

Chitose  
Is in the  
Ramune  
Bottle

6.5

Hiromu

Illustration by  
raemz



A vibrant illustration of a young woman with long, wavy reddish-pink hair tied in a ponytail with a yellow scrunchie. She is wearing a light blue short-sleeved top with dark blue stripes on the shoulders and a black high-waisted shorts. She is carrying a black shoulder bag with a gold chain strap and a small gold emblem. She is walking towards the left, holding a clear plastic cup with a red straw and a red label that says "Ramune".

6.5

# Chitose Is in the Ramune Bottle

**Hiromu**

Illustration by  
**raemz**

Girls' Trip





"Grr! We came all the way to  
the fish market, you know!"



# Chitose Is the Ramune Bottle

## c o n t e n t s

Chapter One

**A Pinkie Promise from  
Ten Years Ago, Made on  
an August Night**

Chapter Two

**Flowers Bloom from  
Tears in the End**

Chapter Three

**His and Hers Seats**

Chapter Four

**A Bouquet for Raised Hands**



**Miss Misaki**

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**Hiromu**

Translation by Evie Lund

Cover art by raemz

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CHITOSE-KUN WA RAMUNEBIN NO NAKA Vol. 6.5

by Hiromu

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**Saku Chitose**

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

**Yuuko Hiaragi**

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 mysterious upperclassman,  
difficult to read.  
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**

A contrarian boy with a tsundere  
nature underneath. Has been playing  
baseball since middle school.

**Nazuna Ayase**

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

**Kuranosuke Iwanami (Kura)**

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



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## **Hiromu**

Born in Fukui, residing in Tokyo. Recently, I've been having more opportunities related to this series to meet or otherwise talk to people from Fukui. Even when I'm meeting a group for the first time, there's always at least one person I already know or who went to my old school, and it just makes me fonder of my hometown. "Yep, that's Fukui for you..." I'll think. The old-fashioned grapevine is the social media of the boonies—they say you can find anyone on there.

## **raemz**

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

*Chapter 1*  
*A Pinkie Promise from*  
*Ten Years Ago,*  
*Made on an August Night*



I licked my lips and recited the incantation: “Mirror, mirror, on the wall...”

When I was still a young and innocent girl, I used to repeat these words over and over again, like a prayer, like a dream.

It’s trite, maybe, but I was imagining a prince on a white horse who would take me away someday.

This morning, at the end of summer, there’s a sense of calm and serenity, like the clear sky seen in a faint memory.

I’m still in my underwear as I look at myself in the full-length mirror. My reflection feels like a stranger’s.

My thighs and hips have a layer of feminine softness above toned muscles. My waist is slim, and my rounded breasts are beautifully shaped, if I do say so myself.

My midnight blue bra and panties stand out against the fresh sunlight that shines through the gaps in the curtains.

*Mirror, mirror, on the wall.*

There is no trace of the girl who asked that question left anymore.

I try to laugh at myself. “Well, I’m not really the Snow White type, am I?”

Anyway, it was the wicked queen who had the magic mirror. Someone too consumed with her own beauty, unable to accept being inferior to another.

It’s strange because when I was little, she was just the villain. But now I feel a little bit of affinity with her.

*Still, I thought as I changed into the clothes I’d prepared last night.*

*If I was the wicked queen, I wouldn’t make Snow White eat a poisoned apple.*

Once you do something like that, you can’t take it back. It’s a one-way ticket to becoming the villainess of the story.

Instead, I’d put her in a special dress. I’d help her put on her makeup and teach her social etiquette, if necessary.

Then I’d invite her to the castle ball and ask the prince, with my head held

high...

...Who *is* the fairest of them all?

Heh. I guess, any way you slice it...

No one would cheer for the happy ending of a woman who isn't pretty.

I don't think I can be Snow White and captivate the prince at first sight.



It was the night after we'd all gone to the last summer festival in August.

I was stretching in my room when my phone rang.

When I looked at the display, I saw the name "Yuuko Hiiragi."

*Right after everything that happened?*

I reflexively braced myself, wondering if she wanted to discuss Chitose, or maybe even Ucchi.

I hadn't sorted through my own feelings yet.

I was full of what-if scenarios, and I knew I couldn't make progress until I'd picked up some of these fallen leaves first. Or maybe shoveled away some of this snow.

Guess I'm skipping ahead a few seasons, huh?

Gingerly, I answered the phone.

"Yuzuki! Let's go to Kanazawa!"

The first words out of Yuuko's mouth were...not what I'd been expecting.

"Huh...?"

I'd been expecting a more serious discussion... So my response came out sounding kinda silly.

*"We talked about it before, right? We were going to go shopping together."*

"...Oh!"

Finally, I caught on.

Yeah, I definitely made some kind of promise like that with Yuuko.

*Still*, I thought, grinning wryly.

I chose my words carefully and used a deliberate, teasing tone. “You recover quick, don’t you?”

*“I need to go shopping to get back on my feet, all right?”*

Yuuko’s response was easy-breezy.

*“I’m gonna buy new clothes, new cosmetics, and become a whole new me.”*

I burst out laughing.

I wanted to tease her, to call her sanity into question, but I actually knew just how she felt.

I’ve been playing basketball since elementary school, and at times like this, I’ve always been the type of person who would say things like, “I’m going to go eat katsudon!” or, “I’m going to exercise and release some energy!” so it was honestly refreshing to see her react in this normal girl way.

*Tsk*, this is why she’s our airhead princess.

She just got her innermost feelings out in the open, and even though they weren’t returned, she was still so positive, looking to the future.

...I was just a little bit envious of her.

I responded, almost as if I was talking to myself at the same time...

*“Don’t you want to shovel some snow first?”*

*“What?! It’s snowing where you are right now?!”*

*“Of course it isn’t!”*

After that, we chatted for a while, decided on a date, time, and meeting place, and hung up.



...A few days later, nine thirty AM.

I was waiting at the seats near the ticket counter at Fukui Station.

Even though we students are on summer vacation, it’s pretty quiet outside of the weekday commuting hours.

Yuuko and I had agreed to meet at 9:50, so I still had plenty of time.

This is kind of a habit with me.

As I once told Chitose, I don't like making people wait. Even though I know I shouldn't overthink things when it comes to meeting friends, I still feel like I owe it to them. Or rather, I never want to take it for granted that I'm taking up someone else's precious time and effort.

I let out a short sigh, thinking that there was nothing really cute about this weird foible of mine.

*"An overthinker won't be popular with the boys, you know."*

He definitely said something like that.

He and I still hadn't really opened up to each other at the time, so it was surely just a casual joke. But I'd rather people not poke fun at my being-late anxiety.

Maybe I should mix it up, show up late sometimes, like, "Ooh, sorry, were you waiting long?"

Thinking about that kind of thing filled the time as I stared blankly at the people coming and going, but then...

"Excuse me, is this seat...?"

Suddenly, the smell of girly perfume tickled my nostrils.

"...Oh wow, it's *you*." Before I could react, the person addressing me continued. "What are *you* doing here, Nanase?"

I finally turned and saw Nazuna Ayase, my classmate, scowling at me.

"What are *you* doing here, Ayase...?" I shrugged and gestured to the empty seat.

They were all individual seats. It's not like I really had any right to say no to someone taking the next one along anyway.

And she didn't really need to ask in the first place. A polite nod acknowledging me would have been enough.

Ayase took a quick look at the other empty seats, hesitated for a moment,

and then sat down in a resigned sort of way.

I thought back to the time that stalker was harassing me and how I'd actually accused her at one point. I'd apologized properly the next day, but I hadn't really had a chance to talk to her face-to-face since then.

When we met at Chitose's practices and games, we both pretended not to be aware of each other's existence. It was an attempt to act natural, but it was really kinda awkward...

*It's not like I've been going out of my way to avoid her or anything...* I gave her a tight smile to prove it.

Even if Ayase was the one who came for me first, I'm aware that I did something wrong. But it's not like we were close enough to make up. So things have been left kind of up in the air between us, I guess.

Ayase was the first to speak, seemingly unable to bear the silence.

"I'm meeting a friend here."

"Yeah, me too," I said. "Where are you going, Ayase?"

"Nazuna," she said bluntly. She seemed a little embarrassed, too. "You can call me Nazuna. Ayase, Nanase—sounds confusing, right?"

Taken aback by the unexpected offer, I covered my smile behind my hand.

"Then you can call me Yuzuki."

"Of course. I'd sound like a jerk calling you by your last name while you call me by my first."

"...Where'd that come from? Why are you being so sweet?"

"Oh, shut up." Nazuna finally looked me in the eye.

She was wearing a solid white cropped T-shirt with black piping on the collar, hem, and cuffs, and a black miniskirt. The unity of the two pieces made them appear to be a matching set.

She also carried a small black handbag that had a gold logo and strap, which added a pop of accent color.

Honestly, she looked really good.

"I mean," Nazuna continued. "What a coincidence, huh?"

"I guess so."

"Yeah... Seriously."

No matter how small Fukui is, it is highly unlikely that two people from the same class would just happen to meet at the same place at the same time on the same day.

I mean, I don't even want to work out the probability percentage of *that* problem.

"Yuzuki, Nazuna, hellooo! Sorry, were you waiting long?!"

Uh-huh.

Looking in the direction of the voice, I saw Yuuko trotting over, waving happily.

"Oh, come on..."

Nazuna let out an exasperated sound and stood up.

Yuuko looked confused as Nazuna poked her shoulder with her fingertips, scowling.

"You should have told me that Yuzuki was coming. This was super awkward, and I'm blaming you."

"Huh? Why?"

"There was a lot to unpack between us, that's why!"

I was relieved she'd used the past tense.

Yuuko wet her lips, her eyebrows rising. "But you're already calling her Yuzuki, right?"

"Oh wow, you're not completely oblivious, then."

I knew Yuuko didn't have any malicious intentions or anything like that. She hadn't made some careful master plan to make us buddies. But I had to grin.

She must have sensed the tension with Nazuna, but since an apology had already been made, it was done and dusted as far as she was concerned.

So no doubt, after inviting me shopping, when she got chatting with Nazuna, she was like, “Why not kill two birds with one stone and all go shopping together?”

Yuuko looked at me and cleared her throat.

“Yuzuki, I’m sorry. I should have asked if I could invite Nazuna.”

“Oh, no, it’s fine. That outfit looks adorable on you, by the way.”

I shook my head lightly and changed the subject.

Yuuko’s outfit consisted of a mint-green blouse and loose, off-white linen pants. An unusually simple look for her at first glance, but the blouse had such an open back that you’d almost think it was a swimsuit, and the big bow tied in the middle really drew the eye. It’s amazing how she never looks cheap even with so much skin on display. I’d love to know how she does it.

“Really? But your outfit looks amazing, too, Yuzuki. You always look so cool with, like, minimal effort!”

“Thanks.”

I mean, I was just wearing denim shorts, a black camisole, and a thin white shirt tucked in. When I go clothes shopping, I like to wear something that’s easy to change in and out of, and it’s easier to evaluate new pieces in the mirror when you try them on with staple pieces.

“Oh hey, hey, is that where we buy tickets?” Yuuko pointed at the ticket counter.

“Hmm, it looks like there’s a bit of a line right now, so let’s use the ticket machines. I’ll buy everyone’s tickets at once.”

“Can I come with you and watch?”

“I mean, sure, but it’s not that interesting.”

I took their money and went over to the machine.

An unreserved seat on the limited express Thunderbird, which runs between Wakura Onsen in Ishikawa Prefecture and Osaka, costs about 2,500 yen each way and takes about fifty minutes. A round trip of 5,000 yen is quite a costly

expense, so when I go alone, I often take the Hokuriku Main Line, a local train, which takes more time but costs about half the price. After some discussion, we decided to make a short day trip of it, since it was the last day of summer vacation.

After I bought tickets for everyone and handed them over, Yuuko looked at hers curiously.

I teased her before when she was all shocked at the concept of me riding the train by myself, but you basically need a car to get around Fukui. When you've lived here since childhood, it's not so rare to encounter people who've never taken a train or even a bus alone before.

While I was musing over that...

"Oh hey, let's go eat some soba noodles! Saku says they're good there!"

Looking satisfied, Yuuko put the ticket away in her wallet as she spoke.

There's a standing restaurant called Imajo Soba inside the station, and the aroma of fresh soup stock had been wafting through the area for a while now. People who go out of the prefecture must really feel like they're back in Fukui when they step off the train and get a whiff of this scent.

Nazuna frowned. "What? But we're going all the way to Kanazawa. We can come here anytime, even after school or something."

"Oh, good point. Okay, will you come get soba here with me sometime soon, then, Nazuna?"

"All right, all right."

"Then let's just grab some snacks and drinks!" Yuuko started walking toward the convenience store inside the station.

Nazuna glanced at me, shrugged her shoulders dramatically, then followed her.

Watching them go, I placed a hand on my heart.

I felt something like a twinge.

Good thing my feelings didn't show on my face.

I breathed in slowly and out again, trying to calm myself.

To be honest, I wasn't expecting Chitose's name to come out of Yuuko's mouth so easily.

I think the three of them came to some sort of breakthrough that day, when they returned to the festival.

And judging from what was going on, it didn't seem like either of the girls would end up dating Chitose.

But when I called the other day, I just couldn't ask what happened.

Yuuko and Ucchi have both taken a step forward.

I'm sure Chitose accepted their feelings head-on.

I certainly had no right to go wading in.

Still, there was one thing I was sure of.

After Chitose refused her confession, Yuuko was so depressed that she couldn't even bring herself to contact any of us. But now here she is, inviting me to go shopping.

Nothing's been cut and dried just yet.

In fact...

This might actually be where it all starts.

My fingers tightened in the fabric of my shirt.

What is this stinging pain all about?

Regret that I let someone pass me up?

Fear that the same result might be waiting for me someday?

Sympathy for Yuuko, trying to get herself back on her feet with such positivity?

Or maybe...

Was I jealous of the princess who fell asleep with a one-way ticket in her hand?

After all, I'm the wicked queen, right?

When I dipped my head and kicked the ground, the toenails peeking out from my sandals looked extremely cheap, for some reason.



The Thunderbird was pretty open, so we sat side by side. We could have rotated the seats so they were facing each other, but it wasn't a very long journey, and I was a little nervous about three people taking up a space meant for four.

Nazuna was next to the window on the left, I was beside her, and Yuuko was across the aisle.

I offered Yuuko my seat, but she waved me away. "I have a loud voice, so it'll be okay!" she said.

As soon as the train started moving, Yuuko headed to the bathroom. With all the dilly-dallying around at the convenience store and so on, we didn't have any time for a bathroom break before boarding.

Out the window, rice fields whipped past.

Even though we were still only a short distance from the city center, this rural view was classic Fukui.

I wonder if people in other areas would be surprised to hear that high school students go all the way to neighboring prefectures to buy clothes. Maybe it sounds extravagant.

But we wouldn't travel this far if we could do our shopping locally, and it's not like we're only hunting down special boutiques they only have in Kanazawa or anything.

But the kind of stores most people in other prefectures can find at their local Aeon mall just don't exist in Fukui.

Even when I look at fashion magazines, I often find that I have to go all the way to Kanazawa to get any cute things I find there or the cosmetics I want to try.

Buying online means extra shipping charges, and I want to see the actual

clothes and accessories before making up my mind.

While I was busy thinking about that...

"Yuzuki, have you decided where to go to college?" Nazuna asked from the next set over.

"Hmm, not sure," I replied. "I guess maybe I want to go outside the prefecture."

"Yeah, Fukui's got nothin'."

Maybe she'd been thinking similar thoughts to mine, while we both stared out the train window.

She continued, sounding kinda bored. "What about basketball?"

"Huh?"

"You gonna keep playing in college?"

Come to think of it... Didn't Uemura mention something when he was sticking up for Nazuna during our classroom spat?

*"Nazuna did basketball in junior high, you know? She was actually a big fan of your playing style, Nanase. When she found out our team was playing that 'big shot' team, she was like, 'I gotta go watch.'"*

At the time, my mind was a mess, and I didn't really take it in, but looking back on it now, I felt a little bashful and awkward.

But even so...

Why didn't Nazuna continue with basketball in high school?

It wouldn't feel right to shoot her own question back at her, though. Just because I wasn't sure enough to answer her question didn't mean I should make it her problem.

"Hmm, I guess I haven't thought that far yet."

"...I see. So, that's how it is, is it?"

I love basketball, and I can say with pride that I take it seriously. I'm determined to defeat Ashi High and win the Inter-High tournament. But that's

probably because basketball was the first thing that came along for me.

I've always hated leaving things unaddressed.

For example, if there was a sports day or a marathon, I would secretly practice for weeks in advance. I listen to the teacher in class and do my homework and study for tests seriously. Whether it's a simple game with friends, karaoke, cooking (more of a recent interest), or fashion...I give everything my full effort.

When I have a task or goal in front of me, I aim to conquer it, and I hate to lose. Wherever there's room for improvement, I rise to the occasion by studying and practicing even harder.

If I'd discovered volleyball before basketball, I would have aimed for the same level in volleyball, or track and field, or music, or what have you.

So sometimes, I'm not sure.

I've been passionate about basketball since elementary school, but is that the only thing I should devote my life to?

Suddenly, I thought of my team partner.

Even today, when I'm casually going shopping, I'm sure Umi is practicing basketball.

I'll probably continue to live like this for the rest of my life.

If I can do "anything," then I can't really focus on doing anything specific.

After all, I'm still making my way through the faint darkness.

If only it could be a clear night, with a beautiful moon...like the one I saw back then.

"Sorry, was that too nosy?" I realized that Nazuna was watching me with a little concern.

"No, sorry. I was just thinking."

"All right..."

I gave my head a light shake.

No point in getting caught up with thoughts like this right now.

Not when we're actually going to Kanazawa.

My plan was to have as much fun as I could today, to lighten the weird fog I'd been in lately.

"Speaking of," Nazuna said, clearing her throat again. "I'm sorry for what happened, you know."

I was taken aback for a moment, not expecting her to bring it up... Then I shrugged.

"It's cool. I mean, me too."

"You already apologized, didn't you? Now we're finally square."

"...Aww, you're one of those hot-cold types, huh?"

"Don't lump me in with Atomu!"

We looked at each other, and finally, we both burst into laughter.



It's only one prefecture over, but Kanazawa Station was way busier than Fukui Station. There were ordinary office workers and students, yes, but also lots of tourists with large suitcases coming and going all over the place.

I'm pretty used to coming to Kanazawa, but every now and then I still get a little taken aback by it, and I think how it really is different here.

By the way, a lot of students from Fuji High go on to Kanazawa University every year.

I can kinda understand why.

When they want to go home, they can do so easily. But Kanazawa feels more "big city" than Fukui does.

On the other hand, it's still got that Hokuriku region feeling. It's not as big an adjustment as going to Tokyo or Osaka.

I think this amount of distance is just about right for those who want to leave the prefecture for college but worry about going to an actual big city.

"Hey, why don't we have lunch first?" Yuuko piped up as we went through the ticket gate. "If we start shopping now, we'll have to stop for food in the middle, and everywhere will be crowded."

It was just a little past eleven.

A little early for lunch, but Yuuko had a point.

"I haven't eaten breakfast yet, so..." Nazuna nodded along.

"I haven't eaten, either, so I'm actually a little hungry. Yuzuki, you come here every once in a while, right? You must know somewhere with delicious food or a stylish café..."

"Go Go Curry!!!"

Yuuko's eyes sparkled. "I want to try Go Go Curry!"

"Huh...?"" Nazuna and I both said in unison.

Go Go Curry is a well-known chain restaurant that serves Kanazawa curry, a local crowd-pleaser.

Of course, I've eaten it myself, and I know it's delicious. But it's kinda...

I hesitated, unsure how to react.

"We're so fashionable that we came all the way to Kanazawa to buy clothes. Are you sure that's what we want to have for lunch?"

Nazuna took the words right out of my mouth.

Kanazawa curry is a fairly robust sort of meal, consisting of a breaded cutlet on top of rice, with thick curry sauce poured over. It's usually served with shredded cabbage to at least pretend they cared about the calories.

To be honest, when I go shopping by myself, I often just end up going to a chain restaurant for lunch. After all, my objective is clothes shopping, and I don't want to spend extra money or time on eating.

But today, since I knew it was going to be me and Yuuko, I did a little research on some of the fancier lunch places.

Still, truthfully, after the shock of this morning, I just wanted to eat something really tasty for a pick-me-up.

"Boo!" Yuuko complained. "Nazuna, you're hungry, aren't you? Come on, we growing girls need our calories!"

"What are you, some sweaty sports club bro?"

"It comes with cabbage, so it's healthy!"

"You're getting away from the point here." Then Nazuna grinned as if to say, "Eh, whatever." "What about you, Yuzuki? Are you okay with that?"

I laughed a little. "I just have to make sure I don't get any on my white shirt."

"Oh, yeah."

To be honest, I'm used to this kind of thing, spending so much time with Haru.

People often get the wrong idea about me, because I try to keep myself put together, but I like ramen, curry, and katsudon as much as the next person. Sometimes I go to eat at beef bowl joints by myself, and if Yuuko says she wants curry, then that's cool with me.

Also...

I want to practice compromising now, while it's still an option for me.

Not for others...but for me.

And not for today, but for some undefined point in the future.

Even if it's just a selfish, arrogant, self-satisfied imposition.

Yuuko grabbed both our hands joyfully.

"Yay, let's go!"

Then the three of us started walking together...

I was tickled to be here. Surely, this was a moment I'd never forget.



We went to the Go Go Curry restaurant in the Anto, a shopping mall in Kanazawa Station. Nazuna had a small pork loin cutlet curry, I had a small chicken cutlet curry, and Yuuko had something called Manhattan curry, which was a loin cutlet with boiled egg, sausage, and fried shrimp on top. She even ordered a second helping of the cabbage side, too.

Needless to say, those of us watching her were rendered a little speechless.

When we left the restaurant, Yuuko sighed with satisfaction. “That was so good! I definitely want to go there again.”

Nazuna side-eyed her and whispered in my ear. “How does she have that figure when she eats like that?”

“Right?”

“Ever since I quit the club, I’ve been paying a lot of attention to maintaining my body shape.”

“Yeah, I’d be in trouble if I stopped playing basketball, too.”

Muttering back and forth, we headed toward the Kanazawa Forum, a fashion shopping center located right next to the station.

This is usually my first port of call when I come to Kanazawa. There’s so much on offer here that it’s usually my last port of call, too. Although every so often, if I have some extra time, I’ll stretch my legs and walk around the Korinbo shopping district, too.

Entering the building, we stopped in front of the mall directory.

L’Occitane, Sabon, Shu Uemura, Nano Universe, United Arrows...

Just glancing around the first floor, you’ll see plenty of shops that are in magazine ads but not in Fukui.

Yuuko’s eyes sparkled.

“Is there a particular store you’re looking for, Yuzuki?”

“Hmm, I just want some fall clothes. And underwear.”

Nazuna lifted her hand in the air. “I need underwear, too! I want to be Chitose-ready anytime.”

““You wish!”” Yuuko and I both retorted in unison.

The corner of Nazuna’s mouth quirked upward, like she was enjoying this. “Oh, really?”

Whoops. I let myself get baited, same as Yuuko.

I cleared my throat, attempting damage control. “I have to stick up for my ex when a girl’s coming after him with nefarious intentions, that’s all.”

“Oh, whatever, Yuzuki!” Nazuna retorted. “And weren’t you fake-dating to begin with?”

Naturally, I hadn’t explained the details to her.

I looked quickly at Yuuko, but she shook her head.

Nazuna rolled her eyes. “I mean, it was completely obvious.”

*Well, it’s not like it’s something I need to hide,* I thought, smiling wryly.

*I already know that Nazuna is cool.*

*In fact, Nazuna really pays attention to what’s going on around her. I keep noticing the little things she does today.*

I laughed it off.

“What about you? How serious are you about Chitose?”

“...Hmm, eighty percent.”

“More than I was expecting.”

“Ha-ha.” Nazuna smiled mischievously. “I mean, Chitose’s cool. What, am I not allowed to fall for someone cool?”

“I mean...”

“You two, the other girls... Chitose’s surrounded by a lot of top-class competition, but you’re all kinda thirsty and emotionally intense. Maybe Chitose’s going to get tired of the attention and turn to someone easygoing like me instead.”

“Uh...”

“I mean, you two are both thinking about long-term romance when it’s just a high school crush, right?”

“Gah...”

The phrase “emotionally intense” opened up a heavy pit in my stomach.

Sneaking a glance at Yuuko, I found her scratching her cheek. She seemed to

feel as awkward as I did.

Given my personality and the way I handle myself at school, I guess I don't really have many opportunities to hear comments like this from my friends.

So it was sort of refreshing. Really refreshing, actually.

Maybe that was why Yuuko had seemed so much perkier lately.

Nazuna rolled her eyes. "I mean, you're all way too much. You're a hassle. I really don't feel like duking it out against you all. Still, if Chitose *does* choose me...I have no problem discarding my friendship with you to date him."

I found her frankness refreshing, too, and I shrugged in a theatrical manner.

*Still... Let's give it some thought.*

*...Chitose and Nazuna, eh?*

*Could it be? I mean... Maybe?*

Like, I'm pretty similar to Chitose in terms of personality. And to me, Nazuna seems pretty cool.

She's like Haru in that I can chill with her without worrying too much. But then again, Haru shines like the sun. Being around her always makes me feel like I should step up my game, too.

Nazuna, on the other hand? She's so...natural.

It's like she's cool with both her positive and negative emotions, and she's able to be in her feels about boys and friends without overanalyzing things to death. Being around her makes me feel like I can just be me, too, and not have to worry about coming off as pretentious or fake-humble.

...It wouldn't be so odd if Chitose got the same vibes from Nazuna as I did.

So then, I had to think.

What kind of person do I want to be in Chitose's life?

And what kind of person do I want him to be in mine?

"All jokes aside..." Nazuna briskly changed the subject. "Let's start at one end of the mall and work our way around."

Yuuko and I looked at each other and nodded. ““Let’s do it.””



As the three of us shopped together, I started to get a feel for the other girls’ fashion tastes.

Yuuko’s a complete all-rounder. She tries on everything from girly clothes to feminine clothes to mature to sexy.

Nazuna has a relatively cool monochrome look, but her penchant for short skirts and an exposed midriff gives her a devilish sort of spice.

I’ve never really been aware of this about myself, but I realized that I tended to opt for a boyish sort of style.

Incidentally, I also found it interesting how different our tastes were when it came to underwear.

Yuuko tends to choose surprisingly conservative bras and panties that come in a variety of colors. Nazuna chooses cute designs with frills and bows, while I prefer underwear with strings on the sides, in sheer materials with a sexy feel to them.

It’s like how people have their outer facade and their inner self.

Though Yuuko comes across as fearless, able to jump into anything, she’s actually pretty sincere and even timid when it comes to her true feelings. And although Nazuna is bold and provocative and sometimes harsh with her words, she has a hidden cuteness and kindness to her that’s very girly.

As for me, while I try to come off as cool and unbothered, I hide my more feminine side.

...So that’s what was on my mind anyway.

As we browsed the racks of clothes in a shop we’d wandered into...

“Yuzuki, you never really wear girly outfits, do you? Like dresses and skirts?” Yuuko commented, as if she’d been reading my mind.

“Hmm, well, it’s not a conscious choice.”

Still, I have a hunch why.

When I analyze it myself, it feels pretty embarrassing, but to put it simply, it's kinda like my trademark.

Since childhood, I've been hyper-aware of my good looks, and I've had to deal with envy and jealousy and negative attention from both boys and girls because of it. Even though I tried to downplay myself, my body continued growing more feminine all the time, compounding the issue.

...So I took control over what I could still control.

In other words, I tried to neutralize my appearance with what I wore.

I can't tell Yuuko that, though. If I ever tried to explain, it would not go well. It's true, though. I tried to downplay my femininity as much as possible, to avoid drawing further attention to myself.

"Oh, I know," Yuuko said, clapping her hands. "Let me put together an outfit for you from this store! You can have the final decision on whether you want to buy it or not, of course!"

"Um, that sounds kinda embarrassing..."

"Don't worry! I'm confident in my styling skills!"

Nazuna, standing nearby, backed her up. "Sounds good. And Yuuko does have a great eye for fashion."

"Well," I prevaricated, scratching my cheek. "All right, then... Go nuts."

"All righty!" Yuuko tugged on my hand, her touch warm.

I suddenly realized that this was a dream I'd had for a long time, going shopping like this with girlfriends.

And so I stepped into the fitting room with the outfit Yuuko chose for me.

"No looking in the mirror until you come out!" she said.

"All right, all right," I called back as I was pulling off my shirt and shorts.

I almost checked myself out in the mirror from pure habit, but thanks to the warning, I managed to stop myself just in time. I gave a half-smile.

I took a quick inventory of the items Yuuko had chosen for me.

...Yeah. This isn't the kind of outfit I'd ever be able to put together for myself.

After quickly changing my clothes, I put on my sandals and left the changing room.

"Wow. It's a yes to both." Nazuna put her hand over her mouth in surprise.

I guessed what she meant was that both Yuuko's selection and my appearance in it were a hit.

Her honest reaction reassured me.

Yuuko approached, smiling. "Just a sec. One last touch." As she spoke, she deftly swept up my hair. "Okay, all done. Look in the mirror."

"Thanks."

Even without looking in the mirror, I knew what I had just put on.

But seeing the finished image...

"Huh...?"

I was at a loss for words.

Yuuko had selected a wine-red, one-shoulder top in a smooth, silky fabric. It didn't show my belly button or anything, but it was still cropped, and I could see a strip of exposed skin above my waist. There was also a black maxi skirt with a long ribbon tie hanging from the left hip, and it had a wide slit that exposed my legs more than the shorts I'd been wearing. The ankle strap sandals were the same shade of wine-red as the top. A gold bracelet and earrings reflected the light.

No way, I thought, my fingers twitching.

The girl in the mirror twitched her fingers, too.

It was me. Yuzuki Nanase.

I felt exposed; that was the only way to put it.

I gulped and lowered my eyes, then raised my head like I was praying.

The person in the mirror was, unmistakably, a woman with a mysterious charm.

I see...

*Maybe I'm not the wicked queen after all.*

I'm the witch who hides a poison apple inside a mirror.

There's one thing I'm sure of.

I've been trying to be careful about how I look and how I present myself, but I never really noticed how I always opt for boyish items. And there was a reason for that.

Because I didn't have anyone I wanted to poison with the apple I kept hidden inside my reflection.

But now...now I've met him.

I've met the man I want to shoot down with my arrow, no matter what it costs me.

There's a romance I want to make a reality, no matter the risk.



Thinking back...

Once upon a time, I myself was a Snow White who was tormented because of the way I happened to look.

There was proof of that. It just didn't come in the form of an apple.

It was the same, no doubt, for the wicked queen and the witch.

"You look great, Yuzuki! Like some famous overseas influencer!"

Yuuko grabbed my hand casually.

"It's a pain in my butt, but I'll take a photo if you want."

Nazuna held up her phone.

"Hee-hee, thanks."

Listening to their distant-sounding voices, I smiled brightly.

*Mirror, mirror, on the wall,* I chanted to myself.



After spending about three hours walking around Kanazawa Forus, we each had a decent amount of shopping bags in our hands.

Yuuko mock-grimaced. "I bought way too much."

Nazuna sighed and nodded. "Me too. You and Yuzuki keep recommending such good stuff."

"Take responsibility for your own purchases."

Not that I'm one to talk. I ended up buying the entire outfit Yuuko picked out for me. I was already over budget. I'd have to rein it in for the rest of the day.

"I know, why don't we go sightseeing for a little bit?"

After taking a break at a café, Yuuko looked back over her shoulder as she led the way back to the station.

It was still only around three PM, too early to go straight home. But we were all a little burned-out on shopping.

Nazuna curled her lip.

"All right, but let's stash our bags at the station. I don't want to drag all this stuff around."

I grinned wryly. "Sounds good to me."

Yuuko's eyes lit up when we both said yes.

"Of course! I actually have a plan in mind..."

About an hour later...

After leaving our luggage in a coin locker, the three of us walked out of the station dressed in Japanese kimonos, completely different from our usual casual clothes.

The whole thing was Yuuko's idea.

*"Hey, why don't we rent kimonos?!"*

In Kanazawa, there are some preserved historic streets, such as Kenrokuen Garden, the Higashi Chaya District, and the Nagamachi Samurai Residence Street, and there are also many kimono rental shops geared toward tourists.

Even though it's not a festival day or anything, you can hear the clopping of wooden geta sandals all over.

Every time I came to Kanazawa I noticed this, and I'd always harbored a secret desire to join in. I thought back to what Yuuko said that night at the festival, and I cleared my throat apologetically.

"I'm sorry, but to be honest, I don't think I have enough money..."

Nazuna nodded. "I'm a little short, too."

It was just a rental, but it was probably a few thousand yen per person, at the cheapest estimate.

And this time we took the express train. My wallet was already too light to splurge further.

But Yuuko just looked back at our unenthusiastic faces and grinned. "No worries! My mom gave me enough for all of us to rent kimonos! It was her suggestion!"

Nazuna and I exchanged glances before responding.

"We really can't accept that..."

I'd feel guilty asking my own parents for this, let alone taking extra money from Yuuko's mom. I'd never even met her.

Nazuna seemed to feel the same way, her lip twisted.

"Oh, I get it! Totally! I mean, I'd feel the same way!" Yuuko said. "But my mom's kinda weird. If you say no when she offers something, she takes it hard. And she's looking forward to seeing pics. I told her I'd send some right away. So would you guys mind joining me on this?"

"Really...?"

"Really, really! If we go home without renting kimonos, Mom will complain for hours. She'll be all, 'Oh, but I wanted to see Yuzuki and Nazuna dressed in their kimooooonooos.'"

Suddenly, both Nazuna and I burst out laughing at the same time.

Yuuko's impression of her mom sounded exactly like Yuuko.

"Well, I guess we should go for it then...?"

After some hesitation, Nazuna nodded, and we headed to the kimono rental shop.

...So after all that, there we were, waiting for a bus in front of the station.

The store had a custom plan called "a walk around town in summer kimono," so we each got to select the outfit of our choice.

Since the three of us would be walking side by side, we all opted for retro-modern-style patterns.

Yuuko chose a forest-green kimono with mature stripes. She even borrowed a boater hat for a sense of fun in the ensemble.

Nazuna's kimono had yellow and vermillion morning glories and dark green leaves all over it. Her obi strings and *kanzashi* hair ornament drew the eye.

I went for one with eye-catching, irregular stripes of blue, indigo, and white. A design of leaves added a pop of color.

Also, we had a Japanese sun umbrella.

We thought it might be too much if we all had them, so we just decided to keep passing it back and forth.

Yuuko stopped checking the bus schedule and looked at us wryly.

"They call it a 'summer kimono,' but it's still kinda hot."

Nazuna nodded. "I'm glad we got some cool body patches like you suggested, Yuzuki."

"Right?" I swelled slightly with pride. "When you're wearing a *yukata* at a summer festival, just cooling your armpits and the base of your thighs can be very effective, so keep that in mind."

Just then, the Castle Town Kanazawa bus arrived.

I looked it up on my phone, and it seemed like it went around the major tourist spots. As long as we stuck to this bus, we shouldn't get lost.

Our destination was the Higashi Chaya District, one of Kanazawa's most famous landmarks.

As the name suggested, this area was a teahouse district officially recognized by the Kaga clan during the Edo period, and the elegant streetscape with its latticework and stone pavement still retained a strong atmosphere of those bygone days.

Most of the people who rent kimonos in Kanazawa probably head for the same place.

The bus we boarded was filled with a mix of tourists and locals.

The three of us were the only ones dressed up.

There were still a few seats available, but...

Yuuko signaled to Nazuna with her eyes and grabbed the strap.

A group of girls who looked like high school students were sitting a way off, animatedly talking while looking at us. I could tell from their expressions that they meant well, but I felt a little embarrassed all the same.

I don't have much travel experience. But when I come to a place I don't know well, I feel like I can get in touch with the local atmosphere by riding a train or

bus like this.

Kanazawa feels a little more dignified and sophisticated compared to Fukui.

It's like a river, where some parts flow fast and other parts seem suspended in time.

I found myself looking at Yuuko, who was standing beside me.

The bus driver mumbled solemnly into the speaker to indicate we were heading off, as Yuuko gazed idly out the window.

That classroom bathed in the evening light, the sparklers we played with at the summer festival...

She acted as if it was all just a page from a diary that had been torn out and thrown away, like nothing had happened at all.

However, there was a certain sadness in her eyes. Something had changed.

*So beautiful*, I thought, sighing.

And in that moment...

A difficult-to-describe feeling welled up inside me, an irritation almost like anxiety, but I still couldn't take my eyes off her.

I was simply fascinated by her profile.

Before I knew it, the Yuuko I knew was gone.

Colorful scenery, colorful clothes, colorful summer.

And one colorful boy.

When she turned to look at me, I gave her a soft smile.



"Can we take a short detour?" asked Yuuko as we got off at Hashibacho. That was the closest stop to the Higashi Chaya District.

Nazuna and I nodded, and we began walking along the river that ran right next to the bus stop.

The road was already cobblestones, and there was a faint whiff of old-timey atmosphere in the air.

"Feels so nice here." Yuuko held her boater hat with one hand as a gentle breeze blew past.

Nazuna nodded from my other side.

"It's still hot, but it feels cooler along the river and in the shade. It's like you can feel the coming change in the season."

We chattered and clattered over the cobblestones, the sunlight filtering through the trees all around us.

I tilted the Japanese sun umbrella I was holding over Nazuna.

"My seventeenth summer, huh?"

*It's already gone,* I thought.

Yuuko, Ucchi, Haru, and then Chitose.

Behind us all is a summer we'll never forget.

To the left there was a park bench, where an old woman sat holding a paperback, half-asleep.

Someday, in a distant sunset August, I'd dream of old connections. Just like her.

*But I...*

"Let's put the summer to bed."

Yuuko spoke swiftly. Something about the way she said it reminded me of a swaying hair ornament.

"Listen, both of you. I've been thinking about everything that's happened so far...and the future..."

All I could do was follow the flow of the water as it swept me along.

We sat down side by side, and Yuuko started talking, spinning words from threads she'd woven throughout August.

After she ran from the classroom.

The time she spent alone, in despair—although she wasn't really alone.

A kind mother.

A friend who was a boy.

A best friend who was a girl.

That summer festival night.

After she was done, Yuuko lifted her chin, like tucking a bookmark into a story.

"Nazuna, you gave me that advice. But Yuzuki...I felt like I couldn't tell you..."

*Right... She must have confided in Kaito, too.*

For some reason, that was the first thought that came to me.

My head was filled with a lot of information, but one thing occurred to me. He must have had an unforgettable summer, too.

I realized pretty early on that Kaito liked Yuuko. And that he was trying to suppress those feelings behind a playful smile.

So I was shocked when Kaito punched Chitose, but I quickly understood why he was angry.

*Go, Kaito, I'd thought warmly.*

Maybe Haru and I would treat him to a nice meal after club practice some time.

Pulling me back from my momentary escape from reality, I heard something that sounded like a sob.

After sniffling briefly, Nazuna spoke. "...I'm sorry, Yuuko."

Yuuko, sitting in the middle, chuckled. "What are you apologizing for, Nazuna?"

"I mean..." Nazuna hung her head. "I feel like I started a fire. My thinking was, isn't it better to go your separate ways having told the guy how you feel, instead of never saying anything at all? So it's my fault..."

Right... So the two of them had a whole discussion about it.

"It's okay," Yuuko said, smiling gently.

"Nazuna, you gave me the push I needed, but I was the one who made the

decision to act. I don't have any regrets from this summer. I have no intention of just saying good-bye.

"So don't cry anymore," Yuuko said, rubbing Nazuna's back.

I felt the tension drain from me, and my own eyes started burning.

Yuuko, Ucchi, Chitose: a perfectly formed triangle.

I felt terrible because here I was, having failed to touch anyone's heart.

This girl, gentle as the setting sun, was trying to make it so all of our feelings could be kept alive.

"But, Yuuko," Nazuna said timidly. "Are you sure it's okay like this?"

"Like how...?"

"I mean, I get what Uchida's saying, and I can understand Chitose's response. But putting it into words would just make everyone confused and worried."

"Yeah," Yuuko murmured, nodding, encouraging Nazuna to continue.

"But if you look at it from another perspective, it's cruel to drag things out. Like, maybe in the future..." Nazuna paused and turned her head toward me for just a moment.

We made eye contact across Yuuko, and Nazuna looked away awkwardly.

"S-sorry...," she mumbled.

I didn't have to ask to know what that look meant.

*"Maybe in the future, Chitose and Yuzuki might end up dating."*

I bet that was what she was about to say before she stopped herself.

Of course, he could end up dating anyone. Ucchi, Haru, or Nishino. Or even someone else.

"It's okay. I understand all that."

Yuuko continued in a clear voice.

"Saku didn't ask me to wait for him. And I won't lie to myself; I know his answer was no. So it's not like I'm dragging things out. My big romance already ended this summer."

*"Let's put the summer to bed."*

Suddenly, her words from earlier came back to me.

Right. This was Yuuko's way of moving forward. Getting ready for the next season to come.

*Thank you. I'm sorry. You did your best.*

There were so many things I felt like I had to tell her, but I couldn't quite find the words. So instead, I said just one thing.

I turned to my dear friend sitting beside me and asked...

*"What are you going to do now?"*

Yuuko looked at me with a gentle, dreamlike smile on her face.

*"I'll keep loving him just like I did before."*

Ah, I knew it.

Over the course of one summer, Yuuko has matured a little faster than I have.

*This is hard, I thought, looking up at the still, blue sky. If I'm a mirror, and you're a lake at sunset, which one reflects his image more beautifully?*

Yuuko leaned against me.

I gently ran my fingers through her soft hair.

Gently, indulgently, covetously.

*Please, I thought.*

*Please, don't let my clumsy footprints ruin the white snow.*



I hope that this unrequited love might turn into a requited one someday, for both parties involved.

I threaded my hopes together slowly, like a beautiful web, but those wishes frayed until I was left with only a single thin thread.

I would have to tie it all again. Slip the loop over a finger, and then...

Then would it just fall apart again?

If there was a sign to mark the end of a romance, like the final embers falling from a sparkler, would I be able to fall in love with someone else, the way autumn comes to see off the summer?

I, Yuuko Hiiragi, gently placed my hand on Yuzuki's hand beside me.

I tried my best to be strong.

Not for my friends, but for myself.

Truthfully, I was afraid to even say the name Saku.

I don't think I have the right to call him that anymore.

I have to protect myself and take a step back.

After everything, am I still just a sneaky girl who takes advantage of other people's kindness?

I ask myself that same question over and over, and I always wind up in the same place.

That day, at sunset...I did lose one chance at romance.

My dearest friend told me it didn't have to end.

The person I love told me that I was in his heart, too.

Nothing's set in stone.

Let's start again from here.

I could reach him. My words could resonate. We could connect.

But...

The fact that he didn't immediately welcome my feelings... That fact will always be true.

On a sleepless night, I tried to encourage myself with positive words over and over again.

I was rejected by Saku. There was no changing that.

For him, right now, I wasn't the kind of girl he would want above everything else. I wasn't the kind of girl he would be desperate to stay with. He wasn't ready to shake off his doubts and fight for it—at least, not for me.

...I should have known that before confessing my feelings.

Even now, I can't stop thinking about it.

I squeezed our joined hands.

What if it had been Yuzuki who confessed her feelings then?

Or Ucchi, or Haru, or Nishino?

Saku's kind, so no doubt he would have worried about it just as much, and he would have given it some very serious thought, but...

But yeah. What if it was someone other than me?

I wondered if the answer he gave might be different.

Wasn't there a possibility that he'd make up his mind right there in the classroom and take that girl's hand?

...I know there's no point in getting hung up on what-ifs.

But at the same time, I can't shake the fact that out of all the girls close to him, I'm the only one who's had to deal with his apologies.

The others...still have time to nurture their relationships with him and find the right chance to confess their feelings.

But what about me?

I feel like I've been left out in the cold, and I've fallen asleep.

I understand the situation as it stands, in theory.

But I wish I could still spend more time getting close to his heart, so that I could somehow make up for what was lacking.

I wish I could try again, as many times as it takes for him to fall for me, too.

So, my plan: buy new clothes, get new cosmetics, and become a whole new me.

"Yuuko...?"

I realized that Yuzuki was looking at me with concern.

"Heh-heh! Come on, let's go."

I let go of her hand and stood up like nothing had happened.

*I'll keep loving him just the same.*

*That's all I'm allowed to do right now.*



It seemed like we could get where we were going by passing through a park along the riverbank, but taking a shortcut would make it less fun, so I led Yuzuki and Nazuna back to the bus stop.

There were other people around who seemed to be tourists, so I followed them along the road and turned at the intersection signposted HIGASHI CHAYA DISTRICT.

I'm not sure that was the correct route to take, but when I saw the small, fancy shops scattered around, I was glad we'd come this way.

After walking for a while...

"Hey, wanna try that?" Nazuna tugged at my kimono sleeve.

Looking in the direction she was pointing, I saw a transparent box with the words LOVE FORTUNES written on it in front of a shop.

Inside were many small pieces of paper rolled up into cylinders with gorgeous, colorful patterns and designs.

"Wait! Isn't that kinda mean, after what we talked about earlier?!"

Nazuna grinned. "Even more reason to try it! Anyway, somehow I get the impression you're not just going to give up."

"That's true, but..."

"Okay, me first."

Without waiting for my response, Nazuna immediately put in 100 yen and drew one of the colorful slips of paper.

She tore off the colorful outer wrapping and unfolded the paper. "Yes! It's super lucky!"

Yuzuki and I leaned in to see.

At the top of the fortune, there was a picture of a woman wearing triangular glasses and a suit, holding the kind of stick a teacher would use to point at a blackboard.

*You need enthusiasm and effort right now. If you're just waiting for a good encounter, you'll stay like that forever.*

"Agh! It's so preachy!"

After reading the fortune, Nazuna snorted.

Yuzuki and I looked at each other and burst out laughing.

Nazuna continued muttering. "This is supposed to be a super lucky fortune! Can't it say something a bit more uplifting?"

I looked at the paper again.

"Look, but there's something else written as well."

A speech bubble, coming from a drawing of Cupid at the bottom.

"A person who has loved and lost is more beautiful than someone who can never love at all."

"Don't tell *me* that! That's advice for *you*, Yuuko!"

"Hey?!"

Her words...kinda hit me a little.

But I think this is what I like about Nazuna.

She made an awkward moment into a joke with such ease.

"Okay, me next."

Biting back laughter, Yuzuki drew the next fortune. "Aw. Just medium luck."

Nazuna and I leaned in to see.

"Stop clinging to memories of when you were happy forever. The man from your past has already moved on."

"...Huh."

"Yuzuki! Don't just crumple up your fortune!"

Nazuna was dying laughing as I tried to rescue the slip of paper.

"So basically, forget your ex, huh?"

Yuzuki twisted the corners of her mouth as she spoke.

"Well, wait, Cupid is saying something here, too."

We all studied the smoothed-out fortune once more.

"A confession of love is not a gamble that will turn things around all at once. It's merely a process of confirming certain feelings."

"I think this one is more about you, too, Yuuko."

"Oh great, Yuzuki, now you're getting on my case, too?"

I scrunched up my face. "You guys suck!"

Yuzuki's really perceptive, so I think she saw my reaction to what Nazuna said and rolled with it.

"Enough. Time for my fortune."

I grabbed a paper slip, puffing out my cheeks.

Peeling off the outer paper, I...

"Oh. Low luck."

My shoulders slumped in dismay at the words that appeared.

Nazuna leaned in gleefully. "The super lucky one and the medium lucky one were kind of dire. How bad is this one gonna be?!"

Yuzuki nodded. "Well, whatever it says, don't take it too seriously."

"I haven't even read it yet!"

Even as I said this, I slowly unfolded the fortune to the end. This is what I've been reduced to.

"Think carefully before you act—about yourself, about your partner, about those around you. If you act with consideration, your love will definitely be requited."

""No way.""

"Huh?!"

Nazuna explained calmly:

"It's supposed to be not very good, but this fortune's the most apt one of all."

"Is it?!"

Yuzuki laughed, rolling her eyes. "Yeah. The super lucky one actually says something more, like don't let your guard down. What's Cupid say?"

We looked at the drawing at the bottom. But mine wasn't Cupid. It was an old man who looked like a god of some sort, holding a cane. He had a friendly expression on his face, which was a bit more comical than Yuzuki's or Nazuna's drawings. He had some of that older guy charm.

"You may have failed once, but that means next time you'll do better."

"..."

That was it for us. We started howling with laughter together.

Nazuna was choking and wiping her eyes. "The universe is coming after you today, Yuuko!"

Yuzuki's shoulders were heaving as she fought for breath. "And who's this little old man? Why is he only on Yuuko's fortune?"

"And who is the lady who's so full of herself, hmm?"

"Enough! The both of you! I'm gonna die!"

As the others continued to splutter and choke, I stashed the fortune in my purse.

I may have failed once, but...

Secretly, I found myself hoping that one day, I could come around to the old man's philosophy.



After walking for a while, we came to an open area like a square.

Lined with latticework buildings, it had the feel of an old teahouse district.

Nazuna, the one currently holding the Japanese umbrella, piped up.

"Hey, how about eating something to cool down?"

Yuzuki nodded, waving her hand near her face. "Yeah, let's take a break."

"Works for me!" I agreed without hesitation.

It wasn't that hot when we were sitting by the river, but now that we'd started walking, things were getting a little sweaty.

There were several shops around that seemed to be serving sweets.

I pointed to one of them and said:

"Look, gold leaf soft-serve ice cream!"

I'm not great at history or geography, but I think gold leaf is probably a local delicacy, since there were signs for it everywhere. It's like thin gold foil on top of regular soft-serve ice cream, and it's pretty striking to look at.

Several people were waiting in front of the café.

Yuzuki looked hesitant.

"Um, I'm not sure I can even imagine what that tastes like..."

Nazuna didn't look too keen, either.

"It looks great in photos, but wouldn't it stick to the roof of your mouth? I'd really like to eat something a little more 'girls' day out.'"

"Really? But I want to try the local soft-serve..."

Still, I got my way with the Go Go Curry we had for lunch. Maybe I could postpone the fancy ice cream until the next time I came with Mom. She'd definitely go for it, just out of pure curiosity.

As I was thinking about that, Nazuna turned around.

"What about that shop over there? They have something that looks like *monaka* ice cream."

Yuzuki smiled. "Sandwich style, then? I feel like the wafers would get stuck to the roof of your mouth, too."

"...I guess."

We decided to at least check out the menu posted in front of the restaurant.

Gelato and Japanese sweets seemed to be the main selling point, and there were also some unusual menu items that incorporated Kanazawa matcha, *kukicha* tea, salt, and soy sauce.

"That's perfect! It's all made with local ingredients, just the kind of thing to try on a trip!"

The other two looked at each other and nodded in agreement.

Then Nazuna broke into a sharklike grin. "Look, Yuuko. There's something with gold leaf here for you, too."

"...Oh..."

Indeed, at the top of the menu was "Gold Ice Cream Monaka."

But would I choose that when this place had such a wide variety of gelato flavors available? I hesitated a little. And it cost almost twice as much as the other stuff.

"I... I think I'll just get a normal dessert after all."

When I surrendered, the other two burst out laughing.

I ordered a Kanazawa miso and cream cheese gelato, Yuzuki ordered a bamboo charcoal and Brontë pistachio, and Nazuna ordered an Ohno soy sauce and burnt caramel.

I think they were all pretty unusual flavors, but Yuzuki was actually the first to order, and she set the challenge.

I didn't want to be a weakling and get something safe like regular tea flavor or strawberry milk, and Nazuna and I both chose very Japanese-style flavor combinations.

We were informed we could have it in a cup or a cone instead, but in the end, everyone opted for the monaka.

We picked up our gelato orders and headed out of the shop.

On closer inspection, round balls of gelato were sandwiched between the two mochi wafer skins like castanets. It looked like a snowman wearing a knitted hat.

After taking a photo with my phone, I started eating the gelato using the wooden spoon that came with it.

The moment I took a bite, I tasted the rich cream cheese. But then came the aftertaste, salt and the faint aroma of miso.

“Wow, this is so good!”

I raised my voice in surprise, and the shopkeeper who’d just emerged turned to me and smiled, saying, “Thank you.” I felt a little awkward and gave a slight polite bow.

Looking over, I saw that both Yuzuki and Nazuna were eating their own gelatos with satisfaction.

Come to think of it, Mom used to make me miso and cream cheese on rice as a snack, and I remember being surprised at how well they went together. Maybe I unconsciously recalled that flavor when choosing my gelato.

I held my sandwich by its top and bottom wafers, like it was a hamburger.

The scoops of gelato were quite large, and I was worried that I wouldn’t be able to bite into it, but it seemed to be softer than I expected. With a little pressure, it managed to compress into a nice thickness.

As I ate it, the crispy wafer skin and the smooth gelato texture were so wonderful. I could eat a hundred of these.

Once she was halfway through her own gelato, Nazuna said, “By the way, I’ve been thinking about something for a while... There’s a lot of couples around here, aren’t there?”

““Oh, yeah.”” Yuzuki and I both responded in instant unison.

Nazuna frowned. “Seeing them everywhere I look pisses me off.”

““Oh, yeah.””

I didn’t notice many in Kanazawa Forus or around the station, but there certainly seemed to be quite a lot of couples around the Higashi Chaya District. Maybe because there’s more tourists here than locals or businessmen.

“I’d love to go on a kimono date with a guy...,” I found myself mumbling

aloud.

I bet those couples rented their kimonos, just like we did.

We passed by I don't know how many happy-looking couples all dressed up.

Some wore *hakama*. I couldn't stop watching them. It looked...nice.

While I continued to gaze at the street, Yuzuki said, "Yeah, it's a little different from going to a festival in a *yukata*."

I raised my voice. "Right? It's weird, though. Like a break from the everyday. But even festivals are kinda like that, too, right?"

After thinking for a while, Yuzuki responded. "I think it's because you're on a trip."

"Yeah? What do you mean exactly?"

I raised my brows, intrigued, and she elaborated.

"I mean, it was the same this summer, right? At festivals, you're going to see other kids from class and from sports clubs, aren't you? But on a trip, when it's just the two of you taking a stroll... It's basically a privilege reserved for couples, isn't it? Wearing kimonos together makes a statement. Like, *Here we are, we're a couple.*"

Yuzuki's gaze was faraway as she watched the couples go by.

*Right, I thought. It made sense.*

Admittedly, it might not be the kimonos I admired. Maybe I was just envious of these people's relationships. They were able to stroll around this novel location, enjoying a break from the everyday.

Just then, a couple dressed in Japanese clothes passed by in front of me.

They were older than we were but still young, maybe first-or second-year college students.

The boy leaned in to whisper in the girl's ear. She looked down at her kimono, then blushed shyly.

What did he just whisper to her?

Did he say she was adorable in that kimono?

Saku compliments me when I dress up, but it must be so different to get a special compliment like that from your own boyfriend.

Just thinking about it filled me with a bittersweet feeling. My heart did a little leap. But at the same time, I felt a sadness so strong, I could have cried. Because it wasn't me.

If only Saku and I could pick a destination and plan a trip... If only...

I wondered why that girl decided to wear what she did.

Did she deliberate over her boyfriend's favorite colors and preferred patterns?

Or did they choose for each other?

After this, they'd stroll around seeing the sights, have a nice dinner, then spend the night together.

"It must be nice..." I muttered to myself again.

Up until now, I've been the one asking Saku on dates. He's never said no, but there was always an unspoken agreement that it was just a friend thing.

"A trip, huh...?" Yuzuki muttered, too, as if she'd been listening to my inner monologue somehow. "I couldn't be his first girlfriend, in the end..."

She lowered her gaze, seemingly thinking back on the past.

I wasn't quite sure what she meant.

Maybe she knows things about him that I don't.

But the precious moments Yuzuki seemed to be reliving now were private. Hers. I swallowed back the questions I was dying to ask.

*His first girlfriend*, I thought.

Why do we even want to confess our feelings and become boyfriend and girlfriend in the first place?

Even as friends, we can have fun and enjoy being together, can't we?

But I want him to have eyes only for me. I want to keep him away from the

temptations of other girls. I want to monopolize all of his time. I want him to proudly hold my hand in public, and kiss me, and then...

I mean, we all have our reasons, I guess. But the main one seems to be... wanting to be someone's first.

If I could have my wish, I'd want to be the first girl he falls for.

I'd want to be his first girlfriend.

I want to be the one going on that first date.

Holding hands for the first time, kissing for the first time, spending the night together for the first time.

No. Even more mundane stuff would be fine.

Like, I want to be the girl in the photographs he gets printed out for the first time.

I want to be the girl he has his first big fight with.

The first girl to give him her cold.

The first person to clean out his ears. The first person to blow-dry his hair. The first person he drinks alcohol with.

I wish it could be me.

That's why I want to be more than friends.

Because I want to be the first person he thinks of when he looks back on his youth.

I want to be the one who springs to mind when he reminisces someday.

*Tinkle, tinkle.*

Wind chimes were singing somewhere nearby.

I realized that my gelato had started to melt. The paper wrapper was starting to disintegrate.

I hurriedly put the rest of it in my mouth, but the wafer skin had become disappointingly soft.

Suddenly, I realized that Yuzuki was looking at me with a warmth in her eyes.

"Hey...Yuuko?"

In her voice, there was a lingering emotion—as if she'd just been lost in thoughts very similar to my own.

"Let's go buy something for Chitose."

...Not for the others. Only for Chitose.

Sometimes I think Yuzuki and Saku are exactly alike.

He acts all cool, too. He's stubborn and grumpy, too. And he can show surprising amounts of warmth and kindness, too.

So I'm always trying to read between the lines of what she says, just like I do with Saku. Those two might not be the most honest or forthcoming, but they never lie, and they never try to hurt anyone.

Maybe Yuzuki's example gave me the push I needed when I was reluctant to speak.

Or maybe she was just communicating something to me, in a roundabout way.

There was something apologetic about her approach to me.

*Like, I'm sorry, but I have no intention of backing down.*

If that's the case, then...

She really is as kind as I think she is.

Because she reflects me as I truly am. And she sees right through to my secret inner heart.

"Okay! Let's go buy something!"

The person I see in the mirror that is Yuzuki...

That person might be even more beautiful than the surface shows.

Suddenly, I thought back to how the two of them had that whole fake-dating thing.

I wondered how many firsts the girl in front of me had already had.



After that, we wandered around, checking out any place that caught our eye.

In addition to soft-serve ice cream, there were various shops selling products that incorporated gold leaf.

One shop with crafts and accessories made by local Kanazawa artists.

Another shop selling unique hand towels and chopsticks.

Kitchen goods, Japanese sweets, gluten cakes, tea...

"It's surprisingly hard to choose something for him," Yuzuki commented.

"Yeah!"

I had to nod in agreement.

Choosing a souvenir is a whole other level of difficulty compared to choosing a birthday present.

You don't want to give anything too expensive, or they'll feel indebted. And it would suck to give something that'll end up on a shelf instead of being used or consumed.

As we walked along the cobbled street, Yuzuki spoke again.

"He doesn't really eat sweets. He's the type to use only one pair of chopsticks and the same plates until they break. If we buy tea, he'll never even think to use it until Ucchi spots it while she's there cooking dinner and decides to brew it up on a whim."

"Oh yeah, I can see that happening! And I don't like it!"

"It's just a little gift," Nazuna said dryly. "Aren't you overthinking it?"

I pouted. "Nazuna, you just don't understand the feelings of a girl in love."

"Huh? All right, then, I guess I'll buy something for Chitose, too."

"You should buy one for Atomu."

"Hard pass!"

"Oh, but you two are always together."

"I don't like guys who are total pains in the butt."

"Saku's kind of a pain in the butt, too, though..."

"Listen here, you..."

While we were snarking back and forth, another new shop came into view. The sign read SHOP FOR BUSY MODERN WOMEN WHO WANT TO LOOK BEAUTIFUL ALL DAY LONG.

Yuzuki peered inside. "Hmm, looks like they sell those papers that blot oil off your face."

According to the handwritten instructions attached to the signboard, oil blotting paper was originally a by-product of the production of gold leaf paper.

So, that's why there was a whole store dedicated to those here.

When we stepped inside, it was stylish and colorful in a way I wouldn't have expected from this kind of shop. Colorful packaging was displayed along the entire wall.

Nazuna looked around, eyes wide. "Wow, is this all oil blotting paper? Do you use that stuff, Yuuko?"

"Um, my foundation is enough to keep my skin moisturized, so I don't really need to. I used to carry them in my bag when I was in junior high, though."

Yuzuki picked up one of the nearby packages and examined it. "Wow, this takes me back. Back before I started wearing makeup, I used to use these a lot after club practice. More for sweat than for oil."

I clapped my hands. "Hey, since we're here and all, why don't we each buy one?"

Nazuna nodded a little. "The packaging is cute. It might be good as a souvenir."

Yuzuki wiped her neck with her hand towel. "I actually think I could use a few of these sheets right now."

""For real.""

The line near the front of the store was for gift sets, so we headed to the area in the back, where you could buy the packs.

The colorful packaging was covered in Kanazawa-related imagery. I chose a

design with a pattern of *mizuhiki* string art, Yuzuki chose one with Kanazawa umbrellas, and Nazuna chose one with colorful *Kaga temari* balls.

Even though we hadn't discussed it or anything, we ended up choosing designs that were complementary but different.

We all have different tastes, which is obvious even if you just take a quick look at the clothes we each wear.

Just as I was about to pay, something by the cash register caught my eye, and I picked up a small package.

"Hey, look! I'm getting this for Saku!"

I had already fallen in love with it as I held it up to show the girls.

The package had a design showing three men wearing *happi* coats with the characters for "Kagatobi" (a sake brand) written on the back, and they had on kabuki-style makeup. Maybe they used to be something like old-timey firefighters.

In the drawing, they were all making faces into hand mirrors, using blotting paper. It was ridiculous, but so cute.

"What the hell?" Nazuna laughed. "It says 'Self-Care for Real Men.'"

She was reading the slogan on the packaging.

"Isn't it perfect? The narcissism is *so* Saku!"

"Oh, definitely. The smug look in the eyes, the weird smiles."

I wanted to mention that myself, but it seemed like a mean thing to say.

Grinning, I checked the back of the package.

There was some dialogue in the Kanazawa dialect.

"Jiminy Christmas! Your face is shinier than a brand-new coin! (Hey, you might want to wash your face.)"

"Aw, shucks! I ain't got time for this; I'm meetin' up with somebody! (Unfortunately, I have a meeting shortly.)"

"Want some of my Haku Ichi? Jus' like washin' your face, and no one'll know a

thing. (Use some Haku Ichi Blotting Paper. No one will be able to tell you didn't wash your face.)"

"Ha, I'll say! It's smooth as a baby's butt now! (Seriously. My face is very smooth.)"

Yuzuki stood beside me, finished reading it aloud, and blew air through her nostrils like she was deeply impressed.

"It's the neighboring prefecture, but the regional dialect isn't really the same."

"Yeah. Hey, Yuzuki, can you try putting it into the Fukui dialect?"

I recalled how she and Ucchi often goofed around together, pretending to talk like old-time Fukuians.

Yuzuki cleared her throat and spoke.

"I declare! Your face is shinier'n a brand-new coin!"

"In all my born days! I ain't got time for this; I'm meetin' up with somebody!"

"You ain't goin' anywhere without some Haku Ichi. Jus' like washin' up, and no one'll know a thing."

"Now, don't that beat all! Smooth as a baby's butt now!"

Nazuna and I stared transfixed by the sight of this beautiful girl speaking in the Fukui dialect with completely different facial mannerisms and body language to go with it.

Choking with laughter, Nazuna said, "Wow, that was a first-class performance."

I nodded along. "Yuzuki, usually only old ladies in the countryside talk like that."

"My grandma in the countryside used to speak exactly like that. When I was little, I never had any idea what she was saying. And by the way." Yuzuki looked at me with a more solemn expression.

"Are you sure it's okay?"

I immediately knew what she was asking.

Was this really a good idea for a souvenir for Saku?

Any way you slice it, it's obviously a gag gift.

Maybe not the right choice for a male friend. Let alone the guy you have feelings for.

*But still, I...*

"It's okay. I think it works."

I held the package gently against my chest.

"He and I are starting over from scratch, after all."

"I see," Yuzuki said, smiling softly with her eyes, and she left it at that.

I looked at the package in my hand again.

I hoped he'd look at it and laugh, saying, "What the hell did you give me?"

For now, I think...I think that would be just fine.



There was a shrine just outside the shop, so we decided to take turns praying.

According to the explanation written on a sign, the two beautiful pine trees growing within the shrine grounds symbolized the male and the female, and they were supposed to impart good vibes when it came to romantic relationships.

*I hope we can be together, hand in hand, just a little longer.*

Thinking of the people I cared about, I silently prayed.

I've heard it's better to express your resolve and decisions at the shrine, but this prayer was the best I could think up on the spot.

After a while, Yuzuki finished up her turn praying and returned to the *torii* gate to meet us.

There was a quiet dignity to her expression, and she emanated an aura that was both pure and clear, like a shrine maiden dancing.

As our eyes met, Yuzuki smiled softly.

A gentle breeze ruffled her black hair.

...I think I know.

She didn't pray for someone. She made a vow, to herself.

Saku would do the same, whenever he went to a shrine.

I don't know how I knew, but...I was sure of it.

We waited for Nazuna to pray, then we started walking again. We hadn't been walking long when the air suddenly filled with the aroma of dashi soup stock. It was a comforting scent, like when you walk home down side streets at dusk and smell people's home cooking.

Yuzuki, walking by my side, seemed to catch a whiff of it as well. We made eye contact; then we found ourselves entering a nearby shop, as if we were being drawn in.

Immediately, the tantalizing scent grew stronger.

The place had a laid-back vibe, with all different types of bottles lining the walls.

I'd kinda guessed already, but the place seemed to be selling soy sauce and miso dashi broth.

"Welcome!"

Seeing us standing around the entrance, the shopkeeper on duty called out to us in a cheerful voice.

I could stroll into any clothes store, but I felt a little out of place here. The friendly greeting immediately soothed my nerves, though.

Ucchi would already be curiously poking around. The thought made me grin.

As we shuffled farther in, the shopkeeper poured something from a pot into paper cups lined up on a table, then brought them over to us on a tray.

"Would you like to try the soup stock?"

"Oh, is that all right?"

I accepted the cup of broth as I spoke, and Yuzuki and Nazuna followed suit.

I brought the paper cup to my lips, and my nose filled with warm steam and a

sophisticated scent that made me think of upscale Japanese cuisine.

“It’s soothing.”

I took a sip and muttered, “Wow, it’s delicious.”

I looked over to see that Yuzuki and Nanase looked surprised, too.

I wasn’t expecting much flavor from broth, but I could drink this straight down as a soup.

And this scent...was hard to pin down.

Not quite soy sauce, not quite *mentsuyu*...

I had to ask the shopkeeper. “Is this really just dashi broth without any extra seasoning?”

The shopkeeper nodded and showed me a bottle.

“It’s actually called ‘ishiru dashi.’ Ishiru is a traditional fermented seasoning made in Noto in Ishikawa Prefecture—they also call it fish sauce. The broth is made by fermenting sardines and squid for a period of over a year, but it’s a bit strong and pungent as is, so we use it as a secret ingredient as part of a liquid soup stock. What I just gave you is the stock in a little hot water.”

“I see... So that nice rich aroma comes from seafood.”

“If there’s anything else you’re interested in, please feel free to let me know, and I’ll prepare you a sample.”

“Oh, thank you very much!”

The shopkeeper didn’t push us any further and just said, “Please take your time browsing,” and walked off.

It was a comfortable sense of distance.

So we started looking around the store.

But before I could get much browsing done, Nazuna sidled up to me and whispered. “You know about this fish stuff, Yuuko?”

“Nope, not at all.”

“So, do you cook at home?”

"I made boiled eggs at Saku's house a while ago!"

"Okay, elementary school home economics level, I see."

"Hey!"

I was offended, but it was technically true.

I could see that this place had all different types of miso soup and various dashi soup stocks, but I had no idea what the difference between the various packets was.

Nazuna probably had no idea, either.

Yuzuki was the only one holding up items for appraisal and studiously examining the labels.

Thinking back to that future careers meeting... Yuzuki did mention that she could both cook and do laundry.

It didn't seem like she was trying to hide it at all, and I hadn't gone out of my way to ask, either, but lately it seemed that she visited Saku's place from time to time.

I wondered if she'd already made a home-cooked meal for him.

In that apartment, in that kitchen.

Knowing Yuzuki, she would've bought a cute apron or something just for the occasion.

Nazuna's teasing embarrassed me a little, and I tried to laugh it off, but I've been secretly practicing since the eggs. Learning from both Ucchi and Mom.

Still, to be frank...it was a work in progress. I was a long way from being particular about seasonings and stuff like fried versus scrambled and everything else.

With Yuzuki and Ucchi always around, I'd at least like to be able to cook standard fare like meat-and-potato stew and curry rice for Saku without having to check a recipe. Especially because Saku cooks for himself on a regular basis.

"Excuse me, can I sample this *shoyu koji* and miso?" Yuzuki said to the shopkeeper, snapping me out of my thoughts.

“Certainly. Just one moment, please.”

Curious, Nazuna and I drifted over.

Yuzuki showed us the bottle in her hand.

“It says this goes well on egg over rice. He says he often just makes a quick meal of that with natto and *umeboshi* in the morning. So I thought this might make a nice gift.”

*Oh, I thought, surprising myself with my reaction.*

More than Yuzuki, more than Haru, more than Nishino, more than Ucchi—at the very least, I feel like I’m the girl who’s spent the longest time with Saku, since our high school life began.

I don’t say it to show off. And I don’t mean it in the sense of us having an emotional connection or a deeper relationship. It’s simply because he and I have been friends for the longest amount of time.

*...Even so, I...*

I thought that my feelings for Saku were stronger than anyone else’s.

But I had no idea what kind of food he usually ate for breakfast. I don’t think I’ve ever even thought about it.

And that fact...took some of the wind out of my sails.

Although I know it’s childish and selfish to want to know everything about the person I love.

When I lifted the sample of *shoyu koji* the shopkeeper brought over, the aroma wafted into the air. I took a bite. A salty, slightly sweet, and kind of familiar taste spread across my tongue.

I took another taste, and that was when it hit me.

It smelled nice, and tasted nice, too—sort of like the sugar soy sauce you use when you eat leftover New Year’s mochi. Only nowhere near as sweet.

Yeah. This would go perfectly with some egg over rice.

And adding a splash of soy sauce is so simple. Even I could do it.

*Yuzuki really has a good eye for this stuff*, I thought, deflating even further.

I'd expected Yuzuki to pick something fancier, like a stylish curio or something, but her choice was practical and showed good taste.

Or maybe she was trying to match the mood of my gift with hers. Nothing too personal, but a good conversation piece.

Yuzuki's the kind of girl who considers things like that, even when she doesn't show it.

She seemed pleased with the sample taster.

"Yes, I'll take one of these, please." Yuzuki pointed to the *shoyu koji* sauce.

"Thank you. And please try the miso, too." The clerk handed me the same sort of paper cup that the soup stock was served in.

"Wow, it smells good," I commented.

The cup held miso soup... Well, not miso soup exactly. But a spoon of the shop's special miso dissolved in hot water.

After serving the three of us, the shopkeeper moved off, perhaps not wanting to put us on the spot too much.

Yuzuki took a sniff.

"The miso soup that Chitose made for me was delicious. I bet he'd make good use of some of this."

"Oh, totally! Saku's miso soup is delicious, isn't it? It's a bit simpler than the kind Ucchi makes, a little less refined... But somehow more comforting."

I'd love to have some of it again. *It's been a while*, I mused, waiting for the miso broth to cool a little.

"Huh...?" Yuzuki's eyes widened a bit.

I put my head to one side, confused by her reaction.

Then Yuzuki suddenly grinned, like she was embarrassed by some moment of unintended vulnerability.

"Ah, I see. Yes, that's right."

She looked down, tucking her hair behind her ear. She was deflecting. It was a rare, fake smile from her.

Did I say something wrong?

I was taken aback by her odd demeanor, but thinking back on the conversation we just had, I couldn't pinpoint anything of concern.

Yuzuki continued, like nothing was up at all. "Hmm, this is excellent. I'll take this, too. And I think I'll buy the *shoyu koji* for Haru as well. What about you, Yuuko?"

Feeling a weird lump in my throat, I swallowed hard.

"I guess I'll buy some *shirudashi* for Ucchi."

"Sounds good. I bet Ucchi could make good use of that."

No doubt Yuzuki would tell me if there was something she wanted to say.

If she wasn't going to talk, then I'd keep that flicker of doubt I'd just experienced to myself.

I hadn't known her as long as I'd known Haru, but I like to think I know her a little.

"Oh," Yuzuki said lightly, as if she'd just thought of something. "What about Kaito? Don't you need to buy a gift for him?"

"..."

I wasn't expecting to hear his name, and I was tongue-tied for a second.

Yuzuki continued, apologetically. "I'm sorry, I know it's complicated, but I thought I'd at least ask. Or maybe you're trying not to think about it?"

...She was right on the money.

Of course, it's not like I've forgotten.

It's been weighing on me since that day.

He wasn't the first guy to confess his feelings—or that I'd turned down—but this was the first time it was coming from such a close friend.

It was right after I'd been rejected by Saku. And the thought that I'd inflicted

that same kind of pain on Kaito horrified me.

I didn't know how I should approach him from now on.

"Maybe...he wouldn't like that." I spoke with my head down.

Even if you put the confession aside, I'd caused nothing but trouble for Kaito this summer vacation.

He came chasing after me to prevent me from being all alone. He stayed by my side. He listened to me cry...

He was there for me, in a way I don't think I can ever thank him enough for.

So I'd love to give him something as yet another thank-you and expression that I want to keep being friends.

*But*, I thought, biting my lip.

Wouldn't it be cruel for me to do that now?

It'd be like pretending I'd totally forgotten all about Kaito's confession, like it didn't weigh on my mind at all.

*Sorry we can't go out, but we can still be friends!* Like it's no big deal.

And it might give him hope. Maybe even lead him to think, "Maybe I still have a chance."

To be honest, I was thinking of waiting to see what Kaito did first—letting him take the lead.

If he wanted to be my friend even after everything that happened, I'd gladly take him up on that offer. And if he said he didn't want to see me around anymore—well, I'd be sad, but that's the way things go sometimes.

Maybe I'm just dragging things out and delaying the inevitable. But isn't it kinda selfish to expect the person who turned you down to be the one to do the work to repair the friendship?

...I wondered if that was a concern Saku shared, too.

"I can kind of understand your thinking, Yuuko." Yuzuki gently took my hand. "Some people don't want to have anything to do with the person who rejected them. That's all well and good, but sometimes they start spreading nasty

rumors about the other person the very next day.”

She was speaking with authority on the topic—she must have experienced this exact thing personally.

“Still,” Yuzuki continued.

“I think Kaito’s better than that. Sure, he’s shy for a jock, and he often lets his emotions run away from him until he can’t see the forest for the trees...”

She paused for a second.

“...But he wouldn’t hide behind excuses and let his love turn into hate just to protect himself.”

Yuzuki looked me right in the eye.

“Right... Yeah, you’re right!”

I nodded hard, swallowing back the tears that threatened to spill over.

Yuzuki was right.

*“Now we’ve both been rejected by someone we like. You’re not the only one suffering now, Yuuko.”*

The Kaito I know isn’t like that.

This wasn’t me relying on his kindness. This was something like hope, based on the time we’d spent getting to know each other.

...It didn’t make it as far as romance, but it’s love, definitely. Love for a friend.

*I want to stay close to him.*

Seeing my reaction, Yuzuki slowly let go of my hand.

“I’m sure he’s thinking the same thing. He feels bad for hurting you, Yuuko, and he doesn’t know how to face you.”

“But...”

“Unlike a certain someone, you and Kaito and Chitose are kinder than other people. You can take on others’ pain. But you’re not so good at sharing the burden of your own pain with others.”

I felt like I shouldn’t ask her to specify who the “certain someone” she was

talking about was.

Unable to fully grasp what she was getting at, though, I asked for clarification.

"What do you mean?"

"It's simple." Yuzuki smiled dryly. "Yuuko, how would you feel if Chitose avoided you when the new semester started?"

"...I'd hate it!"

"...See?" Yuzuki slouched a little at how easily I'd answered. "Instead of focusing on the pain of having been rejected, why don't you focus instead on how much you still want to be with him and don't want this friendship to end?"

In a second, it all became completely clear to me.

Kaito thought about me the exact same way I thought about Saku.

...Maybe that's an arrogant thought, and I'd rather not put it that way, but what if...what if that's true?

Even if my feelings are never returned, I still want to be around Saku.

Even if we can't ever be more than friends, I still *want* to be friends, at least.

And even if I have to stand and watch him date some other girl—even if it hurts like hell—it doesn't change anything.

I don't ever want to forget meeting Saku, or the time we've spent together.

*Right*, I realized again.

If Saku avoided me...I wouldn't be able to bear it.

But I've confessed my feelings. I have no right to make demands. I have to accept the result. He might go far from me, and I might not be able to call out after him...

*I don't want that.*

*Even if it does end up being unwelcome... Even if I end up hurting him even more...*

*I still think I should talk to Kaito.*

*And all that aside, I just want to.*

"Thanks, Yuzuki. Okay, let's get something for Kaito...!"

"Yeah. He'll love it."

"Anyway," Nazuna said crisply, "why are you making such a big deal about everything? Just say to him, 'Hey, sorry about turning you down the other day. Here's a make-up souvenir.'"

Yuzuki sighed heavily. "What, like he's your coworker who couldn't make it to evening drinks?"

"Ah-ha-ha," I laughed loudly. "Nazuna, you're so chill about everything."

"And you're way too intense."

"I'm not intense!"

"Look, if you're going to get something for him, then just get it. And don't make it into a whole thing. Don't be like, *So sorry for the rejection! But we can still be friends!*"

"I...I can't say anything like that?!"

"No! It's like kicking a guy when he's down."

"Wow... You sound like Yuzuki right now."

"Seriously, though..." Nazuna brushed aside my comment; she wasn't going to play. "What *are* you gonna get for Kaito?"

I didn't even need to think about it.

"The same blotting paper I got from that store earlier!"

Nazuna looked surprised. "Really? The same one? You sure?"

I mean, I get it.

"Yeah. Okay, so it's a slightly different variety, but the feeling of love is the same."

"...You know, that's the kind of sentiment that could only come from you, Yuuko."

The guy I like, and one of my best friends.

No, I can't see the two of them exactly the same way.

Love comes in different forms—different colors, shapes, and tastes. And romantic love is its own kind of thing.

But for now...

I think it's okay to bundle it all up together. Like the gift you buy on a trip.

Feeling a lot lighter, I nodded. "But what about the other boys? We should buy a group gift for Kentacchi. And, Yuzuki, why don't you buy something for Kazuki?"

Yuzuki screwed up her face. "Huh? Why?"

"No real reason... Just to kinda round everything off?"

"No way. What if he's like, *Hey, does this gift mean anything deeper?* Or something."

"Oh, right. Yeah, I think Kazuki will probably blush a little. He's got his cute side."

"That by itself is kinda weird..."

"So, then what?"

"...I think I'll just buy the *shoyu koji* seasoning."

"What about the miso?"

"Kazuki doesn't live alone. One seasoning should be enough for him."

Talking about gifts like this was a lot of fun.

*Another first,* I thought.

Come to think of it... This was my first time on a trip with friends, except for school trips and so on.

Romance, friendship... Boyfriends, girlfriends...

*I hope we can laugh like this the same way ten years from now.*

*Even if it's a wish that never comes true.*



We ended up buying souvenirs for everyone while chatting, then after that, we returned to the plaza where we ate the gelato.

When I checked the time, it was around four thirty PM.

Just as I was wondering if we had time to squeeze in one more sight...

“...Hey, aren’t we forgetting something?”

Nazuna, who was walking next to me, spoke up suddenly.

“What would that be? Your gift for Atomu?”

My witty comeback seemed to make Nazuna angry.

She took a threatening step forward. “Enough of the Atomu thing! That’s not what I was referring to!” She struck a pose that would show off her kimono. “We got all dressed up and haven’t taken any pictures! I mean, what are we even doing?”

““Oh yeah...””

I was totally in shopping mode today, so it completely slipped my mind.

“Oh no! If I went home like this, Mom would be so mad!”

In the first place, Mom gave me the kimono money expecting photos in return.

“Let’s take turns taking pictures. Look, we can pose by that red building.”

Nazuna handed me her phone as she spoke.

She stood in front of a lone willow tree, clutching her Japanese umbrella with both hands.

Dropping her gaze, she adopted a dreamlike expression.

“How’s this?”

““Too fake.””

“Geez, don’t say it in stereo.”

While we snarked back and forth, I took a few shots with Nazuna’s phone, adjusting the composition. She’s so straightforward and no-nonsense, it’s easy to forget, but she’s actually got a really beautiful face. And it was even more noticeable when she was wearing that gorgeous kimono.

I took the phone away from my face and said, “Now with Yuzuki.”

“Er...”

Yuzuki looked hesitant for some reason.

She looked back and forth between me and Nazuna.

“I’ll take the pictures. You go into the shot, Yuuko.” She held out her hand for the phone.

“I mean, I wanted a photo, too, so I was planning to take my place right after Yuzuki...” I said.

“Hmph, what’s the big deal?” Nazuna said. “Afraid people might look at us together and think I’m the cuter one?”

“...Excuse me?”

“I mean, if you’re not confident, I’d hate to force you...”

“Okay, asshole,” said Yuzuki. “You wanna go, let’s go!”

“Er, Yuzuki, who are you doing an impression of right now?”

Yuzuki ignored my jab and stood right in front of Nazuna.

She took the umbrella, then raised it over both their heads.

They stepped closer together, until their obi sashes were almost touching.

It looked like they were facing off against each other, beneath one umbrella.

Yuzuki, the taller of the two, brought her face down, like she was trying to press her forehead against Nazuna’s. Then she gently put her arm around Nazuna’s waist.

“Whoa, personal space.”

Nazuna looked away, mumbling.

Eyes flashing shrewdly, Yuzuki spoke in a sultry voice.

“Oh, she’s embarrassed.”

“Huh?! Why would I get embarrassed over *you*?”

Nazuna struggled to adopt a poker face, glaring right back at Yuzuki.

They looked like two young lovers in a pre-wedding photo shoot.

I watched them silently, and...

*Snap snap snap snap...*



\*

I snapped the shutter, over and over again.

"You're taking way too many photos, Yuuko!" Nazuna turned to me, growling.

I grinned. "These'll be worth a fortune."

"Excuse me?!"

After that, we took turns and got a bunch more photos.

Solo shots, two at a time, and we even asked passersby to get all three of us together.

Yuzuki and Nazuna, who both seemed somewhat awkward in the morning, now seemed to have opened up completely.

I was glad I'd decided to invite both of them after all.

Looking at the photos on my camera roll, I couldn't help but smile.

*It's weird*, I thought suddenly.

Without this opportunity, the three of us wouldn't be strolling along side by side like this. Yuzuki and Nazuna might have graduated just with the bare minimum of interaction as classmates, and nothing more.

But after today, I felt certain.

Both of them would look back on these kimono memories and smile.

A soft breeze caressed the nape of my neck.

It was still too early to call it dusk, but the day was definitely marching on.

A dragonfly landed ever so softly on my shoulder.

*...Summer is about to end.*

The dragonfly left me with that whispered message, flitting off again.

"Thanks," I whispered back, smiling.

*It's all right. I brought things full circle, in the end.*

While I was musing over that thought...

"Now for the grand finale." Nazuna held her phone up and waved me over.

Yuzuki raised an eyebrow. "You're still taking photos?"

"Come on, just get in close."

When the three of us were all lined up together, Nazuna pointed her front camera at us.

We appeared on the screen in our kimonos. I mean, duh.

One last selfie, I guess.

As I waited for the shutter sound...

*Ba-da-ba-da-ba-da-da... Ba-da-ba-da-ba-da-da...*

Instead, her phone began to emit a call tone.

"Huh?"

"Wha?"

Before Yuzuki and I could process what was going on...

"Nazuna? What are you...? Oh."

There he was, the boy I loved, his face filling the screen.

"Sup, Chitose?" Nazuna waved, phone angled high.

I was still reeling from the sudden video call filling the screen.

*"Uh... Hi. Kind of an unusual sight to see all of you together..."*

Oh no. Just hearing his voice made my head swim.

I hadn't seen him since the day of the festival. I wasn't mentally prepared.

Saku was in a T-shirt. It looked like he was home, one foot up on the sofa. I could see a bit of bare knee, so he was wearing shorts.

I couldn't find the words to speak. Instead, I just silently observed everything.

I stole a glance at Yuzuki. She was frozen, a fake smile on her face.

Guess she wasn't expecting this, either.

Nazuna carried on, unconcerned with our feelings.

"The three of us came to Kanazawa and went shopping. Then we rented kimonos and went sightseeing. Since we're all dressed up, we want a cool guy to compliment us, right? What do you think, Chitose? Are we adorable? Do you love it?"

*"Don't pressure me."*

"Oh come on! Say something nice. I chose this kimono specifically to show to you, Chitose."

*"You'll just say anything, won't you?"*

"All right, I'll rephrase the question. Don't we look way different from how we look at school?"

*"...Yeah, maybe a little?"*

"Yay! Made ya say it!"

*"“Hey!!!”"*

As Saku's eyes slid away evasively, both Yuzuki and I yelled in indignation.

Sure, he was doing his usual dry joking bit, but honestly...

Yuzuki was the first to regain her composure and speak next. "Chitooose? When did you and Nazuna exchange contact info, I wonder?"

Saku grinned awkwardly as he responded.

*"Well, about that... It happened around the stalker incident..."*

"Huh? So you were cheating while we were dating?"

*"I thought I might be able to get some clues!"*

"So chatting up Nazuna was like having a one-night stand, is that it?"

*"Hey, now, don't make it sound sordid."*

Nazuna interrupted just then. "Oh, Chitose... Was it just a one-night stand? But we've done it multiple times since then..."

*"You just call me on LINE every once in a while, right?"*

Yuzuki tutted and sighed. "So? No thoughts you'd like to share on me in my kimono?"

Saku scratched his cheek at that. “I’ve seen you in a yukata a few times already, so I guess I’m a little used to the sight.”

“...I’m hanging up.”

“Just kidding! No matter how many times I see it, you’re still radiant, stunning, sexy...”

“...Just so you know, that mean comment you just made really cut me deep.”

“I’m sorry. You look amazing. It’s just a little embarrassing to be honest about how good you look when I’m on the spot.”

“Hmm, I’m not sure you really mean it.”

“What more do you want from me?”

“Home cooking.” Yuzuki stopped glaring and suddenly adopted a relaxed, playful tone. “Let me try something I’ve never had cooked for me before.”

“I’ll think about it, so please calm down.”

“Hmm, okay.”

Their exchange made me blink suddenly.

I remembered the conversation we’d had earlier, while tasting the miso.

Right...

I’m sure hearing me talk about Saku’s miso soup made Yuzuki sad. She might have thought it was something he’d made just for her.

I felt a bit awkward, like I’d done something wrong.

But was it really something I needed to hide? It felt complicated.

Lying about the soup and pretending I’d never had it would have felt dishonest, in a way.

But this is like how I felt the day they went to the festival in *yukata*.

That’s...how it is with us.

One of us might end up holding certain experiences close to our hearts, only to realize that the other one also shared them. Then it feels like that experience isn’t just yours to treasure after all.

While I was thinking about all of that...

"Yuuko, put out your hand," said Nazuna.

I blinked in surprise at her. "Huh? What for?"

"Just do it."

I held out my hand, confused, and she plonked her phone down into it.

"Wait, Nazuna?!"

"Hold it right; don't show Chitose your nostrils."

"No! Hold on...!"

I quickly brought the screen level with my face.

Saku was smiling a sort of awkward-looking smile.

Oh no. I didn't want him to see me looking this flustered.

I swallowed, frantically adjusting my bangs with my free hand.

"Uh, nice weather out, huh?"

*"Why do you sound like a guest making small talk at a wedding?"*

"...?"

The heck am I saying? I'm such a dope.

I've been like this for a while...

Why can't I get it together?

Up until recently, I used to skip up to Saku every morning.

I used to grab his arm without thinking twice. I'd laze around alongside him at the beach.

Now I'm too embarrassed to look him in the eye. This sucks.

I figured things would be awkward after the rejection, but this...this was unbearable.

"Yuuko...?"

His voice. The timbre. The warmth of it.

Just hearing my name in his voice made my heart throb.

Happiness. Sadness. Regret. But I wanted more.

Right...I get it.

*...I'm falling in love with Saku, all over again.*

The moment I realized this, my face was suddenly hot, and I looked down.

Oh yikes. I was blushing for sure now.

I looked down at the straps of my wooden geta, mashing my lips tightly together.

*Why? Why does it have to be like this?*

Of course, it's normal to feel deflated, after what happened.

But maybe almost losing Saku made me realize how much he actually meant to me.

Maybe it was love that helped me find the less cool parts of myself for the first time.

His honest words to me must have really touched my heart.

The way he always tries to act so cool... I guess on some level, I was charmed by it.

I didn't want anyone else to take him away. I was so jealous, I felt like I was going to shatter into a million pieces.

...Maybe all of that combined made me fall in love all over again.

I'm sure it's everything...

Every part of me was drawn to him. Irrevocably. Hopelessly.

"Yuuko?"

Hearing his voice again, I slowly lifted my head.

The Saku on the screen gently smiled.

*Thump... Thump...* But my heartbeat was starting to slow.

"How've you been?"

“Good. You?”

“Getting by.”

“I see.”

“Did you find any good clothes?”

“Oh, loads.”

“It looks a bit warm for kimonos still.”

“Yeah. But it’s cooling down a bit now.”

“Oh, yeah. it’s already the end of August.”

“Yes, a dragonfly told me.”

“Huh? That’s cool.”

I’m sure Yuzuki and Nanase were worried, watching me.

*It’s awkward, isn’t it? Yeah. It’s definitely awkward.*

I guess it sounds that way, to anyone listening to our conversation. But I felt as relaxed as if we were sitting out on the veranda, enjoying a cool evening breeze.

How can I describe the feeling right now?

It’s not like I’m the one approaching Saku, saying, *Check this out, you gotta hear this, guess what...* He’s not just nodding along.

For the first time, I feel like we’re having a real conversation.

We’re not using many words, true. But that’s because we don’t need them.

This summer, we overcame so much together. More than words could express.

And in the end, I’m glad we can confirm that we’re back in this comfortable space together.

So for now, this is fine.

*...Just being able to chat with you normally is all I could ask for.*

I signaled to Yuzuki and Nazuna with my eyes.

*Let's wrap this up. I think he gets the picture.*

They both crammed in beside me, and I held the phone out farther to fit us all in.

"Well, then," I said.

I knew what I wanted to say, with all my heart.

"Bye, Saku. See you in the second semester."



\*

Those were the words I wanted to use to overwrite everything else.

I could sense both Saku and Yuzuki holding their breath.

I mean...I wanted it to sound positive. Let's look forward to meeting again.

I want it to be *See you soon*. Not *Good-bye*.

*This is my sorry... And my thank-you.*

Saku's eyes shifted, like he was confused; then he said...

*"Bye, guys. See you all in second semester."*

And he chuckled, nice and loud.



We walked slowly back through the tourist attraction of Kenrokuen Garden, back along the Higashi Chaya District, returned the kimonos we rented, then returned to the station.

Half of the sky was already dark blue. Before we realized it, night had begun to fall.

Not so long ago, it was still sort of bright out at eight PM. I felt the familiar sense of melancholy that this time of year always brought to me.

It was still a little early for dinner, but we'd eaten lunch early, too. So we bought return tickets first and then headed to an oden shop located inside Kanazawa Station.

Incidentally, while we were discussing what to eat, I remembered what had happened before Go Go Curry and found myself suggesting Hachiban's, but the girls were quick to shut me down. "We can eat that in Fukui!"

I mean, it was only a joke. They didn't have to be so snippy about it.

Then Yuzuki mentioned that Kanazawa is famous for its oden.

Both Nazuna and I pictured something like an izakaya bar where adults go out drinking, so we hesitated a little at first.

But of course, Yuzuki had us covered.

The restaurant, which she'd looked up earlier, was right in the station, and we could see it from the ticket gate. It was open-plan, with chairs lined up around the U-shaped counter surrounding the kitchen area.

It felt almost like a small café or Italian bar in its atmosphere. If it wasn't for the handwritten menu board advertising oden, I'd never have noticed it from the outside.

Some people were drinking alcohol. But it felt safe with the open aisles and passersby walking right past outside. It didn't seem like the kind of place where people drank themselves under the table. More like they were just having a drink with a meal before riding the train or Shinkansen.

Either way, the vibes felt right for three high school girls to eat there without having to worry about anything.

Yuzuki wasn't showing off or anything, but I just knew she'd evaluated every aspect of the place before suggesting it. She's really so switched on and smart about this kind of thing.

While I was thinking about Yuzuki...

"Good thing you're here, Yuzuki," Nazuna said as she took a seat to my right. "I'm no good at researching stuff. If it was just me and Yuuko, we would've ended up at Hachiban's after having Go Go Curry."

"Hey, come on! I have good suggestions sometimes!"

"Like when...?"

"Uh..."

Well... She had me there.

People who are used to walking into unknown restaurants tend to have a better idea of what's good and what isn't.

If it was up to me, I wouldn't know what to do... I guess I'd look up reviews online, start from the five-star reviews, and go from there. And maybe I'd specifically look for places that are a little off the beaten path. Places that might surprise people.

But Yuzuki knew enough to know that there would be a restaurant serving

local cuisine right inside the station. She makes it all look so effortless. She's amazing.

If she wasn't so confident in her choices, she might be worried there'd be pushback on going to a restaurant right in the station.

For example, if Yuzuki hadn't told us about this place, I think I might have just walked right past it. But it's got a nice atmosphere for us girls to eat local oden with peace of mind, *and* we don't even have to worry about missing the train. It's so perfect.

As I was thinking about all of this, the menus arrived.

After all that walking, I was hungrier than I'd thought. I just ordered whatever caught my eye.

They had Kanazawa specialties like *kuruma-bu* (round wheels of wheat gluten) and sea snails.

I looked at my dish.

"Hey, what kind of oden items do you guys like? I like the little tofu pouches with mochi inside."

Ever since I was little, I remember feeling extra happy when I got those in my oden. It's weird... I don't really eat mochi except for at New Year's, so it feels kinda special.

Holding a pair of disposable chopsticks that looked a little fancier than the cheap ones you get at a convenience store, Nazuna said, "Hmm, my go-to is boiled egg and daikon. When I buy the convenience store oden, the egg yolk gets all crumbly and floats in the mustard stock. I know it's bad manners, but I end up drinking all the broth."

Yuzuki looked past Nazuna at me.

"Really? Well, great. This place apparently prides itself on having broth you can drink to the last drop."

"Uh-oh!"

"It's okay, oden is low in calories."

"I guess it's too late anyway, after eating that Go Go Curry for lunch."

I felt both of their eyes on me, and I awkwardly scratched my cheek.

"Now, this isn't just 'cause it's healthy," Yuzuki started to say. "My favorite thing in oden is those *shirataki* noodle knots. I like how tight they're tied. It won't come apart, even when you bite it."

""...Pfft!""

Nazuna and I both put our hands over our mouths and burst into laughter.

We didn't want to make too much noise, since this was a restaurant, but trying to suppress it made us laugh even more.

Shoulders shaking, Nazuna gasped for air. "If you're gonna be weird, at least warn me first..."

I backed her up.

"And you said it so solemnly, too!"

Our reaction seemed to have surprised Yuzuki. She pressed her lips together tightly and looked down in embarrassment. "R-really? I thought it was a common opinion..."

I patted her on the shoulder. "But you get what we're trying to say, right? You looked adorable, Yuzuki, gleefully scanning the place for *shirataki*."

"I wasn't gleeful!"

"You're like, 'Oh, there's still one left! Yay!'"

"Do you think I'm obsessed with them or something?!"

After that, we had a good laugh, then finally dug into our oden with our chopsticks.

Yuzuki went straight for the *shirataki* at first, then she seemed to pause, reflect on what had just happened, and quickly switched her attention to the daikon radish. She's usually so poised and perfect, so I was a little pleased to see that, in the end, she was just a high school girl like us.

As I stared at my bowl, wondering what to eat first, a thought occurred to me.

"Hmm? Wait, they put mustard with the oden in Kanazawa?"

I'd assumed the yellow seasoning stuff served with the meal was mustard, but on closer inspection, it had tiny brown bits of something in it.

"Ah," Yuzuki said, looking at the menu. "It says here it's local *karashi* mustard from Fuichi in Fukui. It's got whole seeds ground into it, so it looks like plain mustard."

"Oh, I see. It's kinda nice to see Fukui things outside of the prefecture. It's like 'Ooh, hometown pride.'"

"Hmm, I kinda get what you mean."

"It's not like it's got anything to do with us, though."

As I spoke, I dipped a bit of *chikuwa* fish cake in the *karashi* and popped it into my mouth.

The texture was nice and chewy, and the aroma of dashi hit my nose.

The stock I'd tasted at the Higashi Chaya District had quite a unique flavor, but this was milder, more subtle.

Fukui *karashi* has a spiciness and aroma to it that can't be compared to stuff you get in tubes. It's delicious, but I'm glad I didn't get carried away and put too much on.

"You know," Nazuna mumbled. "When we grow up, I wonder if we'll go to places like this to drink after work."

Looking around, I saw a man, presumably an office worker, with a large carry-on suitcase by his feet. Clearly, he was on his way back from a business trip. I also saw several women in smart suits, drinking beer and sake with relish.

I put down my chopsticks.

"I can't see myself like that at all, but it does seem like something I'd want to do. When my mom drinks wine, she always seems to enjoy it."

Nazuna looked at me, the corner of her mouth quirking mischievously.

"Never mind the alcohol. I can't see you working in the first place, Yuuko."

"Hmm. But I think I'd look really good in a suit and some glasses with red

frames."

"I wasn't talking about the outfits. Anyway, you make it sound like working woman cosplay."

Yuzuki giggled beside me. "I can imagine you texting me, Yuuko, and being like, 'Can we meet at such and such bar?' And then when I got there, you'd be like, 'Hey Yuzuki,' and start ranting about all your issues at work. Like, 'Help, how do I use a printer?'"

"Hey! I'm sure I'd have more complex things to discuss than how to use a printer!" I pouted, but Nazuna quickly joined in.

"Oh, I'm sure you'd be fine with the work stuff, but I bet even when you're a working adult, you'll still have boy troubles. Like, 'Oh, Saku is always too busy to respond to my LINE messages lately!'"

"...Just to be clear here, Saku and I are dating in this scenario?"

"Nope. It's still unrequited."

"After how many years?!!!"

We laughed until we sputtered.

Here we were, on a trip in the evening, having a nice slow dinner, drinking in the atmosphere of a new place.

Maybe we were on more of a high than usual.

"You know," Nazuna said. "I wonder if we'll still keep in touch even after we start working."

Her voice was tinged with sadness, with something like resignation.

I wasn't sure what to say, but Yuzuki responded instead. "You hear that a lot, right? That your high school friends just sort of drift away after graduation."

Her tone wasn't sentimental. More like stoic.

Yuzuki's much more mature than I am. Maybe she's accepted it already.

"Right," Nazuna continued. "I don't even know if I'm staying in Fukui."

"Yuuko, you said you haven't decided yet, but Nazuna and I both want to go

to college out of the prefecture. Maybe we'll end up working wherever we end up."

"So if you went to Kanazawa U, met a guy and got married, then you'd just live here? I can't imagine it at all."

"Well, you wouldn't have to worry about where to buy clothes."

"Yeah, but that would be kinda boring in itself...?"

"One thing's for sure, there won't be any more evenings like this one."

"Maybe..."

Before I knew what I was doing, I found myself suggesting something.

"Let's make a promise."

I could sense the two of them looking at me.

I gazed into space—at the far-off future.

"Like maybe, at the end of summer ten years from now...the three of us meet here again."

I offered it, like a letter.

Of course, I had no idea if it would actually happen or not.

There were no guarantees a promise made as teens would be upheld as adults.

Even if we remembered it, we might just dismiss it for trivial reasons, like being too busy with work, or feeling tired that day.

But even so, I continued.

"Let's go shopping together, and walk around town in kimonos, and eat Go Go Curry, and have oden for dinner."

...Either way, maybe there will come a day when I want to revisit these days, and the memory of this night will be a kind of anchor.

We'll play the pop music we listened to back then, remember our school blazers fondly (and how we'd be changing them around this time of year), and talk about the boys we used to like.

Like a shoulder massage ticket you give to your mom and dad as a present when you're a kid, one with no expiry date.

It'll be all but forgotten. Then someone will mention it, and we'll be like, "Oh yeah!" And then we'll have no choice but to make good on it.

I wanted to make at least one promise like that today.

"It's a good idea." Nazuna looked at me, chin propped in her hand. "I wonder if dressing up will be as fun ten years from now."

"I bet you'll still be wearing crop tops."

"Yikes."

"But you'll have kids, too, and you'll be a great mom. A total pro."

"Double yikes! Wow, what if I dressed myself and my kids in matching outfits?"

The ice cubes in Yuzuki's glass clattered.

"Okay, let's promise. Let's have some drinks together and talk all night about when we were seventeen."

She put down the glass and held out her little finger.

"No matter who we're living our lives with, we won't hold any grudges. If you turn out happy, Yuuko, at least promise you'll let us hear one or two gripes about your life."

I gently intertwined my pinkie with hers.

"And if you're happy, Yuzuki, tell me a sweet story that'll reassure me my love wasn't a mistake after all."

*Hey, Yuzuki. Who is it you like?*

I almost found myself asking that question out loud—the one I basically knew the answer to. But I managed to stop myself.

This isn't an oath, nor a declaration of war.

I just wanted to talk with this girl about the guys we like.

But for now, I'd put that aside and leave it to our future selves, ten years from

now.

Without words, we shook our pinkies in confirmation.

Right. There are other interpretations, like this one.

A knot forms, forging a connection.

So maybe, from now on, it'll be like this.

There may only be one red thread of romance woven between two people.  
But a broader pattern can form around it.

*Please, please*, I prayed.

...Let this be our cat's cradle, our web of interconnected threads.

It doesn't matter who picks it up in the end.

Just so long as we can laugh together and admire the pretty pattern formed.



I could still feel a faint warmth on my pinkie finger.

I, Yuzuki Nanase, stared blankly at my reflection in the train window.

We were on the Thunderbird, going back to Fukui.

I had the window seat. Yuuko was next to me. And Nazuna had settled herself down in the seat across the aisle with a warning that she was probably going to crash.

Night had fallen, leaving no trace of the sun. Once we left the city, it was pretty much black outside.

I could see the brightly lit interior of the train car in the window, a familiar scene stretching from left to right.

The train is running next to a country road at night. It feels like I'm wandering through the looking glass.

The rattle and clatter of the wheels seemed determined to lull me into sleep.

Like in a fairy tale they tell to bad little girls.

When I was little, I used to have odd thoughts on trains.

When I get off at the station, will it really be me?

What if I got swapped with the girl in my reflection and didn't even realize?

I'd be trapped, wandering endlessly through the night, waiting for the day when I could come aboard again.

...Silly. These little daydreams are probably just a reaction to the feelings of loneliness and sleepiness that cling to me.

The trip is almost over. Summer is almost over.

I traced my reflection's lips, cooling my warm finger against the glass.

Why did we make that promise?

Suddenly, I thought back to the exchange between Yuuko and Chitose I'd seen back in the Higashi Chaya District.

They didn't use many words, but each one was filled with compassion for the other. They acted like a married couple who'd been together for years and years.

And here I was, wanting him to compliment my kimono, feeling bad that I wasn't the only one who'd been served Chitose's miso soup, begging to be his first in everything...

I felt childish and selfish.

And that brought to mind the conversation we had earlier.

*"If you turn out happy, Yuuko, at least promise you'll let us hear one or two gripes about your life."*

*"And, if you're happy, Yuzuki, tell me a sweet story that'll reassure me my love wasn't a mistake after all."*

I'd tried to sum everything up with a snappy remark.

But Yuuko was facing her love with an earnest heart.

I realized now how very different we were.

I'd thought she was naive at best, disillusioned at worst.

Like maybe this time, she really will get her bubble burst and be changed by

it.

But no. You... You're always...

...Like Snow White. Never changing. Always lovely.

I squeezed my own little finger, like I was making a whole new promise.

Maybe I just didn't want you to leave me behind.

Maybe I didn't want you to wave me off.

*The princess and the Wicked Queen—what are our destinations?*

A happy ending, or...?

...Still.

I spoke softly to Yuuko, whose eyes were closed. Nazuna was already out like a light.

"Hey, are you awake?"

Her eyelids snapped open. "Yeah. Just thinking about today." Her tone was calm, content.

"Thank you for inviting me. And for the Nazuna thing."

Maybe it's going too far to say that this experience had forged a friendship between me and Nazuna, but I was happy to have learned that I genuinely liked her.

"Don't mention it. I didn't plan it that way or anything. I just had a feeling it'd work out."

Tsk, typical Yuuko. She always flies by the seat of her pants.

"Can I ask you something strange?" I said. "You can ignore it and chalk it up to me being sentimental after the trip, or you can just laugh it off altogether if you want."

"Sure. Go ahead." She just smiled back at me.

Some people say suffering makes us stronger. It seems like a thoughtless, irresponsible thing to say, but maybe they're not completely, totally wrong.

It's like she was body-snatched, after riding the Galaxy Express in the

summertime.

...No, that would be rude to Yuuko.

She was still herself. She was just moving forward.

I began, slowly.

"What do you want to be? To Saku, I mean?"

I don't even know why I wanted to ask that. Maybe just a stab in the dark.

"Hmm." Yuuko contemplated this, then responded.

"I want to be the kind of girl who can tell Saku that he's cool."

And she smiled, like a bouquet of beautiful blooming flowers.

*Oh, I see. I didn't realize that.*

Although we seem to be complete opposites, we are very similar in some ways.

So I'm sure...

Yuuko bringing up that promise... Me offering my little finger...

Maybe some part of me knew a reckoning would come one day.

I let out a faint sigh and continued.

"You were cool back then, too, Yuuko."

"Thanks, Yuzuki."

Her gaze, clear and perfect as a snowflake, was directed at me.

I could see myself in her eyes. I'm sure she could see herself in mine.

Like two mirrors pointed at each other, the image repeating forever.

*Maybe you and I are two sides of the same coin.*

*Like two girls dreaming the same dream at the same time.*

That doesn't make a pretty pattern.

...But even so.

I clenched my fists tightly, with renewed determination.

*Okay, let's say you're Snow White.*

*And I'm the Wicked Queen.*

*I still won't let you beat me,* I think, smiling a little at Yuuko.

Unfortunately, nobody likes the Wicked Queen in the story.

But I won't just give up my prince.

I'll show everyone my most beautiful side, be the very best me I can be.

So that ten years from now, I'll be able to tell my best friend the sweetest story.

So instead of praying or asking questions, I'll just say this:

*Mirror, mirror, on the wall.*

*...I will be the fairest one of all.*



Chapter 2  
Flowers Bloom from  
Tears in the End

The radio playing in the deep night was like an SOS, sent on a paper airplane from a sea of stardust.

*Hello, I'm here.*

*Hello, is anyone out there?*

It was that quiet corner between today and tomorrow.

Sometimes, I feel so alone. I want to reach out to make sure other people are still there.

I want to hear the voices of people passing by, similarly adrift.

So during those moments, I listen carefully.

I write a letter with no address on a torn-out sheet of notepaper.

Recipient? You.

Address? Unknown.

Postmark? Undetermined.

At the bottom, I write “Asuka,” then I fold it carefully and send it into the air.

It collides with the wall and comes right back.

The undelivered feelings were forming a pile, enough to fill a file folder.

Am I just lonely? Or is it you that I miss?

Another night of me trying to find the right frequency.

Hello, I'm here.

Hello, is there anyone out there?



The lead of my mechanical pencil broke, and I looked up from my textbook.

Leaning back against the chair and stretching, I heard a popping sound from somewhere in the vicinity of my shoulders.

When I checked the clock on the wall, I saw both hands overlapping right in the middle.

I must have been concentrating longer than I thought.

How you spend your summer in your third year of high school will have a big impact on whether you pass the entrance exam or not.

Or so the teachers keep saying.

Whether it was true or not, I'd feel awful if I failed the exams after putting on that big show in front of my dad, so lately, I've been studying late into the night.

In the end, the only memories I have of summer vacation are the time I spent with you, friend.

Our date at Ichijodani. The summer study trip. Visiting Grandma's house. Then the last festival of the summer.

*"...The next song is..."*

My secondhand retro radio, perched on the corner of my desk, spat out garbled static.

Even when it was working fine just a moment ago, the sound often gets distorted all of a sudden.

When that happens, I carefully fiddle with the dial and adjust the position of the antenna.

You can listen to the radio using an app on your phone, but I don't like going through that extra step, for whatever reason.

It's not the vague flow of information I like anyway. What I'm after is being able to pick up someone's voice myself.

The sound quality isn't as good as it would be on the latest high-tech speakers or headphones. But it's a nostalgic, soothing sound. It makes me feel warm inside, like I'm sitting in a coffee shop, bathed in the chatter of strangers. This is how listening to the radio should be, I think.

Usually, when I'm studying, I don't play anything at all—or if I do, it's only songs that I'm used to so they won't affect my concentration.

But late at night, I suddenly long for the sound of the radio.

Determined as I am, studying for so long every day gets exhausting.

Both of my parents are teachers, and unless they're unusually swamped with

work, they both usually go to bed well before midnight.

The nights in the countryside are so quiet and peaceful that I sometimes feel like I'm the only one awake.

I think that's why I want to get out the radio.

The voices of the radio deejays, the listeners calling in—they all make me realize that, somewhere out there, others are working or studying hard and listening, too.

It makes me feel like we're all connected in the night.

Mulling it over, I picked up my mug.

My coffee was piping hot when I poured it, but now it was lukewarm, and the taste made me grimace.

I touched my phone screen as it lay on the table charging, but I had no new notifications.

I sighed, with a half-defeated grin.

*If only I were your classmate.*

I might have been able to send you a message over LINE, instead of writing a letter with no address on it.

Maybe I would've been able to call him, instead of relying on the radio for companionship.

*"Saku, you still up studying?"*

*"Right here at my desk. What about you, Asuka?"*

*"Just taking five."*

*"Wanna chat for a bit? Might wake you up a little."*

*"...Sure!"*



\*

Heh. Something like that.

I wondered if he was still awake.

He said he's a night owl. I pictured him reading a novel or listening to music.

Oh, yeah. He started listening to old J-pop because of me, but I started listening to the radio because of him.

What if I did suddenly call him?

If he was still awake, I bet he'd answer.

I'd tell him I've been studying all day, since morning until now. He'd say, "Wow, you're really working hard." Even though he was feeling sleepy, he'd stay up chatting with me until I felt reassured.

But the reality isn't like that.

Even if I try to seek comfort from him, even if he indulges me, I still can't really share this present moment with him. These are lonely, midnight hours of my third year of high school, the end of my last summer vacation, while I stare down the barrel of entrance exams and inevitable graduation.

*It's so...sad*, I thought.

Even if he called me during his own exam study hell period next year, I'd be long past that point.

I could look back and empathize with him based on my own experience, but... it wouldn't be the same connection.

Then, as I absently listened along to the radio...

*Knock, knock.*

There was a quiet, muted knocking at the door.

"Come in."

The door swung open with some hesitation.

"Still at it?" Dad peeked through the gap in the door and said the same thing he's been saying every night lately. I mean, he knows full well I'm still at it.

"Yeah. I'm gonna study for a little while longer."

Dad furrowed his eyebrows—he seemed a bit worried, but also somewhat pleased.

"Don't overdo it. That can end up backfiring on you."

"It's all right. I won't go getting sick and worrying you or anything."

"Well, all right, but—"

"Yes, yes, 'Make sure you don't forget to eat.' I know."

Dad entered the room bashfully, like a kid who's been caught red-handed.

Immediately, an appetizing aroma spread through the air in the room.

"Make sure to eat."

He held out a tray holding two rice balls, two slices of pickled daikon, a bowl of instant miso soup, and a glass of barley tea.

"Dad, I can't eat two whole rice balls at this time of night."

"The one with the pickled plum filling is yours, and the one with the *mentaiko* filling is mine."

"You're gonna get gout if you keep eating this way, you know."

"What's going on? Is my teen daughter finally rebelling?"

"Nope."

Dad's been like this lately.

Usually, he'd be in bed at this time. But recently, around midnight, he makes rice balls for a snack and delivers them to me.

He usually only makes instant ramen and fried noodles, so at first, I was taken aback. Then I almost cried, realizing how hard he was trying to support me.

"So," I said with a little smile, "I don't need you to make me food every night. I'm a high school girl, you know. If this continues, I'm gonna start worrying about my figure."

"...So that boy cares more about your figure than your health, does he?"

"Nobody said that."

Incidentally, this sort of back-and-forth has also become a common occurrence.

Dad always seems to want to talk about Saku. In fact, I think he really kinda likes him.

Of course I'm glad to have the approval of my father, but it's awkward having him be like, "So how's the boyfriend?" all the time.

I took the *umeboshi* rice ball from dad.

It's an awkward shape, neither triangular nor tubular, and when I squeezed it a little, it started to collapse.

Still, I took a bite anyway.

"...That's good."

Weird shape aside, this is the taste of something Dad made just for me.

I took a bite of the pickled daikon and sipped the miso soup.

I've started to look forward to these little moments.

"This was always my dream." Sitting cross-legged on the floor, Dad spoke around a mouthful of rice ball. "Making a midnight snack for my daughter while she's studying for entrance exams."

Ever since I was little, I've thought of my dad as kind of stiff.

Up until recently, he'd never share any personal thoughts like that.

But everything changed that day. Recently, I feel like I've had a whole lifetime of talks with Dad in a short period of time.

*I'm not the only one who's changed. Thanks to you, friend.*

Dad continued, looking awkward. "Your mother gets angry. Says I bother you too much."

"If you're going to eat with me every night, why not put something healthier in yours, like kombu seaweed or dried fish flakes? And I don't want to sound ungrateful, but you could go a little easier on the salt."

"Already heard all that from her, too."

I chuckled.

I never imagined that the day would come when I'd find Dad's actions cute.

"Ah, the radio," Dad mumbled. "You actually listen to it?"

"Yeah, usually after I eat the rice ball."

"I could buy you a new one. If it helps your studying."

"I like this one."

"I always thought your diligence was just one of your strengths, but you go about it a little differently from most people."

"It's just a radio. Don't make it sound like a whole thing. And you're totally sounding like a doting dad now."

Apparently, Dad bought this radio back when he was younger simply because it was cheap.

With its classic wood grain design, it was like something you'd see in an American black-and-white movie.

He said he got attached to it for some reason and couldn't throw it away. Then when I found it gathering dust in a corner, I begged him to give it to me.

"By the way, Asuka..." Dad finished his rice ball and then cleared his throat in an attempt to appear casual. "Are you interested in meeting an editor?"

"Huh...?"

Dad continued as I tried to process what he was talking about now. "You know *URALA*, right?"

"Um, of course."

*URALA* is a monthly local news magazine. Basically everyone who lives in Fukui has heard of it. It covers a wide range of topics: noteworthy individuals, good restaurants, culture, education, companies, all local to Fukui.

I've never really looked it up or anything, but I'm guessing the name "*URALA*" comes from the Fukui dialect word "urara," which means "us."

The cover models are mainly girls who were born, raised, or currently live in Fukui, and it's not uncommon to hear people mention a friend who ended up on the cover.

For some reason, Dad was looking awkward.

"I got in touch with the editor-in-chief through a work colleague. If you want, you can tour the publishing company and talk with editorial."

*"What?!"*

I got up all of a sudden, sending my chair clattering back.

Dad waved his hand in front of his face, flustered. "Now, don't go getting me wrong here! I haven't changed my mind about college or working in Fukui. And it's not a fiction novel publishing house, but I thought that speaking to an actual editor might give you some extra motivation for exam studying. Maybe that was too much, but..."

As Dad spoke, his voice got quieter and more mumbly. I burst out laughing.

"Dad, you're so flustered right now. Don't worry, I get it." I looked down at the rice ball plate.

Now I knew Dad truly respected my decision.

He must have given it a lot of thought before he stuck his neck out to do this for me.

Suddenly, I remembered that exchange I saw between those editors in Tokyo.

I didn't even need to take a second to think about it.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to go," I said immediately.

Dad stood up, the corners of his mouth curving like he was quietly pleased.

"Well, it'd be better to do it during summer vacation. There's only a few days left, of course, but give me some options for dates and times you're free. By tomorrow, if possible. Also..."

Dad paused and then cleared his throat deliberately.

"They said it'd be fine if you brought a friend as well. If you'd like, you could invite that boy."

"...Ah-ha-ha."

I knew Dad was trying to be considerate, but this was really funny.

"What are you laughing for? Would that young man really want you to go somewhere unfamiliar all by yourself?"

"I mean, he doesn't even know about it. You're the one who set it up, Dad..."

"If necessary, I could speak to him myself..."

"I think it's about time to step back, Dad. Unless you want to be on the receiving end of a daughterly glare."

"...Then we're done here."

And with that, Dad quickly exited the room.

*Oh yikes, I thought, touching my left ear without thinking.*

I'd fully intended to go alone, but since Dad brought it up... Now I didn't know what to do.

Maybe I could ask him and see if he was interested at all.

*But then... If I go and bring it up, he might have a hard time refusing. Like, he'll feel obligated. I don't want to inconvenience him when he's just trying to enjoy the last few days of summer vacation...*

I squirmed around, trying to get my feelings and thoughts in order.

All the while, I was listening to the voice of the deep night.



Two days later, around three thirty PM, I was seated in the passenger seat of Dad's car, on the way to URALA Communications, the company that publishes the magazine.

I couldn't sleep well the night before.

I had read the latest issue of *URALA* from cover to cover, and the more I read and thought about meeting the people who made it, the more excited I became.

What questions should I ask? What if people think I'm just some naive kid?

What if the person answering my questions is extremely strict and scary?

*If this is enough to make me nervous... Wow, I still have a long way to go before I can become an editor, I thought wryly.*

Fiction novels and magazines are different, of course, but with both, you need to meet with writers and handle people with all kinds of different personalities.

This was a great opportunity. I didn't need to overthink it. I just needed to ask all my questions and find out what I could.

Dad stopped at a traffic light and glanced over at me.

"Sure you don't want to pick up that boy?"

"Yeah. I don't want to push it."

"There's still time. Why don't we swing by right now?"

"Like I said, it's fine."

"...All right."

As we talked, I still had my nose in the magazine for one final review. Before I knew it, we'd arrived at our destination.

When I got out of the car, even though it was already the end of August, the clouds overhead really seemed to herald the end of summer.

The chirping of the cicadas sounded impatient and fractious, like they were protesting the coming change of seasons.

I fanned my neck.

I'd chosen a thin jacket and skirt set to try to look sort of serious, but it was kind of stuffy. I should probably have worn my summer school uniform.

I smoothed down my outfit and stood up straight.

The URALA building had its name on the side, and it was a dull sort of color. It wasn't long and narrow like an airplane control tower, but somehow it had that vibe. In the parking lot across the street, there were rows of cars with the *URALA* name on the side. I realized then how many people must work in the building.

Dad got out of the car and turned to me, anxiety in his voice.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to just go in with you?”

I shook my head. “No. I’ll do it myself. It’s an experience, right?”

If I was meeting a direct acquaintance of Dad’s, it’d be better if he went in with me. But I wasn’t, so I had to meet the people involved myself.

I glanced at my watch.

Fifteen minutes before the specified meeting time.

I should wait a little longer. It’s rude to be too early.

While I was thinking about that...

“Asuka.”

...I heard a voice calling me from nearby.

I looked over and saw a boy there, waving awkwardly at me.

“Hello. I see you got here first.”

After much debating, I’d decided to leave the decision up to Saku.

In other words, I’d decided to operate on the assumption that I’d be going to *URALA* alone, but I let Saku know that I’d be touring *URALA* and meeting with the editor.

My thinking was that if his reaction was indifferent, I’d just proceed to go alone. But if he said something like, “Wow, I’m envious,” or “Wish I could come, too,” then I’d invite him.

And now here we were.

*“Do you need to, like, book a slot, or can anyone go?”*

*“No slot needed. Actually, I was told I could invite a friend. But I didn’t want to bring it up and make you feel like I was pressuring you to go, so I left that part out.”*

*“...Well, can I go? Personally, I’m kinda interested.”*

Saku’s always loved books, my career path and dreams aside. But I was surprised by how enthusiastic he was about coming.

I should have just asked him straight out, instead of beating around the bush.

While I was thinking about that, Dad quickly stepped between me and Saku, who was walking over with his backpack slung over one shoulder.

"Hello, young man. How have you been?"

Even as he spoke, Dad's eyes weren't smiling at all.

The three of us haven't spoken since that meeting at school.

Saku frowned. "Hello, Sir. Thank you for allowing me to participate today."

"I'm not the one who gave permission. It's at the company's discretion."

Dad was being frosty, even though he was the one who'd suggested inviting Saku in the first place.

I'd asked Saku if he wanted to ride with us, but he'd stammered, "I-it's okay, I'll, um, take my bike."

"Just for your information..." Dad scowled. "This doesn't mean I'm condoning a relationship with my daughter."

"It's fine, Dad," I anxiously interjected. "He knows what you think."

Dad was so embarrassing!

Saku grinned a lopsided grin. "It doesn't seem like you've changed."

Dad's scowl deepened, and his voice grew even more gruff. "I expect you to bring her home promptly after dinner."

"Oh, I can take her to dinner?"

"I've given Asuka enough money for a decent meal for two. Make sure you eat something that isn't junk."

"Th-thanks...?"

"Also..."

"Da-aaad!" I had the feeling he would go on indefinitely if I didn't stop him, so I cut in. "It's almost time. We have to go."

"But I need to make sure he's aware of our house rules—"

"Just leave it, Dad, unless you want your daughter to really tell you off!"

"...All right. Make sure you learn something," Dad said, finally getting back into the car.

With one last anxious look at me, he drove off.

"I'm so sorry about him..."

Saku let out a huge sigh, his shoulders lowering. "Wow, that guy really is a doting dad, huh?"

"Ah-ha-ha... He's been like that all the time lately."

"I'm just glad he doesn't have a pitchfork. Or a gun."

"Dad actually gave me quite a bit of money. He was all red and saying like, 'That boy lives alone, right? Make sure he eats something nutritious.'"

"I appreciate the consideration. But I can see the future. He's going to be all, 'I'm not handing over my daughter to a rogue like you!' But then when the wedding day comes, he'll cry all over my suit and sob, 'Please, take care of my daughter!' He's definitely that type of guy."

"Huh...?"

A certain unexpected word stuck out to me.

Saku looked at me, brows rising. "No... It's just..."

*Ah crap,* I thought, pressing my lips together. "No, it's fine. I'm sorry for reacting so strangely."

"I mean, that was more of a hypothetical. Like a lighthearted scenario to make a point."

"Please, don't try to explain it. I want to crawl into a hole in the ground right now."

"...Er, sorry, Asuka."

"No apologizing, either!"

I had to cover my face with my hands.

That was totally my fault just now.

Dad's always saying weird things, and I guess my mind immediately went in that direction.

I mean, take today, for example. Saku was only here because he was genuinely interested in visiting *URALA*'s HQ. Why was I letting my mind run away with me and getting ideas? What a mortifying thing to think!

But then the whole thing started to seem ridiculous, and I chuckled.

Say we did get married someday... Dad and Saku would get along surprisingly well, wouldn't they?

They'd be stiff and awkward at first, but they'd open up to each other over some booze.

I could easily imagine a scene at New Year's: My dad drunk and fawning over Saku, Saku bewildered and just trying to survive it...

I slapped my cheeks lightly to bring myself back to Earth.

*All right, that's enough fantasizing for one day.*

This was a golden opportunity that had come my way.

I needed to learn all I could, for the sake of my future.

"Shall we go in?"

Saku nodded and grinned, saying, "Yep."

*I decided to leave this town because of you.*

*But you're also the reason I'm so reluctant to go.*

*...I have seven months left.*

I took another of my remaining tickets—tickets I wasn't sure I'd be able to use up completely—and tore it into confetti in the air.



We gave our names through the intercom beside the entrance, and they said that the editor-in-chief would come straight to us.

I stood up straight, really nervous now.

I sneaked a glance at Saku. He looked so calm. I envied his courage.

After we waited a few minutes, the clear automatic doors whizzed open.

“Welcome. Asuka, is it?”

The man addressing me was, um— Oh, how should I say it?

Simply put, he had a very severe sort of face.

“Ah. Yes... Yes, that’s right,” I answered uncertainly and made eye contact with Saku.

“Asuka, you didn’t bring us to the office of a mob boss by mistake, did you?”

I shook my head hard, looking at the man again.

He had short, shaved hair and a goatee.

His glasses had a faint purple tint to them, and a gold necklace peeked out from his shirt, which was left open to about the third button.

At best, he was one of those dapper middle-aged guys, but at worst...

“Ah-ha-ha!”

Seeing us freeze, the man laughed heartily. “It’s okay. I’m not that scary. I’m Terahata, the editor-in-chief of *URALA Monthly*, and you can feel free to ask me anything today.”

He patted me on the shoulder as he spoke.

His big toothy smile made everything much less scary in an instant, and I felt myself relax.

“Thank you very much for this opportunity. I’m Asuka Nishino, a third-year student at Fuji High School.”

I bowed my head.

“Thank you for allowing me to tag along, too. I’m Saku Chitose, a second-year student at Fuji High.” Saku followed my self-introduction with his own.

“Ah! Good to meet you both!” said the editor-in-chief, and he started walking. “It’s rare for people your age to be interested in this line of work. And it’s a good opportunity for me to talk to current high school students and get some perspective on the youth of today.”

As we followed him, I looked all around.

I'd had the impression that a publishing company would be a chaotic place, with posters everywhere, but this place was tidier than I'd imagined.

It looked like any other ordinary, well-organized office building.

"For starters, let's take a look at the editorial department."

He guided us through a large, open-plan office.

There were desks and computers lined up in rows, a bit like a school staff room.

Of course, this place was a little more trendy and modern than that.

In order to allow employees to concentrate on their work, perhaps, the individual desks were surrounded by partitions that were only just high enough to allow people to see one another's faces. Some of the desks had piles of documents, there were lap blankets draped over the backs of the chairs, and I could see slippers under the desks. Those little details brought this place closer to the editorial department I'd been imagining.

Saku whispered to me under his breath. "They're all working dressed in casual clothes."

"Yeah. I kinda envy them that."

"Still more formal than the editor-in-chief, though."

"Shh! Don't say that!"

While we were whispering, the editor-in-chief pointed to a large table near the entrance.

"Right now, the editorial department is having a meeting. Today's meeting is a simple one, but at our monthly planning meeting, each editorial staff member presents various ideas, and we brainstorm together to decide on the special features and what to cover in that month's issue."

"So even a new member could propose an idea and have it be included?" I asked.

"Of course," he replied. "As long as it's interesting. Before you know the ins

and outs of editing, you'll learn by observing your seniors at work. Still, compared to other companies, you'll be able to jump right in and get your feet wet from an early stage. Learning on the job, as it were."

The editor-in-chief grinned with pride.

"It's a lot of responsibility, but it's rewarding for sure. After all, the magazine won't be published unless everyone gets their pages done. Also, you'll be responsible for the people you interview, liaising with different establishments, et cetera. Whether or not we can present something to our readers in a way that brings out its charm and appeal—well, that's all up to our contributors."

My heart skipped a beat in my chest.

*Right, I thought. Magazines may be the same as novels in the sense of digging up stories.*

"Ha-ha," laughed the editor-in-chief. "Hey! Hirayama!"

One of the women sitting at the table stood up.

She quickly gathered up the documents that were spread out in front of her and came over. "Oh, are these the high school students? Nice to meet you. My name is Hirayama. I'm the lead editor."

She looked to be in her late twenties.

She had a gentle smile and a sophisticated air about her.

Though she was dressed in a smart business casual-type outfit, there was something relatable about her. Like she was a college student, or someone's older sister.

After Saku and I both introduced ourselves, the editor-in-chief spoke again.

"I thought it would be easier for Asuka here to talk to a fellow woman, someone as close to her own age as possible."

Hirayama smiled warmly—maybe she was remembering her own time as a teenager or something. "You know, I also graduated from Fuji High. It's been about ten years since I graduated, but I wonder if they still do things like the 'Welcome Back, Alumni' event?"

"Seriously?! Yes! We did it again this year!" I yelped a little, surprised by this moment of connection.

The event Hirayama was talking about is kind of a special class held every year where dozens of Fuji High graduates from all over the prefecture return to talk to current students about their various vocations and careers.

Other high schools probably have similar events, but at Fuji, there's a strong alumni organization called "Shinmeikai," so the event tends to be really worthwhile and illuminating.

Hirayama smiled. "I see. Well then, please feel free to ask me anything you like, and let's pretend this is our own event."

"I will! Thank you very much."

Saku and I both bowed politely together.



Hirayama and the editor-in-chief led us into a room that felt relatively somber, more like a reception room than a conference room. Most of it was taken up by a large rectangular table that could easily seat more than ten people.

Maybe it's weird to compare it to school, but it felt more like I'd been summoned to the principal's office than anything else.

Perhaps noticing my hesitation...

"Please, have a seat." Hirayama pulled out chairs for us near the door.

"Thank you."

Saku and I sat side by side on the short end of the rectangle.

Hirayama sat one chair away on the long side, at a 90-degree angle to us.

Maybe she thought it would be better to sit close. The table was awfully big.

But being side-on felt less like an interrogation. It was more comfortable, like chatting with friends. I guess it depends on the situation, but this could be a certain kind of interview technique, I think.

The editor-in-chief, on the other hand, sat at the far end of the room, on the

short side opposite us.

Maybe he was planning to leave most of it to Hirayama and just observe.

It felt like he was an exam proctor, evaluating. It made me feel a bit uneasy.

I took out my notebook, pen, and phone, and put them on the table.

Then I looked at Hirayama and realized something.

“Um, is it okay if I record this on my phone?”

I was aware that I was flustered.

It was taking all I had just to sound intelligent with my questions. But if I wasn’t absorbing anything Hirayama was saying, there’d be no point to this meeting at all.

Hirayama smiled, eyes crinkling. “Yes, of course.”

“Oh, thank you.”

I tapped my phone screen.

A question came to mind immediately.

“Do editors and writers also record interviews?”

“Hmm,” Hirayama said, thinking it over for a second. “Everyone has their own method. Some record everything and then transcribe from the recordings before drafting their articles. Some just take notes and then write from those. Some record interviews just in case, but then tend to rely more on their notes. Some even write from memory without taking any notes or recording anything at all.”

“Really? But sometimes interviews can take an hour or more, right?”

“Yes,” Hirayama said tentatively. “Well, it depends. Sometimes being recorded can make the interviewee nervous or on their guard too much. Also, if you know you can just listen to the recording later, you might fall into the trap of not being an active listener. Some believe that relying on their memory alone makes it so only the most salient points of the interview stick with them, cutting through the fluff.”

“I see...”

That explanation made sense.

I glanced down at my phone, worried now about my request to record. Hirayama seemed to notice.

"However, in my experience, I think it's better to record when you can, or at least take notes. When you listen to the recording later, you can often find little nuggets of treasure that passed you by during the actual interview itself. It all comes down to what works for you," she said reassuringly. "Ultimately, it depends on the person, but personally, recording allows me to concentrate on the conversation without worrying about things like, *Oh, I'd better make sure I jot that down*. Also, there's a risk that we might focus on only our own biased observations if we don't have an impartial recording. If you've got a preconceived idea of what angle you're going to take on the article going in, you can end up letting that color your impressions way too much."

Even this brief explanation was enough to show me how seriously Hirayama took the words of her interviewees.

I was glad I'd come today. This was the kind of thing you could only learn from someone who actually worked in the field.

"This is just a basic question, but..."

Suddenly, Saku raised his hand beside me. "Does the editor write the text themselves?"

Oh, yeah.

If you're an editor of a novel, naturally the author is the one who writes the actual text. I wondered if it was different when it came to magazine articles.

Hirayama nodded. "Sometimes we take work from freelance writers, but in the case of our magazine, we usually do the research and write the articles ourselves."

"Sorry to interrupt, but what is the difference between a writer and an editor?"

Wow, Saku was fearless with his questions.

It sounds like the kind of thing that's basic knowledge, but come to think of it,

if you asked me to define the difference, I'm not sure I could.

I could learn a lot from Saku's straight-on approach.

"Let's see," Hirayama said, nodding again.

"Feature writers are basically professional writers who conduct interviews and then write articles. Whereas we editors submit a plan, make appointments with the interviewees, hire writers and photographers, and plan out the look of the pages. Then we draw up something like a rough blueprint, have a designer create a layout, check the manuscript and photos that come in... There are a lot of other detailed tasks, but it's really about overseeing the total quality of pages. Think of an editor's job as supervising the entire process of an article from start to finish."

"...Isn't that a lot of work?"

Saku sounded daunted, rather than surprised.

"You really have to be a jack-of-all-trades as well as a supervisor, yes. If we have to go on location to conduct interviews, we need to arrange Shinkansen tickets, sometimes plane tickets, accommodation, and sometimes order certain documents and supplementary materials. Sometimes we have to pester writers about deadlines, sometimes we have to put in a lot of overtime... From a certain perspective, this industry is kind of a meat grinder..."

"Hey! Mind what you say to the idealistic high schoolers, here!"

The editor-in-chief interjected, even as Hirayama seemed to be joking.

"But, boss, I really need to explain the reality of the job."

"Then tell 'em the reality, not this crazy stuff! Look at me; with your dire warnings, these kids are going to leave thinking this is some sort of dodgy company!"

I hesitated for a moment, wondering if I was supposed to laugh. But then both Hirayama and the editor-in-chief started chuckling.

Okay, so it was a joke... Sort of trying to lighten up the mood?

"Sorry, sorry," Hirayama said. "I got off topic, but in reality, writers sometimes come up with plans and draw up rough drafts, and in some cases, they're

entrusted with tasks similar to editing. What I've just explained is more of a basic division of roles. It's not a particularly grueling or unfair industry, but it is quite a difficult job in any editorial department. You should probably be aware of that."

"Thank you," Saku said, bowing his head slightly.

Saku seemed satisfied with his answer, so I took my chance and cleared my throat.

"Sorry, I wanted to start off by asking this, but would you mind telling us about how you got started in this industry?"

Hirayama scratched her cheek, looking a little embarrassed.

"Yes, certainly. Goodness, it feels odd being the interviewee for once."

I opened my mouth to start with my questions, but then...

"Actually, I like that."

The editor-in-chief snapped his fingers.

Saku and Hirayama blinked.

"Let's make it a real interview." The editor-in-chief crossed his arms as he continued, grinning somewhat mischievously.

"It's not really an internship, but let's make this like a work experience thing. Asuka, Chitose, why don't you interview Hirayama as if you were real writers? What's the pitch? Let's see... Life as a Fukui editor. You can ask all the questions you originally wanted to ask."

I glanced at Saku.

"I guess I'd like to give it a shot," he said, and I immediately nodded.

"Me too! It's a rare opportunity."

"All righty, then," said the editor-in-chief. "Let's give you fifteen minutes to prep. A bit short for a real interview, but never mind. Make a list of all your questions."

""All right!""

I grabbed my pen and pulled my notebook close.

Saku leaned back and stared at the ceiling, the desk in front of him still empty.



...Fifteen minutes later, the editor-in-chief and Hirayama walked back into the room.

They'd brought bottled water for us. I said a quick thanks and then took a big swig.

The editor-in-chief sat at the back of the room, like before. "Okay, are you ready?" he said.

Saku and I both nodded.

"Okay, then who wants to start?"

Without hesitation, I raised my hand.

"It may not be that big of a difference, but I decided to visit *URALA* first, so I think I've had more time to prepare my questions. So can I go first?"

*That's so like you,* Saku seemed to be saying with his wry smile.

"Set the standard to beat," he said.

"I will. You just watch."

This way, I could give Saku a little more time.

Yes, that was part of it. But I was also feeling pretty confident.

Unlike Saku, who came here as more of a field trip out of an interest in books, I'd given this a lot of careful thought and research.

I buy *URALA* sometimes—not every month, but often—and I read it from cover to cover.

My notebook was filled with questions I wanted to ask.

I'm sure there are differences between novels and magazines, and this formal-seeming interview setup definitely made me jittery. But I was confident I'd do pretty well.

When the two adults nodded the go-ahead, I set my phone to record.

"Well, thank you very much for agreeing to speak with me today."

As I spoke, I looked at my notes, at the underlined parts and the crossed-out parts.

I decided to start with a standard question first. "Ms. Hirayama, what made you decide to become an editor?"

Hirayama began talking, like she'd just been waiting for my cue.

"After graduating from Fuji High, I entered the science department at a university in Nagoya. I went on to become an engineer at a machinery manufacturer there, but to be honest, I didn't really enjoy it. I wanted to do something more exciting."

"I see. It sounds like being an editor was something totally different. Have you enjoyed magazines from a young age, or...?"

"Oh yes, exactly. While I was wondering what to do, I suddenly remembered my love for magazines."

Good. I was getting to the heart of Hirayama's drive.

"I see. So why did you choose to work for *URALA* here in Fukui? When it comes to publishing jobs, I have the impression that they're mostly concentrated in Tokyo?"

This was one of my most burning questions.

I'd decided on a career in publishing with Tokyo in mind. So I wanted to know what it would be like to work for a regional news and culture magazine right here in Fukui.

"Hmm, let's see..."

But Hirayama fell silent.

Maybe that wasn't the right question to ask.

I cleared my throat to try to fix it.

"For example, maybe you were attached to your hometown, maybe you were a little tired of living in the city, or maybe you happened to find the right job offer...?"

"Ah," Hirayama said, her tone warm with nostalgia. "Maybe it's all of those things. I was tired of working in Nagoya and wanted to go back to Fukui. And *URALA* was hiring mid-career workers. Not to mention the fact that they welcomed people with no experience."

I picked up on what she was saying and tried to expand on it.

"You say you started with no experience, but have you had any difficulties since becoming an editor? Maybe trouble coming up with article plans, difficulties with writer's block, or not seeing eye to eye with freelancers or photographers? I guess—growing pains, for lack of a better term? Or maybe all of those things at one time or another?"

"All of it, just like you said. At first, I floundered a bit trying to figure everything out. It really was quite difficult."

Hirayama smiled wryly, and I felt my spirits lift.

We were really communicating!

Perhaps it was because I was able to imagine, in my own way, the mentality of the *URALA* staff and what kind of feelings they put into creating the magazine.

I wanted to keep the momentum going as I went to my next question.

"Then is there a kind of specific moment when you feel glad you're working for *URALA*, or is there anything in particular that makes you feel especially good about working for a regional news and culture magazine?"

"Regional, yes... Well..." Hirayama trailed off again.

Even editors who interview people for their jobs might struggle, I guess.

When it comes to interviewing regular people, sometimes the interviewer may need to give a little push.

I cast about for something to say that would help her express her feelings.

"My personal impression is that the appeal of local magazines comes from the way they cover local information that big publishers in Tokyo don't, stuff that's not known about on the national level. Companies that are actively working in the local community, small confectionery shops in the neighborhood, and so on.

When I was researching, I kept discovering all kinds of interesting places in Fukui."

"Yes, that's right." Hirayama sounded more animated now. "Even though I've been doing this job for many years, there's still so much I don't know about our local area..."

"So, like, Fukui has charms that rival Tokyo's, right?"

"Yes. I really believe it does."

"Specifically, what do you think is the true appeal of Fukui? Is it the warmth of the people?"

"Well, everyone I've interviewed has certainly been kind."

After that, the conversation continued smoothly, and the mood was relaxed throughout.

I'd ask a question, then Hirayama would respond.

"...?"

"...!"

"..., ...?"

"..."

"..., ..., ...?"

"..."

We got right into the rhythm, and I ended up talking a lot more than I usually do.

*I'm really enjoying this!* I thought, almost laughing at myself.

I felt like I was really an editor.

I'd caught the editing bug!



Around an hour passed, but it felt like minutes.

"Thank you so much for speaking with me today."

I bowed to Hirayama.

Even though it was my first reporting experience, I think it'd be safe to say it was a great success.

There are differences between being a novel editor and being a magazine editor, of course, but I felt a bit more confident in my ability to talk productively with writers.

Hirayama smiled. "Thank you, I enjoyed talking with you."

Saku, listening beside me, clapped his hands mischievously.

"Good job, Asuka. Amazing. You expressed yourself so well."

"Thanks! I guess I did pretty well, too."

The editor-in-chief finally spoke up then. "Okay, Chitose, you next."

No commentary on my interview.

A little disappointing, but maybe he was saving it for the end.

At any rate, I felt a lot lighter now.

It must be a tough job, dealing with this kind of tension every day.

I sneaked a glance at the editor-in-chief.

Seeing that sharp and serious look on his face, I sat up straighter.

"All right," Saku said, and I made sure to refocus. "I'd like to ask you a few questions as well."

"Certainly. I think Nishino and I already spoke about quite a lot. You might have trouble following that up."

Yes, you could see it that way...

I'd thought my thorough interview was a good thing, but it might have a negative effect on Saku's turn...

I'd asked so many questions, maybe I hadn't left enough for him.

"No, I think it's okay." Saku shrugged, continuing. "Well, then why do you stick with working as a magazine editor? From what you were saying earlier, it sounds like a very demanding job."

I was surprised that he asked such a bold question.

It almost sounded like he was asking her why she hadn't just quit.

"Hmm, why do I stick with it? That's a difficult question to answer." Hirayama mulled over that one for a bit.

I'd been able to prompt her at times like this, but...

But Saku just observed quietly, looking relaxed.

After about ten or twenty seconds, I started finding the silence painful.

*What should I do? Should I jump in and help?*

As I was fidgeting and debating...

"...It's about promoting things I believe in..." Hirayama said quietly, sounding surprised by what she was saying.

Then her head came up, her eyes alight.

"You know, I think that's it! This job is the best for pointing people towards the things that matter to me!" She slammed her hands down on the table and leaned forward. "You know how people get really excited about their interests, and basically post about them online constantly? Well, that's basically what we do! And when you work as an editor for a magazine like *URALA*, you're always discovering cool new things and falling in love with stuff that most people don't know about. I can spread the word about things that excite me!"

Saku started laughing. "Sounds like you're mixing work and pleasure."

"Yes! Exactly!!!" Hirayama continued, her voice filled with excitement. She was a changed person. "And isn't it amazing that it's actually a real job?! I get paid to go eat something incredible at a restaurant and then tell everyone: 'Hey! The food here is to die for!' And it's like all the EIC's griping never even happened!"

"I'll take you off the restaurant articles for slander," said the editor-in-chief, but he sounded amused.

"Well, if you're going to be like that, I won't bring you back any more gifts when I travel."

"The company's already paying for those!"

"Well, then," Saku said, holding back a laugh. "Do you have any interesting anecdotes about visiting restaurants?"

"Hmm... I'm sure I do, but it's hard to think of any when I'm put on the spot."

Hirayama's tone had grown completely casual now.

During my interview, she spoke to me stiffly, in her role as an *URALA* editorial department staff member. But to Saku, she was chatting away like he was a younger student at the same high school.

And Saku continued to calmly observe Hirayama as she tried to find the right words.

For some reason, I felt odd. Like I'd been pushing the wrong buttons.

Before I could put my thoughts into order, Hirayama spoke again.

"I don't have any specific anecdotes, but... When I report on restaurants here in Fukui, I often get treated to the meals for free. I mean, I try to pay, but they're always like, 'It's fine, it's fine.' So I don't have to pay at all sometimes."

"Is that something rare in this industry?"

"Well, in Tokyo I've heard that once the photos are taken and the interview is over, the editors just push their plates away and pay the bill. I mean, restaurants take time out of their day to speak to editors. They deserve to be paid. But in Fukui, they'll offer me stuff that isn't on the schedule for the interview at all. They just serve whatever they think I'd like. And if the food gets cold during the interview, they go back and whip up more!"

"So do you ever ask for extra food or these kinds of services?"

"No, never! I mean, maybe they've caught me drooling over the menu once or twice. But I never, ever ask!"

Everyone started laughing together.

The atmosphere was so lighthearted, chatty, and fun... Totally different from my interview.

Saku, still laughing, spoke again. "Can I ask some serious stuff now?"

"We haven't even gotten to the serious stuff yet?!"

Hirayama was actually quite an expressive person.

Saku nonchalantly asked his next question.

"What do you value, Ms. Hirayama, when it comes to writing articles for magazines? Or I guess, what do you think makes a good feature writer?"

"Hmm...that's a pretty shrewd question. It really does vary from person to person, as I said earlier... I don't think I can make any general statements."

"Just your opinion is fine."

"Well, I'm going to need a minute to think."

I felt a sharp prickle in my chest.

Hirayama fell into contemplation again, while Saku waited silently.

I thought my interview had flowed so well, but this was really different...

With this interview, there were gaps of silence, and sometimes the conversation seemed to hitch, but when things got exciting...

*Hey, someone please tell me.*

*Why is my throat burning? Why does my chest feel tight?*

"Let's see," Hirayama said, seeming to have gathered her thoughts. "To answer that question, I think it would be best to first talk about what kind of magazine *URALA* is currently aiming to be. Boss, is that okay?"

"Fine by me."

The editor-in-chief sounded like he was expecting this.

"Chitose," said Ms. Hirayama, "when you want to look up a restaurant or some specific item of clothing or a book or something, what do you do?"

"...Well, I guess I'd go online. Maybe just on my phone."

"And what about you, Asuka?"

"I guess I'd do the same."

I don't just believe everything I read online, but if you want to get some quick

information, it's the fastest way to do it.

"Right," said the editor-in-chief. "It may be hard for you young people to visualize, but once upon a time, we didn't all have computers at home. We didn't have tablets, and not everyone had a phone in their pocket. Magazines were the best and fastest way to get information."

Saku chimed in. "You couldn't just run a quick search, either."

"Right. So magazines were the go-to for information. Fashion magazines for those who want to be stylish, cooking magazines for those who like to cook, mountain climbing for outdoorsy types. And for those who want to know what's going on in Fukui, there's *URALA*. If you wanted to get info about something that interested you, magazines were the easiest way to do it."

Yeah... It was hard to imagine a world without internet...

There was TV and radio. But you had to wait for the thing you were interested in to be covered. And unless it was a special feature, the information you could get would probably be pretty bare-bones.

"But these days, even young high schoolers like you who specifically come to learn about what editors do... You still run internet searches first, right? That's the era we live in. We have a website, *Daily URALA*, and we're also on social media. We're on YouTube, we're featured on review sites and blogs... There's an overload of information now. It's so easy to share, too. Print is often left in the dust due to how fast the media cycle works these days. Of course, as professionals, we continue to do our best to provide reliable, high-quality content, but a lot of people out there are now of the opinion that the internet is all we need."

There was a sadness to his voice, and in my mind's eye I saw an escaped floating balloon on the wind.

"But back to the original point. In these modern-day times, *URALA*'s goal is to be evergreen. Information on the internet is updated quickly, so if we just focus on updating people, our info will be out of date before long, right?

"So when it comes to print magazines..." the editor-in-chief continued.

"...We aim to be not just a collection of useful information but a collection of

interesting reading material.”

Unlike before, his eyes now sparkled with some kind of emotion as he spoke.

It wasn’t nostalgic sentiment for a bygone era but a glimmering determination to contribute to the present.

“Like novels, like manga, like picture books, like poetry collections. If you like it, you’ll put it on your bookshelf and keep it safe. Then maybe a decade or two later, you might get a random urge to look something up and open it again. We want to be that sort of magazine.”

He paused. When he spoke again, he sounded almost like he was declaring some sort of personal oath.

“I think it would be great if we could preserve a snapshot of *urara*...of us. Of our history, our culture, our towns and people here in Fukui, and pass all of it on to future generations.”

My heart was going *thud, thud, thud*.

These editors...

Were all of them this passionate about words and stories?

Would I be able to join them and match their level of dedication?

“...Hah, don’t I sound cool?”

The editor-in-chief smiled a little awkwardly.

His teasing manner reminded me of a certain someone. I couldn’t help smiling a little.

Hirayama grinned, too, teasingly. “Editor-in-chief, are you drunk?”

“Hey, what do you mean?”

“Giving a whole speech because you’re in the presence of a cute high school girl.”

“Oh, pipe down. It’s an old man’s duty to lecture the youth.”

From the conversations between the two, I felt like I’d caught a glimpse of the trust they’d built between them.

Hirayama might joke, but she seemed to find it fulfilling, working under this guy.

To be honest, I was also a little envious.

Ms. Hirayama resumed the conversation by returning to the discussion on writing.

"As the editor-in-chief said, the present-day *URALA* focuses on its value as reading material. That said, it's still intended to be informative. Magazines, as a medium, must convey as much information as possible, with writing that's concise, accurate, and easy to understand. Lyrical phrasing and metaphors, the kind used in novels, aren't appreciated. Of course, some writers do develop a personal style that gets sought after. Some editors might say, 'We really need a piece by so-and-so on this page.' But generally speaking."

"Huh," Saku said. "But that sounds at odds with what might make something interesting to read. Aren't you worried about the articles ending up bland?"

"Good question." Hirayama nodded. "We need to look at the articles as a whole. Many writers are able to write compelling pieces by keeping their prose punchy and to the point, focusing on getting that info across, while also creating vivid imagery in readers' heads. But it's a fairly advanced skill set and not easily emulated. Anyway, let's leave that aside for now."

After taking a sip of water, she continued speaking.

"In that case, then, what kind of writing *does* turn informative articles into interesting reading material? I could give you my opinion, and if you asked someone else, they might give you a different one... Incidentally, Chitose, what do you think?"

Finding his question reflected back on him, Chitose thought for a moment. "What about depth of the information? Stuff you can't find through internet searches. For example, if you're covering a ramen restaurant, you could write about the menu, but you could also cover their prep and cooking methodology."

"Well, that's one right answer. However, these days, even YouTubers go into quite a lot of detail with what they cover. And that's more information-seeking,

rather than reading for the entertainment value. What do you think, Nishino?"

I tried to express some of the thoughts I'd had while I'd been listening to the conversation.

"I think it's a symbiotic effort along with photography and design... A professional designer puts the page together around the pictures taken by a professional photographer, and then the writer's text can be made visually appealing based on the font and positioning. That's the magazine's— Oh."

While talking, I realized my mistake.

"It's okay," Hirayama reassured me, smiling softly. "Yes, those things are definitely vital when it comes to making our magazine an exciting read. Even we editors love to see an aesthetically pleasing page with great photos. But as you seem to have realized yourself, Nishino, the actual content of the written article is a somewhat different matter."

Embarrassed, I stared down at the table.

I was so caught up in the idea of an interesting reading experience that I forgot the crux of the original question.

"As for my opinion," Hirayama continued.

"...I guess it's the writer's vision that sets it apart."

I repeated it in my mind. *The writer's vision.*

The words vaguely made sense, but I wasn't sure I had a good grasp on what they meant.

Saku remained silent, waiting for the rest.

"Like, their individual take on the subject, their interpretation. For example, even if both of you went to the same place to cover it for an article, hearing the exact same things from the same people... You'd probably come away with different impressions, right? You'd have different angles. Some say reporting should seek to erase personal bias and aim for total objectivity. However..." Hirayama's gaze was unwavering.

"Take this one time when I visited a local small leather craft workshop. I had to decide whether to include descriptions of the craftsmen at work sewing

leather, whether to express their dedication to their craft and painstaking handiwork—or whether to dismiss those things as details and focus on something else for the article itself.

“And here’s another example. Say I’m covering a ramen restaurant that always closes earlier than its official business hours. How do I present that? Do I say, ‘Here’s a restaurant owner who only believes in serving as many bowls as he can serve with perfect quality’? Do I say, ‘First come, first served, so make sure you get in line early!’?

“Or maybe I’m presenting a travel destination that’s only accessible by a bus that comes once every three hours. Do I write something about how access to the location is extremely limited and inconvenient? Or do I emphasize how it keeps the place hidden, how you can forget your busy life and relax without worrying about getting somewhere quickly?

“It’s common practice to end an article with ‘Please try it out for yourself’ or ‘Highly recommended.’ But what if you ended with your own perspective instead?”

The way she spoke, it was like this was her *raison d'être*.

“It’s the writer’s perspective, I think, that enriches magazines and makes them vital reading material for people.”

Her words left a deep impression on me.

I wished I could just sit with those words and vibe with them a bit.

“Thank you, that was very enlightening.” Saku smiled.

“I hope that was a useful response?” Hirayama’s shoulders shook a little, as if she was amused.

And finally, I understood that tight feeling in my chest.

After that, the two of them discussed various things.

Saku would pose a question, and Hirayama would answer.

“...?”

“...!”

“..., ...?”

“...”

“..., ..., ...?”

“...”

Like a staccato rhythm.

I doubt I'm ever going to forget this summer.



“Well, good work today, both of you.”

After Saku's interview, we took a short breath, and the editor-in-chief smiled.

“You did quite well for high schoolers giving your first interview. I give you both full marks.”

His words stung like needles.

Flustered, I looked down at my hands.

Seeming not to notice, the editor-in-chief continued.

“But this is your work experience. I have to tell you that no matter how satisfied you might be with your pages as an editor, it's not getting in print until the EIC gives it the okay. I know this is early stages for you both, but I do want you to bear that in mind.”

*That...kinda sucks,* I thought, gritting my teeth.

But the results speak for themselves.

This was the world that Hirayama and the other editors lived in.

No matter how much pride they took in their work, there was no guarantee their words would make it to readers' eyes.

The editor-in-chief looked straight at me, his gaze shrewd. His expression was no longer as calm or mischievous as before.

“Now let me ask you, Asuka.”

“...Yes?”

“Which do you think was better, your interview or Chitose’s here?”

“...”

Though I’d been expecting him to ask, it still stung.

My breathing grew shallow, and I felt a sour pit of regret in my stomach.

Beside me, Saku looked taken aback all of a sudden.

“Asuka... I mean, Nishino’s interview was...”

“Hold on. I’m asking Asuka.” The editor-in-chief immediately cut him off.

I gritted my teeth together. “It’s okay, I can answer.”

All of a sudden, my throat felt dry.

My hand shook around the plastic water bottle, and I clenched my hand, trying to stop it.

At the very least, I wanted to show integrity and admit to my faults.

“Chitose’s interview was better.”

I said it plainly.

The editor-in-chief looked somewhat relieved. “And how did you come to that conclusion?”

“I...I think Ms. Hirayama seemed more engaged during Chitose’s interview. I think he got more out of her.”

It was something I’d vaguely sensed before he was done.

My interview was full of polite answers, but the conversation with Saku yielded much more personality.

The editor-in-chief frowned but continued. “And do you know why?”

I shook my head, afraid of what might come out if I spoke.

I’d watched the back-and-forth between Hirayama and Saku from the sidelines.

I’d noticed something was different.

Halfway through, I became convinced that I’d failed.

But I couldn't put my finger on how.

I'd prepared my questions with care. Maybe my research was lacking, but I knew I'd spent more time with it than Saku had.

I felt that my interview was smoother, tidier somehow. I'd gotten full of myself... I'm supposed to be the cool older girl, right? Maybe it didn't go well *because I'm a girl?*

Maybe Hirayama took a shine to Saku, as a member of the opposite sex, and that's why she opened up more?

I wanted to deflect from my own inadequacies. I wanted a convenient excuse. So horrible thoughts like those started to cross my mind.

"What do you think, Chitose?"

Great. The last person I wanted the editor-in-chief to ask.

"Asuka..." Saku looked at me, his face twisted painfully.

*You're so kind and wonderful; how could I put that expression on your face?*

The cool older sister had no choice but to say: "Yes, I'd love to get your opinion?"

Saku looked back and forth between me and the editor-in-chief, then slowly spoke.

"It felt like you were doing the talking, Nishino. Not Ms. Hirayama."

"Oh..."

And that's when it hit me.

"..."

It all suddenly made sense.

Right... Yes, of course.

*Yeah, but...* I bit my lip.

Hearing that from him...

It hurt.

"Exactly." The editor-in-chief spoke calmly. "This may sound a bit harsh, but I'd like you to listen. If you were one of our editors, Asuka, that interview you just did would have been rejected. I'd ask you to do it again. And if you pushed back, I'd just replace you with someone else."

"...R-right." I nodded, desperately holding back the emotions welling up inside me.

"I'd like you to think back over your choices. If you were to write an article based off that interview, what would you write? Would Ms. Hirayama even be featured?"

I didn't have an answer to give, so I just waited for the rest.

"Each time Ms. Hirayama stopped to think, you jumped in to assist, Asuka. 'What about this?' 'This is what I think.' 'Isn't this what you were trying to say?' Ms. Hirayama was just going where you led her. But you know..."

"...Those weren't Ms. Hirayama's words."

I suddenly recalled what Ms. Hirayama had said.

*"There's a risk that we might focus on only our own biased observations."*

That was in the context of trying to write from memory without recording the interview, but the result was the same as what I was doing.

I was able to predict Ms. Hirayama's feelings and guide her in a direction that would make the interview go smoothly, basically feeding her the dialogue I wanted to fit my image of the interview.

"Thanks! I guess I did pretty well, too."

I was so embarrassed, I wanted to disappear on the spot.

I'd gotten way, way ahead of myself.

Under the table, I clutched my skirt so tightly, I made creases.

"I'm not blaming you for anything," the editor-in-chief said in a softer voice. "It's a mistake that new editors tend to make, especially those who are serious and passionate. It's clear you've read *URALA* from cover to cover and prepared your questions carefully. I could definitely sense your dedication."

I nodded.

The editor-in-chief continued quietly. “Don’t get me wrong, it’s not that young Chitose’s questions and interview style were especially better than yours, Asuka.”

*Oh no.*

I might have felt better if he’d just given me a simple lecture.

But the way he was trying to soothe the ego of the poor little high schooler coming to watch them work—that made me feel ten times worse.

“So ultimately,” the editor-in-chief said, breaking me out of my fog.

“...Don’t be afraid of silence.”

“Huh...?”

“It’s the same whether you’re interviewing someone or meeting with a writer. Those moments of silence are when the other party is searching for the right words within themselves. Chitose waited. That’s the only difference, but it’s a very big difference.”

*Hirayama trailed off again.*

*Even editors who interview people for their jobs might struggle, I guess.*

*When it comes to interviewing the general public, sometimes the interviewer may need to give a little push.*

*I cast about for something to say that would help her express her feelings.*

Right. That’s exactly what I did.

Instead of helping her find the right words, I got in the way.

The editor-in-chief looked me in the eye again.

“No matter how much we prepare in advance, the best thing we can do is hold back and wait sometimes. It might be hard to do, but try to treasure those moments of silent reflection. Think about the kind of stories that will emerge, the kind of article you’ll submit, the feedback you’ll get from readers.”

He was speaking to me like a friend. Like this was just some neighborly advice.

"That's how we have to do it. Our job is to transmit people's true words and stories."

The sentiments that were being directed toward me were frank, warm, and kind.

"Thank you. Excuse me, I'm just going to go to the bathroom."

And I practically fled from the room.



Quietly, carefully, I closed the door to that room. Then I...

...I ran.

I ran and ran and ran.

*Hold on. Don't let the tears fall.*

*Just a little more, just a little more, hold on, grit your teeth, not yet, not yet...*

I ran into the privacy of the stall and locked the door.

"..."

I covered my mouth with both hands and sobbed.

"Guh... Gah..."

How naive I was.

*"The books I've read so far, the words all things someone desperately dug out of their psyche in an attempt to share their vision with others. If there are worlds out there that only I can find and bring out, then I feel I have to do it."*

I recalled the words I said to Dad once.

I was talking such a big game, when I didn't know the first thing about it.

I went on about digging up words. Digging up stories. Sharing someone's vision.

I had no idea how far I still had to go.

I stumbled right on the threshold. But I was too prideful to even realize that I'd stumbled.

This was my dream. Had I really taken it so lightly?

Had I learned anything from all the precious books that saved my soul?

I've been piling up a bunch of fancy phrases, surface-level stuff, but the pages inside were all blank.

I...I was useless at this.

Though I tried to suppress my sobs, my voice still leaked out hoarsely.

I sucked back my snot, tears dripping between my fingers.

*Gack. Ack.* I coughed like I was being choked, my chest burning.

I'd believed I was capable of better. I'd thought I'd done well, but I was wrong.

*"You did very well, considering you're still in high school."*

Those were the kind of words I was dreamily expecting.



The editor-in-chief said nice things about my passion for the job, but that didn't give me any comfort right now.

*Because you...the boy I adore...*

*The boy who said he wanted to be a light illuminating a path ahead...*

*You knew what to do without being taught.*

He'd known to avoid the trap that had caught me up.

...It was so frustrating. I was so damn frustrated!!!

*If I hadn't invited you along... Would I be feeling this bad right now?*

No. I know with utter certainty that's not true.

This pain didn't come from embarrassing myself in front of you or from worrying about disappointing you.

This pain...made me realize how serious about all this I really am.

I was being confronted with the wide rift between my dreams and my current level of ability.

This might be the first time I've ever been so frustrated over something that matters this much to me.

I've been good at studying since I was little. I was never the best at sports, but I was always able to accept a fair defeat. I wasn't in any sports clubs at school.

So I've never felt this before. I've never been this overwhelmed, being confronted by my own immaturity, totally lost on the path toward the future I wanted. Risking it all for something I just couldn't let go of.

I was scared. I wrapped my arms around me and squeezed my upper arms tightly.

Now I understand why Dad was so worried.

No doubt Dad's seen so many people chase their dreams and fail—their hearts broken along the journey, disillusioned by repeated setbacks and regrets.

Even if I did manage to become an editor...

Maybe the books I sent out into the world with so much confidence wouldn't

sell at all. Maybe I'd be dropped by my favorite author because I lacked ability. Maybe I'd end up ruining a brilliant author's career because I wasn't able to guide them properly...

As long as I continued on this path...there wouldn't be anywhere to run and hide.

I heard the door swing open.

Finally, there came a knock on the stall.

"I'm impressed you managed not to cry until you left the room. I was never able to pull it off."

The gentle voice coming through the stall door belonged to Hirayama.

"You can stay quiet if you want, but would you let me talk for a second?"

If I opened my mouth even a little, it would turn into a sob.

*Knock, knock.* I rapped my response on the door.

"Thank you. You know, Nishino, I really respect you."

My arms slackened. That wasn't what I was expecting to hear.

"You're frustrated with yourself. Embarrassed. You feel pathetic. And you feel like you're about to shake apart because you messed up. Right?"

*Knock,* I responded.

"I think it was about a year after I joined the company that I felt swallowed up by those feelings for the first time. Even before that point, things were tough sometimes. My boss back then was incredibly strict. My manuscripts got rejected over and over. I had to stay overnight in the editorial department, writing and rewriting them, on the verge of tears, but..."

*Knock.*

"To be honest, I used to make excuses for myself, thinking I couldn't help it because I didn't have any experience. I was trying my best in my own way, so people should at least appreciate that, I thought. I drank, complained to my friends, and managed to get through each day."

*Knock.*

"But then one day, I got the chance to cover this bakery I'd always personally wanted to write about. It was in my neighborhood, run by this cute old couple. I loved their pork cutlet buns, their ham-and-egg rolls, their croquette buns, and their bread rolls. When I used to stop by as an elementary student, they'd sneak me some bread that hadn't sold that day. During summer vacation, my mom would send me there to buy breakfast. I'd go right after doing morning calisthenics, and I really started to look forward to the exercise because of it."

*Knock.*

"At the time of the interview, they had already retired, and their son had taken over the shop, but I was desperate to write a great article as a way of repaying all their kindness. This is a little pathetic to admit, but I think it was the first time since I'd become an editor that I was really passionate about writing an article. During the interview, I got so into it that I talked until I embarrassed myself. I spent hours selecting photos, asked the designer to make multiple revisions, and I fussed extensively over every word. I believed I'd created the best possible article."

*Knock.*

"After I sent them the roughs for their approval, the store owner's son called the EIC. He ordered me to go back to the bakery with him. I remember he looked pretty stern. I went wearing the kind of smart suit I don't normally wear. When we got there, the son was furious, and he laid into me."

*Knock.*

"He asked me, 'Was my father's shop the one you meant to write about?'"

...

"My vision was clouded by my own memories and my own sentimental attachment. I focused on the pork cutlet buns, the ham-and-egg rolls... But they were relics of the past. The son had put a lot of effort into the modern menu and the shop's design so that it would appeal to today's young people. The passion behind the bakery had been passed down to the son, but it had evolved into a new form. Even during my visit, I didn't notice any of that."

...

"I broke down in tears on the spot, and I couldn't speak. The EIC had to bow and apologize on my behalf. In the end, they did allow us to run an article on them, but only as long as someone else was assigned to cover it, and it was rewritten completely."

*Knock.*

"I still have nightmares about it sometimes. This is a job where you could easily end up trampling all over the things you love."

*Knock.*

"...Still. It's precisely because of the regret I felt that day that I've managed to make it this far. Because I couldn't just let it end like that. Someday, I'll introduce my favorite bakery again in the best possible way. I'll spread the word across Fukui, maybe across the world."

*Knock, knock.*

"Frustration feeds us in this job. Of course we should be proud of our pages and our articles. We should always give it our all. But we should always strive for improvement. Always think about what we could have done better. The minute you stop caring about that stuff...your career as an editor is dead in the water."

"So," Hirayama said.

"I respect you, Nishino. You haven't even graduated from high school yet, let alone gotten a job, and you're crying like that and trying not to show it to anyone. You've got regrets, and you're feeling them deeply. It might not be my place to say this, but I think you got there ten years sooner than I did. As long as you remember today's tears, you'll become a fine editor for sure."

Her words, her kindness, unlocked a fresh flood of warm tears.

I was blessed.

She had no real connection with this high schooler, but she had confessed to me a part of her past, something so meaningful to her, she'd never been able to forget it.

Even the editor-in-chief could have smoothed things over and avoided the

issue.

*I'll never forget this,* I thought, putting my hand over my heart.

I wiped away my tears, tried to keep my voice from shaking, and said: "All right!"

That determination was for my future self.

"We'll be waiting," Hirayama said, and I heard her footsteps moving away.

After making sure I was alone, I took another deep breath.

"Aghhh!!!"

I cried until my voice cracked, and the rain finally ceased.



After composing myself, I left the stall, washed my face, and exited the bathroom.

As a commemorative gift, they offered us back issues of *URALA*, so I chose the special issue on novels, and Saku chose the special issue on ramen.

The editor-in-chief and Ms. Hirayama came to see us off in front of the entrance.

I bowed my head again. "Thank you very much for today. It was an enlightening experience."

My voice was hoarse from crying, but no one mentioned it, which was even more embarrassing.

Next to me, Saku said, "I learned a lot."

The editor-in-chief smiled warmly. The sharp attitude he'd had when he pointed out my mistakes was gone. "Asuka, you're thinking about going to Tokyo for college and job-hunting, right?"

"I am!"

"I may have sounded harsh, but I have confidence in my ability to judge people. If you can carry on with the passion you have now, you'll be fine. However, I'd like to ask you to do one thing..."

He continued, looking a little hesitant.

"I don't know what will happen in your life from now on. You may be able to achieve your dreams easily, or you may experience many setbacks. You may even find it difficult to live in Tokyo."

With a pat, the editor-in-chief put one hand on my shoulder and one on Saku's.

"In times like these, don't forget that you always have a place to return to here in Fukui. You may think it's too rural, but recently, there are more and more young people here willing to do something different, and this is a place where you can do that. Here at *URALA*, we know this isn't just a boring town."

He smiled a nostalgic, hometown-pride sort of smile.

"So don't think that if you fail in Tokyo, it's over. If you feel like you've hit a dead end, don't suffer all by yourself. Just come home. Urara... I mean, we will be waiting for you here." The editor-in-chief scratched his cheek with a bashful, "Was that me trying to sound cool and failing?" sort of grin.

Hirayama nodded. "Don't go poaching the youth."

"Both of them look like they could run circles around you, Hirayama."

"If that's how you're gonna be, you can forget about me keeping to that deadline."

"You gotta actually meet your deadlines before you can make that threat!"

"You know, I was thinking of asking Asuka to be a cover girl for *URALA*."

"...Hmm, that's not a bad idea."

"Aha! I knew you had an ulterior motive!"

Watching this exchange, Saku and I shook with silent laughter.

After joking around for a while, the editor-in-chief got serious again.

"Asuka Nishino." His face softened back into that boyish smile. "I look forward to meeting you as an editor someday."

And he held his hand out toward me.

I gripped it tightly and swore to myself that I was going to make it, no matter what.



As we left *URALA*, we found that the sky was streaked with red and gold.

The sunset was so magical, I felt like I was about to get sucked into it. Maybe because there were no tall buildings to obscure the view.

Maybe it was because of the rice paddies all around.

The croaking of frogs, like an echo of summer.

Hirayama took us as far as the rotary out front of Fukui Station.

We unloaded Saku's bicycle from the minivan, expressed our gratitude, and said good-bye.

They really took care of us right to the end.

After we'd waved until the van was out of sight, Saku looked at me. "What now, Asuka?"

I smiled a little as I responded. "How about we go for a walk?"

"Good idea. I'm feeling pretty stiff."

We started walking around the station area, with no particular destination in mind.

I like this time of day, just floating on the threshold of evening.

Little by little, lights went on in the shopping district, and the signboards that slumbered during the day popped into neon life.

But nothing could compare to the dizzying splendor of Shinjuku, where Saku and I had also walked around together.

Many of the shops here remained shuttered, and there were only a few people on the streets.

Everyone looked like they were in a hurry to head home, rather than spend time around the station.

But I was feeling sentimental, thinking about how the sleepy Fukui evening

really was nice.

There's a clear delineation between night and day. You can feel the day fading away.

The crossing signal chirped.

It used to play a melody called "Toryanse."

It's a familiar melody, like a nursery rhyme. Something you sing innocently when you're young, but as an adult, there's something melancholic about it.

When I'd hear it in the evening, I used to feel like I might slip into a different world. I used to always hurry to the other side of the road.

Looking to my side, I found Saku apparently deep in thought about something.

Regardless of what the editor-in-chief said... In that moment, I realized that I'm never afraid of silence when I'm with you.

After passing through the Galleria Motomachi arcade and heading down a quiet alley...

"Asuka, look at that." Saku pointed ahead.

As we drew closer, I saw a small hand-painted signboard hanging on the ground floor of a building that had a lot of neon signs for dive bars on its upper floors. The word "bookstore" was written next to the word "HOSHIDO" in alphabet letters, which was probably the name of the store.

I looked at Saku.

"What's a bookstore doing here?"

This was the district with all the bars and the adult establishments and so on.

"I had no idea, either. But I've heard of the café next door, Kumagoro Café. Nanase mentioned it once."

"...What should we do? I kinda want to browse."

"It's not like this is Kabukicho. No one's gonna grab us here."

I nodded and headed into the building.

On the inside, it looked like an old multi-tenant building. It could have been the setting for a horror movie, but I was a little relieved when I saw the bookstore's sign hanging from the ceiling.

We passed by an ancient elevator and entered the door to the shop proper.

"Wow...!"

It was like a mysterious antique shop from a fairy tale.

There wasn't too much horizontal shelf space, but it was crammed with books, records, CDs, cassette tapes, and so on. The interior was quite dim, with only sparse lighting illuminating certain areas, like waypoints in a cave.

In the middle of the store was a large counter stretching across the shop like a sort of twilight flowing between day and night. With the rows of deep-red chairs at the counter, it looked more like a bar than a bookstore.

Was this the beginning of a novel?

At the tail end of my summer vacation, I'd stumbled into a dead-end street with my childhood friend.

Glancing behind me, I saw that the entrance was obscured, and there was only a wide-open exit to who knows where.

The two of us, hand in hand, going on an adventure... I let myself fantasize.

I focused my ears and listened.

I heard Bump of Chicken's "Kudaranai Uta (Boring Song)" playing at a volume so low that it was more like a caress on my eardrums. I realized this was a good place.

"Good evening."

As I was looking around the store, I was addressed by a woman sitting on a chair near the entrance, reading a book.

There were no other customers besides us, so she probably worked here.

Her hair was cut as short as mine. Behind her black-rimmed spectacles, her gently drooping eyes exuded a friendly aura.

"Good evening," I said. "What a wonderful shop."

The woman carefully put down the book and said, “Nice to meet you. I’m Suzuki, the owner of this shop.”

“I didn’t know there was a bookstore in a place like this.”

“I run it with another boy, who’s in charge of music, and it’s usually only open about two days a week. I’m not usually around at this time, either. Today was an exception.”

“Wow. You’ve got a lot of atmosphere.”

“Originally, this place was a dive bar. Even the counter table is left over from those days.”

“Oh, right! Yes, that makes sense.”

“Sorry,” the store owner said. “When a customer comes in, I always start talking to them right away. Would you like to chat? If so, feel free to browse while we talk.”

“Oh, of course.”

Before I knew it, Saku had quickly gone to the back and was curiously looking at the records and cassette tapes. *He just takes life at his own speed, doesn’t he?* I thought, smiling wryly.

When I looked around the store again, I noticed certain novels that I also owned on the bookshelf on the other side, but everything on the counter were booklets that had a somewhat handmade feel to them.

My interest was probably showing.

The shopkeeper beamed. “We mainly sell used books, a few new books, and music-related items, but what we have here is what’s called ‘small press’ books.”

“Small press...?” I repeated, the term unfamiliar to me.

Saku seemed to be interested, too. He stopped browsing and came back over.

“To put it simply, they’re publications independently produced by individuals or small groups. It includes zines and *dojinshi*, too, and there are also some novels I’ve personally edited myself.”

“You edit novels?!”

When I raised my voice, the shop owner tilted her head in surprise. “Are you interested?”

Nodding vigorously, I briefly introduced myself and told her that I was planning to go to Tokyo to become an editor.

“I see. Well, if you’d like, please take a seat.”

Then the owner, Ms. Suzuki, told us all about how this shop came to be.

...Apparently, she originally worked at a design studio.

After having kids, she decided to become a freelance designer so she could keep working while raising her children. Since that wasn’t enough work for her, she started writing articles and eventually began to handle planning and editing.

Around that time, she started calling herself an “editor who loves books” and held events that brought people together through a mutual love of the written word. She started this store on a whim, thinking it would be fun to have something like a used bookstore and editing room.

After completing her brief explanation, Suzuki smiled nostalgically.

“What surprised me the most when I opened HOSHIDO was that it became a gathering place not only for people who simply love books, but also for novel writers, photographers, and artists.”

Beside me, Saku spoke up with curiosity. “Professionally, you mean?”

Suzuki slowly shook her head. “Some do it professionally, but many do it as a hobby, or are actively trying to go pro. Even in Fukui, many people have a desire to express themselves. I wanted to facilitate that. That’s why I began editing other people’s work.”

I had a question. “So have you actually published any novels?”

Suzuki picked up a thick, brightly colored book. “Just with my small press. For example, this was brought to us by a very elderly author who said he wanted to write a novel with his remaining years and leave something behind. The two of us went through round after round of revisions until it was completed.”

"However," she continued. "It's a bit of a sad story, but when the book finally came out, the author was already in the hospital. He passed away a week after I delivered it."

"Oh..."

Ms. Suzuki smiled softly at my reaction. "But I still remember what he said in that hospital room, holding his novel in his hands. He had that childlike joy. 'As long as this exists in the world, I have no regrets.' When I met with her later, his wife also said, 'At the end, he talked about nothing but this book. Thanks to you, I think I was able to set out on my own journey to the end without any regrets.' She was really happy."

When I imagined that exchange, my eyes started to prickle.

When I spoke next, it was my honest opinion. "This might sound trite, but...I think what you do is wonderful. To be honest, I was thinking the only way to become an editor was to move to Tokyo. But even in Fukui, there are people working hard to get other people's stories out into the world."

Suzuki looked a little bashful. "Compared to traditional publishers, what we do is very small-scale. But I believe that publishing a book isn't just about reaching readers. It's about sharing a piece of the author's soul."

"The author's soul..."

"The example I just gave is relatively extreme, but simply the experience of creating a book can really give you a reason to keep going in your later years. You're able to finally express the part of yourself you feel like no one understands, and make your pain and struggles into a story. Then you can finally let them go. Of course, there's also the chance you'll happen upon something completely new and unexpected, too."

Publishing a book had meaning in itself.

Ms. Suzuki's way of thinking gradually began to make sense.

Weaving someone's life and soul into a collection of words—perhaps that, too, was part of the job of an editor.

Ms. Suzuki continued, a faraway look in her eyes.

"Also, an author's life gets preserved in the books they create. How they grew up, what kind of people they met, the experiences they had. What they found beautiful. What made them cry. Their favorite color of the sky. The seasons and memories they cherished. The people they loved. Even in fiction, sometimes I'll be reading, and I'll turn a page, and a sentence will catch my eye, and I feel like I get glimpses of the author's inner life from beyond the page. So..."

Ms. Suzuki cradled the book by the late author as if it were one of her own children.

"Though it's sad, there's comfort, too. You see, he's still right here."

My chest tightened.

I couldn't really say anything meaningful about the author of a book I hadn't even read, a person I've never met.

But someday.

I wanted to create a book like this. A sharing of souls.

What a precious thing that would be!

For some reason, I suddenly wanted to confide in this person about today's events—well, to put it bluntly, the frustration and regret I'd experienced.

"Um..."

I was about to start, but then I fell silent.

I found myself glancing...at you, friend.

*You already saw that ugly side of me, but I don't want to expose it any more.*

I fidgeted with the folds of my skirt...

"Asuka."

You said my name in a gentle voice, as if you'd just intuited something.

"Sorry. Do you mind if I take a break and get some fresh air?"

"Huh...?"

"Maybe it's because I've been sitting all day, but my body is so stiff."

I nodded stupidly, and Saku politely excused himself before leaving.

As I watched him go, I felt embarrassed, like Saku had just been reading my thoughts.

Ms. Suzuki, hands folded on her lap, was smiling slightly.

"That's a very nice friend you have there."

"...Yes. I know."

Ms. Suzuki continued. "So, it looks like you have something you'd like to talk about?"

With a small nod, I went ahead and told Ms. Suzuki all about what had happened at *URALA*.

...After spilling everything, I looked down and said quietly: "I feel a little pathetic for thinking I was better than I am."

I had already accepted my failure.

As Ms. Hirayama said, I was sure this experience would help me out someday.

But the distance between me and the dream I was facing had started to flicker, like an unreliable heat mirage at the end of summer. It was slipping through my fingers.

If I kept chasing it until the end, would I really reach it?

I guess I was turning a blind eye to reality, just like Dad had warned me.

As I was thinking, Ms. Suzuki, who'd been listening to me and making understanding noises, gave me a soft smile.

"If there is such a thing as editor talent, then what exactly do you think it is, Miss Nishino?"

I hesitated for a moment before answering. "Well, for novel editors, having an eye for finding a good story, I guess."

"And what is a good story?"

"Huh...?"

While I sat flustered, Ms. Suzuki continued, a twinkle in her eye.

"This may be obvious, but what makes a good story to me doesn't necessarily

make a good story for you, right? The book you feel changed your life might have little to no impact on someone else. It might just be words on a page to them.”

That was true, I thought.

For example, it’s not unusual for Saku to find that a novel I recommended didn’t really resonate with him.

Looking at the small press publications on the counter, Ms. Suzuki spoke again.

“There probably isn’t one single story that will resonate equally with everyone. At least, I haven’t come across one yet. Do we editors really deal in absolutes like that anyway?”

At that, she paused, looking embarrassed, for some reason.

“...It’s all about a singular perspective.”

And she looked me right in the eyes.

“A...singular perspective?”

“If I don’t make this story into a book, it might be buried.’ Or ‘I alone am aware of the charm of this author and am the only one in the world who can convey it to the people.’ Or ‘I have to do it. There’s no one else.’

“So,” Ms. Suzuki said, lowering her gaze gently.

“If there’s any one talent a person needs in order to be an editor, it’s the ability to hold firm to that singular perspective.”

It was like she was offering me an umbrella in the midst of a downpour.

“The singular perspective you hold so close, Miss Nishino... I feel it, too.”

I placed a hand over my chest.

It was like she was telling me...I was fine the way I was.

Like I was being given a pat on the back. Reassurance that my way of thinking wasn’t wrong.

I nodded over and over, biting back a weak whimper.



When Saku reappeared at a convenient moment, Ms. Suzuki suddenly seemed to remember something.

“Come to think of it, we’re going to close down in the next few years.”

“Huh...?”

“It’s part of the redevelopment project around the station. I think certain other stores around here are going to be closed down, too.”

“I... I see...”

I suppose you can’t fight progress. But it made me even more glad that we’d happened to stumble across this shop.

Each word that was uttered here was imbued with the peace of the cradle, and I could see the unshakable core behind its policy. Just from our short conversation, I’d come to really respect Ms. Suzuki and what she did.

So someday, when I became an editor, I’d wanted to visit this store, guided by my memories.

It might be a bit rude of me to come and bend her ear about the books I’ve worked on, like she was some sort of mentor, but...

Sensing the disappointment in me, Ms. Suzuki said, “Oh, don’t look like that.

“This place is just another sort of book that I’ve edited together.”

The night breeze wafted in through the open door, and the pages of the small press publications on the counter fluttered.

“So many people visited this small used bookstore in the countryside, in the short time it was open, and left behind all kinds of stories about their lives. There was a young man aiming to become a professional Japanese drum player. A photographer trying to capture his own impressions of Fukui. A former civil servant who came here from outside the prefecture and started training as a lacquer craftsman. A girl aiming to become an editor, and the boy watching her from the sidelines... Don’t you think it’s like a novel? This place has been my blank page to write them all down.

“So,” Ms. Suzuki continued,

"I don't feel sad about it at all. I believe that the encounters and stories that were born here will continue to be written in everyone's hearts even after the book closes."

Her words sank in.

It was odd, though; I suddenly felt like bursting into tears.

I looked at Saku, who was listening attentively beside me.

The story would continue even after the book was closed.

*Even after I leave and go to Tokyo, you'll continue to live in this town.*

*Your story will go on. But the name Asuka Nishino will disappear from its pages.*

"It's all right."

Ms. Suzuki seemed to read my emotions.

"I'm working on a whole new book. I'll see you in the next story."

Ah. Right.

I placed my hand on my chest.

*You're not the only one whose story will continue.*

*I have to write my own story myself.*

*As long as a part of you remains with me.*

*Our story will never really be over.*

After that, the three of us talked for a while.

Then we left that mysterious old bookstore behind.



Outside, it was completely dark.

It had been a fulfilling day, between my experience at URALA and my time at HOSHIDO.

I was sure I'd be thinking about both a lot in the future.

It was August. The last summer vacation for senior high school students.

At the end of the day, I'd met some wonderful people and encountered stories that would remain in my heart forever.

But, almost unconsciously, I breathed a sigh of relief.

...I'm glad this had happened now.

What if it had been in June? In the confusion of deciding on a career?

I might have easily compromised on my original dream, thinking that living as an editor in Fukui wasn't such a bad idea, after all.

Well, that word "compromised"—I'm not saying that the people who became editors in Fukui compromised.

In fact, it was the exact opposite.

I thought that I could only fulfill my dream of becoming an editor by moving to Tokyo, but there are people here where I was born and raised who approach stories with just as much passion, straightforwardness, and sincerity. That way of living was so cool to me.

Even though my dreams were supposed to still be in Tokyo, I kept thinking of what-ifs.

Just for a moment, I considered it.

...If I stayed in Fukui, I might be able to stay by your side while still nibbling on the edge of my dreams.

But...

My motivation there would be completely different from that of the editor-in-chief, from Ms. Hirayama, and Miss Suzuki, who chose Fukui of their own will and decided to live here as editors.

I'm sure Dad would approve. And I wouldn't have to be away from you. At the same time, I'd be able to keep my dream alive in some form.

It would be a compromise reached after coming to terms with certain realities.

But if I made my decisions based on those reasons, I wouldn't be able to live my life and be proud of the work I did, like the people I'd met today.

So I was glad today happened.

I stretched, and that's when my stomach growled.

Saku, walking beside me, burst out laughing. "I guess you're hungry. Shall we go and get something to eat?"

I puffed out my cheeks. "Isn't it more gentlemanly to pretend you didn't hear a lady's stomach growl?"

"You worked hard today. I'm not surprised you're hungry."

"Huh?"

I was taken aback by what he was saying now, but Saku continued nonchalantly. "I hope you don't take this the wrong way, but you and I have barely spoken to each other today, haven't we?"

*Hmm. I thought back. Yeah. We really haven't.*

"You see?" Saku shrugged. "Normally, we chat up a storm. But today, when I looked at you, I kept thinking... 'Wow, I'm not in Asuka's heart at all right now.'"

"That's...not true..."

I thought back to when I had you on my mind, as you.

The first time was after our interview at URALA.

The second time was after I heard that HOSHIDO would eventually disappear.

*Huh, I thought.*

Only in the context of my work as an editor.

Even though lately, I've been thinking about you no matter what's going on.

Saku continued impishly. "I don't mean it in a trivial way. I'm not being like, 'Oh, boo-hoo, Asuka ignored me all day.' It's just that you were laser-focused. Listening, learning, soaking up all that you could. Whereas I have no idea what I want for my future. Today, you were...dazzling. Just beautiful."

His words deeply embarrassed me, and I needed to deflect.

"Are you kidding? I was so lame and bumbling today."

"It's the flip side of passion. I was in a casual, study trip mood. I wasn't taking

it seriously, and I happened to stumble on the right answer. Next time, Asuka, you'll be leaving me even further in the dust."

"...Can I ask you one thing?" I'd noticed a wistful tone to his voice, and that made me bold. "Why *did* you come with me?"

I'd intended it as a casual question. But uncharacteristically for him, Saku went red, his gaze drifted, and then he grinned, as if to deflect.

"...I told you. I was interested, a little."

"Hey, don't dodge the subject."

"I think it's good manners for a lady not to pry in a situation like this, right?"

"Huh?"

"Please, stop looking at me."

I didn't. Saku sighed and muttered to himself.

"Late night, listening to the radio. Writing letters addressed to no one."

"Excuse me...?"

Those words—it was like he'd been reading my soul. My heart beat faster.

Saku continued, not seeming to notice my response.

"This summer, all kinds of emotions have crystallized inside me. I feel...a little empty. Like a bottle of Ramune that's lost all its fizz. Still sweet, but there's something lacking..."

Is this your distress signal?

If so, I at least want to match your frequency.

"Hee-hee, is it time to discuss your career path again? It's been a while."

Before I knew it, I'd said words that had started to feel familiar.

Saku scruffed up his hair, looking away.

"It bothers me having that empty space in my heart. How do I fill it? With baseball? With studying? Love and friendship, cliché as that is? Or...?"

"...Or write yourself a whole new story?"

I carefully turned the dial, and after a short burst of static, your voice came through loud and clear.

"You're so dramatic, Asuka."

"Well, you're a dramatic guy yourself."

We took a half step closer to each other and looked up at the starry sky.

Where was my paper airplane now?

Soaring smoothly?

Fluttering?

*If I could have my wish, I thought.*

*Then I wish that the person who unfolds it someday is...you, as a grown-up.*

And I hope I can read it, as a grown-up.

...Maybe, in the middle of night at the end of summer, when I long to hear someone's voice...

*Thunk.* Two high schoolers will knock against the window.

I hope...I hope our story will continue.

Chapter 3  
His and Hers Seats



The keys of a piano alternate black and white, but during a performance, they blend together. In the same way, right and wrong may overlap, and one day, they'll harmonize in beautiful living color.

...This summer had me thinking all kinds of things like that.

I'd been idly playing away at the piano when I became aware of the setting sun hovering above it, and I gently closed the lid.

The musical notes on the page, always so plain, seemed to slip from my fingers like colorful rubber balls at a festival, and I ended up chasing them all over and losing track of time.

I smiled wryly, wondering how much longer I could listen to the festival music.

The sunset sky signaled the end of the season. It also told me it was time to start preparing dinner.

The closed lid of the piano was colored a warm burnt orange, and it reminded me suddenly of old times.

I loved moments like this.

If I held my breath and flung open the door, would I find my younger self secretly listening in?

She used to pause in her playing, like she'd sensed me there, but when I asked her to continue, she'd play "It's Nice to Be Human" as if she'd been waiting for me to ask.

*Hey, Mom. I'm the same as you.*

*I've found someone who means a lot to me, too.*

*I've found a place I want to return to.*

*My piano playing is a little softer now.*

*I've gotten better at cooking.*

*And I've decided to start being a little more selfish.*

I hope we can meet again someday.

...This summer, I was finally able to express wishes like that.



I put on my apron and stood at the kitchen counter.

My younger brother had washed his bento box, and it was sitting in the drying rack.

Beyond the kitchen counter was our table, and this morning's newspaper was sitting on it where Dad had left it.

And on the countertop was my freshly poured cup of barley tea.

It was a familiar scene in our house.

Squinting at the setting sun, I checked the fridge and the pantry shelves.

*I'd better use those somen noodles soon, or I'll have to throw them out.*

But at dinnertime, my brother would be a little disappointed. He wouldn't say anything out loud, but he'd have this "Somen noodles again...?" kind of look.

It's a weird kind of food, I thought, smiling wryly to myself.

Every year, we finish up the mochi in January and the somen by the end of August, consume-by dates aside. You can serve mochi for breakfast and somen for lunch, but come dinnertime, they'll be hankering for something else.

Just like with vegetables and fish, somen tastes best when it's the right season for it.

But if I serve the same thing too much, in the morning or afternoon, the reaction will be, "Again, Sis? You serious?"

So this time of year, I always worry about how to use up what we have left.

After much deliberation, I confirmed that I had tomatoes, shiso leaves, and canned tuna. So today, I decided to make a cold pasta dish with somen noodles instead of capellini.

I'd never made it before, but all I had to do was cook the noodles with olive or sesame oil and season it with *mentsuyu* broth.

*What about side dishes?* I mused, and then I realized I'd better stock up soon.

Lately, I'd been focusing on meat and carbs, so it was high time we had some fish.

Dad would drive me to the store, or my brother would come shopping with me without complaint. I could just ask them.

...But I wanted to go with Saku.

Yeah, that was how I really felt.

At first, we started grocery shopping together out of necessity—at my insistence, I guess—but before I knew it, it had become something I looked forward to every week.

My mom's place was in front of a piano, and for me, that place seemed to be the kitchen. *And your apartment...has become something like a second home to me.*

*I want to be there,* I thought.

I sat down on a kitchen stool and sipped my barley tea.

*...Could I just text you like usual?* I wondered.

Yuuko, Saku, and I had talked about a lot at the summer festival.

I felt like I let my emotions get the best of me and revealed an embarrassing side of myself.

For a long time, I thought it would be enough if he could be something like another family member to me. I tried to convince myself I'd be fine with that.

As a result, I had no qualms about going to a boy's place when he lived alone, and us shopping together became just part of my daily routine...

*Yuuko really is something else,* I thought with a sigh.

One big step forward.

Even now, I get paralyzed in my anxious thoughts.

What if he'd rather eat fast food than a home-cooked meal?

What if he found it hard to say no, even when he'd really rather not?

Like the other day, when Yuzuki and Haru came by, and I asked if I could stay... Maybe that was me being a nuisance?

The more rationally I thought about it, the more I started to feel that having a

classmate over to cook for you all the time —a classmate who is not your girlfriend—might be annoying.

Suddenly, I thought of their two faces, bathed in evening light.

*“From now on, can I be a little more selfish?”*

I had claimed I was going to confront my own feelings, but...

...What does it mean to be selfish?

Until I met Saku, I'd always thought my job was to take Mom's place.

Nowadays, I share the housework with Dad and my brother, but is there anything more I want? Honestly, I don't know.

Ever since I called from Saku's place that day, everyone's been much more considerate of me. Not indulgent, but considerate.

But I spent so long trying to make myself small and not cause any inconvenience to anyone.

...Maybe I've forgotten how to be selfish.

It's not like I was forcing myself to hold back. It's more like I didn't have any other options.

*Hahhh*, I sighed again.

Right now, I was going to make dinner and listen to some of my favorite music.

It's better to think over these things while I'm cooking.

But when I reached for my phone...

*...Bzzz. Bzzz.*

I was getting a call.

“Huh?” I said when I saw the name on the display. “H-hello?”

*“...Sorry, is this a bad time?”* Saku's tone was the same as always.

Even though we'd been meeting up every day up until recently, I felt like it had been a long time since we'd talked. I was a little nervous.

"Um, I was just thinking about starting to make dinner. What's up?"

"I see, then I'll make it quick."

"It's okay. Take your time," I said.

Saku burst out laughing. "It's okay. It's not that important."

Only then did I realize I'd been acting kinda weird.

I'd suggested taking our time over the call, but my tone of voice had betrayed my nerves.

I was embarrassed and unsure whether to make an excuse or just brush it off, but Saku continued.

"It's about time to go grocery shopping... What do you think?"

"Oh..."

It was an unexpected offer.

For some reason, it felt bittersweet. Saku was inviting me out, just when I was doubting whether or not I was even wanted.

I should just say yes, like always... So why was I reacting this way?

I wasn't sure myself of how I was feeling, so I avoided giving an answer. "Oh, right... Do you have food for tonight?"

"Yeah. I've got some somen noodles left. That's fine for today."

"Really? We were going to have somen, too."

"...Is there any way to sort of dress them up a bit? Honestly, I'm getting a little bored."

Chuckling, I told him about my plan for tonight's dinner.

Saku doesn't fuss about measurements much, either. He taste-tests and adjusts as he goes. All I needed to do was give him a rough list of ingredients.

"Yeah, I think I can make that with what I have."

As I'd expected, Saku seemed to get what I was suggesting right away.

Since last year, he and I have had dinner together many times.

It was odd how something as simple as us both cooking the same thing tonight made me feel warm inside.

But even so...

*"So, what about our shopping trip? If you're busy, I can go alone. But I was just thinking you might want someone to help carry your bags."*

"...Hmph."

"Hmm? What does that mean?"

"Just clearing my throat."

"Are you grumpy, Yua?"

For some reason, I'd started feeling annoyed, and it showed in my voice.

*What am I doing? I wondered. It's like I'm completely unstable. Not a cool girl at all.*

That word echoed in my mind—*girl, girl*—and finally, I found the simple answer.

...Right. After what happened, Saku was as cool and collected as ever. And it made me feel left out in the cold.

I wished he'd show a *little* discomfort.

I wanted some level of awkwardness. Something to confirm that there had been a change in our relationship.

I wanted him to show me his bashful, cute side...

I was disappointed in myself as I realized what I was thinking.

I bit my lip in embarrassment, thinking how selfish I was.

Saku was the one keeping all these difficult things inside.

I know he didn't call me just to chat.

I'm the one who said that stuff about taking responsibility for our own feelings of love and holding hands and going forward together and so on.

He had acknowledged my feelings. And now he was trying to go forward as normally as possible.

*People are so complicated,* I thought, putting a hand over my heart.

I was able to be strong for Saku and Yuuko, but I couldn't find the strength to protect myself in the same way.

In the end, I guess I've just been running away.

*It's for their sake,* I'd told myself. I'd kept my distance, figuring it was okay if I didn't face up to my own feelings.

Because that was how I was able to hide the parts of myself I hated—my weakness.

Because that was how I was able to be the version of myself I thought would be most convenient for you.

*As long as I can just be by your side, that's fine,* I'd thought.

But...

*"...That's not right."*

That's what Yuuko told me.

A relationship where you can face up to each other's true feelings and embrace them.

Even if my feelings don't reach the other person's heart, even if my dreams don't come true, I can still treasure those beautiful emotions.

*In that case,* I thought, smiling wryly.

Then even selfishness...selfishness that feels inevitable, almost precious...

Saku, perhaps unable to bear the silence anymore, said my name.

*"Yua...?"*

*"I won't go shopping with you."*

I composed myself and continued.

*"Instead,"*

And, just like my best friend would do it... Just like the girl who gave me the kick in the pants I needed...

"Would you like to go on a date with me, Saku?"

My wish was to be special.



The next day, I waited anxiously for Saku to show.

No need to check a mirror to know that I was probably bright red.

I was glad that I decided to imitate Yuuko, but I guess this kind of thing just isn't me after all.

I thought back over Saku's plainly confused reaction.

*"...What's going on, Yua? Has something happened?"*

*Um, nope!!!*

Thinking back on it sent me into a spiral of embarrassment and self-pity.

All I did was muster up some courage and ask a boy out!

This wasn't some roundabout pretext to get him to help me with an issue I'd been having!

But I felt too awkward to try to explain or smooth things over, so I just gave him the time and place and then hung up on him.

I wondered if he'd even show.

I smoothed my outfit, a little nervous.

Since I said it was a date, I thought it would be rude to go dressed like I usually am, so I put on a sleeveless dress with a sweetheart neckline that showed some skin. Which was unusual for me.

I'd bought it because Yuuko said it looked good on me. But it was a little bit open around the shoulders, so I'd never taken it out of the closet.

On the other hand, Saku's already seen me in a swimsuit this summer. *Maybe it's too late for modesty now...*

*Oh no, what if he thinks I'm getting too excited about this?*

I'd been to his place so many times. Even slept over twice. But this was so far out of the ordinary, I had nothing to cling to.

As I waited, fiddling with my bangs, I spotted Saku riding a mountain bike this way.

Our eyes met, and I meekly held up my hand.

Saku braked to a halt nearby and nimbly jumped off his bike.

My heart skipped a beat to see that familiar, easy manner of his.

"Sorry, were you waiting long? I didn't know where the entrance was, so I took a little detour." Saku smiled apologetically.



"It's okay. We've never been here before, after all."

We were both early; there were still ten minutes left until noon, the time we'd agreed to meet.

Despite his laid-back appearance, he's the punctual type.

"So..."

I don't think he'd fully grasped the significance of the situation yet.

"So you said today was a date...?" he probed.

I'd thought I was prepared for this, but I wasn't ready to be put on the spot, and I almost shot down the idea.

I was the one who'd suggested a date, but hearing Saku use that word made me feel insanely awkward.

At the same time, I was clearly taking this more seriously than him, and I wanted to just run for the hills.

Yuuko's always going up to Saku and being like, "Let's go on a date!" and I think I recall Nishino coming to our classroom once and telling him "Time for a date!" or something.

To me, making such an invitation is mortifying. But to you, Saku... It's just banter, right? Like, "Let's go hang out."

*But, I thought, biting my lip for a sec.*

*I don't want to stand on the sidelines anymore and watch you go on "dates" with other people.*

"...Er, well, yes, that was the idea."

Once I'd finally managed to respond, Saku frowned in confusion.

"Sorry, Yua, can I ask you something?"

Then, looking around him, he laughed.

"Why are we at the market?"

"...I'm begging you, don't fixate on that part!"

I covered my face with my hands. *This is pathetic!*

Asking him on a date had gone fine, even with all the ramifications of the word, but after that...

I mean, that was as far as I'd planned.

What, exactly, were Saku and I going to *do*?

I didn't want him to come clothes shopping with me, like Yuuko. And I don't know any fancy cafés like Yuzuki does. I can't work out like Haru can. And I'm not wise like Nishino. Having a discussion with me isn't that stimulating.

So what I ended up saying was...

*"Let's meet at Fukui Central Market at noon tomorrow!"*

Wow...

Am I even really a high school girl?

Fukui Central Market is located on the premises of the Fukui City Central Wholesale Market, which is itself located close to the Lpa shopping mall.

One part of the market is open to the general public, and you can buy fresh seafood there that was caught that very morning. There are also restaurants there, and fruit and veggie wholesalers.

I've been wanting to visit it myself for a while now.

So... I hesitated, trying to find the words.

*God, why'd I choose this place for our very first date?!*

Even from here, the whole place smells like seafood!

Feeling pressured to say something, I swallowed hard.

*"Um, I was thinking I should eat some fish for once."*

Saku put his head to one side, then mumbled something.

*"So you're here to shop?"*

*"...Squeeze..."*

*"Hey, hold on! If you're gonna assault me, at least have a reason!"*

Hmph. I turned and started walking away.

*It wasn't supposed to be like this*, I thought, my shoulders slumping.

Maybe I waited too long to make my move?

Over the past year, I've gotten too comfortable with our normal daily life. I've become complacent in the relationship. Now I really have become something like a family member to Saku.

"Aw, Saku. You treat me like a real girl."

"How else should I treat you?"

Heh. That exchange would've secretly made me excited under other circumstances, but looking back, it might have just been his way of being polite.

My best-laid plans had gone awry.

We'd go shopping together, and sometimes we'd chat over a can of juice on the way home, and then we'd eat dinner together.

I loved those moments we spent together.

If I had expressed my feelings on that rooftop that day, I doubt we would have had all of that.

*I don't want to pretend it never happened. I don't ever want to let it go.*

*But...I have to live in the now.*

That sweet routine I cherished had become a hindrance.

If the role he wanted me to play is that of a family member, someone he could be with without overthinking... Then wouldn't it just bother him if I started expressing different feelings now?

*If I was Yuuko... If I was Yuzuki... If I was Haru... If I was Nishino...*

*Then would we be able to have a real date today?*

"Well, I guess, you know..."

While I was churning over it all, Saku spoke up almost shyly beside me.

"I certainly can't go on a date like this with Yuuko."

"Huh...?"

I glanced at his side profile. He rubbed his nose, looking awkward, then he mumbled something else.

"Also, that dress looks good on you."

"..."

I quickly looked away, bringing my arm up to shield my face.

*I know, I know. This is just Saku trying to meet me where I am.*

*"Listen, Yuuko. I think Saku really believes that. If he casually compliments a girl, she might get the wrong idea and fall in love with him."*

What an arrogant thing to say. And then I got grumpy when he didn't compliment me on my *yukata*.

But...this could be risky.

What if I actually let myself get pleased over his compliment on my dress?

I took a deep, calming breath.

A date he can only do with me, huh...?

For some reason, even that basic...compliment? Really tickled me.

Saku continued in his usual joking tone.

"I appreciate you dressing up, but riding your mom's old bicycle to the market to meet me isn't exactly the stuff teenage dreams are made of."

"Okay, this time I'm squeezing for real!"

As I felt his warm skin beneath my fingertips, I had a thought.

*In the end, I can only be myself.*

*Maybe I don't have to worry about trying to be like someone else.*

It's a thought I've been nurturing for a long time, half-suppressed. Like secretly watering a plant in the shade.

But if I get ahead of myself, I might trip.

I wanted to face up to my feelings, yes. But at my own pace.

“Let’s go, Saku.”

Grabbing your T-shirt quietly, I took that first small step forward.



As we approached the entrance to the market, Saku grunted in surprise.

“Wow. What are they all waiting for?”

I looked where he was looking and saw a line of about twenty people.

It’s a sight you don’t often see in Fukui unless it’s a newly opened store.

There were a variety of people in the queue, including office workers in suits, groups of people who looked like college students, and couples who looked like they were all in high school.

There was a map of the market venue posted nearby, so I quickly checked it out.

“It’s a seafood restaurant directly managed by Takasu Fisheries.”

“Wow. It looks really popular.”

Takasu is a coastal area located in the northwest of Fukui City, with beaches and fishing ports. I recalled that back when Mom was still here, we went there every summer as a family.

The fact that this restaurant was directly managed by the local fishery meant that they must be serving locally caught seafood.

Following the line, we came to a menu written on a blackboard, offering mostly seafood dishes.

“Yua, have you had lunch yet?” Saku looked at me.

“Nope, not yet.”

“In that case... Why don’t we join the party?”

“Er, but...”

I wasn’t sure how to respond.

I’m not exactly a regular here, and I was definitely kinda interested, based on how popular it seemed.

While I was hesitating and stammering, Saku shrugged, like it was no big deal.

“But I guess I’d much rather eat something you made for me, Yua.”

So casual. Like he has no ulterior motives at all.

But my heart lit up in a rain of sparks, like fireworks were going off inside.

On days when the two of us went shopping, it became a routine for us to stop by Saku’s house for me to cook him a meal.

Of course, I doubted he’d forgotten that, but it meant a lot to me that he’d so easily opt for something I cooked while standing outside a clearly popular restaurant.

Maybe Saku felt the same...

Maybe that kind of daily routine meant a lot to him, too...

I felt my eyes prickle with tears as I smiled.

“...Sure thing!”

I couldn’t stop beaming.

For the time being, we decided to browse.

On either side of the green-painted pathways were display cases of fresh fish and all kinds of side dishes.

On top of Styrofoam packed with ice, we could see all kinds of fish and shellfish, the stuff you don’t often see in supermarkets. It felt like a real market.

“Here, Yua.” As I was looking around, Saku handed me his wallet.

“All right, I’ll hold on to it.”

I took it and put it securely in my bag.

It might be a little surprising to other people, but for us, this was totally normal.

In the beginning, I would pay for the entire amount, and then when I got home, I’d do the detailed calculations, working from the receipts. But it’s a lot of hassle to do it every time, and there’s a chance I could make a mistake, so now, when we go to the supermarket, we use separate carts from the get-go.

I settled on a system where I would pay for each set of groceries separately, and if we needed to split any of the bulk items, we would settle up the difference later.

Maybe it would be better to pay for everything individually, but sometimes it's more cost-effective to buy the multipacks and larger packs. And it's easier to have one person in charge of everything.

I secretly always enjoyed doing it, because when a boy just hands you his wallet, it kinda feels like he really is family.

"Hey, Saku, is there anything you're in the mood for?" I asked.

He frowned thoughtfully.

I think most high school boys go for meat and carbs, and Saku wasn't unique in that regard.

Sometimes I suggest to him—or should I say force him?—to eat seafood; left to his own devices, he'd never bother.

And sure enough, Saku didn't seem very enthusiastic.

"Er, sashimi?"

"That's not really something I can claim to have made from scratch."

"Then raw tuna over rice?"

"We just had that the other day."

"Hand-rolled sushi?"

"These all incorporate sashimi..."

There was definitely a theme.

Of course, I like all those things, but they don't really feel like from-scratch cooking. I always find myself wanting to make something a little more elaborate when I'm at Saku's place. Even more elaborate than I'd make at home.

Being elaborate about everything isn't sustainable, I know, but...

My philosophy is, there's cooking to feed yourself, and then there's cooking that's meant to be savored.

I usually make meals for my family in my spare time between club activities and studying, so time-saving recipes come in handy. It's not uncommon for me to make quick meals using frozen or ready-made ingredients.

But then, sometimes...

Sometimes I like to make a stock from scratch, using kelp and bonito fish flakes, and caramelize onions until they turn a rich brown. And simmer the meat until it's simply falling apart...

There are times when I want to luxuriate in the process of cooking.

I let my mind wander...or think intensely about someone.

And today, we'd come all the way to the market.

I make a lot of plain, home cooking-style meals. Sometimes, I'd like to try making something a little different.

But, my feelings aside, what always happens is...

Saku grunted, as if he'd given up trying.

"I want something as plain and simple as possible. Something like regular salt-grilled fish, with grated daikon radish boiled in *ponzu* or soy sauce."

"There's no fun in making that."

"Well, then maybe mackerel simmered in miso, or pickled fish."

"How many times have you given in that way...?"

This time, I decided to make a suggestion.

"How about sea bream *acqua pazza*?"

"Just salt it up and pop it in the broiler."

"White fish carpaccio."

"Hmm, soy sauce and wasabi."

"Chili shrimp."

"I don't hate chili shrimp, but it doesn't go well with rice."

"Octopus simmered rice."

"I prefer chicken simmered rice."

"Grr! We came all the way to the fish market, you know!"

When I growled at him, Saku grinned sheepishly.

"You asked, I answered. But if you're cooking it, I'll eat anything."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "But, Saku, you always look disappointed when things don't meet your expectations."

"Huh...? Do I?"

"Yeah. Like just recently when I made that simmered flounder."

"Oh..."

He definitely remembered.

He scratched his cheek, averting his gaze.

He's always wishy-washy like this. I know it's annoying, but I'm like a dog with a bone.

It's not like he's a picky eater or anything. Like he said himself, he'll eat anything I put in front of him.

If our back-and-forth was all you had to go on, it kinda sounded like I was a henpecking housewife, but back when I started cooking at Saku's place, I told him straight-up: I wanted to know what he liked and what he didn't, and I wanted honest feedback on everything I cooked.

Otherwise, I'd keep serving him food he didn't really like that much, and he'd have to keep eating it without being honest about how he felt.

With that said, though, I really wanted to serve some delicious seafood today. So I was willing to try anything.

It's the same with Dad and my brother. Maybe one day, like when I have kids, this whole scenario will repeat again.

It was a funny thing to imagine: Saku, slumped at the table as I admonished him, "Eat your fish and veggies!" It's kinda hilarious when you think about it.

Just thinking about it made my shoulders quake, and I had to cover my

mouth.

But do we have a son or daughter in this scenario?

For no particular reason, I imagined a son.

A cheeky look in his eyes, inherited from Saku. Stern eyebrows, but when he smiles, his whole face softens.

He'll learn to speak early. And he'll be quite logical.

*"Hmm, but Dad likes meat better than fish, same as me."*

*"...No, I don't. Shh, don't make Mom angry."*

*"So you really do prefer meat?"*

*"...Never mind that. Just make sure you eat all your fish, carrots, and peppers."*

*"I'm eating lots of shredded cabbage."*

*"...Wait, I want some, too. Don't eat it all."*

Ah. Uh-oh.

I let my thoughts run away with me, while I tried to choke back my laughter.

Saku doesn't really eat vegetables, but he loves shredded cabbage so much that he often has a second helping of it.

The first time I served pork with ginger, he blithely told me, "If you use a slicer, you can cut the cabbage thinner." And I was so annoyed, I practiced it like crazy.

A quick drizzle of mayonnaise, then a shiso dressing.

For a while, he was crazy about the black vinegar onion dressing I recommended, but they only sell it in small bottles, and it ran out so fast. So we went back to shiso.

*...No, wait!*

Now that I was getting lost in my thoughts, I tried to put on the brakes.

*What the heck am I imagining here?*

I was in the kitchen, watching him as I made tea, with our cute son...

I lowered my eyes in shame, twiddling my thumbs.

I don't know how I come across to other people, but I feel like I'm pretty cold. Or to put it bluntly, I'm pretty pragmatic.

Even when I'm with Saku or hanging out with Yuuko and the gang at school, I feel like I stay one step removed. And that position normally works for me, but...

"Yua...?" He sounded curious, and I quickly shook my head free of its thoughts.

"Um, what?"

"You asked what I want to eat, right? Well, how about that?" Saku pointed to a nearby display.

I looked over. One of the shops with a long line seemed to be selling various side dishes.

"It's a swordfish cutlet with sauce. You can eat it like a normal cutlet with rice."

Interesting idea.

Swordfish is relatively plain and easy to eat.

I kinda felt like trying it, actually. However...

"I am not making cutlet rice at your place, Saku."

I turned my nose up at it.

"...Uh, Yua? Are you still mad at me for complimenting Nanase's cutlet rice?"

"What do you mean 'still mad'? I was never mad."

And I meant it.

It had never come up. I mean, Yuuko doesn't really cook. But thinking about it rationally, it's nothing to get upset about.

I have no right to interfere when it comes to Saku or Yuzuki.

But, even though I knew all that, hearing about the pork cutlet made me feel sad in a way I hadn't expected.

I must have thought Saku's kitchen was the place I belonged, like our kitchen at home.

That place was full of the time we'd spent together. And the thought of some other girl being there without my knowledge, having access to that space, made me sad.

So this helpless feeling wasn't anger, exactly. But I was disappointed with myself for being so comfortable in my own assumptions.

But what if?

What if Saku did get a girlfriend?

That special place wouldn't be mine anymore.

I'd have to hand over those lovely routine days to some other girl.

Without realizing it, I'd been avoiding that reality.

I'd gotten too cozy in our familial dynamic. Even if Saku didn't fall for me, I could still be with him and cook for him.

But what if Yuuko ended up becoming Saku's girlfriend?

He might still be like, "Hey, Ucchi, swing by later and cook at my place," in his usual, easy-breezy way.

And what if it was Yuzuki?

She's both smart and perceptive. Maybe she'd come up with a reason for me to come over. Like, she'd ask me to teach her how to cook or something. Leave me some scraps of connection.

But that wouldn't last long.

It would be someone else living these daily rhythms with him, not me.

If I wanted to have my wish...

...Then I'd have to become special somehow. So that I could continue to be by his side.

*Hey, Yuuko.*

*You probably noticed it a long time ago, but...*

I placed my hand quietly over my heart.

*My own impatience and anxiety and jealousy are my responsibility. I don't want to put that on others.*

*I want his daily life to be as calm as possible. Otherwise, he's just going to wear himself out.*

I took a deep, calming breath. “I’m just kidding. Shall we try the swordfish cutlet with sauce, then?”

“Nah...,” Saku said casually, but his voice was warm. “Today, let’s have something you’re excited to make. You do get kinda particular about this stuff.” He gave me a small smile.

“Are you sure? You don’t mind?”

“Hey, who knows, I might like it. But I’d prefer something hearty over anything too fussy. Would you be cool with that?”

I looked at him and his bashful smile.

“You can count on me!”

Today, I planned to knock his socks off.



After visiting all the shops and seeing what we could buy, we started walking the same route over again from the entrance.

I knew from the information I’d gathered that this place had quite a variety of ingredients. They had not only fresh seafood but also seasonal vegetables, fruits, eggs, and unusual seasonings.

*If we need something we can only buy at the supermarket, it might be better to go another day... Or if we’re not already too weighed down, we could swing by the supermarket on the way back...*

While I was thinking it all over...

“Young man! Young lady! Free samples!”

An elderly woman called to us from in front of a fish shop.

She looked about mid-seventies but stood up straight, and her kind eyes

glinted behind her glasses.

I was thinking of looking here anyway, so I signaled to Saku with my eyes, and we walked over.

The woman held a tray of bright-red sashimi. “Here, hon, try the tuna. You won’t believe how good it is,” she said.

I picked up a piece of tuna on a toothpick, dipped it in a little soy sauce, and brought it to my mouth.

“Mmm!” It practically melted in my mouth.

I’d thought the sashimi made with Fukui fish sold at the local supermarket was good, but it couldn’t come anywhere close to this level of freshness.

There was no hint of fishiness, just rich flavor.

Saku looked at me, wide-eyed. “What about a raw tuna rice bowl...?”

“Hold on! I mean, I get it, but...”

I was all ready to whip up a delicious meal that would take tons of prep and skill, and he wanted to go right back to prepared sashimi?!

The old lady watched our exchange with a look of surprise on her face.

“Don’t worry, we’ve got plenty besides the sashimi. Are y’all high school students?”

I nodded.

“Yes, we’re shopping for dinner.”

“Oh, I thought y’all just came ’round for lunch and wanted a gander at the shops. You’re cookin’ tonight, hon?”

“Um, that’s the plan.”

“Well, how about that... Don’t often see young folks shopping around this neck of the woods. You know how to gut a fish?”

“Oh yes. Well, I’m not particularly skilled at it or anything.”

For some reason, I felt put on the spot. I scratched my cheek awkwardly.

The woman’s gaze flicked to my side. “This young lady is going to make a

wonderful wife in the future. Make sure you don't let 'er get away."

"Uh, no, I..."

Flustered, I was about to interrupt, when Saku suddenly spoke.

"Wouldn't dream of it, Ma'am. Matter of fact, this is our first proper date. I can't wait to see what she's got for us tonight."

"Ooh..."

He used Fukui dialect, just for this older lady.

*"Ma'am"? Is he serious?*

"Oh, in that case, I'll give y'all a discount. Just tell me what strikes your fancy, hon."

I couldn't look either of them in the eye.

"Um, then squid and red sea bream..."

Little by little, with my head down, I listed the ingredients I needed.

In the end, we got a huge discount, and the lady even threw in a small pack of sashimi that the two of us could eat in one go as a side.

As Saku and I walked away side by side, I grinned.

"You swindler."

"Don't say that. I told no lies. I certainly wasn't expecting any freebies, either. But it would have been awkward for me to explain our whole relationship, wouldn't it?"

"Well, that's true."

"The old lady must have been thrilled to find a high school girl out shopping for dinner. Let's be thankful to her for her kindness and enjoy this bounty."

*"A wonderful wife," huh?*

That throwaway remark was still ringing in my ears. But it was just me getting carried away... Wasn't it?



I got a bit overexcited and ended up buying all sorts of items. Before I knew it,

the three large personal shopping bags I'd brought were full to bursting.

Saku carried two of them with apparent ease, but they had ice packs and regular ice in them, so they had to be heavy.

"You think you might've bought too much?" he said, and I had to smile wryly at the slight exasperation in his tone.

"I got carried away. There was so much stuff I never usually even see. And I bought some nice dried fish you can keep at your place. All you have to do is fry it."

"Oh, thanks, that will actually come in handy."

As we chatted, we exited the market, and I put my bag into the basket of my bicycle.

Saku strung his two bags across the handlebars of his mountain bike.

We both usually walk to school and back, but when we go shopping, we both bring our bikes, since we end up with a lot to carry.

*"I appreciate you dressing up, but riding your mom's old bicycle to the market to meet me isn't exactly the stuff teenage dreams are made of."*

Suddenly, I felt embarrassed all over again by that thing Saku said earlier. I sneaked a peek at him.

He seemed to read my gaze and offered me an apologetic smile.

"Sorry about that! I was only joking. If that was an actual concern, no Fukui high schooler ever would actually be able to go on a date."

Relieved by those words, I hopped back on my bike.

"Saku, there's a stop I want to make not too far from here. Is that okay?"

"Sure."

We set off, but then I braked to a halt only about a minute after leaving the market behind.

"'Not too far'? More like right next door."

I smiled wryly at Saku's sarcastic comment.

"I mean, I said it was nearby."

"Okay, but what is this place? A warehouse, a factory...?"

"Oh, you've never been here before?"

The building was long, with a flat facade, so maybe it did look like a warehouse.

But I was very used to it.

"It's Ameyoko. Candy alley."

The name probably made him think of the Ameyoko open-air market in Ueno, in Tokyo.

"Huh," he said, looking doubtful. "...Is this where I'm supposed to laugh?"

"I'm not being dumb, you know. Look," I said, pointing to the exterior wall.

There was a large signboard that read AMEYOKO.

Saku made a grunt of surprise. "Huh. It *is* called Ameyoko."

"That's what I said."

Then his gaze lifted to read the words written above the store's entrance.

"Dream Sweets Market...?"

"Yep. Let's just go in." I led the way through the automatic doors.

"Wow." Saku exhaled, impressed.

As someone who comes here often, I was tickled by his reaction.

There were no partitions other than the pillars, and the spacious store felt a little like a corner of a warehouse, with brightly colored sweets on display all over the place.

There are probably hundreds, or even thousands of different types of confectionery.

Lots of the shoppers seemed to be parents with children, or groups of women.

"I haven't really looked it up, but I guess this place is run by a confectionery

wholesaler. It's cheaper than buying sweets and snacks at the supermarket, and the items come in large packs, so I sometimes buy stuff here for my family. I decided to stock up today."

My younger brother, in particular, was at the age where he gets hungry every few hours, so I tried to make use of this place as much as possible when I had the time, to save money.

Saku looked around curiously. "Huh, I had no idea this was here."

"Well, Saku, I guess you don't really eat sweets much. Sorry to drag you along, but I'll make it as quick as possible, I swear."

"It's okay... This reminds me of buying candy for school trips. It's kinda exciting."

"There's an old-fashioned candy section. Why don't you go take a look?"

"Sounds good... I think I will."

His face was as innocent as a schoolboy's, and I was glad I'd brought him along.

When we reached the old-fashioned candy section, Saku turned to me, his eyes bright. "Man, this takes me back!"

"When you were in elementary school, were you one of those kids who'd spend every last yen of your allocated budget on buying candy?"

"Oh yeah. It was all about quantity back then. It wasn't like I really wanted all that much candy, but it was exciting to spend every last yen I could. Like when you get an allowance to spend at a festival, or when you buy candy by weight and you can fill the whole cup."

Catching the excitement in his tone, I joined in.

"There used to be a candy section here like that. They sold about three different sizes of cups. They had cookies, chocolates, candy canes, gummy bears, *et cetera* in a big transparent case, and you could choose what you liked. It was an all-you-could-scoop."

Just like that...

Saku always carefully scoops up people's hearts and takes care of them.

So whenever I talk to you, I get these faint memories from the past...

...It was when I was in third year of elementary, I think.

Mom, my younger brother, and I went to a nearby supermarket to buy sweets for our field trip.

However, the candy section there wasn't very big...

And in the middle of the store, my younger brother suddenly started crying.

Apparently, he'd gotten excited when he saw a friend at school with a bag full of all kinds of sweets, but when we got to the supermarket and he tried to choose, he'd burned through the allocated treat budget before he could get much of a variety.

No matter how hard I tried to calm him down, he wouldn't stop crying, and I had no idea what to do. Then Mom said...

"You wanna go see candy heaven?"

With that, Mom brought us here.

My younger brother burst into tears. "Wow! Look at this place, Sis!" he said. I remember we spent about two hours choosing sweets together, our eyes sparkling.

Mom indulged us without complaint.

In fact, she said she was going to buy sweets, too, with the same budget. She got really into picking and choosing with us.

Mom was usually kind of quiet and reserved...but that day, she got a little crazy with the sugar rush, too.

"I'm gonna buy mini donuts!"

"Aw, no fair, Yua! I want those!"

"But that'll put you over budget."

"Ooh, *umaibo* sticks! I want the teriyaki burger flavor!"

"Oh, yes, Mommy likes those, too! Get me one!"

"Mom, you're buying too much!"

"It's okay. No one will know if I'm a little over budget."

"But you have to follow the rules..."

I'd forgotten all about that until now.

We were a happy family like that, once.

Maybe I kept coming here to try to recapture some of the feeling of that moment.

*My brother's a little older and a lot more annoying, and Mom is gone, but I have you here with me instead.*

Saku turned to me with a grin, no idea of what I was thinking.

"Hey, Yua! Why don't we buy some candy, since we're here?"

I giggled. "All right. The budget is 500 yen."

"Okay, then let's choose together."

"All right!"

*Maybe, someday...*

*If Saku becomes a dad...*

*I bet he'll do this kind of thing with his kids.*

*And if I get my wish, the mother of those kids will be...*

I tried not to think about it any further and grabbed a pack of mini donuts.

Four small ring donuts. All of them snuggled up happily together.



We both bought 500 yen worth of candy and some large snack packs for my house, and then we left Ameyoko.

Despite being distracted by my memories at first, once I began my selection, I became completely engrossed.

Halfway through, I suggested, "How about we buy each other 500 yen worth?" but Saku said, "That would be boring."

*C'mon, let me have this.*

Thanks to that, we ended up having to play rock-paper-scissors three times over whether we should get the *umaibo* sticks in the spicy *mentaiko* fish egg flavor that Saku likes, or the veggie salad flavor that I like.

I lost. But it was fun.

I wouldn't go as far as to say it overwrote those old memories for me. But it colored them a little, so that they weren't so sad to look back on anymore.

Saku looked satisfied. "What was that last thing you bought, Yua?"

"Oh, this?" I took out a silver package from the plastic bag.

"Yeah. You don't see candy like that often."

"Look."

I pointed to the exterior wall opposite the Ameyoko sign.

It said **YOKOI CHOCOLATE** in big characters.

He must have been distracted by the existence of Ameyoko before and overlooked it.

Saku did an exaggerated double take. "Oh. Huh. Wow, I've never heard of it, but it's clear they want to advertise it."

"Ah-ha-ha," I laughed. "It's made here, but it's actually so well-known that it's even sold in Tokyo. It's called 'couverture' chocolate, I think, and it meets international standards for chocolate, so it's kind of a luxury product. It's really, really good! Yuuko actually loves it. I was thinking of buying some for us to eat together sometime."

"Oh, really? I totally thought it was just some local product they were really pushing."

"Hey! You don't say things like that in front of the store, even if you're joking!"

"Sorry, sorry. But if it's that good, let me try it later."

"Well, sure!"

"Oh, right," Saku said. "So, what's on the agenda now?"

"Um," I said, thinking for a moment before answering.

Normally, we would just head to Saku's place and make dinner, but...

"Sorry, but if you don't mind, could we stop by my house first today? It's going to be difficult to carry around all of these bags, and there's quite a lot of seafood that needs to go in the fridge."

We usually had meat and fish in our bags when we finished up shopping, and Saku's fridge is a large, family-friendly type that he used in his old home, so it's big enough to store my food temporarily as well.

But considering tonight's menu...

I also wanted to grab some seasonings and spices from my house that would be wasted if I went out of my way to buy new ones.

Saku shrugged, frowning a little. "Sure, I don't mind at all."

"Oh, uh, my dad and brother are out today, so don't worry about that."

"I'm not worried about that."

"Huh?"

I looked at him in confusion, and he sighed. "I kind of guessed this might happen, based on the amount of shopping we did, but are you sure this is what you want? I mean, this is supposed to be a date, right?"

"Uhhh..."

Hearing him say it... Ugh.

At some point, I forgot and started treating this like a regular shopping trip.

Now that we had plenty of fresh ingredients, I was all ready to make a delicious meal.

But...how was that different from what we always do?

After buying so much, it would be hard to even stop by a convenience store, let alone a café.

But then I took a breath and calmed down.

What else was it that I was after, though?

The two of us, shopping and then cooking at Saku's place, to the tunes of the radio that he'd always switch on.

You'd come back and forth to the kitchen to sneak tastes... I'd secretly watch you reading or napping on the couch, and sometimes we'd chat...

To me, that kind of time is more precious than any date.

So really.

"...Yeah, it's cool."

Looking into Saku's eyes, I couldn't help but smile.



At my house, I wanted to make Saku feel welcome.

"Would you like to have some tea while I put this stuff away?" I asked.

He smiled his usual wry smile. "No, I'm okay. I'll carry your stuff to the front hall and then wait here."

"Right, okay. Well, I'll try to be as quick as I can."

Yeah, it would be awkward for him to run into Dad or my brother.

But even knowing that my family was out today, Saku barely even wanted to step inside the front door.

There was really no need to be so guarded, I thought, especially with the way things were.

But now I understood that it was his way of drawing boundaries.

He's so kind, but also such a complex individual.

I hauled the personal shopping bags of stuff into the kitchen within a few trips.

First off, I stored the food I'd bought for my own use in the fridge and freezer.

I separated the bulk shrimp and shellfish and put half into plastic baggies for Saku. Then I transferred the spices and seasonings I'd need for tonight's dinner into a container from the hundred-yen store.

Then, after rinsing the chopping board, I grabbed a knife and chopped up enough cabbage, Chinese cabbage, and radish to bring to Saku's place for tonight.

I also needed to prep the squid and the red sea bream...

I'd need to prepare a cooler and replace the melting ice and ice packs...

By the time I finished all the work, almost half an hour had gone by.

It took longer than I'd expected. I'd need to hurry.

I'd find Saku leaning against the wall, reading a paperback, or staring blankly at the sky, phone forgotten in his pocket.

I couldn't wait for the moment I emerged from the house and saw his face again.

As I was thinking about this, something suddenly occurred to me.

*Vroom.*

I heard the familiar sound of a car engine from outside.

*Oh, crap,* I thought, grabbing my stuff in a hurry.

Dad's car. Why was he home so early?

As I hurried toward the front door, I felt a growing sense of impatience.

*I don't mind if Dad meets Saku, really.*

*I've been mentioning him since last year. Dad's even given me permission to stay over.*

*I already told Dad that we'd be shopping together and then I'd be cooking food over there, so I doubted he'd suddenly have an issue with it now.*

The issue was Saku.

He'd probably rather avoid running into a female classmate's father at her house.

What if this made Saku feel awkward? What if he stopped wanting to go grocery shopping with me?

"Saku!"

I walked through the front door and called out to him. As I'd guessed, I found him gazing up at the sky.

"Sorry, it looks like my dad's home. We should hurry up and leave."

Saku raised his eyebrows in surprise for a moment.

"No, we can't do that."

"Huh...?"

"I should greet your dad properly."

Before we could say anything else to each other...

*Slam. Beep beep.*

I heard the car door closing and locking.

Then leather shoes approaching.

Dad emerged from the nearby parking area.

...Then he came to an abrupt halt.

He looked back and forth from me to Saku, smiling a little in confusion.

Dad's the type to smile when he feels awkward.

Maybe I get it from him.

This was hardly the time for deep thoughts, but...

Both my mom and dad were calm and smiley people, but while Mom had a hidden strength, Dad was more like a willow tree. No, more like a freshly aired futon.

Mom, me, my brother—we all had our own personalities, roles, and lives, but sometimes we came together as a real family unit...

But this wasn't the time to be having a little break from reality.

I needed to introduce Saku, or we'd all just be standing here lost.

Should I introduce Saku to Dad?

Or Dad to Saku?

Who should come first in this situation?

"Uh, erm..."

No doubt I looked just like Dad, smiling awkwardly.

"...Nice to meet you, Sir. My name is Saku Chitose, and I'm Yua's classmate."

Saku was the one to take a step forward and bow politely.

"Your daughter is one of my best friends."

I was fascinated by his sincerity for a moment, and it distracted me from the situation at hand. He was usually always so jokey.

*Who are you, really? You're always full of surprises.*

Dad loosened his tie before speaking.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Yua's father. We talked once on the phone, I believe, when I was in the hospital? It sounds like you've done a lot for my daughter."

I knew I should intervene and take charge of the situation, but I was too embarrassed to speak.

I just didn't feel ready for this.

Even if a day like this was on the horizon, I'd thought it would be a long way off.

Oblivious to my discomfort, Saku continued talking in a mature manner.

"Not at all, Sir. Yua's the one who's done so much for me. I hope I didn't cause any trouble for your family..."

Dad waved his hand dismissively.

"No trouble at all. I'm actually very grateful. Ever since she met you, Yua's been smiling more. She talks about her friends and her life more, too."

Then, smiling gently, he continued.

"She's been through a lot because of me, ever since she was little, so I'm grateful that you've been able to help cheer her up."

"Dad..."

I inhaled sharply.

I never expected him to say stuff like this to Saku on their first meeting.

Even with family, Dad's not the most forthcoming.

Saku's stiff expression softened a little, and he looked almost embarrassed.

Still smiling, Dad spoke again.

"Do you like what she cooks for you?"

"Da-aad!!!"

When I tried to make him stop, Saku laughed heartily.

"Yes, I absolutely love it."

"..."

Hmph!

I couldn't bring myself to look at him.

Sure, it's only cooking, but talking me up in front of my dad...

I know Saku was trying to be considerate, but a little tact would go a long way...

The way this was going, Dad might think Saku had come over especially to meet him.

Yikes. I was the only one freaking out here.

Dad seemed pleased with Saku's response, nodding as he continued.

"You might think I'm a doting father, but my Yua is a very responsible girl. She supported us when my wife didn't. So I have no right to question any relationship between her and someone she's decided to trust. That said, I do have a request."

"Yes, Sir?" Saku said, standing up straighter.

"Ah, this is difficult..."

Dad suddenly looked serious... No, I think he was sad.

"Please, don't do anything to hurt her. She's suffered enough already because of me."

“...Stop!”

I couldn’t stop yelping with emotion.

“I appreciate the sentiment, but please don’t make Saku responsible for our situation.”

Dad looked shocked, then hung his head.

“Yua... Yes, of course, you’re right.”

Just then...

Saku put his arm out, as if to say, “Hold on.” He paused, as if he was finding the right words, then said: “I can’t make any promises.”

““Huh...?””

He shot me a soft look, then continued.

“If Yua and I continue to spend time together... Then the longer it goes on, the more risk there is in my words and actions and decisions. I just don’t think I can completely eliminate the possibility of hurting her.”

With his arm still held out in front of me, he clenched his fist.

“I wish I could say that if I hurt her, I’d work to make amends until everything was all better... But this summer, I learned that some wounds can only be healed by the one who was hurt. At the same time, though, Yua taught me that in some relationships...it’s okay to hurt each other. It’s part of understanding each other.”

He paused and took a moment to collect himself.

“So, at the very least...that’s the attitude I want to have toward Yua.”

“...”

I covered my mouth with my hand, trying to hide the emotions swirling within me.

Trying to prevent them from coming out as tears.

*Hey, Dad.*

*I still can’t put it into words, and I don’t have any promises I can give, but*

*maybe a chance like this won't come around for me again.*

*Even so, I hope a day comes when I can be proud and tell you how I feel.*

*I want to smile bright and introduce you...*

*...This person right here...is the most important person to me.*

Dad just quietly closed his eyes.

“Please, take care of my daughter.”

Then he bowed his head low.



Feeling a little lighter now after leaving more than half of our bags behind, we bought one iced café latte and one *houjicha* latte at the convenience store, then sat down on the riverbank on the way back to Saku’s place.

It was probably around four PM.

The sunlight reflecting off the water’s surface was so mellow.

*Crick, crick, crick.*

*Ree, ree, ree.*

We could hear cicadas chirping nearby. Small boys with bug-catching nets were running around the riverbank, a last desperate attempt this summer.

I guess this was good-bye to the random whiff of insect repellent you get wafting on the air. At least until next year.

“Summer is over, isn’t it?” I said quietly.

Saku’s response was equally subdued. “It really is, huh.”

My little finger brushed against his involuntarily.

“Saku, can I ask you something?” I said.

“Hmm?”

“How come you decided to introduce yourself to my dad earlier?”

“Is it really that strange?”

“Normally, a boy would have panicked and tried to make a quick exit...”

"Well, it's not like I needed to. I didn't do anything bad to you."

"...Sure about that?"

"What?!"

"Hee-hee, I'm just kidding."

"I'm getting chills down my spine, please stop."

"So a guilty conscience has absolutely nothing to do with it?"

"You've stayed at my place twice, so I'd be lying if I said that."

"Y'know, maybe I'm the one who feels guilty about that."

"What do you mean?"

"That's a secret."

Saku sighed, flung his legs out in front of him, and lay on his back. His little finger was gone from mine, which felt a little sad. "I've wanted to find a chance to say hello to your dad for a while. In the end, I kept putting it off for a whole year."

"Why?"

"I mean, if your beloved daughter was constantly going to a stranger's house to make food, you'd be worried, right?"

"Dad's pretty understanding, you know?"

"That's because he trusts and respects you. He's like, 'After what happened last year, I should give her free rein to be happy. If my daughter says this boy's okay, then he must be.' You know?"

"Hmm, I wonder..."

"Uh, I hope you don't take this the wrong way... But your dad's basically divorced, right? No matter what happens, he'll be on edge about his daughter's relationship with any guy. This might sound blunt, but he could be worried about you being taken for a ride by some asshole. I mean, I'm not saying your mom was an asshole or anything, but—"

"You don't need the disclaimers; I know what you meant. But I think you're

overthinking things.”

“I’m guessing you didn’t notice, then.”

“Notice what?”

Saku looked at me, smiling a little awkwardly.

“Your dad’s hands were shaking as he adjusted his tie.”

“Huh...?”

I should have spotted it...but I hadn’t at all.

Ever since Mom left, I thought Dad had become like an empty shell.

The fact that he never even bothered to scold us kids anymore was a sign of apathy, at least to me.

Maybe he exhausted all his crying, worrying, and getting angry the day that Mom left.

But maybe.

Maybe he was just giving us space, while still observing closely.

“So, you know,” Saku said, continuing:

“I didn’t want to make up something on the spot that makes me sound like a nice young man or whatever; I tried to express my true feelings as much as possible. Not just about the last part, but about the cooking and shopping together, and all of it. I hope that came through the way I wanted it to.”

His wavering gaze felt like it had the power to draw me in.

How does he do it? How does he home in on someone’s true heart and scoop it up safely like that?

Just for today...

I’d match his sincerity and say...

“Yep. I love you, too.”

I’ve always wanted to say the most outrageous things with a straight face.



Once we were at Saku's place, I opened the living room window.

This is a riverside apartment, and you can smell the changing seasons on the breeze.

Summer to fall, fall to winter, winter to spring, spring to summer.

I've watched over a year's worth of changes here.

And again, from summer to autumn...

Road of Major's "Aisuru Anata e (To You, the One I Love)..." was playing on the Tivoli.

Maybe he was just tired, for some reason.

Saku immediately lay down on the sofa with his eyes closed, his bangs falling over his face. The shadow of the T-shirt he'd hung out to dry on the balcony fluttered on his body.

At this rate, he'd end up having a nap.

I crouched next to him and peered at him, when...

"By the way, what *is* for dinner tonight?" Saku mumbled, like a half-sleeping child.

I fought back a laugh. "I found some red sea bream that looked delicious, so I thought I'd make paella with it."

"Oh, that sounds good. Extra rice, please."

"All right, all right."

"Is there anything I can help you with?"

"I might ask you to prepare the mussels later. It'll take some strength to pull out those thready bits."

"All right. Just let me know."

"Hey, Saku?"

"Hmm?"

"Are you in touch with your family?"

He sat up then and looked right at me. “What’s with the surprise attack?”

“Sorry... Maybe I shouldn’t have asked...”

“No, it’s not like that...” Nervously, I took his hand. “Do you remember what we talked about earlier?”

“Which part?”

“If my beloved daughter was constantly going to a stranger’s house to make dinner, I would be worried...”

“Oh...”

“I wonder if it’s the same for your parents? Normally, if a stranger was coming into their beloved son’s apartment all the time, they’d be worried. Have you told them about me?”

That’s when I realized, for the first time...

What if, in the distant future, I had a son or daughter?

What if they started living alone at university, having friends of the opposite sex over? I’d probably feel more than a little anxious...

“Nope,” Saku said, shaking his head. “They’re pretty hands-off.”

“Trying to sidestep again.”

“No, it’s true.”

“I thought the same thing at first, that my dad didn’t mind at all.”

“...Hmm. Yeah.”

“I’m not going to ask you to introduce me to them. But if it ever comes up... would you at least mention me?”

Maybe that made me sound pushy or even clingy.

*But you only care about other people; you’re not very good at caring about yourself.*

Saku responded jokingly. “If I told them, they’d be like, ‘Oh, okay,’ and that would be it.”

“Well, that would be fine, then.”

"But what would you do if they were like, 'Hey, come visit, and bring her with you'?"

"Well, then..."

I sat up straight, knees together.

"I'd be delighted to make their acquaintance."

I spoke with zero hesitation.

I mean, he did the same thing for me.

And I'm really glad he did.

Saku looked shocked for a second, then started laughing. "You're weird today, Yua."

"Just following your example."

"Thanks, though."

"You're welcome."

"Well, then," I said, standing up. "It's a little early, but is it cool if I start making dinner?"

"Yeah, to be honest, I'm already hungry."

I put on my apron and stood at the kitchen counter.

Music was flowing from the Tivoli. I could see him reading a paperback on the sofa. The ingredients we'd bought together were spread across the countertop.

The scene in this apartment was so familiar.

Leaning lightly against the counter, I picked up my phone.

I looked up some paella recipes and gave them a skim.

I'd only made it once a long time ago, and I only had the vaguest idea of what was involved. But I seemed to have the gist of it now.

"Sorry... Do you mind doing the mussels?" I called.

"Sure." Saku got up from the sofa and came over.

"Can you pull out all the beards—they look like whiskers—and then scrub off

the surfaces? If you pull the beards toward where they open, they should come right out."

"All right."

Leaving him to it, I filled a pot with water and set it on the stove.

I finely chopped the garlic and onion, then cut the bell peppers into the right size strips.

I deveined the shrimp with a toothpick, and then got out the prepared squid and shredded red sea bream fillets.

I heated an empty iron frying pan, and when white smoke began to rise from it, I added some olive oil and swirled it gently.

When I put the shrimp, squid, and sea bream into the pan, the delicious aroma of frying seafood filled the air.

While they were searing, I added some stock to the boiling water and taste-tested it. Then I threw in the mussels Saku had finished preparing. Once the shells opened, I scooped them out. I turned off the heat, then sprinkled them with some saffron that I'd wrapped in foil and lightly heated in the oven.

Once the shrimp, squid, and red sea bream were seared, it was time to slowly stir-fry the garlic and onions.

Once the garlic and onions had gone transparent, I added a whole can of tomatoes and crushed them with a wooden spoon.

I added in rice, fried it lightly, then poured in the stock I'd just made...

*All right. Time for a quick rest.*

All I had to do was keep checking on the progress of the rice as the stock simmered. Then I would add salt and pepper as needed, and then finally I'd arrange the seafood and peppers on top.

Steam rose from the pan, along with an appetizing smell.

Whenever I prepare a dish that I'm not used to, I feel this odd sense of excitement, mixed with anxiety and anticipation.

Would it come out well? Would it be delicious?

...How long can we keep doing this?

For some reason, I was struck by a deep loneliness.

How many more times would I be able to cook for Saku in this apartment, in this kitchen?

It might be all over tomorrow, or the day after.

If only these lovely days could continue forever.

When I turned around, Saku was nowhere in sight.

He'd already finished preparing the mussels, so I'd expected to find him reading or taking a nap on the sofa.

I guess I was so focused, I didn't even notice he'd gone to take a shower.

I stood there, lost in thought, and...

"...Yua."

Saku was peeking out from the bedroom that adjoined the living room, showing only his top half.

"Huh? What's up? Were you sleeping over there?" I asked.

He seemed uneasy, his gaze sliding away.

"No, that's not it."

"Then what...?"

He's not the type to say someone's name for the fun of it. He'd been cool and calm even in front of Dad, but now he seemed oddly on edge.

After clearing his throat, Saku finally spoke.

"Um...do you want to sit?"

Looking aside, he brought something out of the bedroom...

...An antique wooden stool.

"Huh...?"

Saku continued, oblivious to my utter confusion.

"You always cook for me, and I haven't been able to give you anything in

return. And after what happened with Yuuko, I guess I really owe you. I wanted to do something that would show you how much it meant to me.”

He scratched his head, looking awkward.

“But then after what happened, I thought it might be inappropriate to give you a present. And I remembered how you always stand at the stove while you’re making a stew or something... I always felt a little guilty...”

Finally, Saku looked me in the eye.

“I bought it for my kitchen, so you can sit on it if you’d like.”

He smiled shyly. His eyes are so unguarded.

I felt a sharp pain in my midsection.

*No... So you mean...*

Saku continued, with an airy shrug.

“...I guess it’s for *you* specifically to use, Yua.”

*Drip.*

*Drop drip drop drip.*

*Oh... I’m...*

“Whoa... Hey... Yua?!”

Tears were sliding down my cheeks before I’d even realized I was crying.

The tears kept falling; Saku was getting blurry, but his flustered state was the last thing on my mind.

I’ve been worried I was making a fool of myself. That I cherished him so much...while he didn’t feel the same way. I was afraid that someday this way of life would simply fall apart.

Just like with Mom. I was afraid that one day he would suddenly leave me.

I clutched my hands to my chest, overflowing with happiness. I was so, so happy.

Of course, him giving me a place to sit doesn’t change anything.

I still have the same worries and concerns, but...

He said it was for me specifically to use.

He thought of me and chose it for me.

*We can stay like this, for just a while longer.*

*I'm cool with you being here.*

*I'm waiting for you to make our dinner.*

*...You... You gave me a spot in your apartment.*

*You know, Saku.*

*I don't ask for much.*

*I won't cause any trouble for you.*

*Like, when I come to your apartment.*

*I only say, "Honey, I'm home" secretly inside my own heart.*

*Will you allow me at least that much?*

Desperately wiping away the tears, I sniffled and spoke in a trembling voice.

"Thank you, Saku. Thank you. I'll cherish it, always."

Saku smiled gently.

"You don't have to take it so seriously. Just sit on it like normal."

His words were like a warm hand resting on my head.

"Yeah... Okay..."

*Hey, Mom. I'm like you.*

*I've got something that means so much to me, I can't let it go.*

*I have more places to return home to now.*

*I've realized that I don't like being normal.*

*I've decided to shoot for the best of the best after all.*

*He's even already met Dad.*

*One day...one day, if you and I meet again...*

*...I'd love to introduce you to the special person I've found for myself this summer.*



Chapter 4  
A Bouquet for  
Raised Hands



Two plastic bottles sat side by side, sweating condensation. I stared at our reflections, distorted within them. I tried to hold on to the moment, praying it would stay this way forever, but the sky seemed to be moving on, drifting farther and farther away.

Instead of thunderclouds, swift puffy white cotton floated by. The bottles of Pocari Sweat from the freezer stayed frozen for longer and longer these days. The squeaking of rubber shoes on the gym floor sounded sharper in the dry air, and I realized that the floor I'd been lying on felt cooler against my hot skin.

...Bit by bit, this year, as every year...

True summer was coming to an end, and I felt a little sad about it.

Maybe, somewhere in my heart, I thought it belonged to both of us.

The season he and I had arrived at together...was like that.

If fall was catching up fast, then I'd have to pass the baton. Then I'd just stand there and watch as someone else ran off in my place.

Like a deflated basketball, lying forgotten in the corner of the clubroom.

Things had certainly changed over the course of the summer. For me, him, and everyone else.

I've got a sense that I can't stay this naive, unworldly girl much longer.

But I still feel out of step. It's like I've lost track of where I'm going, like I'm stuck in a state of limbo.

All I have is a heat deep inside my chest, urging me to do the next thing faster and faster.

I know that if I delay, I'll soon be left behind.

And I realize that I haven't accomplished anything yet.

Still, I wish we could stay like this for a little while longer.

...Him and me.

I wished summer never had to end.



One afternoon, with less than a week left in August.

After morning club practice and lunch, I was on my way back to the clubroom.

"Umi, do you have a moment?" Miss Misaki, our adviser, stopped me.

"Uh, sure...?" I looked at her curiously.

Miss Misaki often goes to the staff room immediately after the post-practice meeting, so it's unusual for her to hang around until after we've all finished packing up.

Usually when she wants to speak to me or Nana personally, it's to consult on a club member who's not feeling well or to give us little pep talks on days when we don't practice as hard. But I had the feeling this time was different somehow.

The team's motivation had clearly increased since the game against Ashi High in July.

Next time, we were gonna win.

I mean it. I think everyone is working together toward that goal.

The only person who's not giving it their all is...

Mind swirling with these thoughts, I walked over to Miss Misaki, who was sitting on a plastic chair with a frown on her face. When she spoke, her voice was quiet but emphatic.

"There's something I just want to check."

She sounded serious. I stood up a little straighter.

...Maybe she'd seen right through me.

Biting my lip, eyes down, I waited for the lecture to begin. But Miss Misaki just sighed.

"Umi, uh, the thing is..."

Miss Misaki was always so precise with her instructions. It was rare to hear her stumble over her words.

*Wow, I really must have been dropping the ball lately.*

Miss Misaki continued carefully. “I guess you won’t be finishing your summer homework assignment anytime soon, will you? I mean, uh, forget I said that.”

“Wait... Er, what?”

That was seriously the last thing I expected her to say.

Miss Misaki looked away and continued apologetically. “I just thought I’d check, but... I have this friend, and every time we meet up she says, ‘Looks like you won’t be getting married anytime soon, right?’ and it really gets on my nerves.”

“Miss Misaki... I’m really not sure what you’re asking me here?”

“She flashes her wedding ring and then pretends to be all apologetic...”

“...”

“Hey, say something, Umi.”

“Um, I think this is a conversation to have with a therapist, not— Yeek!!!”

I got a solid slap on the butt, and I screamed out loud.

Miss Misaki acts like a cool beauty and a strict teacher at school, but she doesn’t let you mess around like Kura does. And she’s really harsh on rule-breakers.

But once you get used to her, she does have a surprisingly playful side. Everyone on the team adores her. It’s why we call her Miss Misaki instead of using her last name.

It’s normal to show weakness sometimes, but Miss Misaki looked like she was genuinely upset about something. Kind of lost.

I let my shoulders relax and decided to just go with it.

“I’ve finished my homework and everything, you know?”

“...don’t...be... silly...!”

“What’s with the weird facial gymnastics?! ”

“I see, Umi. Are you going to avoid the issue, too?”

“Can you stop acting like homework is the same as getting married?”

We looked at each other for a moment, then both started laughing.

Still, I can understand how Miss Misaki feels. Honestly, on the last day of summer vacation last year, I went sobbing to Yuzuki and begged her for help with the homework. It was the same in junior high. But this year, we had the summer study trip, and I got a lot done then. After that, I had some free time on my hands, too...so I filled it with homework and stuff. Like a form of meditation. So actually, my homework was all done and dusted.

"Jokes aside, though," Miss Misaki said. "You'll be free tomorrow, right?"

"Er, but we don't have club practice scheduled for tomorrow...?"

The schedule was set ages ago. A lot of club members won't have finished their summer homework, so the break was meant to give them time to catch up.

"Yes. As announced, no club tomorrow."

I nodded, waiting to find out what she was getting at. Miss Misaki got up from her plastic chair and continued with some delight.

"Kei's going to stop by."

"What?! She is?!"

Kei was my predecessor. She was captain until we lost to Ashi High in the Inter-High qualifying round in June, and she played power forward. She was a team senior we could all rely on, with a gutsy playing style that capitalized on her height of five foot seven. Even after she quit the club and I became captain, she'd still give me advice every now and then.

Buuut...

"But why during summer vacation, when there isn't even any club practice? She still hasn't graduated. She could come by anytime after school...?"

Miss Misaki waved a dismissive hand and smiled. "Ah, I misspoke. Kei *is* coming, but she's not actually one of the main guests of honor."

"Okay...?"

"Two of our old club alumni—they were third-years when Kei was a first-year

—they also want to stop by, like old times.”

“*What?!*” I couldn’t help but raise my voice and take a step forward. “So you mean they graduated right before we entered Fuji High?!”

Miss Misaki grinned, like she’d been waiting for that reaction from me. “Yep. An ex-captain and an ex-star player.”

“...”

I remembered, even now.

I watched the Inter-High preliminaries when I was in my last year of junior high and was totally unsure of what I wanted to do in my future.

Ashi High has dominated Fukui girls’ basketball for years, always competing with Yuai Girls High and Hokuriku Technical High. Fuji High wasn’t a weak team by any means, but it still fell short of the real big-hitter schools. I think that’s how most people saw it, too.

But that year, Fuji High defeated Yuai in the semifinals and made it to the finals.

When I heard about it, I remember thinking that anything can happen in the world of sports. A team that’s inferior in terms of strength can still pull off a surprise victory.

But basketball isn’t like baseball or soccer, where you play to defend every point. In basketball, it’s more of a free-for-all, with everyone trying to get as many points as possible. So there aren’t so many teams that completely dominate games.

It’s simply a matter of mechanics. Sometimes it doesn’t pay off. Anyway, I’m not here to analyze it.

But, for example, in baseball, if Chitose hits a home run and pitcher Uemura gets through the game without giving up any runs, theoretically that victory belongs to the two of them. If your pitcher is the star batter, too, then the game is basically won by a single person.

In soccer, you could theoretically just grab the first goal—it doesn’t matter whether it’s an opponent’s mistake or the outstanding performance of an ace

striker—and then just tighten up your defense and pass the ball around until the clock runs out. That's not how it usually shakes out, but it is technically possible.

But basketball has many detailed time limits, including rules that require you to take a shot within a set number of seconds, so no matter what you do, the game keeps moving fast. The only way to win is to attack as a team and accumulate as many points as possible.

In other words, the overall strength of the team is directly linked to the results.

In the world of basketball, it's possible enough to win in the preliminaries, but the prestigious schools that are always aiming for the top spots in the country aren't easy opponents. You can't rely on luck or momentum. So when my teammates and I talked about going to watch the finals, I was absolutely expecting an Ashi High victory...

But at the end of a pitched battle, it was Fuji High who snatched that coveted ticket to the Inter-High tournament.

Even thinking about it now makes my chest burn with excitement. Ninety percent of the audience was convinced of Ashi High's impending victory, but each member of the Fuji High team ran, jumped, and shot with all their might, competing equally with athletes from prestigious schools from all over the country.

I think it was definitely luck and momentum. But more than that, they showed confidence. Their steadfast practicing paid off.

Leading Fuji High was a point guard who made passes so accurate, you'd think she had GPS in her head for the ball. And a small forward who took those passes and drove like a rabid wolf toward the basket, scoring point after point.

...I was like, huh. So even in public college prep schools, there are students who take basketball seriously enough to aim for the top.

I'd been torn between going to Fuji High like my parents wanted, for the sake of my future, and my own desire to attend Ashi High and compete on the national stage. But that was the moment I knew which way I had to go.

Since then, those two senior girls have been legends to me. I worshipped them.

It's the Cinderella story every sports player dreams of. An ordinary team from a public school beats the big shots and goes on to win the championship.

Miss Misaki was still talking even as I was getting lost in the amazing memories.

"Both of them are attending a university in the Kanto region with a very strong team, and they're competing in the intercollegiate tournament for the championship. Apparently, they got in touch with Kei because they're home on break from summer practice, and they all decided to drop by and say hello."

"Um, Miss Misaki...!"

But before I could finish my sentence, Miss Misaki grinned.

"You're interested, huh?"

I nodded immediately. "And do you think we could use the gym?"

Miss Misaki covered her mouth, her shoulders shaking. "I thought you'd ask. I already checked. The other clubs are on break tomorrow as well."

"Do you think the older girls will, like...come in sportswear?"

"Well, they're not the kind of people who'd show up at the gym without their basketball shoes."

My heart was thudding in my ears.

I was excited to meet the senior girls, yes, but it was more than that...

Recently I've been plagued by that weird limbo feeling.

I thought I might be able to shake it off and live my life again.

I'd finish up the summer properly and get moving toward next year.

For some reason, I had a feeling this would help.

"Oh, right... Nana..."

I was just turning, thinking I should go to the clubroom and tell my partner, when Miss Misaki clapped me on the shoulder.

"I already told her. But it seems she has plans she can't miss out on. She would have liked to come, she said. Seemed disappointed."

"Oh... Okay."

A point guard and small forward. Their play style would be similar to ours, so I thought it might serve as a good source of inspiration.

At that moment, suddenly...

Before I knew it, his familiar face popped into my head.

"Um, there's someone I'd like to bring with me... Is that okay?"

You could tell by the way I said it that I wasn't talking about a teammate.

But Miss Misaki didn't ask questions. She just sighed a little. "Don't get too excited." She raised her eyebrows meaningfully.

*It's okay. I won't*, I thought.

The basketball I loved, some amazing older players, someone I wanted to get on an equal footing with, someday...

All these aspects of my life could use a little extra fire.

...Let's hope the fire in me is up to the task.



Then the following day.

The meeting with Kei and the others was scheduled for four PM.

I got to school a little after three, planning to get the court ready and do my warm-ups. I double-checked to make sure I still had the key I'd brought home (with Miss Misaki's permission), then headed to the gym.

*Skreek. Thud. Thud.*

A pleasant sound reached my ears.

I'm pretty sure I can tell a person's skill with the ball just from the sound of their dribbling. I once said that to Nana, and she was like, "Yeah right!" It's true, though. The sharpness of their footwork, the confidence of their dribbling, the accuracy of their shots... The better players all have a unique rhythm to their

playing style. I reckon I could pick Nana out of a lineup just by listening.

I sighed heavily. Seriously?

Whoever was practicing right now was really good. So good, it made me scowl.

Still frowning, I stepped into the gym to see a tall girl, about five foot nine, flying across the gym like she weighed as much as a feather.

Her hair was short but flowing, while her form was straight and firm.

At the apex of her jump, the ball spun forth from her nimble fingertips.

*Phwoosh.*

It dropped right through the basket, barely even ruffling the net.

*Thump, thump, thump*—the ball came my way, and I grabbed it. She noticed me and gave me a big grin.

“Huh? Am I late?”

She looked like she was completely warmed-up already, her neck covered in a fine sheen of sweat.

Returning the ball one-handed, I answered. “Nope. We’re meeting at four. But why are you here before me, Mai? You don’t even go here.”

Mai shrugged, unbothered. “The place wasn’t even locked. And during summer vacation, no one batted an eye at a girl in her practice clothes. Plus, I’ve been here before, so I know your campus. I just strolled right on in through the school gates. Oh, and this is my own personal ball.”

“I’m not asking *how* you got in. I’m asking what you’re doing here in the first place.”

Holding the ball in both hands, she gave me a response that surprised me. “You said you’d be here early today.”

“I don’t remember inviting you to join me.”

“Oh, but it sounded like you were asking me out.”

“*Tsk...*”

I scratched my head, annoyed, but I couldn't help grinning.

No, I didn't ask her to join me. But I did tell her I'd be training on my own for a while before. And I figured maybe she'd show up like this.

It's more like leaving an itinerary on someone's desk as opposed to sticking a love letter in their locker.

...Mai Todo. The ace of the Ashi High team. She's been a shooting guard since her freshman year. I've been winning games since I was playing in the kid leagues, but I've never won against any team with Mai Todo on it. The practice game back in July was a tough battle, but in the end, she bested me.

But since then, even though I've only seen her as my rival and archnemesis, she seems to have taken a liking to me. These days, we chat pretty often.

So after my talk with Miss Misaki yesterday, I figured, if Nana can't come, I'll ask Mai... So I sent her a message on LINE.

Sure enough, within seconds, she called me back like, "Are you asking me out on a date?"

Apparently, Mai was there the day Fuji High defeated Ashi High. She'd been dead set on Ashi High up until then, but after that game, she'd started to seriously consider Fuji High as well. Kinda like me.

*"Still, I couldn't hack it grades-wise, so I changed my mind about Fuji."*

*"Yeah, I get it."*

*"It's actually kinda amazing how you even got in, isn't it, Haru?"*

*"...Yeah, I get it."*

That was what we'd said during our phone chat. And she was right; sometimes I have no idea how I actually managed to pass the entrance exams for Fuji.

At that time, all I was thinking about was getting into Fuji High and defeating Ashi High, and so I was devoting as much energy to my studies as I did to basketball. I was pretty pleased with what I could do when I put my mind to studying, but the moment I was accepted into Fuji, I started burning out, and I quickly fell to the bottom half of the class. I'd like to blame it on how hard

basketball training is, but Yuzuki and others are keeping their grades at the top, so I can't make excuses.

Come to think of it, Mai also said something like this:

*"Isn't your partner and point guard that girl Yuzuki? When I won in the quarterfinals last year, I was a little envious. It was like you two were a real unit."*

*"You say that after totally blowing our whole team away."*

*"Well, I got mad."*

*"Hmm, would you consider yourself a jealous person, then?"*

*"If I wasn't, I wouldn't be so passionate about my boyfriend, basketball here."*

*"Well, yeah."*

I thought she was the cool type on the surface, like Nana, but sometimes she doesn't know when to let things drop, and it's annoying. Still, when we talk like this, it's kinda nice. We have a connection.

I mean, there's someone so close to me who's just as serious as me, just as stupid as me, and so much better than me that it makes me laugh.

Of course, I feel the same thing when I play with my partner Nana, but right now, it's this girl who kinda gets to me more than anyone else.

Maybe I invited Mai here today because I unconsciously wanted someone around who'd match my level of energy for basketball.

When I got back from changing in the clubroom, I found that Mai had started getting stuff ready, since I'd given her the key to the gym. She had the ball and scoreboard out, even though no one had given her permission. Maybe she was just shameless, or maybe she just felt at home anywhere there was a basketball court.

*"Hey, Haru. Wanna warm up?"*

*"Yeah, in this weather, a light jog and stretching should do it."*

*"Okay, I'll do it with you."*

In the winter, I'm more careful about warm-ups and stretches, but even

though it's the end of summer, it's still mild, so my body's not stiff at all.

I spoke to Mai as we started running together. "By the way, how long do you usually practice at Ashi?"

"Hmm, usually, we practice for about an hour in the morning, and then we practice for about three hours after school, I'd say? On Saturdays, Sundays, and long holidays, I do a lot of independent practice on my own."

"What, seriously?!"

"Ah-ha! You thought we had a ton more practice time than you do, didn't you?"

"..."

She was right, and I wasn't sure what to say.

If you think about it, Ashi High School is a public school no different from ours, but because of their school's powerful reputation, I somehow assumed the school allowed them to practice longer than us. Our school's primary focus is getting us ready to go to college, so we're forced to do what we can with our study-free time.

It is true that there are some private high schools in the world that have lots of dedicated time for practice. But when I heard that Ashi was basically the same as Fuji... I didn't know what to think.

Now I had no room for excuses.

"So, what kind of practice do you do?" I looked down at my feet.

Mai's stride was narrow, and even though she was jogging, she seemed a little cramped. When I looked up, she was about a head taller than me. Her legs were also a lot longer than mine.

Mai replied with a chuckle as she casually sped up. "It's pretty simple. Tommy really puts a lot of emphasis on basic training, doing hard circuits every morning. We do weighted squats."

"Gah..."

Tommy was short for Tominaga, their coach. Apparently, our two coaches go

way back, and you can often see them chatting together during games.

Circuit training is a combination of muscle training and aerobic exercise. To put it simply, it's like a super tough obstacle course. We set up a number of training spots around the gymnasium, such as hurdles and heavy medicine balls, and run around them. In the summer, it's a tough workout that often makes several first-years collapse.

We do it on weekends and long vacations when we don't have any games, but to do it every morning...

Mai seemed to love my reaction. Swelling with pride, she continued. "And we run a *lot*. We're a mountain school, so they make us run sprints over and over at a nearby hilly area called Jigokuzaka, or Hell Slope."

*Maybe that's why she never looks even slightly winded in the second half*, I thought, frowning.

"Honestly, I'm a little surprised," I said. "I thought Ashi High put more emphasis on technical training and actual play."

"Of course, we do things like that, too. According to Tommy, 'Technique is like a sword. You need to be strong enough to wield it while you're running, or it'll be useless to you.'"

"I guess that's one very specific way of looking at it..."

"By the way, Tommy's favorite phrase is: 'You are not women; you are warriors.'"

"Seriously?"

Wow. I really, really underestimated Mai's team.

I had the mistaken impression that prestigious players like those from Ashi High just practiced smarter and in a more sophisticated manner.

Maybe I could use this info to our advantage...

We may not be doing as well in terms of individual ability or tactical proficiency, but if we kept practicing the basics and worked on our stamina, we might have a chance.

I mean, Mai and her team were the same. Talented players from all over the country were working hard, but never taking a single win for granted.

That's why they're so formidable.

Theirs is a wall that can't be knocked down without considerable effort.

While I was chewing over what I'd learned, Mai tossed her head casually. "By the way, is that boy coming?"

"That boy...?"

"You know, Saku."

"Hey, don't call him by his first name."

Even I still called him Chitose.

I kinda wanted to call him Saku... But I'd been calling him Chitose since first year. It would be weird to switch now, especially when there was no obvious reason to change it. Now, if we started dating or something...

"Chitose, then. Why are you so prickly about him anyway?"

When Mai and I started messaging back and forth, the first thing she asked was, "*Is that guy who came to watch the practice game your boyfriend?*"

I immediately said no way, but she wouldn't back down at all. And I got a bit carried away and ended up saying all this stuff I kinda regret now.

Mai continued, super casually. "I mean, on our team, romance is forbidden."

"What...?"

"I told you, right? We're warriors, not women. At least for the three years we play basketball at Ashi."

I'd heard rumors of this sort of thing... Some prestigious sports schools, where the kids stay in dorms, have rules about relationships, too.

At that time, I'd just casually said, "Well, if you really want to concentrate on the competition, it's only natural."

Because for me, romance was a completely different matter, and it had so little value that I could easily throw it away for the sake of basketball.

But now...I understood why such a draconian rule might be necessary. Boy, did I understand.

I felt lost...confused...hurt...in limbo.

If you asked me now if basketball was all I think about in life, I wouldn't be able to lie to you.

Mai continued calmly, like it was no big deal to her.

"Everyone has to have their hair cut short. We're supposed to eat two bowls of rice before coming to morning training. Phones are banned at school. Some of us even cancel our cell phone contracts completely. I keep mine because I like to watch NBA games and rewatch videos of myself playing, to check my form. Anyway, I rarely have time to think about anything except basketball."

"You have to go that far...?"

Wow, those girls really dedicated everything to this. Their time. Living their lives. Enjoying entertainment. The precious fleeting youth every high school girl takes for granted.

This is what it means to seriously aim for the top.

This is what it means to not want to lose to anyone.

And even for Ashi High, the national pinnacle was still so far out of reach.

I bit my lip hard so Mai wouldn't notice.

*If this continues, I will never be able to catch up.*

The truth is, I've already figured it out—the true source of the anxieties I feel.

Until that day and that moment, I lived only for basketball.

I wasn't bound by strict rules like the Ashi High girls, but I think that I was giving my all to my sport, too.

...But then I learned about romance.

Suddenly, I found myself thinking about Chitose more and more often.

I began to spend some time learning about beauty and fashion, trying to figure out what to do to make someone fall in love with me.

These days, if he invited me to dinner or something, I'd probably be fine with skipping solo practice.

...There's no doubt about it. I'm weaker than I used to be.

After that heated practice match with Ashi High, I confessed my feelings.

Ever since then, I've felt burned-out, just an empty shell of myself.

I may have gone the wrong way, but it doesn't mean I don't care about basketball anymore. I'm still grappling with how I felt during that battle with Mai...

It's like there's two boys I want to give my heart to, and I can't choose, so I'm cheating on both.

I wish I could say that basketball is basketball and romance is romance, but I just don't think I can.

For example, up until now, all I could think about was defeating Ashi High and winning the Inter-High championship. But now I'm thinking much more long-term.

Will I continue playing serious basketball in college?

What about when I start working?

If I continue on this path, one day I'll have to say good-bye to him.

But if I get it all out of my system in high school and decide to leave basketball behind, then there's a possibility that we could go to university together.

...I already have this huge handicap, with my height. As it stands now, I may not have a chance of ever defeating Ashi High, let alone posing a serious threat to Mai...

I guess I have to choose.

Who do I love more? Him or basketball?

I guess you have to give up on the second most important thing in order to get the most important thing.

Mai continued casually—or was it fake-casually...?

"That's why I want to ask you. I was just wondering what it's like to have someone you like, to be in love."

It sounded to me like she was criticizing me for not being more serious about basketball. I picked up the pace and stayed silent, head hanging.



After finishing the warm-ups, we were doing some light shooting practice, playing one-on-one, when I heard a voice call out to me from the doorway.

"Uuumiii!!!"

I turned to see Kei, our old captain, waving at me. Beside her stood Miss Misaki and those two seniors I'd never been able to forget. They all wore training gear.

"Kei!"

I ran over to her, and she flung her arms open to give me a big hug.

"Hey, it's been a while, kiddo. You're still so small."

"And you're as huggy as ever, Kei."

"Hmm, but have you become a bit more feminine...?"

"Don't touch my boobs! I'll drop-kick you, I mean it!"

After we finished greeting each other again, I beckoned Mai over.

"Erm, this is..."

"Mai Todo?!!!"

Kei took a step back and let out a cry of surprise.

Maybe she remembered the thrashing we got in the Inter-High qualifying round.

Mai looked tickled. "Are you the power forward? You were amazing during that game."

"Wow, even the girls from Ashi High are so nice!" Kei responded with her usual enthusiasm.

Surprisingly, Mai seemed to remember players from other teams as much as

they remembered her. When we first met up at this gym, I'd imagined other players in the prefecture were like ants to her...

*“But each one’s playing style is baked in to her mind.”*

In the end, Chitose was right.

And here I was, thinking about him again.

I scratched my head, looking at Miss Misaki.

I'd told her I practiced with Mai from time to time, so she didn't seem too surprised to see her.

“Is this cool, Miss Misaki?”

“Sure, the more the merrier.”

Mai piped up again. “Tommy said to go and get a good hard practice in with you guys.”

“Oh yeah?” Smiling wryly, Miss Misaki turned to the seniors and said, “Well, let me introduce you. The shorter one is Aki, the captain and point guard on our old team. The taller one is Suzu, the small forward who was our ace. Aki, Suzu, this is Umi, the girl I was telling you about. And this is Mai Todo, the current ace at Ashi High School. Let’s all have a good practice today.”

““For sure!””

We all bowed to one another. Mai is generally frank with everyone, but perhaps because she's an athlete, she greets people in a polite manner.

Aki was the one with a short permed bob dyed a light brown, which she had pulled back with a slim headband. She took a step forward, her round eyes fixed on me with interest.

“Nice to meet you both. Umi, I heard from Miss Misaki that you’re really small. At university, I get told I’m small a lot.”

Aki was around five foot two, a little shorter than Nana. Not particularly tall for a serious basketball player, but still tall enough to make me envious.

I was starstruck, so I got a bit tongue-tied. “I went to see your final game against Ashi High! I admired both of you so much, that was actually what made

me decide to go to Fuji."

"Oh really? Yeah, that was really our golden era. Unfortunately, Kei had nothing to do with it."

"Hold on, Aki!"

Kei yelped as the conversation suddenly turned to her. Yeah, she'd been in the game at the time, as a first-year regular, and I remember thinking she had real spirit.

I piped up, grinning ironically. "Ah, but with Aki and Suzu dominating the game, it kinda doesn't even matter what the rest of the team did..."

"Wow, thanks, Haru!"

As we all laughed together, I started thinking.

Aki seemed very different from how she'd come across on the court.

No matter what was happening in the game, she was cool as a cucumber, and her passes were sharp as icicles in midwinter. But off-court, she seemed so nice and personable.

As I was slowly processing this small surprise, Aki tapped the floor with the toe of her shoe, a thoughtful look on her face.

"But can you really hang out with the ace of Ashi High? Back then, we really wanted to win, so we thought of them as our rivals."

"..."

It was a deep cut.

She was saying I was too soft, befriending someone I was supposed to want to destroy on the court.

Like, "Wow, you're not so serious about the game, are you?"

While I stood there tongue-tied, Mai responded instead. "Oh, interesting. So you're the type who can't play their best without making enemies, hmm?"

"Hold on, Mai!"

I panicked at Mai's confrontational tone, but Aki just smiled with half her

mouth, like she was enjoying it.

"Aha! Just the attitude I'd expect from the ace of Ashi High. I remember how smug you girls all were back then. I wanted to make you choke on your words!"

That was when Suzu, who'd been quietly watching the exchange, stepped forward.

She was probably around five foot five, and her whole body was lean and toned. The bridge of her nose could have been sculpted from marble, and her short hair—shorter even than Mai's—looked really good on her.

I couldn't help but admire her. Like, she was so cool. Without changing her expression, Suzu spoke. "This is a waste of time."

"Huh...?"

There was a coldness to her voice, which surprised me. For a moment, I thought I'd misheard. On the court, Suzu played with an intense fighting spirit, so somehow, I'd imagined her to be a passionate sort of person.

Maybe she was just scolding her partner Aki in a friendly way, I thought, but her cold gaze was undoubtedly directed toward me and Mai.

"We came here to take advantage of our limited time on break and receive some instruction for the first time in a while. I'm sorry, but we didn't come here to hang out with high schoolers."

"Um, er..."

I was so shocked that I couldn't speak properly.

I could see why she'd say that. Maybe that's why they deliberately chose a day when there were no club activities. Maybe I was the one who'd intruded, and I should have thought more about how my actions would affect them.

She was truly dedicated to basketball, and that was why she was taking this so seriously.

Maybe this was selfish of me, but after dreaming of meeting these girls for so long, I felt...

Mai piped up, one eye on me as I wilted. "You certainly wouldn't want to lose

against me when I only came here today to have fun, right?”

Suzu narrowed her eyes. “I know that Ashi High has a strong team, as does the current Fuji team. But students from a private university are on a whole other level.”

Mai took it casually but showed no sign of backing down. “Actually, we usually win against boys’ teams and university teams, too.”

“Well, mediocre university teams are one thing, but *we* compete for the championship in the intercollegiate tournament. And we beat Ashi High and went to the Inter-High tournament, now, didn’t we?”

“You beat an Ashi High that didn’t have me.”

The atmosphere was crackling with tension. I sneaked a peek at Miss Misaki and Kei.

But neither seemed to want to interfere. They were just watching all this unfold.

Aki clapped her hands noisily. “Oh, back off, Suzu. Let’s just hang out with some cute juniors today and have fun with it. Umi’s aiming for Inter-High, too, you know. Instead of standing here arguing, why don’t you let the basketball do the talking?”

As Suzu sighed and gave up, Mai immediately spoke.

“Kei, Miss Misaki, can you play?”

Kei answered with a little smile. “I still train sometimes, although I’m a long way from my peak back when I still played.”

Miss Misaki grinned confidently, arms folded. “I won’t be beaten by a bunch of high school and college students who are still wet behind the ears.”

“All right,” Mai replied. “Then let’s play three-on-three, full court. Actually, when we do this exercise at Ashi, we do it with no dribbling allowed. But this time, let’s just play normally. Rules are the same as in a true game. No knockouts. Two quarters with a ten-minute break in between. What say you all?”

A true scrap.

That was basically what Mai was proposing.

According to the international 3v3 rules, the game is half court and is equivalent to one quarter. The game uses a knockout system in which either team wins when they score twenty-one points or more.

Mai was proposing that we get rid of all those constraints and simply play three-on-three basketball. As the number of players decreases, the amount of work each person needs to put in increases. Mai mentioned it super casually, but if Ashi High does this with no dribbling allowed, it must make for a super intense practice.

Aki clapped her hands again. “Let’s do it. Miss Misaki, you’ll play on our side.”

“Hey, Aki! Don’t treat me like a handicap! You should play like the old team you once were. Kei on your side, and I’ll play for Umi’s side.”

“...Sure you can still run at your age, Teach?”

“Hmm? You seem to have gotten cocky in college. Perhaps I’ll give you a cold dose of reality.”

Suzu rolled her eyes, looking bored. “We’ll play for half an hour. But if you feel like you’re going to collapse, feel free to call it early.”

I felt like I was being left behind, watching them, and it made me anxious.



After waiting for the seniors to finish their warm-ups, we gathered in the center circle.

My team consisted of me, Mai, and Miss Misaki.

The other team was Aki, Suzu, and Kei.

Despite finally being able to play against players I admired so much...I wasn’t exactly enthusiastic.

After what Mai said earlier, I was starting to wonder if maybe I really didn’t care enough about basketball after all.

Aki was holding the ball and called out to me in a casual way.

“Both Umi and Mai shoot one-handed? Cocky, huh?!”

I guess she'd been watching us practice shooting.

Japanese girls, especially in high school, are generally two-handed players, but Nana, Mai, and I are one-handed players, just like the boys. All of the seniors, including Kei, shoot two-handed.

"Well, the coach I had for mini basketball taught us to shoot one-handed, so..." I trailed off, but Mai stepped in.

"Yeah, I've always shot one-handed. Actually, on our team, it's policy. It's easier to miss when you shoot two-handed."

Oh yeah, come to think of it, that was how the Ashi High girls shot.

The main reason why two-handed shooting is the norm for women is that we lack strength compared to men. It's just easier to use both hands. Your shot becomes sturdier as a result.

On the other hand (heh), as Mai said, it's difficult to get as much control when you shoot two-handed. If you don't have enough force or you're not accurate enough, you can blow it. A one-handed shot, though, you can get it in even if you're not ideally positioned. Two-handed shots tend to be unreliable unless you've got a nice clean line to the basket. It's harder to pull off in a scrappy game.

So the current consensus among female basketball players is that if you can pull it off, one-handed is better.

In fact, in Japan there are still many two-handed players, but more and more teams like Ashi High have a one-handed policy. And female players in other countries almost always shoot one-handed.

Aki pouted jokingly. "Hmm. I feel like I'm being told I'm out of touch here."

Mai was still as combative as ever. "Times have changed. So has Ashi High. You'll see."

Before I could try to leap in and smooth things over, Aki shrugged and said, "All right."

"Let's do it. Miss Misaki, can you do the tip-off? Kei, start the timer. Set it for thirty minutes. I've set up scoreboards by both baskets, so whoever gets a

basket, go and record the score. We'll referee ourselves, but Miss Misaki will have final say if we need it."

We all nodded.

The other team's jumper was tall Suzu. On our team, of course, it was Mai.

As we faced off across the center line, Aki grinned.

"All right. Let's get some real fire in our hearts."

There was a brief moment of silence.

Up until then, Aki had been smiling and joking, but now the emotion was gone from her face. Her lovely eyes grew sharp and brittle, like thin ice.

Meanwhile, expressionless Suzu lowered her brows and gritted her teeth. Her whole body was brimming with power.

A chill ran down my spine.

I got a flashback of the two of them in that finals match.

Right... Nothing's changed.

That's the truth.

Mai seemed to sense something as well. Relaxing her arms and legs, she dropped into a power stance.

The atmosphere grew thick with tension.

Aki, Suzu, Mai...

They were all so different, but all focused on the battle ahead.

And what about me?

I'm on form with my pacing, my shooting, my dribbling.

The problem is my mind.

I've lost track of where I'm going. I can't keep up.

*Dammit!* I wanted to mentally punch myself.

Why did I come here today, again?

Didn't I get into Fuji High because I wanted to be just like these girls?

Didn't I want to crush Mai and grab that coveted Inter-High spot?

Come on! Why isn't my heart burning?!

Is this all I've got?

While I stood there desperately trying to motivate myself, Miss Misaki lifted the ball.

For now, I figured I'd see what I could do against these older girls.

It would be fine. Once the game started, my sporting instinct would kick in.

I lowered my center of gravity as the ball spun upward.

Suzu and Mai jumped at the same time.

*SLAM!*

Two hands slapped the ball simultaneously as it reached the apex of its spin, both trying desperately to send it to the other side.

*They jump so high*, I thought with a small gasp.

I knew Mai could fly, but Suzu was still taller and not far behind.

The ball came spinning toward me.

*All right. Let's go.*

As I took a step...

*...Skreeek.*

A nimble form leaped in front of me, shoes squealing.

"Too slow, kiddo." Aki stole the ball and started running.

"Darn it!"

I chased after her right away.

Now, speed is one of my strengths. If the other person's dribbling, I can catch up to them easily...

"Huh?"

But when I drew level with Aki, she no longer had the ball.

She passed it? But when?

“Mai!” I yelled out reflexively.

Kei had left the court to start the timer, and Miss Misaki seemed to be waiting for her to return. So there were only four active players at that moment.

There was only one person Aki could pass to, and, of course, Mai should be marking her.

“Hyah!” Suzu yelled, sounding excited.

She grabbed the ball and drove forward to the basket. Her dribbling was so powerful, totally at odds with her usual cool demeanor.

Of course, Mai was also on defense.

Even though she’s tall, she’s dangerous because she knows how to move her body.

But Suzu dashed through like she didn’t even care.

Perhaps it was complacency or trust, but Aki seemed to have decided to just watch this one-on-one for now, and she didn’t move much after making her pass.

Near the three-point line, Suzu paused for a moment.

Mai immediately moved between the basket and Suzu and spread her arms.

I was expecting Suzu to go straight for the basket, but perhaps she had the guts to switch up her approach.

Checking Mai’s stance, she dipped low.

“Hyah!”

After making a slight feint to the left, Suzu immediately drove in from the right.

Of course, Mai wasn’t so easy to get past, but...

*...Stamp.*

*...Fwshh.*

“No...!”

I couldn't help but let out a cry as I watched an unbelievable scene unfold before my eyes.

Mai wasn't fooled by the feint, of course; she tried to block, but she was bested by Suzu right in front of the basket, and she ended up on her butt.

Of course, Suzu was able to comfortably score a layup after that.

I ran over and offered Mai my hand...

"Tch."

She got up, scowling with anger.

Well, yeah. I've landed on my butt in plenty of games, but I've never seen Mai Todo disgraced like that before.

She's impressive even if you're just watching her in a game, but if you actually go up against her, you'll see that her core is surprisingly strong, and she's not the type of player you can easily overpower.

It was easy enough to believe that she ate two bowls of rice every morning.

Suzu had finished retrieving the ball. "Defense isn't your strength, is it?" she said. "Your center of gravity is poor."

Maybe it was because her fire had been lit, but the way Suzu spoke seemed a little rougher.

Mai's mouth twitched before she drawled a response. "Thanks for the tip."

She grabbed the ball and leaned in to whisper in my ear.

"...She's good with her hands."

*Ah, yeah.*

When Mai tried to restart the game, Suzu popped her thumb up.

"Don't flip the score. It's my basket. I'll do it."

"...Fine. All right."

Mai watched with annoyance as the score was updated; then she threw the ball right to me.

The opposing team had all returned to their own territory.

We'd allowed them to take the lead, but Kei and Miss Misaki were in the game now, and the real action was about to begin.

In three-on-three, positions aren't clear like when there are five players per team. As the number of people decreases, each person needs to take on a wider variety of roles.

Once I passed the ball to Miss Misaki in the middle, I moved out to the right side, and Mai went to the left.

Just as I crossed the half-court line, Aki started marking me. It looked like Suzu planned to mark Mai, and Kei would be marking Miss Misaki. With only three people per team, it's hard to defend properly, so this is the only way to do it.

All right. One goal at a time.

For a split second, Aki paused to see where Mai was, and I took advantage of it to get away from her.

At that instant, Miss Misaki sent me a pass that made me a target.

"Hyah!"

Aki may have bested me earlier, but my true strength is offense.

I grabbed the pass at a run and used that momentum to dribble forward.

I wanted to go straight for the basket, but I was being crowded out and knew I couldn't break through so easily.

I glanced at Miss Misaki and Mai to see what they were doing.

I slowed down, then pressed forward again.

Once I was sure Aki was still on me...

*Skreech.*

...I dug my heels in and skidded to a stop.

My position wasn't ideal, but so what? I jumped forward and got myself into shooting stance, even though my opponent could clearly block me.

However...

"...I know what you wanna do."

I heard Aki's sarcastic voice, then a slamming sound.

My pass was deflected by the hand of my opponent, completely blocking my shot.

Shit, she knew exactly what I was trying to do.

"You looked too much at the person you wanted to pass to," Aki called. "It was obvious you weren't gonna shoot." Aki had already taken off down the court.

"Dammit!" I couldn't shake her.

Right. Too late to be angry now.

The ball had passed to Kei.

From there, Suzy broke forward, away from Mai.

In the blink of an eye, they'd secured a second basket.

Aki adjusted her headband, grinning. "I can see you're confident in your dribbling and speed. Those are your strengths, as a little shrimp. But you're too fixated on it. Passing isn't an escape route when you get stuck."

"...Right." I responded with my head down.

Aki's words were a bit cold, perhaps because she was in competition mode, but she was definitely giving advice to me. And it was good advice, too.

With the exception of the first one-on-one between Mai and Suzy, Aki and the others were unusually good at getting rid of the ball. I'd seen it during that decisive match, and just from this short bout so far. In other words, the time they spent handling the ball was brief. They kept it moving.

A player who runs while dribbling will never be as fast as a player who passes quickly.

Of course, it's easier said than done to pull that off during actual play. This was probably a result of the trust that Aki and her team had cultivated and the time they'd spent working together.

During Fuji games, I tend to leave control of the match to Nana. The passing between the other teammates, including myself, is pretty lax.

I think some things are just innate.

As Aki said, I believe that my strength lies in dribbling down court and scoring goals, and that's why I've always focused on those things. Of course, I'm not so arrogant that I never pass, but in any situation, I always think first about whether I can make the right decision by myself.

Dammit. There's so many ways I come up short.

The timer reached six minutes before we could gather any momentum for a comeback.

The score was 13 to 7, and the others had never lost the lead they'd had since the start of the match.

We'd gotten three baskets from Mai, including a three-pointer.

Miss Misaki was actively playing a support role and not going in to score points herself. And as for me? I was totally letting us down.

As I was thinking about this, Mai came toward me, holding up her right thumb and forefinger and swirling them around, just when the play was over.

I guessed she wanted us to change up who we were marking.

"Haru, let's try this. I'll go over here." She headed toward Aki.

I ran to Suzu, who was grabbing a pass from Kei.

Suzu was a small forward, like me. Although we are completely different in height, we both aggressively aim for the basket.

"I'm hoping to learn a lot from you today," I said, but Suzu just snorted.

"If you're the ace, I feel sorry for your team."

"You mean my height?"

"That barely factors in at this point."

Before I could finish speaking, Aki passed the ball right over my head.

I decided that there was nothing I could do about this, and followed after Suzu.

She got the pass from Aki around the three-point line, then dribbled slowly,

waiting for the right time to make her move.

I blocked her path to the basket and settled in, ready to break left or right at a moment's notice.

Unexpectedly—or maybe by design—we were in the same kind of position as she'd been in earlier with Mai.

*Squeeeeak.*

I tried a simple feint, just shifting my center of gravity, and Suzu tried to break to my left.

With this height difference, the moment she got even a little distance, one jump shot would be all it took.

With that in mind, I tried to stick close to her but...

“...”

I couldn't let her get in shooting range.

Suzu manipulated the ball with her right hand, while her left hand blocked every movement I made.

She didn't go as far as to cause an offensive foul or anything, but she wouldn't let me get close, she kept knocking me back so I couldn't steal the ball. I felt like a puppet she was manipulating.

“Dammit...!”

At that moment, when I took a half step back to regain my balance...

*Swoosh!*

Suzu took a big step forward.

I tried to take back half a step of space, but her arm was in my way, and if I tried to shove, I'd be causing a defensive foul.

*Stamp. Swoosh.*

I lost my balance and stepped back heavily, and that's when she made her basket.

“...*She's good with her hands.*”

Recalling Mai's words, I realized... Yeah.

When a player on offense drives past an opponent, using the free hand becomes important.

In other words, the non-dribbling hand, including the arm, can be used to block the movements of the defensive player.

Mai and I use this technique, too, of course, but Suzu was a master at it.

One popular example is to put your other arm between your dribbling hand and the defensive player, using it to protect the ball. It's a pretty intuitive thing to do, and I like it because it's an easy battle of power versus power.

In addition, Suzu has a lot of flexibility with how she uses her off-hand.

Some players will divert the attention of the referee and play rough, almost fouling, but that's not what Suzu did.

It felt instead like she was deflecting my power in a very natural way.

Mai ended up on her butt earlier because she'd lost her balance.

She'd wrongly assumed Suzu had the same style as her.

It's easy to be fooled by Suzu's powerful playing style, but actually it was very nuanced and subtle.

I added the points and grabbed the ball as Suzu sighed at me.

"Are you seriously a team captain?" she said.

"Huh...?"

"I'm asking, are you really the one the girls of Fuji High look to for leadership?"

"What do you mean?"

I clenched my fists as Suzu responded in a bored sort of tone. "Whatever. At your current level, you'll never catch up with that Mai girl. Look at her game face."

With that, Suzu sauntered off.

Staring at the court from the end zone, I felt my chest ache.

*I'm all alone in this gym.*

*Is it my body that's weak, or my spirit? Or both?*

*In any case, something hasn't clicked, and I've been spinning idly ever since.*

*Hey, Chitose...*

*What would you do in a situation like this?*

I hugged the basketball to my chest, hating myself for looking to a man for help, even in the middle of a damn game.



After thirteen minutes of our first half had elapsed, the score was 23 to 15. We were the losers.

It was completely my fault.

Except for the three baskets Miss Misaki made to keep her former students in their place, the rest of our score was all flukes.

And none of those points were mine.

We'd swapped marks several times to make sure to round out our practice, but both Aki and Suzu made easy work of me.

On the other hand, Mai was doing what she always did.

The other girls had been running circles around her at first, but as the game went on, she started to adapt more and more, until near the end, it looked like she was playing offense and defense on an even basis with them.

I sat down, back against the wall of the gym, and stretched my legs.

I pressed a half-frozen bottle of Pocari Sweat against my eyelids and sighed heavily.

Condensation rolled down my cheeks like tears of frustration.

Oh man, what happened to me?

I may not be all there mentally, but this is the first time I've felt this useless.

Whenever I stood on the court before an opponent, I would feel excited.

Who am I fighting against now? What do I even want?

It's like I'm wandering through an endless dream at daybreak, not knowing who I am.

*Hey. If this is the way it's going to be...*

*Then I wish I never learned about love.*

*I wish I'd never met you.*

...

*No, I'm sorry! I didn't mean that!*

*Oh man.*

*God. Please tell me you didn't hear that.*

*Oh, get a grip!*

*I hate this.*

I squeezed the plastic bottle.

*I really hate who I am now, bringing all my baggage onto the court.*

*But, I mean...*

As I went back and forth in my mind...

"This isn't like you, you know?" Mai sat down beside me, a sports towel around her neck.

I didn't want her to see me like this, so I put my hand over my eyes and wiped the tears away. I got some foundation on my wrist sweatband—still not used to wearing makeup—and the sight of it made me feel even worse.

"It's that obvious, huh?"

"Yeah. Today you're playing really boring, Haru." Mai looked amused, for some reason.

"Oh. Well, sorry about that."

"Give me your phone."

"What?"

"I know you've got it. Unlock it, too, if you don't mind."

Admittedly, I was excited to have my photo taken with the seniors after practice, but... I took out my phone from my canvas tote bag that was nearby and handed it to her. I wasn't sure what she wanted.

Mai tapped away at the display for a minute, then...

*Ring ring.*

She'd set my phone to speaker, and she was calling someone.

"Huh? Hey, Mai, who are you calling?!"

I tried to grab it back, but Mai deflected me as easily as Suzu's off-hand.

"I thought I'd ask him to cast a lucky spell on you. I want the Haru back from that day."

That day...? Did she mean...?

But before I could say anything, the call got picked up.

"Hey. What's up?"

"..."

From the phone's speaker came the voice of the person I most wanted to hear from... And the last person I wanted to talk to.

Mai pretended to be oblivious to my discomfort and started talking.

"Is that Saku? This is Mai Todo."

"...What?!"

"Ashi High School's proud beauty, the super ace with the amazing bod."

"No, I mean, I remember you."

"Oh? So you think all those things about me?"

"...Ahem. So, what's up?"

*Hey, wait a minute, Chitose, what's going on now?*

*Yeah, I saw you admiring Nishino. She's got short hair, too.*

*Hmph. Sorry for my childlike ponytail, I guess.*

Mai continued, shoulders shaking with mirth. "I just wanted to chat."

*“Why? What’s going on today? And this is Haru’s phone, right?”*



“Well, forget about other women for now. What do you think of me?”

“I’m thinking you’re even more trouble than I’ve been told.”

“Then I’ll tell you about me. All the ways I’m troublesome.”

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?!”

I couldn’t hold back anymore and ended up just yelling.

“Haru?!” Chitose sounded taken aback.

*Oh, I guess he didn’t know he was on speaker.*

“And you! Hang up! Stop flirting!”

“You’re the ones who called me...”

“Oh, come on,” Mai grumbled. “Listen, right now I’m here with Haru, playing a practice game against some alumni she really admires. But it’s not going that well. Whisper some words of love to her like you did back then, Saku.”

“Ma-iii!”

As I panicked, Mai held the phone out toward me with a smug look on her face, as if to say, “All done.”

“Um... The thing is... Ugh, don’t listen to her...”

I needed to say something, throw him off... But I couldn’t get the words out.

If I said anything, it’d come out as a squawk.

If he comforted me now, I’d be relying on him again, and my heart would drift even farther from the court. Why was Mai, from No Boyfriends Allowed Ashi High, doing this...?

“Hey, Haru.”

Chitose was saying my name more softly than usual, like he’d picked up on something.

“Are you smiling right now?”

“Eh...?”

I wasn’t expecting him to ask that, and I ended up sounding stupid in my

response. A soft sigh emanated from the phone.

*“Remember what you told me back then? Smile. Don’t look so defeated.”*

I felt a bittersweet sensation, as if my throat was tightening.

Right... He was listening back then.

I was able to give him a boost while he was fighting all alone...

Chitose chuckled.

*“There you are with some older girls you admire and your biggest rival, right? The partner I know would be feasting right now.”*

...Ugh, this guy...

Always giving me the words I need, when I need them.

I can never talk myself into the right headspace. But when he says it, I immediately feel so much lighter.

Chitose was silent for a little while, and then, with some embarrassment, he said...

*“Also...I like y— I mean, I think my most favorite version of you is when you’re enjoying basketball.”*

*Beep...*

Without thinking, I ended the call.

Never mind saying sorry or thank you. I’d do that later.

My heart was thundering. The blood was rushing through my whole body, and I felt like I was on fire.

What is this? What now?

No matter what I tried, I couldn’t get out of my funk.

Mai watched me with a grin and a raised eyebrow. “Hmm? Is that what love is?”

“Shut up. Dummy. Don’t look at me.”

*Calm down, calm down.*

He was just on the verge of saying “I like you.” Although I know he didn’t mean *that* kind of like.

Argh! This is why I didn’t want to talk to him! I knew this would happen!

*We’re still in the middle of a game, but now all I can think about is him...*

“What are you doing? Playing house?”

I looked up to find Suzu glaring down at me.

“Making phone calls to a guy during the game? You’re really not engaged in this at all, are you?”

“Sorry, it was...”

Aki, standing beside her, cut me off midsentence.

“I’m not talking about Mai here. Sure seems like things have changed at Fuji High. All we thought about for three years was basketball, so we didn’t have any relationships to go all crazy over.”

She was smiling again, maybe because we weren’t playing right now, but there was something sarcastic in her gaze.

*Oh no... The senior girls think I suck, too...*

Any excitement I’d felt from talking to Chitose drained away.

I looked down, saying nothing, and Suzu continued in a mocking tone.

“Well, I’m not going to get involved in the romance of a high schooler, but at least choose a more intelligent guy. ‘Smile? Enjoy basketball?’ What kind of crappy advice is that? But I guess a half-hearted player would go for a bland guy, huh?”

“What...?”

What did she just say?

“Those are the words of someone who’s never put his heart and soul into anything.”

*Hey! Hold on a minute!*

“All right, I think that’s enough of a break. Miss Misaki, let’s finish this

quickly."

As I watched the backs of the retreating senior girls...

I felt something snap inside me.

*I don't mind being scolded or scoffed at.*

*I know my playing today has sucked. I can own that.*

*It's no surprise if people think I don't care enough about basketball.*

*But... But...*

*How dare she make fun of his philosophy?! She doesn't know a goddamn thing about the relationship we built this summer!!!*

I felt a tingling all over, like every cell in my body was on fire.

A surge of energy came from my toes to the tips of my fingers.

I threw away the sports towel I had around my neck and leaped to my feet.

Fists clenched tightly, I glared at the senior girls.

"Ooh!" Mai made a small sound of delight.

I know, what Suzu said wasn't all that bad.

It was my fault for showing weakness.

But didn't I promise?

His dream ended halfway—so I'd bring it to the finish line.

Okay, so right now I'm confused, torn between basketball and love, unable to focus on either.

I may just be fooling myself, thinking I can compete with the senior girls and Mai. Maybe I am naive. Maybe I haven't figured it all out yet. But...

I love seeing him light up with a bat in his hand. I love how he smiles in the face of adversity. I love how he does his best to the end, never giving up.

So I'm gonna prove it.

*The fire you gave to me is alive and well inside me!*

*I haven't really figured out how I want to live my life, but there's a sun that's*

*filled it with light.*

“Mai!”

I slammed my fist against my heart.

“These are *not* seniors I look up to. Now they’re enemies in my way! I’m gonna knock ’em on their asses!”

Mai grinned.

“All righty. Hey, let’s do that Fuji High pre-game hype thing.”

Oh yeah, Mai mentioned she really liked it, and she made me teach it to her. I turned to Mai, and we placed our hands on each other’s shoulders. Then I stamped.

“Are you in love?”

“We’re in love!”

Mai stamped, too.

“Is that love real?”

“It’s in our blood!”

“Then light a fire in your heart!”

“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!!!””

We stamped our feet fast and hard, like a drumbeat.

Then we slapped hands in a high-five, and both ran to the center circle.

We scattered, leaving Miss Misaki to do the toss-up, and Aki muttered something with a hint of a nostalgic smile.

"The pre-game chants haven't changed."

"Well, we like them."

"Miss Misaki thought them up."

"Oh, did she?"

I didn't know about that because when I joined the club, it was already in regular use.

I was a little taken aback. The chants were so passionate and kinda ballsy. Not what I'd expect from Miss Misaki.

Aki continued, her voice cooling. "From me to Kei, and from Kei to you, Umi... We may not come from a fancy basketball school like Ashi, but we're not to be underestimated. People are counting on you, so it's important to be able to shoulder that weight."

Suzu said something similar earlier, and I'd thought I understood.

But what kind of captain was she?

How did she lead her team?

"Aki, when you play, your usual expression disappears, doesn't it?" I said.

When I said this, she responded without even an eyebrow twitch.

"I don't want to telegraph anything on my face."

Hmm, that made sense.

It's true that you can't read Aki's thoughts from her facial expressions or eyeline while she's playing.

*But, I thought, steadying myself...*

"The players I respect smile."

Then I showed my teeth and kicked off against the floor.

"Miss Misaki!"

I dodged my mark and grabbed the ball.

Aki was trying to stick close to me, but I slid around her, took a second to

check Mai's position, and started running.

"Hyah!"

I hadn't forgotten the way they tore me apart in the first half.

The amazing playing of my seniors was burned into my mind.

*Skreek!*

Parallel to Aki, I hit the brakes and made a pass to Mai, who'd escaped her mark ahead.

"Not bad. Very fluid. I thought you were going to dribble and rush the basket again," said Aki.

"Thanks," I replied, but I was already running.

Mai passed to Miss Misaki, who passed to me again.

I was one-on-one with Aki inside the three-point line.

This was my domain.

I can get the ball down the court, but I can't break through the defense as easily.

Holding the ball, I won a few seconds of space, then took a half step back and went into my shooting stance.

Aki jumped to block me without hesitation.

It was playing out as it did in the first half, but...

I tossed the ball without looking.

"Hng!"

At the same time, Aki's eyes widened in surprise.

"Nice!"

I could hear Mai; she must have caught my pass.

*Yes, I did it!*

I've always thought this kind of passing is the domain of players like Nana and Aki; it requires a bird's-eye view of things, the ability to evaluate what's going

on when there are ten players. Of course, that's all still important, but just because I pulled it off in a 3v3 game, I wasn't going to assume I'd mastered the technique myself.

But one thing I've noticed from watching Aki is that she's always checking on the positions of the other nearby players even before she gets the ball.

This is just my guess, but I think that by constantly updating that mental map, you can predict to some extent how your teammates will behave in any given situation.

So that's how Aki already knows whether she should dribble or pass the moment the ball touches her hands.

Plus, relying on that mental map, you don't have to stare at the person you're passing to the whole time.

It's more like scanning the court as a whole and using peripheral vision.

Just now, I knew that Mai was coming to help me when I got stuck, so I just tossed the ball blindly and trusted she'd be there to grab it.

I didn't expect it to be so successful on my first try, though...

*Man, basketball really is fun!*

Even though I've been playing since elementary school, there are still so many things I haven't learned yet.

If I can keep learning, I can go even higher.

Just like him, swinging a wooden bat he wasn't used to.

Mai received my pass and took the shot, but it seemed like her shot connected with Suzu's fingertips, and it bounced off the hoop.

Miss Misaki grabbed it on the rebound and passed to me.

I still hadn't gotten past Aki cleanly since the game started.

I looked at Mai, who was fighting for position under the goal.

As soon as she got around Suzu and moved forward, I would pass.

But Aki jumped up to cut off that route, so I seized the moment to get around

her on the opposite side and keep moving forward.

“Dammit!”

I kept running, hearing my opponent *tsking* behind me.

“*Passing isn’t an escape route when you get stuck.*”

Aki’s words from earlier came back to me.

Taken literally, I think it meant to work with your teammates and not just panic, but I’m sure that wasn’t the only thing she was trying to convey.

For someone like me, who thrives on one-on-one situations, passing is like rolling and dribbling through my legs.

In other words, it becomes one of the weapons necessary to outwit your opponent.

If you have a player who’s only a threat during a drive, and a player who can also make sharp passes that directly lead to points, it goes without saying that the latter will be overwhelmingly difficult to defend against.

The reason is very simple: You have to stay vigilant against whatever they’re going to do.

Just now, because I’d made two passes earlier, Aki was easily lured by my fake-out.

*Swoosh.*

After shaking off Aki, I finally made my first shot.

Passing isn’t bad.

But this moment, when I get around my opponent and score a basket, it feels amazing.

“Yesss!”

I couldn’t help a small fist pump, and Aki’s neutral expression warmed a little.  
“Is the fire in your heart burning now?”

“Yep!”

Before I knew it, the misery that had been swirling in my chest had cleared up

completely.

*Because you said you like me better like this.*

*When things seem messy, focus on the strongest enemy in front of you, and deal with the rest later.*

...The score was 30 to 25 midway through the second half.

Mai was improving every minute, and I was able to take more shots. We were narrowing the gap, little by little.

But we were still far from victory.

Every time we got one step closer, they'd push us back.

*If we don't catch up now, we'll end up trailing all the way to the end of the game.*

As I was thinking about this, Suzu, who'd switched with Aki and was now marking me, gave a brief snort.

"You sure seem perkier now. Being encouraged by a man really got you going, huh?"

I chuckled.

"A long time ago, my partner said something to me. She said, 'I don't wanna lose to the kind of woman who's too proud to ask a guy for help.' I think I understand a little of what she meant."

Suzu flexed her knees and brushed back her super-short hair.

"Hmm. Bland man and bland partner."

Still smiling, I looked her right in the eye.

"You're going to eat those words, and the ones from earlier, too. I'm gonna wipe the floor with you."

Miss Misaki threw the ball to Mai, and with that as the signal, we all started running.

Suzu wasn't as fast on her feet as Aki, so I went ahead and received the pass from Mai.

I quickly carried the ball to the three-point line, stopped there, and adjusted my stance while I kept dribbling.

Suzu slipped between me and the hoop and hunkered down.

"You making fun of me, kid? You could have shot then."

"Maybe we've both been making fun of each other," I shot back, manipulating the ball with ease. "Shall we clarify things?"

"Bring it on!"

No passes, no tricks at this point.

It was a one-against-one battle with our pride as women at stake.

I'd show her how I could sink it fair and square.

I let the tension flow from my body.

I recalled the feeling I'd had when I'd competed against Mai.

Chitose swinging the bat, his movements as graceful as Japanese dance.

I copied what Suzu did before and did a subtle feint, using just my eyeline and my center of gravity.

Slowly, and then...

*Skreek!*

One burst of movement, all my power concentrated...

I controlled the ball with my right hand and set up a drive using my off-hand as a shield.

Naturally, Suzu saw what I was doing and reacted as well, and we collided, but Miss Misaki called no foul.

"Guh!"

Defending with my off-hand, I thought, *She's strong.*

I'm hardly weak, but against someone equally trained and taller than me, I'm always the one who gets dominated.

So maybe...

I could still feel the jab of Suzu's arm against my flesh.

Deeper, sharper, more fine-tuned.

Polish it up. Polish it up.

At that moment, the sound disappeared from the court, and I felt as if everything around me was moving in slow motion.

The position of the ball as I dribbled with my right hand, the pressure I was exerting with my off-hand, and Suzu's arm blocking my course—I felt it all, through my fingertips.

Suzu had shown me what to do through her playing style.

I ducked as low as I could, like I was readying for a dive into a pool.

Rather than competing head-on with a tall opponent...

*Swoop.*

I'd let my power flow...

Creating a path with my off-hand, I slipped under Suzu's arm.

"Are you kidding me?!"

Yep. I'm small, shrimpy, and agile, so this is the better option for me.

*"If you're the ace, I feel sorry for your team."*

I understand now.

I think, then, Suzu was struck by that thing I said: *"I'm hoping to learn a lot from you today."*

Is it okay to be so humble in the face of the enemy?

If you're an ace, show what you're made of. Crush your opponent, no matter who they are.

Thinking back on my own attitude... Ugh.

But I certainly have learned.

Now I know how to eat my opponents alive.

Right, Suzu?

*Swoop.*

I made a layup, then pointed a finger at Suzu.

“First point.”

Now the score was 30 to 27. We were within range!

She smiled, but there was a wolflike snarl in it.

“All right, Umi. I’m about to remind you who’s older and more experienced, so prepare yourself.”

I felt like I was floating on air. Just then, a large hand slapped me playfully on the back.

“You finally broke through, Umi.”

“Miss Misaki...”

I think she was talking about more than getting past Suzu.

Miss Misaki, who’d stayed on the sidelines until now, gave me a mischievous smile.

“Now then, it’s war from here on out. We have to show your seniors who’s boss, don’t we?”

A little ways away, Aki yelled with a smile in her voice. “Try not to get overexcited! You need to watch your health at your age.”

“Huh? Switch with me, Todo. I’m marking Aki now.”

“Sure, Misaki.”

As they passed each other, Miss Misaki whispered something to Mai.

After confirming that everyone was ready, Kei threw in the ball.

Aki grabbed it, turned, and started dribbling fast on the attack.

She was as quick as ever, but Miss Misaki could keep up.

I ran on the left side while marking Suzu.

Aki slowed down and paused, perhaps wary of Miss Misaki’s defense. She tends to try stealing the ball when she sees an opening.

*Swoop.*

As soon as there was a break in the tension, she slid her arm behind her back and made a pass without looking.

The ball was directed to Kei, who was free on the right side.

I gasped, but Miss Misaki simply grinned. “Gotcha.”

Mai swooped in and stole the pass.

Switching to defense, Miss Misaki kept grinning. “Aki, you’re obsessed with your no-look passes.”

“...”

“Also, Kei has a simple, shall we say naive, style.”

“Hey, that’s mean!”

From that short exchange, I could tell now what Miss Misaki said to Mai.

Something like, “Leave Kei unmarked, and aim to steal where Suzu can’t see you.”

And with Mai’s speed and flair, she was able to improvise.

I see... You can exploit those blind spots, too...

Yeah, nothing about that situation was forcing her to do a no-look pass.

Mai made a layup, and the score was 30 to 29.

*All right. Time to finish this.*

I summoned all of my fighting spirit...

“Umi, switch.” Miss Misaki came over to me.

She was probably planning on marking Suzu this time so she could mentor all of her students.

I nodded and went to mark Aki.

“Kei, let’s go!”

Suzu grabbed the ball enthusiastically and tried to make a quick attack, making skillful use of her off-hand, but...

*Stamp.*

After only a few feet, Miss Misaki stole the ball.

"You're so obsessed with your off-hand moves, your basic ball handling is poor! Haven't you fixed that yet?"

"Dammit!"

*She makes it sound easy, I thought... I bet Suzu was thinking the same thing.*

It's true that using the off-hand too much can result in an offensive foul if you get it wrong, so it's just a secondary technique in driving forward. If the player gets too distracted and loses control of the ball, your off-hand technique doesn't mean anything. But Suzu's dribbling wasn't as bad as it could have been.

We switched offense and defense again, and Miss Misaki passed the ball to Mai, who was free of her mark and could head directly to the basket.

Suzu yelled as she chased after her. "Aki, go shore up the inside. Umi can't do anything from there."

Aki nodded, dashing toward Mai.

I bit my lip, thinking how she'd gotten a read on me in such a short amount of time.

I was now outside the three-point line. If I was Nana or Mai, I'd just go for the basket...

Shooting from the outside wasn't something I had nailed down, so if I got the ball, I'd have two choices: return the ball to the inside, where the defense was thick, or rush for the basket myself.

In that case, since I'm so short, I should focus on passing while guarding to make a three-pointer happen, but I've always been stubborn and stuck to making drives at the basket.

On the left side, Mai was keeping the ball with amazing handling against Kei and Aki.

She truly was an all-rounder. I could cry.

Even girls blessed with height keep trying to aim higher.

Mai called out, a confident look on her face. “Maybe I’ll put an end to this game right now.”

Rolling the ball and moving back...

“You look like you want this ball.”

And she used her momentum to make a pass to me.

I received the ball outside the three-point line.

Darn it. She was right. I wanted it.

“Hah, watch her crash and burn.”

Suzu’s voice rang throughout the gym.

As my seniors could tell, I was still immature.

I was wavering between basketball and a boy, and because of that, I can’t dedicate my full passion to either. I try to get motivated, but by myself, I’ve been lost.

*I can’t see the future at all, I’m a different person from day to day, and I don’t have any medals to be proud of, but still...*

*...I don’t want to lie to the boy I love.*

I grabbed the ball in both hands and bent my knees.

Suddenly, I got a flashback of that home run of Chitose’s that I saw.

What was it I thought at the time?

*I don’t want to go too far away from him.*

*No... It’s different now.*

*I can be me. I can fly as high as I want to fly.*

I’d catch up and show him that I was worthy of standing beside him.

I braced my legs and flew.

All I was focused on was the sensation of my fingertips, the shining rim of the hoop.



I took my shot straight from outside the three-point line.

I drew a high arc.

Like the midday moon, like the midsummer sun.

For the both of them, it was still unrequited love.

*May I reach your heart.*

*I love you, basket.*

*I love you, darling.*

The ball traced an arc like a rainbow in the sky, then fell through the basket.

*Sshwooop.*

Right through, nothing but net.

“OH YEAH!!!”

I raised my fist in the air, yelling.

I’d been secretly practicing my two-handed three-point shot ever since the game against Ashi High.

My fire hadn’t gone out, after all.

Like that pass from earlier. When faced with a forward who’s only a threat on the inside and a forward who can shoot from the outside, there’s no need to think about which one is more of a threat to the opponent.

I’m not a sharpshooter like Nana, sure, and I can’t get the distance when I shoot one-handed.

But fooling the others into thinking I was way out of range kept them out of my hair while I took the shot.

I’ve always known this technique existed, but I’ve always turned from it.

It’s like I’d be admitting that I can’t compete head-on, with my height.

Like I was running from the true field of battle, the inside.

*But I think, if you were me...you’d reach for it, if there was still the inner potential to get stronger.*

Mai was staring at me with a stunned expression. “Wow, that’s your secret weapon?”

“I wanted to keep it a secret until we beat Ashi High in an official game.”

“Well, you’ll have another one by then, won’t you, Haru?”

“Love is a heavy thing.”

Suzu, watching our exchange, started laughing hard.

“Yes! This is what the Fighting Girls of Fuji High basketball are all about. But Umi, don’t go thinking you’ve won.”

“Of course. I won’t stop until you’re crying and ready to take back what you said.”

“Fine with me. Let’s go.”

““Let’s burn up the court!””

Then we all started running again.

Beyond generations, teams, and positions.

The gym filled with the squealing sounds of basketball shoe rubber.

*Ah, yes... I wish...*

*I wish that my blazing heart for basketball will endure forever on the court.*



In the end, we lost the match 42 to 37.

We fought hard, but in the end, they got us with their superior experience and ability.

There must be a lot of players like them on the front lines of college teams.

As we bowed to one another across the center line, Aki’s expression suddenly warmed, and a smile returned to her eyes.

She took my hand and held it, looking somewhat apologetic. “Umi, Mai, I’m really sorry. We were real jerks, weren’t we?”

“Uh... Ah-ha-ha...”

"You're not even going to say no?! This is all Miss Misaki's fault! Now our cute little juniors totally hate our guts!"

Miss Misaki just laughed, while I was getting whiplash from Aki's sudden change of character.

"I asked them to do something dramatic to shake you up, since you seemed to be in some sort of mental block. But I don't remember asking them to act like they were in some bad teen movie."

"Hey!"

Little by little, I began to understand the situation.

Miss Misaki must have noticed I was having trouble and asked the senior girls to help.

Aki puffed out her cheeks and continued. "We're athletes, not counselors. We've never even met you; there's no way we'd be able to subtly suss out your issues and offer advice."

"Right," said Suzu, her shoulders shaking with laughter. "We figured the best thing to do would be to find her sore spot and hammer on it, get her mad enough to release all that pent-up tension."

"Wow..."

*What a sloppy method. Like we were at a sports day or something. Geez.*

*I mean, I get it... But wow, they played me.*

Aki smiled, pointing at her partner.

"Suzu was forcing herself to play the bad guy, so she had to act like a mysterious cool character at first."

Suzu scratched her head. "I mean, saying the wrong thing would blow the whole thing. So I decided to speak as little as possible."

"Once the match started, though, you completely forgot about acting and went back to normal."

Ah, so this was her *real* personality...

Miss Misaki interrupted the conversation. "Aki's coldhearted routine was

oddly alluring.”

“Hey, Miss Misaki! Don’t make fun of me! I went to all the trouble of helping you out!”

Suzu asked something that had been on my mind. “So, were you also acting while you were playing?”

Suzu answered for Aki. “Nope. She always has that game face on during a match. But usually, she’s as easygoing as anything.”

“If I don’t stay cool, other people start to lose their heads.”

*It’s kinda nice, I thought. If Nana and I went to the same university, would we be able to stay together forever?*

I still have no idea what my future looks like.

“That aside...”

Aki let out an exaggerated sigh and shrugged her shoulders. “I’m super tired.”

Suzu flopped down on the floor, too. “Seriously. And you were all, ‘Oh, it’s just gonna be a little warm-up and playtime.’”

“No, you said that.” Aki smiled sarcastically. “Miss Misaki played us, too. You could have warned us you were going to bring two superstar high schoolers. We almost freaking lost, you know?!”

Miss Misaki grinned. “I was worried you were getting big heads at that university and neglecting your practice. I thought a loss might be a good lesson for you.”

“Miss Misaki, you really suck sometimes.”

“Hmm, if you’re complaining this much, I guess you two still haven’t fixed those flaws I pointed out.”

“We wanted to show our best, playing against juniors! We usually follow directions, though.”

“All right, then.”

“By the way,” Aki said, putting her arm around Mai’s shoulders. “You’re pretty amazing, huh, Mai? It’s true, today’s Ashi High isn’t the Ashi High we knew.”

You're way ahead of the ace from our generation. But—and maybe I don't have a right to say this after being scolded by Miss Misaki—it seems you like to mess around a little."

"Right, right," Suzu interjected, grinning. "She even tried to attack *me* one-on-one! This kind of player's dangerous. She won't stop until she wins."

Mai tossed her head, her eyes sparkling. "And you two were amazing, Aki and Suzu. I'd like to play against you both a little more."

"No more," Aki wailed, running away from Mai, toward me.

After composing herself, her eyes went wide and warm.

"Umi..."

Aki placed her fist above my heart.

"I was a little worried about you before, but after you got all fired up, you were as impressive as Mai was. I know you're gonna carry the torch. From now on, you'll keep getting better and better. Keep your head up and keep running, and don't let the fire in your heart die."

Suzu also stood up and put her arm around my shoulders.

"Your last three-pointer surprised me. And your passing and your off-hand. But don't limit yourself. Forget about your height handicap. Just toss those thoughts in the trash. Keep focusing on your drive. Eat the defense up. If you defeat everyone who stands in your way, you'll reach the top."

I swallowed the joy that bubbled up within me and blinked back hot tears.

"Right!"

I was full of gratitude.

Aki and Suzu looked at each other and burst out laughing.

They're so talented, so passionate, and so kind.

They truly were the seniors I admired.

Then Suzu seemed to think of something. "By the way, have you two decided on your career path yet?"

I scratched my cheek. "Well, I'd like to be able to continue playing basketball in college, but I don't have any solid plans in mind yet..."

Mai nodded. "My coach, Tommy, has given me some recommendations, but I haven't really thought about them properly."

Suzu beamed. "Then you two should come to our university. Then we can play together."

"Huh...?"

Aki clapped her hands. "Yeah! I wanna pass to Umi and Mai."

I'd never really thought about it.

But university lasts for four years. If we went to the same school, I could play on the same team as them.

And so could Mai.

Suzu continued, gauging my reaction.

"Many players from our team go on to play for corporate teams. That way, even after they graduate from university, they can continue playing basketball. Aiming for the Olympics isn't just a pipe dream, either."

There's no pro women's basketball in Japan.

So, of course, I knew that if I wanted to play serious basketball even after I finished my education, I would have to join a corporate team.

*...The Olympics, huh?*

I imagined it for just a moment.

A forward under five feet tall standing on the court, wearing a Japan national team uniform. Driving through crazy-tall opponents from other countries. It's an insane yet thrilling idea.

Looking around me, I see Nana, Mai, Aki, and Suzu.

I doubt the reality would work out just like that, but it's still a dazzling enough goal to fight for.

I stood there, heart pounding, as Mai spoke. "You look thoughtful."

"Eh, maybe." It was a lukewarm response for the fire burning within me.

I was thinking of his face.

I want to challenge myself, I want to see how far I can go, and I want to still have dreams even after I graduate.

But if I do that...

If I get too preoccupied for romance...

"By the way..."

As I was churning over it all again, Suzu spoke, like she'd just thought of something. "You didn't beat me, but I'll still take back what I said earlier."

"Huh...?"

"You know. I made fun of your man and your partner, didn't I?"

Halfway through, I was so absorbed in the competition that I completely forgot about it.

But that was why things got so heated in the first place.

I responded with a little smile. "It's okay. You were just trying to provoke me."

Suzu looked away.

*Hmm...?*

After a short silence, Suzu continued, looking apologetic and embarrassed. "Well, I was actually pretty steamed..."

Her voice trailed off, almost inaudible by the end.

"Seriously?!"

Suzu scratched her head and then smiled. "But, well, when I watched you play after that, I realized that any guy you chose, you must have chosen with genuine passion. I'm sorry for calling him bland."

"Uh, then..."

I mustered up the courage to ask while clutching the hem of my T-shirt.

"...Did you seniors really not have boyfriends for the entire three years of high

school?"

Suddenly, the place became quiet.

For some reason, Miss Misaki was desperately holding back her laughter, gazing at the ground.

When I looked over, Suzu's tightly clenched fist was trembling. "Hey, Aki, did you just hear something?"

Aki put on a faint smile, but her voice was icy. "Hmm? I think something was in my ear. Maybe she should try saying it again."

I coughed, confused, and tried to speak again...

"What I asked was, did you seniors, for three years of high school..."

"Don't say it again!!!"

They all yelped at me angrily.

"Hey, Aki, we were being naive. Let's crush this cheeky junior right here."

"I agree. We don't want Umi's boyfriend coming to watch the game and messing up her passes."

They closed in on me.

"Ah, I didn't mean..." I gulped.

But they clearly knew I didn't mean it as a joke or dig.

Both of them looked at me with puzzled faces.

"I mean, Aki said she only thought about basketball for three years and didn't have time for romance... And Mai said that boyfriends were forbidden at Ashi High... So..."

I fell silent, realizing I was stumbling over my words.

"“Psshhh!!!”"

For some reason, Aki and Suzu both burst out laughing at the same time.

Finally, even Miss Misaki couldn't hold back anymore, until all three of them were holding their stomachs.

"H-he... It was a serious question..."

I was so confused!

Suzu gasped for air between guffaws. "What now, Aki? I think Umi misunderstood all your big talk."

"It wasn't big talk! Anyway, it's all a matter of interpretation!" Aki dramatically wiped her eyes, then looked at me. "Sorry, Umi. I got carried away with what I said, but it's not like we were forbidden to date like they are at Ashi High. And I'm really sorry for how I said it, but the truth is, I just never had a boyfriend."

"Um, you mean, you cut out all unnecessary things in order to play basketball seriously...?"

"Ha-ha-ha." Suzu snorted. "We're not samurai, you know. We always talked about crushes in the clubroom, but we weren't very feminine, so we never even dipped a toe in that world. Right, Kei?"

Kei hadn't been saying much, acting more as a support for the seniors, but she narrowed her eyes. "You know, Umi. The reason I was so sensitive to boy talk was because of them. I thought if I let my guard down, I would end up retracing the same path and end up getting super annoyed with any junior who had a boyfriend, right up until graduation."

Miss Misaki, who was watching the exchange with a grin, came over and wrapped her arm tightly around my shoulders.

"I'm not going to criticize Ashi High's policy. In fact, some people go completely off the rails because of love affairs. I can understand the rationale behind banning them so the team can focus on basketball. However, I believe in the potential of you girls and your passion for basketball."

"Huh...?"

Miss Misaki looked at Aki, Suzu, then Kei.

After taking a short breath, she spoke again.

"Aki, if you want a man?"

"Hold him close!"

“Suzu, if he doesn’t care?”

“Knock ‘im down!”

“We are...”

“““Fighting girls!!!”””

Miss Misaki grinned as the voices of the seniors rang out.

“Listen, Umi, this is my answer. Love and friendship, success and failure, conflict and struggle, regret and frustration—and the man you love. Embrace them all and become stronger. Put everything you have into it and shoot for your goal.”



\*

“Ah...”

Miss Misaki hugged my shoulders tightly.

“You’re not warriors. You’re *fighting girls*.”

My heart bubbled up like the Ramune we drank that day.

The marble rolling in the bottle sounded like church bells.

The heavy dark curtain that hung deep inside my chest became white and transparent, like a wedding veil.

Crazy thoughts went through my mind, but I was starting to feel like maybe it was okay to vacillate between the moon and the sun.

I didn’t want to let my feelings show in a smile. I tensed my lips, but I could feel my cheeks glowing.

“Huh? You didn’t notice?” Mai’s eyes softened in amusement, the corners of her lips quirking up.

I realized that Aki, Suzu, Kei, and Miss Misaki, too... Their expressions were all a little different, but they were watching me warmly.

Mai kept peering at me. “It was the same during the game in July, too. After talking to Saku, you really reached your peak, Haru.”

“Don’t be stupid...!”

But it’s true. I’d said the same thing myself.

Suzu burst out laughing.

“You didn’t even realize it! In the first half, you were as sad as an abandoned cat caught in the rain, but as soon as I made fun of your man, you started trying to tear my throat out.”

“Well, you provoked me...”

But Aki continued. “Seeing you chitchatting with your boyfriend on the phone during halftime actually really annoyed me, though. I was serious when I went over to tell you to knock it off.”

"H-he's not my boyfriend!" I protested weakly.

"You've started something you can't give up on, Umi," said Kei, looking thoughtful and mature.

"Kei..."

I once had a conversation like this.

At that time, it was about Nana.

And it turned out exactly as we said.

"So..." Mai said. "That's why I asked you so much about Saku. I've never really cared before, but I thought maybe if I learned about love, I'd become even stronger."

*Ugh, you're so annoying!*

And she's talented and dedicated enough to make anyone fall for her.

However, I couldn't keep from smiling.

"I won't give him away. He's mine."

"Whatever. If you want him, grab him. And if he turns you down, drop him. Right?"

"Argh, don't be stupid!"

*Tsk, she can't be serious, can she?*

Having a basketball rival is fine, but having her as my love rival? No way!

As I was musing over that, Miss Misaki clapped me on the back.

"...You won't be young for long. Fall in love, girls."

...

After a short silence...

""""We don't wanna hear that from *you*, Miss Misaki!""""

The three seniors all spoke at the same time.

Then Mai spoke.

"By the way, I forgot, Tommy asked me to give you a message, Miss Misaki. It

was: ‘Looks like you won’t be getting married anytime soon, right?’...”

Ah, friends always cut the deepest.

I rolled my eyes a little as Miss Misaki frowned.

“All right. You girls are gonna get it today. Better prepare yourselves. And Todo... You call Tominaga here for a little chat.”

Grinning, Aki picked up a ball and started dribbling.

“Let’s change up the teams anyway. I want to pass to Umi, so I’ll give you Kei,” Suzu said, stretching. “It would be interesting to attack together with Mai. You can have Kei.”

“So nobody needs me?!”

Listening to Kei admonishing the others brought back some nice memories, and I closed my eyes.

The cicadas were quieter now this time of day, somehow listless. The early setting sun that came in through the second-floor window spilled across the court, brilliant even through my closed eyelids.

The breeze blowing through the open door smelled like twilight.

The sound of the balls being hit by the baseball team practicing outside echoed like the end-of-day bell.

Summer was coming to an end anyhow.

And I was changing.

*But, I thought, slowly opening my eyes.*

Though I may lose my way, get lost in worries, get hurt...

I have people around me who are saying it’s okay.

Because there’s a place where I can face up against my weaknesses and fight with everything I’ve got.

So, I...

I kicked off against the court with a squeak of rubber.

...Good-bye to the summer that changed me.

Let's meet here again next year.

## AFTERWORD



It's been a while. Hiromu here.

I have a feeling that this time, the afterword will be packed with announcements and acknowledgments. Even now, there might be some readers who still aren't following my Twitter, so please forgive me for going into detail.

First of all, *Chitose Is in the Ramune Bottle* won first place in the *This Light Novel Is Amazing!* 2022 competition for the second time since last year, making it the first debut work to win twice in a row!!!

Last year, I came in first place, something I'd never imagined, but this year, I decided to aim for the top spot from the beginning. To be more precise, I worked with the belief that if I could finish Volumes 5 and 6 to my satisfaction, in addition to Volume 4, which was barely out of the voting period last time, I would be able to aim for a second consecutive victory. Or something like that.

So, when I heard the results, it was like instant relief (by the way, the editor in charge, Iwaasa, kept starting phone conversations with fake-outs like, "Hiromu, unfortunately..." so you'll have to forgive me for being a nervous wreck).

Anyway, thank you to all the readers who voted!

In response to the results, there's a slew of good *Chiramune* stuff coming your way. (In fact, some of them were already underway before I heard the results, but let's not quibble over details.)

There's a fully voiced video featuring all the heroines, commemorative goods commemorating the second *This Light Novel Is Amazing!* victory, and the production of the long-awaited *Chiramune* LINE app stamps drawn by none other than raemz, plus more!

And the biggest thing to report is that there are various collaborative projects underway, with the full cooperation of Fukui City in Fukui Prefecture!

I'll try to jot down everything using bullet points, okay?

- An online stage tour has been decided! (Real-time streaming is scheduled for March 21, from two PM to three thirty PM, right after this volume is released. You can watch it for free.)
- *Chiramune* × Fukui City collaboration poster production and display
- *Chiramune* sacred place pilgrimage map distribution
- Character life-size panel installation and keyword rally
- *Chiramune* × Fukui original goods
- Collaboration project with stores that appear in *Chiramune*

...Seeing it all laid out is incredible, like something out of a dream.

I would actually like to give you the details for each one (as there are deadlines approaching), but there aren't enough pages available to me here, so if you're interested, please go to the Gagaga Bunko official website and visit the special subsite to commemorate the second consecutive competition victory. I think you can easily find what you need by searching for "Fukui City *Chiramune*."

Also, apart from that, there is a collaboration with the familiar shopping mall Lpa, which appears in the first volume (a bus decorated with *Chiramune* art, a huge signboard on the outside wall, original cards and tin badges, et cetera; I could talk about it all day...), and FBC Radio's "After School ☆ LIVE" program has a *Chiramune* feature. The passion of my hometown for this work knows no bounds!

Wonderfully (and surprisingly), neither I, Hiromu, nor Shogakukan approached them about any of this at all.

Just like the catchphrase of the fourth volume, "Catch the Fever," the enthusiasm of the readers in Fukui spread like wildfire, and the sight of *Chiramune* permeating wider and wider, beyond the hands of this author, was amazing. It still doesn't feel very real to me.

Now, let's move on to the acknowledgments.

First of all, I would like to express my gratitude to everyone who has worked hard to make the collaboration between *Chiramune* and Fukui City a reality, and to everyone who has generously cooperated. I never dreamed that I would be able to create such a large-scale project.

Also, I would like to thank *URALA* and *HOSHIDO* for taking the time to answer my questions for the purpose of writing Volume 6.5! I would just like to make a disclaimer here and say that I, Hiromu, have reconstructed the majority of the stories as fiction, based on the things that each person told me, so the *URALA* and *HOSHIDO* that appear here belong only to the world of *Chiramune*. If you have any opinions, please direct them to me!

By the way, I'd like to mention one more thing: Just because we're collaborating with Fukui City, that doesn't mean there are any dodgy backroom deals with people asking us specifically to set scenes in their establishments (lol). Including in this volume, the locations that appear in the story are places that *Chiramune*'s characters visit of their own volition, and things that they eat and so on are their own choices, so please read with confidence and don't make any strange assumptions! (Even when it wasn't related to the collaboration, I kept including more and more stuff about Fukui...lol.)

Thank you, raemz, not only for the cover and general artwork, including the monochrome drawings, but also for the wonderful, newly drawn LINE stamps! I plan on spamming everyone I know with them! Also, raemz was selected as the second-place winner in the illustrator category of the *This Light Novel Is Amazing!* prize! As a friend, as someone who's walked the path of this series together, and of course as a huge fan, I am delighted! Congratulations! And Iwaasa, the editor in charge—you had wanted to try Fukui crab since the first volume, but on the night we finally got to eat it, you were apparently in such bad health that you couldn't taste it at all...so we're just going to have to go and eat it again sometime soon (lol).

In addition, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to everyone involved in *Chiramune*, such as those in charge of advertising and proofreading and, most of all, to all the readers who gave us the gift of winning the big prize for the second time in a row.

I hope I've managed to write a story that you might think of in summers to come.

HIROMU

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