with me. My only guess as to why was that I hadn't experienced it before.

If there was one thing that I lacked sorely, then it had to be experience.

Well then, go get some. I knew that I should. I knew that Shimamura was implicitly recommending me to do so as well. Having her come so far for me really did make me want to give it my all.

As much as adapting to what was around me wasn't my thing, I knew that it would be necessary here.

That was the sort of situation I found myself in.

Sipping my post-meal tea, I made up my mind.

It was now clear who the first person I needed to get closer to was. My eyes cast downwards as they had a

tendency to be, I stared at her, observing her behaviour. Ah, she got up. Following after her, I too gulped down my remaining tea, thanked Shimamura's mother, and left the table.

The person I'd laid my eyes on was none other than Shimamura's little sister. Why? Well, a big part of it had to do with the fact that she was, like mentioned, Shimamura's sister, but there was more to it than that; she reminded me of myself. While I did have a little trouble admitting it, the truth was that our personalities were the same.

The more closely a person resembled yourself, the easier it should be to figure out what it was that they wanted. At least, that was the idea.

Entering the hallway, I saw that Shimamura's sister was just about to return to her room. Quickly, I began walking towards her. Was this a good idea? Or was it not? The voices in my mind were still busy arguing over how to proceed, and even as I caught up to the girl, no sort of consensus had been reached among them.

Busy thinking about that, I'd completely failed to notice how massive the difference between our walking speeds was.

I passed the girl and turned around to face her. The ornament attached to her hair shook as she jumped a little.

Staring at her, I instinctively found myself touching my own hairpin.

“Umm...” I tried talking, all the while struggling to calm myself down. It felt like my voice might crack any second now.
“My name is Sakura Adachi.”

My hand pressed against my chest, I went ahead and introduced myself. The little girl—so little that her en-tire body was swallowed by the shadow which I cast—proceeded to stare back at me, the expression of shock on her face quickly fading away as she worked to regain her composure. I was left with the impression that she wasn’t exactly in a good mood.

No, it was like she found me intimidating.

“I’m a friend of Shimamura’s. I mean, your big sis-ter’s.”

Why was it that I was having such trouble speaking? The words simply refused to come out of my mouth, almost as if I was trying to speak English to a foreigner.

Again, why? I was so suspicious.

“I see.”

The girl's reaction sounded extremely stiff. Similarly, the air around her appeared almost powdery, like she was trapped inside a cloud of dust or something.

I could feel my voice growing hoarse as said dust made its way down my throat. It was difficult to resist the temptation to run away.

And yet, I couldn't. The obsession I had over having to change, having to do something differently had trans-formed into a sword and was now poking at my heels, making it impossible for me to turn around.

An awkward smile formed on my face as I ordered myself to stand firm.

You could tell by the wrinkles which had appeared under my eyes just how difficult this was for me.

Shimamura's sister appeared more confused than anything. She likely had no idea what it was that I wanted. Paying no mind to that fact, I took yet another step towards her.

"That's why I... umm... I was thinking... I want to get to know you better. Get closer to you."

Get closer to her?

"So... How about it? Will tonight do?"

"Tonight?"

“Yes.”

“Will what do?”

A loud noise reached my ears as I sat there in the bathtub, almost as if a bucket or something had fallen down onto the ground. It sounded like one of those stereotypical things you'd often hear in movies.

Of course, in reality, there hadn't been any sound. No, my mind was merely playing tricks on me under the influence of the hot water in which I'd stayed for far too long.

“.....”

As tiny as Shimamura's sister was, the tub still wasn't quite large enough for the two of us. The fact that we were facing each other certainly didn't help either.

Allow me to explain. I hadn't dragged her here against her will and torn off her clothes or anything of the sort. Of course I hadn't. Rather, I'd asked her if she would like to do this and... well, I might have pushed her just a little bit, but even so. In any case, this was mostly consensual. Probably. The fact that she was completely silent and had been for while now did paint me in pretty bad light, I'll give you that.

The way I'd seen it, this was the best way to get close to a kid like her.

Speaking of...

One of the items on my list was "take a bath with Shimamura". I suppose I could cross it off now.

Then again, that did fall into the domain of words games. Hmm... To put a sticker on it or not... I honestly wasn't quite sure which path to take.

"You're friends with Sis, right?"

Half of her face submerged below the water's surface, the girl stared hard at me.

The sound of bubbles mixed together with her voice as she spoke.

"Yeah... Yes, I am."

Her sudden question had caught me off guard, leaving me with little time to choose my words.

While I didn't know her exact age, I could only assume that the girl was around five or six years younger than me. And yet, here I was, talking to her all respectfully as if I was the younger and she the older.

"What sort of friends?"

Another question which I didn't know how to answer. If I did, I wouldn't feel so scared all of the time. My

mind wouldn't constantly be full of worry.

"I've been her sister for way longer than that", the girl stated before I managed to say anything. It was there that I understood what she'd actually meant.

She wasn't referring to the depth of our friendship, but rather, its length.

Thinking about it some more, I realised just how silly it was that I'd ever been confused. What sort of elementary school student would ask another person how deep their friendships were? The thought alone kinda scared me.

"So, yeah."

Like the bubbles of the bath, a tiny bit of politeness could be heard in the girl's voice before it quickly faded away.

I was left with the impression that she harboured some amount of competitiveness towards me. I suppose that only made sense; being her little sister, the girl was likely more than slightly dependant upon Shimamura. It was for this reason that my presence at times caused her anguish.

Looking at it like that, the situation honestly wasn't bad at all. However, as you peered just a little deeper, you

began to see where the problems lay. Specifically, when you looked at me; the fact alone that she was Shima-mura's sister filled me to the brim with jealousy. Why? Because for so long, I'd yearned for something similar, a name for our relationship.

Silence fell between us. We sat there without a word, droplets of water continuing to drip down from our hair.

I knew I had to do something. My mind began to burn, almost as if someone was squeezing my head together.

It had been like that at the pool as well, but unlike then, simply getting into the water wasn't going to cause things to move forward this time. It didn't need to be a miracle. It didn't need to be a backwards somersault. No, I only needed something to move us past this hump.

But how? What was I supposed to do here? Toss water on her face? Wait, no; on a second thought, that didn't sound like a good idea. What if she interpreted it as me picking a fight with her?

At the same time, there wasn't much else here that caught my eye. While the bathtub owned by Shima-mura's family was quite long vertically speaking, it made up for that by being extremely narrow. Moreover, its

simplistic, box-like design meant that you could barely stretch out your feet.

Not that I had any plans of doing that. Instead, it was my goal to keep my legs as close to my body as possible. And yet, despite my best attempts, I would still occasionally find them coming into contact with those of the tiny girl.

While nowhere near as cramped as sitting side by side would've been, I still had to wonder, why exactly was it that we'd chosen to face each other.

Unconsciously, our eyes met. It felt like a firework of warmth had gone off inside my head.

I continued my fierce battle submerged within the hot bathwater. While these expressions were admittedly quite cheap, which each one, I could feel the insides of my mind continue to boil.

“So, why?” Shimamura’s sister asked. Once again, she was using as few words as possible. “Why the bath?”

“I wanted to get along with you better.”

It was quickly becoming clear to me just how difficult playing the role of the older party truly was. Unable to keep it up, the corners of my mouth soon dropped, giving way for an utterly pathetic expression to take over

my face.

From the right angle, it probably looked like I was grinning to myself like some idiot. Great.

The lips of the girl sitting opposite to me puckered even tighter.

“Why?” she asked once more. Why indeed?

I could feel the water swallow my body as I sat there, unable to find an answer to her question.

“Why...”

Because Shimamura had told me so? Because I wanted Shimamura to approve of me? Because... Shi-mamura...

While all those things I'd listed were certainly true, I couldn't help but wonder, was there something more to it, something else?

Did I really need such a complex, roundabout reason to love my neighbour?

Some more moments passed, and soon, I could see the girl's face starting to turn scarlet.

A question popped into my mind as I stared at her.

“Umm... Do you, love your sister?” “Huh?”

Instantly, Shimamura's sister leapt up, creating a

splash in the water around her. A few droplets ended up landing on my face.

The faint shade of red from earlier had now trans-formed into a full-blown blush, reaching not just her cheeks but her ears as well. Was the water on her side of the bath just that much warmer? Or, could it be?

Slowly, the girl returned below the water. She then replied to me in a soft tone of voice, almost as if attempt-ing to fake being calm.

“Not especially. We’re just... normal.”



I could see behind her blush that the girl was only saying that to make herself look tough. She wasn't doing a particularly good job at hiding it though, and as a result, it was trivial for me to tell what was actually going on in her mind.

I had to wonder, was this how I too appeared to the people around me?

"I see. But, I do think that Shimamura probably likes... loves you."

My chest ached as I squeezed the words out through my throat.

"Anyway, my point was, I want to like the people Shimamura likes as well."

With all the things that had held it back having melted away, my tongue was now free to move as it pleased.

Really, was that what I thought? Was it not the exact opposite?

Was I not scared senseless of the idea of Shimamura liking someone who wasn't me? Did I not hate it?

Yes, that was more accurate. Much, much more accu-rate.

In that case, what was I saying right now? What were these words coming out of my mouth?

Why exactly had I chosen to defy everything I felt and knew to come here?

I could feel myself growing more dizzy by the second. My mind lapsed into chaos, and I really meant that.

“And how is that related?”

“Well, if everyone chooses to value and protect the same thing, then it feels to me like it’ll be easier to keep it safe.”

This concept wasn’t something that had existed in my heart previously. So then, where was it coming from? Why was I saying these words out loud?

My mind was quickly overheating. At this point, steam could start shooting out from my ears and I wouldn’t even be surprised.

I proceeded to think about the true nature of what was going on here. Then, after a few moments, it hit me. I managed to arrive at one possible explanation. Could it be, could it be that I was simply ashamed? Ashamed that I’d dared to brag?

“You sound like my teacher”, the girl stated. I was left with the impression that she was specifically referring to my excessively polished outer layer.

After a short pause, she continued.

“Like me.”

A smile appeared on her face.

Not a broad, bright smile, but rather, a faint grin.

It didn't seem like she was filled with joy or anything like that. Rather, I was left to think that her smile was meant to be almost sarcastic in nature. That was what made up the majority of her expression. And yet, it wasn't all. There was more to it than that; though extremely faint, something about the way she looked at me gave me the impression that the girl did also harbour a certain level of empathy towards me. Had we done it? Had we taken a step towards mutual understanding? If so, then this had all certainly been worth doing. That was how I saw it. That was how I wanted to see it.

A journey of a thousand miles began with a single step, and the same was also true for people; even if you found yourself unable to close your distance with someone in a single go, you could always work on it slowly over time. That was the conclusion I'd come to. However, the very next instant...

“Happily ever after?”

...something blue appeared next to us, causing me to nearly leap up into the air.

“Eek!” Shimamura’s sister screamed a fraction of a second later. She appeared just as shocked by the intruder as I was. “How long have you been standing there for, Yachii?!”

“Hehehe. It seems that you have your own long list of things that you still don’t understand, Shou.”

Was that really the problem here? Personally, I was more curious as to how she’d gotten in considering that the door hadn’t been opened at any point.

There was also the fact that she was wearing clothes. And not just any clothes, but a pyjama styled after a lion, its hood forming a mouth which chewed on her head.

Quickly, the girl shifted her attention away from Shimamura’s sister and towards me. Her glimmer mixed with the vapour spreading through the room, painting everything behind her in a pale shade of turquoise. There was something about its appearance which made it seem like the very core of my body would be left feeling refreshed were I to breathe it in.

Of course, in reality, I knew that wasn’t the case; despite its colour, we were ultimately talking about mere vapour here.

“So, happily ever after?” the girl asked again, repeat-

ing her question from earlier. This time, it came aimed at me.

I hardly felt like we'd reached a conclusion where such a statement was appropriate, a true ending if you will. If anything, I'd say that nothing had even begun yet.

The eyes of the girl, almost transparent as if containing no impurities, gave a glimpse at something profound. It really was like for a moment, all of her youthfulness had been stripped away. No bottom could be sensed in her gaze, no walls. Staring into her eyes was the same as staring into space itself.

A shaky, unsteady voice escaped my mouth.

"Probably, yeah."

That was what I thought to myself, that this was good.

This was good.

"I'm glad to hear", the girl nodded. She then followed her statement with an innocent laugh, almost as if all of the wisdom she'd shown mere moments earlier had vanished, melted away. "Now, if you'd excuse me."

"Ah, Yachii. Wait. Since you're here already, get into the bath."

"Nope!"

With her hands held out in front of her, the girl began making a run for it. While it was still a mystery to me how she'd gotten in, it appeared that for her exit, she was going to be using the door like normal.

"Wait!" Shimamura's sister yelled before leaping out from the tub. Her stiffness from earlier, her shell, had now been discarded, revealing that beneath it all, she did possess the capability to act appropriate for her age.

"Caught you!"

"Eek! What are you doing, Shou!?"

The high-pitched voices of the two frolicking girls filled the room as they clung onto each other. Their friendly relationship brought to mind that of Hino and Nagafuji, and as I stared at them, one thing became very clear to me.

This was what it meant to be close to someone.

So then, what about my efforts so far? Had they been fruitless? Had there been no point to what I'd done?

No, that wasn't the case. I really did think so. And yet, my mind continued to race.

Resting my head against the corner of the bathtub, I turned my eyes towards the ceiling, distancing myself from everything that was happening.

Softly, both my ears and eyes grew soaked with some-thing fuzzy.

“It’s...”

It's so warm.

I was starting to feel dizzy from staying in the water for too long.

The spinning sound of the fan's blades enveloped my head as I lay there, my eyes closed.

I was currently resting my body on the floor of the room I'd been given upstairs.

My skin felt hot, almost as if it had swollen. The warmth of the bath still lingered with me.

I wonder, was Shimamura's sister okay? I suppose she couldn't be too badly affected considering that she'd stayed behind to play with the blue girl.

That girl, she sure was energetic, wasn't she? That was the one thing that had come to my mind as I stared at her.

While I might still very much have been a child in the eyes of adults, as far as I was concerned, an eternity had passed since I was her age.

Putting it that way, I'd come a pretty long way, hadn't

I?

Someone then knocked on the door. Instantly, my feet grew stiff in anticipation.

“I’m coming in.”

As if answering my wishes, the person who appeared turned out to be none other than Shimamura herself. I quickly opened my eyes and turned around to look at her.

She’d already changed into her pyjamas, and in her hand, she held a pillow wrapped in a towel.

“I brought you an ice pillow.”

“Oh, thanks.”

A second passed, after which Shimamura’s mouth twisted into a grin. It almost looked like she’d come up with a joke or something. A joke at my expense, to be precise.

“An ice pillow or my lap, which would you prefer resting your head on?”

“Your lap!” I shouted without the slightest bit of hesitation. Hook, line, and sinker.

Shimamura took a small step backwards, appearing quite bewildered by both my answer as well as the intensity at which it’d come out from my mouth. The surface

of the ice pillow waved as she squeezed it slightly. "Personally, I think the ice pillow might be nicer." "No, it's fine. Really. I'm totally fine now", I repeated, all the while shaking my hand in front of me as if to emphasize my point. Oh, but wait; if I was doing fine, did that mean I had no need for her lap either?

"It is pretty harsh. But, Shimamura, if you could..." Was I being too persistent? Was she going to find that odd? Then again, the appropriate time for such worries had likely long since passed.

Shimamura almost certainly saw me as a weirdo. Possibly just as weird as that girl and her strange-coloured hair. Really, it was only after calming down a little that I realised just what I'd done.

Smiling in a manner which made it seem like she was hiding her true expression, Shimamura sat down in front of the fan. She then grabbed my head and pulled it close to her. I offered no resistance, simply allowing her to do as she pleased, and soon, I found my head planted firmly against her thighs. They were so soft, so gentle. I could feel wave after wave of heat run across my scalp.

To be completely honest, I did get the impression that all this extra stimulus likely had an overall negative

effect on my well-being. Or rather, I knew that for a fact. It felt like the surface of my brain was covered in tiny, tiny pores, all of which had opened at once.

There was a real possibility that, had Shimamura not placed the ice pillow on top of my head, my internal temperature would have just kept rising and rising, ultimately causing me to explode. Thankfully, she had. As a result, I now lay there sandwiched between the pillows, unable to see anything but what was directly in front of me as the rest of my field of vision had been blocked off. This whole situation, it was kinda luxurious, wasn't it? I found my feet drawing tiny circles in the air as I thought about that.

Were this to be my reward for merely taking a bath, there would never come another day where my skin was anything but swollen.

“Does it feel good?”

“Yea.”

The weight of the ice pillow made it slightly difficult for me to speak, resulting in my voice coming out muffled.

The other explanation was that I was trying my absolute hardest to press my face as tightly against Shima-

mura's thighs as possible, but obviously, that couldn't be the case. Of course not.

It just looked that way because of the ice pillow.

"I might be misremembering things, but weren't you saying just the other day that you'd gotten good at dealing with the heat?"

Yes, that was something I had carelessly blurted out on the phone. While I didn't know why exactly she was asking me this now, I could only imagine that her intentions were far from good. As such, I concluded that it might be for the best if I pretended like I hadn't heard her talk at all.

I groaned something vague into her direction, acting like that wasn't the case, only for Shimamura to ignore me instead and follow her question up with a statement which made little sense to me.

"I suppose that's impossible for a statue made of ice." A million questions flooded my mind all at once, making it impossible for me to disregard her this time. "What are you talking about?"

Seriously, what was this?

"Huh? You don't know? Well, I guess that makes sense. It's not really something you call yourself."

“Call myself what? What is this about?”

“Well, sometime ago in school, a girl... who was she again... Sancho? Pancho? One of those two. Anyway, a girl you went to middle school with told me that people used to call you that there, an ice statue.”

“I...”

I could neither confirm nor deny that. I'd barely talked to anyone during my time in middle school, after all. Regardless, that was the nickname I'd been given, huh? How strange. Why ice? Was I really that cold?

“Looking at you now, I'm not sure if ice is the best description. I might go with... Hmm...”

Shimamura didn't finish her sentence, instead choosing to cut her words short. I was able to tell based on the aura surrounding her that she was having difficulty deciding what to say next.

“You might go with what?”

“Oh, no. Never mind.”

Ahaha, she quickly added. Why was it that her laugh sounded so dry? I wanted to ask her that. I wanted to... cry.

A statue of ice, what was that supposed to mean? The thought alone made me kinda embarrassed.

I had a feeling that this would be bothering me for a long, long time.

As I sat there, writhing with my mouth closed shut, Shimamura at last changed the topic.

“If I’m being totally honest, I much prefer to be the one resting my head on your lap, Adachi.”

“Well, that... That makes sense.”

Was this a form of praise? A request, perhaps? Examining the context, I slowly arrived at a conclusion. It wasn’t the case that Shimamura enjoyed my thighs for any particular reason. Rather, she simply wanted to relax, slack off as she had a tendency to do. Now that I thought about it some more, it’d been during the winter season that she last placed her head on my lap, hadn’t it?

I wonder, what was the name of that emotion I’d felt while staring down at her face as she slept, her eyes closed softly?

It seemed like it should be easy to figure out. Trivial, even. And yet, even now, I was still searching for it.

“So, you wanted to take a bath with my sister, huh?” Shimamura asked me out of the blue. Instantly, my eyes shot open.

Yeah, I nodded back, only to realise half a second later

that she might get the wrong idea.

“Oh, but, it wasn’t the bath itself that’s important. I wanted to get on better terms with her.”

The bath’s important only with you, Shimamura. I was able to stop myself in time and not say that last part out loud. Thankfully.

“Did you manage to?”

“Yeah. A little bit. Probably...”

If I had to estimate, I’d probably say that I was around one millionth of the way there.

As things continued piling up, the value of a single step, its meaning and weight, they all faded into nothingness.

The more you accomplished, the less your accomplishments mattered. It was kinda ridiculous, wasn’t it?

“Hmph.”

Moving her hand, Shimamura rocked the pillow from side to side, causing my head to move as well.

I could feel with my cheek as something swam around within the towel. While originally meant to cool me off, it appeared that my heat was such that the ice would instead be the one to melt down.

“Anyway, I do think she quite likes you, Adachi.” My chest immediately squeezed tight. So did my throat. Honestly, it was a miracle that I managed to stop myself from making some weirdo noise.

“...! ...!

A second later, I realised that I’d misheard her: Shi-mamura wasn’t talking about herself, but rather, about her sister.

Was this it, was this the definition of disappointment? It certainly felt that way to me.

“Oh, no, I’m not sure about that.”

“Hmm. I’m sure that I already mentioned this, but my sister’s super afraid of new people. I can’t imagine her being willing to take a bath with someone she’s not bonded with.”

“Yes, but...”

I didn’t quite know how to reply to her. In a lot of ways, it felt similar to when I was too tired to talk.

I had to imagine that the girl’s motives were more complex than her simply having taken a liking to me.

It was very much possible that the reason why she’d agreed to my proposal was because she wished to check for herself what sort of a person this friend of her big

sister's was. If so, then I had to wonder, what was the verdict she'd reached? Did she see me as an insect who clung onto her sister?

Were someone so young to call me annoying and compare me to a fly, I don't think I'd ever be able to recover.

"I feel like it's something she thought a lot about." "Really?"

Shimamura reacted at first, sounding almost like she doubted my statement. However, after a short pause, she continued in a different tone of voice: "Hmm, yeah, I suppose that might be."

"I mean, there are probably lots of things that I don't understand, that only you can see, Adachi."

There were, yes. Her many wonderful qualities, for example. The kind expressions often seen on her face.

All those were things she likely couldn't sense for herself. Of course not; very little of what I thought and felt was in any way connected to Shimamura. How nice would it be if that were ever to change—if one day, we would become able to see the world the same way.

Between the two pillows, I watched as the fan continued to spin.

"After all, despite how you are normally, even you

can act like an adult at times.”

How was I normally in her eyes? What did she mean by that? While the vagueness of that comment did concern me a little, what really had me interested was the second half of her statement.

Me, acting like an adult. What part of me?

The part where I worried myself sick over other people?

“Say, Adachi. Do you have plans for the future? What are you gonna do when you grow up?” Shimamura asked me randomly. Well, not really “randomly”; I suppose it had to do with the fact that we were just talking about adults.

Anyway, I decided to reply with the first thing that came to mind. I hardly imagined that she was expecting some super deep and philosophical answer or anything like that.

“When I grow up... Work, I guess?”

A pretty dry reply, even if I do say so myself. I did have some other thoughts as well, although as those were ones created by the influence of Shimamura’s lap and just outright ridiculous, I couldn’t exactly recite them out loud.

“Well, yeah, obviously. I was more thinking, what sort of work will you do? What sort of adult will you be? You know, stuff like that. It’s a lot to think about. Lots of stuff.”

Shimamura kept on talking, the words rolling off her tongue like water. Rather than wanting anyone to answer her, it sounded more like she was asking these questions of herself.

What sort of adult would I be? While I wasn’t particularly anxious regarding the future, I also hadn’t thought about it to any real extent. After all, I already had my hands full dealing with the present. Dealing with the present Shimamura. Dealing with her. You might not have expected being sandwiched between two pillows to have such an effect, but it seriously felt like parts of my brain were starting to turn off.

There was only one wish, one very simple wish the current me had for the future.

I wanted to be with Shimamura, even when we were adults.

Yes, it did seem like something born in the heart of a child, but that truly was how I felt.

“So, feeling any cooler?”

“A little...”

That statement was partly a lie. Specifically, while the half of my face which was pressed against the ice pillow was so cold that I could feel my skin tightening up, the other half, the one clinging to her lap, that was burning hot. The purpose of the lie was to allow me to stay like this for just a little bit longer.

“Hmm, yeah. I guess the ice is not really doing much.”

“Huh?”

Having said that, Shimamura pulled the ice pillow away from my face. I put up no resistance, prompting her to then remove her legs from underneath my head and stand up. It was only when I rolled onto the floor that I realised my mistake.

Dammit.

As I lay there, wallowing in an ocean of regret that I wasn’t quite able to put into words, I could see in the corner of my eye the image of Shimamura staring out through the window.

“Hmm... What about outside? It’d probably be cooler there than here.”

Shall we go? she added. Still not fully past my earlier blunder, I lifted my head and asked her the following:

“Outside?”

“Yeah. On the veranda. Or more accurately, where we dry our laundry.”

I slowly got up myself, walked next to her, and took a look outside. What I saw on the other side of the window was the veranda she was talking about. Funny how I’d never noticed that before. It didn’t seem like there was much room there, though. I got the impression that, were we both to stand on it, we wouldn’t even be able pass by one another.

That was exactly what we proceeded to do, go to the veranda and stand side by side. The air felt both heavy and languid, just like how it had inside. If I’m being perfectly honest with you, I could barely tell a difference.

We waited and waited, but no gust of wind came to wipe the warmth away.

“Hmm, it’s not really cool here either, huh?” “No.”

“Shall we go back?”

I didn’t answer her question with words, instead choosing to shake my head while grabbing her hand. Well, “grab” might have been bit of an overstatement. Rather, I took it calmly. That’s right, I was relatively

calm right now. Why wouldn't I be? It was just the two of us here, after all, Shimamura and I. Anyway, my heart began to pound as I slowly squeezed her fingertips.

After a short pause, Shimamura readjusted her hand before gripping mine back.

I could feel the half of my face which had been cool just moments earlier now growing hot.

I stared directly forward, observing the scenery before us.

What I saw was a section of a very mundane residential area.

Tracing with my eyes the various rooftops and red street lights which floated in the darkness of the night, I couldn't help but feel like I was staring into outer space, or perhaps the depths of the ocean. The thick darkness filled every gap, every crevice of the town. And yet, as I turned my gaze towards the clouds slowly drifting through the night sky, I saw it, saw the glimmer which pulled us towards it.

The lamps of the tall buildings, the flickering lights of the steel towers. And, above all those, the glow of the moon.

This was what the night displayed to us.

We stood there, taking in the atmosphere, showing no signs of growing tired of it.

The way the clouds were stacked on top of one other, I felt them to be so beautiful.

Shimamura, too.

For this short duration, we were seeing the world the same way.

Still holding hands, we took some distance between us, as if spreading out our wings.

There, in the windless night, my mind raced as I wondered, what would be a good name to call our relationship by?

Bonus chapter: “Nagafuji: The Visitor - Part 2”

Looking at it again, I noticed that my room had far less storage space compared to Hino’s. You could barely take three whole steps from the door before hitting the back wall, and between the bed as well as the various school books and piles of clothes lying on the floor, even the fan was left slightly tilted to the side.

I wonder, what was it about this room that Hino liked so much?

“You can see the fireworks pretty well”, she stated from next to the open window, answering my question.

My room being on the third floor meant that the roofs of the buildings opposite to us did little to block our view. I suppose that only made sense; though quite tall, our house was very narrow.

Quietly, the mosquito repellent attached to the rim of the window let off its fumes. It smelled a little like meat which had been smoked.

“Only during summer, huh?”

With that comment, I rested my body on top of Hino.

“Hey”, I could hear her grumble under my breasts.

That's right; she was just the perfect height so that, when sitting, me embracing her from behind placed my breasts directly on top of her head.

"Are they heavy?"

"Huh? No... It's more that, it's already too warm here as is."

"I see, I see. Alright. I guess we'll need to have the fan work a little harder for us then."

I went ahead and switched the device from "low" to "medium". As I did, its tiny motor made the loudest noise.

"Is the fan okay? It sounds just like when Dad cracks his hips."

"Hmm, maybe it needed to stretch a bit first."

This was my fault. You were supposed to let it run on "low" for a bit longer first.

"Aah, how I miss the air conditioner and its pleasant blow."

"Go have it fixed then."

I could tell based on the movements of Hino's shoulders and head that she was staring at the top right corner of the room. Right there, by the ceiling, a white cooler unit had been installed, its plastic casing having turned

slightly yellow from being exposed to the sun. The de-vice was currently making no sound whatsoever. Again, as mentioned, this was not an air conditioner, but rather, a cooler. That was important to know to understand how silly the next part was: Despite its name, what shot out when you turned it on was (approximately) 36 de-grees warm air. Quite the opposite of what you would've expected of a cooler.

"I was told that buying a new one could be cheaper." "Well then, have them do that, buy you a new one." "And where would we get the money to do that?" Also, if I did have working air conditioning here, that would make going over to Hino's place that much less exciting.

It'd just be a waste, wouldn't it? I certainly thought so. More fireworks filled the sky, painting it a different colour.

This was the fireworks display for the two of us. One by one, the sounds of explosions reached my ears.

"Fweeee! Pop-pop! Bam! Blam! Fwoooom!" "Shut up."

"....."

Wobble, wobble.

“Hey, no moving from side to side. I can feel your tits rolling on top of my head.”

Hino sure was making a lot of demands tonight. “Geez, you have no elegance...” she mumbled as a follow up. Or at least, that’s what I assumed she said; the constant sound of fireworks going off in the background made it difficult for me to accurately pick out her words.

The next series of fireworks shot up, four this time. Quickly, the sky became painted green. While we were too far away to actually smell the gunpowder, the fumes coming from the mosquito repellent made for a decent approximate.

Green, huh? There was something about the colour that made me hungry for a melon. Or a kiwi fruit, per-haps.

“Say, Nagafuji.”

“I wonder what the next one’s gonna be like. Shoot, shoot!”

“Is there anything about this house that you don’t like?”

Her voice sounded slightly dark, nothing at all like the radiant flashes before us.

“Of course. I have a bunch of complaints.” “Like what, for example?”

“Well, I get smacked if I eat the croquettes that are for sale. That’s one.”

“Oh, I see. Well then. Moving along”, Hino stated, bringing the conversation to an end before it could even truly begin. She was speaking slightly faster than normal, and by slightly I mean a lot. What was up with that? Then again, if the conversation was over, I suppose I didn’t need to worry about it. Yeah.

Another wave of fireworks came, painting the night sky red.

Like scars the sparks spread around.

“Say, Nagafuji.”

“Wooh, wooh, wooh, whee!”

“Seriously, what’s up with you?”

It seemed that Hino hadn’t understood what I meant.

How unfortunate.

The message I’d tried to convey was that I was in a really good mood at the moment.

“Personally, I feel like fireworks are at their prettiest when viewed from here”, Hino stated, choosing to ignore me completely. She then continued: “Do you know why

that is?"

What a simple question. Easy, even.

"Because I'm here, obviously."

Of course I knew that. Triumphant, I let out a laugh.

"Shut it, cow", Hino stated after a moment of silence. She then quietly mumbled the following: "Really, you have no elegance..."

Her comment this time came in between the sets of fireworks, allowing me to confirm my earlier suspicions. So, she was badmouthing me, huh?

That gentle tone of voice of hers, perfectly mixing with the mosquito repellent, that was the Hino I loved.

-Chapter 4-
Adachi Revival



I took the remaining sticker and attached it. Tightly, it pressed against the paper, covering the letters under-neath.

I stayed like that for the next few moments, staring at the list of things I wanted to do while immersing myself in the joy of crossing yet another set of items off it.

This was the very first thing I'd done after returning home. Just in the span of a single day, I'd achieved four whole things. Was this what they meant when they said "turn misfortune into fortune"? Wait, no; had that really been any misfortune?

It was only through that fight of sorts that I'd been able to change, after all.

To reform the way I thought, to broaden my horizons, to stop fixating on only Shimamura.

I'd done it.

"....."

There were no problems, none whatsoever. We even had tomorrow ready and planned; by Shimamura's suggestion, we were going to be hanging out with everyone.

Everyone being Nagafuji and Hino, based on what I'd heard.

As for where we would be going, well, it seemed that

the right to decide that had been given to me. Apparently, whatever I chose, the rest would go along with it.

“Aaaah...”

It really did feel like I was being treated as an outsider to the group, as someone whose wishes needed to be given extra attention lest they lose their temper. I found my head pressing into my hands simply thinking about that.

Then again, it wasn’t like I could blame them for it. I was well aware of how irritating I was, how much inconvenience I caused them.

“Oh, but. Right.”

Extending both my body and my arms, I picked the list up from the table. The idea I’d had was to choose a destination which would allow me to attach more stick-ers to it. I knew it was risky. The thought alone made me so anxious that I already felt like running away. And yet, this was simply too good of an opportunity for me to ignore. I was surprisingly audacious when it came to this sort of stuff, and I had to say, I didn’t entirely dislike that part of myself; as I’d recently come to realise, there were many things in life you’d never be able to obtain if

you always held back.

As there used to be very few things out there that I wanted, this fact had been all but irrelevant to the past me.

But, now, things were different.

Where to go, where to go. I moved my finger from side to side. While the list itself was quite long, most of the items had been written with only Shimamura in mind, meaning that my options were severely limited knowing that Hino and Nagafuji would be tagging along. In addition, I'd squeezed way too much text on the tiny piece of paper, and now that I looked at it again, it was seriously difficult to make out the individual words. Just went to show how ridiculously excited I had been for the summer break.

“.....”

I wonder, would I be satisfied by the end of it? Would this be enough for me?

Wait, no. I shouldn't say that. Not after Shimamura had gone out of her way to pay attention to my needs.

It was kinda pathetic having her treat me, a girl from her class, the same way she would a child way younger than herself. She was kind, yes, but that kindness was

tepid. Immersing myself in this feeling, its temperature so falsely similar to warmth, I soon found my body growing restless. I wanted to jump out.

I most certainly wasn't feeling comfortable.

At the same time, it couldn't be denied that having someone act conscious of you was, in itself, a form of kindness.

The people around me, the world, they were surprisingly kind. I felt bewildered by this realisation, unsure as to how to properly react to it.

Even so, while I didn't know the right answer, staying where I was, cowering in fear, that couldn't be it, right? No, it couldn't. I needed to go out there and express my affection, convey it out of my own volition.

What was now imposed on me was something natural to all humans: neighbourly love.

You were supposed to get along with your friends. You were supposed to work to improve your relationship with your parents.

You were supposed to put value on those around you.
“That’s...”

That's how it is, I nodded to myself while hugging my knees.

The things I'd ignored so far had now transformed into powerful waves. I could feel them tossing me from side to side.

My heart trembled, like walking on the ocean's surface.

"....."

I swallowed once, then again. It was my own saliva, yes, but I felt so stagnant I just had to drink something.

Remaining like I was, I placed my head against the wall and closed my eyes. There, in the darkness, I could hear a sound.

Not a clear sound, but one very blurry, noisy, like an entwined thread.

Focusing my ears, I could tell that this wasn't the sound of cicadas singing. Then, a few moments later, I realised it: The sound was coming from inside me.

"Have lots of fun with Shimamura."

That was one of the items on my list. Well, more accurately, it had been in the context of holding her hand, but having done that earlier, I'd already gone ahead and attached a sticker on that part of the sentence. As for the remaining half, well, that was what I planned on doing

now.

Having “lots of fun” was something that worked better the more people you had. Well, at least, that’s what you’d usually say, right?

I didn’t think so at all, personally. Regardless, the way I’d chosen to approach this situation was to ignore my baseless intuitions in favour of trusting the common wisdom.

Now then, with that in mind, it was time to come up with a place for us to go to. I immediately crossed the pool off the list; the only effect the cool water would have on us was to calm us down, which was the exact opposite of what I was after. Yes, the shock of seeing Shimamura in a swimsuit had left me completely restless the last time, but that wasn’t the point here.

It wasn’t.

After thinking about it for some more, I ultimately settled on karaoke. I distinctively remembered that be-ing something we’d done before, and since I couldn’t really think of any other place we could go to, leveraging my memories seemed like the safest choice. I was like one of those elderly people who insisted on replacing their car with one of the exact same model. Unable to

venture forth, unable to make a leap for it.

I now stood before the station. This was where we'd agreed to meet at, though looking around, the others were nowhere to be seen. That made perfect sense; as was in my nature, I'd wound up arriving way earlier than I was supposed to. I wonder, was that due to me having the most free time out of all of us? I did have a part-time job, yes, but outside of that, I didn't really do much of anything. Working with other people wasn't something I ever spared time to, and as such, when I was forced to do so, I always came off as being... empty.

It was through the path Shimamura had laid before me that I tried my hardest to fill said emptiness.

“.....”

I could only hope that I wouldn't accidentally bury myself in the process and end up suffocating.

“Ah”, I suddenly heard a voice speak next to me while I stood there waiting in the shade near the taxi platform. Was this sound aimed at me? That was the impression I got, and as I turned my head around to check, my eyes met with those of a girl I didn't recognize. She wore glasses and had long legs. If I had to guess, I'd say that she was probably a high school student. It didn't seem

to me like she was an acquaintance of mine based on her appearance, although judging by the way the girl was staring at me, it might be that we'd met somewhere before.

This interaction only lasted for a moment, as soon, she turned around and ran inside the station.

Having turned back myself, I was left to tilt my head in confusion.

Just who had that girl been? I knew an extremely small number of people, and yet, I couldn't think of anyone who fit.

Shimamura ended up arriving while I was busy thinking about that. She came riding a bike, possibly due to the distance between her house and the station. In addition, she was also wearing a white hat, one which looked very ladylike.

It was a little... plain compared to her usual apparel? It didn't match her age? In any case, I was left with this impression that the hat might have been her mother's.

"Good morning. Hmm, no, it's not really the time for that anymore. Hello", Shimamura greeted me while raising her arm a little, her bike now parked next to me. I had to say, despite doubting it just moments earlier,

the hat and the thin ribbon tied around its rim went really well with her soft voice and gentle expression. She appeared much different than she usually did.

“Ha—Hello.”

My attempt to greet her back in a funny, light-hearted way failed miserably, leaving what came out of my mouth to be something from in-between the two approaches—not exactly serious but not smooth either.

Really, had a single one of these attempts of mine ever succeeded?

“The others aren’t here yet, huh?”

“No.”

“Knowing them, they’ll probably come late. What do you think, will it be Nagafuji’s or Hino’s fault?”

“Who knows”, I mumbled in response. My mind had already begun racing as I thought about what we should do next.

That’s the way it went when I was with Shimamura; I always overthought everything in a desperate attempt to be the best version of myself I could possibly be.

I’d dive way past my depth, and ultimately, end up embarrassing myself by doing something weird.

You might say that if I already knew all that, then I

really should just calm down. You'd be right. I really should do that. The problem was, I wasn't the one in control here.

No, it was Shimamura who was making me act this way. It was always her. Even now.

Let's have fun. That's what I wanted to tell her. I really did. And yet, the words refused to come out. I began doubting myself more and more, and soon, didn't know if I should even say anything.

My mind was filled to the brim with questions that I was unable to ask her.

Was she inconvenienced by having me around? Was I an annoying person to have to deal with?

I never managed to bring myself to ask her any of these things, even though I really did want to. I was scared. Scared of what would happen if she said yes, if she called me annoying.

Well, I guess she already had. And it was because of that I knew I needed to change.

Those feelings had manifested themselves as me now standing here, waiting for someone else—someone who wasn't Shimamura—to arrive.

We ended up not having to wait for long; soon

enough, the bike carrying the two girls rolled in. It seemed that, between the previous time and now, Naga-fuji still hadn't learned to ride one.

I wonder, would Shimamura be equally willing to attend to my needs were I to show a similar weakness myself?

Hmm... Glancing at her face, I got the impression that might be tough. Sure, she might do it to a certain extent, but getting on the same level as Hino and Nagafuji, that was probably out of reach. We were still missing some of the prerequisite steps. Whether you wanted to call it love or passion or whatever, I strongly felt like we needed more of that first.

Those were the most concrete terms I was able to put my feelings in. Vague, I know. It almost felt like I was staring at something buried at the bottom of the ocean, the only visible part of it being its blurry outline.

"Sorry that we're late. It was mostly Nagafuji's fault." "Oh, really?"

Really, Hino stated over her shoulder, earning a short "Hmm, I guess" from the other girl.

I instantly found myself charmed by this little inter-action. You were able to get a good sense of just how

much Nagafuji trusted her friend.

“So, everyone’s dressed up all casual today, huh?”

Apparently, we were going to be skipping straight past greetings. As for what Hino had said, yeah, that only made sense; we didn’t have school today, after all.

“Weren’t we the last time too?”

“Were we? I definitely remember us wearing school uniforms... Well, who cares. Let’s not dwell on it.”

Not good at all, she shook her head. Nagafuji proceeded to do the same shortly after, almost as if mimicking the other girl.

If I had to guess, I’d say that it was likely her who was confused here.

“Now then, let’s get going.”

Led by Hino—who’d come late, mind you—we began making our way towards the karaoke place. Why was she in the front? Well, that’d be because she was the one who’d picked where we were going; after looking up all the available karaoke places online, I’d ultimately decided to let her make the final choice. Hino basically knew the town inside out. Her knowledge was on such a level that, despite having been born here myself, I felt like a total outsider being guided by her.

The two rode ahead, with Shimamura coming second and me taking the back behind her.

Unconsciously, I'd placed myself on the edge of the group. That was something that tended to happen.

If you wanted to view human relationships as a puzzle, I suppose I'd be a piece which didn't fit anywhere. Further going along with this metaphor, it was hardly worth thinking about how such a piece, one chased into a corner, would get treated in the end.

I had to wonder, would I ever be able to do it, to fit together with someone?

Still riding behind Shimamura, I went ahead and called out her name.

There was a questioning look in her eyes as she turned around to face my direction. Hastily, I suggested the following:

"If it's fine with you, could we sing a duet again?" Unlike previously, we'd kinda decided this whole thing on a whim, leaving me with no time to pick a song and memorize the lyrics to it. Even so, there should still be at least a song we both knew how to sing. I ended up having to not wait long for an answer, as immediately, Shimamura nodded her head.

“Sure.”

Having said that, she gave a quick glance forward to make sure she wasn’t about to collide with anything before turning back to me.

“Still, I wonder, are there any songs we can sing to-gether?”

“Let’s look for one once we get there.”

Was that really the best verb to use there? Where exactly where we going to be looking for a song like that?

After all, it wasn’t like the list at the karaoke place had a special mark or anything of the sort indicating songs that we both knew—that we shared.

Shimamura responded to my strange remark with a smile. She then turned back, for real this time.

I could feel myself grow relaxed as I looked at her. There was something very calming about that, talking with just the two of us.

At the same time, I also felt nervous, uneasy.

Was Shimamura really smiling because of what I’d said?

Having arrived at the karaoke club located behind the station, we entered the room prepared for us. It was very similar to the one we’d used previously, albeit the

lights here were much brighter. So much brighter, in fact, that I got the feeling it'd strain my eyes were we to stay for too long.

I was able to sit down next to Shimamura without any trouble this time. Not just that, her taking a seat on the edge of the sofa meant that I was the only one doing so. Only I sat next to her. Me. Silently, I celebrated this fact while placing down my bag.

Looking at it now, it was true that Hino and Nagafuji had waited for us to take our seats first. Had they done that on purpose to be considerate? I couldn't deny the possibility. Hmm... Those two, they were certainly what I'd call good people. I went ahead and thanked them in my mind.

Having picked up a mic, Hino then began singing without bothering to choose a song first.

“Alright, I’ll start. *Ninensee~*.”

“Stop that right now”, Nagafuji instantly lashed out, prompting the other girl to draw back. Neither of them sounded particularly serious about what they were do-ing.

“I’m getting a *deja-vu* here.”

I agreed completely with Shimamura’s assessment.

“Hmm, I wonder, what should I sing? They don’t have any of my go-to hits.”

Her go-to hits?

“In that case, why don’t I lead the vanguard?”

With those words, Nagafuji stood up and took the mic from Hino. Though she tried to protest and take it back, her complaints were quickly drowned out by the singing of the taller of the two. The song chosen was about making croquettes. Fitting, I suppose.

Nagafuji really seemed to be pouring her heart into it, going as far as to move around matching the lyrics. Hino also jumped in halfway through.

As for Shimamura and I, we were left to stare at them in silence.

The end of the song was accompanied by the following statement from Nagafuji:

“What you just heard was the theme song of Nagafuji Meat.”

“Liar. All that’s ever for dinner at your house is cab-bage.”

“But cabbage miso is delicious.”

Give it back, Hino grumbled while grabbing the mic from the other girl’s hands. She then turned towards us.

“Now then, which one of you will go next?” “Huh? There’s a fixed order we have to do this in?” “Yep. It’s called the natural flow.”

Confused, I turned to look at Shimamura, only to notice that she’d had the same idea. Our eyes immediately met. Neither of us had so much as begun working on picking a song. Putting aside the menu she’d spread open for a moment, Shimamura accepted Hino’s offer and took the mic.

“Right. Hmm, what to choose.”

She spoke right into the microphone for some reason. Was she asking me, or perhaps herself? I wasn’t quite sure.

While Shimamura was busy doing that, my thoughts travelled down a completely different path.

Hino and Nagafuji. Those two were always together, truly inseparable. And yet, in addition, they also managed to deal perfectly with their surroundings.

The fact that they were currently hanging out with someone like me was proof of that.

I was nothing at all like them. They were nothing at all like me. I wonder, were they aware of that themselves? I had to assume so.

“What does it mean to be close to someone?”

I had no idea. After all the hours spent thinking about it, I'd still to find an answer, and at this point, all I could do was ask.

The others immediately turned to look at me. Was that a weird thing to ask out of nowhere? Yes, yes it was. Absolutely.

I probably would've drowned in the resulting embarrassment had Nagafuji not drawn the attention away from me by doing what she did next.

“Shimamura!”

Her arms spread open, she began running towards the person mentioned. Like me, she'd given no warning as to what she was about to do, and before Shimamura could even react, the girl's body had already slammed against hers. She instinctively bent as far back as her seat would allow, leaving Nagafuji to stagger as she tried to avoid falling on the floor.

It was quite the sight to watch unfold before me. Still in a state I'd hesitate to call balanced, Nagafuji proceeded to form a peace sign with her fingers.

“Like this!”

“Oh, really?”

No doubt, she nodded in a manner brimming with confidence. I could see Hino's face in the corner of my eye. By the looks of it, she was just as bewildered as I was.

"Hmm, maybe it would've been better if I had called her Shima?"

Appearing to doubt herself, Nagafuji tilted her head slightly. I looked at her, then at Shimamura, then away.

Even I could tell that this wasn't it.

"Could simply Ma work?"

No, but that's too peculiar of a nickname to call Shimamura by, she quickly added, pulling away from the idea. I also thought that didn't work. It just... wasn't who she was. I wasn't fully able to explain why, but I really had this idea in my mind that, were you to come up with a nickname for her, the "Shima" part should be included. It was that fundamental.

Leaving it out was like ignoring the essentials. That was what I thought.

That was a fixation I felt to exist in my heart. "Okay. To put it short, what Nagafuji's trying to say is... Honestly, I don't got a clue. What are you trying to say, Nagafuji?"

It seemed that even Hino didn't have a full grasp of her friend's behaviour. Instead of answering, what Nagafuji did was place her finger against her cheek and tilt her head slightly.

"You don't understand?"

"I'd be scared for my future if I did."

Hino followed this statement of hers with a dry laugh. Shimamura smiled a little too, almost like she was doing so to match her. As for me, all I could do was shake my shoulders.

The passionless laugh I'd tried to force out had gotten stuck somewhere along the way.

"Well, me not understanding you is really just busi-ness as usual. Now then, if you haven't decided yet who'll sing, then I guess I will."

Having taken the mic, Hino then began singing, and just like the last time, the song quickly turned into a duet as Nagafuji joined in.

Their corner of the room was certainly having what I'd describe as a grand old time. But, that was only their corner.

As for me, it felt more like I'd tripped and fallen flat on my face.

“.....”

My back itched.

With my hands placed on my knees, my spine natu-rally began to curve.

I could feel my very being become just a tiny bit more stale each time I breathed in the room's air. Slowly, I was drying up on the inside.

My ability to think grew weaker and weaker, almost as if the wrinkles covering the surface of my brain were being smoothed out.

The voices resounding through my head felt different than normal. The sensation was in a way similar to that of waves hitting a beach; they'd draw close to my ears before pulling away. I wonder, who was it that these voices belonged to, these voices which caused my skin to shrivel? I felt like were I to focus my mind and try to pick out what they were saying, that alone would drive me insane.

It really did feel like things were getting worse, even when compared to last year.

Like I was slowly going bad.

Why was I here right now? What was this all for? Could this conflict filling my mind be seen on my

face? Apparently so, as soon, Shimamura grabbed my head, brought it close to her, and gave it a soft pat.

The other two were still singing, and while I hadn't expected her to do so, it didn't exactly shock me either.

There was something about that reaction that felt alien to me. I barely recognized it as my own.

As if comforting me, Shimamura's hand weaved through my hair.

It was almost like she was praising me for trying my hardest.

I say this at the risk of being misunderstood, but the past five hours had been truly uncomfortable.

My shoulders were stiff, my nose felt dry. My back was burning.

Really, how long would it take for me to start enjoying this?

"What about dinner? You guys wanna go eat some-where?" Hino asked just as we exited the karaoke place.

You could hear some fatigue mixed in with her voice. Made sense; she and Nagafuji had been the ones singing for the vast majority of the time.

A group of people chatting amongst each other

passed us by. They appeared to be having a great time, one man in particular laughing so hard he had to hold his belly. That was how humans were; they laughed with others.

I wonder, should I have acted like that too?

“Huh? I thought you were coming over to have dinner at our place. You specifically asked if you could and all.” The speaker this time was Nagafuji, having already hopped onto the back of the other girl’s bike.

“Oh, right. I remember now. Well then, I guess this will be where we break up for the night”, Hino stated, drawing back her earlier proposal. Though it likely hadn’t been her intention, Nagafuji really had saved me there.

“See you later. Will the next time be at school? Hmm, I would like to meet at least once before that.”

“I’m pretty sure we’re gonna meet like, tomorrow.” “Yes, we are. But not them. Pay attention.” Silently, I watched as the two rode away.

If I had to describe how I felt right now, I’d say that the sensation was similar to filling a quota, finishing up all of the summer homework I’d been assigned.

That was the impression I was left with as I examined

my mental state. It was also why I couldn't help but groan. I was stuck. Things weren't moving.

"You didn't really have fun, did you?"

Prompted by the sudden voice, I lifted my head, only to find the last person left—Shimamura—smiling down at me wryly.

She had been completely right in her assessment, leaving me to wonder how I was supposed to reply. I vaguely remembered saying something to the effect of "it was fine" the last time this had happened, but now, even those vapid words refused to leave my mouth.

My earlier suspicions had been right; something in-side me really was changing.

Was that a change for worse? Or perhaps...

"Not to say I expected anything else. I do know that's the sort of person you are, after all."

What she was talking about wasn't a mere guess, a feeling. No, it was the truth.

As a person, I was horribly introverted. I'm sure that she knew that as well as I did. "Regardless, I—"

Shimamura's words were cut short as all of a sudden, a phone rang. Not mine, obviously, but rather, hers.

I could feel my middle finger jitter slightly in the rhythm of the tone, almost as if the sound was somehow carrying tiny electric shocks into my muscles.

Having pulled her phone out from her bag, Shima-mura went ahead and focused her eyes on the liquid crystals which formed its display.

Instantly, I froze.

My chest became cloudy and my throat clogged up. It was difficult to resist the temptation to snatch the device away from her and check who the person was.

Every last fibre of my being was telling me to do so.

My heart kept pounding faster and faster. The sensation was similar to having my survival instincts kick in, only ten times stronger.

Whether it was due to my reaction or not, that I couldn't tell, but in any case, Shimamura chose to de-cline the call instead of answering it.

"I'll just call back later."

Was she doing this to be conscientious of my feelings, or did she simply not want to talk with the person right now? Again, it was impossible for me to answer that question.

"Where were we? Hmm... Oh, right. Adachi, I feel

that—”

“It’s fine”, I blurted out with intensity I didn’t know I had in me. I was truly scared to hear the rest.

Seeing Shimamura’s expression stiffen in a way which indicated she was about to say something, I quickly went ahead and repeated myself:

“Really, it’s fine. It is.”

Please don’t abandon me, I silently added in my mind.

Clingy, yes, but that truly was how I felt.

This reaction was similar to that of a child’s. Looking at Shimamura, it was clear that she didn’t quite know how to properly take it in.

And yet, she simply left the matter there, choosing to ignore what was really going on. That was the sort of person she was.

“Well, alright. If you say it’s fine.”

“Yeah...” I nodded my head a little. How many times, how many times had I forced out those empty words—“I’m fine”?

Shimamura opened her mouth as if she was about to say something, only to give up halfway and instead raise her arm.

Slowly, she shook it from side to side.

“See ya.”

“Right...”

I waved back at her after a short pause. I'd been fine with it ending like this just moments earlier, but now, those feelings were starting to fade away. All that re-mained were their afterimages.

Whereas the usual me would likely have followed her home, I now understood that it should be my objective to work on fixing those sorts of strange deviations. As such, despite all of my instincts telling me otherwise, I decided that it'd be for the best if I kept to that plan for now. Or rather, I had no choice but to do so. My mind filled with these sorts of unreasonable thoughts, we separated.

Shimamura gave me a short glance over her shoulder while walking away. Did she again find the way I was acting odd? Did she feel uncomfortable? I could only assume so. Our eyes met, prompting her to once more wave her hand in the air. I replied by waving back.

She didn't look back for a second time. Neither did her bike turn around once she got on it.

Passing the traffic lights and crossing the side walk, she began making her way home. I could only watch as

her back slowly grew distant.

I wanted to tell her to stop, to wait, but I couldn't. I wanted to chase after her, but I simply didn't have the will to do so.

It hurt. It was painful. Feeling something akin to fatigue deep behind my eyes, I took a long, hard breath.

I spent the next couple of moments standing there all by myself.

A mixture of different sounds reached my ears as I remained like I was, motionless, my hands glued to the handlebar of my bike. All the laughs, the strong footsteps, those had nothing to do with me. I was alone. Searching. Searching for the reason which had brought me here, why I was here now. I went ahead and extended my neck in a desperate attempt to find something, anything to agree with.

All so that I could feel like I'd spent my time right. Being right next to the station, it was only natural that I was able to hear trains nearby. Mixed in with their sounds was the song of cicadas.

Where were there cicadas here? No matter what direction I turned my head in, all I could see around me were people and tall buildings.

A long time passed.

What good was going to come from me staying here? Nothing, probably. I might as well go home. With that in mind, I proceeded to pull my bike out and hop on. Though it did come close, I was somehow able to place my feet on the pedals without tumbling over. Something about that felt similar to jumping directly on a wheel which had already started spinning. Ignoring those sensations, I began pedalling.

My ears were quickly filled with the sound of metal creaking; apparently, the wheel of my bike had gotten caught somewhere.

Was this something I could fix on my own? No, likely not. Well, in that case, there was no reason for me to stop. My straightened back gradually slouched forward.

A loud noise resembling a firework going off could be heard in the distance. While I wasn't able to witness the accompanying flash due to it still being bright outside, considering the time of year, I could only assume that yet another festival was going to be held tonight; these distinct bangs echoing through the night were pretty much a weekly occurrence during the height of summer break. It was quite the popular thing all in all, going as

far as to form the core of our city's tourism season.

As if called by the sound, unpleasant thoughts soon rushed to fill my mind.

I could see in front of me the image of Shimamura walking with someone who wasn't me.

There she was, attending a summer festival with a girl whose name I still didn't know.

By the time I arrived home, she would probably already have called the person from earlier back, wouldn't she?

My grip on the handlebar grew tighter. I stayed like that for a long while, attempting to gain control of myself as a sharp wave of pain travelled between my thumb and index finger. This wasn't good. I wasn't like that. Desperately, I tried to fix my failings, push myself into the right direction.

The light of the setting sun painted both the sky and the clouds in its scarlet glow.

I lifted my gaze from the road, and as I did, my eyes instantly grew wet with tears.

I'd tried so hard to get along with everyone. And yet, here I was, all by myself. Why? Why was that?

Before I knew it, my feet had stopped pedalling and

placed themselves against the ground, pulling the bike to a halt. My back became covered in sweat as a gush of warmth shot through my body.

I could feel my mind opening.

The backside of my neck was especially warm, almost making it feel like I'd passed through a tiny cloud of hot mist. A very specific description, yes, but that really was how it felt to me.

Imagine wearing multiple layers of warm clothes on a cold winter day. That was what the sensation was like.

I grew flustered.

The cityscape around me spun to such an extent that I started feeling nauseous.

No longer could I stand still.

“This isn’t right.”

I kicked the ground. Just like the wheels of my bike, the gears in my head too began turning.

You could almost smell burning rubber in the air as I continued picking up speed without an end.

This stench filling my mind, I shouted out the follow-ing:

“I knew it! This isn’t for me!”

Nothing that was going on here had anything to do with me. It was all unrelated, unconnected.

It’d be good if I could stop being such an introvert and start living a life where I got along with everyone around me.

A part of me truly felt like that might be for the best. At the same time, it was impossible for me to shake the feeling that there was something wrong about that approach. It simply wasn’t right.

I’d been hearing these strange noises inside my head for a while now, and at last, I was able to make out what they were saying.

This isn’t right, shouted every last fibre of my being in unison.

Those screams echoed throughout my body, from the tips of my toes to the top of my head. I was afraid. Afraid of changing.

“This isn’t right! This isn’t right!!”

The fact that there were people around me, the fact that I was in the middle of the city, none of that mattered. I just kept on shouting.

All that I’d kept stored inside me had exploded out,

transforming me into a human firework of sorts.

No, I wasn't okay.

"Today, I wanted to—"

I wanted to go out with just Shimamura. I always wanted to do that.

I knew that would've made me a thousand times happier, I knew it. No matter how hard I tried to hide the truth by burying it behind this concept of belonging to a group, it was impossible for me to deny the obvious; the path which I ought to take was right there in front of me. Cicadas did that too, dig themselves under the ground, but they came also out at some point. So then, why didn't I?

Why would you waste your time alive laying beneath the soil when that was all you could do when you were dead anyway?

Even if I had a hundred people around me, none of them would come close to replacing Shimamura. No matter how many relationships I piled together, they would never reach this same height. Many did not make one. There was also something else I understood at last: What was right for Shimamura didn't need to be right for me.

Shimamura and I, we were different types of creatures.

It was exactly why it was okay. It was exactly why I was so charmed by her.

The amount of strength I was putting into my legs made it feel like my bones could snap in half any second now. Similarly, the speed at which my bike slid forward was such I wouldn't be surprised if the asphalt covering the road were to be left cracked in my wake. I was using every ounce of strength I had to make the pedals move. I'd even lifted myself off the saddle at some point. When was the last time I'd gone this fast? I honestly couldn't remember. It must've been years ago, if not more than that. All this because I was chasing after a figure I knew I wouldn't find at the end of this road.

Look at me. Look at me and no one else.

I'm only ever looking at you, Shimamura.

After all.

After all, I—

“I love you! I love you, Shimamuraaaaaaaaa!”

This honestly might have been the first time I'd ever said those words out loud.



Having been able to for once release what I felt inside me, the rest of my sentiments took on the form of a sensation unlike anything I'd ever experienced before. Softly, those feelings patted my cheeks.

Joy and irritation both simultaneously ravaged my mind. These emotions were messy, yes, hard to make sense of, but considering that I'd previously had nothing to cling onto, they were more than enough to satisfy my needs.

I could feel my cheeks cool down slightly as tears tinged with the evening sun rolled down them. My face was a complete mess as was my mind, but the tears, those painted the outline of my true feelings.

The flow of time itself had sped up, leaving me with no room to pay attention to the glares of the people I passed.

Somehow, I'd managed to travel to a world belonging only to me.

What spread before me there was scenery completely unlike the usual.

I hadn't been able to see it on my way here, but now, the image of it filled my entire field of view.

A city of dusk, the sounds of fireworks and cicadas

resounding in the distance.

The way this turmoil, all this activity ran past me in the corner of my eye, it was like I was a whole lap behind.

I was growing desperate. Desperate to catch up with summer before it flowed away from me.

Passing both the lights and cicadas, I kept on ped-alling.

I'd found what I truly wanted to do during summer break.

From beneath the countless number of things I'd written down, all those letters and words, the answer had come to me.

Up next: The second half of summer break.

Bonus chapter: “Yashiro: The Visitor - Part 9”

“Wait!”

“Eek!”

That was the sound Yachii made as I lunged towards her. She'd been running away from me for a while now, almost like a cat, but finally, I was able to catch her.

Well, if you wanted to be completely accurate, she was actually a lion, not a cat. Hmm... She really liked that costume, didn't she?

“Give it up already, Yachii.” “Hehe.

You are too naive, Shou.”

With those words, Yachii jumped out through the lion's mouth. Huh? How on earth did she do that?

She slipped away from my grasp, leaving me to hold only her pelt.

“Hyeeh!”

Were her shoulders somehow more flexible than those of a normal person?

Also, as I now discovered, she'd been completely naked underneath.

“Seriously!? You don't wear any underwear with

this!?”

“And why would I do that? It’s already so warm.”

A puzzled look formed on her face as she tilted her head lightly to the side. It didn’t seem like she was one bit embarrassed.

“Now then, farewell.”

Fully naked, she began turning around to escape, only for me to once again catch her before she could get anywhere.

This time I made sure to grab the nape of her neck, just like what you’d do with a real cat.

“Let’s see you shed this skin.”

“Eek!”

It’d be seriously bad if she did that.

I had to wonder, why was Yachii so against this? All I was trying to do was make her take a bath.

“Yachii, do you not like warm things?”

“It isn’t a matter of preference. They make me feel like I am about to melt.”

She gripped her cheeks and squished them as if to emphasize her point. They seemed so fluffy, so soft. They were soft.

“Now you’re just exaggerating.”

“What are you two doing?”

The speaker this time was Sis, having just walked out from the kitchen. A frown immediately appeared on her face as she gave the naked Yachii a glance.

“Yachii jumped out!” I explained while holding up the discarded lion pelt.

“You seem like you are sweating too, Shimamura.” “Well, yeah. It’s super warm.”

“Would you like to take your clothes off?”

“No, I wouldn’t. And you’re not going to stay like that either. Go take a bath, or if not, then put your clothes back on.”

Why does she even take baths in our house anyway... I could hear Sis mumble to herself as she walked off.

“There you have it. Off to the bath we go.” Grabbing her hand, I began pulling Yachii with me. “Hmm, I suppose I don’t have a choice”, she stated back. This counted as her resignation, and just like that, we made our way to the bath.

“Sit over there, Yachii. I’ll wash your hair”, I beckoned to her, acting like a big sister would. Replying with something to the effect of “that’s not necessary”, she nevertheless moved to the designated position. I

leaned over her from behind and aimed the shower head towards her.

Though usually tied with a butterfly knot, when re-leased, her hair reached well below her hips.

"Blub blub blub."

"Whoa..."

No matter how many times I saw it, this sight never ceased to amaze me: The water coming from the shower grew tainted blue as it passed through Yachii's hair.

Not only that, every time I stroked her hair with my fingers, the same blue particles which often floated around her would shoot up in the air. Combined with all the steam, it really did feel like the entire bathroom had been painted in a blueish colour. I stayed like that for a moment, staring at the scenery around me with the shower head still in hand.

"Wow..."

"Blub blub blub blub."

"Just close your mouth."

With Yachii's hair now wet, I went ahead and added in shampoo. I had to say, she'd been completely correct in her earlier assessment; not the slightest stain could be seen anywhere across the entirety of her glimmering

hair. Likewise, neither her shoulders nor neck were at all tanned, instead appearing whiter than even the floor tiles. And yet, I washed them anyway.

Immediately, Yachii began rocking her head from side to side. Was she bored? I couldn't say. Whatever the case, that was something she did every time.

"Hey, stop moving."

I squeezed her head between my hands to keep her still.

"You're so selfish, Shou."

"What are you even talking about?"

Moving my hands with intense speed, I made the shampoo foam. Just like the water before them, the bubbles too grew tinged blue.

What about me? Was my skin also changing colour? I went ahead and checked, only to discover that no such thing had happened; I was the same way as always.

"Your hair really is a mystery, Yachii."

It was also prettier than anything I'd seen elsewhere.

"Really? All I did was reproduce the hair of the earthling I used to model myself after." "Y-
You did?"

"Correct. There are pretty weird earthlings out there."

“Not as weird as you, I think.”

For what it was worth, I’d personally never met a girl anywhere near as strange as Yachii. Not just that, I kinda had a feeling I never would. She’d be the only person of her type I’d ever come across in my entire life. That was what I thought.

Finished washing her body, we entered the bathtub together. The tub itself was quite narrow, and while that was a slight problem when taking a bath with Sis or that friend of hers, with Yachii, there was more than enough room for me to straighten out my legs.

Softly, the droplets dripping down from her hair hit the surface of the water.

I shifted my attention towards Yachii, her long hair which continued to glimmer.

The light coming from it was so bright that, combined with the ceiling lamps, it really felt like she might soon disappear.

“Say, Yachii. You came here to find those, what were they again, your brethren or something, right?”

“I did, yes.”

“And once you find them, you’ll go somewhere?” There was something transient about her, fleeting.

I couldn't help but get the impression that any one of these days, I might wake up to her no longer being here with me.

No matter how close I got to her, no matter how good of friends we became, this feeling just wouldn't go away.

I felt it even now as I floated in the water.

"Correct. I will have to return to space", Yachii stated, sounding both soft and firm at the same time.

"I see..."

What she meant by space, I didn't really know. Regardless, I did get the feeling that, once she was gone, we were never going to see each other again.

"That will likely happen in around three thousand years from now."

"Huh?"

Yachii responded to my obvious confusion by nodding her head deeply.

Three thousand years? How long was that? Let's see... My grandmother was about seventy years old, so...

.....

Yeah.

"Well, that's good then."

I didn't always believe everything Yachii said.

And yet, hearing that number, there was something about it which helped me relax.

I soon noticed that Yachii had begun staring at me.
“What”, I asked her, only for her to...

“*Smooch.*”

...press her lips against the tip of my nose.

The world before me became tinged in her colour. My hands pressed against the tub’s bottom grew stiff, my fingers trembled.

It was when she began licking my nose that I could no longer hold still.

“What are you doing!?”

As if exposing my feelings, I leapt out from the water. A grin formed on Yachii’s face as she stated the following:

“Doing this is a sign of friendship, I heard.” “R-Really?”

I had never heard anything of the sort myself. Assuming she was from the city, maybe it was some city thing? No, that didn’t seem right.

My eyes proceeded to spin as a type of warmth different from that of the bath’s rushed through me.

“Are we not friends, Shou?” Yachii asked while tilting

her head. It appeared that she had interpreted my shock the wrong way.

I could see the glimmer inside her downcast eyes move around, rotate like a globe.

Each one of those shiny dots was its own star.

“We... We are. We’re friends.”

Different compared to my friends in school, yes, but regardless.

Though I didn’t know how to put it into words, there was something about her that attracted me, something I wasn’t able to let go of.

Even now that we were both naked, that sense still remained.

“I just wonder... Why on the nose?”

“Hmm? Did I get it wrong?”

“Well, normally, I think you’re... you’re supposed to do it on the cheek.”

“Really? Alright then. One more time. *Smooch*.”

“*Smooch...*”

Holding my knees tight against my body, I sat there as Yachii’s lips pressed against my cheek.

Once more, the shade of blue in all of its glimmer filled the world before me.

Afterword

Titles chosen by my editor:

Usotsuki Mii-kun to Kowareta Maa-chan
Denpa Onna to Seishun Otoko Adachi to
Shimamura Tamako-san to Kashiwa-kun

Tantei Hanasaki Tarou ha Hiramekanai
Roppyaku Rokujuu En no Jijou
Tatta Hitotsu no, Negai
Tsuyokunai mama New Game
Sabaku Boy's Life
Bishoujo ha Kiru koto to Mitsuketari
Samurai Dead End

Titles chosen by me:

Boku no Shoukibo na Kiseki
Baka ga Zenra de Yattekuru
Bocchies
Tokage no Ou
Kinou ha Kanojo mo Koishiteta Ashita
mo Kanojo ha Koi wo suru Jikan no
Otoshimono

Hitomi no Sagashimono
Niji'iro no Alien
FuwaFuwa-san ga Furu
Otomodachi RoboChoco
Europa no Soko kara
Kami no Gomibako
Kuro Kuro Kurokku

Looking back at it this way, it's about half and half, huh?

It would be truly fantastic if even one of these titles were to catch your eye.

Iruma Hitoma



Hitoma Iruma

Irukuma likes takoyaki, yakisoba, okonomiyaki, ten-musu, anago sushi, yakiniku, misokatsu, gyoza, chao fan, mayonnaise shrimp, beef cutlets, fried shrimp, cro-quettes, hamburgers, hayashi rice, as well as curry rice.



Illustrator/Non

Never did I think I'd get to draw the two as little girls...

Thank you... Thank you so much...