

# TRAPEZIUM

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Idol culture has been around in Japan for quite some time now. Every few years, a boom comes around, but it feels like it is in a period of decline now.

For Yu Azuma, it didn't really matter.

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## Ch.1 South Star ~ The Girl with Ringlet Curls ~

\* 1 \*

Day one of the project.

After homeroom, I boarded the 4:00PM train like usual. In this rural town where only one train runs every hour, the students who are not members of any club naturally get to be acquainted. But today was different.

“I heard that Takahashi got suspended from school for sneaking on a train. A cab driver saw him climbing a fence and he was reported.”

“Really? That's hilarious.”

The conversation of two unknown high school boys echoed in the empty train car. As the departure announcement was made, the train began to move in the opposite direction as usual. What am I even doing? When I pressed my three left fingers against my pulse, I felt strong beats. There were many chances to turn back, but I refused. It's a stupid and hopeless project, but it seems I'm prepared to start.

Located at the southern tip of the peninsula, a station is famous for being empty. The desertedness of the station could be felt the moment I got off the train. The station had a dilapidated playground attached to it, with a panda that had lost an eye to weathering and a rabbit that looked like it was bleeding, both buried in overgrown weeds. It's fine during the day, but just imagining passing through here at night is creepy. I want to complete the mission smoothly and hurry back home.

After walking along the main street by the sea for a while, I saw a small sign. It didn't take as long as I thought. If I turn down this road, I'll be a little closer to today's destination. The strong sea breeze was annoyingly pushing my back.

—Holy South Teneritas Girls Academy.

Looking up at the majestic school gate, I returned its gaze without backing down. As a bonus, I paid my respects to the plaque sculpted in a style like the manga, “The Rose of Versailles.” I had confirmed in advance using Google Street

View that there was no guard room, and as I expected, there was not a single security guard in sight.

However, the private young ladies' school was not so easy to pass through without any obstacles.

"Hey, what are you doing?"

"Me?"

"Is there anyone else here?"

Looking around, there was indeed no one else. The girl in the white blazer stared at me with a fierce look, as if she were peering into a hole. She confidently crossed her arms and slowly closed the distance between us.

"What business do you have at our school?"

"I just stopped by on a whim."

"It's impossible to believe that you would come here to such a remote place without any reason."

"..."

Should I tell the truth to avoid suspicion? But I don't think she would understand me easily even if I did.

"Well, Ms. Suspicious, let's go to the staff room together."

"I'm not suspicious."

"Why are you here then?"

"I just... want friends..."

"Friends?"

"I just want to have friends at this school."

"Hmm, that's funny."

The girl snorted loudly and then began to laugh, covering her eyes. There was nothing refined about her actions.

“You know, someone as elegantly dressed as you wouldn’t fit in with our students. Understand? That skirt with those slit-like openings, and that ribbon wrapped around your neck like a leek. Quite sophisticated. I can't keep up with that.”

“Well...”

“Dealing with you seems like it would be troublesome, so I’ll excuse myself. Be grateful. I’ll overlook the fact that you’ve trampled on the name of Teneritas.”

Watching the girl leave, I tried to stay calm and assess the situation. But it wasn't easy to suppress my anger.

“Ugh, what Teneritas...”

I raised my middle finger in the back of that blasted girl. She was being sarcastic. The uniform I'm wearing from Joshu East High School is notoriously bad. It's a well-known fact among the locals.

According to nationwide surveys, 60-70% of female middle school students are concerned about school uniforms when advancing to high school or taking entrance exams, with over half saying that the uniform is a deciding factor in choosing a school. In other words, one out of every two female middle school students chooses a high school based on its uniform.

However, East High has a high entrance exam ratio and a decent brand reputation. It's something to be proud of, as it has enough tradition and charm to cover up the unfashionable uniform.

If the meaning of Teneritas in Latin is really “tenderness,” then that girl should be expelled. Sarcastic Girls Academy should be established and have her quickly arranged to be transferred there.

\* 2 \*

As I proceeded into the courtyard, a scenery reminiscent of a fairy tale world unfolded before me. Broad-leaved trees were planted to cover the school building from the inside, and beneath them, several benches were placed where one could

enjoy the shade. As I gazed at the beautiful fountain reflecting the setting sun, I couldn't help but wonder if this was truly a school.

I crossed paths with Teneritas students who seemed to be heading home several times, but the psychological trauma from earlier hindered me from approaching them easily. Overwhelming anxiety and impatience. Just when my confidence was about to disappear, a girl carrying a tennis racket came into view.

“Wait!”

I was momentarily captivated by her looks. I had planned to start by gathering information, but it seemed my plans had changed. I desperately tried to catch up, but the girl went towards the back of the tennis court. Without thinking, I grabbed onto the fence with all my might. I must not lose sight of her, shining like a pure gold ingot.

“Excuse me.”

“Yes?”

“Are you here for the tennis club?”

When I turned around, a petite woman in tennis gear was standing there. Her face looked exactly like the actress Ikue Sakakibara from the past.

“Um...”

“That uniform, you’re from East High?”

“Yes.”

“I see, you came to spy on us, huh?”

“S-Spy?”

“I never expected a student from East High to come here. It seems we’ve become stronger too. Since you’re here, why not join us for a bit?”

“Well, I...”

“Oh, come on!”

Forcibly, I was handed a tennis racket and I reluctantly gripped the handle. My experience with tennis was limited to physical education classes, but I was confident in my athletic abilities. The problem was my opponent.

“To give you a taste, you'll first have a match with her.”

The girl resembling Ikue brought along a pure gold ingot.

Seeing her up close, she was so beautiful and well-put-together that I couldn't help but tense up. I wanted to avoid hitting the ball into her face at all costs.

“I'm Azuma. Pleased to meet you.”

“I'm Ranko Katori. Come at me with all you've got.”

She smiled at me, a beauty down to her name. At that moment, memories of a manga I read at my mother's family's house long ago came flooding back.

“...Madame Butterfly?”

Ringlet curls with a big ribbon. Perfect proportions like a girl from a manga. I see, the southern beauty named “Ranko Katori” was none other than Reika Ryuzaki, who had jumped out from the pages of “Aim for the Ace!”

"Game, set. Won by Katori."

The result was a straight win for Katori. Although I lost the match, I managed to push it to deuce in the final set, which was a decent performance for an amateur. Maybe I have some talent for tennis after all.

“East High, you should leave.”

“Huh?”

Ikue forcefully pulled my arm, paying no mind to my will.

“I'm disappointed. To think you'll lose to someone like Katori.”



“Please wait...”

“I have no business with a loser. Bye.”

Without exchanging a word with Katori, I was chased out of the tennis court. A big question mark floated above my head. I couldn't just go home silently like this. Should I wait for Katori to finish her club activities? But meeting Ikue again would be awkward.

“Azuma!”

At that moment, I heard a voice calling me from beyond the fence. The heavens were on my side. The pure gold ingot with a big ribbon was coming towards me.

“Let's go somewhere else.”

Katori grabbed my wrist. I couldn't help but feel nervous at the warmth transmitted from her long, white arm. It was a stark contrast to when Ikue had pulled me earlier.

When we reached the courtyard, Katori let go of my hand and gently sat on a bench.

“I just want to thank you, Azuma.”

“Thank me?”

“Yes. Before the match, you called me Madame Butterfly, didn't you?”

“Yes.”

“I was happy. You see, I love ‘Aim for the Ace!’ and joined the tennis club because of it.”

“I love it too! I read it at my mother's family's house...”

“Azuma, what club are you really in?”

“Huh?”

“You’re surely not in the tennis club.”

“.....”

“It’s impossible for me to win against anyone.”

Katori looked down with a sad expression. The rose petals that were in full bloom just moments ago now fell, seeming ephemeral.

“...I’m sorry.”

“There’s no need to apologize. It’s embarrassing, isn’t it? To think I look like this but being weaker at tennis than anyone else.”

It was surprising. When I first saw her, I thought she was a perfect and flawless woman. But now, she seemed fragile, vulnerable, and meek.

“I don’t know why you came here, Azuma... but thank you, either way.”

“Actually, I came here to make friends at this school.”

“To make friends?”

“Yes. It’s strange, isn’t it?”

“It is.”

Katori squinted her eyes and gave a gentle, dignified laugh filled with kindness.

“But, we’re both strange, aren’t we?”

She took my hand again and wrapped it gently. Her fingers, thin and delicate, seem unsuited for sports. I felt embarrassed as my own hands were so big compared to hers.

“As a thank you for calling me Madame Butterfly, if you’re okay with me, I’ll be your friend.”

Filled with a sense of satisfaction greater than when I passed the Pre-First Grade of the English Proficiency test, I returned home and opened the iron gate of my house. I greeted a neighbor I encountered on the way with a “good day,” but all I received in return was a strange look and a simple “welcome back.” What had I been expecting? The environment I had lived in so far suddenly felt meager when viewed from a different perspective.

Without stopping in the living room, I headed straight to my room, condensed into a five-tatami mat space, and sat down in a chair, setting aside some time to reminisce. It seemed I had somehow accomplished my mission. For a first attempt, it was quite decent.

I spread out a homemade map on my desk, reminiscent of Ino Tadataka, and placed a large X over Holy South Teneritas Girls’ Academy located below. I didn’t feel like writing anything on the career path survey paper that was also spread out on the desk.

My phone rang. It was a call from the girl from earlier. I had saved her number under the name “Minami” which means South.

## Ch.2 West Star ~ The Girl with Overly Long Sleeves ~

\* 1 \*

From east to west, I arrived at an unfamiliar station again today. There are three high schools in this station's vicinity, and I vaguely remember their respective features and uniforms. In a region with not a particularly large population, general information about the school district is widely known and shared. The only exception seemed to be Holy South Teneritas Girls' Academy. Rumors circulated about the school having fees more than five times that of public schools, and that students were taught arts like violin, harp, and classical ballet in class. However, since I didn't know anyone personally who went there, the truth remained unknown to me until I met Minami.

I don't know anyone at the school I'm about to go to. However, it is a traditional school with a history of 50 years. There is some "reliable information" flowing in this direction.

I headed towards the main gate against the flow of students leaving school. Unlike the other day, all I passed were boys, boys, boys. Not a single one in a school uniform. Perhaps because it's a five-year program, they all looked older than me. Yes, the place ahead is not a high school. My next target is West Techno Technical Junior College, with a deviation value of 66.

When I was around 4 or 5 years old, my mother and I once came to the cultural festival called "Industrial Festival" at the West Techno Technical Junior College. About 10 years have passed since then, and visiting here again, I didn't feel as nostalgic as I thought I would. The only memories left to me are the fact that I came here and the brief time I spent playing "goldfish scooping," but I try to paste that trimmed memory vividly in my mind now.

It was inside a classroom. My first time goldfish scooping in my life. Even if the scoops tore several times, the technical college boys would exchange it for a new one. Thanks to them, I was able to scoop up the red goldfish I aimed for, and the boys were delighted with me. I remember looking at the transparent vinyl pouch they wrapped as a souvenir and realizing that two more goldfish had been given to me. It was such a nice surprise that I might have forgotten to thank them.

Even now, the goldfish from that time are in our aquarium at home. One of the goldfish I got as an extra managed to survive in the cutthroat world of goldfish. That survivor has managed to thrive in the world of survival of the fittest, but recently its backbone has become a little crooked. It is good at making poker faces and it is probably still drifting alone in the aquarium today. But I don't have time to drift like a goldfish now. A boy from the goldfish scooping, kind and with an impressive smile. Such a technical college boy will gently reach out to me surely today again.

“Are you meeting someone?”

“...No.”

“I see. Hey, can you give me your contact info?”

“.....”

I deeply regret what I did two seconds ago. This boy should not be wearing a V-neck that is roughly open at the chest to school. The black skinny pants he wears underneath also look tight around his thighs, making it hard for him to move. If that were the case, a polo shirt and camel-colored pants from Uniqlo would be much better. His coordination gives an obvious impression as if he is wearing the same clothes his mother bought him.

“I’m sorry. I don't have my phone.”

When I flatly refused, he left with his mouth pouty like Suneo from the anime, Doraemon. I stealthily put my phone I was holding into my bag. With only a feeling of “I’m honestly sorry,” I let the guilt I felt toward him be buried.

There was something that had been bothering me since earlier. I couldn't help but feel someone’s gaze from the bicycle parking lot which can be seen on the left just after entering the main gate, about 30 meters ahead of me. No, it was not just a feeling. There is someone who is clearly looking at me. His green checkered shirt stood out even from a distance.

(Is he trying to hide?)

This time should be when club activities are taking place, but students are flooding out of the gate one after another. Regular high schools typically end classes after the 6th period, but I'm pretty sure technical colleges have classes until the 8th period. That would mean it’s just after classes have ended, and it’s

currently rush hour for students going home. If he's at the bicycle parking lot, then that green shirted guy must not belong to any club.

I stealthy headed straight to the bicycle parking lot. The green-shirted guy noticed and immediately averted his gaze, conspicuously starting to unlock his bike. He repeated the action of inserting and pulling out the key meaninglessly, making it obviously unnatural. As I approached, his lower body, hidden behind the bike, gradually became visible, and eventually, camel-colored pants appeared. Because he was wearing them slightly high-waisted, a bit of white socks could be seen around his ankles. It was uncool, but it left a favorable impression. I decided to approach him with confidence.

"Excuse me."

"Umm... yes?"

He let go of the key and replied in a small voice.

"I have something I want to ask you, is that okay?"

"M-Me?"

"Of course."

"....."

He had curly hair that looked messy, as if it had grown out completely. His thick-lensed glasses had a sense of weight, but they were stably supported by his high nose. As I took another step closer, almost urging him for a response, I noticed that his skin was surprisingly beautiful. There was not a single blemish, not even pores, let alone acne or facial hair. His skin was so white and beautiful that I briefly suspected he might be wearing foundation. It was hard to imagine him as a genderless individual given his aura. He probably had naturally flawless skin.

"I want to know where the Robotics Club meets. Could you tell me?"

"Ah... yes."

He spoke with a muffled and somewhat hesitant tone. He wasn't brusque by any means, but there was something about him, this lingering sense of virginity.

“Um... so, you go straight along the side road next to the building you can see over there... and then go a little to the right, and there should be a courtyard, and then... um... yes, that's right... no, wait... maybe... ah... I'll just show you.”

“But, weren't you about to go home? Is it okay?”

“Yes... I think it might be hard to understand just by explaining with words.”

“Thank you. If you please then.”

“The Robotics Research Club should be meeting in the prefabricated building next to the practice room... this way.”

I meekly followed him on his back. He was only slightly taller than me. His back seemed quite unreliable.

“Excuse me. Were you staring at me from the bicycle parking lot earlier?”

“Um... well... no... I mean... it's just... your uniform.”

It seemed my initial impression wasn't mistaken.

“My uniform? Oh, I see. You were probably thinking, ‘Where is that school with the lame uniform from?’”

Even though I had to rely on them for more than two years, I couldn't help but feel embarrassed after being sarcastically commented on by a Teneritas girl. Maybe I should have just worn casual clothes today.

“I just... like high school girls' uniforms.”

He said, stroking his hair on the side of his head with his index finger and grinning.

“.....”

His gaze from the bicycle parking lot was indeed surprisingly direct. His admiration for the uniform had become a dazzling entity, evolving into a ray of light that pierced through me, transcending the laws of physics. I realized that I had unconsciously been guided to him when I went to talk to him.

I'm not backing down. In fact, I felt I have a more advanced perspective. It was his depth, his awareness and openness about his love for high school girls' uniforms at this age, that made me feel uneasy. I had thought that the process of developing a fetish like this usually happened later in life, as opportunities to encounter high school girls' uniforms decreased with age and one came to appreciate their appeal. Awakening to this at his age was an early debut into the realm of eccentricity. However, it was also mysterious that he had been looking downward diagonally since we started talking. We hadn't made eye contact even once.

"If you like them so much, you should look at them more. If you don't get your fill now, you might end up breaking the law in the future."

"Well, I get too excited when they're close by."

As he said this, I didn't miss the way his eyes flickered towards me. There was no saving someone with such a deep-seated perversion, so I changed the subject.

"Are there really few girls at the technical junior college?"

"Yeah."

"I haven't seen a single one since earlier."

As I glanced around, I felt like my eyes were meeting with the technical high school boys around me more than usual. When I looked up at the building next to us, I spotted someone pointing at us from a window on the third floor. This is bad... My outfit is really standing out. I decided to walk with my head down, and just then, I heard a voice from the front saying, "Tell me about it tomorrow." I guessed that the green-shirted guy had encountered an acquaintance. Just before we passed each other, I glanced at his expression and saw that he was exchanging knowing looks with the other guy with a smirk.

"I'm sorry if I caused any trouble."

"No, not at all."

When I peered into his face and saw that he was still smiling, I felt relieved. I couldn't help but burst out laughing when he quietly murmured, "It's a valuable experience."



“Do technical junior college girls really get a lot of attention?”

“They do. When you’re surrounded by guys all the time, just seeing a girl makes her seem cute. Oh, you can see the practice room over there, just a little further.”

I tried to shift my gaze from the guy’s face to the practice room in the distance, but what caught my attention was the pool just to the left, heavily influenced by nature. It was a far cry from the clean, warm indoor pool at my school, East High. This one had no roof and was simply enclosed by a fence, and the water was brown and murky, likely because it was before the swimming season. There was a student standing by the dirty poolside.

--Could she be...?

“Hey, wait. Isn’t she?!”

“Oh, you know her? She became famous last year in the NHK Robot Contest--”

--Kurumi Taiga. I managed to find today’s target, the white tiger, early on.

“She’s our princess. But why is she at the pool?”

“Princess...”

That nickname probably wasn’t limited to just this school. It was likely her nickname online as well.

\* 2 \*

I had known of her existence long before visiting the Holy South Teneritas Girls Academy.

There is a romanticism in harems and being the only girl, such as “Male student teachers who come to girls’ schools are popular” and “The only young female teacher at a boys’ school is treated like a madonna.” When I heard the theory that “girls in technical junior college are popular,” I first felt envious as a girl. At the same time, the theory that “the cutest girl in that school must be incredibly popular” was established in my mind, and I have decided that going to

"West Techno Technical Junior College," the only high school in Joshu, was the first step in the plan.

I used Yahoo as my search engine. When I entered "West Techno Technical Junior College" into the image search, photos of the school building and gate appeared just as I had hoped.

"Security seems really lax."

Just as I was feeling relieved to have a sense of the atmosphere, my scrolling suddenly stopped. A photo caught my eye. I quickly moved the cursor and clicked on the image. A cute girl in work clothes appeared on the full screen of my PC. I clicked on the URL of the source link displayed below to read more, and that's when I found out who she was.

The URL led to a page titled "Image! Kurumi Taiga, the Super Beautiful Girl who is a trending topic at the Technical College Robot Contest." The content mentioned how a girl from "West Techno Technical Junior College" became incredibly popular for being extremely cute at a robot contest broadcasted on NHK last year. The fact that a website was created to compile a summary of the article with captured images, along with excerpts from Twitter and 2channel, shows the high level of specs that one would not expect from an ordinary person. The article ended with the powerful line, "Kurumin is the princess of the robot world!"

"I only found out about her a little bit online, but is she really famous?"

"It was really something for about a month after she appeared on TV. Fans even came to school to see her."

"Fans?"

"Yes. The power of terrestrial broadcasting was great, and Kurumi became a hot topic around here. Oh, it's already been half a year since then?"

"How famous was she?"

I didn't even know about 'West Techno Technical Junior College' until I searched it up.

“I wouldn’t say famous, but I think everyone around here knows about her, you know? It’s been enough time that it’s become common knowledge, so there aren’t many people making a fuss about it lately..”

I see. Although it’s rare to hear about Dandy Sakano these days, his fame from “Gets!” is still deeply ingrained in the hearts of those who lived through that era. It must be the same principle.

“By the way, what grade are you?”

Since his gaze was downward, I didn’t feel like his "you" was referring to me, but under these circumstances, it could only be me.

“Me? I’m a first year in high school.”

“Oh, I see. You were still in middle school last year, so maybe you didn’t know because it was exam season.”

As soon as he realized that I was younger than him, he started talking to me as if I was a middle schooler. And was it just my imagination, or did he become more talkative as soon as we started talking about Kurumi?

“Um... you don’t have to answer if you don’t want to, but why do you want to go to our Robotics Club?”

“I actually came to see her.”

“Oh, is that so? Did you recently find out about her and become a fan?”

“Well, you could say it’s something like that.”

“If it had been half a year ago, you might have been turned away at the gate, but now she might listen to what you have to say.”

“Huh? What do you mean by..”

Before I could finish speaking, he started walking, so I followed him. There was no longer any need to head to the practice room. He put his hand without hesitation on the wire mesh door leading to the pool.

“When I thought a ghost member finally showed up after a long time, he brought a girl along.”

“Well, yeah.”

Though I want to glare at the guy laughing smugly, I can't break my expression. I never expected that he, who guided me this far, was also a member of the Robot Research Club. But more than that, I'm amazed at the real Kurumi Taiga up close. Her eyes, which are rounder and lighter in color than they appear in photos, her featureless face, and thin lips decisively make her 'cute'. Her straight bob is slightly longer than mine, with the hair around the top tied up with a rabbit-shaped hair band. She wears an intentionally oversized sweater, a technique that works because her body is slender. If an ordinary girl wore it, it might look too big. Though it's thin, I wonder why she doesn't feel hot in a sweater at this time of year. I can't tell if the cute sleeves are for sun protection or a blatant attempt to look cute. Her cute appearance contrasts with her sharp tone, leaving me a sense of discomfort, but perhaps due to her high, thin voice, she doesn't give off a harsh impression.

As I retort sharply to him, she turns around as if nothing happened and walks away, sitting down on the poolside around the middle of the 50m pool. She lifts the robot she had previously raised back into the pool and starts fiddling with her laptop and controller.

“Well, it's time for me to go home, so I'll leave you to it.”

“Thank you.”

I thanked him for the more than sufficient guidance so far and decided to tell him my phone number, which he asked for in passing. With this distance between us, there was no worry that our conversation would reach Kurumi unnaturally.

“Good luck.”

His narrow eyes finally turned towards me through his thick lenses. For a moment, a silent world spread out. By the time I realized it, he was gone.

“.....”

There are strange encounters in life. A strange guy who likes uniforms. I never expected him to look at me like that in the end.

In order not to waste the favor he had done for me by coming all the way here, I had to do something. However, the fact that I was here alone was definitely a mystery to Kurumi Taiga.

She was completely absorbed in the robot, and she hadn't even noticed that I was alone. I quietly walked towards the poolside. Slowly but surely, as I approached, Kurumi, sensing my presence, turned towards me. Then, she hurriedly lifted the robot out of the water. I watched her as I drew closer to her.

"T-That robot is nice, isn't it?"

"....."

"My name is Azuma and I'm from Joshu East High School."

"....."

"What are you doing right now? If it's okay, could I observe for a bit..."

"W-Wait a moment."

She interrupted the conversation as if to say to not get any closer.

"What's this all about?"

She looked puzzled, waving her hands in front of her face, and turned a bewildered expression towards me.

"Um, I'm not a suspicious person. I'm just a bit interested in robots, so I came here, but I don't really know much about them..."

"I... I don't really understand what you mean. I'm sorry. Goodbye."

She said in a relaxed tone of voice, but she said it clearly, and then she started to put all the equipment she was handling on a cart nearby. My hurried attempts to stop her were meaningless, and she left the pool without ever turning back.

"I failed I guess..."

In my school bag was the “beginner’s robot assembly kit” that I had intended to show her later. I had spent 60,000 yen on Amazon, which I had used up my 500-yen coin savings to buy for this day, but it seemed to have gone to waste. If all went according to plan, I was going to confide to her that I was having trouble with the instructions, which were more difficult to understand than I had imagined, and ask her to build it together. I knew it wouldn't go that smoothly, but I had a faint hope. I failed to realize the difference between idealizing and hoping for the best. Ideals are something you imagine on your own, while expectations are directed towards others. I should stop expecting things.

I look up and the sky is blue-black. The mossy blue poolside and brown water are appropriate for me right now. I forcefully shove earphones into my ears and lift my feet, heavy as lead, against my will. I don't want to see anyone else today. I traced the meaning of the lyrics flowing into my ears and tried to immerse myself as much as possible in the world of the song, that's all I can think about on my way home.

\* 4 \*

When I take off my loafers and step onto the flooring, the fatigue in my feet is absorbed by the floor. I decided to stick to my usual routine after returning home and headed to my desk in my room today as well. By doing so, even on a day when I don't want to look back, my brain naturally reflects.

What should I do next? One option is to change the target to another high school in the west. However, is there anyone else who makes me want it so badly? I don't feel like I'll find someone even if I look.

Should I consult with that guy who helped me today? I had only given him my phone number unilaterally, but now there is a convenient app where if one side registers a number, the other side’s account is automatically notified. “Shinji” was already added to my list of friends.

(Thank you for today. After that, Kumiko left immediately... It's because I made her uncomfortable. I'm sorry.)

He must have been surprised to receive such a gloomy report. I killed time staring at Shinji’s icon until I got a reply. His home screen showed a beautiful night

sky. I had expected an image of a 2D girl in a school uniform, so it was somewhat disappointing. The top image remained the default. In the end, the only personal information I knew about him was his name, "Shinji."

When I returned to the talk screen, the text I sent had been read. Immediately, a new notification appeared at the top.

(Thank you for today, too. Actually, Kurumi contacted me as soon as I arrived home. She asked me who that girl I was with earlier really is.)

At times like this, when it's a message from someone you like, do you calculate the timing of your reply, not too early or too late? I replied without hesitation.

(I see. I'm sorry for putting you in a difficult position.)

What did Shinji answer Kurumi, I wonder. As I was about to ask, a message from him arrived.

(I answered cleverly about your true identity. It seems Kurumi also wants you to come again. This time, she wants to show the robot properly.)

I left the technical college around 6:30PM. The current time is 8:01PM. I'm confused by the rapid changes in the situation that occurred in just over two hours. Perhaps because of the huge contrast between feeling down and feeling happy, after reading this message, I felt a bit of unease mixed with joy.

(Thank you. I will come over the day after tomorrow.)

I thought it would be better to go as soon as possible, but tomorrow's forecast predicts rain. Besides, I wanted to use this day to deepen my knowledge about the robot contest. With relief, hunger came, and I headed to the living room to pick up some crab cream croquettes for dinner. Now, drowsiness hit me. I lay down on the sofa for just an hour's nap. However, when I woke up, blue light was shining through the gap in the curtains.

\* 5 \*

"Oh, Azuma."

She waves at me from the poolside, and I waved back. Her welcome was so perfect. Her droopy eyes drooped even more, and her white teeth showed in her smile, making it seem like there should be a “nimaa” sound effect attached. To my left, a mass of inorganic materials is again placed on the table.

Prompted to move to the right, I sat down shoulder to shoulder with Kurumi. Feeling a little embarrassed by the difference in treatment from last time, I felt a little embarrassed, but she spoke first.

“I’m sorry for being so rude last time.”

“No, I’m sorry for suddenly starting a conversation.”

“Azuma, it’s not your fault. I heard from Shin. You came all the way here today, spending over an hour on the train. When I heard about your enthusiasm for robots, I was a little surprised, but I understand...”

Did Shinji set me up as a robot fanatic or something? If that’s what led to this moment, I can’t blame him, but it would have been nice if he had told me beforehand like “This is what I’ve told her and set up.” Still, I can’t drop the baton Shinji has passed to me here. I’ll strive for even more careful communication from now on, to avoid having my secrets blown away.

“There aren’t many girls who are into robots, so I’ve always wanted to meet you. You’re famous, after all.”

“.....”

Kurumi’s face twisted slightly. It seemed she wasn’t pleased that her reputation had preceded her.

“I’m sorry that I came to see you because I know you one way or another. Let me tell you about myself first.”

I gave Kurumi a brief self-introduction. I mentioned that I like idols, that I used to do classical ballet when I was young but have since stopped, that I scored 100 points for the first time when I went to karaoke the other day, and that I couldn’t assemble the robot I bought from Tamiya properly... all in English, which I claimed to be my special skill. Only the last episode was a blatant lie, as I wanted to include the word “robot” no matter what.

“Wow! You’re fluent! Did I misheard you? You bought a robot from Tamiya?”



“Yes.”

“That sounds nice! I've never bought a Tamiya!”

As I watched her laugh again with “nimaa,” I couldn't help but think that maybe it wouldn't be so bad to aim to become a full-fledged robot fanatic from here on.

Kurumi's mannerisms are very gentle. There was none of the sharpness I felt when talking to Shinji. Perhaps this is her usual self. However, I somehow get the feeling that her coldness towards him is out of love.

“Um, can I ask you something I've been curious about since the other day?”

“Okay.”

“Why are you here at the pool?”

It seems there are other places for the Robot Research Club, and since it's a prestigious school, there should be a fair number of club members. So why is she here alone?

“We're currently having an argument.”

“An argument?”

“Yes. It's a long story, but I'd like you to hear it.”

“If you're okay telling me, go ahead. I'd like to hear about it.”

“Thank you. At our school, last year” robot contest awarded the Design Prize to a ‘robot that looks like a jumping rabbit.’ We also secured the recommendation slot from the judges and were able to compete in the national tournament. This year, everyone in the club is aiming for the national tournament again, focusing on the Design Prize... but I don't like that. What I really want is to make a robot that can win the competition.”

“Why not make a robot that is both well-designed and capable of winning?”

“Doing both is difficult. If you focus on performance, unnecessary decorations can get in the way. My programming skills have expanded this year, so I want to try using C++ or Java...”

“Being able to use C++ is amazing. I respect you even though we're the same age.”

“Really? That makes me happy.”

The languages she mentioned, C++ and Java, are called object-oriented languages, and they are very difficult to master. It seems like I have put in some effort in preparation to be able to handle technical terms.

“Even if you win the Design Prize, it doesn't guarantee you can go to the national tournament. Whether you get recommended or not depends on the judges' preferences. But if you win, you can definitely go to the nationals. We were eliminated in the first round last year, but this year, I want to fight at the Kokugikan Arena.”

As she spoke, she gazed at the robot next to her, almost as if she was petting it.

“What's that?”

“It's a robot that the mechanical team made experimentally for this year's competition. It's still in the experimental stage, but it's enough to test if my program can control it. Right now, I'm the only one allowed to move it around freely, but if it goes well, maybe everyone will recognize it. Each school can enter up to two teams, so if two more people help out here...”

Japanese people love those who work hard with all their might. Moreover, if they see such a beautiful girl working so hard, there's no way they wouldn't support her. I would like to caution myself for thinking that technical junior college girls are probably spending all their time with boys who pamper them.

“However, this year's theme is quite challenging, and I'm having trouble with it.”

She looked down at the brown pool.

“This year’s theme is water sports. It’s the first attempt, and everyone was puzzled when it was announced. The idea of laying water in the Kokugikan Arena was never considered before, so it feels strange.”

“It must be tough in this murky pool.”

“Yeah. Honestly, it’s full of flaws.”

While looking at Kurumi’s troubled face, I came up with a good idea.

“Should we try to get permission to use the pool at our school?”

Kurumi opened her eyes and mouth wide, stopped for about four seconds, then nodded vigorously without blinking. This way, I could see Kurumi again.

“I’m home.”

“Yuu, you’re late again. Where were you?”

“I stayed behind to study. Oh, we have cabbage rolls today.”

As I celebrated alone with my favorite food, my phone lit up.

(How did it go today?)

The sender was Shinji.

“I was able to talk to Kurumi without hurry...”

(You did it! That’s great!)

It was a short message, but I could imagine Shinji’s delighted face from the exclamation mark.

“Yuu, either eat dinner or play with your phone. Choose one.”

“Okay. Thanks for the meal.”

Lying on the sofa, I thought about how to reply to Shinji.

—Why have you been so kind to me?

Is this a heavy question? In the end I turned off the screen without sending it.

When I got out of the bath, I got a call from Kurumi. Showing that she understood her strengths, she used cute emojis that were not the default ones but with rabbits and hearts in a row instead of punctuation marks. The message asked me to let her know as soon as I found out when the pool would be available. I replied, (Leave it to me!) and started planning to take over the pool from the swim team. I had completely forgotten about my homework, but I could do it tomorrow morning.

## Ch.3 East Star ~ The Girl who Wants to Shine ~

\* 1 \*

I had only intended to become close with Kurumi Taiga, but in the end, I led West Techno Technical Junior College to the runner-up position. The pool was unexpectedly in the yard of the Katori family, but it was I who brought Katori and Kurumi together.

“To all the members of Team B who fought alongside me, and to all the club members who kindly accepted my selfish actions for about two months, thank you so much. This result was achieved with the help of many people. Next year, we will aim for the championship.”

These were the words Kurumi tearfully spoke to everyone in the Robotics Research Club after the recent National Technical Junior College Robotics Contest. Katori and I watched her from a distance. The young lady, who had been holding back tears since before the awards ceremony, began to cry uncontrollably at those words, wiping her face with a white lace handkerchief. Katori had a flaw where each of her actions became dramatically like a heroine on stage.

This year’s theme was different from previous years, which might explain why schools considered powerhouses were being eliminated one after another. Kurumi’s words in a post-tournament media interview, “The facilities of the practice water area were the biggest factor in our victory.” were probably not meant to reassure us. It was thanks to the support of those who provided the water area that West Techno Technical Junior College was able to advance to the finals.

For Kurumi, the robotics contest is a mission, but for me, it’s just a tool. The contest is like glue. It took some time and effort, but thanks to it, the East, West, and South are now solidified with the adhesive power of super glue. Now, what should I do with the “North?”

\* 2 \*

“I watched yesterday’s broadcast. It felt more like Kurumi's show than a robot contest, didn’t it?”

“.....”

“What’s wrong? You look so down.”

“I’m just tired from school.”

I think to myself that she must be. As I sip on my acai smoothie, I watch her silently. Katori then glanced in my direction.

“Did you watch it too, Azuma?”

“Of course. It felt nostalgic, didn’t it?”

It’s been a month since the national competition. Finally, yesterday, the event was broadcast nationwide. Given that Kurumi was the runner-up, I was sure she would be featured, but I didn’t expect her to receive so much attention.

“I’m not good at communicating, so I’d be troubled if I was approached by a lot of people.”

“That just means everyone was watching. Even I, who don’t usually watch TV, watched it.”

I’m already used to Katori immediately bringing up her own standards. Even after the robot contest ended, I continued to gather the southwest team. We moved our weekly meeting spot from the pool to the food court in the shopping mall.

“I’m going to be interviewed by NHK next week.”

“Oh, that’s amazing! I’ll make sure to record it.”

—An interview?

“Kurumi, won’t we be on it too?”

“What are you talking about, Azuma? We have nothing to do with it.”

“Come on, maybe as your friends!”

“No way. Right, Kurumi?”

“It might be a bit difficult.”

Kurumi narrowed her eyes and pursed her lips. It seems that this interview is a close coverage of the entire robot research club. Normally, the offer would go to the winning school, but it's all thanks to Kurumi's overwhelming effect.

“Oh!”

“What's wrong, Azuma?”

I suddenly looked at the clock and saw that it was already past 6PM. There were 30 minutes left until our appointment time.

“Sorry. I have to go.”

“Oh, do you have something else to do?”

“I've been asked to house-sit for a bit.”

I held the remaining half of my acai smoothie in my left hand and opened Google Maps with my right. I regretted not coming up with a better excuse as I headed towards my next destination.

“Café BON”

A small sign hung on the door. This seemed to be the place. The interior couldn't be seen due to lace curtains covering the only small window. This is a difficult store for first timers to enter.

“Welcome.”

Pushing the door slowly, the white-haired master greeted me.

"Good evening."

I found him at the table furthest back. He was brashly drinking iced coffee as he waited.

“I’m sorry to keep you waiting.”

“No, not at all.”

Shinji awkwardly smiled. When the master came to bring water, I ordered orange juice and sat in front of him.

“It’s a nice place.”

“I’m glad you think so. It’s my regular spot.”

There were no other customers in the store besides us. It didn't seem to be freshly squeezed, but the orange juice was soon brought in orange-colored glasses.

“I was with Kurumi until just now.”

“Did you mention coming here?”

“Of course not.”

“I see.”

On the day of the robot contest, I saw Shinji while I was cheering for Kurumi. He had a serious camera hanging from his neck, and seeing him like that, I couldn't help but call out to him.

—Do you remember me?

“Well, I was surprised to see you at the Kokugikan. I never thought I’d meet you again.”

“You seem busy for a ghost member.”

“It was particularly hectic this year. Oh, I brought the camera you asked for.”

I received the weighty single-lens reflex camera and immediately checked the data. ...The photos were perfect. It was no wonder, considering the size and weight of the lens. There were hundreds of shots, with many good ones. This should be perfect.



“Say, Azuma. Why did you tell me to take a large number of photos of Kurumi back then?”

“Give me all those photos.”

“Why?”

“Just give them!”

Shinji looks troubled. It’s only natural. I hadn’t given him any explanation.

“I can’t obediently agree with you unless you tell me why you want them.”

“.....”

Will he laugh at me? Will he make fun of me? Maybe I should try to get him on my side. I have to say something, anything, but I’m bad at lying.

“Could it be, Azuma, that you like girls?”

“Huh?”

“No, I don’t mind at all. I mean, Kurumi is cute, right?”

“No, no! It’s not like that... um... don’t laugh if I say the reason, okay?”

“I won’t laugh. I promise.”

“Well... actually... I want to gather one person each from the east, west, north, and south of Joushuu and create an idol group.”

When I revealed my once-in-a-lifetime plan, he raised his eyebrows, showing a smile that could be interpreted as either amused or troubled.

“I worked up the courage to tell you, and that’s the face you make?”

“No, it’s just... I’m oddly convinced.”

“Are you pulling my leg? Aren’t you surprised?”

“No. Because you seemed different from the first time we met.”

I didn't want to hear that from a uniform enthusiast with glasses, but I managed to hold back.

"So, Kurumi is the representative of the west?"

"Yes. To be honest, I want to take advantage of Kurumi's popularity. That's why I want those pictures you took, Shinji."

"If I give them to you, what are you planning to do?"

"I want to spread them on the internet."

Kurumi is already known to some extent among certain groups, but she needs to be more famous. She's smart, can build robots, but her charm isn't just that. With a smile that comes with a sound effect of 'nimaa', a sad expression that makes you want to hug her, Kurumi has the power to change the atmosphere around her. I feel like that talent is directly linked to being an idol.

"If a miracle happens, just one photo could make her an idol."

Shinji nodded silently.

"Even in yesterday's robot contest program, she was treated like a heroine. Kurumi is amazing. Even students from other schools were talking about her story. But I don't want yesterday's program to be the peak for Kurumi. I don't want her to be only noticed when the program is broadcasted. I want the robot contest to be just one of the ways people get to know her. The more reference materials there are, the more her cuteness will be conveyed. So, by looking at these photos, I want more people to be interested..."

I realized it too late. Without realizing that I was leaving him behind, I had been talking to myself for quite some time.

"Sorry."

I quickly drank the orange juice to regain my composure and took a deep breath.

"Azuma, you're interesting."

"I'm not happy about it."

“I understand why you chose Kurumi. But why go through the trouble of gathering people from the east, west, north, and south?”

“Every time I see a cute girl, I think she should become an idol. But I think they just don’t have the opportunity. That’s why I’m going to create it for them. Kurumi and the girl I found from the south, Katori, are both really cute, but they won’t become idols unless they reach out for it themselves, right? That’s such a waste. I really want to go to all the schools, but my school life is limited by time. So, I thought I’d start by selecting four schools... Are you listening?”

Shinji started fiddling with his phone on the table. He had been listening patiently for a while, but maybe he had actually been fed up for a long time.

“Look at this.”

He suddenly thrust his smartphone screen towards me.

“What is this picture?”

“It’s a photo from when I went to Lake Tekapo.”

“Wait, you took this yourself?”

“Yeah. When I was in middle school.”

It was a fantastical scene, like something out of a painting. I had thought it was a picture he had found on the internet, so I hadn't paid much attention to where Lake Tekapo was. A stone church was surrounded by a vast number of stars. Does such a view really exist? Even if it does, can an amateur capture it so beautifully in a photo?

“I’ve always liked stars. But it’s difficult to capture them with a camera. I started practicing, and before I knew it, I was hooked.”

“It’s really beautiful.”

“If you ever have to take photos again, let me help you.”

This was the second time I had looked into Shinji’s eyes. Once again, I found myself in a silent world. When I realized it, Shinji had finished his coffee.

“Hey, Azuma, can I get a refill?”

“If you’re having one, I’ll have one too.”

“That’s great.”

Shinji gave a primitive ring to the bell, and the master peeked out from the kitchen.

“Another coffee and orange juice, please.”

“Coming right up.”

The master went back to the kitchen without taking any notes.

“Is it okay for a girl to be out so late?”

“It’s fine. I like this place. But in return, you have to give me the photos as soon as we get back.”

“Got it. Now, let’s continue our conversation.”

I once came home and saw my indoor shoes in the shoe locker. There were no thumbtacks or graffiti. It wasn’t that kind of situation. I just couldn’t bring myself to change into them.

After that day, I couldn’t go to school for a while. It’s not that I hated studying, so I was happy when I found out about Baba House. Ms. Baba, a plump woman, embraced everything about me. That was when I was in fifth grade.

For the next two years, I worked hard at Baba House. I didn’t want to go to the same middle school as everyone else, so I decided to take the entrance exam for the only local combined middle school and high school. I was worried that my attendance record in elementary school would affect me, but I was relieved to pass the exam. This was a new start, a fresh start for me. I said goodbye to Baba House. And at this point, I decided to fix my appearance, which had been a complex for me. Since my parents gave permission, my face must have been quite ugly. “You won’t be seen for who you are at a normal school, so you should be strong.” my mother said. I’m no longer the old me. I nodded confidently.

However, after about six months, I found myself going back to Baba House. I needed a school for my heart. To avoid causing trouble for my parents, I went to school during the day and rushed to Baba House after school. I went to school without bringing my heart with me, and by doing so, I was no longer as hurt as I used to be.

In the open space of Baba House, there are several large bookshelves lined up, with over a thousand books. I like reading books here without being disturbed by anyone. Today, I picked up a book and freed my mind.

Compared to a life surrounded by mean neighbors, a violent parent, and a drugged-up best friend, my world is easier to live in. The elderly couple living next door is kind to me, and my mother and father always worry about me. As for best friends... Well, I don't have one.

The person who called me their friend disappeared a long time ago. When I finished reading the last page, the clock pointed to 9PM.

"I'm sorry for staying so late."

"It's okay. You can stay here as long as you like."

Ms. Baba smiled, loosening her thick cheeks. Having such a kind person nearby is more than enough for me.

"How are you getting home?"

"I'll have someone pick me up."

"I see, that's good. Take care."

As I fastened my seatbelt, the unfashionable compact car slowly started moving.

"Hey Mika."

"Yeah?"

“You should control yourself. At this rate, you’ll keep going to Baba House forever.”

“Yeah.”

“Are you thinking about the future? Are you enjoying every day like this?”

“Yeah.”

—There was no way it was enjoyable. A life of walking endlessly through a dark tunnel with no end in sight. Born with the talent to be hated, no matter how hard I tried, I was destined to be despised.

“Mika, I... I’m worried about you. I’ll do what I can... just tell me. What do you want to do, or how do you want to be..”

“Kurumi Taiga.”

“Huh?”

“I want to be like Kurumi Taiga.”

Everyone in Joshu knows her. She’s cute, smart, and popular. I’ve always thought that if I imitate her, I might be able to get closer to her, to live a glamorous life.

I want to meet Kurumi Taiga.

\* 3 \*

“Happy New Year.”

Despite saying this as my first words, it's already been seven days since New Year’s Day. From the end of the year to the beginning, all three of us spent time with our families. I thought our first meeting of the year would be at the food court as usual, but Katori started begging to go to the electronics store to buy a computer. Although Lady Katori is not usually in need of money, it seems she received tens of thousands of yen in New Year’s gifts. Since the city becomes more prosperous as you go north in the Joshu region, there was no choice but to head north to visit a major electronics retailer.

“Any store near the station is fine, right?”

“Azuma, you’re really reliable. I can always depend on you.”

Katori’s habit of relying on others remains unchanged even as the new year begins, but when praised and encouraged like this, I don’t feel bad about myself.

Arriving at the electronics store, which boasted “new products at low prices,” we headed to the fourth-floor computer sales area. It was amusing to see everyone’s true nature in the escalator, which was lined with mirrors. I didn’t miss the fact that even Kurumi, who seemed indifferent to fashion, and Katori, who always seemed confident, glanced at the mirrors on either side to check their appearance. I think this is one of the few spots where the narcissism that most humans conceal is liberated. I pledged to be a minority and fixed my gaze straight ahead.

“Could you get me this one?”

The computer, equipped with abundant functions, cost around 150 thousand yen. Will Katori be able to make good use of it? It’s obvious that she wanted a computer because of Kurumi’s influence, but it’s also easy to imagine her not being able to use it effectively even after buying it. Holding the large paper bag, Katori wore a satisfied smile. She could have had it delivered, considering she had the money, but she insisted, “Feeling the weight and bringing it back home is precious.” asserting a theory that commoners wouldn’t understand.

“You know, I also want to go somewhere.”

“Sure. Where?”

“To the bookstore. I want to buy a birthday present for a friend.”

“Oh, there should be a large bookstore around here.”

“With you around, we won't get lost.”

I always end up walking at the front. The childishly dependent Katori follows me closely behind.

“Hey, could you slow down a bit?”

“Minami, if the bags are heavy, you can just go home for today.”

“Don’t be so cold. I’ll come with you.”

When we arrived at the bookstore, Kurumi dashed off toward the back of the store. I glanced at the new bookshelf near the entrance, but the only author I knew was Haruki Murakami. And that was only because I’d heard the name, not because I’d actually read any of his works. It made me realize how little I was connected to reading. In front of the political books featuring figures like Akira Ikegami and Shinzo Abe on the cover, middle-aged men in suits stood shoulder to shoulder, flipping through the pages. I passed by the marketing and gardening sections and found myself stopping at the self-help books aisle.

“9 Ways to Become a Successful Person”

I thought the title was cliché, but apparently, it has sold over 300 thousand copies. I picked it up, flipped through a few pages, and then closed the book, returning it to the top of the stack. I couldn’t quite relate to the idea of “Stop Having a Plan” that jumped out at me early on. Can someone who lives without a plan really write a book? I wondered, feeling skeptical.

“Hey, Azuma, Azuma.”

Kurumi, holding her bag, clung to my shoulder. It seemed she had successfully purchased the present, but something seemed off.

“What’s wrong?”

“Look at that girl over there. She’s so cute.”

It was rare for Kurumi to compliment someone’s appearance. She often showed me pictures of animals or cute anime characters, but this was the first time she had said something like this about someone we saw on the street.

“...You’re right.”

From this angle, all I can see is her profile, but her eyes are unusually large, her nose straight, and overall, she has a face that seems universally appealing. However, whether it’s due to makeup or her extraordinarily glossy long hair, she exudes a charm that neither South nor West possesses.

“She’s cute, but she gives off a vibe like she’s popular with guys.”



I bend down to whisper in Kurumi's ear. With a pessimistic feeling that she might be wearing a pair of rings on her ring finger, I glance at her hands and inadvertently catch sight of the title of the book she's reading. It's surprising. She, who seemed to exude an aura of being popular and having a romantic nature, is reading a book titled "Young People Who Don't Live for Love." My thoughts from earlier are completely overturned. As we both engage in what could be colloquially termed "gazing," the browsing girl quickly notices our gaze. She hurriedly looks in a different direction, but our eyes meet for a moment. Did she think it was suspicious? I quickly pick up a random book from the shelf and pretend to read it, stealing a glance at her expression. Then, the girl's lips move.

"Azuma?"

Her large eyes are looking at me.

"So it's really you, Azuma."

"Uh, um..."

"Don't you remember me? I'm Mika Kamei. We were in the same class in elementary school."

"Kamei."

—The name sounded familiar. However, the Mika Kamei in my memory and the one in front of me didn't match at all.

## Ch.4 North Star ~ The Girl Who Does Good ~

\* 1 \*

While consuming miso soup with clams, I gazed and drifted towards the television screen to check today's horoscope. The morning began as usual, with no noticeable changes. It was time to leave soon. I plucked off the strawberry stems, popped two berries into my mouth, and headed to school, crushing the frozen puddles on the way. The heat packs on my stomach and back wouldn't warm up until I arrived at school.

Upon entering the indoor heated classroom, I felt a vague discomfort in the lukewarm air. However, I maintained a poker face, heading straight to my desk placed at the back. I quietly greeted the nearby students, then transferred the contents of my bag to the desk drawer. As I did that, I overheard a conversation unfolding near the teacher's desk. Today, Akko, the information expert, was hosting a talk show.

"So, about last time! I always thought it was strange how she always leaves school early, but it seems she's hanging out with girls from another school."

"Well, she doesn't belong to any clubs. But why? Did you see her, Akko?"

"No, someone from West Techno told me yesterday. She went to the same middle school as her."

"West Techno, where Kurumi Taiga is?"

"Yeah, exactly. Apparently, Kurumi and Azuma are good friends."

"I see."

"And then, there's another flashy person..."

--Ding dong.

The bell interrupted their conversation, and the Akko group returned to their seats. Imagining them in 20 years, finding fulfillment in chatting in the park near the housing complex, saying, "It's already this late, I have to make dinner." which I couldn't help but smile.

I wasn't so oblivious as to not notice the rumors circulating about me. It was annoying how one of the nodding acquaintances would constantly peek at my expression. Whether they were intentionally speaking loud enough for her to hear or thought they were whispering quietly to each other, it was certain that thanks to Akko, the information would spread among the girls in the grade before the end of the day. I was prepared, but I wanted to avoid any misunderstandings. In the nine months since I entered school, I had tried to behave in a way that wouldn't make people dislike me. I refrained from participating in the speech contest and politely declined when the captain of the basketball team confessed to me.

I only paid attention to my appearance and responded just enough to not seem unfriendly. That's how I quietly spent my time, thinking about appearances. Thanks to that, I had never had anything hidden from me or seen vulgar words written on my desk. My relationships in high school were reasonably good.

I decided to visit the neighboring class during lunch break. It was hard to enter an unfamiliar classroom, and to make matters worse, the person I needed to talk to was seated by the window. She seemed to be writing in her notebook, perhaps working on an assignment. It would be rude to disturb what she's doing, but the fact that she was alone was convenient.

I quietly approached from behind and lightly tapped her shoulder, causing her to stop writing. She turned around, smiled when she saw who it was, and turned her belly button towards me.

"Oh, Azumatchi. What's up?"

"Sorry to bother you out of the blue. I wanted to ask you something, Mittsu."

"Huh, me? That's rare."

Despite her rough tone, I knew she had a pretty good heart. I've known "Mittsu" since nursery school, and we went to the same middle school. We weren't close enough to play together often, but that was simply because our circumstances were different. She had always played soccer and baseball with the boys. Her skin was tan, her hair was very short, and even now as a high school student, her appearance hadn't changed. Lately, I had seen her often with her softball team members.

"You still have that beautiful black hair. Are you still doing it?"

“Of course.”

“As expected of you, Azumatchi. You never change. It’s kind of weird that you went out of your way to dye your hair black.”

“Well, my natural hair color is brown.”

My hair has always been lightly pigmented, which was an insecurity of mine. My idol always maintained beautiful black hair. Even the bob I got recently was inspired by her.

“So, what do you need?”

“Do you remember Mika Kamei? She was in the same grade as us in elementary school.”

“Oh, yeah. I remember her. We were in the same class a few times.”

“She was quiet and had a simple vibe, right?”

“Yeah. A plain character. But for some reason, I have this impression that I won’t like her. She was the only one in our grade who took the middle school entrance exam, right?”

“I see.”

“Ah, right. You wouldn't know anything about that, Azumatchi...”

She scratched her head with her short hair, skillfully raising one eyebrow. The middle school entrance exam... I didn't know about that part of Joushuu.

“So, what’s up with Mika Kamei?”

“I suddenly remembered her and got curious.”

“What’s that all about?”

Mitsu opened her mouth wide again and smiled. She didn’t wear makeup or colored contacts, and her charm lay in her unadorned appearance and personality. Her white teeth stood out against her tanned skin, exuding

cleanliness. It was a secret that I've always thought she resembled Mimura from "Summers."

"Is what you're writing now an assignment?"

"Yeah, that's right. If I submit this today, I'll be exempt from the makeup exam. I have to finish it before club activities. It's seriously annoying."

The sports clubs led busy school lives. The judo club devoted their time to sleep during classes and gave their all in morning and after-school practices. The baseball club aimed to be model students in everything, from their attitude in class to their grades, to avoid angering their advisor. While the school environment was not strong enough for any club to achieve remarkable results that would guarantee admission to university on sports recommendation, why were they so dedicated? How many of them would continue playing sports as university students and working adults? I struggled to understand.

"I see, sorry for bothering you. Thanks. Good luck."

"Yeah, you too, Azumatchi. Teach me English again sometime."

\* 2 \*

After school, one of the Akko group came up to me and asked, "Azuma, where are you going today?" Since there was no need to tell the truth, such as going straight home because of the rain, I gave a vague answer about visiting my grandmother, making it difficult for them to pry further. My actual grandmother was full of vitality and would probably be watching the evening reruns of her favorite dramas by now.

As soon as I got home and retreated to my room, I found myself thinking about Mika Kamei again. Her appearance I saw at the bookstore the other day didn't seem to match with her old self. However, it was hard to imagine someone else impersonating her. There must be limits to how much someone could improve their appearance through growth.

There are cosmetics called "Eyeputti," "Mezaik," and "Eyetape," which artificially create double eyelids. Eyeputti is an adhesive that sticks the eyelids together, while Mezaik and Eyetape are tools that can create a double line by pressing an adhesive thread-like material onto the eyelids. Compared to the unnatural finish of Eyeputti, Mezaik and Eyetape are more natural-looking and

easier to blend in, but both have the drawback of being easily peeled off by water or sweat. After swimming, I've seen several classmates looking shabby with their eye makeup half peeled off.

On the other hand, double eyelid surgery has become more accessible year by year. In particular, the buried suture method is popular due to its affordability and minimal scarring, with a lower risk of failure compared to another method involving incisions. By promoting it as "minor cosmetic surgery" without using a scalpel, it seems to create a more casual image. However, cosmetic surgery is ultimately a surgical procedure performed by a doctor and does not eliminate the presence of any wounds. After three months, the double eyelid line is likely to blend in, but in the first one or two months after the surgery, the lines may appear unusually deep. This is particularly noticeable when looking down, and if there are several hollows that look like small finger indentations, it's the evidence of having undergone the surgery.

Although I have talked about this in detail, I am fortunate to have been born with a good eye area. I only frequent cosmetic surgery websites, blogs, and Instagram for such trivia. The reason I have gone into such detail is to convey that Mika's face is entirely constructed.

When I went to talk to Mittsu, it was merely for confirmation, as I had already sensed the imitation when I looked at her head-on. She likely has a silicone prosthesis for her nose, probably an L-shaped one, and her eyelids are likely buried sutures. The inner corners of her eyes have also been cut.

Considering Mika Kamei while accepting the change in her appearance, I tried to recall memories with her. It was certain that we were in the same class at some point between the first and third grades of elementary school. However, I couldn't remember which teacher's class it was. Did we ever sit next to each other? Did she have a nickname? As I pondered these questions, I realized that not only was it difficult to recall memories with Mika, but I also struggled to recall any memories from elementary school. The annual school trips, for example, were unclear in terms of their destinations. I couldn't remember if I was on the red or white team for the sports festival, let alone whether we won or lost. In my early years of elementary school, I had barely even awakened to my own ego. I was simply a member of the school organization. Perhaps I had some worries typical of elementary school students, such as finding homework troublesome or feeling anxious about being on duty. Thinking about this made me feel that the struggles I face as a high school student now would seem trivial in ten years.

"Let's go out for a meal sometime."

It was a polite phrase often used among girls. Mika said this to me at the bookstore and asked for my LINE ID. I didn't have a particular reason to refuse, so I gave it to her, but I haven't received a single message from her since then.

What's troubling is that she goes to North High. Indeed, in the initial plan, the strong candidate from the north was a student from "Joushuu North High School." That's exactly where Mika Kamei attends. However, can I easily consider Mika as the representative from the north?

Honestly, because of the time I spent on Kurumi's Robot Contest, I've just settled with an East South West trio. Adding another person would be difficult.

As I lay my head on the desk lost in thought, my phone vibrates. If it's a message from Mika, the timing is too perfect.

(Today, I had tea with Kamei~. We ran into each other at the station.)

The sender was Kurumi. Mika and Kurumi met?

(Tomorrow, we're going to have pancakes~. Want to come too, Azuma?)

"Oh, Azuma was interested in robots too, Kurumi?"

"Yeah. Since there weren't anyone with similar interests near her, it seems like she went all the way to West Techno. From there, we started practicing for the Robot Contest together and stuff. We became close."

"...I'm envious."

"It's a strange first meeting. Even though we met for the first time, she started speaking fluent English, saying 'Let me introduce myself.'"

"Azuma lived in Canada, that's why."

"Yeah, yeah! Sometimes she talks about her memories in Canada. Like how the gardener was excellent, so the city was beautiful, or how the hamburgers were delicious."

“You sure know a lot about her.”

“We’ve been together for over half a year already, huh? You were classmates in elementary school, right?”

“Yes. It was in the lower grades, so Azuma probably doesn't remember..”

“She definitely remembers! Azuma remembers even the casual things I said that it's kind of creepy. Oh, it's almost time for the train. Which way are you going, Kamei?”

“I'm going north.”

“Opposite of me. Well then, goodbye. Thanks for reaching out~.”

“U-Um... are you free tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow?”

“Yeah. There's a new delicious pancake shop that opened recently. I thought it would be nice to go together.”

“I love pancakes~.”

“They say it's really delicious. Oh, right. If it's okay, could you ask Azuma to come too?”

\* 3 \*

Unlike Tokyo, there were no long queues here. Located about a 15-minute walk from North Station, this shop might be a nationwide chain, but the taste was incredibly good. There weren't heaps of cream or the use of ricotta cheese, just a simple scent of butter and maple syrup that spread in the mouth. Despite this, the fact that the shop was so empty was probably due to its location. If this shop were to open in Harajuku, it would definitely become a popular spot with a 3-hour wait.

“Azuma, you like sweets, don't you?”

Kurumi said with a smile as she savored a strawberry topping.

“You like them too, right?”



This was the first time in weeks that I had something like this, and it is really delicious. It was worth holding back on something sweet in the morning. As I chewed the first bite, the sugar that I have been craving gradually spread throughout my body, bringing warmth. That sensation was similar to soaking in an open-air bath on a snowy day. I was afraid that Katori would be furious if she found out that I had come here with Kurumi and Mika, but I would be able to talk to Kurumi about it later.

“Kurumi, Azuma, I’m sorry for inviting you so suddenly. Actually, there’s a reason...”

So it was Mika who invited me for pancakes? I had thought it was Kurumi, so I adjusted my perspective.

“It’s more like a request than a consultation...”

I had a bad feeling about this approach. No matter how long we've known each other, there are things that must be firmly declined depending on the situation. When it comes to money matters or anything related to religion, it’s best to cut off the relationship immediately.

“Have you two ever thought about volunteering?”

“Huh? Volunteering?”

“We’re looking for someone to teach middle school students. Azuma, you can teach English, you know.”

“.....”

I probably could do it, but there’s a part of me that can’t immediately say “can do.” Considering Mika attends a high school with a deviation value about 15 points higher than East High, her academic level should make teaching middle school English relatively easy.

“Is teaching part of the volunteer work?”

“Yes. There are organizations that teach children who couldn’t attend school due to circumstances, or who can’t afford to go to cram school because of economic or family reasons.”

“Really?”

“There are also events like camps and retreats, which are fun. And, more than anything, the children are adorable, even though we’re not that far apart in age.”

As she suddenly began to speak lively, I was struck by a strange emotion. The fact that she, who looked like she would spend her days off visiting karaoke or bowling alleys with guys, was engaged in volunteer work seemed to trigger some kind of chemical change. High school girls with flashy appearances, who seem to enjoy their real lives, are often rejected by a certain segment of people who seek the unreal, such as anime. However, adding a bit of unexpectedness can complete the “fascination” factor. A character with a flashy appearance who volunteers on days off might not appear in a dating sim, but if she did, players might cry out in vain, “Please serve me for free too!”

The person who seemed most fitting for the last spot was right in front of me. The northern beauty had approached me herself.

“I don’t know if I can do it well, but I’ll give it a try.”

“Really? Thank you.”

Mika pulled my hand firmly. By using this volunteer work, it seemed that the distance between me and the northern girl would naturally shorten.

“I am not good at English, so Azuma, do your best!” Kurumi said.

\* 4 \*

“Big sister, I’m done. Look.”

“Let me see. Oh, close, but the spelling is different. I understand wanting to use roman letters though.”

When I pointed out the mistake, the little one in front of me immediately grabbed an eraser. As I gazed at the letters he was rewriting, “*welukamu*,” my mind drifted back to the past. In a place far away with a time difference of about 17 hours from Japan, there is a capital city called Victoria in Canada. For about five years, from the fourth grade of elementary school to the middle of the second year of middle school, our family spent time in this place.

It was a beautiful city. I understand now that the reason my mother opposed my father's moving there on his own was because she wanted to go there herself. The elegant flowers placed all over the city were tended by gardeners, and horse-drawn carriages ran alongside the cars on the roads. The buildings are grand, and are constructed in a fashionable English style, as if a ball were being held there at night. A city like a theme park created by Oriental Land actually exists in reality – I was impressed by Canada when I was in the fourth grade.

The downtown area surrounding the Inner Harbor was Victoria's most beautiful area, bustling with energy yet somehow serene and dignified. Along the seaside promenade, there were several street vendors. Particularly prominent among them was a juice stand shaped exactly like a lemon. Its realism was such that a pilot flying overhead might mistake the oversized lemon for being placed on the concrete below. Customers attracted by its cute appearance formed a line in front of the stand. When the young me, tugging at my mother's sleeve, begged to stop by, my mother graciously agreed. It was a special day for us, our first visit to Victoria. We joined the line, filling the waiting time with anticipation. Finally, when the customer in front of me began placing their order, my mother whispered teasing words into my ear with a playful smile.

"Try ordering for yourself."

I vigorously shook my head, but the situation did not change.

"You know at least how to say 'please,' right? Come on, you can do it."

With a strong push to prevent me from backing away, my mother encouraged me. The elderly, white-bearded clerk noticed me and leaned out from behind the counter to make eye contact.

"Remone-do, puri-zu."

"Sorry?"

It seemed the elderly man's distant ears didn't catch my words. As I turned to ask for help from my mother, the long line of people behind us came into view. There was no time to waste. The young me clenched my fists.

"Remoneedo, puriizu."

This time, I tried to speak clearly, enunciating each syllable as if in a conversation with my late great-grandfather, making sure each word was distinct and deliberate.

*“Sorry.”*

The clerk made a visibly unpleasant face, waved dismissively, and gestured for us to move aside, conveying a clear message of “get out of the way.” Prompted to leave the line as if we were invisible, my mother and I were urged away, and the clerk began taking the order of the customer who had been behind us.

Not understanding the difference between English and “Janglish,” I experienced an indescribable mental anguish at that moment. It was what you might call “anguish” in youth slang. Apologizing, my mother’s voice pulling my hand felt distant, and as soon as I sat down on a nearby bench, I couldn’t stop crying.

It was an unbelievable humiliation. I don’t mind writing foreign words in katakana, but I wish they would have used the appropriate katakana conversion. I was humiliated because of it. The experience became a trauma that has come back to haunt me every time I see an English word ever since. If only they had used English words like “bnana” for banana, “watah” for water, and “choklit” for chocolate, I wouldn’t have had to go through that experience. I’ll have to find the right time to teach this little one, who is now pinching a pencil between his nose and mouth, so he won’t have to experience the same thing.

*“It’s almost time to finish up.”*

The door opened, and the owner of this house, Ms. Baba, entered the room. The little one quickly closed his study materials and threw the pencil into his pencil case.

*“I’m tired~.”*

He exclaimed while stretching, but his brain probably wasn’t working hard enough to be tired, as the textbook he used today was at an elementary school level of difficulty.

*“Good job. You studied hard.”*

Ms. Baba said, lightly patting the little one’s head. As expected from the head of a volunteer organization, she only had the equipment of carrot and stick.

Since Ms. Baba was going to see the little one off outside, I was left alone in this unfamiliar room. The yellowed air conditioner was set to 20°C, a bit warm for me as I was wearing Heattech under my uniform. The small, windowless room of about four tatami mats was filled with carbon dioxide, and if I tried to take a deep breath here, it would likely harm my lungs. I glared at the air purifier placed in front of me. No matter how much it repels pollen and PM2.5, it is impossible to clear the stuffy air that is characteristic of a winter room.

Ms. Baba returned within five minutes. Judging from her rubbing her hands together, it seemed cold outside.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

“No, not at all.”

“I’ll make some tea, so wait here.”

Finally released from the shabby study room, I was now led into a spacious living room. I wondered if this served as a communal space. A large L-shaped sofa that could seat more than ten people was placed there.

Unlike the cramped room with just desks and chairs lined up, here I could feel a focus on interior design. There were potted plants in the corners of the room, emitting a faint aroma of aroma oils. And there were four impressive shelves against the wall. They were lined with a large number of books.

“I feel like I could read here...”

Carrying a teapot on a tray, Ms. Baba sat across from me.

“Do you like books too, Azuma?”

It seemed she had heard my muttering.

“Oh, no... I’m sorry, but I don’t read much.”

“I see. I thought you might like them.”

A fragrant Darjeeling tea was poured into the cup.

“So Mika invited you here. Thank you for coming.”

“No, I had a great time, really. Thank you for the tea.”

“That's good to hear. Have some tea and relax.”

The aroma of the fine tea leaves reminded me of Victoria once again. Victoria, originally a British colony, had a strong tradition of afternoon tea.

“Ms. Baba, I heard that you used to be a teacher at a special needs school.”

“Yes, that's right. It's been a while since I quit, but I was for a bit.”

“Why are you doing this now?”

“.....”

“Ah, I'm sorry. If it's difficult to talk about, you don't have to...”

“.....Hahahaha.”

Suddenly, Ms. Baba covered her mouth with her hand, laughing as if amused.

“Why are you laughing? Did I say something funny?”

“No, not at all. I'm sorry. It's just...”

After laughing and calming down on her own, Ms. Baba straightened her posture.

“You seem mature, Azuma. It was funny how you asked, like you were interrogating.”

As I kept my head tilted back, Ms. Baba murmured, “You are just as nice as I thought you would be.” I wonder if I am being mistaken for someone else.

“Um... I hope it's not rude, but is the boy from earlier able to keep up with school lessons?”

“He's always been in special education classes.”

“He didn't seem to have any disabilities though.”

“Williams syndrome makes him very good at storytelling. In his case, it’s mild, so he looks almost no different from a typical person. His mother decided to send him to a public middle school instead of a special needs school and wants him to take the high school entrance exam. For now, he’s getting as much support from us as he can.”

“I should have been a bit gentler with him.”

“It’s sometimes better to treat him normally. He said he had a lot of fun when I sent him off earlier.”

“Really?”

I couldn’t recall doing anything particularly enjoyable. Was this really what the little one said, or was it a lie Ms. Baba told me to make me happy? Ms. Baba gave me the same look when she saw that my cheeks had loosened up.

“Um, may I use the restroom?”

“Of course. It’s out that door and to the left.”

Although it interrupted our lively conversation due to the diuretic effect of the tea, there was nothing to be done about it.

When I tried to enter the restroom, I noticed a post on the door. First, I relieved myself, washed my hands, and then stood in front of the door again. It seemed to be a newsletter distributed to the entire group. The headline read “Summer Camp Retreat,” and below a large photo, there was a record of activities.

In the photo taken on a riverbank with about 20 people, Mika Kamei’s figure could be seen. Even in the small image, her exceptionally cute appearance was evident. However, even in the photo, it was clear that her nose was unusually high. I memorized the URL written in the bottom right of the newsletter and then returned to Ms. Baba.

“Welcome back.”

“Um, there was a post on the toilet door...”

“Oh! Are you interested? Yes, Azuma, please join us if you can make it!”

I felt Ms. Baba's enthusiastic invitation, but unless I was a home security guard, it would take a lot of courage to sacrifice a precious day off.

"We have a spring mountain climbing event next month, which might be just right for you."

"Um, is it okay to invite friends if I decide to participate?"

"Friends?"

"I'm just a little anxious going alone."

"I see... It's okay. We'll talk more about it later. It's getting late today. Is your ride home okay?"

"Oh, I'm taking the train, so I'll be fine."

"Take care. It started raining when I went outside earlier."

Since I didn't have an umbrella, I borrowed a vinyl umbrella from Baba House.

"I'll definitely return it when I come next time."

"It's okay, we have plenty. Take care, Azuma. And give my regards to Mika."



## Ch.5 Same Star ~ The Girl In A Wheelchair ~

\* 1 \*

It seems like I might be sleep-deprived, as I slept through the entire fifth period. Despite the afternoon classes being prone to drowsiness, the music teacher showed a movie, the masterpiece “La La Land.” Thanks to the pleasant sound of the Western music, I was able to experience REM sleep, leaving my mind refreshed. I didn't feel guilty for not paying attention to the content since even the awake students claimed they couldn't understand it. In the sixth period English class, the results of the final test were returned. I felt relieved upon seeing their score, as I couldn't find a single mistake, making me confident I wouldn't be embarrassed teaching English to middle school students.

Today, I have to spend the day with Shinji. As I went to the café we met the other day, he was not there yet. I took a seat at a table in the back and ordered an “Apple Juice.” While waiting for Shinji, I occupied myself using my phone. When I visited the URL from the poster I remembered at the Baba House, a blog called “Niko Kids” appeared.

“Niko Kids” was the name of a volunteer organization led by Ms. Baba. Despite visiting the site last night, I was extremely sleepy to be able to scroll through past articles.

The content was the same as the newsletters posted in the Baba House restroom. The latest article documented last month's soba-making experience, featuring a photo of a female volunteer and a boy with Down Syndrome kneading soba flour together. The event always concluded with a group photo taken by “Niko Kids,” and of course, Mika Kamei was in it.

–Klang.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

“Yeah, I waited.”

“Sorry, sorry. Oh, one hot coffee, please.”

After placing his order with the master behind the counter, Shinji sat down in front of me.

“Hey, Shinji, if you were to order coffee in England, what would you say?”

“That’s random. Well, probably just ‘Coffee, please.’”

“Don’t you say *kohi*?”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, that’s because if you say it in katakana English, they wouldn’t understand.”

“Then don’t you think we should get rid of the word *kohi* in Japanese and just use coffee instead? That way, it would be pronounced the correct way and would be understood.”

“What’s with that?”

Shinji took off his outer garment with a puzzled expression. His chestnut-colored Chester coat would likely reach the floor if he hung it on the back of his chair. However, without doing so, he neatly folded the long coat and placed it on the empty chair next to him. Shinji’s attempt to portray himself as a “composed and capable man” made me feel uncomfortable.

“Even Katakana is part of Japanese. The Japanese for the word apple, *ringo*, and *appuru* are both considered Japanese. But when you’re in an English-speaking country, just say ‘apple’ in English.”

“..That's a boring response.”

“Though it’s impossible to change the Japanese language now, no matter how much you think about it.”

As he casually crossed his arms, the coffee was brought to him. “Well then, let me enjoy the coffee.” Shinji said, raising his cup towards his face. After taking a sip and giving a mocking smile, he then raised his pinkie and waved the cup towards me. “Coffee is really good, isn't it? Coffee.” he began to say, so I responded with a slang gesture by raising my middle finger. It seems we’ll continue clinging to Japanese-made English till we die.

“Come to think of it, Kurumi’s photo was spread to some extent, but there was a limit.”

“Why are you talking about this now? I’ve already moved on to something else.”

“That’s mean. You called me an accomplice the other day, right?”

Shinji pouted childishly. It was a minus point for a boy to do something so lacking in cuteness.

“I met someone from elementary school at the bookstore. Through her, I started as a volunteer.”

“Volunteer?”

“It’s surprising, huh?”

I showed Shinji the Niko Kids blog.

“This is the volunteer group. And this girl is the one I know.”

I enlarged Mika’s image and pointed to it, and Shinji began to grin openly. It seemed that Mika’s face was indeed beautiful to everyone who saw it.

“I made her the last one.”

“So, does that mean you’ve got all four directions covered?”

“Yeah. I’m planning for all of us to be featured on the Niko Kids blog now.”

“Then should I take the photo?”

“No. It seems Niko Kids has their own photographer, so just help spread the word.”

“Aww. I’m confident I can take cuter pictures of everyone though.”

“We don’t need them to be cute this time. We just need proof that we’re doing volunteer work. When you do activities like this, you seem like a nice person.”

“That’s kind of a prickly way to put it.”

“When you become an idol, your past is quickly revealed. Now, which do you think would be more favorable: photos of you with a guy surfacing, or photos of you dedicated to volunteering?”

“That's a terrifying quiz.”

He immediately understood my intentions and muttered so with a grin on his face. While observing his face, I noticed that he had upgraded his glasses. I decided not to mention the evolution from silver-rimmed ovals to black-rimmed Wellingtons.

“So, you’re not just planning to become an idol, but you’re also thinking about what comes after?”

“Yeah. I'm a presumptuous girl.”

“I don’t dislike that. So, what exactly do you do as a volunteer?”

“I teach English to middle school students.”

“Wow, you’re good at English?”

“I lived in Canada for five years because of my father's job.”

“What?! I didn’t know that.”

Come to think of it, while Shinji and I have met a few times, we hardly talk about each other's pasts.

“We always talk about the future, huh?”

“Maybe that's why. It's hard to grasp who you really are, Azuma.”

“That's because I'm not a simple girl.”

It wasn’t intentional to avoid talking about the past. It’s just that neither of us had asked or been asked about it until now. I had come to think I knew a lot about him, but most of it was speculation like, “He must be like this,” and in reality, I realized I had only heard from him about going to Lake Tekapo.

“There’s something I’ve been wanting to ask.”

“Yeah?”

“Why do you want to become an idol so badly?”

“When I first saw an idol, I thought that humans can shine too.”

“.....”

I can’t forget the excitement I felt at that time. When I was in Canada, my relatives sent me a lot of tapes with recorded Japanese TV shows. Among them was a recording of those people singing.

“Since then, I’ve been searching for a way to shine too. I kept it hidden from others, lied about it. But I think there are a lot of people like me. People who have dreams and desires they can’t speak out loud, but think about and work hard for every day. Like those who say they didn’t study but still get a perfect score.”

“They often have dark circles under their eyes.”

“But they are cool.”

There were only two of us in the café today. We filled the almost-empty café with our laughter. For a moment, there was silence, and I suddenly felt like my words had become bragging, but it was too late. Revealing your true feelings to others is literally exposing yourself naked, which is embarrassing.

“Why are things that shine so attractive?”

“As expected of you, Shinji, who loves stars. You understand me very well.”

A reliable ally. I felt like everything would go well from now on. I think I am overly trusting this time. To think the arrival of spring was supposedly not good news for me.

\* 2 \*

I spent the early hours of the morning thinking about how to spend my spring break meaningfully, but I ended up falling asleep without finding an answer. Combining this with my memories before losing consciousness, I realized I had

spent 13 hours lying in bed. This was the result of valuing the consecutive holidays too much. As I stared at the desk calendar placed on the desk with my vague consciousness, a sense of loss that would come in 8 days began to overtake me.

Is this indulgent lifestyle only allowed during this short break? Spring break starts today. I, who was about to end the first day of the consecutive holidays in my pajamas, was a loser in the making.

I sluggishly got up and pulled out the syllabus from the drawer under the desk since the entrance ceremony. Before the new semester begins, what should I do? I decided to start by clarifying the vague expectations I had for my second year of high school.

As I glanced through the page with the annual schedule written on it, I learned that I would have to attend school for a total of 207 days next year. There was no mention of a race walking competition, but instead, there was an event called "mountain forest work," which sounded very laborious. The cultural festival, the sports festival, and the school trip. Confirming the timing of each event gave me an overview of the year. However, I couldn't find any value in any of them for myself.

—*Beep beep.*

I can hear the sound of my phone vibrating on the bed. It's happening while I'm at my desk again. Lately, my phone always vibrates when I'm sitting in this chair, almost becoming a jinx of mine.

(Azuma, what are you wearing tomorrow?)

The sender was Katori. I haven't decided on tomorrow's outfit yet, so I couldn't reply.

The event led by the volunteer group of Ms. Baba is tomorrow. It seems to be a spring tradition at Niko Kids to climb a mountain with dozens of participants while supporting people in wheelchairs. I took a photo of the mountain climbing guide distributed at Baba House and sent it to Katori and Kurumi. Looking at the clock, the hour hand is pointing at six. I need to wake up early tomorrow. I should start getting ready soon.

\* 3 \*

Fifteen minutes before the meeting time, I arrived at the station near the foot of the mountain. The Uniqlo windbreaker kept the perfect temperature. If it got too hot along the way, I could just take off the shirt underneath.

After passing through the ticket gate, I found myself in a plaza already crowded with people. I wonder if they are all from “Niko Kids.” I stood next to the ticket machine, waiting for the arrival of “South” and “West”. Both of them tended to arrive right at the last minute. Sure enough, Kurumi appeared right on time.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Azuma.”

What immediately caught my eye upon meeting was something like wings sticking out from her shoulders.

“Good morning. You’re carrying something cute.”

With that, two white objects bounced as Kurumi turned around. From the back, it looked like a backpack with a rabbit face. While the face served as a container, the large ears didn't seem to have any practical use. The fluffy fabric seemed prone to dirt and water, and the white Holland Lop rabbit was likely to be dirty by the time we returned. It wasn't just the backpack that wasn't suitable. She also seemed to ignore functionality in her clothing. She was dressed in her usual outfit: a light pink men's-like parka on top, and navy, snug jeans at the bottom, ready to take on the mountain. The denim didn't seem to have much stretch, making it look uncomfortable to move in, but at least she wasn't wearing a skirt.

“I fell in love with it at first sight and bought it online. It's big enough to fit a laptop, you know.”

“Oh, surprisingly practical.”

“Is Minami here?”

“Not yet. The orientation is about to start soon.”

“She's still as laid-back as ever. Oh, there's Kamei!”

Kurumi pointed, and there was Mika Kamei, shining as if her high nose was a landmark.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

Katori arrived about 15 minutes later than scheduled. Without being out of breath, she appeared confidently, which made both Kurumi and me pout.

"You're here finally, South. But what's with that outfit?"

Katori, equipped with a hard shell from The North Face, shorts, flashy tights, and Montbell trekking shoes, arrived with her passion for the mountain on full display.

"What do you mean? That isn't mountain climbing gear. Kurumi, you're not planning to climb in that outfit, are you?"

"This is the most comfortable clothing I have."

"If that's the case, you should have worn your work jumpsuit. You're underestimating the mountain"

But I remember Katori saying she had never climbed a mountain. Did she buy a whole set of gear just for this day?

"You're so pumped up, but is your hairstyle going to be the same as usual?"

"Yes, of course. It won't get in my eyes, and it's actually the most suitable."

"It's a mismatch for mountain girl fashion though."

"It's a good sense of style to mismatch them."

"Minami, Kurumi."

In the center of the plaza, there was a familiar round woman. Ms. Baba was waving a small yellow flag.

"There is someone I want you to meet, so come with me."

I had already informed them about Baba House and me teaching English as a volunteer.

"Ms. Baba."

"Oh, Azuma, good morning."



“Good morning.”

“Good morning.”

“Fair tidings.”

The two girls who had been hiding in my back showed themselves up and greeted her.

“This is Ms. Baba, who I am indebted to.”

“Nice to meet you. I'm Kurumi Taiga, a second-year student at West Techno Technical Junior College.”

“I'm Ranko Katori, a second-year student at Holy South Teneritas Girls' Academy. I've been looking forward to today.”

When introducing themselves during spring break, they struggled with how to express their grade. Both Kurumi and Ranko will be in their third year starting from the new semester, but they must have decided to stick with second-year until the end of spring break.

“I'm Baba. It's you who I am indebted to, Azuma. Nice to meet you, Taiga, Katori.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“Azuma, can I talk to you alone for a moment?”

“Huh? Um, okay.”

I asked the two from South and West to wait, and Ms. Baba led me away from them. I wondered if there was someone she wanted to introduce. However, contrary to my expectations, she headed towards a less crowded area of the plaza. She stopped under a big tree and turned around to face me.

“Azuma, I didn't hear anything that you're bringing two people today.”

There was no smile on her round face.

“Um, well...”

I quickly tried to recall. I had asked if it was okay to bring friends along, and she had said yes. Maybe I hadn't specifically mentioned two people. But I didn't think it would be a problem to have one more person. In fact, having more hands for volunteering would be helpful.

"You should have told me properly. There are some things that I have only prepared for a certain number of people."

"...I'm sorry."

"Also, is it okay that you'll be in different groups?"

"What?"

"Today, you're in the same group as Mika. I thought it would be okay to put another person in there, but with two, it's a bit of a problem..."

"Why can't we all be together?"

"Azuma, you know what kind of event it is today, right?"

"Yes, we're all going hiking together..."

"Exactly. Today, for each wheelchair, there will be five people supporting, working together to climb. Four of them being women might make it uneasy. It might not be impossible, but think about the person in the wheelchair. The children from "Niko Kids," the students and parents from the special needs school who find walking difficult. Many people are looking forward to this day, once a year."

"....."

"I'm sorry for sounding preachy even though you came all the way. I'm still grateful that you came. If you have any questions, please feel free to ask."

After Ms. Baba finished her advice to me, she busily returned to the crowd in the plaza. After she disappeared from view, I also headed back to where I was.

"Welcome back, Azuma!"

"You don't look so good."

“I’m totally fine. It was just kind of like a preliminary explanation.”

I desperately tried to lift the corners of my mouth to smile at Katori and Kurumi, but my face felt stiff, and I couldn’t smile properly. I felt heavy thinking that I would eventually have to tell these two what was just criticized. I wondered if I could use a fake illness as an excuse to go home right now.

—“Everyone of ‘Niko Kids,’ good morning. We will now begin the orientation, so please crouch down where you can see me.”

The leader, Ms. Baba, holding up a flag in her left hand and a megaphone to her mouth with her right hand, was surrounded by everyone. She took a deep breath, swelling her belly, and began to lead the group.

“Everyone will be climbing the Route 1 trail, which takes about two hours one way. Today, we have 90 participants gathered here.”

If I remember correctly, last year’s “Niko Kids” activity records stated that there were 50 participants. The scale has significantly increased.

“Let’s all work together and enjoy the climb. However, please don’t push yourself too hard. If you feel any abnormalities, please immediately notify the staff nearby. The people here are teachers from the special needs school who will be supporting you all today.”

The introduced teachers each greeted the group one by one. Then, representatives from the adult and youth volunteers expressed their determination, after which Ms. Baba took over again.

“From here on, we’ll be moving in groups. You’ve already been assigned, so if your name is called, come over here. All the volunteer students below junior high will climb last with me, so please wait a bit. Alright, for Group 1, we have Keiji Fujiwara, Hiromichi Yokota, Kaede Mishima...”

A boy of about 10 years old was holding the plate labeled “1.” The people whose names were called gathered around his wheelchair.

“Hey, Azuma, I’m starting to feel anxious.”

Kurumi tugged at the hem of my clothes from behind. When I turned around, I saw furrows between her eyebrows.

“Kurumi...”

“I wonder if I can make it to the top.”

“It’ll be okay. There are plenty of adults here too. Everyone feels a bit nervous, it’s normal.”

In truth, this was my first time trekking as well. I didn’t understand the point of willingly challenging something so harsh. If it weren’t for volunteering, I wouldn’t climb a mountain, and if it weren’t for a dream, I wouldn’t volunteer. Maybe it's better to decide on my own will. I wonder what Katori and Kurumi feel as they are here.

“If it gets tough, just tell me.”

Katori, who had been silently listening to our conversation, confidently showed off an oxygen canister. Who would get altitude sickness on a mountain only 600 meters high? Her Montbell backpack, inflated to the brim, seemed to be packed with other unnecessary climbing gear.

“By the way, Azuma, do you know which group we're in?”

“Um... Actually, the two of you and I are...”

“Azuma~!”

When I turned towards the voice, I saw Mika waving her hands enthusiastically.

“Come on! We're about to depart!”

Next to Mika was a girl holding a plate labeled “3,” her head turned towards me. It seems I am in Group 3.

“Oh, I have to go.”

“It seems we were called without realizing it.”

As I started walking towards Mika, Katori and Kurumi followed behind me. They probably weren’t called. However, it was impossible to tell them that they are in a different group in this situation.

When I arrived where Mika was, a man who seemed to be the leader of the group nearby greeted us warmly.

“Now we’re all here.”

“Thank you. Pleased to meet you all.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“Pleased to meet you.”

East, West, and South all bowed to the members of Group 3, and as expected, Mika spoke up.

“Huh? You two are not assigned in this group. Right, Ms. Baba?”

“Yeah, Azuma’s friends are in Group 10, so they’ll have to wait until they’re called.”

“Huh?”

“Alright, everyone in Group 3, please depart.”

Ms. Baba waved to the girl in the wheelchair holding the plate and urged the assembled members of Group 3. Katori and Kurumi looked at me as if they wanted to say something. However, the others in the group began to move forward without waiting for me.

“Sorry, things happened and it looks like we are separated. Let's meet again at the top.”

I filled the awkward silence with these words and started climbing the mountain without waiting for their response.

\* 4 \*

When I joined Group 3, a well-built man who had greeted me with a smile earlier handed me a thick rope.

“Please take care of this, Azuma.”

The wheelchair-bound girl, who seemed to find even speaking difficult, tried to gauge her emotions from her expression. What was she thinking as she looked at the blue sky reflected in her eyes? Coming here today was probably not her own choice. The girl's mother constantly looked around at the scenery. When she spotted flowers peeking out from the road and birds hiding in the branches of trees, she would stop and pause for a few seconds. I climbed the mountain path, alternating between observing people and nature.

"Why did you bring the two of them?"

As we passed a sign that read "1 Kilometer Point," Mika, who had been silent until then, spoke up.

"I felt lonely coming alone."

The true purpose she had spoken to Shinji about the other day was, of course, a secret.

"I see..."

After that, Mika fell silent again. Silence continued in our group. I tried to say something to change the atmosphere, but as the slope became steeper, I lost the will to do so. Occasionally, a man who seemed to be the leader would speak to everyone. However, the responses from the group were absorbed by the trees, and unintentionally, the four of us, including me, became a group of young people with poor communication skills.

After two hours, we finally reached the mountaintop, where adult volunteers were waiting. They had departed before us and apparently prepared lunch. I received a lunch box and homemade miso soup, then decided to take a break at a bench under a nearby tree. Mika returned from the restroom and came over.

"Good work."

"Ah, yeah. Good work."

"How was it for you, Azuma?"

"It was my first time at this kind of event, so I don't really know."

"Was it fun?"

“Mmm, not really.”

Honestly, it was not enjoyable at all. What I realized after finishing the climb was that even if I dedicated my holiday to volunteering, I wouldn't feel the satisfaction of having done something good.

“Sorry for making you end up in the same group as me.”

“No, it's not like that.”

“.....”

I had to deny that properly. However, as I chose my words, the silence grew longer. Eventually, Mika moved the lunch box from her knees and walked towards where a lot of people were gathered.

After a while, I tried to follow her, but it was too late. People were gathering at the mountaintop, so I lost sight of Mika.

As I searched for Mika, I noticed Katori's large ribbon ahead of me. She had tied The North Face hard shell that she wore at the foot of the mountain around her waist. She was standing in line for lunch with Kurumi. What felt odd about Kurumi was that she had rolled up her sleeves. Even in the summer, she never rolled up her sleeves.

“There she is, the traitor.”

Kurumi said that when they noticed me. Katori also turned her face towards me, and both of them sent me cold glances. My feet started to turn back towards the bench as if I was evacuating.

After about five minutes, Mika didn't return. There were two lunch boxes on the bench. Despite my confusion, I was definitely hungry, so I decided to eat lunch first. I took out my water bottle from my backpack. When I shook it, it made a clinking sound. It seemed like the ice hadn't melted yet.

I had thought that the food at the summit would be delicious, but I was completely wrong. The white rice, hijiki seaweed, and croquettes were all mushy and unpleasant. At one point, I noticed that the miso soup had long gone cold, and when I lifted the paper cup, I saw ants floating on the brown surface.

“Drowning must be tough.”

I found a patch of grass about 30 meters away, so I moved there with the paper cup in hand. I aimed at the pennycress mixed with the weeds and spilled the miso soup.

“Even though you're a girl, you're so barbaric.”

When I turned around, Kurumi, Karasu, and Mika were lined up, holding their lunch boxes.

“N-No, this is because of the ants...”

“Hurry up and come over here. Let's eat.”

Kurumi called out to me without any particular anger. I clenched the empty cup and headed towards where everyone was waiting, still not able to organize my thoughts. Kurumi and Katori began to spread out a picnic blanket in front of the bench where I had been sitting alone until just now.

“Weren't you two angry?”

“Just sit down for now, okay?”

I obeyed Katoris suggestion and sat down next to the half-eaten lunch box, watching the two of them finish spreading the blanket. Mika silently started eating her lunch box next to me again.

“Choosing a larger picnic blanket was the right decision.”

“Thank you for everything today, Minami.”

“It's okay. Come on, let's eat.”

“Digging in.”

“The miso soup is delicious.”

“I know, right.”

I felt disgusted by their deliberate insistence on the deliciousness of the miso soup, even though they must have seen me spill it. Not only were they not



allowing me to participate in catching up on the conversation, they even seemed to have made a barrier. Did these two come here just to tease me?

“What’s wrong, Azuma? You look so grim.”

“Well, I just thought... maybe you two were angry.”

“We’re not angry.”

“Really?”

My disposable chopsticks fell to the ground as she stood up, but that was the least of my concerns right now.

“To be honest, I’m not angry anymore. At first, when I was left behind at the foot of the mountain, I was like, ‘Huh?’”

“Kurumi was saying she wanted to leave. It was a mess.”

“Because even though you dragged me here today for the hike, the person herself ends up going ahead. It’s really nerve-wracking with just me and Minami. I thought about leaving.”

“Who do you think took care of everything until now?”

“Sorry, sorry. You were surprisingly reliable. Ah, Azuma, you finally smiled.”

“Thank goodness...”

I was pondering how to repair the crack that had unintentionally formed between us, but for now, I felt relieved.

As soon as all the tension left my body, my appetite returned. I found charm in the dishes that had been so unappetizing before, and I lifted the lid of the lunch box that I had closed once. Just as saliva started to form in my mouth, I remembered the death of my chopsticks, and I had no choice but to watch everyone finish their meal. Mika next to me had her mouth open only to eat, unable to speak.

“Oh, let me introduce you. This is Mika Kamei from Joshu North High School, who was in the same group as me today.”

“I know her, so it’s just Minami who doesn’t know her, right?”

“Oh, that’s right... Well, we did talk a bit earlier. She invited us to eat together here.”

So that's why the three of them came here together. Why did Mika invite the other two?

“I’m Katori Ranko. Nice to meet you.”

“Huh? Isn’t your name ‘Minami’?”

“Oh, right. I go to Holy South Teneritas Girls' Academy, so I’m called Minami. So, you can call me Minami too, Kamei.”

“Then, since I’m from North High, should I go by ‘Kita’ or something?”

“Well, if that's the case, my name is Kurumi, but can I go by ‘Nishi’?”

“Wow!”

“What's wrong, Katori? You seem dramatically surprised again.”

“Us four are like the cardinal directions: East, West, South, and North!”

Katori, Kurumi, and Mika widened their eyes. The three of them didn’t suspect any coincidence. I imitated Katori, covering my mouth with my hand to hide the laughter welling up inside me.

\* 5 \*

“Okay, say cheese.”

After finishing taking the group photo in a good position, today’s mission was almost over.

“Well then, everyone, let's prepare to head down. We’ll go back the same way we came.”

At Ms. Baba's command, the group of 60 people quickly dispersed. They realized they had been holding their breath, and as they breathed in the air at the summit, their bodies naturally began to stretch. Then, Kurumi suddenly spoke to the girl in the wheelchair in front of her.

"Sachi, did you eat?"

"Yeah. It was delicious."

"Let's do our best on the way back too, okay?"

"Yeah."

From their conversation, it became clear that "Sachi" and Kurumi were in the same group. Sachi, as she was called, was a girl who, aside from being in a wheelchair, was no different from any other healthy girl.

"Oh, Mom."

A slender, tall mother appeared from behind. The beautiful mother, who looked like a model, must have given birth to Sacchan at a young age.

"Sachi, it must be nice being surrounded by cute older girls."

"Yeah."

"Please take care on the way down too."

The mother nodded lightly, then looked at the faces of the four high school girls surrounding Sachi.

"Oh, is that you, Mika?"

"Long time no see, Sacchan's mom."

"You were in a different group this year, right?"

"Yes."

"But I'm glad we saw each other today."

Mika used polite language in a familiar tone and tried to communicate with adults. Judging from the “Niko Kids” blog, she has been a member of the group and participated in its events for the past three years. It wouldn't be surprising if she had interacted with Sachi, the girl in a wheelchair, before.

“Wow! So Sacchan’s family and Mika know each other.”

Kurumi, who had been crouching to meet Sachi’s gaze, stood up with a bouncing sound effect and looked at both of them with their round eyes. Next to her, Katori conveyed her feelings without saying a word. She put her hand to her mouth, expressing a dramatic astonishment for the second time today.

I could only watch this exchange with a wry smile. Despite being dealt a blow, I managed to stand my ground at the summit.

“And you are?”

“Uh, well...”

Suddenly, Sachi’s mother turned towards me and tilted her head to the side.

“She's my friend.”

“I see. Mika’s friend. Nice to meet you.”

“...Nice to meet you too.”

Compared to the boundaries of friendship, this introduction was as obvious as a SECOM laser sensor. Thanks to Mika’s helpful assist, I couldn’t even manage a proper self-introduction. But upon reflection, I realized there was no need to give my name. Even if I did, Sachi probably wouldn’t remember it anyway.

At this moment, the focus was on Sachi. It didn’t feel good, like a stone stuck in a gear that had finally started moving. I suggested to Mika beside me.

“It might be time to return to our group.”

She readily agreed with a “Yeah.” and we returned to our respective groups.

The sun was still shining brightly, and there was no sign of it setting yet. The descent was fast-paced, and it felt like there were fewer rest stops than during the climb.

“Alright! I can see the goal.”

We arrived at the plaza where we had gathered in the morning. Most groups had not yet arrived, but it didn’t take long for all groups to finish their descent. The closing ceremony was brief, and the “Niko Kids” group that had gathered early in the morning bid farewell here.

The wheelchair girl I had supported had been looking up at the sky all day. She seemed to have been born with a disease called muscular dystrophy. As a thank-you for today, her mother handed out postcards to all members of Group 3.

“Wow, it’s really cute.”

“My daughter drew it.”

A blue bird was flying through the forest. The trees she drew had gentle colors. A landscape far more beautiful than reality. I felt sad. I was angry at the disease that robbed her of such wonderful talent and strength.

“Thank you.”

Both Mika and I bent down to the height of the wheelchair, thanking the artist of the postcard directly. She did not change her expression until the end. With strong eyes, she gazed at the sky, dyed orange.

When I went to meet Kurumi and Karatori, as expected, the two of them were chatting with Sachi. After spending this much time together and still not running out of things to talk about, I wondered what kind of conversational skills they possessed.

“It’s time to go home.”

“Yes.”

“Fun times always fly by, don’t they?”

Rejecting the lingering atmosphere of reluctance to leave, I pointed towards the station.

“We need to hurry, we only have 5 minutes until the train leaves.”

“Thank you all so much.”

Sachi and her mother bowed. Kurumi slowly let go of Sachi’s hand and bowed deeply. Karatori, and even Mika who was next to her, followed suit, and for a moment my field of vision cleared.

As we started walking towards the station, Mika stopped me.

“Azuma, I have to help Ms. Baba, so I’ll stay here.”

Ms. Baba, visible in the distance, was talking earnestly with the adult volunteers. It would be better to convey my thanks when we meet again.

“Got it. Say hi to Ms. Baba for me.”

“...Yeah. See you later.”

Mika disappeared into the crowd of adults, including Ms. Baba.

“Mika’s gone, huh.”

“Let’s all get together again sometime.”

The time together where East, West, South, and North was brief, but it certainly turned around for the better. If life had a save function like a game, I would want to use it right now.

“I feel a sense of accomplishment.”

“Me too.”

“Same here.”

The rural train was as empty as ever. Despite the many empty seats, the three of us sat side by side. The Montbell backpack, which hadn't shrunk, and the broken-down backpack were held carefully in the arms of the two.

"Ms. Baba."

"Oh, didn't you go home with everyone else?"

"Yes. I'm helping with the cleanup until the end."

"Aw, you didn't have to..."

"This is where I belong."

"Mika..."

"Azuma already has wonderful friends. I shouldn't get in the way."

"..Yeah."

"I understand that. But I had so much fun. Today was really, really fun."

"Mika, listen. You're an important member of 'Niko Kids.' But if you find another place where you feel at home, I'll be happy to wave goodbye. What I want for you now isn't to be careful around me or to help with volunteering."

"....."

"...I want you to smile, Mika. You've been holding back too much. You've been through too much. You need to have a lot of fun to make up for it."

"..Okay."

## Ch.6 Accomplice ~ The Camel Colored Photographer ~

\* 1 \*

At this time, I learned about the industrial festival held at West Techno Technical Junior College when I received an invitation from Kurumi. While the season for cultural festivals is typically autumn, at West Techno, they seem to hold it before summer due to the Robot Contest event in autumn.

I was excited for the industrial festival, which I hadn't attended since childhood. Invited by Kurumi, East, South, and North gathered at the nearest station to the technical college in their respective school uniforms. Katori, who was the only one in casual clothes due to yesterday's majority decision, appeared with a pout.

“It's strange to wear uniforms on a holiday.”

“Well, for cultural festivals, wearing casual clothes would stand out.”

“But today's not a cultural festival, it is an industrial festival.”

Despite only meeting for the second time, including the day of the mountain climbing, there was no sense of discomfort in the banter between Katori and Mika.

Various flyers were being distributed in front of the school gate. In addition to the usual food and beverage stalls like hot dogs and chocolate bananas, there were also unique events specific to technical colleges, such as science experiences and robot battles.

Kurumi said she was in charge of the tapioca stand. Shinji's class seems to be making curry, but I don't want to see him today of all days. It's easy to imagine Shinji, with a high school girl in uniform in front of him, smirking.

“It's quite lively here, isn't it?”

“Minami, make sure not to get separated.”

“Understood.”

With that, Katori grabbed my school bag.



"Hey, wait a minute, young ladies, what grade are you in? Won't you come visit our haunted house?"

A guy approached us, persistently handing out flyers. I feel like I've met him somewhere before, but it must be my imagination.

"Ghosts are bad for the heart."

Katori replied calmly, rejecting the man's invitation gracefully.

"Kurumi must be lonely and crying by now. Let's hurry."

"I wonder if she'll be happy to see us."

Katori is probably hurrying because she's thirsty. While I feel sorry for Kurumi, who is expecting customers and is probably lonely, the tapioca at the cultural festival is usually lukewarm, hard, and bland.

"Kurumi's class is on the third floor... it should be around here."

"There! I can see one with 'Tapioca' written on it over there."

Katori let go of my bag and pushed through the crowd. Mika and I followed her. The line at the tapioca stand stretched all the way to the corridor, with a male student who appeared to be Kurumi's classmate holding a sign that read "End of the line."

"It looks like you have to order to get in."

"Oh, there she is! Kurumi!"

"Where?"

I looked where she was pointing, but I couldn't see Kurumi.

"Are you sure you saw her?"

"I am."

Perhaps she saw her from her taller height. But even if Kurumi was at the back of the classroom, it would be difficult to make her hear us from this distance.

“Let's just get in line for now.”

Inside the classroom, there was a register right at the entrance, and it seemed like you had to pay first and then wait to receive your order. There were a few tables and chairs available.

“Next, please place your order.”

“Then, I'll have one milk tea.”

“I'll have one too.”

“I'll have a Calpis.”

“That'll be 400 yen each.”

The customer service was polite, but why do the male students from the technical college avoid making eye contact? Perhaps it's because there are few girls in their class after all. It reminded me of when I first met Shinji.

“Here's number 56. We'll collect the plate tag when you pick up your order, so please proceed over there.”

As prompted, I made my way to the back of the classroom, but due to the high population density, I kept bumping into people. It wasn't hot because of the air conditioning, but unnecessary communication was bothersome.

“Katori, look for Kurumi.”

“She's been there since earlier. Over there.”

“Really? We can't see her at all from here.”

“Follow me.”

Katori ruthlessly forged ahead. There were long tables separating the kitchen from the customers lined up along the windows of the classroom. On the other side, there was a girl. With an apron tied around her waist, she scooped tapioca with a blank expression. She was undoubtedly a beautiful girl.

“Kurumi!”

"Wow! Thank you, everyone. I'm happy you came."

She told the quiet boy next to her, "I'm going to take a break." and Kurumi circled around the table and came over to us.

"Is it okay if you don't make the orders?"

"It's fine, it's fine. I've been in charge since the preparation. Did you all just get here?"

"Yeah. We came straight here after arriving."

"We thought you might be lonely."

"Hehe, that makes me happy."

I didn't fail to mishear. Right after Kurumi smiled, something like a scream reached my ears from behind. Looking around, I realized that everyone's eyes were on us.

——We were surrounded.

The reason why only Katori, who is tall, could see, and the reason why the tapioca stand was so busy... I see. There was a crowd around Kurumi.

"Excuse me."

One of the two plain-looking high school girls poked Kurumi's shoulder.

"Hm?"

"Could you take a picture with us?"

They were wearing class T-shirts instead of uniforms or regular clothes. That means they are also students at the technical junior college.

"We saw you at last year's robot contest. Since then, we've admired you as a senior, Taiga."

"Really? Thank you. Well then..."

Although she complied with their request, she didn't smile much or even pose. Kurumi doesn't usually show much courtesy to store clerks or restaurant staff. Whenever faced with such situations, I can't help but feel a sense of superiority that I'm special to be able to get along with her.

"Hey, hey. Let's have our picture taken too."

I noticed a group of four or five male students trying to take advantage of the situation and approaching. Taking pictures with guys can be risky for an idol. I had to stop this somehow.

"Kurumi, I need to go to the bathroom. Can you show me where it is?"

"Yeah, I'll guide you. But maybe it's better to wait until the crowd calms down a bit."

"I'm about to burst!"

\* 2 \*

After reluctantly stopping at a restroom I didn't really want to go to, we sat down on a bench in the courtyard.

"You know, I'm happy to be able to meet everyone like this."

"....."

"I used to skip the school festival every year. I thought setting up a booth was too much trouble, and I didn't have anyone to go around with."

"....."

"But this year is fun."

"That's good to hear. I'm having a great time too. But being with everyone makes me not want to study for exams anymore. So, at some point..."

"Excuse me."

A stranger interrupted Katori's turn.

“I’m Shimizu from the 5th year. If you’d like, please come see this.”

The man handed Kurumi a piece of paper and quickly walked away. Being in the 5th year meant he was in the same grade as Shinji.

“What’s this?”

Six eyes peered over Kurumi’s hand.

*“Child Monitor Lizard, at the gymnasium from 1:10PM”*

“What’s this flyer about? What’s ‘Child Monitor Lizard’ that is written big on top?”

“Maybe it’s the name of a band. They’re performing at the culture festival.”

“What should we do, Kurumi?”

As the chatter grew louder, Kurumi frowned.

“Um, I’ll leave it to everyone.”

“What are you saying? You should definitely go.”

“I agree.”

“If everyone says so, I guess I’ll go.”

The three of us got up from the bench and followed Kurumi. I usually walked at the front, but this time I ended up at the back. It felt refreshing.

We arrived at the gymnasium with plenty of time to spare. It would be cruel to fill the gap with a copy band of students who had no connection to each other. The band ‘Squid Tentacles’ that was performing now had each instrument’s sound too strong, drowning out the vocals. I wanted to remotely tweak the Roland amp on the stage.

“The vocals sound lonely.”

“Do you want to go buy something?”

“Oh, how about our tapiocas?”

“Ugh.”

When I opened my bag, I found a creased number tag.

“Why didn’t anyone notice?”

“It’s your fault, Azuma. You kept talking about going to the restroom.”

“I’ll go get them.” Kurumi said.

“No, you can’t. You need to be here. You’re the one who needs to see the performance the most.”

“But if they’re lukewarm, shouldn’t I ask them to be remade?”

Indeed, only Kurumi could do that. The three of us fell silent.

“We still have plenty of time before the Child Monitor Lizard would perform, so it’s okay.”

Kurumi went back to the tapioca stand. I followed her since it’s my fault that we got sidetracked that I asked to go to the restroom. I asked Katori and Mika to stay at the gymnasium and save seats with the folding chairs.

“Number tag 56? Oh, it was made quite a while ago, so it’s definitely lukewarm.”

As expected, the tapioca drinks we ordered had melted ice and were bulging. However, thanks to Kurumi’s use of power, we were able to exchange it for a new one, so we were relieved. Holding the cups in both hands, I was worried that they might slip due to their coldness and condensation. Just as we were about to return to the gymnasium, I heard a voice calling Kurumi from behind.

“Kurumi.”

It was the voice of a girl I had heard somewhere before.

“Oh, Sachi!”

Kurumi ran to Sachi's wheelchair as soon as she saw her face. Why was Sachi here? Did Kurumi invite her to the school festival? Nevertheless, had Sachi come all the way here alone?

"Let's go around together. Oh, Sachi, can you drink this?"

"Yeah."

Sacchan took the tapioca drink from Kurumi and sipped it through a small straw.

"Azuma, sorry. Can you also carry the tapioca I have? Can you use that tray over there?"

"I feel like I'm going to spill it on the stairs."

"It's okay. We'll use the elevator."

"Huh, there's an elevator?"

It's unthinkable in public high schools, but apparently, it's common in national technical high schools. Did she invite Sachi knowing that?

As we walked with the girl in the wheelchair, students from this school and other schools in the hallway all turned to look at us. However, Kurumi paid no attention to her surroundings and instead seemed confident. Although we descended in the elevator, to get to the gymnasium, we had to pass through an outer corridor where there were several steps. Once outside the school building, there was no barrier-free access.

"Azuma."

"Hm?"

"I think I'm going to wait here with Sachi after all."

"Seriously?"

Kurumi was firm in her decision and would not listen to any persuasion.

In this situation, the only option was to go back to Katori and Mika, who were saving seats, and come up with a plan. When I returned to the gymnasium, the two of them stood out in the front row of folding chairs.

“Oh, you're here. Thanks, Azuma.”

“Mine is the Calpis flavor.”

Katori and Mika both grabbed their tapioca drinks as soon as I arrived. They didn't seem to feel any discomfort about Kurumi not being there.

“Hey, listen to me drinking. Kurumi said she's not going to watch the band.”

“What? What happened in such a short time?”

“Earlier, Sachi came to Kurumi's class.”

“Sachi from 'Niko Kids'?”

“Yeah.”

“So, where's Kurumi now?”

“She's with Sachi.”

“If Kurumi isn't going to watch Child Monitor Lizard, then there's no point in us watching either. It was pointless to save seats.”

The two of them began to pack up their things.

“Where are Sachi and Kurumi?”

“They're probably just outside the gymnasium. Wait, really, is everyone not going to watch?”

“On the contrary, do you want to watch them, Azuma?”

“I do.”

“Then we'll go on ahead.”



Mika seemed hesitant, but Katori dragged her along. I was the only one left in the gymnasium.

“Poor Shimizu. That guy must be feeling sorry too.”

I sat down in the seats they had saved for me, avoiding the possibility of my own mistake. Oh well, I didn’t really feel like being with Sachi anyway.

\* 3 \*

(We’re in the home economics prep room, which has been turned into a curry shop.)

After the three songs of Child Monitor Lizard, I checked my phone and saw a message from Mika. I typed, “I’ll be right there.” As I was about to press the send button, I hesitated. If this is a curry shop, Shinji might be there.

Checking the pamphlet, I found out that unfortunately, there was only one class in the whole school serving curry. I left the gymnasium feeling depressed.

“Oh, Azuma, you’re finally here.”

“Sorry for the wait.”

“Your portion of keema curry just arrived.”

“Let’s eat it before it gets cold.”

Luckily, Shinji was nowhere to be seen, neither at the register nor on the floor. From what I overheard from the four, the time between ordering and getting their food was quite long. The keema curry in front of me was 80% rice. The vegetable curry ordered by Katori had carrots and potatoes that looked horribly unattractive, but she seemed delighted with its simple taste.

I told Kurumi my thoughts on Child Monitor Lizard. I mentioned that Shimizu’s songs, “Heroine,” “High School Girl,” and “Love,” were all very unstable in pitch that it was unbearable to listen to. Kurumi only said, “I’m glad I didn’t hear them.” and smiled softly.

After finishing our meal, we chatted for a while. Kurumi's time limit was approaching, so we left the home economics prep room. The number of visitors had decreased significantly compared to the morning.

On our way to see Kurumi off at her classroom, Sachi suddenly leaned out of her wheelchair.

"What's this?"

She pointed to a sign that read "Cosplay Photo Booth - You in 10 Years."

"Wanna check it out?"

When Mika asked Sachi, she vigorously nodded.

"Can you make time for this, Kurumi?"

"Sure, if it won't take long."

"Then let's go in for a bit."

Feeling the lack of liveliness from the hallway decorations, I wasn't very enthusiastic, but I reluctantly agreed, judging that any more selfish behavior would be dangerous. Inside the classroom, cheap dresses and rabbit costumes greeted us.

"Welcome. Oh, we didn't expect such cute girls to come to be our last customers."

"Last?"

"Yeah. We were thinking of closing since no one else is coming."

The technical junior college student who spoke in refined gay lingo was wearing a skirt and lipstick. Perhaps the budget didn't allow for a wig, as their head remained bald.

"Well then, ladies, please choose the clothes you want from there. But it shouldn't be what you want to wear now. Imagine ten years from now."

"Why?"

“It’s more fun that way, like a time capsule.”

The gay student pointed to the rack placed at the entrance. They were cheap costumes that caught the eye as soon as you entered the classroom.

“I’ll wear this.” Kurumi said.

“Isn’t that a bit too quick to decide?”

“I like this one!” Sachi said.

Kurumi chose a men’s suit, while Sachi chose something like a short dress.

“What cosplay is the one you chose, Sachi?”

“This one? It’s for an idol! It’s frilly and cute!”

“You really love idols, huh.”

Mika, gripping the wheelchair’s handles, gently stroked the girl’s head.

I never thought Sachi was like me...

“But I’m still going to wear the ‘bride’ outfit, okay?”

“Oh, why is that? It would be nice if you wore that cute one, since you have the chance.”

“Nah. I want someone older than Sachi to wear that.”

“In that case, I’ll wear it.”

If Sachi wasn’t going to wear it, then I would. Among the dresses on the rack, the pastel-colored one with a petticoat seemed the most charming.

“There are plenty of props too. Here, take this.”

The gay student forcibly handed me a plastic microphone that probably once held a tablet candy. They must have overheard mine and Sachi’s conversation.

The three of us — Katori, Mika, and I — were led by the gay student to the changing room. Since Kurumi had already changed into a men's suit, we left Sachi's change of clothes to her.

"What did you choose, Minami?"

"I'm an explorer. Have you read Livingston's biography, Azuma?"

"No. I've never read anyone's biography to begin with."

While changing into a nun's costume, Mika seemed to have something on her mind the whole time.

"Mika, you know about Livingston, right?"

"....."

"What's wrong? You're so quiet."

"Minami, do you know why Sachi chose the wedding dress?"

"...I don't know."

"All the costumes here have short skirts, and Sachi can't find anything she wants to wear."

"But aren't dresses with short skirts cuter?"

"Minami, if your legs were made of metal... would you want to show that to everyone?"

"....."

Ah, she wore long pants during the mountain climbing the other day too. That's why we didn't realize she had a prosthetic leg.

"I'm sorry. I'm not angry at all."

With a roundabout tone, Mika left the changing room. Katori and I were left alone in a space filled with an unavoidably heavy atmosphere.

"...I said something bad, didn't I?"

“We didn’t know, so it’s not our fault. I don’t think you were to blame either.”

“...Thank you.”

As I slipped into my lace-up boots, Katori began putting on her Timberland boots.

“Azuma, they suit you.”

"Minami, you look like someone from Living-something."

"Hmph, you don't even know him."

“I’ll open the door.”

Sachi was waiting in front of the changing room. My gaze naturally went to where her feet were.

“Wow! Amazing!”

Despite feeling quite embarrassed by the otherworldly experience of cosplay, Sachi’s exaggerated reaction slightly eased it.

“That’s great! Now that everyone’s changed, what color background should we use for the photos?”

“We can choose the background too?”

“Yeah, but it’s just between white and green.”

“I prefer green!”

“Green it is. Let’s go in front of the blackboard.”

“Oh, I see.”

One shouldn't expect top-notch quality from students. What’s even more surprising is that the gay student is holding an instant camera. Despite advertising it as a photo studio, is the crucial camera a Polaroid?

“Okay, I’ll take the picture!”

—Click.

As the shutter was pressed, a rectangular shape emerged from the camera. However, on the still blank paper where nothing should have been captured yet, there were unexpected black lines.

“Oh no, what's with these lines? Ink leak?”

The gay student began dismantling the Polaroid. Their hands were getting increasingly black.

“Do you think you can fix it?”

Why did the ink leak? Why did they even use a Polaroid camera? Why did we end up in this situation in the end? Regrets swirled with the passage of time. It seemed I wasn't the only one feeling frustrated. Katori, Mika, and Kurumi's mouths were drooping in a way that didn't suit their outfits.

“I might be running out of time.”

Kurumi checked the time on her phone and immediately made a call.

“Shin, where are you now?”

The ominous feeling was probably more than just a feeling.

It was futile to hope that it wasn't the Shin I knew.

“A senior from the club will be here soon. He's usually in charge of taking photos at tournaments, so he's pretty good. Let's have him take the pictures. Azuma, you know him, right?”

“Y-Yeah.”

The reality that I couldn't escape was waiting for me here. If we were destined to meet here anyway, worrying about the curry shop was just a waste. Thanks to that, I wouldn't even remember the taste of keema curry.

Within five minutes, Shinji arrived at the classroom. Perhaps he had been a little far away, as he seemed unusually out of breath.

“Sorry, Shin.”

“Wow, you’ve got a big camera!”

“Thank you so much for coming.”

Following Mika’s words of gratitude, both Katori and Sachi bowed their heads. Shinji, who had been stuffing his hands into his pockets, brought them up to his face in a gentlemanly manner, saying, “No, no.” Perhaps meeting at this moment was lucky in a way. After all, we were not in our school uniforms but in cosplay outfits. Shinji smirked as he looked at us, but thankfully, the bridge of his nose wasn’t as long as I feared.

“I’m really sorry! Thank you! Ugh...”

“You’re a boy, so stop sobbing.”

Katori forcibly lifted up the arm of the gay student who had been sitting down, and reluctantly, they lifted their head. Their face were covered with transparent snot.

“I’m here now, so you don’t need to cry anymore.”

“Wow, Shin, you’re surprisingly reliable.”

“Kurumi, why are you in a suit?”

“Because it’s a cosplay photo studio.”

“I get that, but why did you choose that one?”

“Because it’s the most ‘Security Engineer’ looking one.”

With us, who lacked coherence, rearranging ourselves in front of the blackboard, Shinji wielded the Leica hanging from his neck. Our eyes met through the viewfinder.

—*Click.*

The shutter sound was so faint that you wouldn’t hear it unless you listened carefully.

“Okay, got it.”

“Hey, you should've said ‘cheese’ or something, otherwise, we wouldn't know.”

“I was definitely making a weird face just now!” said Kurumi.

—*Click.*

“I told you, the timing—”

“Don't worry. I got a good one. Kurumi, you should hurry back once you've changed, since that guy from the tapioca shop was looking for you. I need to clean up too, or I'll get scolded.”

Kurumi immediately dashed into the changing room, while Shinji returned to the classroom.

“What's with him? He totally ruined the mood.”

“You know with him, right, Azuma?”

“Yeah, kinda...”

“It's good that we managed to take the picture, right?”

“Yeah, I guess so. Let's get changed too.”

Katori and Mika went into the changing room. I was about to follow suit, but then I stopped. Since Kurumi was gone, if I went to change, Sachi would be left alone.

“Sorry, Sachi. I'll be back soon, can you wait?”

“Yeah! I'll be fine!”

“Okay then...”

“Azuma, thank you for wearing that outfit! You look just like a real idol!”

“.....”



I think it's easier to find words that make a child happy than ones that make an adult happy. I wanted to believe it was still too early for flattery from someone her age.

“Would you be happy if I became a real idol?”

“Yeah!”

“I see.”

Leaning forward, I whispered to Sachi.

She extended her pinky finger in front of my face, saying, “That’s a promise then!”

\* 4 \*

“Wow, that girl in the wheelchair too, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“The costume suited you.”

“Idol costumes are supposed to be cute, you know. But that one looked cheap.”

“It’s because it’s from the cultural festival.”

“Guess you need the real deal to wear the real thing, huh?”

“How was the curry?”

“Eh, didn’t leave much of an impression.”

“But I really put effort into it, added some secret ingredients and all.”

“Oh, can I have the photos you took?”

“Since you’re asking nicely, I’ll develop them and give them to you.”

Thanks to the coffee magic, Shinji seemed like a completely composed man. However, meeting him wasn't for engaging in such everyday conversations.

"Next, we've decided to target the center of the four cardinal directions: East, West, South, and North."

"Oh, I didn't know there was a high school in the central area."

Shinji, holding his cup up, listened with a careless attitude. I silently observed him for a while. It seems that coffee takes precedence over me in his priorities.

"Hmm? Did I say something strange?"

"No. What do you mean high school?"

"Oops."

Shinji leaned back in his chair, finally setting his cup down on the table.

"So, what's the target then?"

With the focus of his black-rimmed Wellington glasses finally turning towards me, he got down to business.

"Oryu Castle."

"A castle? Doesn't seem like it would be very useful."

"Even though locals rarely visit Oryu Castle except during cherry blossom season, it's highly rated on TripAdvisor. It ranked 12th in last year's 'Most Popular Japanese Tourist Spots for Foreigners'."

"Oh, it's popular among foreigners."

At this point, I took out the TV guide I had hidden in my school bag and pointed to the program schedule with the title "Top 30 Tourist Destinations in Japan Chosen by Foreigners."

"This will start airing from next season."

The show is called “Real Deal Spots In Japan That We Really Heard About.” It's a mundane title, but it seems popular comedian Up Curry Shimoda will be hosting it.

“What’s this show about?”

"Oryu Castle will be featured on this show. So, starting next week, we'll be working at Oryu Castle."

“Working?”

“Yeah, we’ll be guiding foreigners while acting as interpreters. I’ve already sorted out the details.”

When I visited Baba House the other day, I consulted with Ms. Baba about wanting to volunteer as a castle guide. With Ms. Baba, who has been volunteering in the castle town for over 20 years, things were quickly arranged. She promised to introduce us to some important people.

“I want us to appear on TV with the castle.”

“...Will it really go that smoothly?”

Shinji’s cloudy expression suddenly filled me with anxiety.

“You’re just talking about volunteering as a castle guide. Most of the castle information is usually handled through narration. Doing interpreter volunteering is also common at most castles, so it’s difficult to stand out there. I've heard about some places where they dress up as samurais or ninjas for tourists. And if the filming day is on a weekday during the day, that's pretty much the end of it. Even if by some chance we do appear on TV, I don't think much will come out of it unless we do something really extraordinary."

His words were accurate. It’s the first time he’s said something like this. Usually, he’s the one encouraging me with words like “That’s interesting” or “Keep going.” I was hoping for that today as well.

The TV guide spread out on the table was something I bought on a whim because of the cover. A five-member idol group was holding lemons next to their faces, smiling at me. Perhaps I had interpreted it as if I were led by it.

“But you’re still going to do it, right?”

"Huh?"

"When most people encounter a wall on the path they want to take, they usually try to find another path. But you, Azuma, you either climb over it or break through it, right? You're like a wild boar. No, more like Godzilla."

"Calling a girl Godzilla?"

"Sorry. Sorry."

I watched as Shinji hastily took a sip of his coffee. He always talks fast, discussing his principles vehemently. The other day he was arguing about the maliciousness of wearing gym shorts under school skirts. He'd apologize as soon as he finished venting and his ears would turn red. Lately, Shinji often pretends to know everything about me, but I usually see through him just as well.

"Azuma."

"What?"

"I have a suggestion—"

## Ch.7 Formidable Adversary ~ Multilingual Elder ~

\* 1 \*

The anniversary of the siege of the castle fell exactly one week after I confided the plan to Shinji. The dignified Oryu Castle stood tall, bearing a clear blue hue as it looked down upon me.

“Good morning.”

Ignoring the gaze from the ticket booth attendant behind the acrylic panel, I headed towards the main gate. Since I had already paid the entrance fee, I hoped they would overlook this slight breach with a spirit of hospitality. The time was 10:55AM. I had managed to arrive exactly five minutes earlier than the designated time. Quite a feat by Japanese standards.

Oryu Castle, visible from all over the Joshu region, stood atop the mountain. Of course, I had used the shuttle bus. Climbing mountains, which were not even my hobby, was not something I did multiple times a year.

“Are you Ajima?”

“Huh?”

“You’re Ajima, right? Ms. Baba referred you to us.”

“Oh, yes. I’m Azuma.”

Noticing my unfamiliar behavior near the entrance, three elderly people approached. They were probably around the same age as my grandfather. This elderly gentleman, who appeared to be around 80, seemed to have difficulty pursing his lips due to his large dentures. I noticed a membership card hanging around his neck. Ah, this person must be—

“You must be Mr. Itami, right? Ms. Baba referred you to me. I’m Yu Azuma. I look forward to working with you starting today.”

“Likewise, I look forward to working with you.”

As I extended my right hand, Mr. Itami's frail fingers, adorned with wrinkles, enveloped my hand. The other two gentlemen beside him also exchanged handshakes in succession.

"Well then, without further ado, I'll go fetch the armbands. I'll be back shortly."

With those words, one of the gentlemen disappeared somewhere. His round eyes, rosy cheeks, and plump figure were quite charming.

"We need the armbands for this activity. Each person takes a turn, and today it's his. The person on armband duty goes to the main gate to collect everyone's armbands."

"I see."

For a moment, I had doubted the severity of the hierarchy, but Mr. Itami's explanation about the duty rotation reassured me.

"By the way, have you ever been to the Kudamatsu Museum nearby?"

The sudden question didn't come from Mr. Itami but from the other gentleman.

"The Kudamatsu Museum? No, I haven't been there yet."

"I see. You should check it out. Here, take a look at this picture I took when I went there last time. Pretty amazing, right?"

I was forcibly handed a photograph. In it, a broken fighter plane was depicted. Perhaps when one would get older, they would come to appreciate this charm.

"Hey, hey, you old man. Can't you see Ajima is troubled? Your story can wait. I don't understand why you suddenly brought out the picture." Mr. Itami interjected sharply, prompting the military nerd gentleman to smoothly stow away the photo. It seemed Mr. Itami held a much higher position.

"By the way, Ajima, do you speak English?"

"Yes."

“In that case, you might find today a bit boring. The guide for today is Spanish.”

“Spanish...”

Could it be that the guide would conduct the tour in Spanish?

At this moment, the gentleman who had left earlier to fetch the armbands hurried back.

“Sorry for the wait. Here are the armbands.”

“Thank you. Well then, see you later.”

The two gentlemen started walking towards the south gate, leaving only Mr. Itami and me behind. It seemed that the plan to move in a group of four had changed.

“Mr. Itami, where are they heading?”

“Since there's only one pre-booked visitor today, those who aren't assigned will do some outreach at the gate. If they spot foreign tourists, they'll ask if they need a guide.”

It may seem as daunting as hunting for a cut model, but this was exactly what I had imagined a volunteer guide to be like.

“But that old man can't seem to read the mood.”

“Hahaha...”

It was easy to guess which old man he was referring to. It seemed that even in the senior society, there were dark sides.

The client appeared on time. I felt relieved at her gentle appearance. Hanna, the Spanish, was a 20-year-old college student. That was as much as I could gather, as from there, the conversation was initiated by the elderly Japanese, starting a Spanish exchange. Judging by Hanna's cheerful responses, it seemed the conversation was going well.

“Before we enter the main castle tower, let me give you a brief history of Oryu Castle.”

Mr. Itami informed me, before switching back to Spanish from his denture-clad mouth. He then took out a file from his oversized shoulder bag, and finally, the volunteer tour began.

\* 2 \*

“This Oryu Castle was built towards the end of the Sengoku period. Around that time, it was fashionable among warlords to build flashy castles to showcase their power, and this castle was one of them. Of course, it was also well-designed. That hole over there is called a *sama*, or a small opening. It’s currently open, but it would be sealed with plaster until the enemy attacks—”

Mr. Itami explained for about five minutes using the file he had. He occasionally included Japanese for my benefit, but I noticed Hanna seemed bored during these moments.

“Well then, let’s enter the castle now.”

After finishing the first point of the tour, Mr. Itami started walking at the front again. Whether his stride was naturally wide or if he was just in a hurry, I couldn’t tell, but Mr. Itami, despite being elderly, walked fast.

We followed behind him, but Hanna stopped at key points. She walked a bit, then paused, taking photos with her digital camera each time. It was challenging to keep an eye on Hanna and Mr. Itami alternately, and coordinate so that we would not get separated.

When we reached the door to enter the castle tower, Hanna handed me her camera apologetically.

“Please.”

I accepted it graciously and aimed the lens at her. She smiled as I clicked the shutter, posing with her thumb up. I wondered what Hanna’s dreams were as I peered through the viewfinder.



As we entered the castle tower, the density of people increased suddenly, and I lost sight of Mr. Itami. Left behind, Hanna and I decided to proceed further into the castle for now.

According to the floor plan, it seems that the route is to descend from the 3rd floor to the 2nd floor and then to the 1st floor. Currently, Hanna and I are on the 1st floor, which is converted into a souvenir shop. Hanna was gazing at the “Donor Appreciation Board” placed next to the floor plan, taking photos without understanding its meaning. I wonder how much those listed names donated. It's hard to imagine the figures, but perhaps they're arranged in order of those who contributed more.

“Nobuko Katori”

I noticed a name at the top right corner that caught my attention. No way. If I remember later, I'll ask about it when we meet again. It's not something worth taking out my phone to ask about right now.

Hanna signaled with her eyes that she was satisfied, so I guided her to the elevator to go to the 3rd floor.

“Ajima.”

“Oh, Mr. Itami. Thank goodness we found you.”

Sure enough, Mr. Fast-walker was waiting in front of the elevator. I wonder what would have happened if we had chosen the stairs.

“Well then, let's go up.”

The top floor of Oyu Castle was like an observation deck. From there, you could see not only the castle town but also the sea beyond. Mr. Itami opened his file again and began the continuation of the tour. Just like before, he explained the view, alternating between Spanish and Japanese.

“Today's clear weather allows for a beautiful view all the way to the distance. There used to be a river to the south of this castle, so in the past, they made an escape route in the north direction. Just around that area...”

During the time allocated for the Japanese explanation, Hanna had been wandering around the 3rd floor repeatedly. I felt guilty for letting her wander around to kill time, considering she had traveled all the way to Japan for over 15

hours. Although I considered suggesting, "I'm fine with just a brief explanation." I hesitated due to the possibility of upsetting the elderly gentleman. In the end, I decided it was best for Hanna to wait.

"How do you like it? There must be a lot of things you didn't know even though you've been living here, right?"

"Yes."

"Great, great. Now let's move on to the 2nd floor."

Mr. Itami narrowed his eyes contentedly and resumed walking with astonishing speed. I grabbed onto Hanna's arm and followed closely behind the elderly gentleman.

Descending the stairs, it felt like stepping into an art gallery. The atmosphere had changed completely from the 3rd floor, and the space was filled with the sound of koto music, with exhibits lined up.

"WOW!"

Hanna dashed towards a Japanese sword with the inscription "Kunitoshi Hotarumaru." After observing it meticulously from hilt to tip for quite some time, she clapped loudly, seemingly oblivious to her surroundings. Mr. Itami hurried over and asked, and Hanna expressed her excitement in a high-pitched voice.

"Haha. Ajima, she's saying that this Japanese sword is amazing."

While I didn't say it out loud, it was apparent from Hannah's demeanor, so I didn't need to translate.

"In fact, this Japanese sword is the most popular among tourists."

Foreigners have their preferences, I guess. A Japanese sword seemed like just a slightly oversized kitchen knife to me.

"Among history enthusiasts, it's considered a legendary sword. That's because this sword went missing after World War II. It was thought to have been confiscated during the sword hunt, but it was found here in Joshu about 20 years

ago. It was big news back then, but Ajima, you weren't born yet, so you wouldn't know. The name Hotarumarū comes from a dream of a warrior named Aso Korezumi..."

The value of this sword, which is cherished by people from different countries with different languages and perspectives, may be higher than I imagined.

Hanna was fixated on the Japanese sword until the Japanese guided tour ended. Along the way, she spoke to passersby and had her photo taken in front of the sword.

This 2nd floor was the last stop of the volunteer guide tour. Our time spent at the castle tower was just under an hour.

I escorted Hanna to the main gate to bid her farewell, and we exchanged our final goodbyes.

*"Gracias."*

Using basic Spanish to thank Hanna, she grabbed my hand.

*"Ajima, arigato."*

I couldn't help but chuckle, and Hanna furrowed her brows, saying, *"Gomennasai. Watashi nihongo wakaranai."*

*"No! No! Very well!"*

If I had inadvertently hurt the pure-hearted Spanish, it was all because of the denture-wearing old man.

As we enjoyed our final girl talk, the military nerd old man and the charming old man, who had been on separate paths, appeared. Despite it only being an hour, it felt strangely nostalgic.

*"Well, well, today was refreshing."*

The charming old man seemed disappointed. It seemed he had been turned down by numerous tourists he approached after our separation.

*"Hanna!"*

The tactless military nerd old man called out to Hanna familiarly.

“¿Cómo estás?”

“Muy bien! Gracias! ... ¿Hablas español?”

“Un poco.”

The old man scratched his white hair, smiling shyly. Truly, he couldn't read the mood until the end. Did he think it wouldn't matter what he said to a Spanish person? Hanna, with her innocent green eyes, narrowed them without understanding any potential offensive language. I pulled Mr. Itami's bony arm and whispered to him.

“That old man still doesn't get it. He just said ‘*un poco*’ to Hanna.”

“Hahaha.”

Mr. Itami burst into laughter, revealing his dentures.

“Ajima, ‘*un poco*’ is perfectly good Spanish. It means ‘a little’ in English.”

“Oh, really?”

I couldn't believe I'd end up embarrassed like this. And even that problematic old man could speak Spanish. It's frustrating, but today was a complete defeat.

“By the way, Ajima, it's better not to use ‘*ano*’ which means ‘that’ in Japanese when talking to Spanish people. Also, avoid ‘Mariko Kaga.’”

“What do you mean?”

“Hahaha, it's a secret.”

At Hanna's suggestion, we took a final commemorative photo. This photogenic castle did a great job to wrap up the day.

After seeing Hana off, I decided to join the elderly gentlemen, who mentioned they were going to replenish their sugar levels. The charming old man, who was in charge of returning the armbands, would join us later. I boarded the shuttle bus with the remaining two elderly gentlemen and headed to a quaint café near the station. There was an elderly couple as the only customers, and the master behind the counter seemed to be well into his sixties. Being surrounded by elderly people like this, I couldn't help but worry that my life force might be drained away.

Prompted by the master, who seemed like he would suit smoking a cigar, we sat down on the sofa.

“Good job today. What do you think of it?”

“It was more challenging than I imagined. Doing this as a volunteer... I really admire everyone here.”

“Hahaha. Those are kind words.”

Mr. Itami smiled contentedly as he looked at the Coke float brought to him. I didn't want him to ascend to heaven just yet, so I kept the conversation going.

“Where did you learn English and Spanish, Mr. Itami?”

“I worked in trade relations for a long time. I had many opportunities to encounter English, Chinese, French, German, and Italian, so I naturally picked them up over time. I learned Spanish more recently.”

“You're amazing.”

“No, I guess I just enjoy acquiring knowledge.”

“Doesn't memory deteriorate as you age?”

“Well, you do have more free time as you get older.”

Mr. Itami delicately spooned the ice cream into his mouth with a silver spoon.

I used to think that learning was for the sake of benefiting my future self. But I've learned from Mr. Itami's way of life that it's not everything.

"Do you think you'll be able to manage on your own next time?"

"Y-Yes."

I need to improve quickly. Mr. Itami will undoubtedly become my rival when the time comes for Oryu Castle to be featured. An elderly person who can speak six languages is quite a formidable adversary.

"Could I have the file you were using, Mr. Itami?"

"I made it for my own convenience, so I can't give it to you. However, I can give you the manual to use. Everyone does it differently, incorporating their own style. Ajima, please do your best while utilizing your own strengths."

"Understood. Thank you."

"Is there anything else you're unsure about or want to ask?"

Should I say it here? Shinji's proposal from the café had been swirling in my head all day.

---"What is this proposal?"

---"I was thinking, maybe I could join as a volunteer too?"

---"This is an East-West-South-North plan."

---"I know. But because it's me, I might be the one that could help you all."

I took a deep breath and exhaled all at once toward Mr. Itami.

"Well!"

"Yes?"

“I won’t lose. I’ll show you I can be a great guide, just as good as you three, Mr. Itami.”

Mr. Itami slurped his cola, now merged with the ice, in one gulp. With a loud noise, he pulled the straw from his mouth, leaving only the container with ice in front of him. Though he might be short on permanent teeth, his taste buds were youthful. After three droplets of water fell onto the coaster, Mr. Itami raised his head.

“..Young people sure have spirit. Good luck.”

Mr. Itami took out a thick stack of documents from his bag and placed them in front of me. One was a paper document about Oryu Castle, and the other was a manual book issued by the Japan Tourism Association for volunteer guides. Souvenirs are troublesome to take home, but even the burden of bringing them is heavy. I reluctantly put them into my bag.

After the charming old man finished returning the armband and arrived late, Mr. Itami ordered a second cola float. The military nerd old man intermittently inserted stories about the army and navy, but no one got interested in them. Eventually, he was seen picking his nose with a paper napkin placed on the table.

“Then, shall we go now?”

We split the bill separately and left the store after paying. I bid farewell to the three elderly gentlemen who seemed surprisingly energetic for their age. My next deployment date is next Saturday.

“Hello? I’ve got a request for deployment next Saturday. Yeah, that’s right. Today, I found out that Shinji might actually be useful. By the way, do you have a mobile printer?”

\* 4 \*

Once I briefly moved my phone away from my ear to check the signal, it seemed to be not too bad. Talking with Mr. Itami apparently requires a high level of listening skills.

“Ajima, I really need you to come. Are you available next Thursday or Friday?”

With the noise of dentures, he probably said something like this. The reason for being called was of course imaginable, but I thought it would be a little later.

Every Friday, Katori is tied up with tutoring, so Thursday seems more convenient, but this week I had plans to go to Baba House to teach English to the little one. Well, maybe I can just take a break. With Kurumi, who doesn't have club activities during the test period, and Mika, who always comes when invited, it should be easy to bring them along.

“I’ll head there after school on Thursday. I can be there by around 4PM.”

The Itami All-Stars summoned on the day consisted of seven members in total. Mr. Itami himself, the charming old man, myself, along with Kurumi, Katori, Mika, and Shinji. For the past few weeks, I had been planning to approach from the angle of being able to guide as skillfully as Mr. Itami, in order to gain their recognition. Although it felt like I was being half-coerced as a helper, these four high school students had officially joined the ranks of senior volunteers. That old man who’s known for being unable to read the mood hasn’t come.

“Thank you all for coming today. Actually, we received a call from the TV station the other day, apparently they want to feature the castle on a program. Today, um... there's someone related to that coming from Tokyo. It seems they want to hear from us. To be honest, I’m not sure of the details, but please, cooperate with them.”

“I didn’t hear anything about any coverage.”

Kurumi pouted at me.

“Yeah, me neither.”

Maybe it was mentioned over the phone, but it didn’t quite register properly in my ears, probably due to Mr. Itami’s way of conveying the message. Blame-shifting might help smooth things over.

Kurumi’s reluctance towards the coverage was expected. I was more concerned about the other two, but it seemed to be unnecessary worry. Katori and Mika couldn’t contain their smiles upon hearing about the coverage.

Was the old man with colored glasses and a cardigan draped over his shoulders going to show up? As the All-Stars lined up in front of the gates of Oryu Castle, the person who appeared was nothing like what I had imagined.



“Sorry for being late! I work as an assistant director at a production company called Elmix. My name is Koga. I'll be in your care today!”

She appeared to be in her early twenties and bent her head down just enough for her backpack to almost slide off her front. Her tone was lively, but there was a slight unnaturalness in her intonation.

“Ms. Koga, you came all the way to this countryside. Impressive.”

“Oh no, not at all!”

“You're quite young. I was surprised.”

In response to the impressed charming old man, AD Koga replied, “Despite how I look, I'm already 24.” Despite being in her mid-twenties, a time when one would typically be fashion-conscious, she didn't even bother with makeup. Her thin checkered shirt was wrinkled, and her brightly colored Nike sneakers were so dirty they looked like they had just been through a sports festival. Although her hair was dyed blonde, the roots were starting to show black due to neglecting touch-ups. Her eyebrows were shaved off completely, giving her a rather unpleasant appearance. Was she really from Tokyo?

“It must have been a long journey. Why don't we have some tea and chat?”

Mr. Itami, always smiling and with emotions hard to read, remained unchanged today. However, his determination could be sensed from his first sight in a hunting cap and his slightly raised voice.

The All-Stars and the eyebrow-less AD moved to a tea shop on the castle grounds. After ordering sets of matcha and sweets for everyone, Itami, the leader, began to lay out documents on the table.

“So many! Thank you very much for your thoroughness.”

AD Koga picked up one of the books, but after flipping through pages four or five, she quickly returned it to its original position.

“Oh, but please give us the data! It's okay if it's later!”

“...Understood.”

Even the mild-mannered 77-year-old seemed to grimace a little, but Koga started up the computer without any remorse. Several questions were already typed into the open screen.

“Um, then let me ask you some questions! How do you usually conduct your tours? Let's start with Mr. Itami.”

“Well, showing them in practice is the most straightforward way, I believe... but explaining verbally is quite challenging. Um, I usually have a file in my bag that I use, so I would...”

Even for a guide like Mr. Itami, known for his long-windedness, his answers in such situations wouldn't be this brief. The pleasant sound of Koga's typing combined with the old man's boring explanations would normally induce drowsiness, but when it came to discussing TV programs, it was a different story.

After Mr. Itami finished his turn, the charming old man added a few words. Now it was our turn. We had plenty of time to think, but when my eyes met Koga's, words wouldn't come out.

“Um...”

“I heard that the high schoolers here provide a photo service. Could you tell me more about that?”

Was she gathering information beforehand? I closed my slightly open mouth and sent a glance to Shinji. It would be better to leave the response to him for this question.

“Y-Yes. Um... At Oryu Castle, there are several photogenic spots where you can take commemorative photos... a-and we also take pictures of visitors while they're touring with a guide. Um, n-now we have a small cordless printer, so we can develop and give the photos to them on their way back. Um... I-I, personally, enjoy taking photos, and it's a great opportunity for me to improve my skills.”

“I see, I see.”

Koga nodded several times. It seemed like a good response. I was actually grateful for Shinji's stumbling. Thanks to him, the weird pressure was lifted, and it became much easier to talk.

“I-I’m in charge of the camera, but the guide is... um, her...”

When Shinji pointed at me, all eyes in the tea shop turned towards me. Without raising my shoulders, I took a deep breath. I didn’t want to admit it, but I seemed to be sweating in my palms, which was unusual.

“I’m Azumz. Nice to meet you.”

“Azuma, nice to meet you. Can you speak English?”

“Yes. I’ve lived abroad before, so speaking English is technically part of my role. However, I’m not very good with history, so everyone contributes to the content of the tours.”

Koga glanced at each of the three faces that “everyone” referred to in turn.

“...You’re all really cute, huh?”

Kurumi lowered her head slightly, while Katori and Mika smiled proudly.

“You seem like a nice person. I’m Katori. Nice to meet you. This is Kurumi next to me, and next to her is Mika.”

“Nice to meet you.”

Katori, in a good mood, suddenly took charge of the conversation.

“Ms. Koga, are you from the Kansai region?”

“Oh, well, actually, yeah. I’ve kind of toned down the accent.”

“Oh, there’s no need to tone it down.”

“Really?”

“Really. Because from the moment you greeted us, your intonation seemed unnatural. You probably thought you were speaking in standard Japanese.”

“Oh boy.”

The brash young high school princess's manner of speaking to anyone was always condescending, and of course, she was unaware of it, which was a flaw in her character. Unless someone had exceptional people skills, they wouldn't be able to have more than a few words of conversation with her upon first meeting. While AD Koga initially thought she was a strong-willed woman from her tone and appearance, seeing her respond with a smile made her seem different.

"You've got quite a personality, miss. Well then, I'll try to make it easier for you to talk from now on. By the way, one thing's been bothering me. Why is everyone's uniform so different? I thought you were all friends from the same school."

"We're all members of the same volunteer organization."

Explaining in detail would make the story longer, but it was wise to summarize it concisely. It would take some time and technique to explain the past year without skipping over it.

"Oh, I see! So you all became friends through that."

"That's right."

"To add to Azuma's explanation, we come from all directions, North, South, East, and West, to this Oryu Castle. My name is Katori, but since I'm from the south, they call me 'Minami.'"

"That's amazing! That's a great introduction, and I'd like to include it somewhere. I'll discuss it with the director."

"Really? Please do."

I clasped my hands together with all sincerity. Glancing at Kurumi, who I was concerned about, I noticed she was nodding along with my request, almost as if she was in agreement, as she gave a nod towards AD Koga. Whether she had changed her mind or was hiding her true feelings behind a facade of reluctance, it was convenient for me either way.

After finishing all the questions, AD Koga settled the bill for everyone's matcha and sweets at the tea shop.

"Tokyo folks sure are well-off."

The charming old man muttered jokingly.

As we left the tea shop, the sky was unexpectedly dark. It seemed like it might rain even though I hadn't brought an umbrella. Gratefully, the senior duo offered to return our armbands for us, so we gladly accepted. With that, the All-Stars disbanded.

"I'm surprised. I never expected Oryu Castle to be featured in the media. I wonder if we'll be on TV. It would be fun if we all appeared together."

"I think I'll pass."

"What are you saying? We need you."

When I glanced back, I saw Shinji and Katori walking side by side. Shinji quietly savored Katori's casual remark.

"Looks like everyone's getting along well."

Even Kurumi, walking on my right, squinted her eyes as she watched the two.

"Right."

But there was something on my mind. From midway through the coverage, Mika's behavior had been noticeably odd. Normally, she would be nodding and smiling while Katori spoke, but the Mika standing to my left wasn't showing any sign of joining the conversation. Instead, she was glaring at the ground conspicuously, as if she wanted someone to touch her. This feeling... I was sure I had felt it before. What could have caused her to act this way?

"Mika, is something wrong?"

"....."

Despite my attempts to get something out of her, she remained silent, refusing to meet my eyes.

"Did you see AD Koga's shoes? They were orange, purple, and green. Poison mushroom colors."

"....."

“Hey, what’s wrong? Why so quiet...”

“...Ugh! Can I just say how I’m feeling right now because it’s bothering me?”

Her sudden outburst triggered everyone’s danger sensors. Everyone froze as if in agreement.

“...What... is it?”

“I mean, aren’t we just volunteer colleagues?”

"Huh?"

“I mean, earlier, when Azuma was asked by Ms. Koga, didn’t she say something like that? That we’re only connected through volunteering?”

“That’s not what I meant! I just thought it would be a quicker way to explain it. It, uh, it’s just easier to understand that way.”

“We were friends from the start. I wish you had said that properly.”

“.....”

I see. It seemed the cause of her anger was directed at me. I attempted to find words to retort, but quickly gave up. Conversing with someone whose temper was flaring was wise to put on hold.

“Well, it’s not a big deal, right? Azuma didn’t mean any harm, did she?”

I decided to quietly nod in agreement with Katori’s meddlesome intervention.

Mika started walking in silence. Was she always this troublesome? We continued moving forward again. How heavy my steps felt.

Thinking Mika’s anger would subside after three days, I left her alone. In reality, it didn’t take much to repair the situation. The next day, she sent a message apologizing and expressing her passion for the coverage.

However, things weren’t that simple. On the day of the shoot, Kurumi didn’t show up at Oryu Castle.

\* 5 \*

“Mom, it’s starting!”

I shouted towards my mother who was doing the dishes. She calmly wiped her hands with a dishcloth and sat down on the sofa.

“Yu, you’ll ruin your eyes if you watch from so close.”

“*No problem.*”

To avoid letting my mother sense my nervousness, I replied to the 50-inch TV. Indeed, I was sitting a bit too close, but at this point, it was better to strain my eyes than to move.

“And now, it’s starting! It’s ‘Real Deal Spots In Japan That We Really Heard About!’”

Announced by the host, Curry Shimoda, as the crane camera pulled back. The four guests in the studio were shown.

“Excuse me?”

“Oh, what’s up? Seems like you have something to say right off the bat.”

“Isn’t the title a bit off? You could’ve just kept it as ‘Real Spots in Japan’ to keep the rhyme with ‘real,’ why did you change that part? Having ‘real’ written in kanji but pronounced as ‘*maji*’ changing it to ‘real deal’ is just so lame.”

“Don’t call it lame. Apologize to everyone.”

Curry Shimoda’s retort without his usual snappiness which is unusual, and the forced recorded laughter leaked painfully from the television.

“Now, let’s go straight to this recording.”

--- Today’s featured spot is Oryu Castle. This region is called Joshu Prefecture, and once, there were many castles standing here. However, only Oryu

Castle remains. This castle, visited by many tourists, is also beloved by the locals.

---

After the narration synced with footage of the castle ended, the announcer who I worked with during the filming the other day appeared on the screen.

“Now, I’m here at Oryu Castle. It’s said that there’s a super-famous guide here who speaks six languages fluently at the age of 77. Actually, he’s here today, so let’s call him in. Mr. Itami!”

With a loud voice, the announcer invited him, and an elderly man wearing a hunting cap appeared on the screen. Mr. Itami introduced himself in Spanish and Chinese.

“Thank you, Mr. Itami.”

The skilled elderly man left with a satisfied expression. The part where he was talking extensively about Oryu Castle seemed to have been completely cut. Whether it was due to unclear pronunciation that couldn’t be compensated for by subtitles or simply because the speech was too long, the reason was unknown.

“There are other people in Oryu Castle who provide charming hospitality. Surprisingly, the people who are doing this are students! Let’s hear what they have to say. If you please.”

Familiar faces and those who have been taking care of me since birth came into the frame. My heart rate, which had been steadily rising since the start of the program, reached its peak.

“Nice to meet everyone!”

As the four lined up next to the announcer, each of their names was displayed on screen. Ranko Katori, Mika Kamei, Shinji Kudo, and Yu Azuma... Finally, it seemed like I had made my television debut.

“So, you all come here after school or on days off from school to volunteer as guides, right?”

“Yes, that’s right. Interacting with people for the first time is really enjoyable, you know.”

After Katori finished speaking, the screen briefly switched to the studio.



--Wait, did she just say 'you know'?!

A comedian with a frivolous-style model wife interjected a retort towards Katori. Laughter from my mother could be heard from behind.

"We heard that your roles as guides are divided."

"Yes, that's correct. I'm in charge of communication and I use this file to explain things in English."

The me in memory overlapped with the me on screen. The person projected on the LCD in front of me was indeed myself, but somehow seemed a bit different. Is this how I usually appear to others? I looked much worse than the face I see in mirrors or selfies.

When the speaker changed to Shinji, I noticed that my legs had gone numb. It seemed that I had been sitting on my knees for a long time.

"I... I'm in charge of... taking photos."

The way Shinji's shoulders were hunched up seemed oddly unnatural, like a joke. Despite his normally rounded shoulders and stooped posture, he seemed to have stiffened up, burying his neck.

--*Click.*

I took a photo of the TV screen with my smartphone camera and sent it to Shinji with a quick message.

(Monster Jamila Found!)

"Thank you, high school students."

By the time the message was sent, our segment was already over, and the announcer was exploring Oryu Castle on screen. The woman in person seemed more delicate and gentle than she did on TV, recalling the day of the shoot.

"Your coverage is over, Yu."

"Yeah."

I shifted from the floor to the sofa, nursing my numb legs.

“Where’s the robotics contest girl that day? She was always with you.”

“She’s usually here, but she didn’t come that day. Didn’t show up even after the time passed, and I couldn’t reach her by phone. Turns out she lost her phone the day before.”

“Oh, that must have been worrying.”

“Yeah. We thought we might not be able to be interviewed. Everyone was saying they’re going to look for her.”

“...So that’s how it went.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Well, I still have to finish washing the dishes.”

As the recording for Oryu Castle ended and returned to the studio footage, a comedian with despairingly poor articulation was declaring victory over Mr. Itami. The studio was filled with a cheerful atmosphere. During the program’s ending, an actor who had come for promotion praised us high school students. Considering the achievement made without Kurumi, it was a cause for celebration.

The day after the broadcast, despite the rain pouring down, my spirits were unusually high. In my bag, I had tucked away a towel and a hair iron. And on this day, I delayed my departure for school more than usual.

“I saw you yesterday!”

“You were so cool speaking English fluently!”

As I entered the classroom, I was surrounded by waiting classmates. In the hallway, even students I had never met before greeted me, and while waiting in line at the school store, girls my junior asked me for photos.

On the second day after the broadcast, I woke up earlier, spent twice the usual time on makeup and hair styling, and even during my commute, I walked

with my eyes wide open, ready to be seen at any moment. But by the fifth day after the broadcast, I realized something.

“Oh, you’re Yu from the Azuma household. Coming back from school?”

"Yes, I am. Hello."

“I saw you on TV the other day. Quite impressive, doing volunteer work while going to school.”

“Thank you.”

“Why do you have such a scary look on your face?”

“Oh, it's nothing. Goodbye.”

At this point, only elderly people living in the housing complex would bring up that topic. As a week passed since the broadcast, I couldn’t help but feel frustrated by the unchanging daily routine.

I was waiting for the situation to change. But would such a day ever come if I just waited? Despite wanting to change, I realized how much I had already changed since that day when I desired it.

Even if I appeared on a program with an 8 percent viewership, even if hypothetically 8 million people saw me, if those 8 million people forgot about it, nothing would remain. We became famous only within our rural community.

On the night when I realized this, I seriously contemplated how dreams could truly come true.

—“I never thought I would pass. I just happened to apply and got in. But if I hadn’t auditioned back then, I wouldn't be here now.”

The person with beautiful black hair, my idol, spoke like this in an interview. Even though we were both human, their world seemed different, as if they stood in a place where they could be satisfied. That’s why they could confidently assert that their choice at the crossroads was correct. They had such overflowing confidence in their expression.

Where did I — go wrong?

Since our segment in the program aired, I hadn't gone to Oryo Castle even once. I had ignored all calls from Mr. Itami. But with each consecutive ringtone, the pain in my heart only intensified. I reluctantly pressed the answer button.

"...H-Hello?"

"Oh, Ajima. You finally picked up. Have you been busy lately?"

"I've been thinking of increasing my study time a bit."

I lied to the elderly man while lying on my bed.

"I see... Actually, there's someone I want you to meet. Could you come by sometime soon?"

I no longer had any desire to volunteer. I wasn't kind enough to help people without expecting anything in return.

"If it fits my schedule, I'll come. I'll contact you when I have free time."

They probably wanted to introduce me to a new volunteer. Even if it was a newcomer, they were probably elderly.

That night, I deleted Mr. Itami's contact from my phonebook.

The frequency of gatherings between the four of us, East, West, South, and North, had decreased. Still, we met once a week at the food court for some casual chat. Despite her absence from the shoot, things didn't become awkward between me and Kurumi. I felt the urge to blame her, but I didn't know how to do it while maintaining our relationship.

Today, another meaningless day at school came to an end. Watching the baseball club members hurriedly putting on their shoes, I headed to the restroom as usual. The restroom after school was empty and perfect for touch-ups. I used a cigarette lighter to burn my eyelash curler, and the heat raised my eyelashes to the limit, and then I was done.

As I walked out wearing my loafers and approached the school gate, I suddenly stopped in my tracks. I recognized the person standing there. But why was she---

“Oh, Azumatchi! I'm so glad to see you!”

“Ms. Koga! What are you doing here?”

“I have the day off today.”

“A day off..”

She looked even more beautiful today than when I last saw her. Her eyebrows were neatly drawn, and her makeup was well done, with no trace of oiliness. Even her high-tone hair looked freshly touched up at the roots.

“So, I came to see everyone. As a third-year AD at the edge of the cliff, I have a favor to ask.”

As AD Koga bowed her head, her backpack slid forward with momentum. I hurriedly helped her, and she chuckled shyly.

## Ch.8 Savior ~ Poisonous Mushroom AD ~

\* 1 \*

“No way... This is great...”

Receiving such a sudden and delightful surprise, I inadvertently bit my tongue. It hurt, and I could taste the iron from the blood. Although Koga’s words seemed to be entering my ears smoothly, my brain was already overheating, struggling to catch up with comprehension and organization. As time passed and I absorbed the situation, I became aware of something welling up from around my heart. For some people, it might turn into tears, but I was looking up at the sky with a clear view. No matter how extravagant a birthday celebration with money or how passionate a proposal with an edge I receive in the future, I don’t think I will ever be able to surpass this feeling of joy.

“Ms. Koga, please leave this to me.”

I took Koga and we hurriedly went to the food court. The three of them were already relaxing on the usual sofa seats.

“Sorry for being late.”

“Oh, you’re from the last time!”

Katori, who was the first to notice something unusual, stood up from her seat and displayed her dramatic surprise once again today. Apart from opening her eyes wide in shock, she had no other expressions in her repertoire.

“Why are you here?”

“Well then, Ms. Koga, please explain to everyone.”

Koga replied with an overly loud “Okay!” Her voice echoed widely in the sparsely populated food court. The employees at the Mister Donut inside the food court looked at us with suspicion.

“Well, you see, besides the show we covered last time, I’ve got another project on my plate.”

—It is another show Koga was in charge of. It’s a late-night variety show on Fridays that everyone might have heard of. It seems to have been running for five years, but its ratings have been struggling since the beginning of this year. So, in last week’s meeting, they apparently reached a consensus to completely overhaul the structure.

“I want you guys to appear on that show.”

“Us?”

“Just when I thought it was already the end for me and then I met all of you at the Oryo Castle. I told them during the planning meeting that I found interesting kids. Then the producer said, ‘Why don't you give it a try?’ It's the first time I've been entrusted with something like this... it's my first chance. Please, I'm begging you.”

Koga explains that last month, as her peers were steadily advancing from assistant directors to directors, she was further knocked down when a senior sarcastically remarked, “You’re just not cut out for making shows, huh?”

AD Koga is also struggling and rushing to fulfill her dream.

“Um...”

Kurumi pouts her lips and twists her neck.

“But there’s school and stuff.”

“Are you not allowed to appear in public entertainment at your school, Kurumitchi?”

"I don't know. There's no precedent."

There's no precedent at our school either. The West Techno Technical Junior College, where Kurumi attends, has no uniforms, no restrictions on hair color or piercings, so the school rules should be even more relaxed than at East High. Part-time jobs, which are only allowed during long breaks at our school, have no specific restrictions at a technical junior college. If it were prohibited at West Techno, there would be no way it would be allowed at Mika's academic school or Katori's prestigious girls' school either. However, when I appeared on TV last time, neither my homeroom teacher nor the grade coordinator for student guidance said anything. Perhaps it was because it was volunteer exposure. Whatever the reason, it shouldn't have been listed as prohibited in East High's student handbook.

Is Kurumi trying to use school as an excuse to escape, like during the Oryo Castle interview? However, this time, it's not going to be that easy to get away.

"Hey, please. We'll adjust the recording date to fit everyone's schedule, and of course, we'll explain it to your parents too. We need that catchy 'East, West, South, North' vibe. So, I beg everyone."

Koga bows repeatedly, seemingly countless times just for today. How many more times does she have to bow for everyone to agree?

Kurumi's expression remained frowning, and the other two didn't seem eager to speak lightly. Meanwhile, Koga had been bowing her head all this time, and I couldn't help but break the silence.

"Hey, everyone. Ms. Koga came all the way here, so let's help out."

"...I agree."

Mika said lazily, raising her hand while resting her elbows on the table.

"Ms. Koga, we understand your feelings, so please lift your head."

Following Katori's lead, I returned to my original posture, but Koga's expression didn't brighten.

"Could you tell us specifically what we'll be doing?"

"Okay. Well, let me tell you what I'm currently considering."



It's a weekly 30-minute program. The offer we received from Koga was for a small segment within it.

Apparently, in Tokyo, there's some kind of "festival" held almost every week. The classic outdoor music festivals are a summer tradition, but there are also gourmet meat festivals, super spicy food festivals, and even fortune-telling festivals regardless of the season.

The current plan Koga is considering is for us high schoolers to visit various festivals and conduct impromptu interviews with vendors and attendees. Koga says that if a popular entertainer would do that, there would be a risk of panic when the entertainer will be surrounded, and if they are an unpopular entertainer, they're more likely to be refused interviews, so amateur high school girls are perfect for it.

"I think we still need to work out the details, but I'd like to discuss it with everyone."

"It sounds fun just hearing about it. But my school has various rules too."

"That's probably the case. Well, I don't think deciding immediately is possible, so could you get back to me by the end of this week? Here's my contact information."

Koga places four business cards on the table and stands up.

"Sorry for taking up your after-school time. I hope we can meet again."

—— Hey, isn't that Kurumi Taiga?

—— Yeah, and the one next to her is Katori from Teneritas.

—— Wow. You should go talk to them.

—— Nah, it's no use. They won't even bother with people like us. I heard they have terrible attitudes.

“Minami, don’t engage with them.”

“Why not? I can’t just stay silent after being spoken to like that.”

“Those kinds of people are best left alone.”

“.....”

“Hey, Minami, what did you think?”

“About the TV show discussion earlier?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m really interested.”

“Even though you're a high school senior preparing for entrance exams?”

“Yeah, despite what everyone else says. How about you, Kurumi?”

“I’m undecided. I’m still trying to figure out what's important to me right now.”

“That’s something I think everyone struggles with, even me.”

“.....”

“It’ll be okay, I’m sure. Let’s just give it a try for now.”

\* 2 \*

“Hello, Ms. Koga? Everyone has agreed!”

Recording takes place once a week, always on weekends or holidays. There is no need to worry about school, we would receive 5000 yen allowance per session, on top of transportation expenses. The three agreed to the project on the condition that they could always ask for help if they became unhappy with the project.

About a month after the broadcast started, Koga informed us that our trial segment had become a regular feature. With Katori's intense character, Kurumi's devastating smile, and Mika's universally appealing looks, "East, West, South, North" managed to generate a bit of demand. And with that, I began to see a glimmer of hope for my dream, which I had almost lost once.

"Excuse me, Ms. Koga. Can I talk to you for a moment?"

"What's up, Azumatchi? You look so serious."

After finishing the shoot as usual, I approached Koga. I had asked the others to get ready to leave first, and then I took Koga to a secluded area.

"What's wrong?"

"Um, do we need to join an agency or something?"

"Oh, no need for that at the moment. Don't worry."

"Well, actually, I kind of want to."

"Oh, really?"

Koga started to ponder while touching her chin. She wasn't just AD Koga anymore. Thanks to the success of our festival segment, she had been promoted from assistant director to director. As a result, she now had a more dependable demeanor than before.

"I'll look into it a bit."

"Thank you!"

The next day, I received a call from Koga. Since the recording schedule would be sent via email, I immediately guessed that it was about our discussion from yesterday.

"Oh, Azumatchi? Regarding what we talked about yesterday with the agency, I think I found a place where I can introduce you."

“Really?”

The agency's name was Marsact. I hadn't heard of it before, but when I looked at their website, I saw that they represented a well-known actress.

“I gave them a brief explanation from our side, but they want to meet and talk in person. When can you come to Tokyo?”

“If it's after the next recording, I'll be fine with that.”

“Okay. How about this Sunday then? I'll let them know.”

“Please do.”

After hanging up the phone, I sat down at my desk. There were still six days until Sunday. I took out loose-leaf paper and a pen from my drawer.

Under Koga's referral, I visited the agency alone. I had informed the other three that I would do some shopping before returning. As I approached the receptionist, whose eyelash extensions were starting to come off, I informed her, “I have an interview scheduled for 6PM.” and she guided me to a room in the back.

The room was entirely glass-walled, with a heavy red sofa placed awkwardly. It felt far from calming. I had imagined a neatly arranged interview room like a conference room, and I hurriedly tried to recalibrate my simulation, but it was too late.

A man in a gray jacket was about to open the door.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Ms. Azuma.”

With dark skin and bold white teeth, the man confidently entered the room and plopped down on the sofa.

“Please, have a seat.”

“Oh, okay.”

“I’m Endo from Marsact. I’ve heard about you from Koga. I’ve also seen your show. I thought you’d be a good fit for us, but first, could you tell me about yourself?”

First off, self-promotion. His sturdy physique added a strange pressure. If I were nervous at a time like this, it would render meaningless all the hardships I had endured so far. I detached my tense body from my consciousness.

“Okay. I lived in Canada from the fourth grade of elementary school to the second year of middle school, so I can speak English. I’m not interested in boys, and I’ve never dated anyone before. I’ve been practicing dance and singing on my own. I’m scared stuff will stay on social media networking sites for the rest of my life, so I haven’t registered to any of it. I want to become an idol. Nice to meet you.”

“.....”

The man from the agency in the gray jacket had a stern expression, frozen in place. Did I say something strange?

“..You want to be an idol?”

“Yes. It’s been my dream for a long time.”

“...I see.”

“Um, I want to create an idol group with the girls I’m currently doing the show with! Here, I have some materials.”

I handed the man a paper summarizing the profiles of the three girls.

“What’s this? Did you create this?”

“Yes!”

South \* Ranko Katori. She comes from a wealthy family and embodies the image and demeanor of a refined young lady. Her family even has a swimming pool at home. While she has a flashy appearance, there’s also a somewhat old-fashioned vibe about her, reminiscent of the character Madame Butterfly from "Aim for the Ace!" She used to be on the tennis team but quit before becoming a

regular player. Despite her condescending remarks, she means no harm, so it's somewhat endearing.

West \* Kurumi Taiga. Originally famous locally, she has a cute face and a talent for programming. She ranked second nationwide in a robotics competition and was the heroine of a technical junior college. She has fans all over the country. Standing at 150 centimeters tall, she always wears loose-fitting clothes.

North \* Mika Kamei. She always keeps her hair and nails meticulously groomed, with no flaws in her beauty routine. Despite being considered strict due to her good looks, she's actually kind-hearted. She's been involved in volunteer work for a long time.

"Wow... this is amazing."

"Thank you. Everyone here is so unique."

"You're probably the most unique one. I've been in this industry for 20 years, and I've never seen anyone like you before. Are these girls all aspiring to be idols?"

Endo grinned, showing off his white dental implants.

"Are there girls who don't want to be idols?"

"There are probably plenty."

"They may not say it, but deep down, I think they all dream about it."

"Too bad it's not such a beautiful world. Plus, there are plenty of people who feel disgust at just the word 'idol'."

"....."

"Sorry. Please don't take this as my opinion."

"....."

"My motto is to press forward courageously. You're a straightforward person. Since you have this segment, try to do something that ties in with the show. I'll talk to Koga. You can now leave."

Though meant to be encouraging, his words somehow sounded cold. Endo continued to display his dubious white teeth until the end. The words that came from those fake teeth were not genuine. I couldn't bring myself to believe that the world of idols wasn't beautiful after all.

\* 3 \*

"Oh my, welcome."

"Hello."

I was relieved that I was meeting the master for the first time in several months and that the store, which had few customers, was as usual. The last time I came here was before I started volunteering at Oryu Castle.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

"Long time no see."

I lightly apologized to him, though it had indeed been a few months since I last saw Shinji. However, I had been in frequent contact during that time, so it felt like "some time ago" to me.

"'Long time no see'? Has it really been that long?"

"But you see, we used to meet several times a week until recently."

"Don't phrase it like that."

"Sorry."

I had to make it clear, or the master on the floor would misunderstand. Even though I was seriously warning him, Shinji just laughed.

"It's amazing, isn't it? Just the other day, you were doing English volunteer work, and now you're appearing on TV as if it's nothing. You've really leveraged the Oryu Castle."

"I can't deny that, but don't call it 'leveraging.'"

“The volunteers seem a bit sad without you. Oh, but everyone hopes that you keep moving forward, speaking on behalf of the elderly brigade.”

“Shinji, you don’t have to force yourself to continue.”

“It was my own decision to start with because I wanted to. It’s rewarding to bring joy to others and improve my photography skills. It’s a good environment for me.”

“A good environment, huh? I’m envious. I went for an interview at the office yesterday.”

“You said you wanted to get in.”

“Yeah.”

“How did it go?”

“I think I have a good chance.”

“That’s great, Azuma.”

I’ve been keeping Shinji updated on everything over the phone, from the lack of response from Oryu Castle to deleting Mr. Itami’s contact information, to Koga showing up.

“How do you feel now?”

“Well, it’s like... I’ve finally come this far. But it’s scary to feel relieved. I wonder if my dream will really come true. But the happiness I feel is many times scarier than the fear.”

I told Shinji about the joy I couldn’t tell anyone about, and all the feelings I had been suppressing were released at once.

“I see.”

He smiled not with his usual smirk but with a rare gentle smile.

“Hey, why did you invite me to the café today?”



“There’s no particular reason. I just wanted to have a leisurely chat.”

“I see.”

“I wonder if we won't be able to meet like this anymore, just the two of us.”

“.....”

I stared blankly at my apple juice, pondering that thought. If things went well, they wouldn’t be able to meet like this anymore. The secret meetings they held at the café seemed unnecessary now. Lacking finesse, I couldn’t find the right words.

“I’m glad I got to have one last date with you, Azuma.”

“Huh? A date?”

“Yeah. I mean, today isn’t some kind of strategy meeting, right? We’re just meeting up.”

“.....”

What Shinji said wasn’t wrong. What we’re doing right now could be considered a date. Even if we didn’t think of it that way, our actions could be interpreted as such.

The longer the silence dragged on, the more pressure mounted on the next words to be spoken. “Don’t act like we’re dating.” “Don’t get ahead of yourself.” “I never thought of this as a date.” As I dismissed one thought after another, I found myself not wanting to say anything at all.

“Oh, right. Do you know this guy named Shimizu from the 5th year?”

It wasn’t something I particularly cared about, but it was a good topic to break the silence. It had happened a little while ago, but it was so memorable that I still remember it vividly.

“Yeah, I know him. Why?”

“He approached Kurumi at the industrial festival. Invited her to come see his band.”

“Wow, seriously?”

“Is he as sketchy as his reaction implies?”

“Shimizu is the kind of guy who names his RPG character ‘Kurumitan.’ Pretty sketchy.”

“Yikes.”

“So, did Kurumi end up going to see Shimizu’s band?”

“No, but for various reasons, I ended up going.”

“Wait, you went? Why?”

Seeing Shinji laugh heartily, I felt relieved. Shinji’s laughter was quiet. He didn’t clap his hands or make strange noises. His mannerisms might be a bit sloppy around the nose and mouth, but there was always a sense of refinement in his actions.

“You won’t be coming to the industrial festival anymore, will you?”

“Why not? I’ll still go.”

“That’s impossible. You’re becoming a TV celebrity. Not to mention, you’re going to be an idol soon, right? The four of you are already famous in this countryside. You won’t be able to move freely.”

“Do I really have to be constrained like that? But I don’t feel sad about it because it’s what I want.”

“What about not being able to see me anymore?”

“I’m a little sad about that.”

“Just hearing those words makes it worth inviting you out today.”

Shinji looked at his coffee and smiled awkwardly.

“Can I ask you one last thing?”

“What?”

“Why didn’t you audition to become an idol? It seems like a much faster route.”

“Well... I wonder why.”

On that day, the master didn’t take any money. Instead, he asked for an autograph. Using the thicker end of the marker pulled from the depths of the kitchen, I wrote on a piece of colored paper. The result was terribly clumsy, but that was part of its charm. After all, it was my first time making an autograph for someone.

“Well, see you next time.”

“Yeah. Someday.”

As Shinji’s frail figure disappeared, I started walking in the opposite direction. Who could have imagined that someone with such a weak appearance, someone who slouched so much and wore such unfashionable clothes, would become such a reliable presence for me...

——“Why didn't you audition?”

His words lingered in my mind even after he was gone.

“I can’t admit that I failed all the auditions. It’s too embarrassing to say.”

## Ch.9 The Directions Themselves

\* 1 \*

This was our first time recording in the studio.

When I think of a television station, the first thing that comes to mind is a spherical structure. Since I was a child, I had longed to enter that sphere, but when I arrived at the location designated by AD Koga, I was slightly shocked. It was an old-fashioned, plain building, far from modern. While the site was spacious, the neighboring commercial building looked much cleaner.

After enduring the piercing gaze of the security guard for 5 minutes, our beloved Koga finally appeared. Of course, she was in work mode, with no eyebrows drawn. Without any special acknowledgement for us who had traveled all the way from Tokyo by the first train for two hours, Koga began to guide the innocent high school girls.

“What are we going to do today, Ms. Koga?”

“I can’t tell you that yet. Come on, we’ve arrived at the studio. This is the D-Studio where the filming takes place.”

Koga stopped in front of a door that looked heavy.

“Instead of cramming yourselves like that, hurry up and go in. Please don’t greet the staff loudly since I’ll go in with you.”

“.....”

“Don't just silently stand there. Ready... set...”

With trembling hands, we push the door open, revealing several cameras waiting inside. Standing in front of the largest camera is a familiar figure. That physique and gray jacket is Endo from Marsact.

“Now, this way please.”

We were prompted to go towards Endo. Meanwhile, the cameras continue to film us.

“This may seem out of the blue, but I have something to tell everyone who has gathered here today.”

The other three froze so stiffly that I couldn't help but wonder if their hearts had stopped. Among the four of us, I was the only one who knew the true identity of the man named Endo and what might happen next.

“It seems that the cardinal directions, East, West, South, North, project seem to be well received, and you all have been chosen to sing the ending theme song of this program, ‘The Directions Themselves’”.

The handheld cameras, poised and ready, move closer to each of our faces. Despite trying to be conscious of my angle, I couldn't help but show a surprised expression.

“We'll start with singing and dancing lessons right away. Additionally, there will be explanations for parents and guardians regarding your affiliation with the agency, as well as some paperwork to fill out...”

That moment in the studio was broadcasted on the program the following week. What had been a segment featuring amateur high school girls doing unannounced festival reports just a few months ago had now transformed into a history of their growth of becoming idols.

“Are we just going to be taken further and further into this different world?”

“I feel like I want to run away right now.”

“I understand the anxiety, but we've managed to get through everything so far. I'm sure if we continue to go with the flow, things will work out somehow.”

“Are you okay with this, Minami? Not living a normal high school life.”

“Well, I’ve never really minded being in the spotlight. Plus, spending every day with everyone is a lot of fun.”

“I see... That’s right...”

“...Kurumi, are you crying?”

\* 2 \*

After joining the agency, not only would we sing the ending theme song for the program, but other opportunities started coming in as well. The day I found out we would be featured on a page in the idol-specialized magazine I bought every month, I was so happy I skipped a step on the staircase while running up to our apartment building.

At the same time, our blogs were also launched. I realized for the first time that not having been active on social media meant I lack the techniques to attract people.

Kurumi’s blog mainly featured homemade robots, making up 90% of the posted images, while the remaining 10% consisted of photos of herself. Thanks to the destructive power and rarity of her content, Kurumi dominated in terms of comment numbers. In her latest post, she shared different hairstyles using rabbit-shaped hair ties with accompanying photos, which garnered over 1000 comments.

Each of Katori’s posts started with a cheerful greeting of “Fair tidings to you all,” followed by numerous replies to questions. Surprisingly, the diligent young lady proudly boasted about using the computer she bought last New Year’s, even though no one asked.

The comment counts went in the order of Kurumi, Katori, and Mika, with myself ranking last. Despite having such passion for being an idol, it was frustrating not being able to effectively convey it through one’s content.

In this information age, our identities were quickly uncovered. Everything we had done—such as the four of us volunteering and Kurumi participating in the robotics competition—was swiftly revealed. Despite being convinced that we had been one step ahead, it seemed there was no escaping the scrutiny of the modern world.

An unexpected incident occurred during our lesson. Only Mika was called by the manager, and hours passed without her returning.

“What could have happened to Mika?”

We were left waiting in the room even after the lesson was over. When Mika returned hours later, her eyes were swollen.

“What happened?”

“There are photos of me... with my boyfriend... I’m sorry...”

I immediately grasped the situation.

“That sucks.”

I quickly searched Mika’s name online. The problematic image appeared immediately.

It was a screenshot of a picture with her boyfriend, captioned as their 3rd anniversary. The guy turned out to be a member of “Niko Kids.” The source of the leak seemed to be his Twitter. Surprisingly, it was posted just last week. They were still together.

But then why was she reading “Young People Who Don’t Live for Love.” when we met at the bookstore? I was also too naive to judge that she didn't have a boyfriend based on that fact alone. Even though they found out about our past volunteering activities, it was all in vain if this also came out simultaneously.

In the end, Mika continued her activities without any consequences, but she didn’t smile at us for a while. We couldn’t find the right words to say to her. Understanding the significance of all four of us being together, I couldn’t bring myself to tell her to quit.

At the end of the broadcast the following week, we were told that “The Directions Themselves” would be played in a live format. Finally, the results of the month-long rehearsals could be showcased.

“Okay, this one’s for you, Azuma. The rest of you, take the dummy microphones from here.”

Just before the rehearsal, the other three were given dummy microphones. In other words, they were supposed to lip-sync.

“Why am I the only one without one?”

“It’s a matter of the frequency of the sound.”

“Isn’t delivering the song and captivating the audience with the dance what being an idol is about?”

As soon as those words left my mouth, the atmosphere in the dressing room changed drastically. The adults all looked at me with disgust.

“Well, I’m not good at singing, so it works out for me.”

“Minami, if you think you’re not good at it, why don’t you practice?”

I was getting angry at Katori, who was smiling so carefreely, and at the staff members, who were not saying anything. Why is it that I am always the only one who is desperate, and everyone else is just standing there with a cool face?

“East, West, South, North, spinning around with our youth tickets~♪”

After the singing recording was over, I checked the monitor where the manager had been filming with their smartphone. Only my part was out of tune. It was as if I was the most tone-deaf one. To think the microphones of the others are dead, that way, they can smile more freely, that it felt like I was the only one losing out.

“Minami, are you having fun right now?”



“...I was having fun until recently.”

“The other day, you said something to me. I still think I feel different after all.”

“.....”

“You said that if you just go with the flow, things will work out somehow. But you know, Minami, it seems like I’m about to lose it.”

“Kurumi...”

“Mika stopped smiling. Because of the verbal violence from strangers. Is this what being a celebrity is like?”

“.....”

“Isn’t it strange? Is it for money? Or for distinction? Why does everyone want to become famous?”

“Maybe they want their existence to be accepted by many people.”

“I don't understand that. I don't need other people's opinions. I just want to live the way I want.”

“But Kurumi, this is an opportunity. We’re all here with different destinies mixed together. This kind of experience may never happen again in our lives.”

“You think it’s an opportunity to just go along with the flow? It’s just a gamble.”

“If you win the gamble, your dreams will surely be easier to achieve.”

“What is your dream, Minami?”

“.....”

“Can you really achieve that dream with the way we’re living now?”

“...I don't know... but...”

“Please, don’t stop me anymore. Before I lose it... set me free.”

“NOOOOO!”

During a meeting in the agency's conference room, I suddenly heard screams. Since the room had glass walls, we could see everything outside, and it was immediately clear that Kurumi was crying out. Both the adults present and us, who were in the middle of the meeting, froze at the sight of her unusual behavior. It was supposed to be Kurumi's first solo job today... What on earth had happened?

“Aaaahhh!”

The manager half-dragged her into the room, and the meeting was temporarily halted. The adults instructed us not to leave the conference room.

Kurumi's voice could be heard leaking through the quiet space.

“I can't take it anymore! No! No! I don't understand it! I'm not myself! I don't recognize myself in front of the camera! I can't even answer elementary school science questions! I don't understand why they wouldn't come out, and I feel like I am going crazy!”

Faint voices of adults trying to calm her down could be heard, but her screams didn't subside.

“I'm stupid and powerless that I can't even answer something like this... What should I do? If this is broadcasted, everyone will think anyone can easily make a robot. I don't want to do it anymore. I don't want to be on TV. I don't want to be known. I don't want to be seen by people.”

She's completely lost her composure. It would be bad to leave Kurumi alone like this.

“We have to convince Kurumi.”

“Wait, Azuma.”

“What?”

“What are you going to do by going there?”

“I’ll talk to Kurumi. We’ll just try again next time.”

“...Azuma, you really don’t understand anything. Kurumi is at her limit.”

“Limit? What are you talking about? I’m sure Kurumi just gets nervous easily. Give her a little more time...”

“She’ll collapse.”

“Well, what should we do then?”

“Let’s turn her back to being a normal girl. Kurumi was originally a shy girl who didn’t like standing out or being in the spotlight. Azuma, you should understand.”

“After coming this far, you want to quit?”

“That’s right. I’ve realized something. Being an idol isn’t fun to begin with.”

Even Mika next to her nodded quietly at Katori’s words.

“Minami, Mika, you’re both strange too. Wearing pretty clothes, cute hairstyles, basking in the studio lights... Do you realize how happy that makes you...”

“The reason you think it’s fun is because you love being an idol, Azuma.”

“That’s not true! If you get used to it, it’ll surely become enjoyable. Idols can make lots of people smile, you know? There’s no better profession!”

“...W-What...”

Mika, who had been silent the whole time, trembled as she spoke.

“What about the people around them... if they can’t make them smile?”

“What?”

“You’re different now, Azuma. It’s scary.”

“.....”

“The cool Azuma who saved me... Where did she go? What happened to the old Azuma?”

Katori gently patted Mika’s back as she broke down in tears. Kurumi’s screams still hadn’t subsided. I wanted to cry too. I packed up my things and left the office. Why, why? Regret overwhelmed me. And it didn’t go away even when I got home.

\* 3 \*

A few days later, Mr. Endo informed me that three contracts were being terminated. Although they didn’t ask me to quit the agency, the program that used to feature the East, West, North, and South corners was reorganized into a separate project, and I no longer had any work to do. Along with this, our blog was closed down, all planned events were canceled, and even the ending song was quickly changed to a new track by a different artist.

The title of idol, which I had finally grasped, slipped away from my hands effortlessly.

I’ve never been this depressed about school. I didn’t want to admit that I felt like an empty shell, but during class, I found myself staring at the blackboard while my mind wandered out the window. During lunch break, Akko from another class came over to talk to me.

“Oh, Azuma. I saw you yesterday too. You seem busy. If you ever have any trouble at school, feel free to tell me!”

Who do you think you are saying that? Normally, I’d hide my true feelings behind a smile, but today, I couldn’t do that.

“Thanks. I know you’re saying bad things about me behind my back.”

Since the program was seamlessly connected with pre-recorded video footage, nobody noticed the changes in the cardinal directions, East, West, South, and North. At this moment, there was an announcement that a career guidance

session would be held in the afternoon. It was a particularly cruel time for me, feeling lost in the darkness.

We were lined up in single file by class in the gymnasium, being looked down upon from the stage. A woman in her mid-thirties, with short black hair and glasses, clad in a suit, began speaking, "It's never too early to start thinking about university entrance exams from your first year." and went on to elaborate on a lengthy "recommended three-year career path plan." Is she, who seems to work for a major educational company and likely lectures in front of hundreds of students from elite schools each time, a successful example?

Glancing around, it seemed I wasn't the only one feeling detached. What were my classmates thinking? I spoke to the guy sitting next to me, who was sitting cross-legged and looking at his vocabulary book.

"Do you even need to listen to this?"

"Huh?"

He, from another class whose name I didn't even know, looked surprised at me.

"She is giving a speech."

"Yeah, but I've already decided on my target school."

"I see."

I couldn't help but envy him, knowing what he had to do now.

"Hey, what about you, Azuma?"

"Why do you know my name?"

"Well, you're famous."

He chuckled apologetically, admitting he'd never actually seen me on TV.

"So, what's your target school, Azuma?"

"I... haven't decided yet. I don't really have a clear goal for college."

“I see. Then what do you want to do in the future?”

“I won’t say.”

“Not saying means you’ve already decided on something, right? That’s good.”

“Why is that good?”

“You know, once you’re in high school, people stop asking what you want to be when you grow up. Entering this school kinda sets you on a limited track, like, ‘This is the kind of life you’ll have,’ with few options. Just like this.”

He gestured towards the woman speaking on stage with his little finger.

“So, I was worried if there were any students here who actually have dreams. Among the students listening here, there are probably a lot who just chose East High School because it roughly matched their test scores, then they’ll aim for a university that roughly matches their level, send resumes to companies they think they might roughly fit in, and end up working for a company they roughly got accepted to. I don’t think that’s necessarily bad, but... it feels a bit wasteful to me.”

“What about you then? What do you want to be?”

“The coolest profession that requires diligence as a prerequisite.”

“The coolest...”

Even though there are countless professions in the world, he had arbitrarily ranked them. What a lucky guy. I couldn’t help but see myself in him, someone whose name I didn’t even know, reflecting on my past year. When I realized that I wasn’t needed in the profession I admired the most, what awaited me was endless sadness and embarrassment. I didn’t want him to experience that.

“Study hard then.”

“Yeah. I hope your dreams come true too, Azuma.”

I asked myself once again what I wanted to do in the future, but my ideal didn’t change. I couldn’t forget the shock that pierced my heart when I first saw an idol. But I’m not the kind of person who deserves to achieve their dreams. Despite

saying it was for someone else, everything I've done has been for myself. I've pretended to be kind, but when things got inconvenient, I didn't hesitate to hurt others. I know I shouldn't be an idol. Even though I know that, as long as I remain myself with my bad personality and lack of self-awareness, I can't easily dislike the things I love.

There was no way I could allow myself to cry here and now, it would be so lame. Even if I couldn't hold back my tears until I got home, I could cry when I was alone. But I didn't even have a handkerchief, and I couldn't hold back my tears. I buried my face in my knees and cried quietly.

After school that day, I waited at the gate of North High for my friend to leave the school.

"Sorry. Um..."

"Whoa, you surprised me. What's wrong?"

"If you don't mind, could you tell me about the old me?"

I came prepared to be pushed away, so I bowed my head before even checking Mika's expression. I stared at the tips of Mika's loafers and prayed.

"...Sure. Let's talk a bit at the park over there."

There was no one else in the park, which lacked play equipment for children. Mika, who had been walking ahead, chose to sit on a swing instead of a bench, and I settled onto another swing.

"Azuma, did you hear about us from Mr. Endo?"

"Yeah. Everyone has quit, huh?"

"I'm sorry."

"It's not something you need to apologize for, Mika."

"But Azuma, your eyes are swollen."

Mika looked away from me and started swinging the swing gently. Then, time slowly rewound.

“You don’t... remember do you? When everyone, even the classmates and teachers, ignored me, you were the only one who talked to me.”

“.....”

“I was afraid that if you did that, you would be bullied too. But you said to me, ‘I don’t understand why I should stop talking to you when I have something to say to you. I don’t take orders from people I don’t respect.’”

“I guess I’ve always been cheeky since back then.”

“No, Azuma, you were cool. You were beautiful, smart, and you never cried.”

I just cried a moment ago, though, I quietly muttered to myself.

A child who never cried. That's right, when I was in elementary school, I was once contacted by my parents because I didn't shed tears. I had completely forgotten about it, but it was also because of a lecture. The entire school gathered in the gymnasium, and that day, there was a call for drug and marijuana prevention. A man with a beard spoke tearfully about losing his son in an accident caused by dangerous drugs. During the lecture, the sound of sniffles surrounded us, and the student council president thanked him tearfully at the end. I couldn't forget that shocking scene. The gymnasium was enveloped in tears, and it felt like an eerie space where if you didn't cry, you weren't human.

I couldn't cry. I stared blankly at the adults. The man with the beard, the teacher, and the adults whose crying faces I rarely saw were not pleasant to watch. My homeroom teacher found my behavior suspicious at the time and called my parents after the lecture. That night, my parents asked me why I didn't cry. I remember honestly answering because I had a valid reason. I never thought I'd cry at a career guidance session.

“But when you went abroad, Azuma... I was truly alone. That alone would have been okay, but I was treated horribly. I don't even want to remember it. That's why I stopped going to school. Instead, I went to a prep school. I worked hard to pass the entrance exam for middle school, and went to a different school from everyone else. I even changed my appearance, started anew. But it was impossible.



Someone had planted my elementary school years into North High. Because it's a small town, everything like that spreads quickly."

"....."

"I've known about Kurumi since middle school. I was jealous. She was cute, talented, and I kept researching her online, wondering how I could become like her. I wanted to know more and more about her, until I eventually wanted to meet her in person. So, I waited for Kurumi at the station. When I saw her for the first time in real life, it was shocking. But what surprised me even more was that you were next to her."

"....."

"My hero has returned to Japan. I chased after both of you in a daze. And then, I approached you two at the bookstore."

"Huh..."

Was that not just a coincidental encounter?

"Azuma."

She stopped the swing by rubbing her loafers against the sand, forcefully stopping the swing's motion. Mika's face had changed quite a bit. Her enlarged eyes were staring at me.

"You see, Azuma, I was your first fan."

\* 4 \*

"Take your time."

As the master set four glasses on the table at the far end, he disappeared behind the counter. The unchanged taste of apple juice accentuated the feeling of Shinji's absence.

"I didn't know there was a place like this."

The place chosen for the reunion of the four cardinal directions, East, West, North, and South was a familiar coffee shop. I had to have a proper talk with the three of them. I believed that this place would ease my uneasiness. There were no ulterior motives like trying to convince them to stay at the agency or being afraid that they would hate me. Living authentically, that's probably something the old me could do.

"Katori, Kurumi, Mika, I'm sorry."

"....."

"I genuinely thought everyone was amazing. I thought as long as I was with everyone, we could do anything. I got you all involved in a lot of things but ended up doing some really bad things."

"Your dream..."

Kurumi spoke, her voice barely above a whisper.

"I kind of noticed it. But I'm sorry I couldn't help. I realized that being an idol, or having a job that involves being idolized, was just not for me. I was scared of being involved in someone else's life who I didn't even know."

"Kurumi..."

"You can't debug an idol, you know."

Kurumi chuckled with a troubled look in her trademark bunny-shaped eyes.

"I'm sorry too."

Mika mumbled with her head down. Holding onto her glass with both hands, she slowly lifted her gaze.

"I don't think I should have done things with such ambiguous feelings. I feel sorry for my boyfriend, for Azuma, for everyone. And... would you still be friends with me from now on? Meeting all of you, I've truly changed. I'm glad to be alive."

"That's quite dramatic. Of course, I love everyone, so we'll always be friends. Right, Azuma?" Kurumi said

"Of course!... But I still don't get it. Mika, is love really that important?"

“Hehehe. You’ll understand if you find someone special. Even you, Azuma.”

Will that day ever come? Mika looks happy now, but I don’t feel the need to understand her feelings. I’m much happier the way I am now.

“As for me, Azuma.”

Katori, who had been silent all this time, began to speak slowly.

“I’ve found something I want to do.”

“Something you want to do?”

“Yes. I want to travel the world and engage in humanitarian activities.”

“Huh, are you serious?”

“Of course I am.”

Perhaps I hadn’t understood the young sophisticated lady, who I always thought spoke condescendingly, talked only about herself, and chose the easy way out.

“What about your exams?”

“I won’t take them. If push comes to shove, I can just take over my dad’s company.”

“That’s quite ambitious.”

“Not everyone is like that. You need considerable ambition to live this kind of high school life.”

“Definitely!”

Kurumi and Mika chuckled in unison. Robotics competitions, volunteering, TV shows — everything we did as the four cardinal directions, East, West, South, and North, was quite extraordinary, yet the three of them stuck with me.

“Thank you for finding me, Azuma.” Katori said.

"You were the first girl who became friends with me," said Kurumi.

"We'll always support you. You haven't given up yet, have you?" said Mika.

This world is filled with challenges, with things we cannot do. But once you've reached out your hand, you have no choice but to grasp onto something. Or cut it off. Fortunately, my hand has only sustained minor scratches.

"Even if I wanted to give up, I can't."

There's a new idol group being managed by a famous producer, and they say there are five rounds of auditions.

I've already sent in my resume.

## Epilogue

“It feels like a series of coincidences really overlapped. It all started when I casually applied for the audition and got through... But I never imagined that I would... be able to appear on this show that I've been watching since I was young.”

The answer to these types of questions, which have been asked tens of times, had a predetermined format. Should I shroud my existence in lies, or should I tear it away? Countless choices are thrust upon me every day. While I've grown accustomed to this lifestyle, there are still many times when I feel like I'm not myself. The mission of an idol is to continue bearing the burden of being their own personal producer.

“You were involved in volunteer activities during high school, right?”

“Yes. It was only for a little while... but I did it. Being thanked by others isn't easy. But when I could help someone smile, it made me happy too. So even in my current job, I want to see the smiles of many people. In a way, it might be selfish.”

Among the audience, I spotted some fans. They had “Azuma” written on towels placed on their knees, smiling.

“Today's guest was the leader of a nationally renowned idol group, Yu Azuma.”

“Thank you very much for having me.”

The two-week-long coverage turned into a sense of accomplishment after the recording ended. Keeping legs closed when sitting, eating neatly, maintaining good posture, being punctual, and ensuring makeup is done to avoid a shiny face no matter how early the morning starts. It was good to do my best according to my own understanding. The self I saw in the studio video recording was an idol.

“Good job.”

The manager, makeup artist, and stylist who had been waiting outside the studio greeted me with applause. Despite the high heels, I skipped happily back to the dressing room, and everyone enveloped me with gentle expressions.

“It’s over, it’s over!”

I shouted with all my might in the dressing room, filled with the smell of a meal box. I changed into casual clothes with a slouched posture, packed up my belongings, and left. Surely, that person would be waiting for me in front of the elevator.

“Good job, Azumatchi.”

“Thank you so much, Producer Koga.”

She spoke in thick Kansai dialect. With eyebrows drawn on, Koga, wearing a thin shirt that seemed easy to move in despite his unchanging blonde hair, seemed to have become more important only in terms of her position.

“I’m going to meet everyone now.”

“Really?! Tell them I said hi.”

“Okay. Goodbye!”

In front of the Daikanyama Art Gallery at 6:00PM. Since the recording ended as scheduled, it seemed there was plenty of time to spare. Stepping into the courtesy car from the underground drop-off, I found the usual driver in the driver’s seat.

“Is it okay if we head to your home?”

“Please take me to Daikanyama. I’m meeting up with friends.”

I wonder when was the last time we were all together. Except for me and Kurumi, none of them live in Tokyo, so we never gathered unless there was some event.

*---I’m holding a photo exhibition, so I want you to come see it.*

Last week, he called me for the first time in eight years. Since he hadn’t changed his phone number either, I was surprised when I saw his name on the caller ID.

“Here is fine. Thank you very much.”

Before the door even fully opened, I darted out towards where my friends were waiting.

“Azuma!”

Kurumi was the first to cling onto my shoulder. The 20-year-old no longer had a rabbit hair tie on her head.

“Fair tidings to you, Azuma. I had so much fun last time. Thank you.”

The young lady in a pure white coat had just come to my live performance last time. Minami always brought Sachi with her each time.

“It’s been a while, Azuma.”

With her large belly, Mika somehow resembled Ms. Baba. She was about to give birth to her second child.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, everyone.”

“Shall we go in then? Shin is waiting inside too.”

——Starry Sky Photo Exhibition ~Shinji Kudo~

Looking up at the large hanging banner with those words, my heart swelled with warmth. Since it was already past closing time, there were no other visitors besides us inside the gallery.

As Kurumi pushed open the heavy glass door, a man stood in front of us. With black-framed Wellington glasses and camel-colored pants, I knew him well.

“Shin!”

“Shinji!”

Kurumi, Katori, and Mika ran up to greet him. I watched his figure for a while. Though not as youthful as in the past, he didn't seem to age much for his age. Despite still having a slender build, there was a certain elegance about him that I couldn't shake off, which oddly made me happy. As I gazed at his profile, his calm eyes suddenly focused on me through his black-framed Wellington glasses.

"It's been a while, Azuma."

"I-It's been... a while."

"Well, we'll go on ahead then."

"W-Wait a minute!"

Kurumi lightly tapped Shinji's back and then went ahead with Katori and Mika. Just the two of us stood in the wide, silent entrance. I thought he'd wear the same troubled expression as mine, but Shinji was looking at me with a soft expression. He was already mature enough not to need reassurance.

"Thank you for coming, even though you're busy."

"No, it's amazing that you're holding a photo exhibition."

"It's all thanks to you, Azuma."

With gratitude, he bowed deeply.

"I didn't do anything. Shinji, you've always had talent."

"You never told me that before."

Seeing Shinji's playful reaction, I finally felt the tension easing. That laughter... it hasn't changed since those days.

"I'd like to hear your thoughts. Can you tell me on the way back?"

"Of course."

"Then I'll wait for you at the exit. Take your time."



With Shinji seeing me off, I walked along the designated path, my footsteps sounding fragile.

The first photo was of a stone church with a starry sky above it. The scenery titled “Tekapo” seemed familiar, but the shooting date was last year.

Since becoming an idol, I’ve had more opportunities to be in front of cameras. Regular gravure shoots, CD jacket photoshoots, and photo books. But even though I’ve been in front of the camera a lot, I’m not knowledgeable about photography. I don’t even know whether to increase or decrease the shutter speed to take blurry photos. Despite that, I can tell. Shinji’s photos were truly beautiful.

As I continued following the arrows, I bumped into a black door. I must have seen at least 30 photos already. It went by in a flash, but this might be the exit.

———*Click.*

“You’re finally here!”

“We’ve been waiting for you.”

The three who left me behind waited without a hint of remorse.

“It’s not fair to leave me behind like that.”

“Sorry, sorry.”

“Hey, Azuma, look at this!”

Mika pointed to a large photo that was incomparable to anything exhibited before it. Upon seeing it, I was speechless.

“...Isn’t this...?”

Memories from that time flooded back in an instant. His Leica camera made a quiet shutter sound. It was us, dressed in cheap costumes.

“We’ll never have this kind of experience again, will we?”

“We were just doing what we loved without any constraints, laughing over trivial things. It was so much fun.”

“I had such a happy expression, didn’t I?”

“Trapezium.”

The shooting date was 8 years ago on May 26th. The high school girls were all passionately dreaming.

“How was it?”

“It was an amazing photo exhibition. Thank you.”

“Do you remember what happened 8 years ago, Azuma?”

“I remembered when I saw that photo. It was taken during the industrial festival.”

“I can’t forget the moment you looked through the viewfinder.”

I simply wanted to become an idol. At that time, I was more childish, foolish, awkward, and cool than I am now.

The joy of fulfilling a dream can only be understood by the one who achieves it. I can say it clearly. Thank you to the me back then.

“I probably should have told you sooner.”

“Huh?”

“From the first time I saw you, you were shining.”

“The Directions Themselves”

A collective preoccupied with appearances  
Struggled at 16  
With the definition of adulthood

Expressing individuality through bold fashion  
I’ve stopped being friends  
With this city that laughs at me

Navigating through East, West, South, and North  
With a coming of age ticket in hand  
The tailwind is reassuring  
Love that sways skirts

Searching for existential value  
Life battling loneliness  
Announces its end without warning  
A sparkling starting point  
The day I met you

Prosperous, stylish cafes  
I’m not fond of crowds  
I prefer old coffee shops

The flowing records, a reflection of myself  
Before tears trickle down my cheeks  
I gulp down the coffee in one go

Venturing through the East, West, South, and North  
With a coming of age ticket in hand  
Courage to step into uncharted territory  
I have it now

A life that constantly updates its masterpiece  
It’s too dazzling for me  
But I want to fulfill  
The promise I made with you

Life’s a map  
Let’s mark the goal with a star  
We don’t need a compass  
Just walk by the light

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## Kazumi Takayama

She was born on February 8, 1994 in Minamiboso, Chiba Prefecture. In August 2011, she passed the Nogizaka46 first generation member audition. Her novel "Trapezium" began serialization in the magazine "Da Vinci" in April 2016. In September of the same year, she published her first photo book, "Kazumi Takayama Photobook: It Might Be Love." This book is her debut novel.

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