

# Chitose Is in the Ramuhe •Bottle•

4

Hiromu

Illustration by  
raemz



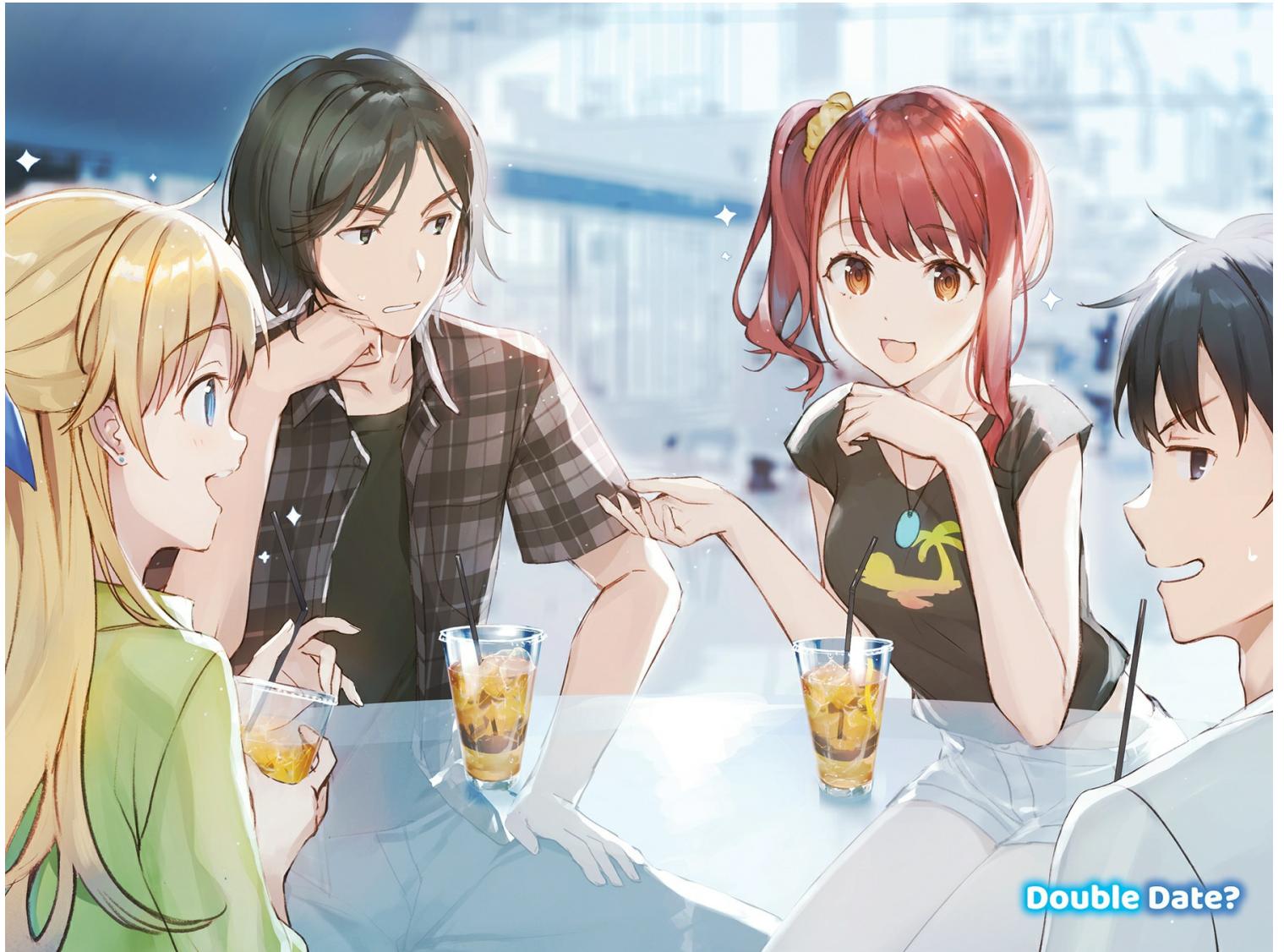
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**Double Date?**





**Light a Fire in My Heart**

# Chitose is in the Ramune Bottle

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Kenta Yamazaki

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**Chitose Is in the Ramune Bottle 4**

**Hiromu**

Translation by Evie Lund

Cover art by raemz

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CHITOSE-KUN WA RAMUNEBIN NO NAKA Vol. 4

by Hiromu

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Original Japanese edition published by SHOGAKUKAN.

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150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor

New York, NY 10001

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First Yen On Edition: June 2023

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Anna Powers Designed by Yen Press Design: Jane Sohn, Andy Swist Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Hiromu, author. | raemz, illustrator. | Lund, Evie, translator.

Title: Chitose is in the ramune bottle / Hiromu ; illustration by raemz ; translation by Evie Lund.

Other titles: Chitose-kun wa ramune bin no naka. English Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2022

Identifiers: LCCN 2021057712 | ISBN 9781975339050 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975339067 (v. 2 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975339074 (v. 3 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975339081 (v. 4 ; trade paperback) Subjects: CYAC: High schools—Fiction. | Schools—Fiction. | Friendship—Fiction. | LCGFT: Light novels.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.H574 Ch 2022 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021057712>

ISBNs: 978-1-97533908-1 (paperback) 978-1-9753-4577-8 (ebook)

E3-20230512-JV-NF-ORI

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**Saku Chitose**

One of the most popular guys  
in the school.  
Ex-baseball club.

**Yuuko Hiragi**

A popular class princess.  
Tennis club.

**Yua Uchida**

A self-made popular girl who tries  
her best at everything. Music club.

**Haru Aomi**

A small and perky girl.  
Basketball club.

**Yuzuki Nanase**

Every guy's favorite, along  
with Yuuko.  
Basketball club.

**Asuka Nishino**

A strange upperclassman,  
socially unaware.  
Likes books.

**Kaito Asano**

Popular jock.  
Star player of the boys'  
basketball club.

**Kazuki Mizushino**

A logical-minded, handsome guy.  
A leading player in the soccer club.

**Kenta Yamazaki**

A former shut-in, otaku nerd.

**Atomu Uemura**

Ace pitcher of his junior high  
school team. A popular guy, seeking  
dominance over his nemesis, Saku.

**Nazuma Ayase**

A rough but cute girl. Often hangs  
around with Atomu.

**Mai Todo**

Ashi High's girls' basketball ace.

**Kuranosuke Iwanami (Kura)**

Homeroom teacher of Saku and his  
group. Fairly hands-off and laid-back.



## **Hiromu**

Born in Fukui, residing in Tokyo. Honestly, I never planned to have enough material for a whole four volumes, but if I go out to eat and you tell me I can get a large for free, I'm the type to order it and suffer even if I'm not hungry. I've realized I'm exactly the same when it comes to writing.

## **raemz**

Born in California. Got a cat and has been eating lots of ramune candy lately.

## PROLOGUE

### The Night Sky I Sought



I ran and I ran, but I couldn't catch up.

I jumped and I flew, but I couldn't reach it.

I'm very used to losing. My inferiority complex and I are good friends by now.

And yet I believed that no matter how often I hit a wall, I would eventually be able to grab hold of my future with both hands, if only I could manage to just plunge ahead without losing hope.

I wanted to live up to the sun, my namesake.

And yet I guess some nights still leave me shivering all alone.

Because there isn't anyone like me, where I'm headed.

There may be things in this world that you can't do anything about, even if you fret and struggle and writhe.

Maybe I'll just end up missing every hit I swing for.

...No, no, that's not the whole of it.

Above all, what I fear the most is that the bright-red flame inside of me will go out, all because of some tiny little catalyst.

Even up until now, that thought has brought me up short, while I've pasted a thin smile on my face.

Empty gym after school... Speak to me.

Ten years from now... Twenty years from now... Have I gotten through the

present day without regret?

Can I look back on this time and say that I did my best?

Hey, sweaty wristband. Speak to me.

Is my sunlight reaching the heart of someone dear to me?

I want to prove it with every inch of this small body of mine.

I want reassurance that, even when I get all hotheaded, even when I work myself up into a stinky sweat, I don't look lame.

So that I won't screw up, won't lose sight of myself, won't give up on myself.

I was in search of the vast moon in the sky.

One that would accept all the passion burning in my soul.

# CHAPTER ONE

## Barefoot and Ponytailed in the Pool After School



The beginning of summer is heralded by certain signs.

After school, in Gym 1, I found myself having that thought out of nowhere.

They're like secrets of a tiny world. Little kids shouldering their school backpacks are the fastest to pick up on it, while grown adults in suits find it increasingly difficult to spot.

Take the sound of a wind chime tinkling, or the whiff of pool chlorine coming off a kid who passes you on the street, or the water shimmering on the far-off asphalt, or the brand-new posters advertising chilled ramen noodles, or it could even be the sight of your own arms and legs, covered in tiny fingernail crosses from tending to mosquito bites.

It's almost as if...

It's almost as if all those tiny signs combine to let you know...

...it's going to be summer, from here on out.

There are always signs at the turn of the seasons, but why does it feel like there are so many of them this time of year?

Maybe it's because ever since those days when we learned to count the days until the longest vacation of the year, we've been captivated by summer.

What kind of encounters, adventures, and wonders await?

In one corner of our heart, we ache for summer, so much so that we search the mundane moments of everyday life to find those little signs calling to us and

telling us it's time.

I heard a squeak, the slightly unappealing sound of basketball sneakers, and it broke my reverie.

Right.

For example, right now, in this very moment.

—This summer has brought with it sweat glistening on girls' skin, like bursting bubbles in soda pop.



It was the first of July.

The cloudy weather so typical of the Hokuriku region had lingered for a while but was now completely gone, giving way to endless blue skies that washed my gloomy heart clean.

Exams finished up a week earlier than they did in most years, and after school, just as I was thinking about maybe doing some rooftop reading for the first time in a while before heading home, I was stopped by Haru Aomi.

Apparently, her club practice session that day was going to be a little lighter than usual, and they were planning to follow it up by playing some catch in the nearby park.

When I told her I'd be up on the roof and to holler once they were done, Yuzuki Nanase asked me how I felt about coming along and watching their practice. I felt a bit awkward about potentially encountering their supervisor, Miss Misaki, but that wasn't a good enough excuse to justify saying no.

So in the end, I was dragged bodily by the two of them to the gymnasium, to observe their practice session from the catwalk on the second floor.

After purchasing a cold soda from the vending machine, I made my way back and looked down to see the girls in their baggy T-shirts and shorts running around in all directions below me. Judging from the fact that half the players on the court were wearing numbered blue bibs, it seemed that they were training for upcoming matches.

*Squeak, squeak, thud.*

The rhythmic sounds of basketball echoed across the court.

“Sen, mark Nana. You’re too slow!”

Haru, who seemed to be the center of the team without any bibs, shouted at her teammates.

The girl being shouted at tried to block Nanase’s shot, but the three-pointer, released with one hand from a high position, easily passed through the hoop.

“All right, time to make a comeback! Over there!”

Grabbing a throwin from a teammate, Haru put all her strength into her legs and set off running like a bullet shot from a gun.

Leaning forward slightly, she rushed into the middle of the opposing team’s formation. Their defense was denser than she’d anticipated, though, and she tapped the brakes, coming to a tight stop.

Pulling herself together, she relaxed, straightened her upper body, and—

“Outside!!”

By the time Nanase shouted that, a no-look pass had already gone by behind her, and she turned to the left where her teammates were running, reaching her hand out.

“Don’t leave Umi open!!!”

Nanase barked instructions in quick succession.

But Haru took advantage of the momentary gap to slip through the defense and grabbed a pass that was returned to her by a nearby teammate. Dodging the opponents who’d caught up to her, weaving left and right in small increments, she broke for the goal as if she were sliding down a runway and sprang up from her left foot.

Her ponytail swung.

—*Pop, pop.*

Fresh sweat drops burst like lemonade bubbles and rained down onto the court.

*Ah, summer’s here.*

At that moment, for some reason, I was arrested by that particular thought.

The center, the tallest player of either team, jumped without hesitation and stretched out her hand to block the shot.

But Haru twisted her body in the air, turning her back to the opponent and throwing the ball backward.

It was a desperate, messy shot, but it brushed over the fingertips of the center and eventually fell almost straight through the net.

With a beep, the digital timer announced the end of the scrimmage.

According to the scoreboard, Nanase's team had won.

Most of the players on the court put their hands on their knees or leaned back to breathe heavily, shoulders heaving.

Meanwhile, Haru approached one of her teammates. If I'm not mistaken, it was the girl who was meant to have been marking Nanase.

"Sen!"

She raised her voice sharply.

I'm guessing that was a court nickname, much like Umi and Nana. The girl in question jerked visibly, looking timidly up at Haru.

"You should have been marking Nana more closely! You underestimate your opponent like that, and you'll be sorry come the real game! And you were too slow with the counter! You wanna end up crying again?"

"...I'm sorry, Umi."

Sen, a somewhat timid-looking girl with short hair, bowed her head.

Haru's last remark was probably in reference to the Inter-High preliminaries held last month.

The Fuji High girls' basketball club had had an impressive run and made it into the top four of the prefecture, but unfortunately they lost in the semifinals to Ashiba High School, regulars at the Inter-High tournament.

When the third-years retired, Haru was appointed the new captain.

The tall girl who played center approached both of them and said something. I couldn't make out much from where I stood, but it was probably something like: "Well, it's only been a minute since we became a brand-new team..."

"That goes double for you, Yoh!" Haru's voice rang out. "That last block... I was just standing there, but you put zero pressure on me. You barely even tried to block my shot. I could have landed it with a normal jump shot, if it wasn't for my height."

Haru kept wiping away the sweat that ran down her cheeks with the sleeve of her T-shirt.

"I'm not saying that you should suddenly show off moves that are beyond your ability. It's fine if you can't do something, but let's just...try, okay? Otherwise, we can kiss the Inter-High tournament good-bye, and we already have less practice time than other schools get."

This doesn't just apply to basketball, but Fuji High is a college prep school first and foremost, no matter how much we claim to be good at both academics and sports. Classes are tightly packed until seventh period, and practice after seven PM is not allowed. In the run-up to the test period, basically all extracurricular activities are shut down.

Compared to strong schools that put more emphasis on club activities, and Koshien High School baseball regulars, the amount of time we have for practice is far less. Ultimately, if you want to compete on an equal footing with opponents like that, Haru's right: You really have to step up your game.

Not much time had passed since Haru took on the role of captain, but I was glad to see her doing such a good job.

"All right, all right."

Nanase, who was standing a little bit away from Haru, clapped her hands together.

Until a few moments before, she'd been nonchalantly drinking a bottle of Pocari Sweat with a sports towel around her neck, but then an impish grin appeared on her face.

Incidentally, Nanase had the role of vice captain.

"Now, with the postmortem finished..."

Grinning, she pulled a whistle on a string out of her shorts pocket.

"Off you go, losers! ♪"

*Screee.*

Like a well-conditioned reflex, the members of Haru's team reacted to the sound and went dashing toward the end line.

*Screee.*

When Nanase blew another short whistle, the runners quickly turned back and dashed toward the opposite side. Apparently, this was some kind of punishment for the losing team.

*Scree.*

*Scree.*

*Scree, scree, scree.*

Nanase happily mixed up the rhythm, blowing the whistle at random intervals. It was more like a stamina test than a penalty.

*Screeeee.*

Now she had them doing one long dash, from end line to end line and back.

"Have you no heart?!" Haru yelped, while running with all her might.

*Scree! Scree! Scree!*

Nanase responded with a few light peeps of the whistle.

Even the girl named Sen, who was being scolded earlier, was running alongside Haru, both of them cursing together.

"Hold on, Nana, take it easy on us!"

The girl named Yoh, though, seemed to be getting her revenge.

"Captain, you're not lifting up your feet high enough!" she said, giggling.

"Oh, so you're on Nana's side in this, huh? Well, whatever... Girls, sound off!"

"Yes, boss!"

*Ah, all this is really great, isn't it?*

Feeling the heated atmosphere of the gym on my skin, I let my thoughts flow.

Friends of the same age, all with different backgrounds, with different abilities and personalities... All running together in the same direction.

For most, this is a limited period of time, with a passion, spark, tears, and sweat that are also limited, not leading directly toward their future in any way.

Would they ever be able to devote themselves to something so seriously again in their lives?

Whistles, shouts, footsteps... They overlapped, like voices singing a round.

I opened the window behind me so I could divert my eyes for just a moment.

A lukewarm wind brought the nostalgic sound of easy batting hits out on the sports field.



"You've really improved at this, Haru."

"Hee-hee, of course."

After the girls' basketball practice was over, we headed to Higashi Park, near the school.

This was only about the fifth time I'd played catch with Haru, but honestly, I was a little surprised at how fast she learned. Her solid basic athletic abilities probably helped with that.

For example, when you're throwing a ball, you might think *Should I hook it on my fingertips more?* or *Should I bend my arms more?* You can take what you've learned elsewhere, apply it to any sport, and improve quickly.

It might just be what people call motor coordination, and I wouldn't say that natural ability plays zero part. But personally, I think the time spent seriously testing the limits of one's own body is far more vital.

When you can't play the way you want, you shouldn't blame vague things like talent. You should try out different forms instead. Improve your basic physical strength with running and muscle training, expand your range of motion

through stretching, stuff like that...

The training you do today may start to pay off at a later date, when you least expect it, and you'll suddenly realize you're getting a little better. As you steadily repeat this process, you'll eventually be able to reproduce the movements you envisioned in your head naturally with your body.

I could feel a lot of time well spent in each of Haru's nonchalant moves, and it gave me a strange feeling of satisfaction.

*Whoosh. Clunk.*

*Whip. Smack.*

"Haru, even if the ball is low, you shouldn't turn the glove underhand. Keep the glove upright as much as possible. Bend your knees to catch."

"Got it."

"For grounders and short bounds, you should turn the glove underhand."

As I spoke, I threw a light grounder.

Haru turned the glove as advised, but the ball came at her at a bad angle, and she fumbled it.

"Gah!"

"Bad luck. When you're dealing with a grounder, it's easier to catch it if you go for the ball when it's on a straight trajectory or when it's falling."

"Another!"

As she spoke, she returned the ball with a pop fly.

Gauging where it was going to come down, I caught it with the glove tucked behind my back.

"Whoa! That was cool!"

Haru's innocent excitement made me feel a little embarrassed.

"Every baseball boy in the country tries a back catch at least once. By the way, it's a forbidden technique. If you screw it up, it's so embarrassing you'll practically die, and if you try to do it in a game, nine out of ten coaches will

pitch a fit."

"Can I try it, too?"

"It's risky to mess it up with a hardball, so try it once you're a little better."

"Tch."

While we were playing around, Nanase returned from her convenience store pilgrimage.

"Ignoring Chitose for a sec, you're really playing hard, Haru, considering how much running you had to do earlier. Why don't you take a break?"

As she spoke, she held up a plastic shopping bag in her right hand.

"Ooh, did you buy me my pork bun?"

Haru went dashing over, and Nanase smiled with fond frustration.

"Are you insane, in this heat? And anyway, this isn't the season for pork buns."

As she spoke, she took out a package of ice cream from the bag and tossed it to Haru.

Haru caught it in her glove and joyfully pressed it against her cheek.

"You got me a Papico. ♪ Aw, Yuzuki, you know me too well."

Then the two of them sat down, each taking adjacent benches.

The benches would be a little cramped for three people to sit on, and even with two people, it'd be a little difficult to keep a comfortable distance.

Without thinking too much about it, I sat next to Nanase, about three fists' distance apart. So it ended up being Nanase and me on this bench, and Haru alone on the next bench.

"Chito—"

"Hey, Chitose." Nanase spoke over Haru.

I looked over to see half of a Papico popsicle being offered to me.

"Oh, thanks."

I took it, hooked my finger through the ring on the end, tore it open, and put it in my mouth. Chewing lightly and pushing out the contents produced a crisp, cool sound, and the nostalgic taste of milk coffee melted and spread out across my tongue.

The mouth of the convenience store bag was open beside me, so I threw the empty plastic container into it.

At the same time, Nanase was holding the cutoff tip of her Papico in her mouth. Tucking a drooping lock of her medium-length black hair behind her ear, she pushed her tongue out and let the wrapper drop into the bag. While I couldn't say this was exactly good manners, the way she did it struck me as oddly childish and cute.

Perhaps noticing my gaze, she slowly looked up to check my expression, then scratched her cheek with embarrassment.

"Um, you guys?" Haru said, on the other side of Nanase.

Looking up, I saw that she held both halves of a divided Papico in each hand.

"Whoa, if you scarf it down that fast, you'll get a stomachache."

When I said that, Haru puffed out one of her cheeks.

"Never mind that! Where do you get off going halvsies with Yuzuki when I have to eat this whole thing by myself?"

"What do you mean...?" Nanase chuckled. "Chitose doesn't eat sweet stuff that much anyway, and besides, half probably isn't enough to satisfy you, Haru."

"How rude to talk that way to a beautiful maiden. Even flower blooms blush before me!"

"Well, how do the blooms react when they see said maiden slurping down two halves of a Papico in rapid succession?" I couldn't resist sassing her, and the two of them immediately snorted with laughter. The timing was perfect.

The wind blew softly, as if to spread our small moment of shared happiness through the neighborhood. The playground equipment, dolphins and pandas on thick springs, swayed pleasantly.

It was past six PM, but it was still too bright to describe it as dusk, and the temperature was still high. My left hand, the one that had been holding the Papico, felt pleasantly chilled.

I picked up the glove, ball tucked inside it, and held it my right hand. I fiddled with it as I prepared to speak.

“...Too bad about the Inter-High tournament, huh.”

It was the first time I’d mentioned it directly to them. I think it’s only right for the outfielder to offer a few words of comfort to the players who lost the game.

I went to cheer them on in the semifinal game against Ashiba High School, commonly known as the Battle of Ashi High.

Haru and Nanase took the lead in a ferocious attack, just like in their practice games, but I got the impression that the other team was just better.

In particular, the weakness of the defense was noticeable even to the untrained eye, and even if the two managed to score a goal with a spectacular play, it was easily taken back in mere tens of seconds.

In the second half, I thought that the weakness of their backup players also had an effect.

While Ashi High played a confident game, resting their main players in rotation, Fuji High tried to play with the starting lineup as much as possible. So the backup players they brought on were noticeably weaker.

All that being said, if it was merely a case of the simple difference in overall ability, there should have been a good chance that the game could have been overturned if Haru and Nana had seized the flow with a few stunning plays.

The final nail in the coffin was the opposing team’s ace player.

She was their shooting guard and stood at five foot eight; she made good use of her height as she cut into the inside as sharply as Haru ever did, and she shot from the outside like Nanase.

Crucially, she was just as brilliant as both of them.

Whenever Haru or Yuzuki tried to gain dominance with their playing, she’d snatch back the advantage, and so it seemed that Fuji High never could quite

create their own rhythm.

As a player, she was just as good, possibly even better than... Well.

“—Mai Todo,” Haru murmured, as if she’d been reading my thoughts.

“That girl was something else, huh? She’s never lost an official game, not since the Mini Basketball League era.”

Her statement probably referred to the Ashi High ace I’d been thinking about.

Beside me, Nanase agreed.

We athletes have a vague bond and a shared sense of camaraderie even though we may pursue different sports, so from elementary school right up until now, I’d had many opportunities to support my peers in sports.

Basketball, softball, volleyball, track and field... I watched women’s games as well, but Haru and Nanase stood out. Even putting aside our bonds of friendship, you could immediately identify those players who were a cut above, just from their playing style and demeanor.

That’s why Haru’s words struck me as unexpected, while at the same time, I was completely convinced.

Mai Todo had left a major impression.

Haru must have guessed that I was having trouble coming up with a suitable reaction.

She continued with a weak smile. “Apparently, she was already over five foot two in elementary school. I always used to say, ‘*I will never lose to someone who only has the advantage of height*,’ but Todo’s not only tall, she’s fast, strong, and just plain good, too.”

Needless to say, height matters more in basketball and volleyball than it does in any other sport. Even Nanase, who must be over five foot two, is probably average height or below it compared to the girls on the really strong teams.

Haru was only five feet tall at most.

It’s not hard to imagine that it takes an extraordinary amount of effort to compete at that height.

Originally, being the ace of the team would be impressive enough, but Haru was able to compete more than evenly with most opponents.

Still, if I voiced such a trite, placating statement to her, I reckon she'd blow her top.

When someone is seriously aiming for the top and doing their best, it's a massive insult to tell them they're great...for being short or whatever.

How do you beat someone taller than you who is as athletic and as hardworking?

No doubt Haru must have been thinking along those lines.

"So that's why today's practice was so intense."

When I said that, Haru laughed brightly, as if she was coming out of a funk.

"Yep! Next time, I'll beat her for sure. Next year, we'll beat Ashi High and aim for the Inter-High. To do that, I'll have to train thoroughly and do what I can as captain."

Nanase, who had been silently listening, suddenly opened her mouth.

"You know..."

"Hmm?"

Haru nodded breezily, while Nanase hesitated for a second before shaking her head a little.

"Never mind."

Being indecisive wasn't normal for Nanase, but perhaps she was still chewing over the defeat. She let out a short breath and mischievously lifted up one corner of her mouth.

"More importantly, wouldn't it be better to use my three-pointer as the axis of attack next time?"

"What do you mean, vice captain?"

"...Yeah, the six-inch height difference between you and the ace is completely fatal."

“—Ah, shut up!”

I followed Nanase’s lead and threw out a joke.

“Calm down, Haru. You win the biggest attitude contest, at least.”

“Let’s talk about how big *your* attitude is first!”

Haru shot back at me, slamming the empty Papico container into the bag.

“At any rate, Yuzuki, you lost in terms of three-pointers.”

“Hmph. I made a higher percentage of my baskets.”

“Isn’t that because you only shoot when you’ve got a good shot?”

“I think it’s better than losing my head and making it easy for the other team to grab the ball.”

The corner of Haru’s mouth twitched.

“Yuzuki, with that personality of yours, you couldn’t even land a successful shot right in a man’s heart at any point. S”

Now Nanase’s brow began to twitch.

“Hmm? What exactly is that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing in particular. Just that I’m afraid it won’t be your turn for a little bit, hee-hee. ♡”

“It’s interesting to get a lecture on men from the kind of girl who calls me all excited after buying an outfit just because a guy complimented her in it, you know?”

...Um, so yeah.

*I know how this is going to play out...*

“Ha! Now that you’ve shot your mouth off, I think we’re going to have to settle the score with a little one-on-one, don’t you, Nana?!”

“Great—I’ve already proven my superiority in basketball and feminine appeal, Umi, and I’ll beat you over the head with that fact again.”

“So um... Why don’t we just return to our friendly game of catch, and...”

““Chitose will be the referee!!””

“Yes, ma’ams!!”

And that’s how I found myself drawing lines in the dirt to keep score for them.

*Sniff.*



Seventh period, the following day.

All the students were gathered in Gym 1.

Today was the send-off rally for the various clubs that had gotten into the Inter-High tournament, and for the baseball club, which had gotten through to the National High School Baseball Championships and the summer Koshien preliminaries.

A similar rally was held before the Inter-High preliminaries, but now the whole thing had been scaled down. A lot of clubs end up losing, including Haru and Nanase’s girls’ basketball club.

Lined up on the stage were the boys’ tennis club, archery club, swim club, mountaineering club, and baseball club. It seemed that mostly individual sports clubs were the ones that ended up winning the chance to compete in the Inter-High competition.

Meanwhile, the baseball club, which was about to face the tournament, was lined up with eleven members on the bench.

“You know...” While we were all listening to the principal’s long greeting speech, Haru, who was sitting next to me, leaned in a bit. “This kind of thing is so awkward, both for the people standing up front and the audience, isn’t it?”

Her whispering, slightly warm breath touched my ear, and it tickled a little.

“I agree. Normally, we’re just quietly doing our own club stuff, but suddenly we have to feel like we’re representatives of the school. It’s hard to relax.”

I may have been in the audience right now, but last year I was on the other side.

When I was in junior high, there were send-off rallies, and I felt the same way

each time.

"Right? It's kind of embarrassing having to walk in in sports uniforms when everyone else is in school uniforms. You have to wonder what the seated kids are thinking."

At times like this, I always get this sudden realization that club activities and school life might seem closely adjacent, but they're actually segregated to a surprising degree.

For example, when I was in junior high school, even if I was in the same class as my teammate, I always thought of him as a "baseball club teammate" instead of just a "school friend."

The more serious the club's activities, the more time the members spend together after school and on holidays, and sometimes they literally eat from the same pot at training camps and on road trips.

We often say that a class feels more unified after experiencing the school festival together, but clubs are like doing that kind of event with everyone all year-round.

Inevitably, they become more like family than friends. In fact, if your club is really serious about aiming for the top, they'll probably spend more time together during the three years of high school than they do with their own parents and siblings.

So maybe the embarrassment I feel at events like this is a little like having my school friends see me in town with my family.

Thinking like that, I felt a dull pain in my chest.

I opened my mouth to say something that would help distract me.

"So how does it feel to be one of the onlookers?"

I thought I'd chosen a silly topic, but what I got from her in return was a sadder tone than I'd been expecting.

"I guess it really is a little bit painful. Realizing that you've lost."

"...Yeah, I understand." I whispered back to her, before I'd even realized how thoughtless it was.

Haru glanced at me and spoke in a blunt manner.

“You’re not defeated yet.”

“I already lost, last summer.”

Before I knew it, the players finished expressing their determination for the Inter-High, and the mic was passed over to the representative of the baseball club.

The one holding the mic was Yusuke Ezaki, who used to be my teammate.

*Right, he’s the captain now, I thought.*

Fuji High’s baseball club wasn’t exactly a strong team. I mean, when I entered the club last year, it was easy to grasp that even its survival was in jeopardy.

At that time, there were ten third-years and zero second-years.

In baseball, which requires at least nine people to play a game, that number was cutting it pretty fine.

If there were less than nine new students, they wouldn’t have been able to even participate in the official games after the third-years left.

But luckily, ten people joined the club last year.

The third-year students retired, and even after I quit, they managed to continue their activities.

Looking at the lineup onstage, the two people I didn’t know were probably new students who’d joined this year.

“Hey.”

While I was thinking about this and that, Haru jabbed her elbow into my arm.

“If you’re really feeling down about it, I’ll lend you my bosom for a pillow. It’s the least I can do.”

I felt like I might have said too much, so I quickly covered it up with some smart-mouthing.

“...Unfortunately, I actually prefer fluffy pillows.”

“Oh you, Chitose! ♡ Which would you prefer, a split watermelon or a crushed

tomato?"

"I apologize, so could you please stop saying disturbing things with audible heart emojis in your voice?"

Thanks to our silly back-and-forth, I could barely make out what was coming out of the old, crackling speakers.

"—And I would like to fight our best fight this summer, with the whole team together."

Yusuke concluded his speech and capped it off with a low bow in unison with the other club members.

When he lifted his head, I felt like our eyes met, but it was probably just my imagination.



After school that day, when I returned to the classroom after helping Kura carry the teaching materials, Nazuna Ayase was sitting by the window, staring blankly out at the sports field.

It'd been about an hour since homeroom ended, and it looked like the others had either already left school or headed to club activities.

It might be a little rude of me to think it, but this wasn't normal behavior for Nazuna. She looked different from usual, her profile tinged with ennui, so much so that I missed the right timing for a chance to address her.

Outside, the baseball club, soccer club, and tennis club were shouting in high spirits. At the same time, the drama club's vocal practice of "Ah, ee, oo, eh, oh, ah, oh" sounded strangely clear and assertive.

As I listened idly, the wind blowing in through the open window ruffled Nazuna's loose curls that had clearly been set with a curling iron.

She had her cheek resting in her hand, elbow propped on the slightly damaged top of the old school desk, and a cumulonimbus cloud floated in the blue sky outside the window. I had the vague thought that it was a scene that represented youth so vividly that I wanted to cut it out and keep it.

The breeze flipped the pages of an open notebook, left behind on someone's

desk.

Nazuna turned around, eyelashes fluttering as she slowly blinked.

"Oh, it's you, Chitose."

She waved, speaking lightly, as if the scene I'd just witnessed had been nothing more than a summer's day mirage.

When I spoke, I matched her breezy tone. "What's wrong? Did you forget your homework and get detention or something?"

Nazuna laughed, crinkling up her face, although I wasn't sure what was so funny. "This isn't elementary school! I'll have you know, I get better grades than you might assume based on looks."

"...Oh."

"Hey, why so shocked?!"

I smiled wryly, amused by the almost musical dynamics of her tone, and continued. "Then, were you waiting for Atomu?"

"Huh? Why would I be?"

"I mean, aren't you guys dating?"

"Excuse me?" She responded with an exaggerated inflection, as if I was out of my mind. "There's no way I'd go out with someone as gloomy and sullen-eyed as that guy."

"Ouch, that's harsh. I almost feel bad for him."

"I prefer guys like you, Chitose. Flamboyant womanizers."

"I'm not trying to pick a fight here, you know?"

Nazuna seemed to be the type to openly express her feelings, as I'd initially thought when she got into that skirmish with Nanase. That kind of open-minded attitude might cause friction and misunderstandings with others, but I personally liked it.

"The thing about him..." Nazuna murmured. "He's a little bit like me."

I nodded silently for her to continue, so she propped her cheek against her

hand like before, gazing out the window.

"I was watching the club practice. Must be nice, I thought."

As I'd learned from Atomu before, Nazuna played basketball until junior high school, and it seemed that she was a reasonably talented player.

After hesitating a little, I said, "Is it okay if I ask why you didn't continue in high school?"

Nazuna smiled vaguely.

"I may be like this now, but I started playing basketball fairly seriously in elementary school, and by third year of junior high, I was pretty good. Even so, making the top eight of the Fukui Prefecturals was as far as I got. It's nothing to really boast about, I guess."

I actually thought that getting to the top eight in the prefecture was pretty good, but I had the feeling she wasn't looking for a cheap compliment right at the moment.

The conversation seemed like it would run a little longer, so I sat down in the seat in front of her.

"Remember when Atomu said something about me being a fan of Nanase's playing style?"

It happened when Nazuna and Nanase had that fight, right here in this classroom.

I nodded.

"The team that I lost against in the quarterfinals was the team Nanase was on. You know how she's really pretty and all? Before the match, I was totally hostile, saying stuff like, '*She's only playing basketball to show off anyway,*' but the result was a refreshing defeat. She beat me so bad that I just had to laugh."

As she spoke, her eyes softened a little, as if she was reliving a cherished memory.

"I wish I could have written it off as just a difference in natural talent, but it wasn't. She just ran a lot faster than I did and practiced shooting a lot more. You know what I mean?"

"Yeah, more or less."

"It's an exaggeration to say I'm a fan, but for some reason, I wanted to see more of this girl's basketball playing. I went to see the semifinals. There, Nanase lost to Aomi."

Nazuna paused for a moment, letting a smile leak out like a sigh.

"That sucked. I thought Nanase and the others would definitely win. Then I was sure I could put it all behind me. But as soon as that thought crossed my mind, I had a realization. I was like... Oh, is that all I amount to? Someone who needs that kind of closure to make peace with herself?"

"I see." I responded briefly, and she giggled, twirling her hair with her fingertips as if to hide her embarrassment.

"Whoops, didn't mean to say all that. You must think I'm lame."

I silently shook my head.

Even so, she still looked awkward, so I opened my mouth with the intention of changing the topic.

"So does that mean that your story just now is similar to something Atomu is going through?"

Nazuna pondered that for a moment, pouting, then tilted her head slightly as if she was scrutinizing me.

"Well, that's not for me to talk about. Why don't you ask, Chitose? You know, have a heart-to-heart with him."

"Huh? What if Li'l Chitose ends up defeating him?"

"Pfft, what?"

"I'm scared of the payback."

"Well, love hurts sometimes, doesn't it?"

"Wait, are you saying he's got a thing for guys who are hot and cold? Please, spare me."

"Hey, this is a weird conversation, you know?"

Nazuna laughed; apparently, she found my comedy routine genuinely funny.

Even her buddy, Atomu, is a lot like this. I know he went after Kenta and Yua that one time, but I don't think there were any ill intentions.

A thought came to me, so I had to ask.

"By the way, do you know a basketball player by the name of Mai Todo?"

After a moment's pause, I got a muted, self-deprecating murmur in return.

"That's the girl who beat Aomi in the final. Sucks, if you ask me."

After saying that, Nazuna looked out at the sports field again.

I followed suit, and the two of us quietly witnessed the bustling after-school atmosphere unfold.



The following day at lunch, I ran to the shop the moment that fourth period ended.

From today onward, it seemed the girls' basketball club would be having afternoon practice as well as morning and after-school practice.

As for what that has to do with my current situation, Haru and Nanase ordered me to: "Go buy us some fried noodle buns because we don't have time to go ourselves."

Recently, the way they've been treating me is just appalling, isn't it?

More accurately speaking, Haru's order was for one fried noodle bun, one pork cutlet bun with Worcestershire sauce, and one hot dog. Nanase's order was for a mixed sandwich. And they both added chocolate chip cookies to their regular order.

Incidentally, even though said cookies are a steal at only fifty yen apiece, they're as big around as two regular rice crackers, so they're a very popular shop item when you feel like you need a little something extra to fill up on!

When I arrived at the shop counter, a little out of breath, there were four trays laid out on the long table filled with plenty of sandwiches and buns, and there were already a large number of students crowding around.

I thought I'd done a good job of getting over there fast, but we second-year students were located on the third floor of the school building, and fourth period ended slightly late, so it looked like I was a little slow to the draw. The sandwiches often sell out fast, and sometimes if you don't get there in time, you're left with nothing but cookies to choose from.

But at any rate, it looked like today I'd managed to get there just in the nick of time.

The lunch lady is a veteran of the job, so the line moved along at a rapid clip, and my turn soon came around. I bought lunch for Haru and Nanase, then myself, and immediately after, I saw a figure come running down the hallway at a frantic pace.

I smiled to myself and added an extra sandwich and cookie.

After paying, I walked off and went to speak to the individual who'd just joined the end of the lengthening line and who was in the act of taking out her handkerchief.

"Yua, if you allow yourself to get that sweaty, your makeup will slide off, and we'll be able to see your real face."

"\_\_\_\_\_"

"Please, can you stop squeezing my jugular like that?"

Wiping the sweat off her neck, she responded without a moment's hesitation.

"I don't wear that much makeup."

"I was joking. This is a rare event, isn't it, you buying lunch?"

Yua usually brings her own bento lunch. If we make plans in advance, we sometimes go to the cafeteria together, but I haven't seen her buying sandwiches very often at all.

"Yeah, I made my lunch, but then I forgot it at home. I think I might have gotten here a little too late."

She looked at the front of the line with a defeated smile.

For sure. By the time her turn came around, the container would no doubt be

completely empty.

"You think you can get by on a ham-and-egg sandwich and a cookie?"

I handed them over to her as I spoke, and she gazed at them with a dumbfounded look.

"I saw you running over. I wasn't sure how much girls tend to eat, or what your preferences are, so I'm afraid I chose sort of randomly."

My only basis for comparison was those two.

Haru eats so much she'd startle even the guys on the boys' sports teams, and Nanase worries about all kinds of things in relation to maintaining her figure, so I went with what I knew and opted for a sandwich with an extra side.

Yua looked at the sandwich in her hand, then at me, and muttered quietly.



“Tch, Saku, really.”

“Oh, sorry, would you have preferred the mega-stuffed fried chicken sandwich liberally drenched in mayo?”

“I’d never eat something like that.”

Well, that doesn’t even exist to begin with.

Yua clutched the sandwich to her chest and crumpled up with laughter.

“Thank you for thinking of me.”

“S’no biggie.”

When I said that, she narrowed her eyes just a little.

The emphasis on her words seemed to imply something, but I had no idea what it could be.

Thinking it would be uncouth to pursue it any further, I held up my brown paper bag full of lunches for three people.

“I’m going to deliver this to Haru and Nanase, and then we’re all going to eat together. Want to join?”

“Sure!”

For some reason, I suddenly recalled what happened nearly a year ago, and the memory seemed rose-tinted.



In the gymnasium, a shooting practice was well underway, using all four hoops.

Also, when I checked with Yua earlier, it turned out that Yuuko was eating with the girls in the tennis club that day.

Haru noticed us right away, but it looked like she planned to carry on until the right opportunity for a break presented itself. She just raised a hand lightly in thanks.

Yua and I sat side by side on the edge of the stage so as not to interfere with the practice.

"Okay, five free throws in a row. No one eats lunch until they get all five in the basket."

So said Haru, standing in the center and eyeballing the players.

"Sen, your form is messed up again! Run to the far wall and back again for each shot you miss!"

The girl did as she was told and ran to the wall and back, after which Nanase approached her to give her some advice.

"I understand practice is important, but I can't believe we have to do this during lunch break!"

A tall girl who, if I remember correctly, was named Yoh, was moaning not far from us.

Haru continued, almost as if she'd heard her. "Hurry up and get those baskets, and then you can have your lunch."

Another team member spoke up.

"Captain, what if we can't get five baskets in a row before break ends?"

"Then no lunch for you. ♪"

""She's evil!!!!""

Watching the exchange echoing in the large gymnasium, Nanase smiled a little in a rueful way but made no effort to intervene.

"Ah, youth," I muttered casually as I pulled the ring on my canned coffee.

Yua, who was drinking milk tea next to me, smiled wanly.

"They're amazing, aren't they? Haru and Yuzuki both."

"I don't know much about the artistic clubs, but the music club also has competitions and so on, right?"

"Of course. But for us, it's more a chance to have fun and perform together, and it's not really so intrinsically tied to the results."

Of course, there had to be clubs like that, I thought.

We talk about clubs for enjoyment and clubs for self-improvement as if

they're opposing things, but they actually stand alongside one another.

It's a matter of degree, I guess.

For example, if you have two days off a week, then you'll take those two days off, but you'll do your best during the set times and enjoy yourself to the utmost. And when it comes to competitions, you'll do your best to get the best possible results.

Most high school club activities are like that, whether it be sports clubs or arts clubs.

Beyond that, whether to make the most of every weekend and break time, like with Haru and Nanase's basketball club, is up to the club supervisor's policy, the standard set by the older members, and the general atmosphere of the club itself.

—It's only now that I've been able to start thinking of it that way.

"What about you, Yua?"

The thought popped into my mind, so I asked it.

I knew that Yua always carried a saxophone with her, but she'd never talked about club stuff seriously with me until now.

Actually, it was probably more that she was being considerate of me and purposefully avoiding the subject.

"Hmm, I've always been bad at competing and that sort of thing."

Slightly embarrassed, she scratched her cheek and continued.

"I've been learning the piano and flute since I was little, and in high school I decided to take up an instrument that was a little bit unexpected for me, so I chose the alto sax. It's something new and fun, and it feels great to play in a gymnasium or hall. I guess I'm satisfied with that..."

Unlike with sports such as baseball and basketball, where the goal is to win, there were probably a surprising amount of people who played music like that.

"Yeah, I can see you playing the piano and the flute. But have you ever accompanied the choir in a singing competition?"

“Oh, for sure. Like, hey, boy! Sing properly! ...You know.”

“Whoa, I can’t picture that.”

When I said that, Yua chuckled, and I could see genuine amusement in her eyes.

“Well, just kidding. This is about all I can do, since I’m no good at the inter-class tournaments. Or in gym.”

“Yeah, you’re the type to eat dirt at the moment of truth during the relay races.”

“Hey, that’s mean! We do running and weight lifting in music club, too, you know. If I flex, you can totally see the faint outline of muscle.”

“Indeed? Then, please permit me to just check...”

“Fine, fine, here.”

“Don’t just play along with my teasing! That’s no fun!”

We both burst into laughter and chuckled together for a while.

A few moments later, the practice broke up with perfect timing, leading to a void of noise in the air as the hustle and bustle suddenly ended.

As I idly listened to the erratic pounding of basketballs, I found my mouth saying things I didn’t even fully comprehend.

“One day, let me hear it... Your saxophone playing. Not in the gym or auditorium, but maybe someplace like a dried-out riverbed at dusk, when someone’s getting cold feet. Some kind of off-the-cuff situation like that.”

After saying my piece, I realized that the silence I’d been trying to fill was still hanging heavy, even as my mouth remained slightly open, and Yua was staring at me with a slightly odd look on her face. She averted her eyes.

I continued in a humorous tone to hide my embarrassment.

“I mean, the reason I want it like that is because the shape of a mouth playing the saxophone at dusk is so darn sexy.”

As soon as I finished speaking, the whistle sounded as if to condemn my lame joke.

"Okay, take a break, everyone! Ah, I mean, I guess that's all for today. You can just put everything away and disperse. Good practice, everyone," Haru called.

The club members shouted to each other, saying things like "I'm hungry!" and "I'm totally spent!" as they tidied up the gym and started mopping.

I breathed a sigh of relief, as if their mopping might also serve to wipe away the embarrassing things I'd just said. That's when Yua mumbled softly, as if she had seen right through me to my weakness.

"—All right, you're on. When the time comes, I'll be by your side more than anyone, Saku."

Before I could guess the meaning of those words, Haru's voice rang out again.

"Nana, let's get a move on and get it done."

"I won't wait for you if you screw up, Umi."

"Bring it on!"

Apparently, these two devoted themselves to just supporting and giving advice until the other members achieved their quotas.

Haru stood at the free throw line and bounced the ball powerfully three times: *thud, thud, thud*.

With everything that had happened, more than half an hour had gone by since lunch break started.

Those two were going to miss lunch if they didn't get their butts in gear, but...

*Swoosh, thunk.*

It looked like there was no need to worry about that.

The one-handed shot flew toward the basket, straight and true, and it ended in nothing but net. For a moment, the net, pushed by the momentum of the ball, deformed sideways, and then spat out the ball.

Haru grabbed it and faced off against Nanase, undaunted. "In a row? Or taking turns?"

"We take turns, one throw at a time. That will pile on the pressure nicely, won't it?"

Nanase stood at the free throw line this time.

She hit the ball with a light touch, exuding a natural, flowing form.

In contrast to Haru's high, sky-grazing shot trajectory, Nanase's highly arched shot slipped through the net almost without shaking it.

Nanase smiled softly and coolly.

Haru smiled, defiantly lifting the corner of her mouth.

*Thud, thud, swoosh... Thonk.*

*Thud, swoosh.*

In the end, without either of them having missed a single shot, Nanase lined up for her final throw.

The summer sunlight coming in through the window on the second floor obscured the ball's orbit, and it was so dazzling that I involuntarily looked away.

Beyond it, I could see Yua's profile. Her expression was the same as ever, as if the words we had just exchanged had already melted away, like hot asphalt sizzling in the sun.



After putting the ball away, the two came over to us.

Nanase said a quick thanks, took her sandwiches, made a bit of small talk with us, then headed to join her teammates on the other side of the gym.

It looked like we were eating lunch in the gym, then.

I assumed Haru would follow suit, but she put her hands on the edge of the stage and hoisted herself up, settling down next to Yua.

"Don't you have to go and eat with them?" I asked.

I got a joking answer with a smile.

"They can't relax if they have to eat with the demon captain, can they?"

She continued talking while folding back the wrapper of the yakisoba sandwich she'd been handed.

"Besides, it's not every day I get the opportunity to eat like this with Ucchi."

Beside me, Yua chuckled and nodded.

"For sure. Usually we eat all together, with Yuuko and Yuzuki, too."

As she spoke, she carefully opened up her ham-and-egg sandwich.

I'd already started eating mine a while ago, but Yua waited politely until Haru and the others had finished practicing. That was typical Yua, I thought.

"Hey, I've been wondering about something for a while; mind if I ask?"

Haru pulled up her dangling legs and sat cross-legged on the stage. Her baggy practice shorts rode up, revealing slightly flushed knees and thighs.

Then she propped her elbows on her crossed legs, grabbed the yakisoba sandwich in her right hand, and took a big bite.

"Sure, what is it?" Yua answered, and unlike a certain someone, her legs were tightly clasped together as they dangled from the stage, and she had a makeshift, simple napkin made from the sandwich wrapper draped over the front of her skirt.

Haru swallowed her mouthful of bread and looked at the two of us.

"Why are you two so buddy-buddy, Yua and Chitose?"

Unable to figure out the meaning behind her words, I exchanged a glance with Yua.

Yua lightly raised her free hand, conveying the nuance of denial.

"Ah, I didn't mean it in a strange way, so please don't misunderstand me. Somehow, Ucchi, you don't seem like the type to mix with a guy like this."

"Hey, there's no misunderstanding at all. I get the feeling I'm being insulted here."

I put in a little jab of my own, but she continued as if she hadn't even heard me.

"I mean, Ucchi seems to be the most commonsense person in our group. Like, she's an honor student? Graceful? Quiet? ...Hmm, my vocabulary's not up to explaining it without somehow seeming rude."

Well, I knew what she meant.

And of course, the part about it sounding like a roundabout put-down.

Yua must have felt the same. She brought her hand to her mouth and spoke, choking back laughter. “Haru, Nishino said something similar.”

“What, did she?”

“Yeah. She said that the answer was probably somewhere inside of you, right?”

“...Oh yeah—”

She was referring to last month, when Asuka Nishino came to our classroom.

As I recall, there was an exchange that went along those lines.

Yua smiled faintly, watching Haru, who was scratching her head and looking awkward.

“Actually, I kind of agree with Nishino, but yeah...”

She squinted a little, as if peering into the past.

“I think it must be because Saku actually treats me rougher than anyone else ever has.”

There was a moment of silence, then Haru spoke in a light tone, as if to push the silence back.

“Wow, I had no idea you had such a crazy fetish, Yua!”

“Oh yeah. Yua’s the type that gets all fired up under persecution.”

I jumped on the topic and rolled with it, but then I was hit with a glare as sharp as a pointy icicle.

“—Er, Saku?”

“Sorry, sorry. It was just a joke.”

Yua let out a sigh of exasperation.

Haru laughed for a second, then threw her arm around Yua’s shoulder, squeezing her cheek.

“Then, how about me? I’ll treat you ♡ real ♡ rough! ♡”

"Hmph! Not you, too, Haru!"

"Here, Ucchi, eat some sandwich."

"Your idea of rough treatment really is rough!" Yua turned her face primly away.

Haru laughed. "Only joking," she said, before her voice turned a little more serious. "Still, I get it. Chitose does have that aspect to him."

I started feeling uncomfortable and thought about acting a little goofy again, but I saw how Haru's words made Yua's eyes soften gently, and so I abandoned that idea.

Instead, I was just trying to come up with a nonoffensive topic suitable for a high school student's lunch break, when...

*—Creak.*

After the girls' basketball practice ended, the gym had become distinctly quiet, and the sound of an old and poorly constructed door opening resounded loudly. It was the door to the gym teachers' lounge, which was located in the opposite corner from the gym stage where we were sitting, with easy access to both the gym and the sports field.

"\_\_"

I found myself making a nonverbal sound in my throat.

"Representative! Did you get permission?!"

A roar resounded like thunder.

The source of the roar was the male teacher who had just emerged from behind the door.

His white hair was cropped close, almost like a crew cut, and he had the paunchy belly of a man in his fifties, with a quizzical wrinkle embedded between his eyebrows. His sharp gaze was the only thing about him that apparently hadn't been degraded by age.

*Ah, things never change, do they?*

Haru's shoulders jerked.

“...Yikes, it’s Wataya.”

Wataya, head of phys ed, was one of those hard-faced teachers that are kinda rare nowadays.

He himself probably didn’t even mean to come across as yelling, but with his imposing appearance and bellowing voice, a lot of the students cowered before him and were afraid of him.

“Captain!” Wataya bellowed once more.

Haru was just about to speak up, when...

“I’m Nanase, the vice captain. We’ve got permission from Miss Misaki to use the gym. I also checked to make sure no other clubs had plans to use it.”

She was interrupted by a smooth voice.

Nanase stood there with a dignified look on her face, squaring off against Wataya.

That was a good enough answer, apparently.

“Well, don’t be late for class,” Wataya said, and he began walking off.

“She got...permission?”

Haru murmured under her breath, then looked at the ceiling and heaved a big sigh.

“That’s Yuzuki, always on the ball. Even though I was the one who suggested having daytime practice, I never even thought about getting the permission of our supervisor—or even the circumstances of other clubs.”

“Why not just call it delegation?” I offered.

She smiled a little, but it looked forced. “Heh, yeah.”

Well, Haru was still new at this captain thing. It didn’t show much on the surface, but I guess she felt a certain amount of responsibility and pressure.

*Now then, I think I’ll have a cookie as a palate cleanser,* I was just thinking, when Wataya stopped in the act of crossing by the stage. I realized he was staring right at us.

Perhaps thinking that he was about to voice a complaint about something else, I could sense Haru stiffening up again.

But his eyes were focused right on...

Wataya frowned deeply.

“—An undignified display, Chitose,” he spat.

I clenched my fists tightly, holding them out of sight of my opponent.

“You don’t seem to have changed any, Coach,” I said through gritted teeth.

From that simple exchange, I could sense both Haru’s and Yua’s shock.

Apparently, they both picked up on it at the same time.

—The man in front of us was the supervisor of the baseball club.

Two seconds, three seconds, four seconds, we kept our eyes on each other.

Five seconds, six seconds, seven seconds—neither of us speaking a word.

It was Haru’s goofiness that broke our stalemate.

“Coach Wataya! ♪ It’s not very nice to waylay a fellow when he’s sitting with two pretty girls and say that he’s putting on an ‘undignified display’! Hmph!”

Her overwhelmingly clunky way of averting the subject had the effect of making myself—and no doubt Wataya, too—suddenly lose all of our venom.

With a short, muffled click of the tongue, Wataya gave me one last hard stare before leaving.

After making sure he’d left the gym, I spoke up. “Don’t go attempting things you’re not a seasoned pro at, ya dummy. You’re gonna hurt yourself.”

Haru scratched her cheek bashfully. “Ah yeah, I suspected as much. Maybe Yuzuki would have done a better job of it.”

“But still...” I flipped the still-untouched cookie over to Haru. “That was really cool, how you tried to help me out there.”

Yua piped up, following what I’d just said. “Thanks, Haru.”

“Tch! Why are *you* thanking me, Ucchi?”

As if Haru was getting more and more embarrassed, she turned away and began to stuff her cheeks with the cookie she'd just received.

Beside her, Yua bit into her own crunchy cookie.

Watching them, I finally allowed myself to unclench.

My palms, still as calloused as they were during my basketball club days, showed the clear impressions of my fingernails.



The lunch break passed in a flurry, and the three of us rushed into the classroom, as the bell (metaphorically) slapped us on the butts and announced that fifth period would start within the next five minutes. Luckily, the teacher wasn't there yet.

Come to think of it, we had Modern Japanese class next. Kura always arrived just as soon as the bell rang, so we'd probably have made it in time even if we hadn't rushed.

The members of Team Chitose were gathered around Yuuko's desk.

Nanase, who'd left the gym quite a bit before us, lightly raised her hand in greeting with a refreshed-looking face. Clearly, she'd done a meticulous job of wiping away the sweat and refreshing her makeup.

Incidentally, Haru, who'd been racing me, had her bangs sticking to her sweaty forehead.

*Same basketball club, but such different girls,* I thought.

Seeing us, Yuuko Hiiragi stood up and called out to us as if she had been waiting impatiently.

"Hmph, you're late! What were the three of you doing?"

"Eating lunch in the gym while watching the girls' basketball practice," I replied.

She looked obviously dissatisfied and pouty.

"Hmph, no fair. I should have gone, too."

Yuuko eyed Yua with a disgruntled look, but Yua seemed too distracted to

notice.

"Hah... Pah... Huff..."

She was letting out a series of sexy sighs.

Small beads of sweat slid down from the smooth nape of her neck and her delicate collarbone. The droplets, which she'd missed with her handkerchief, continued to slide down her shoulders and back, with some flowing into the graceful valley of her front, tracing her feminine form.

Or to put it in less flowery terms, she was a sweaty, exhausted mess from trying to keep up with Haru and me on our full-tilt dash to the classroom.

It didn't seem like she had the ability to speak yet, so for the time being, I pushed the bottle of water I'd bought before returning to the classroom toward Yua and took the liberty of speaking on her behalf.

"She would like to say, '*Yuuko, you're* the one who abandoned *me*, so you're the one in the wrong here!'..."

"Is that so, Ucchi?! Oh, I'm sorry if I made you feel left out!"

Yua pinched me in the side.

*Yua, you should relax a little, or you'll end up collapsing.*

I coughed in an exaggerated manner before continuing.

"Actually, she would like to say, 'Just kidding, I was actually dying to spend some time with Saku, so it actually worked out in my favor. Only, then that oblivious oaf, Haru, barged in and totally spoiled the mood...' Ouch, ouch, Yua, Haru, please, have mercy."

While Yua was squeezing me, Haru aimed a swift kick at my butt, and Yuuko pouted. "Saku, you're the worst!" she complained. "And Ucchi is always, always on my side, aren't you, Ucchi?"

Yua was looking a bit troubled as I took her hand.

Then Kaito Asano, who'd been watching the scene unfold with a tinge of envy, interrupted.

"Anyway, that's not fair! If you're doing lunchtime practice, you should let me

join."

Haru sighed deliberately. "Sorry, but the girls' basketball club would never allow that."

"Huh? Why?"

"They don't want you staring at their butts."

Kazuki Mizushino, who'd been silently watching the proceedings, spoke up with a hint of exasperation.

"More importantly, since the start of the new school year, there have been shifts in various relationships, so perhaps it's time you retire the whole Saku-and-his-wife-and-concubines thing. Right, Yuzuki?"

"Why are you turning to me for backup here?"

"Why do you always suspect me of ulterior motives?" Nanase smiled, and the effect was chilling.

"Mizushino, are you and me going to have to have a discussion?"

Kazuki shrugged this off and turned to pat Kenta Yamazaki on the shoulder.

"Now, Kenta, perhaps a word or two toward Saku."

"Don't stand there flirting all day; hurry up and take a seat, you jerk!"

*Ah yes, you too have lost much of your reserve.*

Just at that moment, the bell rang and Kura walked in, so I retreated quickly to my seat.



Zzz, zzz.

*Snuffle, snuffle.*

I think it was about fifteen minutes after fifth period started.

As I listened vaguely to Kura talking, I could hear this strangely regular breathing.

When I looked next to me, I saw Haru dozing comfortably in the shadow of her propped-up Modern Japanese textbook. She might still have looked cute if

she was just lightly nodding off, but she was flat out asleep using both arms as a pillow, facing this way. Well, I know how it gets after a hard practice and a big lunch.

Noticing a little sheen of sweat on her forehead, I smiled and shook my head, then opened the classroom window.

Swaying in the gentle afternoon breeze, the trees were dozing comfortably, too.

The ball-proof net surrounding the sports field seemed to undulate softly.

Chalk scraped repeatedly against the blackboard.

Someone peeled a fresh sheet of paper off a loose-leaf notebook, making a crisp sound. Someone else removed the cap of a highlighter pen with a loud pop.

It was a perfect afternoon, the kind you could find just about anywhere.

Zzz, zzz.

*Snuffle, snuffle.*

I looked at Haru again.

Her skin, which had almost no make-up, was translucent and fresh, and her eyelashes, which were longer than I had expected, were casting thin shadows in the warm sunlight.

Her cheeky, well-formed nose seemed to twitch a little, every now and then.

*She is so damn cute, I thought honestly.*

Usually, I ended up treating her like more of a guy friend, but looking at her quiet sleeping face like this, I realized that she was really a girl, after all.

*Yep, I thought, sneaking a peek at the smooth nape of her neck as Haru shifted in her seat.*

Noticing that a loose hair was stuck to her well-shaped lip, I instinctively stretched out my hand and brushed it away with my little finger.

Perhaps it tickled. She smiled and opened her eyes slightly.

"...Mmm. Chitose."

Murmuring my name, half asleep, she murmured some other, incomprehensible words and then closed her eyes again.

Hey now, that wasn't fair.

Zzz, zzz.

*Snuffle, snuffle.*

Oblivious to my discomposure, she started breathing regularly again.

This girl's putting a lot of effort into her life, isn't she?



All of a sudden, I wanted to stretch out this time for her somehow, like pulled taffy, so she could have a good rest.

Before I knew it, my breathing fell into rhythm with Haru's, and my eyelids gradually became heavy.

With one foot in the classroom and one foot on the edge of sleep, I vacillated dreamily back and forth, chasing after a ponytail that bobbed and bounced like a wild rabbit.



—*Smack, thwap.*

“Ouch!”

“That hurts!”

Jumping involuntarily due to the sudden impact, I found Haru next to me, rubbing her head in the same way.

“You two sure are birds of a feather, aren’t you?”

When I finally looked up, Kura was looking down at me with a textbook in his hand.

I cleared my throat, feigning innocence, and spoke.

“I was just meditating on the author’s feelings for a little while.”

Haru followed my lead.

“...I thought it would be so sad if only Chitose got in trouble, so I decided to be his accomplice. I didn’t *want* to, but...”

“Don’t think you can fool me. You’ve been asleep in a puddle of drool this entire time.”

“Huh?! There’s no way Haru the Beauty would ever drool!”

—*Smack, thwap.*

“Ouch!”

“That hurts!”

We each received another blow.

*Darn it, why am I the only one he's hitting with the hard corner?*

"Don't flirt in my class."

When he said that, the whole classroom erupted.

Kura continued with a mean grin. "By the way, I spotted young Chitose here touching Miss Aomi's sleeping lips. I thought a kiss was imminent."

*You were watching me this whole time? You sicko!*

Haru's face contorted in disgust. "You..."

"Quick, somebody call my lawyer!"

After watching our exchange for a few moments, Kura spoke, gesturing dramatically.

"Oh, it's just deplorable. I'm spending my life teaching you students so that each of you can improve your grades even a little, so that you can come into contact with good writing and enrich your minds."

"Didn't you just digress and talk about horse racing, sir?" I said.

Kura ignored my comment. "If I simply allowed students to get away with sleeping in my class, it would set a bad precedent for the others. Still, it pains my soul to have to force you to stand up and take a public punishment."

I was getting a bad feeling about this.

Usually, Kura doesn't fuss so much about a little thing like a student taking a moment to rest their eyes.

This was about something else.

This was playing out the same way it did when he wanted to force the Kenta issue on me.

"Okay," Kura said bluntly. "Chitose and Aomi, you'll clean the pool together after school tomorrow."

"Huh?!"

Haru and I ended up yelping in unison.

"Why?" I added.

We don't have swimming classes at our school.

There is a swimming club, but I heard they only take part in club activities in order to be able to participate in competitions, and that each individual practices at an outside school.

Kura lifted the corner of his mouth.

"The principal, a former member of the swimming club, was overjoyed when the individual division was selected to participate in the Inter-High. Now the pool, which has gone unused for so many years, will be reopened for practice."

"Which means, at the very least, there's got to be ten years' worth of sediment accumulated in that pool..."

"Don't worry, they seem to have had a contractor come in for maintenance once a year. It last had a once-over in May of this year, actually, so it won't be all that dirty."

"But... I have club practice..." Haru cut in timidly—testing the waters, so to speak.

"You think she's going to just let you off for sleeping in my class and tell you to run along to club practice as usual? This is the very strict, rule-stickler Miss Misaki we're talking about here."

Hearing those words, Haru deflated in her seat. "Oh no, Miss Misaki's gonna kill me."

It seemed a little unfair, so I tried to resist just a little for the principle of it, even though I knew the jig was well and truly up.

"In the first place, isn't it the policy of the individual athletic club to clean their practice space themselves?"

"The principal's opinion is that it is best not to burden those talented swimmers who've made it to the Inter-High, and their supportive teammates, with such matters."

"Wait a minute. This is originally a job you were asked to do, isn't it, Kura?"

Kura put a hand to his forehead and cast his gaze to the heavens.

"Indeed, but my plan was to ask volunteers to help me with the cleaning. Still, for the sake of my beloved students' education, I'll turn my heart to stone this time and leave it all to you kids."

"So these volunteers, then, they would be...?"

"...Well, that's just it. The class president, of course, the one who has too much time and energy. And his sidekick."

"The buck always stops at me, doesn't it?!"

Kura returned to his teacher's lectern, as if to imply that the discussion was now over.

Haru and I exchanged glances, and we both sighed heavily.



That night, after eating dinner, I changed into a T-shirt and shorts and left the house.

Standing on the bank of the river that flowed by right in front of me, I scuffed my shoes against the ground beneath my feet.

I could smell the scent of a summer night riding the damp, lukewarm wind.

Trickling water, overgrown weeds, the footpath, muddy with the prints of rubber boots, sugary sweet sorbet that's just about to melt, thin smoke rising from mosquito coils, someone's sweaty back.

The air was a mixture of all those things, hammering it home that the next season is coming again.

I slowly stretched the muscles of my entire body according to my familiar routine. Finally, I stretched my hip joints, then opened the case on the ground to one side.

Gently, I pulled out a wooden bat.

This was a new bat, different from the one I'd had in baseball club, the one I'd used to smash the glass of Kenta's bedroom window.

I bought it around the end of last summer and the start of fall, about the time I met that certain person.

After confirming the sensation of my grip several times, I stretched out my arm in front of my face, tilted the bat, and looked at the tip.

After counting to three, I relaxed and let it sway lightly.

In my head, I imagined an explosively talented pitcher, and...

*Shwoop.*

...Yes, that was a straight hit.

I swung the bat a few times, critiquing my own swing.

*Shwoop. Shwoop.*

*Shwomp. Shwomp.*

After quitting the baseball club, I took some time off, but I think the reason I resumed this swinging practice was simply because I was restless.

After all, it's been my routine every day since elementary school.

It's become a part of my life, rather than a form of sports practice.

There was no real reason for me to switch to the wooden bats used by college or pro players, instead of the metal bats that are the standard in high school baseball.

I think it's just that I wanted to switch things up for myself mentally.

*Shwup. Shwup.*

*Whump. Whump.*

After about fifty swings, I was approaching a form I was satisfied with.

When my form isn't right, the bat makes this sort of sluggish, dragging sound, but when my swing is smooth and natural, it literally cuts through the air like a knife.

The reason it took me a little longer than usual to get to that sweet spot was probably because of what happened during that day's lunch break.

It was the first time since I quit the club that I actually had a direct conversation with the coach.

*Shwoop.*

See, just remembering it makes me overswing.

I took a deep breath to expel the pent-up irritation inside my chest.

Then I readied the bat again and wound up to swing...

“—Young man! That’s a knuckleball!”

*Huh? Knuckleball?*

Startled by the sudden voice, I ended up swinging with my waist positioned all wrong.

“Oh dear. You just struck out.”

*Oh, shut up, I know!*

Turning around, inwardly cursing, I saw...

“Wait, Asuka?”

An unexpected arrival was standing there before me.

“Evening.” As she spoke, Asuka smiled mischievously. She was wearing a loose baby-blue summer sweater, white culottes, and sneakers, in a relaxed style.

I put down my bat and wiped my sweat with the sleeve of my T-shirt. “Erm, what are you doing here?”

“Just taking a walk to get a break from studying.”

Well, it was still only just past eight, so it’s not like it was an odd time for a high school student to be out.

“Even so, it’s quite a long walk from your house to here, isn’t it, Asuka?”

When I said that, she turned her face away bashfully and twisted her hands in front of her.

“Well, how should I say it...? I was walking aimlessly and ended up here before I knew it, or maybe I was wondering if you’d just happen to show up?”

She looked so adorable that I couldn’t help snorting with laughter.

I started feeling increasingly devilish.

“I feel like I’ve heard that line somewhere before. ‘It’s better for us to run into

each other here.' It was on a beautiful moonlit night like tonight, as I recall."

"Ah, there you go, putting a damper on things." Asuka looked away. "I mean, I haven't seen even a glimpse of you since that day... Even though we agreed that we'd go on a date with me wearing that dress I bought during our trip."

I could barely catch that mumbled last part, but I could tell she was pouting.

"Regardless..." I said, changing the subject. "What was that, just now?"

Asuka finally looked at me and chuckled.

"After I met you, I learned a little from reading baseball manga. You've got to be able to react to a sudden curveball, you know, young man."

"I can't hit a sudden knuckleball in high school baseball, you know."

By the way, a knuckleball is like a pitch that draws an irregularly vacillating trajectory, and neither the catcher nor the person who throws it knows which way it's going to go.

Asuka squatted down a little distance away, saying "Oh, is that so?" in a quizzical manner.

The culottes looked like a skirt but had a gusset just like shorts, so Asuka must have felt safe letting down her guard. The soft fabric fanned out, and the backs of her thighs showed, plump and rounded.

The smoothness of her pale skin, floating in the faint darkness of the night, threatened to remind me of that night in Tokyo.

It's not like I'd been actively avoiding Asuka, but a lot seemed to have changed in terms of our relationship, and I felt awkward, so it was sort of true that I hadn't really been seeking her out.

I wasn't sure how to face her, really.

*I definitely like her. I don't need to go looking for reconfirmation of that at this point.*

*I'm attracted to her; I admire her.*

But I still didn't know if I should label that feeling as active romantic interest.

Oblivious to the fact that I was having trouble finding a safe place to put my

gaze, Asuka hugged her knees and looked up at me.

“Why don’t you continue?”

Asuka spoke in a sweet voice that seemed to be floating in the air.

For some reason, even those words sounded like they might be loaded with meaning, so to distract myself, I did as she suggested and readied my bat once more.

*Shwoop. Shwoop.*

*Shwomp. Shwomp.*

*Ah yes, Chitose’s mental state is all in disarray.*

Asuka was looking at me with a sort of pleased expression.

Suddenly, I was enveloped by a nostalgic sense of *déjà vu*.

When you’re practicing on the sports field after school, and a girl you know walks past, beyond the net, or when the brass band passes by close to you at a competition, you get this sort of fluffy sense of excitement in your stomach.

It’s that feeling of embarrassment when people see you in a different context from the usual, when you’re raising your voice beyond its usual pitch, and you’re trying to look kinda cool, and you’re honestly showing off a little.

*Shwup. Shwup.*

*Whump. Whump.*

I regained my concentration and continued my swinging.

“—An invisible miracle ball!”

“You think I can hit something like that?!”

Every now and then, she’d call out with strange interjections.

Once I’d counted to a hundred again in my head, Asuka spoke up in a quieter tone.

“You just couldn’t quit baseball, could you?”

“Don’t be dramatic. It’s the same as doing calisthenics along to the radio.”

Until now, I'd never told anyone that I'd kept doing practice swings like this.

To be honest, I felt guilty getting caught in the act just before, as if I'd been exposed trying to keep a secret from someone very precious to me.

Asuka got to her feet, came over, and touched my fingertips very lightly.

At less than two feet away, I looked down to see her faint teardrop mole and felt my breath catch in my throat.

But then the pale baby-blue shape floated away from me like a butterfly, and I felt the weight of the bat lift from my grip.

"You've been swinging this heavy thing..." Asuka shakily raised the bat. "And you've been doing it where no one can see. You've been swinging it day after day, haven't you?"

I responded lightly, as if pretending not to notice the mixed emotions that were starting to well up inside me a little again.

"I'm begging you, don't try it out. You're such a klutz, Asuka; you're gonna lose hold of it and send it flying straight at my head."

"..."

"Why is it that whenever you're not sure how to react, you go straight to 'All right, I'm gonna kill you now' mode?"

Asuka pouted and lowered the bat.

"See, that's just the way you always evade the subject." She smiled. It was a lonely smile, like the far corners of the night.

"In the end, you never told me why you quit."

I bit my lip against the sensation of being pathetic as well as the remorse that was slowly seeping through me.

I couldn't even talk about it with the girl who'd been by my side during that horrible, rotten time.

Thinking back, it sure was nice of her to hang around a guy who grumbled and moped without ever getting anywhere close to the crux of the matter.

"You never directly asked, and I didn't want to appear uncool in front of you."

"You couldn't let yourself appear uncool, in other words, right? You're like that Bump of Chicken song, 'No-Hitter, No-Run,'" Asuka said. "No matter how anxious you are, how pained, or troubled, or how much you want to run away, you always just smile like that, with a calm expression on your face."

"You're overestimating me. And on that night in Tokyo, I was whining like a big baby."

"Mostly for my benefit, right?"

"Asuka..."

"Just kidding." Asuka lifted the bat again. "I'm sorry; I didn't mean to disturb you. It was the first time I saw you playing baseball, so I got kind of excited."



"If you don't mind that it's just me goofing around with a bat, then come watch anytime."

"Can I bring a sleepover bag? Next time, I'll bring my favorite pajamas, too."

"What for?"

"So I can practice cooking a delicious meal and waiting for you while you practice baseball with everything you've got."

"Try again after mastering meat-and-potato stew."

"I'll shoot for the stars and a home run!"

"Whoa, watch out! I didn't think you were actually going to lose hold of the bat!"

After that, I concentrated on swinging, getting in approximately two hundred swings.

The number itself doesn't mean much. Sometimes fifty is enough, and sometimes it doesn't click even after swinging a thousand times.

Asuka was like an elder sister watching her little brother's efforts, smiling away, occasionally making comments, and generally enjoying herself.

After making the best-feeling swing of the evening, I put my bat back into its case.

I offered to walk Asuka home, but she said she'd feel bad making me do that, so I told her I wanted to get some running practice. We set off, occasionally bumping our shoulders and little fingers together.

A cicada croaked.

"Let's hope..." Asuka began. "Let's hope it's an amazing summer, far better than last year."

I gently touched my bat case, which I was holding in my nondominant hand. It was a habit I'd picked up a long time ago.

"Just like back then, huh?"

When I looked around the vicinity, I saw an old couple sitting on the porch of

their house, leisurely nibbling on a watermelon.

An old electric fan rotated its head with boredom on its flat face, and the bamboo blinds swayed comfortably.

*It's going to be a hot one tomorrow, I thought.*



I waved to Asuka, who ran off quickly ahead, saying she didn't want her dad to spot us, and mumbled to myself.

"...Hey, Saku. Why'd you quit baseball?"

With a sigh, I looked at the sky full of stars and smiled wryly, thinking about how playing it straight was a field I didn't much care for.



After school the next day, Haru and I, who were done with homeroom, headed to the staff room, complaining all the way.

We took possession of a bunch of wooden deck brushes, plastic buckets, and unfathomable chemicals, and listened to Kura explain how to use them.

Partway through, Miss Misaki came to see how it was going.

"Umi, Chitose, cleaning the pool together, eh?"

Beside me, Haru's shoulders jerked.

"W-we'll finish as soon as possible, and then I'll run right along to club practice."

"Eh..." Miss Misaki smiled and lifted the corner of her mouth. "There's no need to rush. Take a day off club practice today. If, by some chance, you do manage to finish early, then go for a date with Chitose or something."

"Why him?! ...But never mind that; the captain can't just take the day off."

"Right, you're the captain. And the captain has to set an example."

"\_\_"

Kura interjected just then. "Right. I don't want any more napping or canoodling going on in my class, after all."

He had an unlit cigarette between his lips. Oral fixation, perhaps.

Miss Misaki glowered at him. “Don’t forget that you should be setting an example for the students as well, Mr. Iwanami.”

“All right, all right.”

*Serves you right. See how you like being told off.*

With a bitter look on his face, Kura put the cigarette away in his pocket.

Miss Misaki watched until he was done and then spoke again.

“Anyway, Umi, you’re having the day off from practice today. If that doesn’t sit right with you, consider pool cleaning a form of physical training and put your back into it.”

“...Roger that.”

Haru still seemed dissatisfied, but she must have realized that the decision would not be overturned. She nodded reluctantly.

“And as for you, Chitose,” Miss Misaki said mischievously. “Don’t go doing anything that would make it difficult for you to look Nana in the eye afterward, all right?”

“...Please don’t forget that you’re meant to be a role model for the students, too, ma’am.”



After leaving the staff room, we changed our shoes at the entrance and went outside.

The pool was on the other side of the road from the clubroom building next to Gym 2. In other words, because it was built independently outside the school grounds, it was necessary for us to go out from the east gate, which is located exactly opposite the main gate.

Haru and I divided up the cleaning stuff between us and were just headed across the sports field, when...

“Saku!”

Yusuke came running over from the baseball clubroom, located behind the

back net right beside the main gate.

He was wearing practice spikes and clearly was just about to get stuck in club activities.

I put a lid on various emotions and spoke in a lighthearted tone. “Hey, captain of the baseball club. Don’t go running around out here with spikes on; you’ll wear them down.”

Yusuke smoothly ignored my comment and said, “I was looking for you. After homeroom I went to your classroom, but you’d already left. I thought you’d gone home for the day.”

“Oh, my bad. I’m on pool cleaning duty as punishment for sleeping in class.”

I held up my deck brush and plastic bucket.

Yusuke glanced at Haru for a moment, then looked at me again. “I have something serious to discuss. You got a minute?”

I knew he wasn’t the type of guy to back down and go off quietly in a situation like this, even if I did say no.

I silently shrugged to indicate passive affirmation.

“Haru, I’m sorry, but go on ahead, would you?”

“—No.”

Unlike a certain hesitating someone, Haru responded with a crisp, firm refusal.

“Why not?”

“This is obviously about baseball club, right? In that case, I’ll hear what he has to say, too.”

Yusuke, who was watching the exchange, gave a wry smile. “Since what I have to say does involve the baseball club, I’d rather you butt out. You have nothing to do with this.”

Haru snorted. “Weren’t you listening the other day? I’m his current catch partner.”

“Don’t lump this together with your silly game...”

This time, I had to interject and cut him off.

“Sorry, but my partner won’t back down at times like this.”

Seeing Yusuke gritting his teeth slightly, I felt my heart also twinge a little.

—Partner.

That’s what I used to call this guy.

“...Fine, then, Saku, if you insist. I don’t really care.”

After we relocated to a place with as few prying eyes as possible, Yusuke cleared his throat.

“I’m not good at beating around the bush, so I’ll just say this straight. You should play baseball with us again.”

It was kind of what I expected.

“Now, come on... Haru aside, weren’t you listening to *me* the other day? My skills have gotten all rusty by now. I wouldn’t be of any use to the team.”

“Uh-huh. If you’ve really cast baseball aside, that would be the case.”

“Right—that’s what I’m trying to tell you, though.”

When I said that, Yusuke grabbed my arm.

“Then why’ve you still got this batter’s hand, then?”

“\_\_”

I shook him off reflexively.

My “batter’s hand” is a symbol of lingering regrets, after all.

But Yusuke continued regardless.

“This hand belongs to someone who swings the bat hundreds of times every day, making blisters, crushing them, and making new blisters form on top of them, until the skin is hard all over.”

I knew I wasn’t going to be able to deceive him.

After all, even Atomu had seen through me before with just a single glance.

“You...,” Haru murmured beside me.

I patted her on the shoulder as if to say, “Hey, no biggie.”

“I guess I just kept going out of habit.”

“Even if that’s the case, it means you haven’t forgotten the feel of the bat.”

Yusuke took a step forward, closing the distance between us.

I took an equivalent step back.

“Don’t be silly, Yusuke. The big summer tournament is just around the corner, and you’re still obsessed with the guy who quit a year ago.”

“The tournament is why I’m here.”

Yusuke thrust his phone at me as if to say, “Take a look at this.”

I took it from him and zoomed in on the image displayed on the screen, to see...

“...Player registration roster, huh?”

A column of familiar names.

Probably submitted for the competition this summer.

“You want me to see how nice it is that the number of new members increased, or something?”

“Scroll to the bottom.”

“Tch, I’m not interested in the benched members of a team that I quit.”

Or rather, since there were only eleven people now, and up to eighteen people could be registered, everyone’s name was sure to be listed.

Surely he didn’t just want to show me who the regular players, numbers one through nine, were, either?

As I scrolled down the screen, unable to read his intentions, my eyes were drawn to a familiar set of Japanese characters.

“What...the...heck?”

—The person registered as the twelfth player was...Saku Chitose.

*Is this last year’s roster?*

*No, there are first-year students listed whose names I don't know, and the jersey numbers are different, too.*

Yusuke grabbed me by the shoulders as I stood there in confusion.

“Do you understand? The director kept registering you as a player!”

I received as big a shock as if I'd been hit by a dead ball to the head.

“Listen, Saku. I know you're not the kind of person who would do something like this just because you made a mistake or some emotional reason like that. I'm sure you regret it.”

The seriousness of Yusuke's words made my heart beat faster.

“If you just get yourself together, we can fight together on the baseball pitch this summer. Please, come back to the team. Give us a chance to fulfill the promises we couldn't last summer! Give us a chance to make this right!”

*Oh, this one hasn't changed.*

*Always so straightforward, so passionate, such a...*

“...Kidding me?”

“Huh?”

“—Are you freakin' kidding me?!!!”

...such a straightforward, passionate, inveterate coward.

With a thud, I stepped on the steel plate under my feet with all my might.

As I'd flung his hand off my shoulder, I'd also let go of the plastic bucket, and it was now rolling around randomly on the ground.

I knew that Haru was shrinking away from me in alarm.

But I was too worked up to worry about that right now.

“Fight together this summer? Fulfill our promises? With *you*? Remind me who looked away and made a snap judgment with the others back then?!?”

“I... I regret it.”

“If you're being truthful about that, then why now? After all this time?”

“...Because I didn’t even know if you still wanted to play baseball.”

“No. You never would have approached me if the coach hadn’t left me on the roster like a consolation prize. You think I’m some sort of dog who’s going to wag his tail and come scurrying back to the club when you wave a treat in front of my nose? You think I’m gonna act like none of it happened and just go back to enjoying baseball? You think I’m going to stand shoulder to shoulder with you like a partner again?”

I clenched my right fist as tight as a vise.

“It’s not...it’s not that easy!”

With nowhere else to put my feelings, I faced the concrete wall and started punching it.

“Chitoseee!!!” Haru jumped on me and grabbed my arm. “You’re an athlete! Don’t hurt your dominant arm!”

“—Ngh, let go of me!”

“Don’t be such an idiot! You’ll have to kill me first, cause I am not letting go!”

She hung on, glaring at me, using all the strength in her small body.

“Don’t act like such a stupid, pathetic weirdo!!!”

Suddenly, Haru’s barrage of honest emotion landed a direct hit on my heart.

I snapped back to reality as if she’d slapped me hard in the face with her words.

Haru continued to glare at me with determination in her eyes.

She’s like a ray of light, I thought, although it was hardly the time.

I calmed down inside, as if a bit of sunlight had broken through to dissipate the miserable gloom that had overtaken me.

I took a deep breath and let the tension go from my limbs.

Remembering the two of us on the swings at the park, one evening at dusk, I smiled slightly. She’d saved me again.

Even against that jerk Yanashita, I’d only ever used my left hand.

“Thank you, Haru. I’m fine now.”

“You sure?”

She still looked doubtful, so to reassure her, I injected a light, jokey tone to my voice.

“Yeah. By the way, I think I just felt something like a tiny pancake press up against me.”

“I think you meant a Jumbo ♡ sweet ♡ bun. ♡”

“For the sake of argument, can we call it a cream-filled brioche?”

“—All right, that’s it, I’m gonna break it.”

“Not my dominant arm!”

It was all right now.

Business as usual.

Regret, pity, trivial feelings of superiority, disappointment, hope, disillusionment, expectations. Yusuke was a frozen mishmash of all those elements as I faced him and spoke.

“I’m sorry for losing my cool. I did that for my own aesthetic; it wasn’t done out of any kind of grudge held against you or the others. It was bound to happen sooner or later anyway. So just forget about former club members like me—and give it your all to get to Koshien. Live your red-blooded high school baseball life.”

“Saku...”

“I’ve made up my mind. I will never go to bat for Fuji High’s baseball club again.”

I picked up the buckets and brushes that were lying around and started walking away.

My ex-partner stood there, still and silent.

My current partner hurriedly caught up and fell into step with me on my left side and spoke almost as if she was trying to console me with a warm hug.

"Hey, Chitose. Let's make that pool all nice and shiny."

"Just like summer itself."

An overeager cicada croaked, and a strong wind blew past.

Consumed by the dust from the dry sports field, I rubbed my eyes with my right hand.



The bottom of the pool, which had been drained after school, was still pleasantly wet, reflecting the cool, glittering light like Blue Hawaii-flavored shaved ice.

Just as Kura said, it wasn't actually all that dirty.

I had to wonder if it was really necessary to go out of our way to clean it when it wasn't that bad at all, but I guess it's more about the feeling of cleanliness.

I rolled up the hem of my pants.

Haru also took off her sneakers and socks.

All she'd done was bare her feet, but maybe it was the extra skin exposure that made her legs look so healthy and muscled, just like you'd expect for a sports club member.

As instructed, we started by cleaning the high-up places like the poolside area and the diving board, and so on. I lazily sprayed on some water using the hose attached to the faucet and rubbed it in with the deck brush, throwing some detergent or disinfectant or whatever it was onto the visibly dirty places.

Every time Haru bent over, the back of her skirt rode up, and I could see her light-blue bra straps showing clearly through the back of her taut shirt.

However, she herself seemed oblivious to the fact that she was being watched so closely.

I felt a little sorry for her, diligently cleaning up like she was, so I limited myself to only peeking at her every now and again.

After that, we concentrated for about two hours, and by the time we'd polished every corner of the bottom of the pool, the edges of the sky had begun

to gradually turn a deep-red color.

"I can't imagine Kura will find anything to complain about with the job we've done," I muttered.

Haru smiled in response.

"Yeah. That much work was basically a hard training session."

As she spoke, she loosened her tie and fanned her shirt hem with her hands.

I picked up one of the electrolyte drinks that we'd left by the poolside and tossed it her way.

Haru caught the bottle one-handed at the end of its graceful arc through the air.

She popped the cap and drank deeply, droplets of liquid spilling from the edges of her lips, mixing with her sweat and sliding down her neck.

Summer, after school, a pool, a girl with a ponytail.

The perfect scenario, just like in a commercial.

"Thanks for earlier."

When I said that, Haru took her lips away from the bottle and stared hard at me.

"Even my hubby loses his cool sometimes, doesn't he?"

"Sorry you had to see that."

"Well, it's better than just standing there hesitating during a scene like that."

Even though she didn't know any of the details, her words really penetrated right through to the softest layer of my heart.

Haru continued to fiddle with the nozzle dial on the end of the hose.

"I mean, even if I ask what happened, you dodge the question."

I'm not enough of a jerk to ask "What question?" so I didn't.

But I still couldn't think of a response that would prevent me from stepping on Haru's feelings.

In the end, I let a vague smile suffice as a response.

Haru let out a short sigh of disbelief and said, “Tch, you’re such a complicated guy.”

Then she grabbed the lever of the nozzle that was pointing right at me.

With a *pssht* sound, a thin jet of water shot out like a rocket and hit me directly in the face.

“You jerk, that hurt!”

She watched me, smiling beatifically, as I panicked and tried to divert the stream with my palms.

“Has that cooled your head down somewhat?”

“Turn it off jet mode! At least set it to shower!”

—*Pssht, pssht.*

“Listen to me, darn it!”

I ran this way and that, completely drenched.

“If you keep that up, I’ll still getcha even if you steal a base, Baseball Boy!”

“All right. This is war. Stay right there!” I grabbed the brand-new plastic bucket that was nearby.

It was so hot that we’d been using a bucket of clean water to wash our hands and faces in every now and then.

Sensing something, Haru slowly backed up.

“Wait a minute, Chitose. That’s no fair.”

“Young lady, prepare for the drenching of a lifetime.”

“No, no, you can’t do that right now!”

“Resistance is futile!”

“Yeek!”

I flung the contents of the bucket at her without mercy.

Dripping wet from the top of her head to the tips of her toes, Haru squatted

down in a fluster.

Clutching her knees, she curled up, her shirt clinging to her back...

"\_\_"

Her bright skin tone and light-blue bra straps were clearly visible.

"Quit looking, you idiot." Haru spoke in a voice that was faint with embarrassment.

"Wow, why aren't you wearing a camisole, you doofus?"

"I... I thought I'd be too hot, so I took it off before cleaning."

"It didn't occur to you that sweat might make your shirt see-through?"

"I mean, my T-shirts for club practice are all opaque... I just forgot..."

I pretended to be calm while averting my eyes as much as possible, but that image just now was burned into my mind, and I couldn't get rid of it.

Her skin as seen through a soaking-wet shirt was more tantalizing than a girl in a bikini would have been.

—Especially because it was Haru.

She wasn't the same girl anymore, the one I could hang with like I did with my guy friends.

I felt like I'd caught a glimpse of the woman inside Haru, who wasn't fully a woman yet but wasn't a girl anymore, either. The guilt of it made my heart beat faster.

"But I guess..." Haru began.

Water splashed and dripped onto the ground.

"—I guess I don't mind, as long as it's you."

My heart skipped a beat, and I found myself looking at her in surprise.

Haru had gotten to her feet at some point. With her gaze cast downward and her cheeks pink, she held her arms protectively over her chest. But her gorgeous arms and tie weren't enough coverage to fully obscure the delicate lace that showed through like a morning glory flower at dawn.

Her wet hair clung to her cheeks and neck, and her slow breathing was filled with thrilling sex appeal.

Thinking I might go crazy if I looked directly at her, I lowered my gaze to see droplets of water slowly sliding down her thighs from underneath her skirt.

It took all of my self-control to turn away.

Haru kept talking, before I had time to even unpack the words that were reaching my ears.

“Chitose, are you interested in me?”

“No... That’s not it...”

*Squelch.*

*Squelch, squelch.*

I could hear her wet, bare feet padding toward me.

She stopped, right behind me.

“Then turn and look at me,” she whispered softly in my ear.

I took my time turning around, as if I were fumbling in my pocket for an answer that I didn’t actually have.

“Listen, I— *Gurgleburgleglug!!!*”

She filled my slack, open mouth with a full blast of the shower mode, and I choked.

“You left yourself wide open for that one!” Haru stuck out her tongue.

“That’s a dirty trick; I was distracted!”

“Oh my? Was wittle Chitose distwacted by sexy Hawoo, hmm?”

I composed my expression and silently pushed back my hair. “Sorry, Haru.” I reached out and took her hand gently. “I mean, I just got kinda worked up... I’m not sure I’ll be able to come back from this.”

“Huh, what are you talking about? Are you serious?”

“You have a change of clothes, right? Is it okay if I get you real messy?”

"I do, and I guess it's okay... I mean, hold on a second, Chitose..."

Haru squeezed her eyes shut.

*Splooosh.*

I pointed the hose nozzle, the one I'd casually taken from her hand, at her face, and I squeezed the lever without hesitation.

"Blurgh! Hold...on... *Gurgleburgle!!!*" she burbled.

"It's hard to counter if the attack never stops, isn't it?"

"..."

"Oh my! Did wittle Ha♡woo♡ see Chitose all wet and sexy and feel a change, hmm?"

Haru smiled as she parted her wet bangs. "All right, I think I'll tie you to that ladder over there and pray for the victory of the swimming club."

"Are you talking about human sacrifice?!"

After that, we messed around like a couple of goofballs, forgetting the time.

Eventually exhausted, I decided to lie down on the bottom of the pool.

Haru untied her ponytail and followed suit.

While we were unaware of it, the trailing, torn clouds had become dyed a bright-red hue, and the deep-blue night was drawing near. Puddles here and there softly soaked up the sky, giving us the illusion of floating in the air, just the two of us.

The wind, which had become somewhat cool, passed by us almost reluctantly.

The insects chirped, and the deck brush we'd left propped up in the corner fell down with a clatter.

Two crows flew away toward the mountains, like little smudges against the sky.

"Hey, Chitose." Haru spoke up in a quiet tone. "Last summer tournament, Kaito invited me to the ballpark, so I went."

"Seems so."

It must have been after that that we'd started talking more, like we were doing now.

"You were the only one."

I nodded silently.

"I truly believed that you could go on to the Koshien tournament, even leading such a weak team, from a high school like ours."

"...Uh-huh."

"You were really cool."

Haru didn't say anything else. It seemed like she was done talking.

*I'd like to stay here by her side and gaze silently at the sky until the darkness obscures my pathetic face, I thought.*

The moon floated like a disc of cut-out ice in the sky, somewhere between dusk and night.

I closed my hand into a fist and gently knocked it against Haru's shoulder.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Pouting Orihime and Crying Hikoboshi



—I've been having this dream now for a long time.

First was elementary school.

Invited by a school friend, I participated in a Little League baseball practice, seeing it as just an extension of playtime.

This friend, who didn't stand out much in gym class at all, was somehow able to pitch and hit a small softball incredibly far.

I think it was just pure frustration that I felt.

It was only natural that he was better than I was, since the guy was getting specialized coaching every day and had plenty of experience, but it was the first time I was completely defeated by someone in sports.

I was permitted to join on a temporary basis, but I found myself stopping by practice every day. Once practice was done, I would continue hitting balls against a wall of the school building into the evening, and I'd get kind of lost in it.

Then one day, when a ball I'd hit went zooming straight into the side of the school building, I submitted my official application to join the club.

The dream I wrote down on my graduation essay in big letters... *PRO BASEBALL PLAYER*.

Next was junior high.

There were these third-years who weren't that serious about baseball.

You couldn't really call it a strong team, even to be polite, so the laziness of their practicing wasn't really something anyone could do anything about, I thought.

What I couldn't accept was that, even though I was never like "All right, let's change this situation," they still started to turn against me when I became a core player soon after joining the club in first year.

For a while, the third-year students, and the second-year students who followed their lead, continued to shun me.

However, the coach was a good and fair coach.

Regardless of your attitude toward practice or your grades, if you played well, he'd put you in the game. If you didn't, he wouldn't.

A simple rule as applied to athletic clubs.

Fortunately, all the first-year students were on my side.

All of them had played baseball seriously in elementary school, and they had a common desire to aim seriously for the top in junior high school, too.

We endured the silly, unreasonable treatment and silently devoted ourselves to practice.

I think it was only natural that when the third-years eventually graduated and left, the starting lineup was filled with first-year names.

And so we became a strong team.

Our junior high school, which had only ever made it to the second round at most, won the best four, runner-up, and the city tournament, and finally, we even won the prefectural tournament in the last summer of junior high.

By that time, I had already become a devotee of the sport of baseball.

Before I knew it, I'd apparently gained quite a name for myself as a batter.

We received several invitations for matches from schools in the prefecture that were regulars at the Koshien tournament, and also from schools with strong teams in the neighboring prefectures.

But after my experiences in junior high, I didn't find those elite teams all that

appealing.

What's fun about joining a team where winning is taken for granted?

I wanted to claw my way to the top and astonish the world.

I knew that, that way, I could grab hold of a reality that was like something out of a sports manga.

Or so I thought.

—I just didn't realize how much I benefited from the environment surrounding me.

Finally, high school.

When I started, I was alarmed to learn that the baseball club had ten third-year students and zero second-year students.

If the third-years all graduated, and there weren't enough players left for a team... Well, that would be no laughing matter.

Relying on info gathered from my classmates, I did the rounds and approached students in my grade.

It was then that I encountered Yusuke Ezaki.

I didn't remember his face, but when I spoke to him, I realized he had been the fourth batter of a tough team I'd faced several times in junior high, and of course, he fully intended to join the baseball club.

I found a few other key players who'd been on teams that sounded familiar to me, too.

I can only believe that it was fate that among the ten freshmen I finally gathered together, there were even decent players for special positions such as pitcher and catcher.

I was ready to go all the way to Koshien...to the pro major leagues.

From there on, my aim was to give it everything I had and make my way to the top.

I was afraid of nothing. Not of practicing until I passed out, nor having to realize my limits, nor getting beaten by some formidable opponent.

All I had to do was overcome every obstacle, one by one.

I loved baseball.

I'd give it my full power, my whole entire life, everything I had.

I'd dedicate the entirety of my youth to it.

—*Pwsh, fwshhh, swshhh*.

Static flashed across my vision all of a sudden.

Yusuke, and my other teammates, disappeared in a sandstorm.

When my field of vision cleared, I was alone on the open sports field.

No bat, no glove, no ball, no uniform, no number.

Just your average, sad loner.



*Ding-ding-ding.*

I sat up, throwing the blanket off me.

Not knowing if this was a continuation of my dream or reality, I blinked my eyes rapidly.

As if tracing over vaguely blurred memories, I catalogued each and every thing that appeared in my field of vision.

One wall of miscellaneous bookshelves. My Tivoli Audio stereo. The dining table. A bitter orange glove smeared with oil. A black wooden bat with a dirty grip. My familiar apartment.

Spread out around me was the reality after the dream.

“—Hahhh...”

I exhaled deeply to expel the stagnant air swirling in my chest.

I was overwhelmed with a sense of relief that I didn't have to stand on that sports field anymore, and at the same time, I felt a profound sense of loss that I would never be able to stand there again.

The tank top I was wearing as loungewear was damp with sweat.

When I checked my phone, tossed casually onto the low table, I realized it was Saturday.

Apparently, I'd decided to take a nap on the sofa after finishing up maintaining my gear, and I ended up sleeping until morning.

I staggered to my feet and threw the tank top into the laundry basket.

After washing my face at the sink and gulping down several cups of cold barley tea, I finally felt awake.

*Again?* I thought.

I've been having that dream ever since I quit baseball.

Recently, I haven't been having it so much, but yesterday's altercation with Yusuke must have really been bothering me.

Just thinking about it still made my heart hurt a little, but then I realized that Haru's bright smile seemed to have overwritten the memory a little, and I felt like she'd saved me, somehow.

When I turned on the Tivoli, the FM radio was playing a cheerful song, perfect to start off the weekend.

Hot air rushed in from the window I'd left wide open, blowing away the last remnants of my dream.

After inhaling it deeply into my lungs, I was just standing in the kitchen, thinking about making coffee and fried eggs, when...

*Ding-ding-ding.*

My phone was ringing.

Come to think of it, I remember now. I was woken up by the ringtone.

After seeing Yuuko's name on the display, I answered the call.

"Hello."

"Hmph, finally, you answer. You're late, Saku. Where are you right now?"

"What do you mean, where am I? I just woke up. I'm at home."

"...You jerk! We had plans to meet in front of the station for our date today!"

"Maaan..."

Yikes. I completely forgot about it because of what happened yesterday. We'd agreed to meet at eleven. In front of the dinosaur monument at the rotary by the station.

When I checked the time, it was showing just past twelve.

I was way late. With no excuse.

*Wow, I really slept for a long time.*

"Sorry, sorry, sorry! Give me half an hour... No, I'll be there in twenty minutes, so please just wait somewhere cool!"

"Oh, I see how it is. I was up bright and early at seven in the morning, all excited to get ready for our date, but you, Saku, completely forgot about our plans and slept the morning away, didn't you?"

"There's...there's extenuating circumstances involved. Lunch is on me, so please let me off the hook here."

"Hmph. I bet you're just sitting there elegantly listening to the radio, making coffee and fried eggs, smiling to yourself and thinking, 'Not a bad Saturday, is it?' Weren't you?"

"Hey, are you watching me right now somehow?!"



I hurriedly got dressed and headed for the station.

Even though I'd told her to stay somewhere cool, Yuuko was sitting out in front of the dinosaur monument, waiting for me just like we originally agreed.

She was wearing a white tank top that accentuated her chest and a long pistachio-green shirt, with light-beige culottes underneath. Her hair was tied in a half-up style with an electric-blue scarf.

Her legs, generously exposed to the strong summer sun, were pleasantly full and lustrous.

She was so beautiful it was almost unbelievable to find her sitting in front of a train station in Fukui, but here she was. There was a sulky look on her lips,

which were as full as her legs.

The Fukuititan's long neck and roaring cry seemed to perfectly represent the mindset of a girl who'd been kept waiting all this time. The Fukuiraptor also growled menacingly.

*I'm seriously sorry, you know?*

While casting about for things I could use to soothe her, I finally hit upon the idea of telling her that I'd treat her to eggs Benedict at the only fashionable café I knew in this area, and she finally regained her humor.

...But when I accidentally let it slip that it was a place I'd gone to with Nanase, she went right back to sulking and kept it up for the next half hour.

After that, we strolled around the Seibu department store in front of the station (west exit side) and the AOSSA complex behind the station (east exit side).

By the way, AOSSA is supposed to be derived from the saying "Aossa," the Fukui dialect for "Let's meet."

When I first heard about that, I thought *Dassa! (Lame!)*, but it's become so well established that some people even make a cringeworthy joke of it, saying "AOSSA de aossa!" or "Let's meet at AOSSA," so maybe it was a good name after all.

After Yuuko was satisfied with the purchase of some summer clothes, we sat down at the seating area they had out in front of the Happiring commercial building.

I laid down Yuuko's shopping bags, which I'd been made to carry as a punishment for being late, on the next chair.

"Saku, did something happen?"

Yuuko was in a better mood now, after I'd given her a ton of compliments when she was trying on clothes.

"Hmm? Why do you ask?"

"Because you always arrive early when we have plans to meet. Stuff like today hardly ever happens. Actually, I don't think it's ever happened."

*This girl knows me so well, I thought.*

The option of brushing aside her concerns crossed my mind, but when I remembered the exchange we'd had at Hachiban's last month, I decided to speak frankly.

"There was...an altercation. It had to do with the baseball club. I guess I'm a little tired out from that."

"...An altercation that had to do with the baseball club, huh?"

Yuuko kept her gaze cast down, and there was a hesitance to her voice as she repeated what I'd said.

I was pretty hardheaded around the time I quit, so she was probably having trouble gauging how deeply to probe into this topic.

"I was invited to return to the club," I said.

Yuuko abruptly lifted her head.

"Of course, I refused."

"...I see."

Her tone of voice was so flat that I found myself smiling wryly.

"Why *are you* getting so down about this, Yuuko?"

"Well, I mean, baseball was really important to you, wasn't it? Like it was all you had in your whole life, that kinda thing."

"Hmm, I guess."

"Anyone would feel scared and sad to lose something that meant that much to them."

I could see her clutching the fabric of her culottes under the table.

*This really isn't like her, I thought.*

Normally, at times like this, she'd be the type to try to brighten up the gloomy atmosphere.

I didn't want to continue this drab discussion during our special date, so I tried to make my voice sound as light as possible.

"Do you have anything like that in your life, Yuuko?"

"Like what?"

"Something special, I mean."

She responded without missing a beat, a "What the heck is this guy even saying?" kinda look on her face.

"You, of course."

"Whoa, don't hit me with a fastball. At least wrap it."

Finally, Yuuko smiled. "You know, Saku—"

Just as she was about to continue...

"Hmm? If it isn't Chitose and Hiiragi."

A familiar voice addressed us both by name from behind.

"...Guh." I turned around and grunted involuntarily.

"Hey, that's rude! Who was that reaction aimed at, hmm?"

Standing there were Nazuna and Atomu.

They must have been shopping, just like us.

Atomu had two paper shopping bags slung over his shoulders. "Tch."

Observing his melodramatic reaction to seeing me, I responded to Nazuna.

"The one there clicking his tongue, of course."

"I thought so. Hey, can we sit? Let's have a coffee together or something."

""No, thanks.""

We two guys spoke at the same time, our voices melding so perfectly that it was almost annoying, but it seemed Nazuna had no intention of getting the okay from us to start with.

It's not that I particularly dislike Atomu, but he's not the kinda guy I really want to see on my weekends, either. I didn't want to get mixed up with him, since it could easily lead to a headache.

For the first few seconds, it looked like Yuuko wanted to continue the

conversation she'd been having with me, but a few moments later, her expression changed to something like relief, and she welcomed Nazuna by saying, "Great idea, Ayase. Let's do it." I'd never really seen the two of them conversing in the classroom, but it didn't seem like their relationship was bad or anything.

There were four chairs arranged around a round plastic table, and Yuuko was sitting on my left.

Without hesitation, Nazuna sat down to my right.

*Hey, if you do that, I'm gonna end up sitting across from Atomu.*

Not that I'd be happy with sitting next to him, either. I'm sure he was feeling the same way.

He pulled his chair out as far away from the table as he reasonably could and sat down reluctantly, avoiding my gaze.

"Hmph, why are you two acting so stiff and odd?" Nazuna sighed in frustration.

I didn't want to look at Atomu, of course, so I let my gaze fall on Nazuna instead.

She was wearing a relatively simple combination of a black logo T-shirt and white shorts, but the length of the slightly loose T-shirt was quite short, and every time she moved even a little, her smooth waistline and well-shaped navel kept appearing and disappearing. I wasn't sure where to look.

"Hey, Saku? Where are those eyes going?" Yuuko's cold voice jabbed the back of my head.

"The...the chair. I thought the curve of the, er, back of it was kinda artistic."

"Those plastic chairs you see everywhere?" Nazuna commented, sounding completely unbothered. "Eh, it's fine. I'm showing it off, after all."

"See? She says it's fine, so I can look all I want, right?"

"Saaaku..."

"I apologize; I got carried away."

The two girls laughed, highly amused, but a tongue cluck from the far side of the table echoed in the air.

"You know..."

Nazuna turned to Yuuko.

"A while back, it kinda seemed like Chitose and Nanase were dating for a moment there, but like, aren't you two actually dating?"

"We're not dating. My love for Saku is one-sided."

I was used to this comeback, but Nazuna looked a little shocked.

"Oh, really? Well, isn't that kinda harsh? I mean, here you are, out on a date, on the weekend. Although, I guess you could say the same about us."

She sneaked a glance at me.

Yuuko scratched her cheek a little awkwardly. "It's not harsh. I asked for it to be this way. I asked him to just be friends; I said that I didn't want his response until I'd made a proper confession of my feelings. But if you're implying I'm being a bit of a hassle to Saku, well, I guess you'd be right there."

I thought about saying something to add to that, but that would have just made things complicated, so I didn't.

True, Yuuko said something along those lines to me in our first year.

Of course, I was conflicted at first, but I couldn't just reject someone who hadn't even properly confessed her feelings to me yet. Actually, it was more like she cut me off when I was trying to tell her my honest take on things.

Even if I genuinely felt that this ambiguous relationship was becoming a hassle, I'm pretty sure I've always had the option of quietly keeping my distance.

But she'd become too important to me to push her away like the other girls.

"Still, it won't last forever." Nazuna spoke as cuttingly as a freshly sharpened Japanese knife. "In your group, Nanase, Aomi, and Uchida are all pretty good-looking, and the other day, a pretty senior came to our class, too, right? That being the case, I want a shot with Chitose, too. And there are plenty of other

girls besides me who want the same.”

“...I understand that completely.”

“Doesn’t seem like you do. Okay, so then if tomorrow rolls around, and Chitose starts dating some girl you know, you wouldn’t have any regrets? Even if they start holding hands and kissing and groping?”

“\_\_”

“It’s obvious to see that you’ve been getting special treatment, Hiiragi. But giving you special treatment could get tiring. I don’t think you’re the kind of girl a guy could be with in a normal way.”

“—That’s not true!” Yuuko protested in a louder voice than before. “Saku treats me more roughly than anyone else. He doesn’t give me any special treatment. That’s why I want to be his special someone.”

“Oh, just shut up! You’re so *annoying!*” Nazuna stood up, and the cheap plastic chair toppled over. “Okay. Me and Hiiragi are just going to go grab some drinks.”

Then Nazuna grabbed hold of Yuuko’s hand and dragged her inside the Happiring building.

I reached out and righted the fallen chair.

Now I was left alone with this jerk.

“\_\_”

“\_\_”

“...Hey.”

I heard a voice.

“\_\_”

“...I said hey.”

An auditory hallucination?

“Hey!”

I responded reluctantly. “Summons for a Mr. Hey! Do we have a Mr. Hey in

the building?"

Atomu tched again before continuing. "What was that about, earlier?"

"What do you mean, earlier? Yuuko saying she likes me? Or Nazuna saying she wants a piece of me?"

"I don't care about that stuff. You said something about the baseball club, didn't you?"

"...You were listening?"

"There's hardly anyone around, so voices travel. Even on the weekend."

I gave up and looked at the person sitting in front of me.

"Why didn't you join our school's baseball club, Atomu?"

Apparently, he didn't like that I'd changed the subject, so he started frowning. Watching his face, I continued.

"I'm not very good at remembering faces and names. But when you said that we'd played against each other in the prefectural finals, I remembered you. Even in junior high, you had a hell of a fastball."

"—Huh. Well, you got three hits in your first three at bats and one walk against that 'hell of a fastball.' Two home runs, five RBIs. I can tell when someone's being condescending."

"That's not true. I was seriously panicked during that game. I still can't forget it. That first pitch, a low inside fastball. It's the first time I haven't been able to get a hand on one of those, even though they're usually my bread and butter, and I was all positioned to hit."

"Spare me the jokes. You were smirking at the batter's box with this 'That's the best you got?' look on your face."

"Oh, let me tell you, that wasn't the case. It's a bad habit of mine. When I hit up against a wall that I can't seem to overcome, I find it all so much fun that I can't help smiling."

"\_\_"

"That kind of thing happens, though, right?"

Atomu let out a big sigh.

"It was your fault that I quit baseball, and it was my fault, too. I've just had it confirmed for me that my choice wasn't a mistake after all. It's just..." Then he muttered under his breath. "I thought that, after that, you'd go shooting up the ranks like a bat out of hell."

I bit my lip. I was getting the same thing from all sides these days.

I made my decision. It's done.

—So could everyone just quit shoving a mirror up in my face and insisting I'd left something important behind?

That was the end of our little verbal game of catch.

Yuuko and Nazuna returned before long, and after chatting about random stuff for a while, we went our separate ways.

The roar of the Fukuititan sounded desolate, somehow.



“—Mai Todo, from Ashi High, is here.”

After school on Monday, Haru came breathlessly rushing into the classroom.

In preparation for the Inter-High, Ashi High was holding practice matches against high-ranking schools in the prefecture, and Fuji High, after our win in the semifinals, had been selected.

It seemed that the supervisor of that team had been friends with Miss Misaki since way back and had stopped by today to go over a few schedule adjustments.

I had no idea why the ace, Mai Todo, was accompanying her, but maybe it was just to introduce herself. Or maybe there was something else they needed to get done here.

Even so, I marveled at Haru's ability to be so excited to see someone who'd thrashed her on the baseball court.

I smiled a little, remembering Haru with stars in her eyes.

Well, I guess that's how it goes sometimes.

Of course, it's frustrating to lose, but I can understand genuinely looking up to someone who's better than you, and even becoming a bit of a fan of theirs.

It didn't look like we'd be playing ball after school today, so I was just about to head on home when Haru's locker caught my eye.

She'd left her tote bag behind, the one she rarely carried with her, unlike the sports bag that seemed permanently glued to her person. She must have tossed a sweaty gym kit in there.

At this rate, she was likely to forget it on her way home.

I didn't have anything better to do, so I grabbed it, figuring I'd go deliver it to her.

When I entered Gym 1, I found Miss Misaki, Haru, the Ashi High supervisor, and Mai Todo all standing there talking.

The other club members, including Nanase, had already started stretching, but the practice session hadn't actually started yet. They were all keeping quiet, so they could overhear the conversation in progress.

"Since you're here, Todo, how about a warm-up match?" Haru said, holding the ball under her arm. "Right, Miss Misaki? Miss Tominaga?"

Miss Tominaga was probably the name of the Ashi High supervisor.

Miss Misaki had a cool beauty that anyone could appreciate, while Miss Tominaga had a more distinct face. Combined with a slender, tall body that could even stand shoulder to shoulder with someone as tall as Kaito, she had the vibes of a model walking the runway at Paris Fashion Week.

Scary and unapproachable. Both teachers had that in common.

But seeing them in a row like this, it looked like Miss Tominaga was about five foot nine, Mai Todo was about five seven, and Miss Misaki was about five five.

Haru was conspicuously tiny at only about four foot nine.

Of course, those three were unusually tall for women, but that conversation just before came across as though the three were adults in conversation with a whining child.

Miss Tominaga responded with a wry smile. “Sorry, but it’s right before the Inter-High. I don’t want our ace risking injury.”

But Haru didn’t seem willing to back down that easy. “Just a little light one-on-one.”

“Um... Look, this is difficult to say, especially to a student who doesn’t belong to our school...”

Miss Misaki interjected. “What she’s trying to say, Umi”—she put her hand on Haru’s shoulder—“is that this girl has to go up against ace players from across the country soon, so she doesn’t really want to go picking up any bad habits from playing with a little shrimp such as yourself.”

“\_\_\_\_\_”

Even from the corner of the gym, I could tell that Haru was shaken.

“Hey, I wasn’t about to phrase it so harshly.” Miss Tominaga fixed Miss Misaki with a sharp look.

“Right, because she’s not one of the girls from your team. I’m her coach, so I figured it would be better to tell her straight.”

“...Well, in that case, I concur.”

I could tell that Haru was gritting her teeth and clenching her fists as she listened to the familiar back-and-forth between the two teachers.

*The teachers are probably right, I thought.*

To begin with, it was kind of a miracle that Haru was able to stand on the front lines of our basketball club as its ace player. She was short even compared to the girls in our class.

But she was kind of an anomaly.

When it comes to the Inter-High tournament, a lot of the players would be clear over five feet.

Would practicing with Haru be of any benefit to someone who wanted to win in an environment like that? I hated to say it, but I couldn’t see that it would.

“I hope you don’t misunderstand me,” Miss Tominaga said in a kind,

supportive tone. “Fuji High has a strong team. They’ve got an uncanny ability to make a comeback when the chips are down, and that’s why we came here to ask for a practice match. And there’s no doubt that you’re the player who’s at the very heart of this team. When you and that point guard of yours work in tandem, you pose a real threat.”

“You mean...” Haru spoke in a weak sort of voice. “You mean you think there’s merit in practicing against Fuji High, when Yuzu...when our point guard is in the mix, but as an individual player, I have no worth to you; is that it?”

Miss Tominaga glanced at Miss Misaki, but Miss Misaki remained silent, as if urging her to continue by herself.

Haru’s teammates, who were supposed to be stretching, were watching this situation unfold with bated breath.

Sighing as if backed into a corner, Miss Tominaga continued. “I’m not saying the point guard is better than you, or anything like that. It’s just that when the two of you work together, that’s the only time you pose any sort of threat to us. If you’re asking me whether there’s anything to be gained from having our Todo practice against you individually, then well... I don’t think there is.”

Haru, who was staring at the ground, seemed about to say something, when...

“—Okay. Let’s do it. One-on-one.”

It was Mai Todo who’d spoken.

Haru’s head snapped up. “Seriously?”

“Yeah, can I borrow your clubroom so I can change my clothes?”

“Mai!” Miss Tominaga said sharply.

But Mai Todo ignored her.

“At this point, I’m not likely to get injured just from a little one-on-one. And there’s no guarantee I won’t find myself up against a shorter opponent during the tournament.”

“...For goodness’ sake, you never listen to me, do you? Fine. Knock yourself out.”

Haru's expression brightened. Then she began chattering to Mai Todo as if the two were old friends.

"Let's go, then, Todo. I'll show you to our clubroom."

"Thanks, uh..." Mai Todo hesitated. "Sorry, would you mind telling me your name?"

For a moment there, it felt like the air in the gym had frosted over.

Haru froze for a second, then grinned brightly. "I'm Fuji High's small forward, Haru Aomi. It's great to have this opportunity to play against you!"

Nanase was watching all this unfold with a worried expression.



I couldn't just drop off her gym kit and leave after seeing that, so I asked Miss Misaki to allow me to watch as well.

After getting changed, Mai Todo returned to the gym and started doing a light warm-up.

She wore a black T-shirt, shorts, black wristbands, and basketball sneakers. The ensemble gave her a fairly imposing aura.

Probably her whole team wore the same kind of black T-shirt. The words **LIGHTNING FAST** were written on the back in bold white lettering.

I took a closer look at Mai Todo. She was an impressive beauty with black hair cut short like a boy's, and she had wide-set eyes and long, well-trained limbs. But more than her looks, it was her vibe that compelled the eye.

—Ah, yep, this player has it.

In every sport, you find them. The player with "the aura" about them.

She did some light running and stretching and dribbled the ball with a confident touch.

Every move she made exuded what can only be described as the unique aura of someone with genuine skills.

No wonder the other members of the club didn't seem to be in the mood to practice.

They stood on both sides of the court, watching the match.

At some point, Nanase had come over to join me.

"Well then, let's do it."

For Mai Todo, this was an away match that had been decided on the spur of the moment, but she was as relaxed as if she were playing against a child in the park.

Haru, who was ready and waiting, said, "What are the rules?"

"We shoot from anywhere. First to ten points wins. Offense doesn't switch to defense until they lose possession. You go first."

"Aha. That's taking it pretty easy."

When Haru said that, I found myself looking to my side.

"What's going on?" I asked.

Nanase looked conflicted. "Umi is the type to play close to the goal, but Todo can shoot from outside. If a shot from anywhere counts for one point, then that eliminates the superiority of a three-point throw. Like, when Umi and I play against each other, it's two points for a regular shot, and three points for a three-pointer. Clearly separated—and the winning percentage is fifty-fifty."

"So she's not going to use any advantages of hers that Haru doesn't also possess, in other words."

"And the idea of no substitutions until the ball is stolen from the offense means, in the extreme, that if you can score ten goals in a row, you can win without ever going to the defense."

"On top of that, she handed the first shot to Haru."

"Must be some sort of handicap, considering the height difference. She's completely underestimating Haru."

As she spoke, her expression was filled with frustration.

I wondered if there was such a big difference in skill level. It was true that Mai Todo's skills were impressive. You could see that she was a first-class player.

But I didn't think that either Haru or Nanase were so far behind that they

couldn't compete without handicaps.

*Thunk, thunk, thunk.*

Mai Todo, who was in the starting position on the defensive side, lightly bounced the ball as she spoke up.

"You don't look okay with that."

Haru slowly shook her head. "No, I'm grateful you agreed to this. In return..."

Mai Todo bounced the ball once and then passed it.

Receiving it, Haru smiled fearlessly. "If I win, we play one more round, with fair rules this time."

The corner of Mai Todo's mouth twitched upward.

"Nice. I like that."

*—Stamp!*

Cutting off the conversation, Haru took a sharp stride forward.

"She's fast!" cried one of the spectators.

She took two, three more steps, leaving her opponent completely behind.

Mai Todo hadn't even completely turned around yet.

*Swoosh.*

With a gentle sound, Haru pulled off a layup.

Her teammates all responded with excitement.

Mai Todo received the ball from Haru and spoke with surprise in her tone.

"Huh."

"You feel a little more motivated now?"

"You and I haven't had many chances to face off directly up to this point, but you appear to move three times faster than I would have thought."

Beside me, Nanase smiled with a little bit of pride. "Umi may be a shrimp, but she dribbles really low to the ground. If you try to steal the ball from her and misjudge, that's a foul. And because she's so small, she's got a lot of power

concentrated in one compact package, so she's uncommonly fast when it comes to lunging forward or retreating. It's not that easy to steal the ball from her at all."

In other words, it would be extremely difficult for the defense to steal the ball while Haru was dribbling it.

Mai Todo passed the ball to Haru and called out to her in an easygoing tone.

"Go on then, one more."

"If you even blink, I'll leave you in the dust."

—*Stomp!*

Just like before, Haru darted forward to her right.

But this time, Mai Todo followed at exactly the same speed.

Two steps, three— *No good; she can't shake her.*

A long arm stretched out, reaching for the ball.

—*Thunk.*

Haru fed the ball under her leg and switched to her left hand.

She turned around and took a big step to the left—with the ball adhered tight to her hand, she turned around and shot again to the right.

Mai Todo's hand came cutting through the air, going for the steal.

*Swoosh.*

And Haru...made the basket.

The spectators reacted with excitement again.

"Aomi... Was that your name?"

Mai Todo was looking right at Haru.

She smiled and responded, "Oh, just Haru's fine."

Mai Todo continued, wearing an equally warm smile. "You're not bad, Haru. You can just call me Mai, too."

"Okay, Mai, shall we do this?"

“—No.” She passed the ball abruptly to Haru. “I’ve acknowledged that you’re good. So now I’m done with this.”

“What are you...? What’s that supposed to mean?”

—Lightning fast.

Haru charged forward, fast enough to challenge Mai, but Mai Todo didn’t take her up on that challenge.

It was about an arm’s length, or maybe a little less.

Mai maintained about that much distance between them as she stuck close by Haru.

She seemed more focused on preventing Haru from getting past than from stealing the ball.

“\_\_”

Beside me, Nanase gasped.

Perhaps realizing that she couldn’t completely overtake her, Haru tried to outfox her opponent with several feints before gaining momentum and jumping high.

Mai Todo lifted her arms and blocked her.

But Haru twisted her body in midair to turn her back to her opponent and then threw the ball backward.

This was the same kind of shot she’d used when dodging the tall center in the intra-squad game. *It’s going in*, I thought, but then...

“That’s a cheap trick, you know.”

—*Slam!*

The ball was knocked down as soon as it left Haru’s hand.

Haru watched, dumbfounded, as it bounced away.

Mai Todo spoke as she ran to retrieve the ball.

“That won’t work against someone who can jump the same way you can, you know.”

"...Darn it." Haru wiped the sweat off her face with her sleeve.

A time-out was called, and Haru started re-lacing her sneakers, either to fire herself up or calm herself down. I wasn't sure which.

"I guess it's playing out like that after all..." Nanase murmured.

"It looked like she blocked that shot as easy as breathing," I replied, and she let out a small sigh.

"It's certainly difficult to steal the ball from Umi while she's moving, but if you just stick close to her and don't give her any openings to pass or shoot—well, even I can do that. And that's the norm in basketball defense."

"For the first two shots, it looked like Mai Todo was going straight for the ball."

"She thought she could steal the ball easily because she treated Umi as a lower-ranked player. On top of that, Umi has a fatal handicap."

"...Her height, right?"

Nanase nodded emphatically. "I mean, I'm not sure if I could block Mai Todo's best shot even if I jumped as high as I could. But against Haru? Well, if I timed it right, I could block her with just a small jump. Do you know what that means?"

"Even if you're a little slow to react, you can still get there in time."

She nodded in silent affirmation.

In other words, even if Haru managed to easily dribble past and shoot, she could still be blocked by an opponent with a late reaction time and a weak jump.

On the other hand, if you look at it from the defense side, if you can make it in time to jump after entering the shooting motion, then rather than forcing yourself to steal or putting too much pressure on yourself and leaving yourself open, you should focus on defending against the moment of the shot while maintaining a distance where you can't be overtaken. That'll make it easier to prevent any points.

Nanase continued.

"Of course, it's not that simple in a real game because you have to cooperate with your teammates. But in a one-on-one situation, your weaknesses show through. I think that's what Miss Tominaga was trying to say earlier."

About there not being any merit to practicing with Haru individually, huh.

"What did she mean by that last part? Someone who can jump like you can, she said?"

"Umi's jumps are unusually long in the air. Actually, the difference is only a few tenths of a second, but if they both jump at the same time, it's going to feel like Umi's the one who falls first. So she'll try to twist in midair and shoot from a position that's hard for the defense to reach. Even with her height, she's thinking of ways to fight."

"Then that means..."

"Todo is part of the same world. If she can't gain dominance from her airborne duration, then the one who's taller will always win."

*What a cruel sport, I thought.*

Baseball is a sport in which it's relatively difficult to notice handicaps that come as a result of height.

Of course, a ball thrown downward by a tall pitcher is difficult to hit, and the sturdier your body is, the easier it is to hit the ball farther. And of course, the longer the reach, the wider the range of defense.

But there was no specific situation where one player might have a significant height advantage over any other.

The handicap I mentioned earlier can be compensated for by abilities other than height, such as increasing the variety of breaking balls, increasing hit power, and speeding up the reaction to taking the first step regarding a hit ball.

But in basketball, you couldn't do anything to compensate for height difference.

Perhaps sensing my state of mind, Nanase punched me in the side.

"Don't go pitying her, Chitose." Her voice was a little irritated. "Umi is strong. I said it as if it were an easy thing, but I've never seen a player who can keep up

with her speed, including me, which is why she's the ace of our team. Being able to move in the same way as her...makes Mai Todo highly unusual."

"But even so, she won't back down, huh."

"She can't back down. She's trying to set an example."

Before I could process what Nanase was saying, the scene started playing out again.

*Thunk, thunk, thunk.*

After taking her time tying her shoelaces, Haru stood on the defense side and bounced the ball.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

With a thunk, she sent a bounce pass over to her opponent.

"Okay, let's do it."

Then Haru closed the distance as fast as a whirlwind.

"Right, of course you'd charge like that."

Mai Todo lifted the corners of her mouth in a grin.

After that, I was able to figure out what was going on without needing to ask Nanase.

Flipping what we just discussed on its head, with Haru's height, she didn't pose any threat as long as her opponent maintained a steady distance from her and maintained defense.



The only way Haru could check a taller opponent was to aim for the ball while it was being dribbled.

At least for that moment, the ball would be within Haru's reach.

But in opposition to that, Mai Todo...

—*Swerve*.

She dodged, with featherlight ball handling.

“Too bad.”

She took a strong step forward and passed Haru in one bound.

*Swoop*.

Unobstructed, her layup easily resulted in a basket.

“You know, Haru,” Mai Todo said. “If you had another seven inches, I’m not sure I’d be able to beat you.”

She continued, playing with the ball in her possession.

“Apart from the height difference, you’re as fast as I am, you have a similar jump, and you’ve got the same level of strength as I do.”

Haru was clenching her fists.

“But in basketball, those seven inches you lack are everything.”

The spectators were silent, which was maybe why Haru’s still-impassioned voice rang out so loudly.

“Don’t talk like it’s a done deal just yet.”

“You wanna continue?”

“Oh yeah, I’m gonna crush you!!!”

Mai Todo returned the ball to Haru with a pleased expression. “What a shame. I’d love to try playing against a version of you with those extra seven inches.”

Once again, Haru charged.



After Mai Todo and Miss Tominaga left the gym, the usual practice session ensued.

But the ray-of-sunshine captain, who was usually right in the middle of things, was absent.

She'd just walked out, saying she needed some fresh air.

In the end, Haru never returned to the offensive side. In fact, she didn't even manage to touch the ball for the rest of the one-on-one session.

Todo's play style was so overpowering, and the club members seemed to be in a daze, as if they couldn't shake off what they'd just seen.

"Mai Todo is really something else."

"She's a cheater. Of course she can win if she's the only tall one."

"That's right."

"Still, I never would have imagined that Umi would get decimated like that."

"I mean, there was a seven-inch height difference, you know? It was Umi's fault for challenging her."

"But didn't Haru do great just getting that basket?"

"She wasn't even taking it seriously while playing defense at first, you know?"

"So does it mean that if we wanted to go to the Inter-High, we'd have to defeat someone like her first?!"

"So funny!"

"No way, no way. I'd lose all my motivation if I came up against her."

"So that's the power of natural talent, huh... There's too big a discrepancy."

"Aw, I wish I was five seven, too..."

"You're already five five, you've got enough height as it is. I mean, just look at Umi."

"Height's a natural talent."

"Hey, you shouldn't say that."

“But aren’t you a little disappointed? Umi always acts like such a big shot.”

“If Nanase were our captain, then...”

“—All right, everyone, time to concentrate!”

Nanase clapped her hands loudly.

With that, the other club members stopped talking and went back to practice.

As I stared blankly at the general scene, Miss Misaki called out to me.

“Chitose, how long do you plan on just standing there?”

“Oh, right. I just came to deliver this, so could you hand it over for me later?”

I put Haru’s tote bag down on the wall and was just about to leave when...

“Never mind that.” She grabbed me by my backpack. “Go and bring back that silly girl.”

*That silly girl... She must mean Haru.*

“Don’t you think we should leave her alone right now?”

Complete defeat while her teammates were watching.

Right after she’d demanded a one-on-one challenge with such brash confidence. It’d be strange if she wasn’t completely deflated right now.

“You underestimate Umi. She’s looking far ahead.”

Miss Misaki sighed with frustration.

“But why me?”

“At times like this, the prince has to be the one to go and collect the princess.”

“You know, recently you’ve started transforming into a really meddlesome old auntie...”

*...Yank.*

“I’m going, I’m going; don’t try to yank out my spine.”



As soon as I stepped out of the gym, I spotted Haru.

She was sitting on a bench under the wisteria trellis, staring blankly out at the sports field.

In her field of vision were the baseball, softball, soccer, track and field, tennis, and handball clubs.

Various club activities, all crowded together in a fairly limited space.

*That's the drawback of public schools, I thought.*

"Hey, shrimp."

I put my hand on the back of the bench and took a chance on my choice of words.

After all, I knew that if it were me, I'd hate for people to be tiptoeing around my feelings.

Still sitting, Haru tilted her head back and looked at me.

There was no trace of tears on her face.

"You sure took your time to come and comfort me, dearest."

"How about a smooch on the forehead, just like this?"

"I never said you could assault me."

I went around the bench and sat down right next to her.

"That rival of yours is pretty strong."

Haru chuckled with frustration. "Rival, huh. She couldn't even remember my name. That kinda hurt, to be honest. I guess I never made any kind of impre— Ouch!!!"

*Biff.* I karate chopped her on the head while she was still speaking.

"You fool. Even I can't remember each and every one of my opponent's names and faces."

"That's just because your memory is awf— Ouch, ouch!!!"

"But each one's playing style is baked in to my mind. What Mai Todo said just before... '*You and I haven't had many chances to face off directly up to this point, but you appear to move three times faster than I would have thought.*'"

She said, '*up to this point*,' not 'in the semifinal.' She wouldn't say something like that to a player she had no memory of."

Which meant she probably hadn't forgotten the times they'd played against each other in elementary and junior high.

Haru's eyes widened suddenly. "...Right."

A ball from the tennis club's practice came rolling toward us.

It stopped perfectly at the passage where we were sitting, which separated the school building from the gym and the sports ground. I stood, picked it up, and threw it back at the girl who was running toward me.

She skillfully caught it with her racket, called "Thank yooou," and gave a quick nod.

Yuuko, who was practicing farther back, seemed to have spotted us just then.

"Saku! Haru!" She swung her racket carelessly.

I raised my hand lightly in response.

"It sure must be nice," I said as I sat back down, "to play a sport like that, just for fun."

That was an honest sentiment.

I remembered that Yuuko once said that she participates in club activities just for the fun of it, not caring whether she wins or loses. I might come off as condescending when I say this, but I swear I've never once ridiculed that kind of attitude toward sports.

What I mean is, everyone starts off having that attitude toward playing sports.

Just being able to throw the ball farther than yesterday, hit more hits, catch the fly better... That alone was supposed to be fun enough, wasn't it?

"It's not possible. Not for you and me." Haru sighed.

"Our souls have been taken prisoner; that's why."

Some might call it overdramatic.

But I could easily relate.

Ever since I was little, I've sacrificed the free time that my friends around me spent playing to push my body to the limit every day. *I want to be strong; I want to win; I want to be number one.*

And even after I quit, they still won't let go of my soul, so all I can really say is that yes... I've been taken prisoner.

"What did you think about what Mai said?" Haru asked.

"Seven inches, you mean?"

She nodded.

"It's a sound argument. There's nothing else to really be said."

"Yeah, I think so, too."

"I'm pretty skeptical of things like ingrained aptitude and motor skills, but physique is definitely a benefit that we get from our parents. We can cover for some of our shortcomings by being able to build muscle easily and training hard, but we can't do anything about our height."

"I sure drank a heck of a lot of milk, though." Haru chuckled. "But you know, I don't want to be jealous of what others have. Mai Todo has all that height and the same running and shooting speed as me, but even she might find her physicality a drawback in some ways. The bigger you are, the bigger a target you are for your opponent, and the more doggedly they might mark you. And people aren't always nice when you're a tall girl in high school, even if it does make you a top basketball player."

That kind of speech could make a guy fall in love.

Someone who can think like that... Even after being beaten down by the gifts someone else has that they themselves don't possess... I find that kind of person incredibly strong and beautiful.

"Can I just ask..." Haru began. "Can I just ask you one thing?"

"If it's something I can answer, sure."

"Do you think hard work will always be rewarded? If I keep running, if I keep

flying, do you think I'll be able to beat Mai someday? Maybe someone even more amazing than her?"

It was an earnest and sincere question.

So I decided to answer with earnest sincerity.

"Here's the unvarnished truth... It's just a dream, this concept of hard work always being rewarded. Actually, I think it depends on what reward you want. Is the reward becoming an even better version of yourself? If so, then yes. But if the reward is becoming the top female basketball player in Japan, then...no, I don't think it necessarily will be."

It was an obvious truth.

If a hundred people work hard for a dream, at least ninety-nine of them won't get what they're after.

"More importantly, your height is a handicap, Haru. If you asked someone in pro basketball, they'd laugh and say you were dreaming."

As I spoke, I remembered the conversation I had with Asuka and Mr. Nishino, her father.

The answer he gave was to keep chasing your dreams until they come true.

If Haru was talking about something concrete, like participating in the Inter-High or playing for a corporate team, I think I would have reached the same conclusion.

But right now, Haru was holding on to something that was more like a pure, abstract wish.

*Is the way I'm living my life misguided?* —That's what it felt like she was asking me here.

"But just as no one can guarantee that hard work pays off, no one can guarantee that it doesn't, either."

I stood up and continued while staring vaguely at the baseball club.

"If only I'd made a hundred more shots every day, dashed every day, would I have gotten stronger? Would I have been able to win? Would I have become

number one? What about if it was two hundred? Three hundred? —Would I still really have been one of the ones who didn't end up getting rewarded?"

I turned around and looked straight at Haru.

"You're the only one who can head forward to try to see the ending. Even if everyone else in your situation has failed so far—well, they're still not you, Haru. If you really want to know the answer, you're going to have to go for it and find out for yourself."

I lifted one side of my mouth.

Haru was taken aback for a moment, but then...

"I'm glad you're the one I asked." She laughed provocatively. "You are just exactly my type. I freakin' love you."

"Save the torrid love affairs until after you've shown Mai Todo a thing or two."

"That won't take long."

Then she leaped to her feet and pummeled my shoulder with her fists.

"I'm gonna fight. Don't go running off now, Chitose."

Then with a meaningful grin, she turned and disappeared back into the gym.

—*Crack.*

A foul ball came flying, skimming over the top of the ball-proof net with a heart-thumping sound.

Standing at bat was the guy who was the linchpin of the batting order, the team's ace.

I caught the ball after one bounce and threw it back toward the sports field with all my strength.



At lunchtime the following day, Kazuki, Kaito, Kenta, Haru, and I left campus and headed to a nearby eatery by the name of Takokyu.

The restaurant mainly served flour-based dishes such as battered octopus balls and Japanese-style savory pancakes, but we were after its "Student

Jumbo” fried noodles.

It used to be this challenge menu item, where if you couldn’t finish it, you’d have to pay more.

However, high school boys with voracious appetites, especially those in sports clubs, tended to eat it all up, so it became simply a cheap and popular menu item that you could eat until you were full. Since the challenge was limited to high school and university students, the store may have intended this from the beginning.

By the way, leaving school grounds during our lunch break was strictly prohibited.

Or so the student rule book said, but that was only on paper. Hardly any of us actually abided by the rule. Tons of students would head to the nearby convenience store to buy lunch, since the cafeteria and the school shop tended to get overcrowded, and the teachers never batted an eye when they saw students there.

I think eating out falls into kind of a gray area, but as long as we don’t cause any problems, it should be fine. In the past, I’ve even gone to lunch with Kura, so if I get into any trouble, I’ve made up my mind that I’ll drop his name into it.

Anyway, at the present time, there were almost no other customers in the cramped restaurant besides our group, who was sitting on the tatami mat area. There were just one or two people at the counter.

Incidentally, it was Kaito’s suggestion that we eat here today.

Kazuki and I immediately agreed, and we strong-armed Kenta into joining us.

As usual, Haru was planning to practice during lunchtime, but it seemed that she’d canceled for today at the request of the other club members. When she raised her hand and said she wanted to eat the Student Jumbo as well, Yua and Nanase went pale and waved her off.

“Ma’am? Four Jumbos with glazed sauce,” Kaito called out to the store’s owner, who was behind the counter.

“Again? Order something different once in a while. Business is going down

because you kids only ever ask for the Jumbo.”

A brisk, clear voice responded.

I figured she was in her midseventies, but with her straight back, neatly trimmed short silver hair and a dry, bold wit, she came across as much younger than she probably actually was.

“There’s five of you, isn’t there? What’s the young lady having?”

“I’m having the Jumbo.”

“Then what about four-eyes there?”

She was no doubt referring to Kenta.

After the success of his diet, he was back to his pre-shut-in physique and kinda skinny again.

“Um, I’m going with a regular order of fried noodles with Worcester-type sauce.”

“You young boys are all such a disgrace. Get the Jumbo, I’m tellin’ ya.”

*Make up your mind, lady,* I mumbled internally.

Now, a major factor in why such a small, established restaurant like this one never goes out of business is the personality of this old lady.

For all her grumbling that business was going down, she had a policy of silently giving her regulars like Kaito, Kazuki, and me even bigger helpings than the regular Jumbo ones.

After chatting for a while, five servings of fried noodles were delivered to our table.

By the way, there are two types of fried noodles served here, ones with the normal Worcester-type sauce and then this place’s original, glazed-sauce variety. The latter variety was more popular with my peers. The perfect balance of just the right amount of spiciness and sweetness is totally addictive.

“Oh, by the way, Saku, didn’t you invite Yuuko?” Kaito asked, digging in to his noodles and slurping them up.

Yuuko isn’t as concerned about calories as Yua or Nanase, so I did ask her, as

it happens, but she turned me down for a very simple reason.

“She said she doesn’t want to get the seaweed flakes caught in her teeth.”

When I said that, us four guys all slid our eyes over to the same exact spot.

“Gimme a break.” Haru spoke just as she was stuffing a huge wad of noodles into her mouth. “It’s okay if I rinse out my mouth really well with tap water.”

*Slurp, slurp, slurrrp.*

*Yeah. I feel somewhat relieved.*

“You know...”

After inhaling half his Jumbo order, Kaito continued.

“Kenta, you got a girl you like yet?”

*Splort.*

Caught off guard, Kenta spat out his mouthful of noodles.

“Careful, Glasses.”

A roll of paper towels came sailing over the counter.

I grabbed it and shoved it on Kenta, who was still choking.

After wiping up the table and downing several glasses of water poured from the table pitcher, Kenta finally responded.

“Where did that come from, Asano?”

“There’s no need to get so flustered. It’s been a while since you returned to school, and summer is the season for love, ain’t it?”

“Is...is it?”

“Duh, of course! It’s the same in your beloved anime, too, right, Kenta? Summer festivals, fireworks, the pool, the beach. There are so many tantalizing summer events. Even last year, just before summer vacation, the number of couples suddenly increased, and—”

Perhaps reliving a painful memory, Kaito pinched the bridge of his nose and tipped his head back.

Kazuki cut in just then. “Still, there were a lot of guys whose love ended with the end of summer.”

Kenta responded dully. “Serves them right.”

“But before the end, they at least managed to cast off the shackles of their—well, you know.”

“Normies. They should die.”

Those two were pretty chummy these days.

“So what do we say, Kenta?” Kaito was back to bubbling over with excitement again.

“I mean, I’m not used to discussing this kind of stuff.”

“Why not? It’s just us guys here; what’s the harm?”

Haru immediately spoke up. “There’s a lady here, too, you know?”

“You mean, the old lady behind the counter?” Kaito shot back.

“You know, if you keep acting like an elementary school boy, you won’t have any luck with girls for the rest of your life.”

“Can you spare me? Insults like that really cut deep, you know?!”

While Kaito and Haru were goofing around, Kenta seemed to be gathering his thoughts.

He opened his mouth and timidly spoke.

“I don’t know if it’s okay to ask this, but what if...what if the person you like likes your friend, or if your friend and the person you like get together...? I mean, what would you guys do?”

All of a sudden, it felt like time stood still.

I wasn’t sure if this was a current issue of Kenta’s, or if he was remembering his relationship with Miki and his old friends.

It was a simple thing to wonder—nothing contrived or malicious.

That was why I felt like it was a little too heavy to make light of, but also too insignificant to warrant a serious discussion.

Kazuki flicked his gaze over to me. Just as our eyes met, I saw a flicker of regret, unusual for him.

Haru was staring down at the table with intense concentration.

Picking up on the slight change of atmosphere, Kaito suddenly broke the silence before Kenta could begin to get flustered.

“What’s this, Kenta? Are we love rivals now?! Love Rivals, capital L, capital R? Or should that be Comrades-in-Arms, instead?”

“N-no, you’ve got it all...”

“Who is it you’re picturing? Is it Ucchi? Yuzuki? Geez, it’s not Haru, is it?!”

“What does ‘geez’ mean, in ♥ this ♥ context, ♥ hmm? Ah... So, Yamazaki, you’ve been looking at Hawoo in that kinda way, have you?” Haru skillfully jumped on board with the teasing.

“No, no, no, that’s absolutely impossible, so don’t worry, Aomi.”

“...Er, Yamazaki, that was actually kinda harsh, you know?”

Everyone burst out laughing.

I was glad that Kaito got the ball rolling.

At the same time, I didn’t really want to entrust that role to him.

One name, perhaps unconsciously omitted, stood like a lonely seesaw in the twilight of the setting sun, with no place to go.

“Hey, Kenta, I’m a simple kinda guy, you know.” Kaito laughed, then continued. “Of course, I want the person I like to like me back. I think it would be great if we could get together. But if the person who could make them the happiest is someone else, especially if it’s a close friend, then I wouldn’t want to get in the way of that. After all, the thing I’d like best is to see them both smiling together, you know?” After delivering that speech, he rubbed his nose, saying, “Is that too cheesy, I wonder?”

Kenta seemed unsure how to react. Perhaps he hadn’t been expecting that kind of speech.

Kaito continued with a smirk, as if to hide his embarrassment.

"But if there comes a time when I'm like, 'all that aside, I still want to take the next step in our relationship... I'll make you smile way more than he does...' Well, then I'll start throwing punches; know what I mean?"

Haru butted in jokingly. "Can't you say something about how you'd try to win her over with your charm, not your brute strength?"

"Aren't girls attracted to strong men?!"

"Ah, sure, sure. Those kind of guys might have been popular in the hunter-gatherer era."

"I have to go back to the Stone Age?!"

After everyone was done laughing, Haru's eyes widened, and she mumbled, as if just remembering something. "I don't know about that."

With the tips of her disposable chopsticks, she began clumping together the stray dregs of red pickled ginger and other leftover bits on her plate.

"I want to make the person I love smile, protect them from pain, be with them when they cry. I don't want to just be like 'Welp, this isn't my place' and withdraw with a cool poker face or whatever."

Then she smiled.

"Hee-hee, kinda."

"Not everyone can say that, Haru." Kaito spoke with a gentle look in his eyes.

I got the sense that this conversation had reached its end.

Kenta looked twitchy, as if he was worried he'd brought up a controversial issue, but then he quickly changed the topic.

"I'm not you, Asano, but I have to admit I'm feeling excited about summer events, too. I get the feeling like something incredible might happen. In reality, though, I'll probably spend the summer chilling in my air-conditioned room..."

Kazuki reacted to that. "What can I say? Summer is the season that makes you want to take a step forward."

*Crack.* He shook his glass of ice lightly.

"It's not just limited to romance. It could be club, studies, or something as big

as life itself. That's possible, right?"

"Hmm, I think I get what you mean," Haru responded. "Summer's like this major thing, right? I mean, I don't really think all that deeply about the beginning and the end of spring, autumn, or winter. It's like, *Oh, I guess it's getting colder. Now it's getting warmer. Oh look, the cherry blossoms are blooming.*"

She took a gulp of water and then continued.

"But summer is the one season that has a definite beginning and end. So once a summer's gone by, I feel like you've gotta expect to have changed in some significant way."

It would've been rude for me to point out how unlike her it was to come out with something so poetic.

—*Summer has a definite beginning and end.*

*Maybe I've just been wandering through an endless summer since last year, and that's why I haven't made any progress.*

The thought wandered through my mind.

Kazuki muttered while looking out the window. "Well, what will change this year?"

The wind chime's bamboo strip fluttered in the wind, causing a clear ringing sound.

The condensation from our cups was forming round puddles on the table.

From beyond the counter, we heard the old lady's bored-sounding yawn.

Checking out the hands of the yellowed wall clock, I was about to stand up, when...

—*Clatter.*

The poorly constructed sliding door opened.

"Yikes."

Haru, who was sitting facing the door, visibly twitched.

I turned to look over my shoulder and saw Wataya standing there.

I didn't feel as shaken as I'd felt when I encountered him in the gym, but it was pretty obvious we were all on a collision course with a major lecture.

Wataya was a stickler for the rules, both in club activities and at school.

I didn't know if it was a legitimate belief system of his or if he was just always looking for an excuse to yell at people, but he never missed a chance to punish anyone who broke the rules.

It wouldn't be very polite to the old lady if we got yelled at in her establishment, I thought rather soberly.

"Chitose, huh."

But when Wataya spoke, his voice was surprisingly weak-sounding.

"Sup." Rolling with it, I inclined my head politely.

"You're probably thinking it's deserved."

"...What are you talking about?" I asked.

He blinked and then shook his head. "It's okay if you haven't heard. Ma'am, I'll come again another time."

And then he quietly closed the door and left.

I'd never seen the coach like that before.

He's the kind of person who always has an unpleasant wrinkle between his eyebrows.

Suddenly, the sight of that player roster flashed across my mind. The one I still hadn't been erased from.

"Saku, hon," the old lady called out to me. "You still feeling bad about things?"

"I'll never stop feeling bad about it," I answered her with a vague smile.

"You know, after you quit..."

The dishware clattered, a lonely sound.

"Every time he came here, he looked depressed. Said he'd crushed a big

talent."

I felt my heart begin to twinge, but I clamped that feeling down as I shot back.

"I won't let myself be crushed by the likes of him. Whatever the reason, I'm the one who decided to quit. He shouldn't waste his time on his narcissistic self-pity."

The old lady shook her head slightly.

"Being a grown-up doesn't automatically mean you can be a good person all the time. Apparently, he just wanted to say that."

This kind of talk wouldn't do anything to help me find the exit out of that endless summer. Not at this point.

I smiled at my current companions who were watching me with worried faces and told them I was completely fine.



I made it to the end of school, carrying with me a feeling of vague discomfort.

Haru had left the classroom to go to club, but she immediately returned to tell me, "Chitose, you're wanted."

"What is it, a confession of love from a cute girl?"

When I responded with a joke, she pointed a thumb toward the door.

"Maybe, if your type consists of a bunch of stubborn, bald-headed monks."

The group Haru had indicated were all staring in at us—they were my former teammates.

I found myself looking for Yusuke, but I couldn't spot him.

I lifted my backpack as I responded. "It's so hard being popular."

When I left the classroom, I found that there were eight of them, all the baseball club members except first-years and Yusuke.

The students walking down the corridor glanced behind them as they passed, noticing the unusual atmosphere.

"We want to talk."

It was Yohei Hirano, the ace pitcher, who spoke on behalf of everyone.

"Yo, Hirano. I was watching the free batting session yesterday. You've still got that bad habit of inclining to the left, haven't you?"

"Saku..."

"What's with all these old faces? I'm not really in the mood for a boring sausage-fest class reunion, you know."

Hirano smiled a little. "You haven't changed, I see."

"So? What do you want to talk to me about? You're not just going to say the same thing Yusuke said, are you?"

Hirano lowered his eyes and bit his lip.

"...Right, about Yusuke."

*You're probably thinking it's deserved.*

*It's okay if you haven't heard.*

The coach's words ran through my mind.

I was getting a bad feeling about this.

"I don't feel comfortable here," I said. "Let's talk somewhere else."

I started walking off, but it was somewhat of a relief when Haru fell into step alongside me without hesitation.



"Complete recovery...in two weeks."

I mumbled to myself.

On the rooftop, under the pleasant blue sky, Hirano informed me that Yusuke had gotten injured during the weekend's practice match.

"He twisted his ankle during a close play with the catcher."

In other words, when he slid into home as a runner, he hurt himself colliding with another player.

Injuries happen in baseball, and two weeks wasn't anything too serious. He could watch from the sidelines for a while and do some upper-body workouts

while he waited to heal. Be better in no time.

But this...

I think Hirano knew what I was thinking, even before I thought it myself.

He continued, his tone filled with regret. “The first game of the year is next weekend. He won’t be recovered in time.”

“What an idiot. What did he think he was playing at?”

The time right before the competition is the time when you have to be most careful about injuries.

Furthermore, close play at home is one of the situations where the risk is much higher. There was no need to hurt yourself just for a practice match ahead of the actual performance.

*Ah, nope,* I thought, shooting down my own criticism.

When it comes to baseball... He’s a driven, passionate guy.

He wasn’t the type to think about the future and let the current moment slip. If I’d been a runner, I’d probably have rushed in without hesitation, too.

You only get three chances in your high school career to aim for summer Koshien.

For Yusuke, who couldn’t play in the match last year, this summer was finally his opportunity to show his true potential.

“Who’s your first opponent?”

If they managed to get through, the second round would be held one week later.

Even factoring in some post-healing adjustments, Yusuke should be able to recover in time for it.

Hirano grimaced. “Echi High.”

“...Ah, darn it. He’s even got terrible luck when it comes to match draws.”

It was lucky they hadn’t drawn a third-or fourth-seed high school for the first round, but Echizen High School, or Echi High, was a public high school that had

previous experience at Koshien. Depending on the year, it wasn't uncommon for them to break the top four.

In recent years, they seemed to be suffering from a weak batting lineup, but to compensate for that, their pitching power was outstanding.

But then I shook my head to clear my thoughts.

This was none of my concern. "So what, you want me to go visit him with a bunch of flowers?"

Hirano took a deep breath and said, "It's shameful to have to ask this, but Saku—can you come back to the team?"

He lowered his head in a deep bow.

The others, who'd been watching this development, followed suit.

"Do you people have any idea what you're asking here?"

Hirano went on, with his head down. "Yes, we do. If we're up against Echi High, then it's going to come down to the pitchers. Of course, I plan to pitch with the intention of preventing them from scoring a single point, but without our number four, Yusuke, we can't score any points, either. We need your strength."

It was exactly the issue I'd just identified.

Hirano had carried the ace number of his team, which had participated in the Hokushinetsu tournament when he was in the second year of junior high school. When I first heard about it, I asked him, "*Why did you decide to go to a high school like this one?*" only for him to shoot back, "*Well, why did you?*" and as I recall, we both laughed about it.

With a snappy fastball that he threw from his height of five nine, a vertically breaking curveball and a great slider, he should have been able to compete evenly against Echi High's pitchers.

The issue, here, was batting.

Hirano... Last summer he'd been our number four, although he'd given that number to Yusuke and was now our number five. To be honest, as a batter, he was barely middle of the pack.

The reason he'd been sitting at the number four spot, generally assigned to the strongest hitter on the team, was because my selfishness had been indulged. In baseball, where offense and defense are alternated with three outs, the best batter should always come up to bat in the first inning, and third in the lineup is more likely to have runners on base than first and second. That's been my policy for a long time.

Of course, both Hirano and everyone else had grown a lot in the past year, but honestly, I thought it would be quite difficult to beat Echi High without Yusuke.

"Even so, I've been nowhere near a game for a year now. Don't assume you can win just from having me back. You should know better than to underestimate baseball that way."

I spoke with some exasperation.

They must have heard about my private swinging practice from Yusuke.

It's a completely different thing, though, to play against a real live pitcher's ball, even more so against a team that's known for their prowess in that particular area.

But Hirano wouldn't budge an inch.

"I'm asking you because you, of all people, are the least likely person ever to underestimate what baseball takes."

"But you've got new first-years, right? When the regulars get injured, it makes sense to give the new kids a chance after all their hard practice. You can't just go and rope in some outsider."

"...They've only just started getting used to playing with hardballs. Of course, they'll improve in the future, but they're not at competition level yet, at all."

*I'm not making myself clear,* I thought.

I casually cleared my throat with the intention of changing the angle of the conversation.

"Did Yusuke ask you to talk to me?"

"No." Hirano finally lifted his head. "He told us not to tell you, actually. He

said if we did, you'd just have another reason to agonize over whether to return to baseball."

"\_\_"

His response was so unexpected I was at a loss for words.

"But we came to ask you anyway, and it was entirely our own, independent decision." Once again, Hirano bowed deeply. "If you want an apology for what happened back then, then I'll apologize a hundred times. But I realize it's too late for that. If you've got any conditions for your return, though, we'll accommodate them all. It's fine if you only return for just the one game. But Yusuke's been fighting hard for us all year. I just want to give him a chance to compete. Please. Please help us."

...I... My answer...is...

I clenched my fists as hard as I could.

"...dare you..."

"Huh?"

"HOW DARE YOU!!!"

An uncontrollable roar of anger surged from behind me.

Haru, who'd been standing silently behind me, leaped in front.

She grabbed Hirano by the lapels, even though he was about a foot taller than she was.

"Why didn't you do this back when Chitose quit, huh?!!!" she shouted; it sounded painful on her throat. "I don't know the details, okay. But if you guys really were such great friends, wouldn't Chitose still be playing ball with you?"

"That's... It's..."

"If you hated him so much you couldn't bring yourselves to stick up for him, or beg him not to leave, then fine. But if that's the case, then you should stay the heck away from him for good."

Hirano slapped Haru's hands away.

"I don't know who you are, but you don't know baseball, and you've never

played with Saku, so what do you know?!"

"Uh-huh, uh-huh. I don't even want to try to understand how it feels to be a jerk like you, with the mentality of an utter *loser*."

"The hell are you...?"

"During last summer's tournament, you lost your fighting spirit halfway through, didn't you? And so did everyone else. '*Oh, we did our best, but they were just too good, so let's just go through the motions.*' Chitose was the only one who was seriously trying to win until the last moment."

"...Hey. I was trying my best, you know. I've been training hard all year to make up for the disappointment of that game."

"Oh really? Then what are you doing here? Shouldn't you all be trying to fill in the gap left by your injured teammate...Yusuke, was it? Using all the skills you've been practicing so hard for the last year? But no, instead you're here, trampling all over the last bit of tenacity Yusuke showed..."

Haru was glaring so hard at Hirano it almost made an audible sizzle.

"Did it satisfy your petty sense of self-esteem to see someone fall from heights you'll never reach?"

I put my hand on Haru's shoulder.

And I did so with utmost gratitude.

"I'm sorry; my feelings haven't changed."

"...This was a waste of time."

As Hirano turned to leave, looking at the ground, I called him back. "Hirano. Don't show your slider until the batter has made it through two at bats. If you're worried about the batting lineup, you can use a mix of weaker fastballs, full-strength fastballs, and curveballs. Don't be shy about throwing the slider once you've gone through the full lineup twice. If y'all manage to score the first run, then it should be a done deal by the time the opposition has figured out what you're doing. You've made a lot of progress since last year, after all."

"...That little shrimp there is right. Apparently, I don't like you that much after all."

"I know. I'll be there biting my handkerchief with regret and watching, so you'd better just make it to Koshien, all right?"

As I watched my ex-teammates slink off the roof with as much dignity as they could muster, I found myself taking a firm grip of Haru's shoulders.

The things Yusuke had apparently said seemed to have gotten stuck inside my heart like thorns. The pain prickled.

*Don't tell Saku, huh?*

Haru gently put her hand on mine. "Chitose, don't go home alone today."

I wasn't sure what she was getting at, so I stayed silent and indicated for her to continue.

"Wait until club activities are over. There's someplace I want to take you."

With that, she let go of my hand, gave me a playful elbow jab to the stomach, then left.

"That hurt, you doofus."

I went to lie down on my back and looked at the sky. It was a perfect summer blue, the kind that makes you wish you could escape.



About half an hour had gone by since I met up with Haru when club practice ended.

For some reason, we'd made it to the top of the local mountain, Asuwayama.

Well, they call it a mountain, but it's about the right height for a couple of high school students to climb on their way home from school if they feel like it. It has an altitude of about three hundred feet or something like that.

We grabbed Haru's cross bike and rode double as far as we could, but once the slope got too steep, we walked the rest, side by side.

We'd ended up at an observatory with a parking lot, a small café, and a police box that I wasn't sure was even in use. There were two large rectangular benches with no backrests where multiple people could sit, or even lie down if they felt like it, all lined up facing out over the view of the town at night.

There's also a natural history museum and a zoo on this mountain, so I fondly remembered the times when I used to come here with my family when I was little.

Somehow, the hour was already past eight PM.

It's not really a place that people regularly frequent, especially not at this time on a weekday.

The café seemed to have long since closed, and there was no one left except us.

The dim electric lights swayed irregularly, back and forth.

I handed the canned coffee I'd bought from the vending machine to Haru, who was sitting on one of the benches, and then sat down next to her.

"It's nice here."

After pulling the tab of my canned coffee, I responded. "I wonder how many years it's been. This might actually be my first time ever coming to see the scenery at night."

"I actually come here often." As she spoke, Haru stood up, leaned her weight on the not-too-high handrail, and looked down at the townscape.

"Whenever I feel depressed about club stuff, whenever I feel frustrated, whenever I feel like I'm about to fail...and whenever I feel like I'm about to lose sight of tomorrow."

"So even you have times like those, Haru."

"Hey, I'm a basketball player under five feet tall. It's always been like this, ever since I was little. So you know..."

She put her hands around her mouth like a megaphone.

"I come here to yell. I yell until my voice reaches all the way down to the Asukawa River. *Damn you, stupid sea!* I yell."

"Don't lash out at the river, then. Go tell it to the sea."

I knew she was making a reference to her surname, Aomi, which means blue sea, and her court name, Umi, which just means sea. Just imagining her yelling

at nothing made me smile, and I couldn't help but joke around.

"It's tough to aim high, isn't it?" She turned around and continued. "Luckily, I've been blessed with friends this whole time. Even now, Nana, Sen, and Yoh, they're all still following me despite their complaints. Mai was right. It's true that, as a player, I'm imperfect. There's a limit to what I can do alone. But when I'm with those girls, I feel like I can't lose."

After making such a strong statement, Haru sat next to me again and gently put her hand over mine on the bench.

Her hand was warm, and the gesture warmed my heart, too.

"Chitose, do you remember the deal we made? The swing set, at dusk?"

"The loser has to expose their deepest weaknesses to the winner, right?"

Haru moved our stacked hands onto her thigh and scooched closer to me. Our two shadows, which darkened and faded with the flickering of the electric light, snuggled up to become one.

Then she turned to me, and...

"—As the winner of that day, here's an order from Haru. Spill it. Right here, right now."

She gave me a twinkling smile.

I felt the glass marble inside my heart clatter and roll. It had been cooped up in a glass bottle all this time, so the sound it made was very faint.

"It's all right."

Haru tightened her hand over mine and continued in a very warm, gentle voice.

"Even when you're hurting, I promise to make you smile. When you want to cry, I'll be by your side, and if you get angry, I'll be angry with you. When you feel despondent, I'll give you a good telling off, and when you can't get back up, I'll give you courage."

—*So talk.*

Ah, she really was a brilliant light.

Maybe with this girl, I could entrust her with this heavy load I've been carrying all this time.

Maybe this girl could blow away the darkness that's been clinging to my heart all this time.

With that smile of hers—bright and strong, like the sun.



—April, last year.

Ten first-year students joined Fuji High School's baseball club.

We all came from a junior high school softball background, but Yusuke, Hirano, most of the other players, and I began playing in matches as regulars.

When we finished our self-introductions during the first practice, I remember Yusuke's eyes shining. "This is like a dream," he'd said. "With this lineup, we can really aim for the top."

"Let's do it, buddy."

I believe I said something like that in response.

Actually, it seemed strange that we would have all ended up together at a college prep school not exactly known for baseball.

Of course, compared to the strong private schools that attract leading players from inside and outside the prefecture, our school was far inferior, and there were a lot of concerns, such as the vacuum left behind after the third-year students graduated. Even so, I felt that if we could strengthen our ranks with the arrival of new students next year and the year after that, we would have enough potential to aim for the top.

The third-years at that time were fighting with just ten players, like our generation, and to say the least, they weren't a very strong team.

It's not difficult to imagine how hard it must have been for the senior who carried the ace number on his back, especially when he had no experience as a pitcher until high school.

I was surprised that there was not a single second-year student, but I was even more surprised to hear that there were originally eight of them, but all

eight had quit.

However, when practice began in earnest, it soon became clear why.

The coach, Wataya, was the old-school type of coach that's pretty rare nowadays.

He didn't go so far as to deprive us of drinking water during practice, or anything like that, but he believed that his way of looking at players and his methodology was absolutely correct, and he often forced us to change our positions and playing styles.

If players argued back a little, he'd scream at them like a raging fire out of control, and this happened on a daily basis. He'd bench us as a penalty for challenging him.

Even in this day and age, he saw no issue in kicking students who screwed up, and he'd humiliate us by making us run laps or bunny hop, even during games or in other public forums.

That's fine, if you're of the school that believes you have to make sacrifices to get to the top.

If you believe that's just what it takes to make it to Koshien, then fine.

But most of his arguments were unreasonable, unconvincing, and based mainly on emotions.

After practice, we often hung out at the park, at the riverbed, at Hachiban's and Takokyū's, and so on, complaining about the coach but still talking about our dreams.

“—Hey, Saku, I realized, after we started practicing together... You’re the real deal.”

“Whoa, Yusuke. Don’t make me puke, man.”

“Just listen. If you sit as the third batter, then even if your opponent is a Koshien-class ace, it’s unlikely he’d be able to totally hold you down. I’m a pretty good batter for Fukui standards, but if you get on base, Saku, and then I become a number four who can bring the runners back home, then we can score points. The rest is up to you, Hirano.”

"Yeah. I'm not a great hitter, but I think I'm doing pretty well as a pitcher. If I can grow to the point where I can compete with top-class players...then you guys will score the points, and I'll keep the other team in check. What do you think, Saku?"

"It's the dumbest strategy I've ever heard. Let's do it."

Then, when May ended, and we were just entering June, Yusuke, Hirano and I began to clean up as regulars. In other words, we became the axis of the entire batting lineup.

Number three, right field, Chitose.

Number four, first base, Yusuke Ezaki.

Number five, pitcher, Hirano.

At first, the coach wanted me to be number four.

So when I presented the theory that the third batter should be the strongest, I was cut off as a matter of course and wasn't allowed to play in any games for a while. But in the end, maybe because he was finally convinced, or maybe because he was just satisfied with the penalty I was given, we eventually settled into this batting order.

From my point of view, Yusuke was a reliable slugger, and Hirano's pitching was at a level that meant he could compete with top schools.

I really thought that if the three of us led the team, we could aim for Koshien.

—It was mid-June when the gears began to shift out of alignment, little by little.

One day, the coach told Hirano to learn a new breaking ball.

"If you keep on like you are, you'll never be able to compete with top opponents. If you can't beat them using your own power, your only option is to acquire superficial techniques. Change your pitching style to focus around breaking balls."

Combined with the depression and anger that had been building in us until then, Yusuke and I exploded.

I still remember clearly the moment when I approached the coach.

“It’s obvious that Hirano’s strength is a four-seam fastball thrown from his full height. He also has some good curveballs and sliders. He should start by polishing those up before anything else.”

Yusuke backed me up. “Breaking balls put a lot of strain on the shoulders and elbows. If he’s going to learn it, it would be better to do it in the off-season and take his time getting used to it, wouldn’t it? At the very least, I don’t think it’s something he should be focusing on when next month is the summer preliminaries.”

“I am the coach of this team!! If you can’t follow my instructions, you can quit right now!”

““—””

“Do you consider yourselves indispensable to the team? Are you that full of yourselves? No matter how good you are at baseball, I don’t need egos who refuse to play as part of a team. Yusuke Ezaki will not play in any games for the foreseeable future.”

I was shouting before I realized what I was doing.

“Wait a minute, why is it only Yusuke? If you’re giving out penalties for talking back, then where’s mine?”

“Even if you tend to get distracted by pointless things, Chitose, the benefits you bring to the team still outweigh that. My decision is that Yusuke Ezaki is no significant loss to us.”

“Are you kidding...?”

I had no idea what to say to Yusuke, who was looking completely bewildered.

In the midst of this exchange, the person in question, Hirano, didn’t open his mouth even once.

—And then the summer qualifying rounds came.

Yusuke was removed from the starting lineup.

Even worse, after that incident, he wasn’t allowed to play even as a pinch

hitter.

It was clear that this, too, was an extension of the punishment.

Our opponent in the first round was the fourth-seeded school, Hokuriku Technical. It was one of the most well-known private high schools in the prefecture. Many players had been scouted from outside the prefecture, and I heard that most of the regular players had been playing in the boys' and seniors' hardball leagues since junior high school.

At the bottom of the first inning, my solo home run gave Fuji High the lead.

Until the fifth inning, we carried the game while maintaining a zero-to-one lead.

I hit a single on my second at bat and a triple in my third at bat.

It was the sixth inning when the game really turned a corner.

It didn't take long for the opponent's batting line to get wise to Hirano's pitching.

We lost twelve runs in one fell swoop.

Hirano dropped out in the middle, but the former ace third-year student who replaced him kept pitching hit after hit without being able to stop their momentum.

In the bottom of the sixth, after I hit the second solo home run with a final burst of tenacity, Hirano struck out. And that was it.

Twelve to two. The game ended after the sixth inning by the ten-run rule.

In the end, it was a complete defeat with no room for excuses.

We were one of those undersized teams that were swept away and battered against the rocks, and this was when my dream reached its inevitable ending point.

“—That’s more than enough!!!”

After the game was over, I approached the coach.

“How long are you going to continue with these silly penalties? If Yusuke was in the game as our number four, he would have scored us more runs in the first

half. The entire flow of the game has changed!"

The coach stared at me with sharklike eyes.

"I'm looking ahead to the next year and the year after that. Ultimately, I've decided to postpone things, and teaching Hirano the new curveball was a part of that long-term plan. Whether you can actually make it with a straight ball thrown from the shoulder, or a curve and slider, can only be decided through actual experience, right?"

"That's got nothing to do with Yusuke's punishment!" I'd raised my voice without realizing it.

"Quit acting like a spoiled child!" he roared back. "If you guys had practiced the curveball without talking back then, if it had worked out well, today's result might have been different. With a mindset toward next year and beyond, I needed to get it through your thick heads that disturbing the team's harmony is unacceptable."

"—Give me a freaking break! We're not pawns in some training game! We wouldn't have to talk back if you'd discuss things with us after taking our play styles and opinions into consideration! You're the one who's disturbing the team's harmony!"

As I ranted, the coach gave a mean smile as if something had just dawned on him.

"Four hits and two home runs against Hokuriku Technical's ace, huh. Hmm, I suppose it's no surprise that you'd get a swelled head."

"I don't have a swelled head! I'm just asking you to let me play straight baseball. I want to shoot for the top. You may want to play the long game as a coach, but we've only got three chances to aim for Koshien, and now—"

I yelled, an inch away from grabbing him by the shirtfront.

"What did Yusuke do that was so wrong? Let him play baseball! Let him give it his all! Please!!!"

The coach responded with a short, spat-out remark, as if he'd already given up.

“—Fine. I’ll put Ezaki back in the game.”

However, he continued.

“I have no use for a little king of the castle. You, I won’t use in my team anymore.”

“—”

—Then, for the month and a half until the end of summer vacation, it was like I was wandering through a maze with no exit.

Unlike Yusuke, who’d still participated in practices even during the punishment period, and was allowed to play during games as a pinch hitter, I was not allowed to touch the ball or the bat at all on the sports field.

Day after day of running, long sprints, and muscle training.

It’s not like I was given a regimen to follow, or anything.

The only thing the coach said to me was...

“You will not take part in the team practice.”

All I could do was basic training.

During the summer vacation, my teammates changed noticeably.

Yusuke, who made his swing compact under the direction of the coach, got more hits, but his long-hitting power was reduced, and Hirano, who’d started practicing new breaking balls in earnest, lost his dynamic form.

At first, my teammates—especially Yusuke, who’d basically replaced me—tried to cheer me up after practice.

“I know it’s tough right now, but the coach will come around eventually.”

“There’s no way he’s just going to keep a player like you on the bench.”

“You could see it as a good opportunity to brush up on the fundamentals.”

“Let’s stand out on the field together again, partner.”

But no one appealed directly to the coach like I had done.

Well, it made sense. I mean, look what happened to me. No one likes to be the next target.

Little by little, everyone began to stay away from me, treating me like some sort of tumor.

—The last day of August rolled around, without any change in the situation.

It was the first time since I'd started playing baseball that I'd had such a long and painful summer vacation.

I wanted to hit the ball with all my strength, I wanted to fire a ball from the outfield all the way back to the catcher, and I wanted to run through the bases, kicking up dust.

Honestly, my heart was on the verge of splitting apart.

*But I can't just give up now,* I remember thinking.

My buddies were waiting for me. We'd all sworn that we'd aim for the top together.

I want to stand out on the field with everyone again, with all of the best club members, including Yusuke this time.

So I told myself to endure the injustice for now and grit my teeth until the right day came.

—Then, after finishing up with club activities and leaving school ahead of the others, I realized I'd forgotten my glove and went back to the clubroom. I wanted my gear, at least to run some drills outside of practice time.

When I stood in front of the door, I suddenly heard Hirano's voice, and my hand froze up.

"...I wonder how long he's gonna make an example out of Saku."

I felt sorry, a little, for all the worry I was causing.

It doesn't feel good to witness this kind of thing from the outside. I'd realized that when it was Yusuke's turn.

No doubt the others were struggling the same way, I thought.

However, the next words that came out of Hirano's mouth were words I never imagined he'd say.

"At any rate, we're stronger like this."

Suddenly, laughter echoed in the room.

"Yeah! The team's more of a cohesive unit."

"He's the only one who's on a slightly different level. He hit two home runs against Hokuriku Tech."

"Chitose's the only one who's super serious about Koshien."

"We also talk about it as a goal to strive for, but that's just, like, a given for high school baseball players."

"Right, more of a dream than a goal. It's just something you say."

"The coach seemed starstruck, too, at first. Benching Yusuke and continuing to use Saku."

"Yeah, no wonder he started thinking he was hot shit. You can't just talk to Coach like that."

"That stuff about how maybe number three is better than number four, too."

"I know he's a good guy, but we're just a regular college prep school. Just 'cause *he* wants us to be all obsessed..."

"He should have gone to a baseball-focused private school."

"I heard he had opportunities, but he turned them all down."

"Trying to lead the underdog team to Koshien? This isn't a sports manga, you know."

"I wonder if he thinks everyone else can easily do what he can do?"

"Some geniuses are just like that. It's a bad habit. We could never catch up with him."

*Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha.* They kept on laughing.

Yusuke finally opened his mouth.

"Well, people who have that talent don't tend to understand what it's like for people who don't."

*Oh, I see,* I thought.

My bat case slipped from my numb fingers and hit the door with a loud clank.

“Saku?!”

When Yusuke flung the door open, nine sets of awkward eyes were staring at me.

I heard my heart break. Snap. A surprisingly weak, faint sort of sound.

“—Oh. I never belonged here...”

The next day, I submitted my resignation letter.

The coach accepted it without saying a word.



I was done talking.

I took a deep breath and stared at the insignificant night view that was spread out below us.

At some point while I'd been talking, Haru had silently taken my hand in hers.

It was a secret that I'd been hiding for a long time, but once I started talking about it, it came out easily.

It's not like I had any expectations about talking lightening the burden, but as I predicted, I didn't feel any clearer in my mind at all.

Only miserable thoughts came welling to the surface.

How did Haru feel?

I glanced to my side.

I wanted her to say something, but at the same time, I didn't want to hear anything right now.

Then...

“...Give me a break.”

I felt her fingernails dig into my hand.

“...Give me a freaking break, Chitoseeeee!!!”

For a minute, I couldn't understand why she was screaming.

It wasn't until she'd grabbed hold of my lapels with all her strength that I

realized she was angry at me.

“Sure, the coach was horrible, and so were your teammates who abandoned you. But more than anyone else, the one I’m most angry with is you!!!”

As I sat there, shocked, Haru continued.

“You spent your whole life on it, didn’t you? You were the best, weren’t you? Even if the others act like they don’t care, you still know how much you’ve put into this, don’t you? How can you just throw away something so important to you that easily?!!!”

“It...it wasn’t easy...”

“Last summer. When I lost to Mai’s school, Ashi High, in the Inter-High school preliminaries, I was so depressed I could barely stand it. I knew it; I’ll never be able to win against the tall girls. I’ve always been short, since I was really young, and at this height, I’ll never be able to get ahead. I was about to throw everything away. I thought, *This is it for me.*”

Haru’s death grip loosened on me, just a little.

“Then I saw you. My first impression was that you were this amazing guy, getting home runs and landing hits against powerful opponents. Then there was that sixth inning. It was obvious the other team was wiping the floor with us, and even an amateur like me could see there was no way out of that one.”

She glared at me again.

“—Chitose, you were smiling the entire time.

“It wasn’t a smile or a laugh of resignation, either. It was like, ‘Hey, the game’s only just begun, let’s flip this situation around and give the audience a show! We can do it!’ It was the face of someone who believed that, from the bottom of his heart. Then you started cheering for your teammates as if the devil itself had gotten ahold of you. To those who’d already given up, you said, ‘It’s all right.’ ‘Your ball’s not so easy to hit.’ ‘Just have faith in yourself and throw straight and true.’ ‘We’ll all be in your corner.’ ‘Go give that guy some support.’”

*Drip, drip.* Tiny droplets were rolling down Haru’s cheeks.

"At the bottom of the inning, you hit a home run. It was so high that it seemed like it could almost fly to the moon...a perfectly perfect home run."

I could hear her sniffing.

"It was like the world was telling me it was okay not to give up. It's okay to have passion. It's okay to give it your all. It's okay to get sweaty and stinky. It's okay to just throw something out there and see what works. Don't be afraid. What you've got's enough to keep on fighting with. That's your secret weapon. If you want something, go out there and grab it. —And so I was able to get back up. I was able to keep on running. Mai decimated me this year, too, but I still managed not to get discouraged."

Haru's fist hit my chest with a thump.

"You were the first real hero I've ever come across."

It was like being punched by a demon itself—

"So don't you dare just bow out like some loser!!!"

I felt hot fire come bubbling up inside my chest.

"So the coach cut you? So what? Go lick his boots and apologize! If he still won't change his attitude, then go to the school or the board of education! And if that's still no good? Then change schools or something! I don't mind if you play a little dirty! So what if your teammates weren't taking things seriously? You should *make* them take it seriously, using your passion and your playing skills! Drum it into their thick skulls that, with you, maybe they actually have a chance of making their dream a reality! I mean... I mean..."

"There's not a single reason why you should have had to quit baseball, you idiot!!"

*Oh, I see.*

I didn't want her to comfort me. I didn't want her to commiserate with me. I didn't want her to reassure me that I could fall in love with baseball again.

I didn't want to blame the coach; I didn't want to curse my teammates.



I just... I just wanted...

—I wanted someone to scold me, for being weak and for running away that day.

“Nng...”

A voiceless sob escaped my throat.

Then Haru grabbed hold of my head and pulled it against her chest.

The sour-sweet smell of her sweat and ocean-scented antiperspirant made the back of my nose sting.

“It’s okay, Chitose. I’m here.”

For such a long, long, time...

“Ugh... Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa  
aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhh!!!!!”

...I’ve wanted to cry, just like this.



After that, I think we both shed a lifetime’s amount of tears.

When I came to my senses, Haru’s shirt was soaking wet, but I still used it to blow my nose on.

“That’s disgusting!!!”

“I was only pretending, goofball.”

“Wow, your nose really runs when you cry.”

“Is that any way to speak to such a handsome man?!”

“Just teasing you.” She laughed out loud.

I was too exhausted for life, so I rolled over and decided to lie down on the bench.

Beside me, Haru followed suit.

Naturally, our hands found one another.

It was just a mediocre observation deck in this mediocre countryside, but the

sky was strewn with stardust, as if someone had emptied a whole bucket of it.

"What are you going to do, then? About baseball club." Her quiet question lingered in the air.

"What do you want me to do, Haru?"

"Nuh-uh. I don't like this Chitose."

"Honestly, I'm still shaken. Last year, Yusuke was also unfairly treated and didn't get a chance. I think it took some real nerve for Hirano and his buddies to come to me. So if I said I didn't feel like helping them out, well, I'd be lying."

"Yep. I love this Chitose."

"I'm not sure I'd be any help to them if I did return at this point, though."

"And I dislike you again."

"If I lent a hand, I do think their odds of winning the first round would increase dramatically. They went on and on about actual game experience, but I've been practicing alone, as if it's the real thing. I've been keeping my body trained, so I'll be ready to play anytime. If I spend one week absolutely killing myself hitting balls, I think I can get my bat sense back up to snuff."

"And I love you again."

"But I can't say for sure, Haru. If you asked me if I could swing the bat with all my might just for Yusuke and Hirano and the others, then no, I couldn't. I couldn't flit in and out of baseball for such a shaky reason. It wouldn't be respectful to the sport."

"Big love now."

"I want another day or two, at least, to think about it. I want to bring last summer to a real resolution."

I squeezed Haru's warm hand.

Deneb, Vega, and Altair were flickering in the indigo sky. The line that connected them was as pure and clean as the games of baseball with only three bases in a triangle that I used to play with my friends in the neighborhood long ago.

Plastic colored bats and colored balls—I would have been fine just with that.

“Shall we make a wish?” Haru said as if she’d suddenly remembered something.

“What for?”

“It’s Tanabata today, you know?”

*Oh right, I thought.*

When I was in elementary school, the wish I wrote on my strip of Tanabata paper was, of course, *I want to be a professional baseball player.*

“Then my wish for you is that you can go forward in your own, Haru-like way.”

When I said that, I got muffled laughter in return.

“Trying to sound so cool right after bawling your eyes out, I see. Well, my wish for you is that you can hit another home run. Yeah, that’s good.” Then, as if embarrassed, Haru continued. “We’re no Orihime and Hikoboshi, that’s for sure.”

“I don’t think you would have quit basketball even if I wasn’t around, Haru.”

“Well, let’s just say you made an assist.”

“What if we end up only being able to meet once a year, too?”

“Well, then we’ll play some one-on-one.”

“Hikoboshi would probably run away from your training regimen.”

“Well then, I’d go swimming in the Milky Way and bring him back.”

While we both smirked over this, I found myself thinking that it would be nice if Orihime and Hikoboshi were spending a gentle night holding hands like this somewhere.

*Ree, ree. Crick, crick. Chee, chee.*

Here and there, insects whose names I didn’t even know were chirping pleasantly.

A light breeze blew every now and then, shaking the leaves in the trees.

The sounds of night in the countryside.

The smells of night in the countryside.

My dream was supposed to be big enough to make it across oceans. How did it end up in a place like this, rolling around at my feet?

"Hey, Chitose," Haru said. "Should we kiss right now?"

I lifted one corner of my mouth and used her own words against her.

"Nuh-uh. I don't like this Haru."

As if she'd been expecting that exact answer, she chuckled quietly.

"...Yep. I love this Chitose."

I wasn't able to thank her, I realized.

But I didn't want what I said to be shallow.

*One day, I'll repay the favor,* I decided.

For now, I would just embrace the warm sunlight that Haru had given me.

So that my heart would never have to be that empty ever again.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Light a Fire in My Heart



The next day after climbing Asuwayama, I headed to school with a dull ache in my muscles, probably because I'd strained different ones than I usually used.

Is my body ready to fight at any time?

*Hmm*, I wondered who it was again, who said such an arrogant thing.

Last night I had so many mixed emotions that I barely slept.

The coach's weak tone of voice, Yusuke's injury, Hirano and his group bowing their heads to Haru and me.

One after another, various faces and their words faded in and out of my memory.

But in the end, I still hadn't found the answer.

Thanks to that, I spent the morning's classes in a complete daze.

Then came lunch break.

I used the pretense of delivering the sandwiches I'd bought to get permission to watch the girls' basketball club's afternoon practice.

Maybe I thought something might change if I saw them play, or perhaps I just wanted to experience the passion of sports.

The girls' basketball team was running around the gym without even taking lunch, as usual. I understood that they couldn't exactly get any hard training done on full stomachs, but it still struck me as pretty tough.

Today it looked like they were practicing as if it were a real game.

"Sen, it's too early to give up. Even if it looks like you're about to be passed, you've got to hang on! Tenacity!"

Haru ran around the court, yelling louder than anyone else on the team.

Probably, she was extra fired up after her recent showdown with Mai Todo. She was giving instructions with more vigor than usual.

"Yoh, you're sloppy today. Don't just focus on blocking and the rebound. Consider your positioning more carefully."

The ball went to Nanase, near the three-point line.

It looked like the two of them were on different teams again today.

Nanase entered a shooting motion, saw that the defender had bought her feint and jumped, then instead made a pass to a teammate who was running along the outside.

The girl grabbed it and dribbled, before aiming and shooting, but the ball bounced off the hoop.

"Nana!" Haru yelled. "Why didn't you take the shot yourself just now? Feinting is all well and good. But after that, you should have been able to aim for a three-pointer!"

Nanase's voice was calm in contrast.

"Being able to shoot and being able to actually make a basket are two different things. I chose the option with the higher probability of success."

"How long are you going to keep that up? That might be fine if we were playing a lower-ranked opponent, but if you can't land a three-pointer in a white-knuckle match, then what's the point?"

"You're getting too worked up, Umi."

"I sure hope I'm getting worked up, while there's still time for it!"

"—Tch."

Uncharacteristically, Nanase seemed to have just clucked her tongue in frustration.

*This is getting a little tense, I thought.*

Haru received the ball from her teammate, looking annoyed still. Then...

—*Thump.*

She dropped to her knees like a puppet whose strings had just been cut.

“Umi?!”

“Haru!!!”

I yelled out at almost the exact moment as Nanase.

I flung aside the sandwiches I was holding and leaped down from the stage.

Cutting through the throng of teammates who were standing there staring, I dashed to her side.

“Haru? Haru!”

I don’t have much first-aid knowledge, but I tried to check her over.

“Ugh...”

She was breathing, even though she was groaning a little. No visible injuries. I’d seen people faint like this during practice before.

“Someone call the nurse!” Beside me, Nanase yelled out.

“It’s probably anemia or dehydration. I’ll carry her to the infirmary.” I put my arms under Haru’s knees and armpits and lifted her up.

Her limp, weak body felt heavier than I’d expected, but she was still light enough to carry easily.

Nanase tried to follow me, a worried look on her face.

I stopped and leaned in to whisper to her.

“I’ll take care of Haru. You handle things here.”

Nanase looked startled for a moment, then nodded.

I headed for the infirmary as quickly as I could while being careful not to jostle Haru too much. If she’d been awake, I could have distracted her by teasing her about the softness of her thighs, but Haru seemed out of it and kept mumbling the same thing over and over.

*I'm sorry. Everyone, I'm so sorry.*

When the nurse examined her, it turned out that she probably did have some mild anemia or dehydration, although the nurse couldn't say for certain.

It was decided that Haru would rest on the bed for a while, and they'd monitor her to see whether she would need to see a doctor.

The nurse left the infirmary, saying she would go and buy something for Haru to eat.

I placed a folding chair by her bed and sat down.

"What were you doing, you idiot?"

Haru seemed to be sleeping contentedly. The air-conditioned room was probably helping.

I think she'd been practicing a lot harder than I'd even realized.

No doubt exhaustion had simply hit her all at once.

Thinking about yesterday, I felt partly responsible.

Figuring that the knot of her ponytail might get in the way, I untied it as softly as possible.

"Mmn..." Haru shifted slightly and opened her eyes. "Hmm... Chitose?"

"Sorry, did I wake you up?"

"What? Where am...? Huh?"

Then she seemed to gather her wits and jerked upright, peering down inside the neck of her T-shirt, for some reason.

"Don't react like you made a mistake one night after getting drunk."

*And don't just jerk upright like that,* I thought, helping Haru to carefully lie back down again.

"Oh, right... It was the middle of practice..."

"You just suddenly collapsed. Probably anemia or dehydration. Have you had breakfast?"

"I couldn't sleep well because of everything that happened yesterday. I finally

fell asleep at dawn, but when I woke up, I was about to be late for morning training... So no, I haven't eaten. Actually, I was so distracted I haven't even taken a single sip of water, either."

"Morning training is an extension of self-discipline. You need to make sure you at least eat before you go."

"No, I was the one who arranged morning training in the first place. I can't be late."

I sighed and handed over the bottle of Pocari Sweat I'd bought from the vending machine.

"Well, what's the point if you end up passing out? Can you drink this?"

She nodded and reached for the plastic bottle, but it ended up falling onto the bed and then rolling onto the floor.

"Yikes, I'm really weak..."

"Tch. You're such a handful." I took off the cap of the bottle of Pocari, put my hand on Haru's back, and gently lifted her up.

Then I brought the bottle to her lips, and...

"Here we go."

I slowly tilted it.

*Gulp, gulp, gulp.*

She must have been thirsty.

She drank about a third of it at once, seemingly without worrying about the runoff that was spilling out of the corner of her mouth.

I felt embarrassed looking at her lightly flushed cheeks and glistening eyes, so I roughly wiped the corner of her mouth with my fingertips.

"How did I get here?" Haru lay her head back on the pillow again.

"It's a shame you don't remember it. It's not every day a handsome prince carries you princess-style. Every girl we passed was screaming."

"—Guh. Someone kill me."

She pulled the sheets up to cover her face. Then, after a pause of about five seconds...

"Was I...?" Finally, she revealed just her eyes as she spoke. "Was I...sweaty?"

"Don't worry. Last night, you sweat so much I'm barely even grossed out anymore."

"All right. Once I've recovered, I'm pulling your nose off for that remark."

"Not my amazing Tengu nose."

That was a comeback I'd once thrown back at the coach. I think Haru must have picked up on that, as well.

We made eye contact and both burst out laughing. I was getting mixed feelings about how weird it is that in-jokes can form in the course of one night.

But hey, it's not like it's a bad change.

"Yikes, I have to hurry back."

"Idiot. You're sick. You need to rest."

"But..."

"Nanase should have things well in hand."

"Oh, right." Haru covered her eyes with her hand as she spoke in a feeble voice. "It's not really going all that well, is it?"

That was when the nurse came back, and so I left the infirmary.



There were about twenty minutes left before lunch break was due to end.

I was pretty sure the practice wouldn't have continued after that, but I needed to tell Nanase what was going on, so I returned to the gym.

From beyond the open doors, I could hear an oddly heated voice and found myself grinding to a halt.

Unpleasant memories were coming back to me in flashes.

"Nana, we can't put up with this anymore."

"Recently Umi has been kinda...frantic. Don't you think?"

I leaned against the door and listened carefully.

Nanase replied with a soft tone of voice. “I’d like to just confirm something, if that’s okay. You, all of you, are serious about aiming for the Inter-High. Aren’t you? This is your one chance, so I’d really like you to tell me the truth... Sen?”

“The Inter-High has been my dream since I was little, and I haven’t forgotten the promise I made to myself. Even now, I’m serious about this. But just increasing our number of practice sessions... I don’t think that’s the right way. Even Umi ended up fainting.”

“I see. So you think it’s better to concentrate our efforts in shorter periods of time?”

“Even three hours after school might be enough for quality practice.”

I felt a reflexive wave of anger. Was that just because I was on Haru’s side? Or was it because I felt like I was being confronted with my past?

“What about you, Yoh?” Nanase continued.

“Of course, I’m also aiming to go to the Inter-High. I’m aiming to *win* the Inter-High. With the current team we have, with Nana and Umi, I don’t think it’s impossible. But just going at it with guns blazing isn’t going to be enough. We’re not all players who can just snap our fingers and fix the issues that have been pointed out to us.”

*You’re wrong, I wanted to yell. I only watched her as captain for a short amount of time, but she never once told you to snap your fingers and fix yourselves. She just kept reminding you to practice mindfully.*

“Okay. What about the rest of you?”

From there, the onslaught of one-sided opinions continued.

I can’t tell how twisted my perception of things was, but most of them sounded like they were just saying “I want to go to the Inter-High, but I don’t want to work so hard...”

...So that’s what this is about?

After all the opinions had been aired, Nanase managed to get the team

mobilized, and the club's practice session was brought to a timely close.

She must have been worried about how Haru was doing.

Nanase came out through the doors where I was standing, in the opposite direction of the clubroom where everyone was heading.

"How long has this been going on?"

"...! Chitose..."

"How long has Haru been ostracized like this?"

She responded with a trembling smile.

"Since she became captain."

"After school, at your place, after practice ends."

That was all she said. Then Nanase left, heading toward the infirmary.



"Sup."

Nanase came to my place at eight thirty PM, as promised. "Can I take a shower first?" she asked.

"Is that really the first thing you want to say when you arrive at a guy's house?"

"Wouldn't you like to set the mood a little more first?"

"The mood's already ruined."

It was our usual banter, but her expression was sort of muted.

*Well, that's probably natural, considering what she came here to discuss.*

I spoke in as bright a tone as possible. "Tch, you must be hungry. I've made some curry. You wanna eat?"

"Oh yeah!!!"

"Then go wash off your sweat. I'll warm up the pot."

When I took out the cleanest possible bath towel from the closet and gave it to Nanase...

"Oh, it's okay. I bought two new ones." She held up a shopping bag and smiled. "I feel bad borrowing your towel every time, so I brought some I can use."

"This isn't a public bathhouse."

"And a change of underwear..."

"Please, can you not?!"

I turned on the Tivoli Audio to drown out the shower sounds as much as possible.

I set my phone to play some music through the Bluetooth speakers. Cider Girl's "Ultramarine" began to play.

I put the pot of curry I'd made before Nanase came over back on the burner.

I didn't really want to eat too much, but I felt like I'd end up overthinking if I just stood around waiting by myself, so I chopped up three onions and some scallions and sautéed them until they turned amber brown to pass the time.

When I finally heard the sound of the dryer, I warmed up the cast-iron frying pan, let the oil heat up, and dropped in two eggs. I left it alone for a while and turned off the heat when the bottom of the egg started getting crunchy and the edge of the yolk began to swell.

Nanase emerged just then, so I put one fried egg on top of the curry and arranged it on the table with barley tea. I didn't have time to make a soup, so I served up instant corn soup in a mug.

"Well then, what's on the menu at Chitose's Diner today?"

Nanase looked refreshed and seemed to have regained some of her usual composure.

"Chef's whimsical summer vegetable curry with minced meat, eggplant, onion, green pepper, tomato, and okra."

I'd just used all the leftover ingredients from when Yua last made me dinner, but I felt like mentioning that would take us on an unnecessary tangent.

""Let's eat!""

Nanase immediately broke her fried egg with the tip of her spoon.

The yolk, which had been half boiled to just the perfect amount, flowed out.

“It’s delicious! It feels like home-cooked curry.”

“Isn’t it spicy?”

“Yeah. The perfect amount.”

“Oh, good.”

“Hey, garçon. Call the chef over.”

“I am the chef.”

While joking around with her, I put some mayonnaise on my fried egg. Three small holes drew a line of squeezy white.

“Ew, you put mayonnaise on top of fried eggs on curry?”

“Yeah, it actually goes really well.”

This time, I picked up a bottle of *shichimi* spice.

“*Shichimi*?!”

“I usually use a spicy roux, but today I made it medium spicy ‘cause I knew you might eat it. Anyway, I always put *shichimi* spice all over everything. Miso soup, pickles, boiled dishes, egg-fried rice...”

“Ugh...”

I popped the top off with one hand and lightly sprinkled the spice over my food.

Nanase pouted. “Ha-ha! The way you’re sprinkling it... So prim and proper!”

“Hey! Pipe down, will ya? Let me at least enjoy my food!”

*I’ve been made fun of like this before*, I recalled.

Still chuckling, Nanase continued.

“Come to think of it, my father used to put Worcestershire sauce on his curry. He’d get in big trouble for it.”

“Was it like, ‘*You could at least taste it how I made it before you start adding*

*sauce!* That kind of thing?”

“Chitose, you’d better be careful of that when a girl cooks for you.”

*It’s all right. I’ve been well scolded for that by Yua already.*

“But it’s funny, how people differ. Like when I was little, and I went to play at my friends’ houses.”

“What, like, they don’t put enough water in the Calpico concentrate or something?”

“Right, right. It was Haru’s house that really shocked me. There was this crate in the entryway, like they actually got real bottles of milk delivered. She’d sit down on the step and just chug one.”

“Sounds like an old man after taking a bath.”

We both made eye contact and smiled at the same time.

Then Nanase’s face fell, and she looked suddenly sad.

“—Now then, where should I start...?”



After we finished the curry, while the dishes were being washed, I made two cups of coffee.

Sitting next to me on the sofa, Nanase opened her mouth as if she had made up her mind.

“How much are you aware of, Chitose?”

“I don’t know the details, but I have a vague idea of what’s going on. In short, your teammates can’t keep up with Haru, right?”

She sighed, and I could sense her nodding.

“At last month’s Inter-High semifinals, we lost to Todo’s Ashiba High School, and it was decided that our seniors would retire. Umi and I were the only ones in the starting lineup for second year, but Sen and Yoh would get swapped in for the second halves... We all bawled our eyes out together.”

*I see; so the backup members at that time were Sen and Yoh.*

—In contrast to Ashi High, which had their main players resting on rotation, and were playing with plenty of leeway, Fuji High was trying to play their starting members as much as possible. In fact, the ability of the players who came on as substitutes was clearly inferior.

After watching the game, I remember evaluating it that way.

“Sen and Yoh, in particular, felt a sense of responsibility. They thought it was their fault the older girls couldn’t go to the Inter-High.”

That night, Nanase continued.

“We had a meeting to reflect on the tournament—or at least wrap things up. That’s when the new captain was decided. Miss Misaki, the seniors, the juniors, Sen, Yoh, and of course myself—our vote was unanimous.”

“I hate to interrupt, but wasn’t the vote split between you and Haru?”

It’s not that Haru’s qualifications as captain were ever in doubt, but surely there were some voices in support of Nanase, with her evenly matched abilities and cool head, too, I thought.

But Nanase slowly shook her head.

“I think everyone realized that if we were really aiming for a higher stage, then the type of person who would pull us forward like that should be the captain.”

So from what I’d heard so far, it seemed that the hearts of the teammates should be more or less united.

I stayed silent and indicated for her to continue.

“So on the day we started up again, we had a meeting with just the club members before practice. What was the new team shooting for? We were all united here, too. Sen, and Yoh, they said, ‘*We don’t want to ever feel like that again. Let’s make it all the way to the Inter-High next year.*’ The mood was good.”

However, she continued with a downcast look.

“Haru thought that wasn’t enough. This is going to be a long story.”



—After the first practice with the new team, Haru called me over.

“Nana, do you have some time after this?”

Since she used my court name, I guessed this had to do with club.

We don’t have strict rules about it, but when we talk about basketball, I usually call her Umi, and if it’s just about general matters, I call her Haru.

We were both hungry, so we bought drinks and hot snacks at the convenience store and sat down by the nearby riverbed.

“To start with...”

Haru popped the cap off her bottle of Royal Sawayaka soda, a local Fukui drink. I recalled her talking about how Chitose had given her a sip not long ago, and she’d realized how delicious it was again after not having it in a long time.

“To the new captain and vice captain.” She held out her bottle.

I clunked my iced café latte against it.

““Cheers!””

Glugging down the Sawayaka in one go, Haru began to choke on the carbonation.

“Aw, we lost, huh.”

“...Sure did.”

Come to think of it, it was the first time the two of us had talked like this since we lost in the prelims.

It was the beginning of June, before the rainy season.

The breeze along the sunset reflection on the river was soothing on my skin, which felt hot from practice.

However, the refreshing coolness reminded me that summer was just on the horizon.

We lost in the Inter-High preliminaries. Our summer was over before it even started.

“Nana...,” Haru said, gazing vaguely out at the river. “Do you really think we

can give Ashi High and other powerhouses a run for their money next year?"

Fight. She wasn't talking about getting to the final round somehow.

She was asking if I thought they could win.

I spoke my mind openly. "Honestly, I think we have more potential now than the old team that included the seniors. Sen's grasp of defense is outstanding, and we have Yoh's height advantage. If we can capitalize on that, then our defense will be much stronger."

"It's our hearts that are weak, right?"

Haru smiled, looking troubled, and I nodded slowly.

This could be said about first-years and the second-years, too, but they don't have that sweaty jock passion. For example, even when I was observing practice, they tried to cut corners wherever possible and complete the training moves while conserving energy and pace.

That kind of attitude is directly linked to the play during the game, and in short, they're too quick to place limits on themselves. If they just pushed it one step further when they ran and jumped, there might have been a different result, but they gave up long before that.

Their hearts aren't on fire at any point, I guess you could say.

I'm sure it's a smart way to live, in society, in the future.

But for an athlete, it's deadly.

At this rate, they'd never be able to win against opponents who constantly stretched their own limits.

"Why do you think that is?"

Haru looked at me.

I'd have to throw my hands up and agree, if the others came out and admitted they didn't care about basketball that much. But the tears after we lost, their passionate talk about making it to the Inter-High—those didn't strike me as fake.

"Maybe they're afraid to take it too seriously."

Haru stared blankly back at me.

Hmm, well, it's probably a sentiment that's hard to understand when you're someone who runs at max capacity 24-7.

"It's obvious to say, but if you take something seriously, then there's a chance you might hit your limit at some point. You might throw up because you practiced too hard, or you might get beaten easily even though you played your heart out. There might be someone who comes along and snatches away the dreams that you could never reach despite your best efforts. And maybe they don't want to have to see themselves fail like that."

"But if you don't get serious about it, you won't even know your own limits. You won't ever see beyond those limits, limits that you might even be able to overcome."

"If you draw a line in the sand from the beginning and say, 'This is how it is,' then you won't get hurt, even after giving it your all. It's easy for everyone to find reasons to explain to themselves why they can't push beyond the limits of what's possible."

"I see..." Haru stood up, swiping at the seat of her skirt. "I want to make it to the top and enjoy the view from there, with the team we have now."

"Of course, I agree with that."

"But I know if I just say, 'Hey, get serious about this,' it isn't going to do any good."

"If it was as simple as hearing it from someone else and making the commitment, they'd have probably already made that decision themselves."

When I said that, Haru turned around.

"—Okay then. I'll guess I'll just have to set an example."

She smiled, silhouetted against the sunset.

"I'll show them that being passionate, being unrefined, being reckless, never giving up, taking it serious—it isn't something uncool at all. I'll just have to set a fire in their hearts."

*Just like him,* she mumbled to herself, then continued.

"I'll push harder than ever in practice, and if they get sloppy, I'll be on their backs. And as for me, I'll crawl on the ground until I bleed if I have to."

"Umi..."

"So, Nana, why don't you support everyone behind the scenes as sub-captain? You can be a sounding board for all their whining and gripes about me."

"You mean...?"

"I don't mind playing the bad guy. I'll be the demon, and you can be the benevolent Buddha, or something. And then in exchange, next year, let's stand at the top and smile together."

I could only silently accept those words and the strong determination behind them.





"I thought I was doing well at being Nana the Buddha, but I don't think I can take much more," Nanase muttered regretfully. "Umi's passion is just going to waste."

"...Darn it."

I wasn't expecting to say that just then.

Was Nanase's angry tongue cluck during the practice directed at herself, in a sense?

"I shouldn't have left things to her so easily. It just reminded me... When we played against each other in the semifinals in junior high school, Umi really spread her passion to the team and really fought. I lost...to that girl."

"What about just telling everyone the truth?"

"Of course, I consulted with Umi about that earlier, but she said, '*If that's the case, we'll just end up going around in circles. I want this to be a team where we can all really fight honestly together, a united team.*'"

"Ah, that famous stubbornness."

I blamed myself for not noticing.

Thinking about it rationally, there should have been a number of signs.

"Yep! Next time, I'll beat her for sure. Next year, we'll beat Ashi High and aim for the Inter-High. To do that, I'll have to train thoroughly and do what I can as captain."

*Do what I can...* Is that what she meant?

Now I understood why Nanase had such an indecisive response.

"They can't relax if they have to eat with the demon captain, can they?"

You'd think it was just a joke, normally.

"The captain can't just take the day off."

"Right, you're the captain. And the captain has to set an example."

"You underestimate Umi. She's looking far ahead."

*You noticed right from the beginning, Miss Misaki.*

“But even so, she won’t back down, huh.”

“She can’t. She’s trying to set an example.”

*That’s right.*

*Show everyone that she’s hit her limit and been blown back, and yet she’s still standing.*

*“...And whenever I feel like I’m about to lose sight of tomorrow.”*

Nanase, who was silently watching me, spoke with a gentle look on her face.

“You should give her a compliment sometime. Umi never confessed her weakness in front of you, did she?”

Far from confessing her weakness—

*“Even when you start to feel pain, I promise to make you smile. When you want to cry, I’ll be by your side, and if you get angry, I’ll be angry with you. When you feel despondent, I’ll give you a good telling off, and when you can’t get back up, I’ll give you courage.”*

—despite everything she was going through, she accepted me when I showed my weakness to her.

“I think...,” Nanase continued. “I think the team will split up soon. Maybe even tomorrow. As for me... Well, she gave me a role to fulfill. When it happens...”

Then she squeezed my hand tight.

“Will you take care of Umi?”

She spoke with such sadness.

I just hoped her prediction would be wrong.



After school the next day, I couldn’t help but peek at the practice from the entrance of the gymnasium, but...

“—That’s enough!!!”

I spotted fireworks going off right away.

“Be more persistent,’ ‘Run more.’ I’m doing my best here, you know. Where do you get off saying I’m not taking this seriously enough, Umi?!”

The first to hit her limit was the short-haired girl called Sen. If anything, I got the impression that she was on the quiet side, but that was why I could instantly feel that she was more emotional than normal.

Haru responded calmly.

“I understand, I understand. No matter how much you try to deceive yourself with your own words, Sen, the ones who are really serious about this can see right through you.”

“What, are you trying to say that you’re different from us? You were a complete failure against Mai Todo even when you were the one who challenged her, so who are you to talk?!”

“Well, Mai Todo still took this little shrimp seriously, didn’t she?”

“\_\_”

“Just now, why didn’t you block Nana’s three-pointer? Did you decide not to bother today because she always lands it? I’ll repeat it over and over again, but I’m not telling you to block her perfectly. Just *try!* Isn’t that what practice is all about?”

Sen slammed the ball against the floor.

The ball bounced high and rolled away desolately.

“You’re talented, Umi, so of course you never hesitate. You’ve got the skills it takes to see the reward of your hard efforts.”

“Well, I... I’m envious of your extra four inches...”

Then Yoh, who was probably around the same height as Mai Todo, interjected.

“It’s all right for you, Umi. If you lose, you can just use your height as a convenient excuse, right?”

—Are you kidding me?

Since when has Haru ever once used her height as an excuse?

Just as I was about to lose my head and barge in there yelling...

“Glurk!”

Someone grabbed me by the neck.

“Idiot. Umi and Nana are holding their own. What do you think you barging in there is going to achieve, hmm?” Miss Misaki’s voice was hissing in my ear.

I shook off her hand, slightly irritated. “Isn’t it the job of the coach to be the bad guy, like Haru’s currently having to do?”

“You mean like Mr. Wataya?”

It felt like a sucker punch.

Perhaps sensing my turmoil, Miss Misaki continued. “Calm down. I don’t agree with his teaching methods, and I have no idea if that man took on the bad guy role. What I’m saying is—were you ever able to make progress as a team if you had someone piling pressure on you from above?”

Thinking back on the days gone by, I ground my teeth together.

“It’s their basketball experience, not yours. They have to realize for themselves who it is that really sets the limits.”

In the gymnasium, Haru was disagreeing with Yoh.

“Oh, really? Then maybe I’ll tell you something, too. It’s all well and good for you, Yoh. You only get to be in matches in the first place because of your height.”

That was bait, I think.

Haru continued.

*—I don’t want to be jealous of what others have.*

I’m sure she was just trying to make Yoh realize that.

Maybe Haru had better reflexes than Sen or Yoh.

But Sen and Yoh had the height advantage that Haru would never have, no matter how badly she wanted it.

If you’re always asking for things you don’t have, you’ll never be able to stop.

Those who are seriously aiming for the top struggle desperately with the gifts they've been given. Don't look to other people's talents as a reason why you don't try your best.

That was what she was trying to convey, albeit in a roundabout way.

But her earnest words fell on deaf ears.

"Oh, I've had enough of this! I'm done. People with natural gifts can't even begin to understand the feelings of people who don't. Why don't you go and aim for the Inter-High all by yourself, hmm?" Yoh said.

To tiny Haru, who had the least natural gifts of any of them when it came to basketball.

With the thump of the basketball as a parting signal, Sen and Yoh led the other members of the team out of the gym.

"Sounds like basketball club's off for at least a week," Miss Misaki commented sagely.

She patted me on the shoulder and then left.

Right, the girls' basketball had the gym all to themselves today.

There, in the rapidly emptying gym, I had that kind of out-of-place thought.

Nanase, who remained until the end, glanced at Haru with a worried expression, then put on her vice captain face and looked emphatically over at me.

"Will you take care of Umi?"

After watching her head of black hair disappear into the clubroom, I stepped into the gym.

Haru stood alone, still holding the ball with both hands.

I gently put my hand on her back.

"Haru..."

"Chitose..."

She looked over her shoulder at me, biting her lip as hard as she could to keep

herself from crumpling. Even so, her lips twitched as if she was trying to smile, as she said...

"What should I do? I can't fight on without my friends. I can't fly all by myself. I'm incomplete... Everyone's gone."

She was rambling, her words jumbled and distorted.



I half dragged Haru, who was still holding back tears, her feet frozen, to the rooftop.

We sat with our backs against the fence, and I put a bottle of cold clear lemonade down between us.

Haru, who was hugging her knees as if to hide her face, didn't touch it. Instead, she spoke in an empty sort of voice.

"Hee-hee. I think I got a little too hotheaded. I'll have to apologize later."

*You know better than anyone that it's a lot more serious than that.*

Her teammates had just turned on her.

—*We won't play basketball with you anymore*, they'd said.

"Miss Misaki said she was going to give you all about a week off."

"Oh... Well, that might be a good thing. I ended up dragging everyone along because of my selfishness."

"It's next weekend, isn't it? The practice match against Ashi High."

Strangely enough, it was the day after the baseball club's first-round Saturday game.

No response from the girl beside me.

"I'm sorry. I didn't pick up on any of this."

"Don't be silly. I didn't want you to help me, dearest. This is my own personal issue."

"You didn't think there was any point in confiding to me? Me, the guy who was abandoned—*betrayed* by his own teammates?"

“No!! I’m nothing like you back then...”

She’d raised her head, on the verge of exploding, but she quickly looked down again.

*Just like a black goldfish at a festival, I thought randomly.*

Everyone wants it because it’s a novelty, but it can only swim clumsily around, compared to the bright-red Japanese goldfish that swims smoothly and skillfully. And it’s got ugly bulbous eyes and can be hurt by the slightest knock.

Actually, it’s better not to let them swim together.

If fish of the same variety swim together, none of them will stand out as a particular target.

No one will be singled out, that way.

Still, we chose to live in such an aquarium.

It’s clumsy and thoroughly undignified.

I opened the cap of my bottle of lemonade.

“You’re a tough, complicated woman.”

I covered the lip of the bottle with my palm, shook it vigorously, and then removed my hand.

—Psssh!!!

The foam burst out like the beginning of summer.

“That’s cold!!!”

“Just a little payback for a certain water fight we once had. Did that cool your head down, hmm?”

“It’s not fair to do it with something sugary! I’m gonna be sticky all day!”

“Hey, your practice T-shirt is going see-through.”

“You are such an animal...!”

Then, when Haru finally looked at me, I grinned at her.

“—As the winner of that day, here’s an order from Chitose. Spill it. Right here,

right now.”

Haru gulped in a breath of air.

*The loser has to expose their deepest weaknesses to the winner.*

That evening when we made that bet, the distance we jumped from the swing was exactly the same, not even an inch of difference.

“It’s too boring to call it a draw. So why don’t we say we both won, and we both lost?”

*...Right, Haru?*

“Besides, you’re my catch buddy. My partner’s problem is my problem.”

“\_\_”

I think she must have finally found her limit.

“Is my method wrong? Am I just tormenting everyone? Should we get along and go easy in practice? Then, even if we lose in the end, we’ll be able to laugh about it being a good memory, right?”

She kept talking, as if a dam had just broken.

“I don’t understand it. They’re serious about going to the Inter-High? How serious is serious? How much more pushing is the right amount of pushing? Where’s the line between concrete goals and idealistic dreams?”

I grabbed her little head and held it against my chest.

Immediately, I felt my shirt grow damp as the emotions she’d been holding back for so long began to seep out.

“Guh... Huhhh...”

Still, she fought desperately to suppress any noise.

It was as if she was afraid that if she cried right now, it would all be over.

*You really are strong, aren’t you?*

“Sorry, I don’t have the answer. I ran away much earlier than you did.”

“Chitose... I’m sorry for saying such arrogant things to you, okay?”

The words I'd gotten from Haru crossed my mind.

*“—So what if your teammates weren’t taking things seriously? You should make them take it seriously, using your passion and your playing skills! Drum it into their thick skulls that, with you, maybe they actually have a chance of making their dream a reality!”*

“I couldn’t do it, either...”

“—There’s still time.”

I spoke as emphatically as I could.

“We agreed that hard work will always be rewarded, right?”

“Huh...?”

“It’s the same, I’m sure. Did your real passion and playing skills actually not reach your friends? Did you move anyone’s hearts, or was it all really you just being selfish and pushing them when they didn’t want to be pushed...?”

“Er, Chitose?”

After I said that, I got to my feet.

“We have no choice but to see how the ending plays out, right?”

I reached out to my dear partner.

“There is at least one man here whose heart has been touched by your passion.”

So...

“—I’m going to swing that bat, one more time.”

*Let’s go after this summer...together.*



So on the sports field where the baseball club had just finished their practice...

“Use me in the first round. Please!”

...I bowed my head low before my former coach.

Eleven baseball club members, including two first-year students I didn’t know, were standing around.

Yusuke, on crutches and wearing a cast, spoke up quickly.

“Hey, wait a minute, Saku. Where’s this coming from?”

Hirano answered that. “We all...went to ask him for help.”

“I told you not to do that!”

There was a crunch, and I could sense Yusuke closing in on Hirano.

“It’s not just your problem! But anyway...he turned us down. Emphatically.”

“Then why?”

I heard the irregular noise of footsteps and crutch jabs coming closer, eventually stopping in front of me.

“Could you lift your head, please, Saku? And why are you bowing anyway?”

“This isn’t to help out the baseball club, just so you know.” I was speaking in clear terms. “It’s not that I want to help Yusuke after his injury. It’s not that Hirano persuaded me. I just wanted to put an end to last summer, for myself.”

“What do you...?”

“It’s my own retirement match, I guess.”

“—All right. I understand the situation.”

The coach’s hoarse voice, which was painful to even listen to, lowered suddenly. I started and braced myself.

He didn’t seem surprised by my offer itself.

I knew those guys wouldn’t have come to approach me without consulting the coach first, after all.

I don’t know how they persuaded him, but they clearly had his blessing.

The coach continued. “In other words, Chitose, you will only return next week for the first round, so is it correct to understand that you’ll be coming on as, literally, a pinch hitter?”

“...Yes.”

“Then I won’t treat you as a member of the baseball club. You’re just a helper, an outside guest. Please, raise your head.”

I did as he said and straightened up.

My old teammates were watching the developments with an anxious energy.

It was hard to read emotion on their matching poker faces, but the coach continued evenly.

“Honestly, the team’s hurting from losing Ezaki. The way things are, getting past the first round will be extremely difficult.”

Then he put his hands on his knees, and...

“If you’re willing to help us, then please, do so.”

...he bowed his head deeply before me.

For a moment, I was so shocked by this that I froze up.

“Hirano and the others said there was some agreement in place with certain conditions?”

Startled by the words he’d just said, I took a deep breath. “Coach, please raise your head.” Then I looked him right in the eye. “There is only one condition. I want to remain separate from the team and practice by myself until the day of the match.”

“Saku, what for?!” Yusuke yelled.

“I don’t want to disturb your teamwork at such an important time. Me being around might have an effect on the rest of you, won’t it?”

“But...”

They still didn’t seem convinced, but the coach accepted it without hesitation.

“Okay. If you need any training equipment, just tell Ezaki.”

I nodded.

That was the end of the discussion.

The coach left the sports field after telling Yusuke that he would leave the rest to him.

After he was gone, I finally managed to breathe a sigh of relief.

“*If you’re willing to help us, then please, do so.*’ Huh.”

When I said that, Yusuke approached me and chuckled.

"He's changed a little, too, since you left," Hirano said. "He still yells at us, and he can be pretty unreasonable. But it's a little different from how it used to be."

"...I see."

It makes sense, obviously, but it hit me that these guys had been through a whole year of experiences without me.

"Hey, Saku, about what happened back then—"

I lifted my hand to stop Yusuke before he could continue. "Never mind about all that anymore."

I meant it, too. I wasn't just acting tough.

I thought I'd be filled with complicated emotions, but my mind was surprisingly calm.

"The coach, you guys, myself... I'm sure everyone was wrong about some things and right about others."

Thanks to her, I could finally think like that.

"I'll search for closure in my own way. So if you guys are still hung up on that day, then I suggest you try to find your own closure. Then let's move forward together."

I smiled and changed my raised hand into the offer of a handshake.

"Let's go and win that match."

"...Right!" Yusuke grabbed my hand tightly.

"Well, you can keep the bench warm so that the buttocks of the regulars don't get too cold."

"Ha-ha. Oh, shut up."

Then Hirano and other guys all placed their hands on top of ours.

Man, sports clubs get so extra.

But I gave myself over to that familiar feeling of comradery, for a while.



"Are you sure this is what you want?" asked Haru, who was leaning against the school gate waiting for me. "You know, Chitose, you never even went into the batter's box when we practiced at the batting center that time."

"You're observant."

When I said that in response, Haru anxiously looked up at me as she continued pushing her cross bike.

"This is...for me?"

"I really don't like girls who go getting wrong ideas in their heads."

I felt her stiffen beside me.

I continued, smiling wryly, wondering why she was being so tentative around me.

"This is *because* of me; isn't that what you meant?"

"Oh, right," she said, a small smile blooming on her lips.

"Hey, Haru, are you hungry?"

"Starving."

"Are you tired today?"

"I'm tired!"

"A day like this calls for...?"

"“Katsudon!””

Our two voices were in perfect harmony.

After we both laughed, I spoke.

"Then let's go. After all, we're both jocks at heart, right?"

"All right, then I want mine supersize."

"Would you like some fried shrimp on the side?"

Then we got on Haru's cross bike and rode through the evening.

As we zipped past the tiny streetlights, we pretended like we were hometown heroes.

Perhaps, even if you consult with your friends a hundred times, you still might not be able to understand each other in the truest sense.

That's why we run, jump, throw, hit.

Believing that one shot, one swing, will get all of our emotions across.



After seeing Haru off, I called Nanase to explain the details of the situation on my side—and in turn asked about the situation on the other side. As expected, Miss Misaki apparently said that they would be taking a break from practice for the next week, strictly speaking, until the day of the match with Ashi High.

It seems that the teammates who'd walked out were pretty heated afterward. Apparently, there was quite a lot of harsh things said about Haru. The frustration that had been accumulating on a daily basis had exploded all at once.

*"I almost snapped, myself,"* said Nanase over the phone. *"When we were talking together, there was one thing that came up over and over again."*

"What?"

*"—Being able to do your best is also a kind of talent."*

"...Yeah."

I've been told that many times before.

*"It's such a cowardly excuse."*

I guess she couldn't stomach it.

I could hear the anger seeping out of her, unusual for Nanase.

*"That girl... After practicing more than anyone else in the morning practice, afternoon practice, and after-school practice, then she goes and practices until late at Higashi Park. She says it's because the players she needs to beat might still be out practicing, too, so she can't rest. How is it fine to dismiss all that effort as just talent?"*

"What's their concept of the talent of effort, though? Maybe it's like putting in the effort is so much fun you can't go without it? Or something?"

*"Are you crazy?! Who's the one out there running laps until they're gasping like a dog, like hah, hah, hahhh? Who's the one practicing a hundred shots a day until they're groaning with the pain, like ugh, ugh, UGHN? Hmm?"*

"N-Nana. Please, don't make those sounds anymore."

*"It's painful. Of course it's painful. And tough. You wouldn't do it if you didn't have to. But there's a version of yourself you want to become, and there's people you want to beat, and there's dreams you want to make real, so you grit your teeth and get on with it, right?"*

"I completely agree, but don't say that in front of anyone else, okay? Next time, they'll just start justifying it by saying stuff like 'Talent means having the raw ability needed to do your best' or 'Hating to lose is also a form of talent' and stuff like that, right?"

*"I understand that. In the end, it's like...a parallel line."*

"...Yeah."

*"Hey, Chitose. Can I speak openly? About how Haru feels about being the captain, about who she's trying so hard for?"*

"Calm down, Nanase. What color is your underwear today?"

*"Translucent saxe blue."*

"Oh, indeed?"

*"Are you coming over to check it out in person?"*

"Okay, so you're back to normal now?!"

Nanase chuckled over the phone. *"Miss Misaki told me that you have to realize for yourself who it is who gets to decide your personal limits."*

"Hmm, I see."

I hate to admit it too bluntly, but I think that's the answer.

We all know that if we work hard, we can become better than we are.

However, if you take someone who is outstandingly successful—for example, Mai Todo—and ask, "Can I become like that if I try hard?" Well, no one knows the answer. No matter how many valid arguments you have, if someone tells

you, "Proclaiming your principles like that is a form of harassment"—I think you'll just have to throw up your hands there.

"Hey. At least wait until next week's match against Ashi High, and then I'll tell you the truth," I said.

"*Will that change anything?*" she asked.

"Well, it might, or it might not. But I feel like she can show the answer."

"*You have a lot of faith in Umi...er, Haru, don't you, Chitose?*"

"That's because the sun is the brightest thing in the sky."

"*Formidable, just as I thought,*" Nanase muttered.

"Okay, I'll do what I can until then."

"*I'm counting on you.*

"*Good night, Saku.*"

"Good night...Nanase."

Then we hung up.

"Now, then," I said, putting the bat case on my shoulder.

*One week, huh?*

Even though the stuff with Haru was still weighing on me, I couldn't hold back the feeling of excitement welling up in my chest, and I realized I was smiling.



The next day, after school on Friday, I went to the batting center with Haru.

Most of the balls used in general batting centers are softballs, but this place is known for having the rare hard cages.

"It's kinda like..." Haru was wearing the unsettled look she'd had ever since we left the school. "It makes me feel guilty to come somewhere like this after school, even though it's not even a test period."

"You want to hit some balls later, Haru? You'll feel better."

"Hmm, I'll just watch."

"All right."

After changing into loose training wear and putting on Mizuno white batting gloves, I was just pulling my bat out of its case when Haru spoke again.

"Is that...wood?"

"Yeah, it's the kind they use in professional and college baseball."

When I said that, a small smile spread across Haru's features.

"I see... That's right."

I was determined to use this bat for next week's game.

Wood is more difficult to handle than metal.

First off, with a metal bat, it's easier to make a ball fly, since a metal bat is harder. Even if you don't quite hit the sweet spot, you can still send a ball to the outfield with sheer force, and you don't even need to use much strength to get a ball to fly.

Conversely, you can't get a good distance with a wooden bat unless you catch the ball accurately with the bat's core.

If you're off even a little, you'll end up with an easy pop fly, or in the worst-case scenario, the bat might even break.

Basically, if you can use the unique give of the wood to your advantage, you can make a ball fly farther with wood than with metal, but there isn't enough of an advantage there to make a high school student opt for a wooden bat.

*But even so, I thought. I've been swinging this one for a year, ever since I quit the baseball club.*

You might be like, what are you doing? Yusuke's and Hirano's summers are at stake here.

But I have my own complicated stubbornness and aesthetic sense.

I entered the cage, put on my helmet, and fed my token into the slot.

The maximum ball speed is eighty-five miles per hour.

Echizen High School's ace had a maximum of ninety, as I recalled, but it would

do for rehabilitation purposes.

I skipped the first three balls and adjusted the height and course.

Now, here's the problem.

I've been swinging, but it's been a year since I've been at bat. Although I know the characteristics roughly, this is the first time I'm hitting with wood.

Can you really get your mojo back in a week?

I entered a left-handed batter's stance and relaxed, holding the bat.

The machine clanked.

*—Phwump.*

*—Phwump.*

*—Phwump.*

I heard Haru's tentative voice coming from behind me.

"Um...three strikes?"

"That's what you'd call it."

My timing was accurate, but the bat was still swinging a little slow.

Still, it wasn't as much as I'd imagined it would be.

*—Phwump.*

*—Phwump.*

*—Phwump.*

It's sometimes said that batting is all about eyes.

It is only natural that the sweet spot, called the core, of this thin bat should be the part used to hit a small moving ball. A small ball that flies at a speed of over sixty miles per hour and both curves and drops.

I'm not particularly strong or built, as far as baseball players go.

Still, I was counted as one of the best hitters in the prefecture due to my dynamic vision, bat control, and swing speed.

It's long been my belief that batting doesn't require much power—or to be

exact, any more physical strength than is necessary. The speed of the swing is produced by shifting the weight and using the lower body.

And if you wait until the last minute, until you can hit the ball with the exact right part of the bat, then you can't fail to make it really fly.

—Phwump.

—Phwump.

—Phwump.

“...Erm, Chitose?”

“Sorry, I was pompously rambling about the finer details, like this was a sports manga or something!”

“What are you talking about?”

In the end, the machine stopped without me making contact with the ball even once.

I left the cage and sat down on the bench for a rest.

Frowning, Haru handed me a bottle of Pocari Sweat.

“Hmm, so this is what all my swinging practice got me, I guess.”

I crossed my legs dramatically as I said that, but all I got was a cold look in return.

“If I lent a hand, I do think their odds of winning the first round would increase dramatically...”

“Hmm, who would say such impertinent things? Such a bad boy.”

“You should know better than to underestimate baseball that way...”

“No doubt, right!”

Well, to be honest, I was a little shocked myself that my eye had lost this much of its keenness.

I gulped my Pocari Sweat.

“Chitose, are you sure you’re gonna be okay? A year is actually kind of a long time to have a blank space in your training, isn’t it?”

“Sure, if I’d quit baseball completely. But I told you. I’ve kept my body well honed.”

“It doesn’t really look that way, though.”

“My visual judgment being off, that’s inevitable. Right now, I’m just testing things out to see how bad the damage is. When you take a shot for the first time in a long time, Haru, don’t you get a little fixated on the distance?”

“Hmm, I guess I do.”

“You just have to get your body in motion, and the rest is a matter of fine-tuning.”

With that said, I went back to bat.

Presently, I needed to be about two inches higher.

I visualized the trajectory of the bat while I readied my stance.

—*CLACK*.

The ball bounced back, high in the air.

Basically, when a foul flies backward, it’s proof that the timing is right for the ball. If you’re a left-handed hitter like me, it’ll fly left if you’re too slow, and it’ll fly right if you hit too early.

“Oh, you hit it!” Haru yelled happily, but even that made me feel a little conflicted.

*I still haven’t hit the bottom of the ball yet.*

Maybe I need to go another two inches higher.

—*CLOMP*.

This time, I hit the ball too close to the top and whacked it down onto the ground.

Two was too much. Better lower it by one.

—*CLONK*.

A smart hit, sending the ball right toward the net where the machines were.

“Ooh!”

Okay, so the trajectory of the bat looks like this.

Of course, even I don't know if I can really adjust it something as precise as inches.

But it works as an example. Two inches should make it fly like this. One inch, like this. Half an inch to adjust.

And if I raise my left wrist just a little more, then:

—WHOOSH.

A sharp line drive that went far above the machine's head.

All right. Feels good.

There were no other customers, so I continued silently for about three at bats.

When I got out of the cage, Haru was waiting for me with an excited expression.

"Nice going, Chitose! Sorry for thinking that I was going to roll you off the top of Asuwayama if it turned out you really were just all talk."

"Hey, I'm gonna remember you said that."

"I'm starting to think you can really do this! Here, have some Pocari."

"Ah. Thanks." I took the bottle and chugged it.

"Hmm, but you don't seem too thrilled?"

I smiled wryly as Haru peered at my face.

I sat down on the bench, and she quickly draped a towel over my shoulders.

"Just like a club manager, Haru."

When I said that, she smiled happily.

At some point, she seemed to have really brightened up.

"Chitoose, ♡ I made you lemon pickled in honey. ♡"

"You sound like one of those first-years who's trying to be cute, but I kinda like it."

“Gifts from the female fans... ♡ I passed them on to other guys. ♡”

“Where’s mine?!”

“If you hit a home run in the next game, Haru will be your manager for the rest of my life. ♡”

“How am I expected to be happy about that after what we just discussed?” I poked Haru’s forehead, even as she batted her eyelashes at me. “Somehow, being able to hit balls at the batting center just feels obvious,” I said. “Once you get used to it, even an old man with his belly out who plays weekend baseball can get the ball flying. It’d be weird not to be able to hit the ball when every throw comes at the same height and speed.”

Haru hesitated a moment before responding. “Like how in basketball, shooting practice and shooting during a game are completely different?”

“Yeah, maybe. In practice, the speed and course of the ball is always different each time, and it’s necessary to judge the right timing for strikes and balls. Then you add breaking balls to that, and it’s almost a different thing. In extreme cases, even if the same pitcher throws a fastball at full power, it’ll go faster when you’re really fired up in the moment.”

That was my biggest concern in regaining my intuition.

Usually, you supplement that part with games and game-style practice.

It would be best to have Hirano the ace throw for me, but I couldn’t let him overwork his shoulder just for me, especially not with the first game only a week away.

In addition, there was another big problem.

“—You can’t handle that wooden bat, you know.”

“Yeah.”

Sure, I made some simple hits—and some really good ones. The distance wasn’t bad, either.

But a metal bat makes balls fly farther and is more reliable with less effort.

*This has turned out to be more trouble than I anticipated, I thought.*

I already had a limited adjustment period.

If I couldn't hit with wood at least as well as with metal, if not better, then using a wooden bat would be really selfish.

"Dude, your hitting style is still the same as it was with the metal bat. You do realize that, don't you?"

"No give to it, eh?"

A metal bat literally feels like hitting the ball with an iron bar.

But a bat that's made of wood is said to have some give to it, making it more like a whip.

"You're good at catching the ball with the sweet spot, but the ball bounces off before it's received the full brunt of the hit. It'd hard to tell at a batting center, but you'd never even get it to the outfield."

"Yeah, you think so, too? It's more like catching the ball on the bat and letting it ride it rather than just a brief moment of contact."

"Yeah. But you can't go overthinking everything. No good will come of it. Why don't you just give it up and use metal, man?"

"Oh, be quiet. I have my reasons."

"There's still a few days left until the second round. I'll come with Echi High's ace, Ikeda."

"I don't know that name."

"The one you defeated in the prefectural tournament semifinals? Asshole."

"Ah! Come to think of it, he had a nice fastball."

"Pah. Losing against someone you already beat... Now, that's no good at all."

"By the way, can I ask you something?"

"What?"

"What are you doing here, Atomu?"

...I finally turned to address the guy who'd been standing there, engaging me in baseball talk for the past few minutes.

"Some limping moron came to see me."

Yusuke. Dude gets around.

"So you decided to come along with a snack of homemade rice balls for me?"

"—Tomorrow, at one PM. At the sports field at Higashi Park." Atomu didn't rise to my bait. He just said that and turned to leave.

As he was quickly walking away, I yelled "Hey!" after him. "You really do like to run hot and cold, don't you?"

"That's it; I'm gonna kill ya!"

Tsk. He just can't be honest with himself.

But...I'd really fall for someone like you, man.

Haru was standing there, watching our entire exchange from beginning to end with shock.



Twelve thirty on the following Saturday.

By the time Haru and I arrived, thirty minutes earlier than we had promised, Atomu was already there wearing workout clothes and warming up.

"Are you trying to kill me?"

I didn't want to keep him waiting, so I started warming up, too.

Haru came along since her own club activities were on hiatus.

She was wearing loose clothes, so she was probably prepared to help out.

I'd already explained the meaning of yesterday's exchange to her.

Once we were both sufficiently warmed up, Atomu took out his ball and glove, and I followed suit.

"Playing catch? Can I join in, too?"

"If you don't want to die, you'd better give it a pass today." Atomu threw the ball he was holding before I could even finish speaking.

Zoom.

Considering he'd only just warmed up, it was such a good throw it made my hand tingle.

Seeing this, Haru withdrew, as if she'd figured out everything.

"Coming from a softball background, you're pretty good, huh?"

Atomu snorted.

"If I don't exercise enough every day, I have trouble falling asleep."

"What are you, some middle-aged man?"

So in other words, this guy has been throwing balls the whole time.

I returned the ball to him as I spoke. "By the way, is it all right for us to just use this place without asking?"

"I got an acquaintance to lock it down for us."

"You should have invited Nazuna. Not very friendly, are you?"

"You sure run your mouth a lot. Just content yourself with that shrimp there."

"What did you say, you jerk?!" Haru, who had nothing better to do, yelled across at us.

The distance between us grew wider, and after landing a long throw, Atomu took the mound.

He had a couple of bucket-like ball cases full of hardballs by his feet.

"What's with those?"

"Ezaki left them, along with the helmet. He said we might need them."

"By the way, it might be a bit late for me to ask this, but didn't he ask you to join in first year?"

"No, it was Hirano who approached me. I blew him off."

"Maybe Yusuke was afraid that you might steal his ace number, Atomu."

"Even if he was, I'm not made to be a pitcher."

As we talked, I also took my turn at bat, smoothing the ground beneath my feet.

"Now, then..." Atomu slammed the ball against his glove. "Each one of these holds a hundred balls. For today and tomorrow, we've got two hundred to work with. On weekdays after school, we'll do this until all the balls are gone."

"Are you insane? Your shoulder or your elbow is going to break."

In high school baseball these days, the number of allowed pitches is so strict that a single pitcher is only permitted to throw up to five hundred pitches per week in official games.

These are tournament games. If a team loses, it's all over.

If a team has an absolute ace pitcher, they tend to rely on that player, and there are many cases where too many consecutive pitches can lead to irreparable failures.

This was a new rule, enacted to prevent such misfortune.

In general, it's said that one hundred pitches per game is a guideline for pitcher changes.

Two hundred pitches from Atomu, today alone. It's not like it's an impossible number, but that's assuming his shoulders and elbows would get a rest over the following days.

This, though—this just wasn't realistic.

But Atomu laughed fearlessly.

"That only applies to ordinary people. I've been throwing that many every day since I was a kid. And anyway, even if I break something, it's not gonna bother anyone but me."

"Pitching practice and actual game simulations lead to different kinds of fatigue."

"What's wrong, Chitose? Are you scared? If you're not confident you can keep up with me, I'll split the number in half for you."

Apparently, he had no intention of backing down.

At this rate, I had no choice but to indulge him.

I gathered up my emotions and spat them out with my words.

“—You *could double* that number, and it still wouldn’t be too many for me!”

I was unable to hold back a huge grin.

“Such a delicious development, the former runner-up becoming a dedicated batting pitcher.”

“Don’t get me wrong, former champion batter. I’m just doing this ‘cause I think it’ll be fun. I won’t throw a single easy ball, just so you know.”

Atomu continued as he smoothed the mound roughly with his spikes.

“Hey, you. Chitose’s girl.”

“Hmm, who are you talking about?”

“You, Shrimp.”

“It’s Haru, and I’ll turn you into lawn fertilizer if you don’t get it right, you know? ❤”

“Ugh, I don’t need this. Listen, you’re Aomi from the basketball club, right? Well, instead of your own training, how about you be our outfield ball girl? Go grab them and throw as many of them as you can back toward me, okay?”

“If you know who I am, then you should have used my name in the first place.”

Muttering to herself, Haru pulled on her glove and ran to the outfield.

Hmm, I felt a little guilty having Haru be our ball girl, but a little exercise would do her good.

I planted my feet and readied my bat.

“Come on, let’s play ball.”

“Get ready to die two hundred times.”

Zoom. Atomu started with a fastball.





—Then, when the sun was going down...

Three corpses lay side by side on the ground.

“L-let’s leave it there for today,” I said breathlessly.

“That’s...my line. You suck.”

Atomu was totally out of breath, too, though.

“Hey, don’t I actually have the most strenuous job here?”

Haru, who had been chasing balls all over the place, was almost on the verge of tears.

“That last one wasn’t bad, but all the rest were garbage.” Atomu spoke with venom.

In the end, even after two hundred throws, neither of us spoke up to end it.

That pitch must have reached around ninety miles an hour—and sometimes transformed into a big curveball or forkball, with enough control to just land inside the four corners of the strike zone.

After playing against Atomu for the first time in a while, I realized he was one hell of a pitcher.

“You didn’t throw a fork when you were in middle school, did you?”

“I learned it in my spare time.”

“You know, for a batting pitcher, your strategy is really good. You can predict my every move.”

“Who are you calling a batting pitcher? What’s the point of me letting you hit it comfortably?”

*You’re really the best,* I thought secretly to myself.

Thanks to that, the nostalgic feeling of an actual game came back to me more and more with each pitch, and from partway in, I was able to concentrate only on handling the wooden bat.

Atomu struggled to his feet. “Same time tomorrow.”

“You should make sure to ice your shoulder and elbow.”

“You don’t need to tell me. Don’t forget that final feeling.”

I waited until he was gone and then sat up.

“Haru, thanks for the help. You okay to head home alone?”

“I don’t mind, but what about you?”

“I’ll do some more swings. Not because of what Atomu said, but I was finally getting into my groove at the end there. I want to make sure it sinks in.”

“Huh?! But you’re about to collapse!”

I answered her with a smile. “It’s fun being able to play baseball as much as I want.”

“—” Haru sprang to her feet. “You lie down.”

Then she pushed me down with all her might.

“Er, Haru? I really don’t feel like getting up to any vigorous activity right now.”

“Oh, quiet down and lie on your stomach.”

I did as she said and rolled over.

The sun had set, and the scent of cool grass and soil was pleasant.

Then I felt something soft on my waist.

Haru had gotten on top of me and was using her fingertips to massage my shoulder blades.

“Ahhh, that’s so nice.”

“It’s to say thank you for giving me a massage before. Hmm, men really do have different muscles, don’t they?”

“Be my manager. Just like that.”

“Chitose, ♡ Haru will make you feel real good. ♡”

“Okay, that’s more scary than trying to be cute, but I’m into it.”

“In exchange... ♡ Swing your bat just for me. ♡”

“I’m not sure what kind of innuendo that’s supposed to be!”

We both giggled together.

We were a little bit high, like that feeling after pulling an all-nighter.

"Hey, Chitose?"

"What is it, Haru?"

"If we accidentally ended up dating each other, I wonder what the weekends would be like. We'd go do something physical and then eat katsudon, then finish up by massaging each other."

"We sure wouldn't be watching movies or going on a library date or to a fancy café."

"What do you think about all that kinda stuff?"

"Hmm, it's not bad. Only..."

Haru's fingers had grown more insistent, although I wasn't sure if she was aware of it.

"Never mind me. You won't be able to do any of that until next year, Haru."

"Why not?"

"Because you have a position you need to get back to. And opponents you need to fight."

"Is it okay for me to be a hot, sweaty, masculine girl?"

"I'll be there at the game, wearing a coat with your name written on the back and waving a banner to cheer you on."

Her fingertips hesitated for a second, then she slapped me on the butt with all her might.

"Ouch!"

"All right, that's you taken care of!" Haru's weight lifted off my back. "Looking at you guys play, it made me realize I really don't want to lose. It seems I can't just be a club manager who supports the team from the sidelines. I want to break through the enemies who stand in my way."

"You can go into manager mode every now and then if you like?"

"Doofus!"

After that, I kept swinging the bat until I was satisfied.

Haru didn't say anything more than that, but rather she squatted down beside me and happily counted the swings. "One, two..."

Having her so close by was a little bit of a distraction, and it took me some time to find the sweet spot again.



The next day, Sunday, was a midsummer day with temperatures exceeding eighty degrees.

I must have been hitting balls for two hours already.

Even Atomu couldn't completely recover from the fatigue of yesterday, so his pitches weren't as sharp as usual.

Even so, he was throwing pitches for me that were really second to none, and I was so overwhelmed with gratitude that I nearly hugged the guy.

"Chitose, you're still only getting three out of every ten. Get a grip already."

"If you hit thirty percent in baseball, you're top-notch!"

"That's a batting average. You can't talk about a decent swing only with a thirty percent chance!"

"Oh, shut up; I know that!"

We continued batting endlessly while cursing each other.

Haru, who had paused to rehydrate, was watching our exchange while rolling her eyes. Suddenly, she froze up, as if she'd just noticed something.

"Chitose! Your hand!"

"Hmm? Oh."

I looked down and noticed the red stains blossoming in various places on my white batting gloves.

"You're bleeding! Darn it, did I put a first aid kit in my bag?"

"Leave him alone, Aomi. His form is all messed up; that's why that happened,"

Atomu said with a sneer.

“Uemura, you pig!”

I interrupted Haru as she was sputtering with indignation.

“I’m sorry—I hate to say it, but I agree with him this time. I’m not used to playing with a hardball and batting against this many throws in a row, so I’m bound to end up with blisters on my hands, right?”

“Tch. All you have to do is pop it with a needle, then smear some glue on it.”

“Blisters... You two should really take it down a notch. You can’t keep practicing like that...”

““It doesn’t matter!””

We two jerks harmonized beautifully.

“Go on, little lord Chitose, let your shrimp-size nursey attend to your wounds.”

“If anything, you’re the one who walked the neatly paved highway of the privileged, aren’t you? If you want to run to Mommy whining about how much it hurts, then I don’t mind waiting around.”

“If you’re so distracted by your little ouchie fingies, then you won’t mind if I crack you over the head, will you?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll whack you right back and send you flying all the way to the other side of the Sea of Japan.”

“Get a freaking grip and hit the ball, you useless waste of a batter!”

“I would if your throws weren’t all over the place, you pathetic excuse for a pitcher!”

*Smack!*

*Clunk.*

*Smack!*

“I didn’t think there were two idiots out there more passionate than me...”



“—Damn, I’m all out of balls.”

Atomu put his hands on his knees and panted heavily.

Haru was doing a valiant job of running around in this temperature, but there weren’t enough of her to pick up all of the hundreds of balls that were flying off left and right.

All three of us were at our physical limit.

*If this was a club practice...,* I found myself thinking.

If Atomu and I both belonged to Fuji High’s baseball club, we’d have all our teammates around us.

Our teammates would watch us and roll their eyes when we started getting heated and arguing during practice. Sure, he’s got a potty mouth, but he would have stuck by me till the end, I think.

Then when we were done with practice, a Jumbo at Takokyū might have been good.

There’d be a cute girl manager like Haru there, who’d say, “You guys are idiots!”

Being scolded like that would be great.

*Maybe...,* I thought.

If I’d remembered Atomu’s name and face, and strong-armed him into joining the baseball club last year...

This guy would never have just quietly obeyed the unreasonableness of the coach. We could have gone on a rampage together.

Both of us might just have gotten kicked out, though.

Weirdly, I had the feeling that if this guy had been there, I might have been able to hold my own that day, instead of just running away.

But whatever.

It didn’t play out like that.

I laid the bat down carefully and stretched out.

Treating equipment with care was the policy of every baseball player that I admired.

I recalled smashing Kenta's room window with my precious former metal buddy bat.

I have to shoulder the same pain... Did I think something like that?

After getting Haru and Atomu to let me have a little break, I got up and was just heading off to round up a few stray balls, when...

"Hey! Saku!"

"Yoo-hoo! Chitose!"

A glamorous voice rang out across the deserted weekend sports field.

I looked over my shoulder, surprised.

"...You guys, what are you doing here?"

Yuuko, Nazuna, Yua, Nanase, Kazuki, Kaito, and Kenta.

The whole gang was here.

"Hey, Nazuna, it should be Atomu you were calling out to."

"Huh? No way. I'm a fan of Chitose's. You can have Atomu, Yuuko."

Those two were getting kinda close. Calling each other by their first names, even.

Atomu spoke up in a bitter sort of voice. "Hey. I thought I told you to keep this a secret from everyone."

"Excuse me? What are you saying now, after you called me up as excited as if you'd just gotten a love letter from your first crush? Anyway, I didn't come to see you. I came to see Chitose."

Yuuko, who had just caught up, spoke next. "Have you three eaten lunch? I brought some rice balls, some cold miso soup, and some lemon pickled in honey, if you'd like..."

"Be my manager for life, Yuuko."

Haru, just returning from the outfield, reacted to this. "Darling. ♡ Didn't my

honey lemon satisfy you?"

"Your honey lemon is metaphorical. That won't fill me up. Hey, stop jabbing my stomach!"

Nanase smiled gently. "Umi, I'll help you out."

"Thanks, Nana."

Kaito, carrying a huge cooler on his shoulder, raised his voice. "Sneaky of you, Saku. You should rely on us more at times like this, right, Kazuki?"

"If he came to us begging, it just wouldn't feel right." Kenta, standing at a distance, looked somewhat shy and restless.

Seeing him, I raised my voice. "Hey, Atomu! It's your fault Kenta's scared. Apologize."

"Huh?! Fine. I'm sorry for teasing you that one time, so hurry up and collect the balls, you shut-in."

"Actually, I only picked on you because I wanted Chitose to notice me; sorry about that.' That's what you should say, isn't it, Mr. Hot and Cold?"

"Ugh. Just go get into position! Or I'll punch your crazy brains outta your skull!"

"Fine, I'll decorate the night sky with your lazily thrown balls and make it a present for Orihime and Hikoboshi!"

"Um, King? Uemura? I really don't mind anymore, so please don't..."

"Shut up!!!"

"Oh... You guys are too cruel..."

After that, we ate the food that Yua had made for us and got right back to it until the sun went down.

Nanase, Kazuki, and Kaito helped Haru grab the balls in the outfield, and Kenta collected the balls they threw back and rolled them over to us at the baseball mound.

Yua delivered water and towels to everyone at every opportunity, and Yuuko and Nazuna kept shouting stuff out, sometimes cheering, sometimes jeering.

At the end of the day, even Asuka, who happened to be passing by, lined up next to them. “Show me how cool you can actually be!” she shouted.

*Maybe..., I thought.*

If I hadn’t quit the baseball club, this kind of scenario would never be happening.

If I continued to focus on club activities, the amount of time I’d have had to spend with my classmates would have been drastically reduced, and I wouldn’t have had the luxury of getting involved in Kenta’s problems. If I hadn’t been depressed at that time, I don’t know if I would have bonded with Asuka, either.

Atomu and Nazuna wouldn’t have gotten close to our group like this, either.

I was filled with regret, withdrawn from my dream, rain falling constantly in my heart.

But that led me to the present, this precious moment.

Everything’s connected.

There’s no going back. No do-overs. No reset button.

Ah, but actually, I don’t feel like doing that anymore.

I think I’ll swing a bat for the sake of tomorrow instead.

My tomorrow. Haru’s tomorrow. Atomu’s tomorrow. Yusuke’s and Hirano’s and the coach’s.

This final swing will connect to the future somehow. I’m sure of it.



—Then came Friday, the day before the first round.

With Haru and Atomu with me, I finished making some final adjustments.

“Finally a hundred out of a hundred, huh? It took you long enough, Boy Genius.”

“The pitcher got winded too quick, and that really put me off my game.”

“Hah. Keep talking.”

How many hits have I made in the past week?

The skin on my hands cracked and bled, dried up during the night, and then bled again the next day.

I approached the mound.

"I'm not gonna say thank you. You were having fun, too."

"I was never expecting thanks. Just show some results, or I'll drop you off the cliffs at Tojinbo."

"Don't worry; I'll show them. I'm the boy genius, remember?"

"Bold words for someone sweating with desperation."

—*Clap.*

We hit our palms together as hard as we could and then both threw ourselves down right on the spot.

I looked at the sky, seeing puffy cumulonimbus clouds, the lower part of them dyed orange. It looked like a flock of whales swimming in the sea at dusk.

The smell of damp night wafted over from the direction of the river.

In less than half an hour, it would be pitch-black, and our odd trio would finally disband.

Haru headed to the convenience store to buy some stuff.

I thought it might be the right time for us jerks to talk privately.

"Atomu, why did you quit baseball?"

"Why are you asking me that now?"

"Tomorrow let's hold a memorial service together."

When I said that, Atomu was dumbfounded before releasing a short laugh.

"Middle school's prefectural final. You had three hits and one walk. Two home runs with five RBIs. Do you remember when I walked you?"

"I don't remember much, but was it the last at bat?"

"—It was intentional."

He spat out the words somewhat self-deprecatingly.

Giving the batter an intentional walk. He meant intentionally throwing the ball four times to force the batter to walk to first base. It has the same effect as a single, but conversely, it's a relatively passive escape strategy, as it's better to land a bigger hit.

"It was a tournament game. If that was the team's policy—well, I guess it can't be helped."

"No, actually at the time, the coach's instructions were 'Do what you like.' Do the walk or go for the strikeout—it's up to you, he said."

I stayed silent, nodding for him to continue.

"When I started playing baseball in elementary school, I had nothing to fear. I really believed I was a genius. But I didn't rely on my raw talent. I worked ten times harder than anyone else. My arm overpowered a well-known team, and I threw myself toward the finals with everything I had."

However, he continued.

"That game was the first time in my life I freaked out. I threw my best pitch with confidence, and you sent it to the stands with ease. It never occurred to me that a batter would land two home runs in one game."

Little by little, the color of the sky was beginning to change.

Atomu's voice had a slightly broken quality to it.

"We made it to the final inning with a one-run lead. Two outs, a runner on first. A homer would turn it around. It would be the game if I gave up a hit—and in came number three, Chitose. Anyone's hands would be shaking, but you entered the batter's box with a casual smile of enjoyment. When I saw that, I knew it. *Ah, he's going to hit it.* The real genius, the real hero, is this guy. I'm just a barking dog, here as set dressing for this potentially amazing moment."

His tone was oddly calm, in contrast to what he was saying.

"I've come up with a hundred excuses. There was no way around it, it was for the sake of the team, keep-away is one of the tactics, mature pitching means to only go up against an opponent you can definitely beat... But as a result of trying to keep you at bay, it all collapsed. Mentally, I was completely shaken. I

let the next batter have three bases.”

Then Atomu started laughing, as if he could no longer hold it in.

“I realized, then. Once I knew I couldn’t win, I stopped enjoying the game. I tucked my tail between my legs. I could never reach the top like that. Sure, I could be a fairly good player. I could go pretty far. But I could never be like one of the stars on TV. So I gave up.”

“...I see.”

After saying that, I stood up and grabbed the bat.

“Then let’s do it. The match we couldn’t do back then.”

I picked up a ball and threw it at Atomu.

“...Gah. Ha-ha-ha. I can barely even throw one more ball like this.”

“Well, I’ve only got one swing left in me.”

I went to bat and started my usual routine.

Atomu smoothed the mound and took a deep breath.

“Darn, I had a nice summer, thanks to you.”

With bright-red passion burning in his eyes, he glared at me.

Then he wound up, as if using every bit of strength in his body.

I readied my bat, and...

“Summer’s only just beginning.”

I grinned.

Then he threw the best four-seam fastball he’d thrown all week.

I swung my wooden bat easily through the air, and the ball...

“See ya.”

Not long after, Atomu walked away across the field. I couldn’t see, since his back was turned, but I’m pretty sure he was smiling.



Haru and I finished cleaning our equipment and came to the wide leveled

riverbed nearby.

We settled down in a suitable place and divided the Papicos we'd bought at the convenience store between us.

"The week went by so fast."

Haru smiled, looking conflicted. "I kinda get that. But at the same time, it feels like it went on so long I could cry. Even during the test period, I had morning training, so it might be the first time I've been away from club for such a long time."

"What about your teammates...?"

She shook her head silently in response to my question.

"I'm still in touch with Nana. Everyone said they've calmed down already, but I wonder if it's the right thing for them to calm down, you know?"

"Well, you won't reach a fundamental solution like that, I agree."

Just reconciling things on a surface level doesn't mean that the gap in everyone's mindset will be filled.

It'll explode at some point again, and there's a possibility that this time it will create a crack that can't be fixed.

It was frustrating that I couldn't give her any advice, but I knew very well that this wasn't the kind of problem that could be solved with words.

"But you know..." Haru said, holding the almost empty tube of Papico in her mouth. "When I was watching you and Uemura, I felt like I was starting to grasp something. About what I should do going forward for my teammates, you know?"

"Haru, at a certain point, it started becoming your training session as well, didn't it?"

At first, she was just vaguely chasing the balls I hit with a somewhat unsettled look on her face. However, after a certain point, the sparkle in her eyes clearly returned, and she began using it as an alternative practice for basketball, by, for example, cutting back in the middle of a dash and continuously running without a break.

"You're strong, after all. You don't run away. You fight head-on."

"Doofus."

Haru clenched her fist in front of her heart and then held it out to me.

"Here's the passion you gave to me a year ago."

I made a fist in front of my chest the same way, and then we clunked fists together.

"And right here is the passion that you gave back to me, Haru."

Tentatively, we bumped our fists together a few times, then grasped each other's hand, our fingers intertwining.

"Let's go and find the answer I couldn't find that day. The one you're still in search of."

"The two of us, huh?" Haru's eyes seemed to tremble. "Chitose, close your eyes."

I didn't ask why.

*It doesn't matter what she's got waiting for me*, I thought.

With my eyes closed, the sounds and smells of the night seemed to envelop me.

Slowly, I went over the memories of the past week.

This time that Haru had given to me.

Haru, scolding me, crying for me, making me cry.

*I'm going to go and stand on that field again.*

She gently tugged her fingers from my grasp and touched my cheek with them. Tracing the edges of my lips, then she was gone in the blink of an eye.

Something soft was slipped over my right wrist.

"You can look now."

When I slowly opened my eyes, I saw that Haru appeared to be somewhat embarrassed, smiling with her cheeks stained red.

"What's this? A wristband?"

On my wrist was a bright-ultramarine-blue wristband, the same color as the team color of Fuji High School's girls' basketball club.

"I wanted to give you some kind of talisman, but I couldn't think of anything cool. You can keep it in your bag if you don't want to wear it."

"This is kinda tight. Is it yours, Haru?"

"Uh... Uh-huh! It's more the sentiment of it, though. Like a good-luck charm, to make sure you'll win."

"..."

"Don't sniff it! Of course I washed it first!"

"Only joking." I smiled, gently stroking the wristband. "I don't think I can wear it during the game due to high school baseball rules, but I'll keep it in my back pocket."

"Because you want to feel dear little Haru close to you?"

"Because it'll feel like I've got you pressed against my ass."

"You pig! If you want a beating, I'll give it to you right now!"

I danced away from her as she raised her hand menacingly.

Choking with laughter, Haru came darting after me.

My body was aching all over.

My hands were so shredded that I wasn't even sure if I could feel them.

But my head was as clear as the blue sky in summer.

The inside of my chest was boiling hot with bright-red blood.

Before long, Haru grabbed the back of my shirt, and we both went tumbling.

As we lay on our backs, gasping for breath like idiots, the sky above was ultramarine. Just like us.

"Let's make tomorrow a day we'll remember for decades to come."

I lifted my hand and slowly placed it over the moon. The moon that was

brightly reflecting the light of the sun.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Sun's Smile



*The morning of a game just hits different, I thought.*

From the moment I woke up, my head was clear, and my heart was calm and still.

The air I breathed in was somehow cool, and it seemed to permeate every corner of my body.

My field of vision was bright and clear, and the dust floating in the morning sun that came shining through the gaps in the curtains seemed to almost sparkle.

It was the stillness that comes with the beginning of summer.

Suppressing each wave of this *now, now, now* feeling, telling myself, just a little longer, not just yet... It's that moment of silence.

Ah, it's so nostalgic.

This is game morning.

Carefully, so as not to break the spell, I rinsed my mouth out, glugged some mineral water, and then I took my usual shower. Then ate pickled plums and fermented soybeans with two bowls of rice. Then drank a glass of orange juice, brushed my teeth, lightly stretched my muscles to check on my physical condition.

After that, I took out the uniform that Yusuke had given to me and changed into undersocks, stockings, and pants, starting from the bottom.

Since I would be sweating in the warm-ups before the game, I put a worn-out practice team T-shirt on top of my undershirt and put my numbered shirt in my sports bag.

Then I packed up the old tools, spikes, gloves, and spare undershirt that I'd spent yesterday carefully cleaning.

When everything was ready, I put the wristband that Haru had given me into my back pocket and lightly tapped it as if activating its magic.

Then I put the bag over my left shoulder and picked up the bat case.

When I put on my training shoes and opened the door, I was greeted by the scorching sun.

A hot, stifling wind was blowing.

*All right. Let's go and put this to bed for good.*



*The morning of a game just hits different, I thought.*

I, Haru Aomi, was awakened by the pounding of my heart.

From the moment I woke up, my whole body felt hot, my chest burning with passion.

I sucked in a deep breath and yelled, "Let's do this!"

Fighting the urge to run out the door right away, I carefully peeled the sheets aside.

Then, as I began my usual morning preparations, I realized... "Oh yes. Today's his game."

...I mumbled his name in a small voice, surprising myself.

Are you awake yet?

Did you sleep well?

Feeling good?

Did you eat breakfast?

Even though I know I shouldn't be worrying about him, I just can't help

thinking about it.

It's been like this since last night, and I instinctively woke up in combat mode, just like I do when it's my own game.

I was going to be able to see Chitose standing on the baseball field once more.

To see Chitose all passionate.

To see him, all sweaty and unrefined.

—Yikes. Don't think about that.

My heart's never going to stop pounding if I go thinking things like that.

After taking a shower and eating breakfast, I was about to pull out my usual comfortable shorts and T-shirt from the closet when my hand suddenly froze.

What caught my eye instead was a blue dress, as blue as a summer pool.

It was the one Yuuko picked out for me the other day.

*"Why not buy at least one cute outfit to wear on special days?"*

She said something like that, as I recall.

This kind of thing isn't really me, and I always scoff a little at girls who come to watch sports games all dressed up. And I'd be so embarrassed if I thought people were judging me. Still...

I reached out my hand, feeling the same way I did when I challenged Mai to that game.

I mean, today's definitely going to be a special day for me. And more importantly than anything else, it's bound to be a special day for him.



I met up with the baseball guys at the school, and we headed to the prefectural baseball stadium on the team bus.

The coach, who hadn't spoken a single word to me since that day, asked me only one thing.

*"What number do you want, Chitose?"*

*"Number three."*

It was a short response, but it let him know that I'd completed the necessary tune-ups.

Instead, I spent the time in transit and while we were warming up fielding depressing questions from Yusuke and Hirano.

Where and how I practiced, why I was using a wooden bat, how good Atomu was, etc., etc.

It was like filling in the blanks of a year, and at the same time, it was filled with nostalgia, like a family get-together.

*Yusuke's injury seems to be recovering smoothly. The cast has already been removed, and it seemed that he has started simple rehabilitation already, and was avoiding the use of crutches as much as possible.*

Of course, he was looking ahead to the second round next week.

*Can't go losing now, I thought.*

I hadn't been to a baseball stadium in a year. The first thing that hit me was the brightness of the green grass.

As I looked around the sports field, I remembered how vast it was.

Come to think of it, when I played my first game here in elementary school, I was really excited to play baseball in the same place as the pros. Seeing my name displayed on the electronic bulletin board and having the announcer girl read my name out loud—it was all new to me.

...I'm talking like this is past tense, but actually in this present moment, I'm as excited as I ever remember being. The thought made me smile a little.

Before long, it was Fuji High's turn for fielding practice, and we ran out onto the field.



Just past eleven AM.

When I arrived at the stadium, Fuji's defensive practice had already begun.

As expected, since it was the first round of the regional qualifiers, most of the people in the fairly large spectator area seemed to be the parents or friends of

each team.

I immediately found Yuzuki, Yuuko, Ucchi, and Ayase lined up behind the back net. Nishino was also in the background a little farther away. Kaito and Kazuki weren't able to come because of club activities, and Yamazaki seemed disappointed that he had family plans that had been decided long in advance.

*Tsk, Chitose.* Being supported by a group of cute girls like this. Even if a dead ball hits his head, he can't go complaining.

I was going to join Yuzuki and the others, but then I caught sight of a certain guy sitting with a poker face, so I just greeted everyone lightly and went to sit down next to him.

"Aomi. Why are you sitting here?" Uemura frowned with displeasure as he spoke. "Sitting alone like a sulking junior high school student? You should come and cheer with everyone else."

"Who's cheering? That's lame. I just came to watch."

"Oh man, you're so annoying! Thanks to you, I can't go over there, either."

"Just go, already."

"I want to watch very closely, so I need a commentator."

"Tsk."

Ignoring that deliberate cluck of the tongue, I immediately asked a question.

"Chitose didn't practice fielding very much, did he?"

"We practice catches and long throws every day, and defense doesn't need that certain touch that batting does. As long as you practice it a little bit every day, it's fine."

Just then, Mr. Wataya faced right and hit a pop fly.

Chitose, who easily reached the bottom of its trajectory, smiled so wide it was visible even from back here as he caught it with a gloved hand that he had wrapped around his back.

The stadium reacted as one, including the opposing team and the spectators. Some people were surprised, some clapped their hands and laughed, while

others frowned.

“Isn’t that—?”

*—the coach who always blows his top,* I was about to say, but just then, as expected, Mr. Wataya’s angry voice cut me off.

“Chitose! Quit goofing around!!!”

Chitose took off his hat and stuck out his tongue.

“Saku, you’re so cool!”

“Amazing, Chitose!”

Yuuko and Ayase took turns yelling.

“Actually, a true fool couldn’t do this kind of thing.”

Beside me, Uemura was muttering.

“You mean he’s not just showing off?”

“Well, maybe that’s the case with him. But look at those guys from Fuji High. They were nervous and stiff, but suddenly they’ve started to come alive.”

Come to think of it, until a little while ago, you could see how stiff they were and how many errors they were making, but now it seemed like they were playing more freely.

“On the other hand, from the opposing team’s point of view, it’s not cool to act so unbothered when you’re a weak team. Based on that display, I bet there’s a few players who’ve figured out that Chitose is *that* Chitose.”

“He was *that* famous?”

“Isn’t it rare for a junior high school softball player in Fukui to have never heard of his name? And today’s starting pitcher was decimated by him during the prefectural tournament. They can’t have not noticed him.”

*Kinda like Mai Todo, as far as girls’ basketball goes, I guess?*

*If so, that makes me kinda annoyed.*

After the practice, Fuji High pulled up to the bench.

In the midst of it, Chitose seemed to hold up a gloved fist in our direction, but

I couldn't react because I thought it might just as easily have been aimed at Yuuko, Ucchi, or Yuzuki.



"What a jerk, ignoring me."

I laughed at Haru, who'd remained poker-faced, and made my way to the bench while grumbling about her.

The blue dress she bought that day... It looks really good on her.

Even though her panties were almost on show, she kept her legs primly together.

I had no idea why she was sitting next to Atomu, and to be honest, the sight of it bugged me a little. But let's just keep that secret.

Yuuko was there. Yua was there. Nanase was there. Nazuna was there. Even Asuka was there.

From the right defensive position, you could see every inch of the stand.

Days like this always make me feel good.

"You jerk, you're doing it again!" Yusuke, who was waiting with drinks, came to join me happily.

"I'm a superstar. It's fan service."

When I joked back, the coach shot me a sharp glance.

"Nice play," he mumbled.

"Huh?!"

Surprised, my reaction came out quite rude.

After all, when I caught a ball behind my back during that practice game, I was quickly removed from the starting lineup and given a stubborn penalty.

He was just bellowing, moments before, as well.

"I understand that's how you do things."

*Oh right, I thought. He's had a year to grow, too.*

Now Hirano came to sit on my other side.

"So which girl is the one you're after, Saku? The little shrimp who went off on me?"

"That's the mindset of a guy who doesn't have options. Listen. *I'm* the one they're all after."

"I hope you hit your head on the outfield fence and die."

"Listen here..."

"But that little one is actually pretty cute. Hey, introduce me sometime."

"If you can play a perfect game, I'll think about it."

"Against Echi High?! At least give me a chance!"

While we were bantering, Yusuke gave the signal, and we all gathered around the coach.

"As you know, we're definitely going to get into a pitcher's duel today. If we let them get more than two points, I think it's going to be pretty tough."

"""Yes, coach.""""

"And at either rate, we need to get the first point. Let Hirano get an unimpeded throw."

"""Yes, coach.""""

"All right, form a circle!"

We formed a circle in front of the bench, shoulder to shoulder.

"Saku, you do it."

"That's the captain's job. Just do it like usual."

"That's right," said Yusuke, laughing and flexing his arm.

"We'll make..."

"""A way through!"""

"We'll destroy..."

"""Every obstacle!"""

"Let's go!"

“““Fuji Hiiigh!!!”””

We yelled from our diaphragms and lined up in front of the bench.

At the referee's signal, we ran out to face the opposing team across home plate.

It goes without saying, but the line here, with only twelve people, was quite short.

“The match between Echizen High School and Fuji High School will now begin. All bow.”

“““Here's to a fair game!!!”””

Fuji, second to bat, scattered across the field.

Unable to hold back the feeling of excitement welling up in me, I ran to the right at full speed.

*Here it is. The long-awaited game.*

*Dooooot.*

Before long, Hirano threw the first pitch, and the long siren resounded across the stadium.



In the first inning, Hirano walked the lead batter, but after that, we finished it with three batters.

It seemed like his powerful four-seam and snappy breaking ball were still in good condition. I wasn't sure if he'd followed my advice, but he hadn't thrown a single slider yet.

His hopes for a perfect game had already evaporated, though. My condolences.

Then we made it to the bottom of the first inning.

Our first and second batters were easily knocked out by grounders in the infield.

It looked like it was going to come down to the pitchers.

Looking at it from the edge, the opponent pitcher was probably still playing with about 70 percent of his power.

I understood how the coach felt, in wanting to prioritize that first point.

*Well, no problem.* I stood up at the next batter's circle.

—For a game like this, I really want to be number three.

I entered the batter's box and smoothed the ground.

I aligned my right foot with the long side of home plate, my feet slightly more than shoulder width apart.

Basically, I have a principle of not standing in front of or behind the batter's box, depending on the pitcher's ball speed or curveball.

Similarly, I never hold the bat short or use a compact stance.

I think it's more natural to think about how to deal using a familiar stance and position no matter how fast the fastballs are or how polished the breaking balls are.

“Up third, right field, Chitose.”

The announcer's voice boomed out.

“Chitose, go for it!”

That was Haru just now.

“Saku! Hit the ball!”

“Go, Chitose!”

“Do your best, Saku.”

Yuuko, Nazuna, and Yua, huh.

“Chitose, show us something good!”

That was Yuzuki.

“Saku!”

Ha-ha, even Asuka was yelling.

I could hear my friends' voices clearly.

Proof that I was nice and calm.

I was just about to get ready when the catcher called time. It struck me as odd, since we couldn't be at that point yet, so I left the plate, swinging the bat lightly.

The catcher rushed to the mound and was talking with the pitcher while covering his mouth with a mitt.

After a while, he came back over while bowing his head.

"Chitose... Are you the Chitose we played in the semifinals in junior high?"

While I was smoothing out the ground like before, the catcher called out to me.

Although this was relatively unheard of in high school baseball, the umpire rarely called them out unless it was an outright obstruction.

"What, you batters and catchers all entered Echi High?"

"You remembered."

Actually, I'd forgotten all about it until Atomu brought it up, but the catcher must have figured it out based on the way we were speaking, and anyway, this wasn't really the time for intricate explanations.

"Well, go easy on me."

That said, I ended the conversation, began my routine, and prepared my bat.

The first pitch was thrown, and a powerful fastball came flying right at my chest.

I lightly bent my body to dodge it. Ball.

"Hyugh."

The catcher snorted in response to my involuntary grunt.

"Not like the old days, is it? Using a wooden bat... You'll only have yourself to blame if it breaks, you know."

As expected, the first and second batters weren't taking it seriously.

When the catcher called time just before, it was to make sure I really was *that*

Chitose, so they could adjust the ratio of the force applied.

Getting through the first inning without danger is vital when it comes to carrying the game to one's advantage.

A quick three-out will create a good rhythm, and conversely, if a run seems likely, there's the possibility that nerves will make the pitcher useless.

The second pitch was a low, outside four-seam with a single rotation. Just barely a strike.

The third pitch was a beautiful curveball, again low and away. This one was in, too.

This was another fast four-seam to the chest. Ball.

A careful placement, I thought.

Intimidate with inside balls and then get your strikes near the outside.

Two strikes. Two balls.

Is it almost time for the real battle to come?

I'm done observing now.

As the opponent, they want to cut it neatly with three people and plant their prized pitching power in my mind. But I'm the third batter, so I can prevent that.

I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly.

I tapped my back pocket lightly, then readjusted my grip, extended my arms in front of my face, tilted the bat back, and looked at the tip.

After counting three seconds, I relaxed and lightly swayed.

—All sound disappeared from the world.

As the pitcher's leg lifted, just as he put his weight on his other leg and started to sink in, the batter stepped back on his right foot in preparation to swing.

From the vague background scenery, the white ball was all I could see clearly.

Faster even than before, a fastball that probably had full strength put into it.

Too bad, man. Now that I was used to his throws, it wasn't going to be

enough.

And to add, the course of his throw...

—It was my bread and butter.

I swung the bat without hesitation.



*CRACK!*

I'd heard that sound many times over the past week, and it pierced through me.

The usual clap of a ball being struck sounded different with a wooden bat—drier somehow, I thought with a strange sense of calm.

"All right, nice. He *is* good at the low inside pitch, after all."

Beside me, Uemura was speaking with irrepressible excitement.

As for me, I was just following the trajectory of the white ball with my eye.

It's like the moon floating in the midday sky, I thought.

If it keeps going like that without falling, it'll fly all the way to the Milky Way... Just like a certain person jokingly said.

"...It's beautiful."

Time had stopped.

*Hmm, actually, I think everyone was probably cheering.*

Screaming, roaring, hissing with anger.

But none of that reached my ears.

That one swing was replaying, over and over again in my mind.

It was hard to imagine that coming from someone who'd been wearing bloody gloves for the past week, a mess of sweat and dirt.

Relaxed, supple, and subdued.

Every movement coordinated, from the toes to the tip of the bat, just like in traditional Japanese dance.

People become beautiful when their movements are as sharp as they can be.

Ah, Chitose was running at full speed.

Even though it was a perfect hit, obvious even to a layperson like myself. Even though the pro players on TV pump their fists when they make a good hit. Somehow, it was just like him, though.

*How long will it fly; how far will it fly?*

*Don't go too far away, please.*

*...Wait, what am I thinking?*

...In the end, the ball fell so far away I couldn't even see it from here.

Far beyond the right stand, I could hear the trees shaking.

"Oh man, he did it."

The crowd erupted, drowning out Uemura's mutterings and enveloping me in a wall of sound.

Well, actually, there weren't that many spectators, but it felt like everyone's enthusiasm was amplified.

Chitose finally slowed down and rounded second base.

*Huh? Did he hit a home run? Seriously?*

I finally came to my senses.

"Hey, Uemura, isn't this kinda amazing?"

When I asked that, he gave me a look as if he thought I was a real idiot.

"It's been a year since he's played a real game, he's unfamiliar with a wooden bat, and his opponent is one of the prefecture's top-class ace pitchers. If you can see anything to criticize about him hitting that ball clear outside the stadium just now, then please enlighten me."

*Right, right... Right...*

He did it; he proved himself in front of his old friends.

He wasn't just bluffing about his dream.

He really did intend to make it all the way to Koshien.

Ah, but see there? He's got that look on his face like that was never his intention, not even one little bit.

His whole body was yelling out about how much fun he was having just playing a game again after so long.

After kicking third base, Chitose fumbled into his pocket and pulled out the ultramarine wristband I gave him.

Holding it in his fist, he stepped on home plate, and then—



—he grinned like an innocent schoolboy, raising his right fist high toward my direction.

Our eyes met.

*Here's a fist pump just for you. Don't pretend you didn't notice it this time,* his smile seemed to say.

Aw, you can't go doing stuff like that.

Look, Yuzuki is looking over at me, and her face is kinda stiff.

You dumb idiot. I have to go fight tomorrow as an athlete myself. I don't have time to be a girl right now.

If you keep looking at me like that... I'm never going to be able to calm my pounding heart back down.

I'm gonna start wanting to run down there and hug you right now.

I'm about to boil over with passion.

No, you know what? I'm going to let it out.

I lifted my fist and stood up, yelling:

“I love you, darling!!!”

I yelled with all my might, flinging my heart out there like his home run.

I could sense Yuuko, Ucchi, Yuzuki, Ayase, and probably even Nishino as well, all looking at me.

Uemura rolled his eyes.

I don't care. I can't stop these feelings anyway.

It's more like me to break forward and run with them.



—About an hour and a half from the start of the game.

The sun, which was almost directly overhead, was slowly burning my neck.

What was the temperature on the mound now?

Hirano's pitching was marked by obvious fatigue.

“Yikes.”

From my defensive position on the right, I glanced at the scoreboard and muttered to myself.

Bottom of the seventh. Two to one.

Fuji High got that one homer in the first inning, but after that, the score stopped moving.

In the second at bat in the fourth inning, I hit a double, and Hirano hit a single to create a chance—one out with runners on first and third—but it didn’t last.

The third at bat in the sixth inning was a walk. The following batters were easily defeated.

Ultimately, after the second inning, only those two hits and the walk were able to get on base.

Our opponents, Echi High, didn’t have a strong batting lineup, either, but they were able to seize upon one of Hirano’s very rare openings, and we gave up two runs.

Little by little, I began to see the difference in strength.

And Echi High’s attacks kept on coming.

One out, runners on first and second. Batter was number two.

*If we don’t pull ourselves together, there’s a high chance that the cleanup hitters four, five, and six will end up in a big inning.*

That was the way things were leaning.

Thanks to the recent slow torture, our morale was sinking.

“We’re not doing so bad against Echi High,” I’d heard someone say on the bench earlier.

I also saw Hirano and the others grinning.

Yusuke hung his head, as if to blame himself.

It was the same as a year ago.

What did they even come begging to me for?

I almost started yelling, but then I remembered what Nanase told me Haru once said.

*—But I'm certain that me saying "Hey, get serious about this" isn't going to do any good.*

That's right.

Especially since I'm just here as a helper, for one match only.

I didn't have the right to say that sort of thing, not after I fled, all by myself.

"Hirano! I'm not telling you to stake your life on this, but at least put your back into it!"

In the end, am I the same as I was a year ago?

All I can do is call out to them from the outside like this.

Hirano didn't even have time to turn around and look at his companions.

"Infielders, you might have to run forward. Let's make sure to catch it!"

A bunt came rolling in to third, as soon as the crack sounded.

But the baseman was completely unprepared, and his response was too slow.

"You won't make it! Don't throw!" I yelled, but in the confusion, the throw went wide over first.

The runner on second base was rounding third.

"Dammit! No, you don't!"

Running in from right field to help out, I grabbed the ball and fired it back to the catcher.

The runner who was heading for home stopped on the way and returned to third base.

Bases loaded with one out. Their number three was up to bat.

If he hits a fly to the outfield and the runners make sure to tag up, they'll take an additional run.

Darn it. This isn't going good.



"It's the same as back then."

As I watched Chitose return the ball like an arrow, I murmured to myself.

Beside me, Uemura also grunted with dissatisfaction.

"Tch. The heck do they think they're doing."

"...Starting to prepare to accept defeat."

"Yeah, you think so, too?"

"They want this to end quickly. They don't want the ball to come to them. It's like that."

"Even the ace, Hirano, can't do anything in this condition. Their hearts are broken. The ball's dead."

It was good, at first.

Chitose's home run really excited the team, and everyone was filled with the belief they could win this. After that, though, our team couldn't hit at all, and as the other team steadily scored points, the tide turned against us.

"Half of it's that jerk's fault," Uemura said bitterly.

"Huh?! What are you talking about? Chitose's the only one who's hitting decently."

"—That's why. What do you think the Fuji High team guys are thinking right now? It's nice to have someone with talent?"

I wasn't sure what he was getting at.

Apparently, he noticed.

Without waiting for my reaction, Uemura continued.

"Even after effectively taking a year off, he can still hit better than us, even though we've worked hard every day, just by making some minor adjustments."

"Give me a break! Even after he quit the team, he still swung the bat every day. The fact that he was able to do that at all is proof that he's been working hard on honing his body since he was young. I mean, this past week—"

"Doesn't matter. They can't appreciate that. Especially not guys like them,

who only see people better than them through a filter of genius.”

---

*“You’re talented, Umi, so of course you never hesitate. You’ve got the skills it takes to see the reward of your hard efforts.”*

The words that Sen said that day crossed my mind.

“Plus.” Uemura folded his hands behind his head. “If you wanna ask me if anyone could do the same thing as Chitose if they put in the same effort, I honestly can’t say that they could. It’s impossible to tell how much of it’s talent and how much of it’s effort, after all.”

“But...at least they can do their best for the game taking place in front of them. Even now, Chitose is the only one running all out and shouting at the top of his lungs.”

“Yeah. It pisses me off, too.”

Even though he was sitting proudly and pompously, his voice was filled with frustration.

*Chitose... What can we do? What can you and I do?*



*What can I do? What can we do?*

That was what I kept thinking to myself as I carefully observed every move made by the number three of the opposing team, who stood in the batter’s box.

Even if I hit another home run in my next at bat, the score would be tied.

If we couldn’t get past this tight spot, we wouldn’t be getting another chance.

I told Haru that we should both go in search of our own answers, and this was the result.

On the mound, Hirano continued to pitch without much enthusiasm.

Before I had time to think any more, a powerful fastball shot right into the middle of the strike zone.

—This is bad.

For a moment, I turned to the rear and took a step forward.

—CRACK!

As expected, the ball that was hit with a full-might swing flew all the way out to the right center field.

That was huge... But it just barely wouldn't make it. Right into the fence, huh.

I trusted my own eye and ran at full speed.

This was the point where, usually, I'd have to decisively handle the cushion ball and prevent a big loss of points.

But if we conceded even one point here, it would be basically fatal.

We had no chance but to catch it on pain of death.

I faced the center who was running in late and yelled out.

“I’ll get it! You relay!”

—Run, hurry up, five more steps, four more steps—no, I can’t make it.

“Gaaaghhh!!!”

Without thinking about it, I flew toward the fence.

I extended my gloved left hand, and...

—SLAM.

My wrist, head, and shoulder connected with the fence, one after the other.

“Ughhh.”

A dull thud—and sharp pain shot through my entire body.

The ball? Got it.

What about the guy on third?

Probably took off for home with a hit like that. Now he’d have to run back to tag up.

I could still make it.

As soon as I tried to force myself to stand up and get into position for a long throw...

—*Zing.*

Sharp pain shot through my raised left wrist.

“Hiiiraaaanooo!”

Then, just like that, I wound up and threw the ball to Hirano, who would relay it.

—*Clump!*

I was off a little, but it still landed safely.

The runner went back to third, making the decision that to continue would be too dangerous.

I made it in time.

I gathered all my strength and yelled.

“One man left! I’ll protect you if it kills me!”

Hirano’s expression showed just a little bit of power, and he struck out the following number four with a snappy fastball and a slider.

*That’s it. You should have done that from the beginning, you idiot.*

—*Zing. Zing. Zing.*

...Ah man.



When I returned to the bench, my friends were waiting for me, somewhat rejuvenated.

“Nice play!”

“You’re too talented, aren’t you?”

“Is it normal to catch that kind of ball, man?”

I let it roll off me, calling out to Hirano.

“Hey, can I get some ice?”

“Okay, but what happened?”

“It’s so hot out I want some to stick some down my pants. Don’t look, you

freak."

"You idiot. Go get some ice. And... You really saved us out there."

"I told you to save the last slider. No more of those 'Mommy, I want to hide'-ers."

"Oh, shut up. It's not the time for your jokes."

I smiled and went behind the bench.

After confirming that no one was there, I filled a bucket with ice, topped it off with water, and stuck my left hand in.

"Gah."

The pain was getting worse and worse.

Needless to say, the cause of it was that play just now.

After all, it was as if the entire weight of my body, after running and flying with all my strength, was caught solely on my wrist.

I guess I couldn't exactly laugh at Yusuke's injury.

*Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.*

From behind, I could hear the sound of spikes hitting concrete.

I slowly pulled out my hand and turned, hiding the bucket of ice behind me.

I was surprised to see the coach standing there, with his usual furrowed brow.

I let out a playful voice while holding back the pain. "I had no idea. Guess you don't wear training shoes during a game."

Unlike players, who run around on the field, coaches who generally only participate in field practice typically wear training shoes without spikes.

That's why I thought the footsteps just now were from one of my teammates.

"I don't want to stand on the field for a game and have it feel like practice," he muttered vaguely. "Show me that," he said, taking my left arm.

"Gah."

His rough fingers applied force here and there, and I let out a groan.

"I don't think it's broken-broken, but maybe it's a minor fracture or a torn ligament... All right, you're getting swapped out. Good work today."

I reflexively shook him off.

"No way. It's just a sprain, probably. I'll just ice it, so go and give those guys a kick in the pants and tell them to buy me some time. Don't you have a yelling quota to fulfill?"

"If you push it too far, you'll never be able to play again like you do now."

"My baseball career ended last summer."

"—Listen..."

The coach clenched both fists and stared at the floor for a few seconds.

"...I'm sorry." Slowly, he lowered his head. "I can't apologize in front of the other players. It would devalue the years they've spent believing in me. It's cowardly to do it like this, I know, but... I'm sorry."

"Can...can you not do this during a game?" I panicked and tried to stop him, but he just kept on talking.

"When I first saw you, I thought you were a true genius. A player who could aim for Koshien—and beyond. I wanted to raise you up to be the kind of person who can stand back up even after experiencing setbacks."

I fell silent and listened.

"But looking back calmly, you were more sincere and dedicated than anyone else when it came to baseball, even without my guidance. You were already the kind of person who stayed looking up. You tried to bounce back with hard work even when you were frustrated. From the beginning, my eyes were clouded by a kind of prejudice, held by untalented people, that makes us believe that all talented people are arrogant. I always coached my players to be humble, and so when confronted with your considerable talent... I was unnerved."

The coach's voice trembled.

"All I had to do was stand back and let you play baseball every day, but... I took that away from you. On top of that, it took me this long to even admit my mistakes."

"That's enough." I put my hand on the coach's shoulder. "Please raise your head. I understand how you were thinking. To be honest, I think it's bullshit to force your own values onto others. And to be even more honest, listening to you talk right now actually pissed me off. However..."

I looked into his eyes...the eyes of the one person I found it painful to even look at, and smiled.

"Someone helped me gain perspective. Made me see that I went about things in the wrong way, too."

*—So the coach cut you? So what? Go lick his boots and apologize.*

*—So what if your teammates weren't taking things seriously? You should make them take it seriously, using your passion and your playing skills!*

I continued.

"Please. Let me continue the game. I don't want to leave something behind forever in the summer... On the baseball field."

The coach pulled his lips into a tight line, then briefly muttered that he understood and turned away.

I watched him go, then thrust my hand into the bucket again.



"Something's not right with him." I turned to Uemura, worried.

"Huh?"

"Look. He's holding his left hand still, even when he's running."

Just then, a ball rolled to right field.

It had just hit the second baseman's glove, so there wasn't much momentum. Chitose swept it up with his bare hand, as if to show how composed he was.

But his catch was totally different from how it was during the practice.

It's not like him to act this way during a game.

"—Ah, dammit. When he hit the fence."

When I saw Uemura's reaction, I was convinced that this was the case.

*He's trying to hide it well, but he's injured his left hand somehow.*

"Is Chitose going to go up to bat at the bottom of this inning?"

We were at the top of the ninth inning.

The pitcher, who'd regained his composure after Chitose's play, dug in his heels and hadn't given them any more runs. But the score was still two to one coming in to the final innings.

If Fuji couldn't score at least one run, we'd lose.

"Er, can he bat with an injured hand?"

"Of course he can't."

The answer was what I expected.

"To be precise," Uemura continued, "in batting, you have the hand that pulls the bat and the hand that pushes it out. Chitose is a left-handed batter, so the right hand is the pulling hand, and the left is the pushing hand. Generally, it's said that the former is more important. There's even a practice exercise where you can actually bat with just one hand."

"So Chitose could do it?!"

"But that practice exercise involves a ball that's gently tossed from close range. Sometimes you see professionals hit a home run with one hand, but they swing as hard as they can with both hands until just before the point of impact. It's impossible to hit a ball in this kind of scenario with just one hand."

"\_\_"

"But with Fuji's skill level and amount of motivation, we've got no chance of winning if Chitose doesn't bat."

"Tch," he clucked his tongue with irritation.

*But...but that's...*

A sharp pain ran through my chest, as if someone had grabbed hold of my heart.

*Chitose got injured because of the team.*

*It's the result of playing with all your might and not giving up on winning.*

*He took one for the team, literally, to cover for Hirano.*

*He ran flat out, just to pass the baton to Yusuke.*

*So someone...someone, please... Help him out, too.*

*Pick up on his passion and stick out your necks for him, too.*

*Chitose...*



*Zing. Zing. Zing.*

As soon as the top of the ninth inning ended, I rushed behind the bench.

I plunged my left hand into the ice water, but it had almost no effect.

The intense pain, like a direct hit to the brain, was getting worse with time.

The director told me to at least tape it, but I didn't want to give the guys any more reasons to be anxious, especially because their morale was already declining.

This inning, number two was first up to bat.

I had to go back, right away, and be on deck with a casual look on my face.

“—Saku, I knew it...”

I looked back toward the voice and saw Yusuke standing there with an irritated expression.

Dammit. I didn't notice him, my head was so dizzy with the pain.

“It happened earlier, didn't it?”

“I guess you caught me. All right. So when that strong wind blew earlier, I got an eyeful of the panties on the girls in the stands. I couldn't walk around without exposing my excitement, so I'm just back here cooling down.”

*Hey, I can't stop joking.*

“Quit bullshitting!” Yusuke yelled.

Hirano and the other team members milled around then, looking at our faces,

wondering what was going on.

"You're shouldering everything on your own again... Enough is enough. You need to be substituted out."

"If you had a team that could do it without me, then why am I here in the first place?"

I didn't have the energy to mislead anyone anymore; I answered him with my hand stuck in the bucket.

"We still have next year. We have another chance. Why do you have to bat so badly any—?"

"Hey, Yusuke," I interrupted him midsentence. "I've been thinking about it for a long time. What you guys said that day. Maybe I'm the one who has the gift, and maybe I don't understand the feelings of people who don't. Maybe I just don't know it, and everyone is working hundreds of times harder than I am."

"Saku..."

"It sucks, doesn't it? Seeing someone who can easily do what you can't do. It makes me burn with jealousy, frustration, makes them seem so...brilliant."

I thought about her. How she was put in the same situation as me, but...she didn't run away.

I thought of her, desperately aiming for the top from a position of overwhelming disadvantage.

Even though my head was fuzzy, the words kept spilling out.

"But what possible reason is there for denying yourself something you love?"

"\_\_"

"Whether or not you're more talented than others, if you love it, you have no choice but to do it, right?"

Besides, I pulled out my arm, smiling brightly.

"—I don't think the next chance will come to a guy who doesn't even look at the present that's right in front of him."

Those words were for myself, for not looking at the present up until now.

I learned that from her... From Haru, who continued to struggle along, living in the present reality.

I returned to the bench, lightly punching Yusuke's shoulder, Hirano's shoulder, the shoulders of my teammates. Then I grabbed the bat.

Once I was on deck, I put on my batting gloves and tightened the Velcro on my left wrist as tight as I could.

*Now, shall we go look for the answer? ...Haru.*



As a result of the previous batter's persistence, they managed to get a walk to first.

*Good, I thought.*

Now I can knock it out of the park, and that's it.

If I can pull it off, that is.

Just to make sure, I looked at the coach, but there were no signs of stolen bases or bunts.

Considering the results so far, the possibility of being kept at bay by the opposing team crossed my mind, but the catcher remained seated.

Thanks, are you gonna let us win?

Unable to do my usual routine, I readied my bat.

The pitcher's eyes were burning brightly, and he was determined to beat me this time.

Good. It has to be that way.

On the first pitch, maybe he put too much force into it, but he threw a sweet straight right to the center.

Got it! A perfect ball!

I stepped hard onto my right foot, and...

“—Gahhh.”

Suddenly, I dropped the bat in the middle of my swing.

A burning pain pierced through my body, incomparable to the dull pain I had experienced until now.

Desperately struggling not to crouch down on the spot, I picked up the bat as casually as possible.

“Are you injured?” the catcher spoke softly.

I pretended I didn’t hear and held up the bat.

Right now, of course, that was a strike.

The second pitch was a fastball, outside.

I hit it anyway.

—*Clunk*.

A tip to the back. Foul.

“\_\_”

The shock went down the bat to my hand, and I almost fainted in agony.

*Don’t scream, don’t react, grit your teeth, bite your lip.*

“Left hand? That’s tough.”

*Darn it, he’s got my number.*

*But it’s okay; now I can narrow down the target ball to a fastball.*

*I wouldn’t bother throwing a curveball that slows down to an opponent who can’t swing the bat properly.*

*Honestly, this actually helps.*

*After all, I can’t control the bat and switch things up based on variations at the same time.*

My breath was coming harsh.

The next ball was straight in the middle, as if he assumed all he needed was speed.

Dammit. Two strikes.

—*CLUNK*.

Another foul to the back.

“—Wow, what a numbingly good ball, huh!!!”

Show off, straighten your back, stare at your opponent.

Instill in them the idea that I can hit it, even with a one-inch margin.

“Enough, Saku! Don’t swing anymore.”

*Don’t talk like a loser, Yusuke.*

*I’m going to set you up nicely. Just shut your mouth and watch.*

*If I can’t look cool now, when can I?*

*If you pull me away now, my masculine pride will die forever.*

*Besides... She and I promised to find the answer together.*

“Come on! I’m gonna hit this ball to the freaking moon and show the bunny that lives there how to play ball!”

My brand-new batting gloves were stained red.



—At first, I thought he was a jerk.

I, Haru Aomi, first learned of Saku Chitose when I ran into him walking with Kaito.

I’m pretty sure it was in the hallway of the school, but it’s not a particularly important memory, so I don’t really remember the details.

I didn’t pay attention to him as a potential love interest, or anything, but as an athlete, I respected and rated Kaito pretty highly.

Well, maybe I’d put him a rung lower than Nana. If Kaito was a girl and played on the same team as us, maybe I’d rate him a little better... But I don’t really want to picture that right now.

Either way, it’s always been clear who catches my attention, regardless of gender.

Maybe it’s because I’m a girl jock, but I like dirty, sweaty people, passionate people, and I love people whose souls are crying out, even if they have a poker

face.

Kaito introduced Chitose to me as an amazing guy known as a genius in the baseball club, but I didn't get that impression from him at all.

He was somewhat pretentious for a high school guy and made a lot of dumb jokes all the time.

A high school baseball player who puts wax in his hair? Shear it short like the rest of them do.

On top of that, to a small girl like me, he said...

*"I heard you're good at basketball, Haru. That's impressive, with you being so short. Can I come and watch you play sometime?"*

What a brazen self-invitation.

*What the heck do you know?* I thought angrily to myself.

Any way you slice it, he was the type of guy I hated.

*Why would Kaito hang around with someone like that...?* Yep, that's what I thought.

—The first Inter-High preliminaries after entering high school.

From the first-year students, Nana and I were selected as regulars.

We'd won our way smoothly to the quarterfinals against Ashi High School.

*She's here,* I thought.

Mai Todo, who I'd squared off against many times, since the days of mini basketball league, and had never once won against.

Ever since the day my first shot went through the hoop, I'm proud to say I've been giving it my best, right from the start.

I didn't know if it was going to pay off, but I drank so much milk that I threw up, and I found some stretches that made me taller, and I tried them all.

I read basketball comics with short player characters and repeatedly told myself that I could do it.

However, Ashi High blew us away. More than double our score. No room for

excuses.

I'm small, but I'm fast; I'm small, but I can dribble past, I told myself, but in the end, those skills I relentlessly polished didn't help me at all.

Because my opponent was tall *and* fast. Tall *and* great at dribbling.

I tried my hardest, but the gap between us just kept widening.

Mai Todo was a player with an aura to her, totally unlike that creepy guy.

Overwhelming talent, overwhelming physical ability, and overwhelming height.

For the first time, I wondered if this was the end of my journey.

I felt a crack open up in my heart.

The flame in my chest faded like a dying candle.

It's surprisingly easy to give up on something when the moment comes.

In the end, only those blessed with talent get to stand at the top, with cool expressions.

—Still in shock over losing, I attended the baseball club tournament that Kaito invited me to.

Chitose hit a big home run from the first inning.

*Huh, he's good.*

...But I was too busy sulking to reevaluate my opinion of him.

Of course, I realized that he alone was a standout player, but this guy, this playboy who smelled like cologne instead of sweat and dirt, left the field with a casual look on his face, like nothing happened.

*I guess this is how it always goes,* I thought.

People often say that hard work pays off, but if that's the case, wouldn't my hard work have made me as tall as Todo right now?

The sixth inning came around while I was distracted with such bitter thoughts.

Just as I realized that Fuji High was up to bat, it happened.

With twelve runs, even someone like me, who doesn't know much about baseball, knows that the game is over.

Actually, Fuji had done well to persevere, when the other side was so overwhelmingly more skilled.

All the players on the Fuji High side, including the pitcher, seemed to be sharing that kind of gloomy realization.

*Too bad. Good game, though,* they seemed to think, losing all motivation.

I felt like I was watching myself lose to Ashi High again, and I was filled with anger, totally pathetic.

—But only one person was different.

That inning, I found myself beginning to watch Chitose.

I guess I figured that he'd be giving up, too.

After all, he was the only one with overwhelming talent, and he must have been frustrated with his teammates who couldn't keep up.

But it wasn't like that.

"Okay, baseball starts here!"

"Hey! This isn't *my* big scene! Hit it to the right, to the right!"

"Hey, Pitcher, can we get that magic ball soon?"

"If we turn it around from here on, we'll look really cool."

"Baseball is a sport where you can get one hundred points with one attack!"

Those were all things Chitose was yelling.

I honestly felt a little embarrassed.

Any way you sliced it, his words were wasted.

In fact, most of the people around me were laughing and cringing.

But Chitose smiled with boyish enjoyment and seemed to actually believe they could still turn the game around.

Chasing unreachable foul balls with all his might, he continued to motivate his

comrades until his voice was hoarse.

He didn't seem to think of himself as either particularly cool or particularly cringeworthy.

He was just going where his soul led him.

That's when I got it.

It was all par for the course for him.

Never giving up until the end. Having passion. Being reckless. Putting in the effort. He didn't think about any of that.

If you have something you love, then you want to aim as high as you can. That's normal, right? It was like that.

Chitose entered the batter's box.

His eyes were sparkling. His smile, joyful.

*I'm going to hit one swing and light the beacon for a comeback*, he seemed to be saying.

The moment I saw that, the aura of sweat and dirt came radiating off Chitose, and he almost choked me with the heat of his passion.

*Oh, right*, I thought.

I wasn't on Chitose's level. He wore his passion for sports with such nonchalance that I totally missed it all at first.

Even though he looked like a baseball genius, I'm sure he was actually just doing his best to pursue what he loved.

*Hey, aren't you standing where I want to be standing?*

At that moment, my heart stopped wavering, and a bright-red flame roared to life.

*In that case, all I have to do is follow this road until I catch up to where he is.*

I'll run and run and keep on running.

I'll jump and fly and keep on flying.

It's not uncool to get all passionate, to get sweaty and stinky, and act uncool.

Right here in front of me was a guy who wasn't bothered by any of that.

Ah, what a simple, refreshing, and pleasant world.

Unable to hold back the feelings that were billowing up inside me, I got to my feet.

"Hit it, Chitose!"

—Zwooom.

As if in response to my words, the ball soared high.

Just like a beautiful midday moon, I thought.

*Yikes. I could fall in love with this guy.*



—Chitose, Chitose, Chitose, Chitose, Chitose.

I wonder how many times I've screamed that name in my heart.

"How many pitches is it now?"

I yelled to Uemura, beside me.

"I don't know! I stopped counting after ten! Is that jerk crazy?!"

Foul. Foul. Foul.

Chitose kept swinging the bat after being cornered with two strikes.

He missed the ball about twice, but after that, he kept at it...

There was no sign of his usual form.

It was like he was asleep on his feet, grimly facing off against the ball.

Every time he swung, his legs seemed about to fail him, but he used the bat as a cane to steady himself.

Shoulders heaving with each breath, he refused to stop fighting.

Everyone on the Fuji High bench was frozen to the spot, watching the situation unfold with bated breath.

As expected, even the audience seemed to have started to notice something was strange, and several people started murmuring in astonishment.

Some players from the team that were going to be participating in the next game appeared to be in the audience.

"That batter's done for."

"He should sub out. The bench, too."

"They don't have anyone else. That's Fuji High."

"They're so desperate that it's funny."

"He should just step off. Doesn't he realize he's just holding everyone else back?"

"That's Chitose, who won the prefectural championship in junior high school."

"Seriously? THAT Chitose?"

"Oh, then it makes sense why he's acting arrogant. He must think the outcome of this game is his decision to make, huh?"

*—All of them... They don't know anything... I...*

"Don't. It's not worth it."

Uemura grabbed my shoulder as I found myself standing up.

"If they don't feel anything watching him, don't even bother."

*But...but I mean...*

Chitose fell to his knees on the field as if he'd finally lost the ability to even stand.

When I thought about what must have been going on inside him as he swung the bat just now...

Well, what was he doing this for?

For Yusuke?

For Hirano?

For his teammates or the coach?

Maybe a little bit for me?

—Hold on. That's not it.

*That's not how you play baseball.*

*You play with pure passion, drive, and enjoyment. Ugh, I can't just sit here thinking about this anymore!*

I stood up with a clatter.

*Darn it. Why am I wearing this stupid dress? It's in my way.*

I yanked up the hem of it and ran down the steps of the spectator seats as if I were flying.

On the way, I heard Yuuko and Ucchi calling out.

"Just stop, Saku."

*No, don't!*

"Saku, you can't take much more of..."

*No, no! Get back up!*

"Hey! Chitose's about to die!"

*Don't die! Just swing!*

I yelled out internally.

*Run! Run! RUN!*

*There are things I have to tell him; there are words I want to deliver to him.*

*I promised you, didn't I?*

*I promise to make you smile.*

*"I'll give you a good telling off, and when you can't get back up, I'll give you courage."*

Standing directly behind the batter's box, I grabbed the net...

"—Freaking *smile*!!!"

...and yelled as violently as a punch to the face.

Chitose's head snapped up, and he looked over at me.

"Why are you swinging that bat like it weighs a hundred pounds?! The Chitose I love plays baseball with joy in his eyes! You've wanted to get back to this all

this time, haven't you?"

If so... If so, then...

"—Don't you dare look so defeated during an amazing chance like this one!!!"

That said, I smiled as wide as I could manage.

I think I saw the corners of Chitose's mouth twitch.

After spending some time talking to the umpire, he took out my wristband from his pocket and put it on his left wrist.

Taking a deep breath as if gathering the last ounce of strength in his body, he stepped into the batter's box and lifted the bat with grace.

—Ah, it's okay now.

Seeing him from the side, I could make out that same smile I saw a year ago. The smile that pierced my heart right through.

"Go beat them all!"

I raised my fist high.

*CRACK!!!*

Tch. I told you not to swing that bat like it's so heavy.

The shot, which looked for all the world like a shooting star carrying someone's wish, arced off toward the back fence.



*You're a hard taskmaster, my princess buddy.*

I ran to first base with my left arm dangling. It was almost completely numb.

It had felt right, but the trajectory was low.

Nine out of ten chance it wouldn't reach the stand.

Darn it.

With this hit, the runner on first base could return home.

But a tie wasn't good enough.

*If we don't turn it around here, we won't have enough energy left to fight in*

*the extension.*

I tried desperately to think as I rounded first base.

I followed the direction of the ball with my eyes.

Sure enough, it hit the fence directly.

Luckily, the ball was rolling in a different direction than the center fielder expected.

Should I just sprint for home base?

As the thought crossed my mind, I unconsciously swung my left arm, and a pain ripped through my brain as though my nerves were being torn apart.

I stumbled and almost crumpled to the ground.

*No. No. A beautiful boy like me can't go out like that.*

Stiffening my arm, I was just about to round second base when...

“Stoop!!!”

Someone bellowed from the batter’s circle.

I put on the brakes and ran back to second base.

“Hirano...!”

The owner of the voice was glaring at me with an expression full of fighting spirit.

“If you’re injured, just stand quietly. You won’t even have to run back home!”

“Heh, really? I’ll leave the rest to you,” I said, finally relaxing my shoulders.



“If you’re injured, just stand quietly. You won’t even have to run back home!”

I looked in the direction of the yell, and...

“\_\_”

My breath caught in my throat.

Hirano, the fourth in the lineup—and, in fact, Fuji High’s entire bench—was on fire.

There was no longer any sign of that dull sense of resignation.

Before I knew it, the entire team was shouting out loud, leaning forward and cheering.

The runner who returned home slapped his hand against Hirano's.

"Make sure you hit it, Hirano! Even if you have to kill yourself to do it, just get Saku home as soon as possible."

"You don't have to tell me. Who could see that and not get all fired up?"

*This is the real thing,* I thought.

Those words, words that resounded all the way to the stand, weren't just brute force. They gave off a genuine, red-hot passion.

It was a response to Chitose's earnest enthusiasm.

That sentiment seemed to envelop the Fuji High team like an aura, sending sparks shooting out.

"Yeah!!! Bring it on!!!"

Standing in the batter's box, Hirano barked.

The atmosphere had changed.

The opposing pitcher looked shaken.

*—Hey, Chitose, are you watching from over there?*

*—Is this reaching you?*

Hirano swung at the first pitch with all his might and sent it to the left field.

"Saku, run!"

...Darn it, wasn't he supposed to walk back?

That's what he'd probably say. But nice batting!

Runners on first and third base.

One more good hit—even an error is fine.

Then Fuji High's good-bye win.

But the next batter, number five, hadn't hit a single good hit in this game.

I put my hands together as if praying and closed my eyes tightly.

Just when we'd gotten into a good rhythm... We're almost there... Someone... Someone... Please...

"Player substitution announcement."

Huh...?

"\_\_\_\_And replacing him will be Yusuke Ezaki."

Ezaki? Huh? Yusuke?

The moment I saw him standing in the batter box, my eyes prickled with heat.

*The heck? If you can take the field, then you should have done so earlier, you jerk.*

*Then Chitose wouldn't be so worn out.*

*...No, I don't think so.*

I think Ezaki was energized by Chitose's passion. Just like I was, that one time.

His leg, still not completely healed, his timidly quivering soul, his weak self that just wanted to run away... A maddening, dazzling flame had been ignited in him, in spite of all that.

*Did your real passion and playing skills actually not reach your friends? Did you move anyone's hearts, or was it all really you just being selfish and pushing them when they didn't want to be pushed...?*

*Hey, Chitose. Are you seeing this? The conclusion you arrived at?*

Your real passion, your playing skills, have lit a fire in the hearts of your teammates.

Connecting, resonating, and exploding.

You are the bright-red sun that shines on everyone.

Standing in the batter's box, Yusuke shouted bravely.

"We'll make..."

The guys on the bench, Hirano on base, and Chitose all joined in the loud barking chant.

“““A way through!“““

“We’ll destroy...”

“““Every obstacle!“““

“Let’s go!”

“““Fuji Hiiigh!!!“““

It was like a hot wind came blowing across the sports field.

I told myself to hold back, to wait until the end, not now, he’s still fighting, but even so... Fat tears began to fall, and I couldn’t make them stop.

You really wanted it to be like this, huh, Chitose?

Back then, one year ago, only you could see this scene.

Together with your friends, all united in feeling, all with the same passion, you really thought you could run right to the top.

That this team could make it.

Well, right now, I can see that.

I think everyone in this stadium sees the same scene.

Look, even those guys who were trying to mock you can’t say anything now.

I can only imagine you running around like this and standing proud at the Koshien tournament.

You, bringing about a success story that’s like something out of a manga.

Chitose was smiling softly, no longer taking the lead.

It was as if he was saying...*I’m entrusting the rest to you.*

Don’t do that. Don’t make that face, as if your role is all over. It’s just gonna make me want to hug you.

You always, always believed in your teammates.

I’m sorry for not being able to notice your pain and despair.

I’m sorry for using such cowardly words like genius.

Sorry it took me so long to give you a good telling off.

I've got my answer, too.

I'm going to grab that baton.

That half-completed dream... I'll take it to the future and display it at the highest stage.

So... So... So...

*CRACK!*

Yusuke's ball flew almost as if it had been hit by Chitose himself.

So puff up your chest with pride. Come back home.

This home run is yours.

And then...

Ah, I can't hide it anymore.

I'm sorry, Yuuko; I'm sorry, Ucchi; I'm sorry, Nishino. But I just can't let Nana win.

—Hey, Chitose. I love you. I love you.



“Ha-ha, you really hit it, huh?”

After seeing Yusuke hit the ball, I headed toward home base at a jogging speed.

My former friends—no, my friends—were now waiting impatiently.

*I'm sorry; I can't run that fast anymore.*

Five, four, three, two, one.

The moment I stepped onto the game-ending base, those surly jerks jumped on me.

“Saku!!!”

“You... This... You really...”

“That was amazing! You're a goddamn superstar!”

*Ouch. Get off. I don't want to be embraced by sweaty men.*

While we were wrestling, Hirano came running over at top speed.

“We did it, we did it, Saku!”

“No, you didn’t. Who was it who said I wouldn’t have to run back, hmm?”

“Oh, shut up. I left the coolest moment to him.”

From behind, Yusuke came back over while favoring his leg.

I silently raised my right hand. “Tch. You made me wait a whole year.”

—CLAP.

After high-fiving him with all my might, I continued.

“Hope you didn’t go making it worse. Anyway, I won’t help you out again.”

“I don’t want someone who can barely even stand worrying about me.”

“Heh.”

“Hey, Saku... At this rate, maybe you could...”

I shook my head to cut him off. “It was a good game.”

Yusuke gave a small smile. “Yeah. It was.”

“—This is finally the end of last summer.”



I took off my helmet with one hand and looked at the sky.

It was endlessly blue and clear.

Gently touching the wristband on my left wrist, I slowly held it up toward the sunlike smile that gave me that last bit of strength.

I'd have plenty of time to think it over.

Everything up until now. And everything that comes after.

So right now, I think I'll take a short break so I can start the next summer.

I lined up in front of the platform and cried out my heartfelt gratitude.

To Yusuke, to Hirano, to everyone else, to the coach, to my elementary school friends, to my junior high school friends, Yuuko, Yua, Nanase, Asuka, Kazuki, Kaito, Kenta, Nazuna, Atomu, and Haru.

—And to baseball.

“Thank you very much!!”



—The next day, Sunday, in Fuji High School's Gym 1.

Today was the practice match with Ashi High.

Seeing the girls' basketball team together for the first time in a week, I noticed somewhat awkward looks on their faces.

In the end, I never tried to set up a forum for discussion.

Words alone couldn't convey it.

There's no point in surface-level reconciliation.

Then what should I have done?

Because Chitose already showed me the answer.

Miss Misaki stared at my face, then said, “I'll leave everything to you.”

That was all she said.

Nana approached me and tapped me on the shoulder.

“Everyone's ready to play. It's just a question of motivation now.”

"Thanks."

From what I heard, she gathered everyone together as vice captain and had them practicing privately for the past week.

I'm really glad this girl is on my team.

But...

"Hey, Nana..." I said. "Remember when I said that I won't lose to a woman who can't get into it without the help of a man?"

"Did you say something like that?"

"I take it back. I got the help of a man, too."

After being taken aback for a moment, Nana smiled provocatively.

"Oh, reeeeally?"

"So it's not just Mai. I'm going to beat you, too, Nana."

"The fact that you declared it with your court name means that it should be a serious match, right?"

Instead of nodding, I smiled.

Nana silently held out her fist.

I bumped my fist against it.

"Okay, then, Umi. Let's deal with the problem in front of us."

"Okay. After that, we'll handle this fair and square, Nana."

"I'll tell you: You weren't the only one who caught fire yesterday."

"He looked like a poor injured lamb out there, but...he's really got something about him, doesn't he?"

I looked up at the catwalk on the second floor.

Chitose was there, drinking clear lemonade in a carefree manner, his left arm hanging in a sling.

After the game, when he went to the hospital and explained the situation, he got in big trouble, I heard.

*Anyway, I'm sure he enjoyed getting attention from a pretty nurse.*

*Huh, he's not watching me or Nana right now. He's watching Mai. Unforgivable!*

*I'll fascinate you so much that you won't be able to take your eyes off me for even a moment, so prepare yourself.*

My teammates finished their warm-ups and formed a circle.

I stepped in between Sen and Yoh, shoulder to shoulder.

"Umi, uh..."

"About the other day..."

The two of them opened their mouths at the same time, but they were interrupted by a slap on the back.

"I won't apologize, so please don't apologize, either."

"\_\_"

"However, if everyone's okay with it, would you lend me your strength? I wanna beat those guys from Ashi High School." I didn't wait for a reply. "Let's go."

I stepped out on the floor and started to yell.

"Are you in love?"

"""We're in love!""""

Nana, Sen, Yoh, everyone stepped on the floor in unison.

"Is that love real?"

"""It's in our blood!""""

"Then light a fire in your hearts!"

"""We won't just wait around!""""

"If you want a man?"

"""Hold him close!""""

"If he doesn't care?"

“““Knock ‘im down!”””

“We are...”

“““Fighting girls!!!”””

*Thump, thump, thump.* We stamped on the floor of the gymnasium like a drum.

Both teams lined up across the center circle.

Mai and I each walked up to the center and shook hands as representatives.

“That’s a great smile, Haru.”

“Is it?”

“I thought you were depressed the other day. Did something good happen?”

“Hmm, I guess you could say that.” I glanced at Chitose.

A mischievous expression, highly suitable for a high school girl, came over Mai’s face.

“Oh, a guy?”

“I made a promise that I’d confront my feelings for him after taking you down.”

“Ooh, I like that. Well, get on with it and crush me, then.”

“Don’t underestimate a young woman in love.”

*Slap.* We lightly high-fived, then I walked off.

In my place, Yoh entered the center circle and faced off against Mai.

*Swoosh.* The jump ball went high.

Now then, it’s time for me to find my own ending, too...darling.



—Damn, wouldn’t it be nice if the difference in ability could easily be filled in with just spirit alone?

After the third quarter, I stared at the scoreboard while rehydrating.

Ashi High had fifty-two points; we had forty.

We were desperately trying to catch up, but they kept gradually widening the gap.

The real problem was the defense.

Sen and Yoh, in particular, weren't fully focused on the match.

I glanced at the two of them, carefully so they wouldn't notice me.

I didn't know what they were talking about, but there was a thin smile on their lips.

Sen's play was more passive than usual, and Yoh's movements were very rough.

*But, I thought. It was my fault for not improving the situation before this happened.*

*It's not that easy to set an example. I can't quite be like him.*

*Chitose didn't even cheer. He just quietly watched the game.*

*Darn it, he didn't even say a single I love you.*

*What happened to the jacket with my name on the back?*

*...Just kidding.*

*I got everything I needed yesterday, so please just watch it right through to the end.*

After the two-minute interval was over, we were back on the court again.

Well, for the time being, I have no choice but to run double and make up for those two.

Fortunately, for the past week, I'd been driven to death by two idiots in the hot sun.

A little game of basketball won't tire me.

I received the ball from Sen and put strength into my legs.

*—Come on, let's go until it burns out.*

Start accelerating from around the center line and plunge into the enemy line at once.

One, two, pull out while making full use of feints and turns.

“Dammit, Mai!”

*She’s a tough one.*

“Sorry, this is gonna be another dead end for you!”

“Bring it on!”

I tried to force my way past her, but she stuck to me, and I couldn’t shake her off.

While I was struggling with her, the opponents I’d already cleared caught up and surrounded us.

It’s been this one pattern the whole time. If I can’t get past Mai, what point is there in getting past the others?

“Darn it! Sen!” I tried to return the ball once, but I guess she didn’t expect it to come to her.

Sen took her gaze off me, and I couldn’t make a pass to her.

It was stolen by Mai in the moment of confusion.

“Gah! Give that back!”

I chased after her like a launched missile.

“So fast. But you’re the only one who’s always on me.”

Nana had been in a bad position during that steal.

But everyone else—never mind them. I’ll run twice as fast.

“It’s tough, playing on such an unbalanced team.”

“Shut up. You don’t have the luxury of talking right now.”

“You know...” Mai jumped lightly.

I leaped after her, but...

“You shouldn’t say that until after you’ve stopped just one of my layups.”

But I couldn’t reach her.

Fifty-four to forty.

*I can't. I need to be faster, get to her before she jumps. Otherwise, I can't stop her.*

Sen, who finally came back, threw the ball at me.

*Agh. Too weak.*

All of a sudden, Mai's hand reached out from behind.

*"Guh!"*

Although I tried desperately to defend it, I lost to her reach, and she scored a jump shot, just like that.

Fifty-six to forty.

*Hahhh.* Mai sighed deliberately.

Then in a loud voice, she said, "Oh, man! At this rate, it'd be better for me to just practice one-on-one with Haru!"

"Mai!" Miss Tominaga scolded her harshly.

"All right, whatever," Mai said, stretching as if she was bored.

Perhaps, in her own way, she was trying to set off a bomb among my team, but it only seemed to have the opposite effect.

Sen lowered her head as if she'd lost more and more confidence.

"Then, do whatever you want," Mai muttered as she stole the ball from Sen again.

I understood what she was trying to do.

"Ready..."

Mai smiled and continued.

"...Go!"

*Stamp!* The two of us took off at the same moment.

*She's fast, but I won't lose in a straight race.*

*Actually, having Mai running right alongside me would help.*

We crossed the center line in no time.

Just cut through to the bottom of the basket, and...

“Don’t...”

A figure with a head of beautiful black hair cut across me.

I no longer held the ball in my hand.

Mai, realizing this, turned around to look at me.

“...underestimate us.”

—*Swoosh. Pahhh.*

Fifty-six to forty-three.

Nana, who'd received the ball from me as we passed each other, scored an eye-opening three-pointer.

“Oh, right. You were there, too. What’s your name?” Mai smiled fearlessly.

“Yuzuki. But you don’t need to remember my name. It’s the little one who’s going to crush you.”

“Even though she’s so isolated and helpless?”

“From now on, I won’t leave her side. Besides...” Nana provocatively raised the corners of her mouth. “It’s just a little longer until they all catch fire.”

“Hey, is that a face that’s plotting something bad?”

Mai grabbed the ball from her teammate and ran.

This time, the two of us followed her.

Nana on the right side, aiming to steal the ball with her dominant hand.

Mai dropped her speed.

I instantly understood her intention and accelerated to get ahead of her, then squeaked to a stop. Then I let the tension drain from me.

—*Thump.*

Mai collided with me, running at full speed, and my small body got knocked back.

“Gah.”

My bare arms and legs stung from the friction against the floor.

Offensive charging.

"Huh, didn't know you could do that."

"Since little ones are easily knocked over, please escort them gently."

This was like a last resort given to me, who was hopelessly helpless on defense.

Take advantage of your natural speed and wild intuition to crush the course first.

Then if they run into you, well—it's a foul on the opponent's side.

Well, it's kind of a fine line with defense fouls, so it doesn't go well every time.

I was saved because Nana threw off Mai's concentration.

Usually Sen would perform that kind of move—but then I stopped and realized something.

From now on, I won't leave her side...

Come to think of it, there was something odd about Nana today.

She wouldn't pass when I wanted it, and she wasn't there when I needed help.

I thought it was because the team was in a state of chaos, but from the start of the game, she'd been trying to guide everyone through her playing.

By intentionally showing a puzzle with missing pieces, she was leaving opportunities for Sen to come help me or for Yoh to connect a pass, hoping they'd notice.

But maybe that wasn't doing the job, so now she was trying to set an example all by herself.

If the two of us play like this, it'll really help.

*Hmph. That's annoyingly smart.*

Connecting a pass with Nana, I went on the attack again.

Of course, Mai was ready and waiting.

I kept the ball to buy time, and...

“Over there!”

I broke left.

Naturally, Mai reacted, but her path was blocked by Nana, who had disappeared but was now approaching from behind.

“Ack!”

Just as she was chasing, just one beat too late...

“Nana!”

I went out of the three-point line and passed to my partner, who was free.

“...Pick-and-roll!”

The other defense players were closing in on Nana.

It was a little far. Usually, you wouldn’t be able to aim there.

But...

—*Fwoop.*

The ball drew a graceful parabola in the air.

*Let’s go today.*

Mai smiled with regret.

“Huh? You only shoot when you know it’ll go in?”

Nana responded coolly. “I hate to lose.”

Fifty-six to forty-six.

*All right, we’re in range.*

Trying not to notice how winded both Nana and I had gotten, I clenched my fists.



—The remaining time was a little over five minutes.

The score was sixty to fifty.

The ten-point difference wasn't closing.

"Ugh."

My skin was sore.

I wondered how many times they'd hit me.

Even Nana and I, who had been scoring points together, had reached our limits.

*Chitose.* I looked upstairs involuntarily.

Despite his grim expression, he smiled when our eyes met.

*All right, all right, I know.*

*I have to enjoy this kind of situation. Thank you, taskmaster hero prince.*

Yesterday, after the game was over, he gave me a home run ball that he got from someone involved in the tournament.

It seemed to be repayment for the wristband.

*Idiot. That won't give me strength during the game.*

So I slept with it under my pillow last night instead.

I was so excited that I couldn't sleep, so I lay awake running my fingers over it.

*All right. In this moment, I'll just have to make do with that clumsy smile of his.*

I slapped my cheeks to pep myself back up.

With the ball in her hand, Mai said in amazement:

"Are you still not giving up?"

"Sorry, but..."

I stamped the floor and shouted.

"—My inferiority complex and I are good friends by now!"

Darn. My legs are weak; I can't breathe, but I have to run.

All my muscles are squealing, my bones are creaking, but I can still fly.

It's always been that way. There was nothing I could do well.

There was no one I could beat easily in basketball.

They're always taller than I am.

For a long time, I was looking at the sky from the lowest point.

Even so, I managed to grit my teeth and get all the way here.

There was an NBA player who was five foot two.

Was I really one of the ones who would never be rewarded for my efforts?

I won't stop. Not until I see the end.

For a moment near the center line, Mai, who had a chance to check the position of her comrades, bounced the ball.

In that direction was Sen... No, she's not running.

Then I'll go by myself.

"Gaaahhh!!!"

I jumped at the ball that seemed like it was going to go over the line...

"Nana!!!"

I brought it back into the court.

I tried to land, but I didn't have the strength to do so—I crashed into the folding chairs.

There was an immense crash, and pain shot through my entire body.

Where was the ball?

Good old Nana didn't even give me a glance; she just scored a three-pointer. She's my partner, after all.

"Ugh..."

When I tried to stand up, an electric current ran through my whole body, and I crouched down again.

I wondered if this was how he felt yesterday.

“Umi!”

Sen and Yoh, who were nearby, rushed over.

I smiled at their concerned faces.

“Hee-hee, can I sleep for just one minute?” I said.

Sen wailed, as if she was about to burst into tears. “Why—why are you able to work so hard, Umi? How can you face opponents you can’t win against, over and over again...?”

Tears spilled from the corners of Sen’s eyes.

I reached out and gently wiped them away.

“Because I really love it, I guess. I love basketball...and playing with you guys.”

“\_\_”

“Besides, I have a chance to win. It’s true that I’m immature. As a player, I have a clear weakness, and as a captain, all I can do is try to fire everyone up. But this team has you all... Nana, and Sen, and Yoh...”

Seeing that Sen was speechless, Yoh, who was crouching beside her, spoke up.

“But no matter how hard I try...”

Slap. I gently tapped her on the cheek.

“The next time you say something like that, I’ll kick your butt. You have a huge talent.”

So I said, with all my heart...

“Couldn’t you guys pitch in and supply those six inches I’m lacking?”

“AAAARRRGHHH!”

Meek Sen’s lips trembled as she roared in a tone I’d never heard from her before.

She punched her own thigh with her fist.

“What the hell am I doing?! The Inter-High has been my dream since I was little! I promised myself! How could I have forgotten?! Am I doing my best?”

‘Umi has talent; that’s why she can do her best?’ It’s all just an excuse for me, for not taking this seriously enough, AAARRGHHH!!”

Yoh followed her.

“Me too... Same thing. I’ve got those six inches that Umi wants... But I’ve been acting like... URRRGHHH!!!”

*Oh, it’s all right now, I thought.*

*Chitose, are you watching?*

*You taught me that... Ah, no, this is the answer we arrived at together.*

*So I wasn’t worried. Not one bit.*

*I was just waiting for the moment to come.*

I spoke, feeling a sense of happy comfort sinking into my throbbing, aching body.

“Did I light a fire in your heart?”

““Yes!””

“Then let’s go get our man. And by man, I mean ball. And then let’s go and make him—er, the basket—notice us. Okay?”

I held up my fist and smiled a little.

“—We’re women who fight.”

The other members, who had gathered before we knew, all shouted it at the same time.

“““YEEEAAAHHH!!!”””

Passion burst forth, like a refrain of yesterday’s scene.

No more sleeping. If you don’t stand on the court now, your dreams will all be for nothing.

All of a sudden, Nana held out her hand.

“I made you wait, Ace. Let’s break through.”

I took her hand and stood up.

"I know you've got my back." I laughed.

Ashi High waited until our team returned to the court, then set the ball in play.

Sticking close to Mai, I said, "Sorry for interrupting the game."

"After that play, you don't need to go apologizing. I'm not that sensitive."

"Then, as a thank you, I'll kick your butt."

"I can't wait."

Mai grabbed a pass from her teammate and shot off.

Just as I was about to be completely left in the dirt, Sen came in to help.

"I won't let you go!"

"Tch, where's this coming from?"

Mai didn't like that and passed the ball back temporarily.

*That's it, Sen, I thought.*

She's great at using her body to block. She's not the type to steal the ball brilliantly, but if she sticks close to you, it's hard to get a chance to shoot. If she could just get rid of her habit of giving up too soon, she'd cause trouble even for a player of Mai's caliber.

The opponent's shot, aiming for a three-pointer, bounced off the rim.

"Gaaah!"

*Squeak.* Yoh grabbed the rebound.

*See? You're naturally on par with Mai in terms of height, and I have the upper hand in terms of core strength. Whoa, wish I could beat Mai on a jump.*

Thinking about such things, I start running at full speed.

The ball came flying from Yoh with a force that you wouldn't expect from a pass.

I caught it in the air, turned with the momentum of the landing, and passed one person.

Mai, who had jumped on the rebound, hadn't returned yet, but there were three people under the goal.

No questions asked, I rushed in to get the defense's attention and didn't even turn my head as I passed to Nana running on the side. She aimed for a three-pointer immediately, but...the ball fell short. It came bouncing off the rim.

"Yoh!"

"Leave it to me!"

She caught the rebound again and returned the ball as if to restart the game, but unfortunately it was deflected by the opponent's defense and went out of bounds.

*Still, that was wonderful, Yoh.*

With that incredible rebound, even Nana could shoot without hesitation in low-probability cases.

"Yikes, I'm getting chills," I said.

Mai, who was crouching in front of me, laughed.

"Looks like you're ready to get serious?"

"Oh, you could tell?"

It's not like I've been cutting corners all this time.

But I couldn't concentrate on offense alone when Sen and Yoh weren't functioning.

*See, now Sen is keeping the defense in check.*

It was as if her whole body was saying "I won't let you get in Umi's way!"

Yoh, too, had a look of determination on her face, stronger even than any look I'd seen on Nana.

As soon as I saw it, fire entered the core of my body.

—*Thump. Thump. Thump.*

This is the sound of your heartbeats.

I'm glad I got to you. I'm glad you're resonating with me now.

Suddenly, I thought of Chitose.

*He must have felt something like this yesterday.*

*The passion you gave me—I'll take it all the way to the top.*

Mai spoke with a defiant look in her eyes.

“But could you beat me one-on-one?”

“I have faith that I’m still in the middle of a growth spurt.”

I stepped forward and received the throw-in.

Then...

“—Get to the basket, Umi!!!”

Chitose’s voice echoed across the gym.

*Hey, why’re you breaking your silence now?*

*Why now, just when I’m about to crush this?*

It was the first time he’d ever called me Umi, and it made my heart skip a beat.

*And you remember those words, don’t you, darling?*

*I wonder if he’ll step up and take responsibility when I do get past this?*

I took a small breath while dribbling.

In my head, I had a batting form that I’d engraved on my heart over the past week.

I’m in a completely different sport, but there’s one thing I found helpful.

When he was standing at bat, he was always limber and loose.

Manipulate the ball while imagining elegant movements, like Japanese dance.

If I remember correctly, Mai was the same when we played one-on-one.

You don’t have to tense your muscles all the time.

Mai broke forward from her holding pattern and went for the steal.

Ah, I see.

When her body is relaxed, her eyes are sharper than ever.

I dodged her, keeping my turn loose and smooth.

“Tch... You learned from—”

Mai said.

“Nuh-uh. That’s one I got from my man. Nice, huh?”

And so...

—*Stamp*.

Instead of bursting forth, I segued smoothly into my next movement.

One step, two steps—Mai still kept a certain distance even as she followed.

That’s Mai. Calm-faced but with unbelievable skill.

At her height, she must have practiced until she puked to be able to move that fast.

But it’s the same with me.

We shorties can’t afford to be any slower.

Once, twice, three times, one more!

Rotate left and right. Back and forth.

Mai’s upper body wobbled.

Aw, sorry—with that height, the torque on each turn was nothing to sniff at.

I took another step and cut Mai off.

Even so, the time difference was only a fraction of a second.

If I went into an unguarded shooting form, they’d knock me down.

The hoop was still a little far away, but I took the plunge with all my might.

—Ah, but.

Strangely, all sound disappeared at that moment, and everyone around me seemed to be in slow motion.

It was like swimming in a transparent pool.

Mai jumped, reaching for me.

She was just about to block my shot.

What about the rest of the defense?

Everyone was holding them back; no one could reach us in time.

My jump still wasn't at its highest point, but it looked like I could get it in... So maybe I'd shoot?

\_\_\_\_\_Huh.

My jump was off; I wasn't positioned straight, but...

—Fwoosh.

But I predicted it all somehow.

I could hear my friends cheering, loud as an earthquake.

"Whoa. What was *that*? Hey, forget about the guy. Stick with me until we both die," Mai said.

"Sure, if you could take me higher than he can."

I gestured to the catwalk with my thumb.

"Yeah, I think I can manage that."

"Oh yeah? You ready to fly to the moon?"

"God, I love you, Haru."

"Thank you, Mai, but my heart is already spoken for."

*Oh, I feel great.*

*I've got Nana; I've got Sen; I've got Yoh and all my friends.*

*I've got an opponent to beat and a lovely guy watching me.*

*I'm a lucky girl.*

*It's all going to work out.*

*I want to run faster; I want to fly higher.*

*How far can I go; how much can I grasp hold of?*

*Years from now, will I be able to look back and say I did my best?*

The answer, no doubt, was in the summer sky beyond us.

So for now...

—Stamp. I took another step forward.

*I just want to live with passion.*



“Gahhh! We freaking LOST!”

On our way home, I, Saku Chitose, stood and grinned wryly as Haru yelled at the sunset, by my side on the dry riverbed path.

In the end, the newly united Fuji High launched a furious comeback and caught up until they were tied, but with less than thirty seconds remaining, Mai Todo scored a three-pointer, and in the end, it remained as it was. We lost by three points.

“Hmm, yes, that’s tough. If you’d played like that from the start, you might really have won.”

I wasn’t flattering her.

In the last five minutes, Fuji High’s team was so amazing that I got chills.

In particular, I thought that Haru’s game underwent a transformation that can only be described as an awakening.

I don’t know the fine details of the technique, but it was like she was dancing on the court with Mai Todo. She looked beautiful, graceful, and like she was having a ton of fun.

When I honestly told her how that made me feel, Haru chuckled and said briefly that it was my fault.

There was no further explanation. She just let out an exaggerated sigh.

“Still...it kinda sucks. I was hoping we could have a celebratory toast with Ramune.”

“Don’t you think that’s kind of mean for me? I’ve got one arm in a sling, you know.”

"I just want something that goes *pop* like a champagne bottle."

That *pop* sound... It would go well with the tranquil aura of the darkening sky. Not bad at all.

After the game was over, Haru was surrounded by her crying teammates—and even Mai Todo, who'd infiltrated their hugging circle.

I was hoping to come and say a word or two if I had a chance, but it didn't feel like the right atmosphere for that.

Our eyes met, so I just raised my hand lightly and was about to leave, when...

"Wait for me, Chitose! I want to go home with you," Haru yelled up at the catwalk.

It was such a moving scene until just then, but when Haru said that, her teammates began squealing and cooing.

Thanks to that, Nanase said, "I'll allow it, just for today" with a scary look on her face. For some reason, Mai Todo gave me a heck of a scowl.

In the end, I waited until both teams had cooled down and cleaned up after themselves, and now we were walking home.

The air was calm.

I thought maybe I should say something—about the past two passionate days, about what I felt during today's game, or maybe I should just directly thank her and apologize. But I felt like we'd already done all of our talking during our respective games.

Haru hadn't said much for the last little while. Maybe she was thinking something similar.

"Hey, Chitose?"

"Hmm?"

"Would you say that I...overcame Mai Todo?"

"You definitely, definitely overcame Mai Todo."

When I said that, Haru quietly pumped her fist.

She parked her cross bike and pulled a bottle of Ramune out of her sports bag.

I wondered if she'd kept it chilled in the team cooler.

The bottle in her hand was dripping with cold condensation.

"Chitose, gimme your hand."

I stared at her dumbly as Haru peeled off the Ramune label, gently placed the ball pusher on top of the marble, and held it out to me.

"You can't open it by yourself, so I'll help."

*Oh, right.*

I took the bottle and held its top with my right hand.

"Ready?"

As she gazed at me with glistening eyes, I felt a little embarrassed.

"Yeah," I muttered. "Well, then..."

—*POP.*

Haru pushed in the marble with her left hand while gripping my right hand tightly.

Then she stretched up, and...

—*Suckkk.*

I felt the touch of her lips on my Adam's apple, then a light bit of suction.

Flustered, I felt an urge to swallow, but I was a little embarrassed about it, so I refrained.

Slowly, the cicadas' croaks resounded, as if they were making fun of me.

I tried to push her away, but she had my right hand held tight, and my left arm was useless in its sling.

*Suckkk. Suckkk.* Haru wouldn't release me.

I felt dizzy, enveloped by the scent of sweat and antiperspirant.

Just then, cold foam came bubbling up from the gap left by the marble,

sweetly dampening our clasped hands.

After a few seconds passed in an instant, like someone messing with the hands of a clock, Haru finally took a step back.

She looked at me, standing there frozen and speechless, and licked her lips.

"Whoops. I was aiming for your mouth, but since I'm so short and all, I was about six inches too low."

"...Haru."

"Well anyway, I've marked the first shot."

"What are you...?"

"—I love you, Chitose."

Haru gave me a full, wide smile.

"You can make up the difference for those six inches someday. See you at school."



With that, Haru flung her leg over her cross bike.

Droplets of sweat fell, like the ones I'd seen that day, after school.

Her shirt billowed in the wind as she rode away, standing on the pedals.

Her short ponytail swung left and right, like a hand waving good-bye.

I... I...

With one arm in a sling, I couldn't clutch my chest, which seemed about to burst into flames. Instead, I took a long pull on the bottle of Ramune.

Not long after, the marble clattered on the bottom, signaling that the bottle was empty.

When I looked up through it, I could see the ultramarine blue around my wrist, the talisman that had done so much for me.

I slowly twisted the cap open with one hand and placed the Ramune marble on my palm.

I lifted it up to the beautiful sky.

She gave me the shove in the back I needed. She was passionate, dazzling, strong, kind...

A smile like the sun. A smile I'd admire, always.

There are always signs heralding the coming of summer.

They're like secrets of a special world. If you just take a step forward, you'll find them.

After you put a proper end to things, a new beginning always comes.

—This new summer brought with it sweat, glistening on girls' skin, like burst soda pop bubbles.

## EPILOGUE

### The Blue Sky I Found



I ran and ran and kept on running.

I jumped and flew and kept on flying.

I chased it and reached it.

It's still not much, but it's right at my fingertips.

Hey, Chitose, did you notice?

How much feeling I put into it when I said *I love you*?

Cowardly, I scolded him, underneath the Milky Way.

Maybe I was the one who wanted to cry the most, crushed as I was by anxiety.

Last summer, the man who gave me that hard kick in the pants when I was about to give up, the man who looked like the vast moon I'd been searching for for a long time, hid himself in the pitch-black night.

Hanging his head all alone, as if he had never reflected light onto anyone's heart.

So I decided to hit him full force with all the passion I had.

Please, take it all in, so that one day, you can show that beautiful shine once more.

Prove that my clumsy way of living isn't misguided, after all.

But, Chitose.

Even if I didn't do that, your flame was still smoldering in your heart.

Are you thinking that maybe this is all thanks to sweet little Haru?

I'd like to let you go on thinking that, but the truth is, that's not right.

It was for your friends. For me, yes. But more than anything else, it was for yourself.

Infuriatingly overly passionate and naive, you would have come to the same conclusion, either way.

The man I loved was not a beautiful moon, after all.

If I wasn't more careful, I was in danger of losing my own name.

So you know, I want us to run along, side by side, so we'll never be defeated, never be left behind.

Light a fire in my heart and never let go.

—Reach out to the bright-red sun.

## AFTERWORD



It's been a while; I'm Hiromu. Let's get straight in to the acknowledgments (I recommend you read this after the main story).

First, raemz. Thank you again for the wonderful illustrations that make me cry just looking at them! I'm sorry for asking you questions over the LINE app like "Is 'We are fighting girls' correct English grammar?" But in response to that, I got a reply saying, "Yes! We are fighting girls! All three together!" and I totally died of cuteness. ♡ Let's keep fighting together, you, me, and the editor, okay?

As for the editor, Iwaasa. Usually in the afterword, I discuss your heartless red pen corrections and e-mails, but this time your response was so gentle that I don't have anything to expose. Can't you help me out a little here?

And now we come to a more serious discussion.

Actually, the baseball club story depicted in Volume 4, and the relationship between Saku and Haru, was originally included in the manuscript submitted for the Shogakukan Light Novel Grand Prize. In other words, Volume 1. Specifically, when Saku lost against Haru when they played basketball one-on-one in the park, Saku had to confess what happened on the baseball team.

To be honest, at that time I had no intention of digging deep into baseball. So I was trying to wrap it up in just a few pages.

But Iwaasa said, "I just can't empathize with this scene as it is. Let's save the baseball stuff for after you've got a few volumes under your belt, and anyway, isn't this the kind of thing that's going to need a whole volume all to itself?" (At the time, he was even more heartless than this, so I've adjusted my memories to have him speaking more kindly.)

I liked the scene itself, even though it was short, and I was stubborn, so I

rewrote it many times. In the end, it was all scrapped. To be frank, I thought *Seriously, a whole volume all about club activities in a light-novel-esque youth romantic comedy?* But I guess I did it anyway! Moreover, it has the largest number of pages in the current series!

If it wasn't for Iwaasa, who was in charge of editing the fourth volume, this tale wouldn't have made its way into the world.

—Thank you for sending some passion my way.

Well, it's rather annoying to end with such a good story, so let me tell you something else that happened behind the scenes! S

Ever since the first volume, Iwaasa has been saying about Asuka, "This kind of female character won't be popular, will she?" and "Isn't it better to leave her as a mysterious, untouchable character?" However, I stayed firm and said, "Watch me overturn that evaluation."

The result was... Well, anyone who's read Volume 3 will understand, right? (Moonsault wrestling-move smugface to the editor in charge.)

Our team can't exist without each one of us. From now on, I would like to write more passionate stories that will light a fire in someone's heart.

In addition, I would like to express my burning gratitude to all the people who have been involved in *Chiramune*, such as advertising and proofreading, and to all the readers who have embraced our passion and are resonating with us. See you again in Volume 5!

HIROMU

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