

BITTERSWEET ECHOES

Reji stood at the park entrance, her heart racing just a little faster than usual. The cool evening breeze tugged at her hair as she spotted him, holding something behind his back with a playful grin.

"Hey," he said, his eyes twinkling with mischief as he stepped closer. Slowly, he revealed what he had been hiding: her favorite ice cream, a perfectly scooped cone of black currant.

Reji laughed, pleasantly surprised. "You remembered," she said, her voice soft but filled with delight as she took the cone from him.

"Well, I had to see if you were real," he teased, an amused glint in his eyes. "After all those late-night chats, I started to wonder if I was talking to a cyborg with impeccable taste."

She shook her head, smiling. "A cyborg? Seriously?"

"Had to be sure," he replied, taking a step back to observe her like she was some intricate machine. "But now... this proves it." He nodded toward the ice cream.

She took a bite, laughing again. "Yeah, because a cyborg would malfunction from enjoying ice cream too much."

"Exactly," he said, the warmth of their shared joke lingering as they both settled into easy conversation, the once virtual world they knew now feeling more real than ever.

As they parted, he grinned. "Next time, 365 steps. There's a staircase near the old temple."

Reji raised an eyebrow. "A challenge, huh? No ice cream this time?"

"Just a test of strength," he said with a shrug. "And it's not a date."

She laughed. "Fine, but don't be surprised if I leave you behind."

"Let's see about that," he smirked, leaving her with a sense of anticipation for their next meeting—no ice cream, just a challenge waiting ahead.

Reji couldn't shake the mix of emotions swirling inside her that day. Her heart fluttered with happiness, yet there was an undeniable nervousness, too. His charming looks had completely melted her, and she found herself replaying every moment, every smile, over and over.

All she could think about was him—wondering when he'd come online, eager to chat again. She kept glancing at her phone, hoping for a message, her excitement for their next meeting building with every passing second. The challenge he'd set wasn't just about climbing stairs anymore; it was about seeing him again, and the thought alone made her pulse quicken.

When they met for the challenge, the old temple stairs loomed before them, each step a test of endurance. As they began the climb, he kept a watchful eye on Reji, ready to call out any hint of fatigue.

To his astonishment, Reji moved with a steady, effortless grace, her energy unwavering as they ascended. She tackled the 365 steps as if they were mere pebbles in her path, her determination clear in every stride.

By the time they reached the top, she looked as fresh as she had at the bottom. He stared, incredulous, unable to hide his admiration. "I should have known," he said, half in awe and half in playful defeat. "You really are something else." She laughed and nudged him with her elbow, a mischievous glint in her eyes.

After reaching the top, they decided to treat themselves to a "Chocolate Bomb" at a café. Reji, never having tried it before, fumbled while filming the dessert's dramatic reveal, missing the best part. He teased her, and they laughed, enjoying the rich, sweet indulgence together.

Afterward, he dropped her home on his bike. The ride was calm, and as he helped her off, they lingered for a moment. She thanked him for the fun day, and with a playful smile, he promised they'd do it again—next time, she'd pick the dessert.

As he watched Reji disappear inside her house, he couldn't help but smile to himself. Something told him this wouldn't be the last time they'd meet. The playful teasing, the way they effortlessly enjoyed each other's company—it felt like the beginning of something.

He swung back onto his bike, still grinning as he rode away. What would their next adventure be? He didn't know, but the thought lingered in his mind, making him look forward to the next time they crossed paths. Maybe she'd finally nail the perfect video, or perhaps they'd stumble upon something even sweeter than a Chocolate Bomb.

Either way, he had a feeling this was just the start.

As he rode away, the cool breeze whipping past him, his thoughts wandered back to Reji. The lightness of their day replayed in his mind—her effortless energy, their laughter, and the warmth in her eyes as they shared that ridiculous chocolate dessert. It all felt so easy, so right. He smiled to himself, already imagining what their next meeting might bring. Maybe something deeper was unfolding between them, something unspoken but undeniable.

But just as the thought crossed his mind, his phone buzzed in his pocket. He pulled over, curious who it could be. It was a message—from Reji.

"Hey," the text started. "Thanks again for today. I had a lot of fun. But there's something I didn't mention."

His heart sank, a knot forming in his chest. He could already feel the shift in the air, something he couldn't quite place but knew was coming.

The next message arrived before he had time to reply. "I'm leaving town soon. For good. It's been in the works for a while, and I wasn't sure how to tell you. Today was probably the last time we'll see each other."

He stared at the screen, disbelief washing over him. His fingers hovered over the keypad, unsure of what to say. How could this be the end, just when things were starting to feel like they were falling into place?

Reji's voice message came next, and hesitantly, he pressed play. Her voice was softer than usual, with a sadness that hadn't been there earlier. "I didn't want to spoil the day, and I didn't want to make things weird between us. You've been such a good friend, and today was really special. But I've known for a while that I have to leave, and I guess I just didn't know how to say goodbye."

He sighed, leaning back against the seat of his bike, staring up at the sky as the realization sank in. This wasn't just a small bump. This was it. An ending.

He replied, his message short, feeling the weight of each word. "Why didn't you tell me earlier?"

Her response came quickly, like she had been waiting for the question. "I didn't know how. It didn't feel real until today. I didn't want to ruin what we had, even if it was just for a little while."

There was a long pause as he gathered his thoughts, the reality of her leaving hitting him harder than he expected. He realized that all the fun, the teasing, the easy flow between them—it was already slipping away, like sand through his fingers. He had been looking forward to their next meeting, the next laugh, the next adventure. Now, there wouldn't be one.

"Where are you going?" he finally typed, knowing that the answer wouldn't change anything but still needing to know.

"Far," came the reply. "Somewhere I can start over. It's complicated, but... I just can't stay here."

His chest tightened, the optimism from earlier fading fast. There was no fixing this, no simple way to bring her back or change her mind. And in that moment, he realized that not every story has a next chapter. Some things, no matter how good they feel, come to an unexpected end.

"I'm really going to miss you," he sent, the message feeling inadequate but true.

"I'll miss you too," she replied. "Today was perfect. Let's just remember it that way, okay?"

He sat there for a long time after, the city lights flickering around him, the sounds of the street fading into the background. There would be no more playful teasing, no more shared desserts, no more adventures. Reji had already become a memory, and all he could do was accept it.

With a heavy heart, he started his bike again, the road ahead feeling emptier than before.

"There are moments in life we can't control, no matter how much we wish things could last forever. Some people and experiences are meant to pass through our lives, leaving behind memories that shape us. All we can do is cherish those memories, hold them close, and let them remind us of the beauty in fleeting connections."

-Rikriti Koirala