



High Speed! 2

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Chapter 1 – Jump

The court was filled with a suffocating heat and heavy breathing.

The ball that was thrown from within the confused fight bounced off the ring, its vibrations making a sound and travelling through the air.

Among several hands stretching towards it, Asahi, who was a head taller, landed while holding the ball. Then, he shoots the ball without a moment's delay.

“Nanase, swift attack!”

Haruka had already started running the moment Asahi touched the ball.

The ball flies to where he runs to. Kicking off with his left foot, Haruka's right hand, that had stretched as far as it could, catches the ball.

Even if he flicks back his wrist, he doesn't let go of the ball, as if it was stuck to him. He slaps the ball onto the floor, throwing it from his elbow.

A sound that was so loud that it hurt echoed in his ears. He holds down the ball that bounces up by force. Holding it down, he runs while slapping it down again. The sound of the ball that continuously echoes overlapping with the sound of Haruka kicking the floor keeps a high-speed beat.

There are two people on defense—.

Ikuya was in front of Haruka, blocking his way. He has a small stature, but in contrast to his appearance, his moves are good. He had already cut into passes three times. He glares at Haruka from beneath his long eyelashes with piercing eyes.

Haruka kept running without stopping his momentum. If he stopped here, the defense formation would catch up in an instant and the long-awaited swift attack would end up losing its meaning.

When he came so close to Ikuya that he thought he'd crash into him, Kisumi called for a pass with miraculous timing.

“Nanase-kun, over here!”

For a second, Ikuya's awareness strayed towards Kisumi. At the same time, Haruka crosses his left foot and turns his back to the defense like that. While making a turn so he mostly comes in contact, transferring the bounced ball from his right hand to his left, he slips by on Ikuya's right side.

Even if he can follow Haruka going farther away with his gaze, he shouldn't be able to shift his center of gravity in time. Ikuya's hand grasping at the empty air disappears from Haruka's field of vision.

The only one left is Makoto standing underneath the hoop.

“Nanase-kun!”

Kisumi runs parallel to him. But in Haruka's eyes, Makoto was the only one he saw.

Makoto lying in wait up-front for Haruka running head-on—.

Makoto also doesn't think in the least that Haruka will make a pass.

The sound of the ball slapping the floor echoes not in his ears, but directly in his body. The sound amplifies Haruka's heartbeat and runs through him alongside the heat.

He has no intention of swinging from left to right. He's up against Makoto. Boring cheap tricks don't work on him. He's not the kind of opponent he can slip past unless he overcomes his limits.

Stepping in front of Makoto with his right foot, he leapt vertically. Pulling back his left shoulder at the same time, he holds the ball high over his head.

Matching it, Makoto jumped, too. Then, raising both hands, he takes up an intercepting stance.

Adding the difference of their jumping power to the difference in height and the length of his arms, he becomes a hopeless wall and oppresses Haruka. Haruka looks back at Makoto looking down on him. The sweat that gushes out scattering, it's impossible to tell who it belongs to.

For a second, the two of them lost gravity, as if they were pushed up by the wind.

When he was still rising during the jump, Haruka pulls the ball to his stomach and passes it to his right hand like that. Makoto's eyes follow the ball. Haruka's right hand swung up from his stomach to the side, drawing an arc. Obeying the law of inertia, the ball that was released from his hand loosely dances in mid-air and gravity pulls back Haruka and Makoto.

Haruka and Makoto land. The two look up—.

The ball was sucked in by the ring, as if it was gently put there.

“Haru!”

Where they came out from the gym, Makoto called out to him from behind. Since girls and boys were divided for the middle school P.E. lessons, Haruka's Class 1 and Makoto's Class 2 had their lesson together.

“Nice shot!”

While putting up his right hand, he overtakes Haruka.

— What's he calling a nice shot?

It was just the last one at the very end that he made. The rest were all blocked. While wondering if even Makoto could be sarcastic, as he was looking at his back running off, he looked back at Haruka once.

“Because Music is next.”

— What's that excuse for?

Perhaps he thought that Haruka was curious about Makoto's reason for hurrying. Makoto isn't the only one running. Everyone from Class 2 was running. While unanimously saying “music, music”.

“Nanase—”

Being called, he turns around. Shiina Asahi was running from the gym. On the day of the entrance ceremony, he acted over-familiarly by saying things like “you’re the type who doesn’t have any friends, huh” and he’s been following him about ever since. In today’s basketball game as well, he made all the passes to Haruka. He didn’t even ask for it.

As he approaches with light steps, he walked beside him, trying to lean on him.

“How is it, my rebound?”

Is he talking about the jump from underneath the hoop? Even if he asks “how is it”, he can only answer by saying that he jumped.

“It was cool.”

He speaks the words he wishes to hear. Perhaps that’ll satisfy him. If he’s satisfied, he wants him to go off to somewhere else.

“Hehe. It really was, wasn’t it? Well, you completely wasted my passes though.”

His hair strangely spiky, his eyebrows are trimmed thin. It’s clearly against the school rules. Whenever a teacher warns him, he says nonsense like “it’s bed hair”. The tips of his pointy hair were right at the same height as Haruka’s head.

“What if you joined the basketball club. Shiina, you’re good at it.”

It’d save him some trouble if he’d start playing a wholesome sport and do something about that hairstyle. It’s annoying how it’s about to poke his eyes out and he can’t do anything about it.

“Oh, you do get it, Nanase. Nah, I was thinking that maybe I’d get invited sooner or later, too. But we have the swim club, so I’m stumped.”

Asahi goes to the Bandou Swimming Club and he was at the previous tournament, too. He proudly said that he overtook Haruka in the medley relay preliminaries. Haruka thinks that if he’s going to boast, he should do it elsewhere. There’s nothing to say in front of the person in question. Besides, if the conversation ends up going that far, what could he be intending to do? It’s not like he doesn’t understand the feeling of wanting to secure a position of superiority at least a little, but that’s a double-edged sword. Of course, Haruka didn’t remember Asahi at all.

“Nanase-kun!”

Shigino Kisumi came running with a refreshing smile. He’s also in Class 1. Since he’s joining the basketball club, he played a very active part in the match just now.

“Sorry about that just now. For not passing.”

He makes the first move to Kisumi who was still out of breath. That sort of thing probably hurts the pride of the basketball club. Because ignoring his call to Haruka for a pass, he denied the possibility of a pass until he reached Makoto.

“It’s fine, something like that. It was an awesome shot, right? What if you joined the basketball club?”

The tips of spiky hair swayed weirdly.

“He’s not joining. Both Nanase and I are busy. Isn’t that right, Nanase?”

Putting aside being busy or not, he wasn’t intending to do club activities anyway. He didn’t like that it would cut down his swimming time, and at this stage, he doesn’t see the point of doing anything other than swimming. Things like basketball, what would he be doing them for? Run and shoot. What meaning could be in that? If it’s just enjoying the outcome of the game, then just the time spent in P.E. is enough.

“Asahi was awesome, too. You got most of the rebounds, right?”

“Well yeah. Wait, why are you being so familiar and calling me by my first name? Without a honorific, even. For the most part, I’m talking to you for the first time right now.”

“Why not, it’s no big deal. Oh, that big kid from Class 2 just now, —what’s his name?”

He’s probably talking about Makoto.

“The one who blocked all of Nanase-kun’s shots.”

That got on his nerves a little, but he tried to keep it from showing on his expression.

“Tachibana Makoto.”

It showed in his voice a little.

“Ohh, so he’s called ‘Makoto’ He called Nanase-kun ‘Haru’, right?”

From the flow of the conversation, he can read where it’s headed. Denying it is a pain, if they want to call him that, it doesn’t matter what they call him. If possible, he thinks that it would be better if there were less situations where they call him by his first name. He thinks it would be much better if they didn’t take advantage of this to follow him around more.

“Can I call you ‘Haru’, too?”

“You, you came later, so don’t try to be so friendly all of a sudden.”

Asahi’s the same.

“What does it matter, Asahi.”

“I told you, don’t call me by my first name. You say something too, Nanase.”

“I don’t particularly mind.”

“Wao, Haru’s quick to understand, huh?”

“W-wait up. Then, let me call you ‘Haru’, too.”

“Do as you please.”

“Then, call me Kisumi, too.”

“Ugh, it sounds like *kiss me*. What a dirty name.”

Without refuting it, Kisumi smiled at Asahi with the whites of his teeth showing.

They cut across beside the spiraea. They're probably as tall as Haruka. In round clusters, several of the small white flowers were blooming. It left an impression how it turned white so only that place stood out, without mixing with the color of the old school building or with the surrounding green. While bathing in the light of the spring warmth gently shining down, the drooping spiraea were swaying in the faint breeze.

The way home from Iwatobi Middle School lead mostly through fields of crops. With barely any real undulations, on the road that just stretched evenly ahead, sometimes, there were family houses built intermittently. The wind from the sea filled with the scent of the seawater, it was so thick that you couldn't help but think that if you listened closely, you could maybe even hear the sound of waves crashing.

The smooth ridges of Minogaseyama visible in the distance, continuing until they reach Kuragakeyama at last, dyed those hillsides throughout the year in the colors of each season. Especially now, the light green is arranged in a delicate shade, it shows a brindled expanse like a smudged watercolor painting. Near the peak of the mountain, it seems the cherry blossoms have finally arrived and it was melting together with the sky in a dulled blur.

Perhaps it's a lark. Letting out a cry, it soars high into the sky. Without really looking at it, Haruka was following it with his eyes, he felt like he was about to lose his depth perception to the bright blue of the sky.

"—Haru"

Walking beside him, Makoto called out to him.

"What."

"Did you decide on a club?"

"Nah, haven't thought about it."

If it weren't for Asahi, he thinks that it would be enough as long as he had the swimming club.

"I was invited to the basketball club, but what do you think?"

He asks, lifting his up-slanting eyebrows that seem good-natured. If he wants to do it, he should. Even if Makoto was invited to the basketball club, why does Haruka have to think something of it.

"Nothing really."

Replying brusquely, he shows that he's not interested.

"Listen, Shigino-kun in Haru's class—"

Apparently, Kisumi invited him.

"During P.E., he was on the same team as Haru, right?"

He knows without being reminded.

“He came to my class during lunch break, and then, he said that there aren’t many first years.”

Of course there aren’t. For every club, they accept trial members from today. All of April is a trial period, officially joining a club is from the end of the consecutive holidays in May.

“At this rate, he’s worried that when we become third years, there might not be enough members.”

In contrast to his appearance, it seems that he has quite the hasty personality. There probably isn’t another first year like him who’d worry about what happens two years from now.

“What should I do, Haru?”

“If you want to join, then do it.”

“But you know, then I won’t be able to go to the Swimming Club as much, no?”

“Do the one you want to do.”

“But you know, I don’t intend on quitting the Swimming Club.”

It seems that inside Makoto, he already has the answer.

“So that’s why I’m thinking of declining after all—”

Cutting off his words at an odd spot, he seeks Haruka’s reaction. If he doesn’t intend on playing basketball, he won’t say something so roundabout. Before he knew it, the choice of picking the Swimming Club or picking the basketball club is being switched with the choice of picking Haruka or picking Kisumi. No, maybe if Haruka switches it, it’s just that Makoto will go ahead and get the wrong idea.

In short, he’s just declaring his intentions that “I want to try playing basketball, but I’m taking Haruka into consideration, too”. How ridiculous.

“Try basketball.”

“Really? Can I?”

Lifting his up-slanting eyebrows that seem good-natured, he shows a smile.

“Do as you please.”

“Thanks, Haru.”

He doesn’t remember doing anything to be thanked for.

Dandelions were blooming on the roadside. He learned about them in science class today. They’re perennials. He thought that they just wither after the fluff is blown away, but apparently they keep living in the winter with just their leaves and roots. What’s more, those roots reach pretty deep into the ground. Perhaps their strength to get back up even after being stepped on comes from this stubborn vitality. Looking at them like that, their English name of *dandelion* makes sense. Apparently, it means ‘the fangs of a lion’, they’re far tougher than they look.

He tries to put Makoto in the place of the dandelion. He thought that the side of him that's tougher than it looks fits quite well. It's a new discovery.

Haruka's house and Makoto's house are next to each other on both sides of the stone steps of the approach continuing to Misagozaki Shrine, holding it between them. The first *torii* [Shinto shrine archway] is around halfway up the stone steps, the *chouzuya* [ritual hand-washing pavilion] is to the left and Haruka's house is past the side of it.

You can't reach the stone steps directly from Makoto's house, the very bottom of the stone steps is where the stairs leading from the entranceway end. To get to Haruka's house from there, you have to climb up again until the first *torii*. That's why Makoto always waited at the bottom of the stone steps.

As always, they run to the Iwatobi Swimming Club. Changing clothes right after they get home from school, they put the necessary things in their bags and leave the house. That's how it was.

When Haruka passed by the side of the *chouzuya* and out the first *torii*, Makoto was fooling around with a black dog at the very bottom of the stone steps.

"What's with that dog?"

He asked Makoto while descending the stone steps.

"Ah, Haru. I don't know, but it looks like a stray dog."

"Didn't it run away from some house?"

"I don't think so. Since it doesn't have a collar, I'm sure it was thrown out."

"Maybe an ownerless dog came down from the mountain."

Though he called it an ownerless dog, it was originally a pet dog that was thrown out and became a wild dog. Since there are ownerless dogs like that in this area, sometimes there were flyers distributed that call people's attention to it. Unlike in the downtown area, capturing dogs that have turned wild is difficult, in most cases, if there aren't any damages, they let them be as they are.

"I don't think that's it, either. It has a good coat of fur."

Assuming that's the case, it is a stray dog after all. If that's so, then he doesn't really mind. It has nothing to do with Haruka.

"Let's go."

".....Okay."

While watching Makoto stand up as if he's leaving his heart behind from the corner of his eyes, Haruka began to run.

Before they had run much on the windless, calm road alongside the coast, Makoto began to worry about the back. Even without listening closely, he hears the sound of footsteps.

"Hey, it's coming along with us."

“Because Makoto pays attention to it, it’s thinking that it might get food, isn’t it?”

“I wonder how far along it’ll come.”

Ask the dog.

“If it gets hungry, it’ll go off somewhere. Leave it alone.”

“..... Okay.”

When Haruka speeds up, the calm air was disturbed a little, turning into the wind and making the leaves of the white clovers sway.

In the end, the dog ended up coming along with them until the Swimming Club. Because they sped up, both Haruka and Makoto ended up getting out of breath, their backs were greatly rising and falling with their hands on their knees. They kept on running with the dog urging them on. In spite of that, the dog in question was sitting with an unconcerned look.

“Haa, haa, you’re too fast, Haru.”

“We can’t, haa, keep running, haa, at Nagisa’s pace forever.”

They couldn’t match their time anymore after entering middle school, so they come separately from Nagisa. It seems that Nagisa still runs alone.

“That may be so, haa, but do you intend on, haa, joining the track and field club?”

“That’s not, haa, bad either. Let’s go.”

“Eeh, haa, are you serious? Haa, oh jeez Haru.”

When Haruka passes through the automatic door of the Swimming Club, Makoto went after him. The dog sat motionlessly. It looks like it won’t come into the building. It might be properly trained not to do that. Perhaps it’s intending to wait there until they come out. Even if it waits for a while, when it gets hungry, surely it would go off somewhere. While thinking that, Haruka began to walk towards the changing room.

When they went out to the poolside, Hazuki Nagisa came to cling to them.

“Yahho! Haru-chan, Mako-chan.”

“What were you swimming today?”

Makoto asked.

“Erm, the fly.”

He’s seen Nagisa’s butterfly once. In those days, the breaststroke evolved into the butterfly, but it seems that Nagisa is trying to evolve that butterfly even further. If he tries hard enough, the day may be close when it’s recognized as a new swimming style.

“You could swim the fly?”

“Don’t make fun of me, okay. I had Rin-chan teach me properly, you know.”

It seems that apparently Rin isn’t suited to be a coach.

“It’s okay to be doing the fly, but have you been practicing the start properly?”

“Sure. Leaping like *baah*, entering like *japun*, with a *suii* feeling.”

He explained with body and hand gestures.

“No. Leaping like *daah*, entering like *bashuu*, with a *gui* feeling.”

Makoto isn’t suited to be a coach, either.

“Hey, you know, I’m going to be like Rin-chan and be able to swim any kind of style. And then, I’m going to become a *konme* [individual medley] swimmer.”

“Wow, that’s awesome. Then, you have to try your best in preparation for the next tournament.”

“The next tournament is a little.....”

It seems he won’t make it in time. It’s a lofty dream, so it can’t be helped.

“Only breast for now.”

“Nagisa, it’s the first time you’ll be swimming alone, huh?”

In the first place, the medley relay from last time must have been his first appearance in a tournament.

“Yeah. That’s why I’m anxious a little.”

“It’ll be fine, since it’s Nagisa.”

“Yeah. Mako-chan, what are you taking part in?”

“I haven’t decided yet, but—”

Raising his up-slanting eyebrows, he looks at Haruka meaningfully.

“I only take part in free.”

“Of course.”

What should he ask but that when it’s too late for it. He couldn’t possibly have thought of swimming a relay again. They’re in a different age group than Nagisa, and there’s no one else to swim with.

“Oh, speaking of which, where’s Zaki-chan?”

Nagisa looks around. Now that he mentioned it, he can’t see Aki yet.

“Well.....”

Makoto apologetically cut his words short. Nagisa and Haruka look at Makoto.

“Well, Zaki-chan joined the swim club. So, she said that she’s quitting here.”

Chopping his words, that’s all he said at last.

“Eeeh, she quit? Without even saying goodbye to me?”

Aki’s in Class 2 with Makoto. So, she probably talked to Makoto about it. In the club activities, the trial period is starting today. However, since the pool is outside, they aren’t supposed to be able to swim. He doesn’t know what kind of activities the swim club could have after school, but he can’t imagine that the training would be more effective than swimming. Perhaps, she wanted to use the swim club as an excuse to quit. In that case, she might have decided it quite a while ago.

Suddenly, he remembered that Makoto said that he’s joining the basketball club.

“She said that she’ll drop by again. And that she’ll properly give her greetings that time.”

Could Makoto be wanting some sort of excuse from club activities? After thinking that far, thinking that it doesn’t matter, he stopped thinking about it.

“I’m going to swim.”

Haruka started to walk, heading towards the pool.

“Okay.”

Makoto follows him.

“See you later, Haru-chan, Mako-chan.”

Waving his hand, Nagisa goes back to the elementary school group.

Standing on the starting block while putting on his goggles, he dives in like that. Creating an opening in the water with the tips of his fingers, he slips his body into it. Arms, head, chest, waist, then feet.

Without becoming one nor denying each other, accepting the water, being accepted by the water. Mutually acknowledging each other’s existence. Mutually feeling each other’s existence. Feeling —the water.

Makoto dived in. Makoto spreads out in the water. There’s no sound. There are no ripples. Makoto’s existence itself spreads out. He senses that deep in his chest. Then, it’s being acknowledged again. That existence is being accepted.

It’s not understanding each other or communicating. It’s just mutually acknowledging the fact that they exist. By acknowledging it as it is, he was able to feel it. He was able to mutually feel it.

In the water..... In the water.....

When they left the Swimming Club, that dog was still there. Sitting in the same spot, he barks at Haruka once as he’s coming out through the automatic door. It seems that it’s using having waited for them to appeal to him. It’s a well-trained dog. Its body is black, but it’s white from the bottom of its nose to its chest, and its feet are white as if it’s wearing socks. Seeing how the white parts aren’t dirtied, it seems

that not a day has passed since it was thrown out. Looking at how nice its fur is, it got enough food, he could easily imagine that it was cared for.

If they treated it with so much affection by training it, feeding it and trimming the lie of the dog's hair, it makes him wonder why it was thrown out. What reason could there have been that they had to throw it out?

"Wah, it's still here, huh."

"What's with the dog? Is it Haru-chan's?"

Makoto and Nagisa came out, too.

"I think it's a stray dog, but it ended up following us."

Makoto replies instead of Haruka.

"Ohh, so it was thrown out."

Nagisa goes up to the dog, squats down and fixedly stares into its eyes. The dog looks back at Nagisa without the slightest movement. Peeking into each other's eyes, it seemed just like they were having some sort of conversation. That negotiation getting established, it would be quite the finale if it became Nagisa's dog.

"Let's go."

When Haruka begins to run, Makoto following after him, Nagisa followed. Then, the dog ran after Nagisa. Even on the embankment alongside Shiwagawa and even on Mutsukibashi, the dog was running while fooling around with Nagisa. Coiling around Nagisa's legs on purpose, it's getting in the way of his running. Nagisa's laughter was ringing out.

Even though he went as far as dropping the pace while praying that the dog would get attached to him like that, the dog ended up separating from Nagisa where they had gotten off of Mutsukibashi.

"Bye, Haru-chan, Mako-chan."

Just by barking back at Nagisa who was waving his hand, the dog started running after Haruka and Makoto again.

"Oh my. It ended up coming this way, Haru."

"Because Makoto pays attention to it. Don't look at it anymore."

".....Okay."

Haruka picked up the pace again a little.

"Haa, haa, hey Haru."

While stooping down at the shrine's stone steps, Makoto wipes away his sweat.

"Haa, haa, what is it?"

Haruka looks down at Makoto while wiping away his sweat, too.

“It’s futile resistance, or rather, haa, somehow I feel like it’s in vain.....”

The dog sat with a composed expression.

“Haa, haa, let’s go home.”

Turning his back to the dog and Makoto, Haruka climbed up the stone steps.

“Okay. Haa, then, see you tomorrow. Haa, haa.”

There’s no sign of the dog following. It’s settled with this. The dog was attached to Makoto, not Haruka. While feeling somewhat relieved, Haruka broke through the first *torii* glowing in the sunset to the left.

After he finished dinner, he was bothered by it a little so he quietly opened the front door. He doesn’t know how good the dog’s ears are, but he walks to the *chouzuya* while trying to conceal his presence as much as possible, and keeping himself hidden behind the *torii*, he visits the bottom of the stone steps. The dog was sitting in the same spot, illuminated by the streetlamp. Perhaps its night vision is good, or maybe it’s doing it because it understood, the dog just stayed still, without barking at Haruka or running up to him.

He thought that Makoto would surely visit it, but it seems that he hadn’t done so.

Has it eaten anything since then? Somehow, it looks like it’s feeling down. He thinks that it should’ve gone looking for food. If it goes to the mountains, there ought to be something to eat there. Even if it stays still in a place like that.....

Haruka went back home and took out a sausage and croquette from the refrigerator. Then, after he pours water into a bowl, he goes out the front door again. Even when Haruka shows himself from behind the *torii*, the dog doesn’t show any signs of moving, and kept sitting still. He thinks it really is well-trained. Or, it was smart from the start, or maybe it’s just stubborn. Anyway, it earnestly stayed still.

Even after he went down the stone steps and put the bowl beside it, it just glances at it and doesn’t try to drink the water. There’s no way it’s not interested. Its white feet are losing their composure and fidgeting.

“You can drink from it.”

When Haruka points to the bowl, it finally poked its head into it and began to drink. It must’ve been quite thirsty, because it did so with tremendous force. As far as he can see from its behavior, it doesn’t seem like Makoto had given it food.

Haruka tried to hold out the sausage in his hand to it. Perhaps the dog had already calmed down, it ended up eating it whole without holding back or being cautious.

“Oi, it’ll get stuck in your throat if you don’t chew it well.”

Its behavior was sort of weirdly odd and Haruka laughed in spite of himself.

Next, when he gives it the croquette, smelling it this time while being a little cautious, it takes a small bite. Perhaps it's not that used to eating something like this. With a bite and then another bite, it keeps taking small bites.

"It's good, huh. Eat it without leaving any behind."

Because it eats it by breaking it down, the croquette's crumbs end up scattered on the palm of his hand, and since the dog licks it, it was tough for Haruka to withstand the tickling.

He heard the sound of the sea in the distance. Guided by the moon, it seems that the tide had risen. The seabirds fly off with a cry. It's not because of that, but the wind bearing the night air drifting quickly, it made the dog's black fur sway.

Night had long fallen, but the scent of spring still remained in the wind.

— It's warm tonight, so it'll be fine.

That's what he was thinking about while watching the dog who still kept licking Haruka's hand though nothing was left on it any more.

The next morning, when he stepped out onto the stone steps, Makoto was fooling around with the dog. His twin siblings are with him.

"Ah, it's Haru-niichan."

Both of them point their fingers at Haruka as he's going down the stone steps.

"Hi. Don't miss the bus."

From this spring, they could go to kindergarten even without Makoto seeing them off.

"Yees."

The two of them cheerfully ran off, but Makoto is still playing with the dog.

"Makoto. If you pay so much attention to it, it'll follow us to school."

"Yeah. Woah."

While wagging its tail, the dog runs around Makoto.

"Did you give it food?"

"Yeah. Fried chicken and spring rolls from breakfast."

He thinks that it's pretty heavy for the morning. That's right, his body is growing. After becoming middle schoolers, it feels like Makoto has gotten a little taller again.

"If you give it something like that, it'll get attached to you."

"Yeah. Woah there, okay, okay."

Just how long is he going to keep playing with it?

“Let’s go.”

“Okay. Bye.”

Even though Makoto’s waving his hand, the dog didn’t try to move from the bottom of the stone steps after barking once. Perhaps it understood that it can’t follow them to school. He denied it right after thinking that. It’s just that yesterday, it instinctively chased after them because they ran. They properly fed it, so it can’t be because it can’t run from feeling sick. Croquettes, fried chicken, spring rolls.....

There’s a possibility that those are heavy for it to digest.

While walking on the even road that stretches parallel to Minogaseyama’s ridge, Makoto turned to look back over and over again. Misagozaki Shrine isn’t visible anymore. It goes without saying that neither are the stone steps. No matter how much he strained his eyes, he shouldn’t have been able to see the dog. Or, perhaps he’s expecting it to chase after them. And that’s why he intends on running with full strength again.

If a dog were to enter the school, first of all it would without a doubt be reported to the health center. He could more or less see where things would go from there. Makoto would stick up for the dog that’s being hunted by the health center saying that it’s his dog, and after being harshly scolded by the school, he’ll take it home.

He thinks that if he wants to keep it, he should just hurry up and keep it already without going through so much hassle.

“Hey, Haru. How long do you think the dog will be around?”

He doesn’t reply because he doesn’t know.

“The health center won’t come, right?”

“.....”

“I wonder if it’s hungry.”

“.....”

“I hope it doesn’t ruin its stomach by eating something weird.”

“.....”

“You know, I can’t keep at my house because of Mom. She says she won’t stop sneezing when a dog comes close.”

“.....”

“Haru, you fed it last night, didn’t you?”

“_____”

“I was thinking that I should give it my leftovers, too.”

Haruka's face suddenly heats up. He thinks that if he saw him, he should've at least called out to him.

"You were getting along so well, would've been a shame to interrupt you."

Feeling like all the blood in his body had gathered in his face, he cast his gaze down.

"I didn't think Haru liked dogs so much—"

"Okay, I get it!"

"Eh?"

"If it's still there when we get home, I'll keep it."

Haruka looked to the side after saying it in a small voice. It's mostly out of desperation. He couldn't stand Makoto arbitrarily imagining any more weird things.

"Really? I'm glad. That's a relief, huh."

A cursing sound falls from the corner of his mouth. He ended up caught in Makoto's pace again.



"If it's still there, that is."

"It'll be there. Definitely."

Where could that confidence be coming from? He eagerly hoped that it's merely wishful thinking with no basis whatsoever.

"Morning. Nanase-kun, Tachibana-kun."

Yazaki Aki squeezed herself in between Haruka and Makoto from behind.

"Hey."

"Morning, Zaki-chan."

Aki smiles at Haruka.

"I joined the swim club."

She speaks as if there was some sort of special test that she had finally passed.

"How was it, the swim club?"

Makoto asked. Perhaps he's more than a little interested. Even though he's intending on joining the basketball club.

"For now, we ran. And we did calisthenics."

That's about it for a swim club where you can't swim.

"But you know, the senpais are really kind. It made me wish that I had older sisters like that."

"Ohh, that sounds nice."

Makoto is envious. He doesn't need to worry, if he joins the basketball club, he'll probably have lots of kind older brothers.

"But Zaki-chan, why did you quit the Swimming Club?"

Aki's smile clouded over for a moment. Then, she lifts her face as if she's staring off into the distance.

"You know, I practiced a lot for the previous tournament. Diving in a lot, swimming a lot. That was the first time I practiced so much."

"You sure did. So did I."

"And then, I always thought of swimming quickly, that I wanted to swim a little faster."

"Yeah."

"So did everyone else. Miki and Maki and Yuki, too, everyone only thought about swimming fast."

"Since that's all you practiced, you got 3rd place, huh."

“Yeah. When we stood up onto the podium, we were all so happy that we ended up crying huge tears. But practice was always harsh, and when we didn’t practice, we were always anxious. No matter what we did, we ended up thinking of nothing but the relay, we cared about nothing but our times when swimming, it wasn’t fun at all.”

“.....Yeah.”

“I like swimming, so I want to have more fun while swimming. Instead of swimming fast, winning or losing, I want to make lots of memories with my companions who I really like. Of course, practice will be strict in the swim club, too, and I’m sure that it won’t be easy, but with companions from the same middle school, we have the same troubles outside of swimming, our kind senpais cheer us up, and next year we’ll have kouhais, we laugh and cry together, I think that’s something you can’t do unless it’s club activities after all. I want to make lots of memories like that.”

Aki puffs out her chest, as if she’s breathing in hope.

“Yeah!”

Makoto agreeing with her, he nodded vigorously.

He thinks that that’s the kind of thing he wishes for from club activities. Among the ties, perhaps he wants do something to form ties again. Is that sort of thing fun? It was something that Haruka couldn’t understand. If those are called companions, then their attitudes towards it are different. If club activities are for the sake of crowding together and fooling around, he probably won’t join no matter what.

“I understand Zaki-chan’s feelings well, too. Actually, I’m going to join the basketball club today.”

“Really?”

“Well, only as a trial member so I don’t know how it’ll go.”

“Oh wow. But, we’re middle schoolers at last. We have to try out everything, right?”

“Yeah. I’m glad that I got to hear Zaki-chan’s feelings. With things taking such a turn yesterday, the atmosphere wasn’t really like that.”

When Haruka directs his gaze towards him with suspicion, Makoto noticed it.

“Yesterday, we observed the flowers on the school grounds in science class, Haru’s class did it too, right?”

“Uh huh.”

It’s a class where they study the wild flowers blooming on the school grounds and draw sketches in their notebooks. Looking up the names of those flowers in lexicons and such, each group had to make a presentation.

“So then, I was in the same group as a boy named Kirishima-kun, ah, you know, the one who often cut through the passes in the basketball game. Remember?”

“Uh huh, I remember.”

He had a small stature, but he moved well. The piercing eyes that glared at Haruka from beneath his long eyelashes left an impression on him.

“He’s called Kirishima Ikuya-kun, he knows the names of flowers really well, he was really helpful.”

If they were saved the trouble of looking up the names in lexicons, then it’s enviable. He thinks that he must’ve been quite the useful guy to have in the group.

“Things were fine up until then—“

As Aki says that, they look at each other with Makoto.

“When Zaki-chan said that she quit the Swimming Club and joined the swim club, he said ‘club activities are just halfhearted playing!’ and suddenly got angry. It surprised me, so I couldn’t ask why she quit the Swimming Club.”

“What does he do?”

“Eh?”

“He does some kind of sport, right?”

“Eh, why?”

“If club activities are halfhearted, then that means he’s doing ‘something that’s not halfhearted’, no?”

Judging from those basketball moves, he thought it appropriate to think that.

“Uh huh.”

Makoto and Aki nod, seemingly convinced.

“I didn’t ask, but that certainly is so. What could it be? I don’t think it’s swimming, though.”

When Makoto says that with a thoughtful look, Aki asks in return.

“How can you say that it’s not swimming?”

“Because I’ve never seen him at a tournament before. What about you, Haru?”

“I don’t remember him, either.”

To their words, Aki shows a surprised expression.

“Eh? You both remember the faces of people from other Swimming Clubs?”

“Generally, yeah. Right, Haru?”

“Setting faces aside, I remember the names. There was a ‘Kirishima’ but in a different year, and he wasn’t ‘Ikuya’.”

Still with a surprised expression, Aki is at a loss for words and Makoto goes back to the thoughtful look again.

The road that stretches parallel to Minogaseyama's ridge is even, but there's a spot with a slight undulation, and surely, Makoto walks without noticing it. He kept the thoughtful look, not even noticing the cabbage butterflies gushing forth from the paddy fields dyed in the purple of the milk vetch.

One of them stops on a red flower. It was a flower that Haruka doesn't know. Among the purples blooming in a cluster, one on the side is releasing a vivid red color. A different species that therefore doesn't fit in with its surroundings, it was a flower that made you feel the strength of being isolated. Perhaps the butterfly was also drawn to that strength.

Haruka was no longer interested in Makoto's pondering. No matter how much he thought about it, it's nothing more than just speculation, if it's inevitable, they'd naturally find out. Rather than that, if that dog is still there at the bottom of the stone step when they come home from school or not was more of a concern. Would Haruka's earnest wish be heard?

While thinking about things like that, he looked up the blue sky that seems to be sucking him in.

Chapter 2 – Run

The oddly tedious Japanese class finally ending, Asahi came to Haruka's desk again like always. He still doesn't really know why he comes during each recess. Without talking about anything, he just pointlessly wastes his time. Sometimes, recess ends with him only gazing out the window. If he were to guess, Haruka's seat is next to the window, so maybe he only comes to gaze at the scenery outside.

In Japanese class, the teacher explained profusely about various aspects to the point of becoming tedious. Apparently, depending on the side you look at, things have different dispositions.

"Haru, what'll you do for the next tournament?"

Is it possible that Asahi has these various aspects, too? He can't find a disposition other than 'annoying', though.

"Haven't decided yet."

The next tournament will be held at the end of Golden Week. Unlike the previous tournament, there will only be preliminaries and finals, so it'll end in just one day. Also, from this tournament onwards, they'll be integrated into the age group one above them.

"Last time, you did the medley relay, right? If you're going with those members, then it has to be the medley relay, huh."

"I won't take part in the relay."

"But hey, if you don't enter soon, you won't make it in time. Tachibana from the class next door's a member, too, isn't he? Are you practicing properly?"

"....."

He said he's not taking part in the relay. Replying to people who don't listen to what others say is a waste of effort. As expected, it's extremely unlikely to find a disposition other than 'annoying' in him.

“Hey, what’re you talking about?”

Kisumi broke into the conversation. Combing up his silky hair, he shows the whites of his teeth.

“It has nothing to do with you. Because it’s about the Swimming Club.”

“Wow, so you both go to a Swimming Club. That’s why you get along, huh.”

Looking at it from the side, do they look like they get along? When he thinks of that, Haruka’s spirits dampened.

“Yup, I go to Bandou SC and Haru goes to Iwatobi SC, though. Well, it’s like that. What they call rivals.”

When he thinks of Asahi considering them as such, his mood fell another level.

“How I envy you, having relationship like that.”

“Hehe, it’s a world unknown to ordinary men..... Hey, Kisumi, you, why you butting in so naturally. Leave us alone.”

“When I sit at my seat on my own, the girls gather around and ask me all sorts of stuff.”

Combing up his silky hair, he points at his seat with his gaze. Indeed, three girls with reproachful looks on their faces were glaring at Haruka and the boys.

“What kind of things do they ask?”

“What my favorite food is, what my favorite song is, what my favorite color is, stuff like that.”

“No way you could answer what your favorite color is. Because it’s not like that’s the only color you use. You can’t paint a picture with just blue, can you? They ask ridiculous things, huh.”

It seems that inside Asahi, colors are synonymous with paints.

“That’s why I made an emergency evacuation.”

“Emergency evacuation?”

Asahi looks at Kisumi with a questioning expression.

“Yeah. Because when I’m here, the girls won’t come close. See, Haru’s unsociable and there’s no telling what he’s thinking and Asahi’s rude and noisy, no?”

In short, they’ve been turned into a cover.

Asahi’s pointed hair jumpily sways.

“Kisumi, you, aren’t you full of yourself just ‘cuz you’re a little popular with girls. A man’s worth is here and here.”

Asahi points at his arms and chest with his thumb. It seems the head is excluded.

“Yeah, that’s true. I’ll make sure to train them, too, with basketball. Ah, by the way, Haru. Makoto handed in the club application form.”

“.....Makoto?”

He'd heard about him joining, but before he knew it, it seems like their relationship is becoming quite close. He's impressed that as always, he's the kind of guy to get along well with anyone. Not just Makoto, Kisumi is also the same kind. This must be what they call 'birds of a feather flock together'.

“Hey, Haru should join the basketball club, too. Asahi, too.”

Asahi's spiky hair sharpens into spikes even more.

“I already told you that it's impossible.”

“Ahh what a shame. If we'd start now, I thought we could make a good team by the time we're third years.”

“Oi oi, are you underestimating me? If I join the basketball club, I'd be a regular at once.”

“Wow, that's awesome. That's our Asahi. The savior of the basketball club. Then, here's the club application form.”

“Yeah..... Hey, you think I'd fall for that trick?”

Maybe he didn't notice until he wrote 'Shii' on the club application form. Or maybe he was trying to get a laugh. It didn't seem that clever, though.

At any rate, he thinks. If Kisumi is walking around carrying club application forms, then perhaps there really are few applicants. In those circumstances, then Makoto's application is practically settled. Bound firmly by the ties, he won't be able to quit, that's more or less how it would go.....

“Nanase-kun!”

An unfamiliar voice suddenly called Haruka's name. When he looks up, Yuzuki Tomo was standing there without hiding her resentment. Asahi and Kisumi look at Tomo with a confused expression. Had he done something to make Tomo angry?

“Yesterday's homeroom—”

Aah, the realization suddenly dawned on Haruka. Yesterday Tomo was on day duty, so she filled the role of chairperson in homeroom. The subject for discussion was 'decorating the classroom with flowers'.

One of the girls does Ikebana, so she can prepare flowers and a vase, so she suggested decorating the classroom with them. Thinking that it's a trivial matter, when they asked his opinion, he replied with 'I don't mind' but it seems to have touched a nerve. Big eyes glared at him.

“I won't allow you to be so passive anymore. It was Nanase-kun's fault that all the boys after him replied with 'I don't mind', wasn't it? That girl cried after homeroom.”

The other boys aren't Haruka's fault. In the end, they decided to decorate with flowers, so he thinks that there was nothing to cry over. They lost no time in putting neat, white roses and baby's breath in a vase at the back of the classroom.

“We’re choosing committee members today, so show me some activeness, all right? The same goes for you two!”

“Yes!”

Reflexively, Asahi and Kisumi reply with their back straightened. After equally looking them over, Tomo turned on her heels and took her leave.

“Scary. I’m bad at dealing with people like her.”

The breath escaping from his body, Asahi fell flat onto the desk. It seems he was quite nervous.

“But when people like her become the leader, they can surely drag everyone along.”

Kisumi laughed, showing off the whites of his teeth.

When he thinks of being trapped in new ties again, he feels fed up. At the same time as Haruka lets out a sigh, the chime signaling the end of recess rang.

Thanks to Tomo, choosing committee members proceeded smoothly. For a start, leading the vanguard, she ran as a candidate for class representative. Without a rival candidate, after she was elected as is, taking over from day duty to facilitator of the meeting, she promptly got started on deciding the boys’ class representative. Seeing as there were no candidates, he thought that it was a brilliant handling of the situation how she wasted no time in changing it to recommendation.

“Since he’s cheerful, brisk and kind to everyone, I think Shigino Kisumi-kun would be a good choice.”

Gaining immense support from the girls, Kisumi was decided as the boys’ class representative.

Proceeding in a good tempo after that as well, Asahi was recommended as the animal caretaker assistant. That was also from a girl.

“I think it suits him, because their heads are like, the same.”

That was the reason for the recommendation. As the girls’ animal caretaker assistant, they’ve already decided on ‘the Ikebana girl’. With an embarrassed and loose expression, Asahi agreed to be the animal caretaker assistant.

Giggling, the girl who recommended him whispers to ‘the Ikebana girl’. Her voices reached Haruka’s ears as well.

“It’s a chicken, a chicken.”

‘The Ikebana girl’ modestly laughed a bit, too.

Oh, he gets it now. In that case, did she mean the contents when she mentioned his head? Or is it his hairstyle perhaps? After Haruka reflected on it, he reached the conclusion that it’s both.

Tomo glares at Haruka.

“Boys’ library assistant. Is there anyone—”

The way she says it reminds him of an auction market. Her gaze is constantly fixed on Haruka. When Haruka reluctantly raises his hand, he was instantly decided on.

“Next, girls.”

Raising her hand with barely a sound, time stopped in the class for a second. Imposingly and with no hesitation at all, the hand of an unremarkable girl called Nii Satomi stretched out.

“—Then, Nii-san for the girls, please.”

Perhaps because she raised her hand with such conviction, when she was chosen as the library assistant, letting out a deep breath, she was relieved.

Choosing committee members coming to an end, when they were making preparations to go home, Makoto peeked his head in from the hallway. He thought Class 1 was fast, but it seems that Class 2 was even faster.

Holding his bag, Haruka leaves the classroom.

“That was fast, did you already finish choosing committee members?”

“Yeah. Because we decided to submit candidates beforehand.”

“Ohh. So, what did you become?”

“I applied for decoration representative, but I lost at rock-paper-scissors. What about Haru?”

“Library assistant. Let’s go home.”

“Ah, from today, I—”

“Sorry for the wait, Makoto. Shall we get going?”

Coming out from the classroom, Kisumi puts his arms around Makoto’s back.

Oh, he gets it now. Club activities start today.....

“Yeah. See you later, Haru.”

“Uh huh.”

His back being pushed, Makoto heads towards the gym. Turning back to face Haruka once, Kisumi stuck out his tongue.

He doesn’t know what for.

When Haruka returns home, there were two Styrofoam trays at the bottom of the stone steps. There was a little bit of milk in one of them and the other was empty.

While thinking what a nice town it is, he looked around but the dog wasn’t there. Maybe it went off somewhere, or the health center took it away, or maybe it followed the person who left the food. At any rate, it seems that Makoto’s wishful thinking missed.

Clearing away the tray, climbing up the stone steps, turning left through the torii, when he passes the *chouzuya*, the dog was sitting in front of his house. Seeing Haruka, it barks. It seems that Haruka's earnest wish wasn't heard.

Stuffing the necessary things into his bag after changing, he leaves the house. When Haruka goes down the stone steps, the dog followed him, too. Thinking that whatever happens, happens, he begins to run.

He raised his speed at the road alongside the coast. Leaving the village of Iwatobi like that, he finally approaches the foot of Mutsukibashi. It felt as if Nagisa was there. But there's no way he would be there. He was long gone already.

When Haruka finishes crossing the bridge, speeding up even more as if to shake off that fantasy, he runs through the embankment alongside Shiwagawa at a breath.

While gasping for air, he went through the automatic door of the entrance. The dog sits obediently outside.

While taking off his sweat-drenched shirt in the changing room, when he thinks of having to wear that again on the way home, he felt a little disgusted. Then when he thinks of running with the dog again on the way home, his disgust goes one level further.

When Haruka comes out onto the poolside, Nagisa came to cling on him.

"Huh, where's Mako-chan?"

"He started the basketball club."

Kisumi's face as he stuck out his tongue came to mind then disappeared.

"Eeh, Mako-chan's quitting, too?"

"He said he's not quitting. He'll come on the days he doesn't have club activities."

"Is Haru-chan doing club activities, too?"

"No, haven't thought about it."

Putting on his goggles, he heads towards the lanes. He can't keep Nagisa company forever. Diving in like that, he slips his body into the water. Acknowledging each other and accepting. Recognizing that they're mutually of a different nature and being accepted.

All of a sudden, the time they swam the relay crossed his mind. He thinks of what he was thinking about at that time. Was he thinking of swimming faster, of winning, things like that?

—Wrong.

That's what Rin feels, that's what Makoto feels. At the very least, Haruka wasn't fixated on winning or losing. He wasn't swimming for the sake of things like that. He was just thinking of releasing his energy and nothing more.

Rin was there, Makoto was there, Nagisa was there. While accepting the feelings of his companions, a limitless energy that wells up is released from deep within his chest. That was the only thing he was thinking of.

Then, a sight he's never seen before —.

Perhaps it was a sight he could only see with those members. If that's the case, he might not be able to see it again.

In the neutral water where neither Rin nor Makoto are, Haruka meaninglessly kept swimming without being released or healed.

When he goes out through the entrance, the dog was still waiting. Sitting obediently, alternately looking from Haruka to Nagisa coming out, he barks at each of them.

"Uwah, it followed you today, too?"

Happily running up to the dog, Nagisa takes its face in both hands and shakes it around. Perhaps because it felt good, the dog let him and squinted.

"It's cute, huh. What'll you do with it?"

"Nagisa, you keep it."

"My place is..... no good."

Unusually, he shows a sunken expression. However, he went back to the usual Nagisa right away.

"Hey, what do you do about food?"

He was grateful from the bottom of his heart that Makoto wasn't there. If he were to say that Haruka gave food to it looking like he was having fun, he'd be so embarrassed that he wouldn't be able to look Nagisa in the face.

"Kind people from town feed him."

"That's no good. It'll overeat or his diet will be one-sided like that."

Unexpectedly, he says something proper.

"Don't worry. From today, I'll be keeping it."

Even if he hides it, Makoto would probably say it anyways, he'll be unnecessarily embarrassed if he's found out later.

"Eh, really?"

"Don't misunderstand. Because Makoto insisted so much."

"Uwaah, awesome. Hey, hey, can I go to Haru-chan's house now?"

"What for?"

“You’re keeping the dog, aren’t you? In that case, there’s a ton of things you should know.”

Necessary for who to know what? He doesn’t understand what he’s thinking, but he couldn’t find a reason to decline either.

“Let’s go home.”

“Yeah.”

Nagisa following after Haruka, the dog ran after him. The dog getting quite attached to Nagisa, even while running, it always fooled around with him. He doesn’t come over to do the same with Haruka. It’s possible that he thinks of Nagisa as the same kind as him. If that’s so, he can accept it.

He didn’t intend on slowing down anymore like yesterday. He crosses the bridge at his usual speed. If Nagisa won’t keep the dog, then there’s no need to take him into consideration.

“Wait up, Haru-chan.”

Seeming like he’s having trouble running, Nagisa comes running after him.

“It’s because you’re playing with the dog. It won’t count as training like that.”

“I know that, but the dog is, the dog is, wah, wah.”

“I’m going on ahead.”

“Wait up. Wah, wah.”

When he reaches the bottom of the stone steps, Nagisa was completely out of breath. Because he wastefully used his physical strength. Contrary to what he expected, it might have been good training.

“This is it.”

“Haa, haa.”

Nagisa just nods, his breathing rough. It looks like even talking is painful for him. Turning left past the first *torii* and slipping past the *chouzuya*, they reach the house.

“Want something to drink?”

He asked, but Nagisa shook his head.

“Haa, wow, haa, it’s pretty spacious, huh. Haa, haa.”

It seems he’s finally able to talk.

“Come on in.”

He shakes his head again.

“It’s fine. Haa, can I, haa, look at the garden a little?”

“Fine, I guess.”

It's not much of a garden. A dog can be kept there, but's pretty much it. The trees in the garden aren't tended to, so the dogwoods and longstalk hollies are freely extending their branches. The fern are also casually growing, to the point that weeds can't be told apart from the lawn grass.

Nagisa takes its face in both hands and shakes it around again. Maybe it's a greeting for dogs. He thinks that it's a well-practiced motion.

"Do you have a dog?"

If he's already keeping a dog, it would explain his words from earlier. He can't keep too many dogs.

"I don't have one now..... But I used to."

Nagisa's expression sinks again.

"Did it die?"

While touching the dog, he stiffly nodded.

"Then, as a replacement—"

"There's no replacement for it!"

Speaking out louder than he expected, it made Haruka swallow his words. The dog's ears stood up as well and it gazes at Nagisa's face.

"Could Haru-chan get a replacement for Mako-chan or me?"

He's never thought about it. He thought that Nagisa saying something like that was very unnatural. He feels a strong feeling of wrongness from Nagisa's sad gaze. Was he that kind of person all along?

Averting his gaze from Haruka, Nagisa turns it towards the dog again.

"Sorry, Haru-chan. For shouting."

Like he's saying it to the dog, an unnatural smile appears on his lips.

"No, it was my fault, too.Sorry."

".....I had a white dog called Dick."

Nagisa began to talk without looking at Haruka.

"When he died, I was so sad that I cried for three days. I wished I'd have played with him more. I wished I'd have taken care of him more. I wished I'd have noticed it sooner..... Even now, I still get sad sometimes when I remember. That's why I won't have a dog any more. I don't want to feel like that anymore."

Letting go of the dog and standing up, Nagisa faced Haruka head-on.

"You know, the night of the day we looked up at the cherry blossom, I cried. When we all met up, I hadn't realized at all, but when I thought that we wouldn't get to swim together anymore, the tears came out. I wished I'd have swum more with everyone. I wanted to swim more with everyone. When I

thought of that, I suddenly got sad..... Companions and friends, too, some day you have to part from them, huh.”

— Wrong.

If he were to say that, Nagisa might have shown an innocent smile again. However, Haruka didn't know what is different and how. While being irritated at the fact that he can't put his feelings into words well, averting his eyes from Nagisa, Haruka gazed at the leaves of hollies swaying in the wind.

At a time when the morning dew was still there, Makoto came and gave food to the dog. While rubbing his sleepy eyes, Haruka goes outside and grabs the hose.

“Morning, Haru.”

“Hi.”

Watering the garden, he pours water into the dog's bowl, too.

“Hey, it was just like how I said it, wasn't it?”

Makoto direct a smile towards him with a triumphant air.

“..... Uh huh.”

This morning's menu was fried horse mackerel and Salisbury steak. If it goes on like this, the dog's diet really will end up becoming one-sided. After going back into the house, reaching the dining table while thinking that he needs to do something about, he reached out towards the deep fried shao-mai with the chopsticks.

While heading towards the school, Makoto looks back at the stone steps. It's the same no matter how many times he turns around. The dog doesn't come.

“It's not coming, huh.”

“Do you want it to come?”

“Not that, I thought that since it's not tied to a rope, it might run off.”

Where did yesterday's confidence go?

“It won't come to school.”

“Yeah, it sure is a clever dog.”

He doesn't know if it's clever or not, but it's certain that it was well-trained. Nagisa said so. After that, Nagisa taught him how to keep a dog and he learned various things that take up time.

Going to the health center, going to the animal hospital, he has to prepare tools and food. It seems that it's not so good to give it human food. Apparently, milk isn't so good either. He said that giving it water

was good. And there are also quite a lot of things that he has to do, like taking it on walks and washing it.

He got fed up while listening, but towards a gleeful Nagisa, without saying 'I won't after all' by that point, he obediently listened.

"So, have you decided on a name?"

Makoto asks.

"Makoto." [The dog's name is written in katakana, whereas Makoto's name is in kanji.]

"Eh?"

"Makoto found it first, so Makoto."

"The same name as mine?"

"Feeding Makoto, training Makoto. I know, let's teach it tricks, too. Makoto sit, Makoto paw, Makoto stay. Also, I have to dispose of Makoto's poop—"

"W-wait, stop it already. Please, let's name it something else. I know, it's black so something like Kujira [whale]—"

"Makkou."

"Aah, like the makkou kujira [sperm whale], huh..... But it really does feel like my name's in it—"

"Makkou."

"....."

On that note, Makoto didn't utter a single word until they reached the school. It was a meagre resistance. For now, the dog's name was decided on as 'Makkou'.

When lunch break came, Asahi came to Haruka's seat, bringing his bento.

"Finally time to eat. Aah, I'm starving."

Sitting down backwards on the seat in front of him, he opens his bento so that he's facing Haruka.

"Hey, can I join too?"

Kisumi came, bringing along a chair.

"Kisumi, eat with the girls."

At Kisumi's seat, the three girls surrounding the desk that had lost its owner and chair were reproachfully glaring at them. So he tried not to look that way as much as he could.

"Why not, Asahi."

"Don't drop the honorific. Actually, call me by my family name."

“Asahi calls me ‘Kisumi’, don’t you?”

“Shaddup. For you, dropping the honorific is fine!”

Can’t he at least get to eat lunch in quiet? Even though it’s the seat by window, like this, he can’t feel the rustling wind.

Since becoming a middle schooler, you could say that he looked forward to bentos the most. In elementary school, they were provided with lunch, the long-awaited *chikuzenni* [chicken stew with vegetables] and ginger-fried pork were hopelessly dull with bread. He thinks that sure enough, it has to be white rice.

Today’s main dish was *kinpira gobou* [chopped burdock root (and sometimes carrot) cooked in sugar and soy sauce] seasoned with Japanese pepper. Waiting beside it are chicken teriyaki, rolled omelette and boiled broccoli in soy sauce. Pickled Chinese cabbage is enshrined in the corner of the cooked white rice. They’re all combinations that go with white rice.

The bento eaten beside the window was supposed to have become a period of supreme bliss. If Asahi and Kisumi weren’t there..... Asahi’s bento was fully packed with spaghetti. Boiled egg and sausage is on top of it. Kisumi’s was incomprehensible. Apart from the rough Salisbury steak and the fried chicken intermingled with orange, he doesn’t really know what’s inside the potato salad wrapped in lettuce.

Perhaps because he noticed Haruka’s gaze, Kisumi picked it up with his chopsticks and showed it to him.

“This? It’s potato salad.”

“What’s in it.”

“Uhm, corm, carrots, chicken breast and avocado.”

“Avocado?”

It was the first time Haruka heard of that ingredient.

“Want a taste?”

Pinched between his chopsticks, Kisumi sticks it out towards Haruka’s mouth. The atmosphere in the classroom noisily swelling, a chill ran down Haruka’s spine. There’s no way he can eat it.

“Oh, of course. There you go.”

Kisumi places the potato salad on the bento box’s lid. Picking it up with his chopsticks, Haruka heard something like a tiny shriek as he carries it to his mouth. He was scared to look at the classroom, so he ate while looking out the window.

“How is it?”

He wishes it were a little saltier.

“Delicious.”

“Right?”

“In exchange, this—”

When Haruka was about to give some of the *kinpira gobou* to him, the atmosphere got noisy again, so he stopped.

“Yoo, Haru.”

Ignoring that atmosphere, Asahi speaks with his mouth full of spaghetti.

“About the next tournament, have you decided?”

The tournament hadn't crossed his mind at all. In the first place, the fact itself of competing with someone was something that didn't exist within Haruka. If Makoto hadn't invited him at the end of 5th grade, he probably wouldn't have taken part in the tournament. If he hadn't taken part in the tournament, he wouldn't have met Rin and Asahi wouldn't be following him around.

That Makoto is enthusiastic about the basketball club and hasn't shown his face at the Swimming Club lately. If things go on like this, Makoto most likely won't participate in the tournament. If Makoto doesn't take part, then Haruka either.....

“Haven't decided yet.”

“You say that, but it's gonna be free anyways, right? Don't think I've seen Haru swim anything other than free.”

It seems that he's been paying attention to him for quite a while, not just in the previous tournament.

“Haven't decided if I'll take part or not.”

“What are you saying? Take part. You can't possibly be thinking of joining the swim club, right? If you joined a place like that, they won't let you take part in SC tournaments. Pass on it, pass on it. Club activities are just playing. Playing.”

Giving up on it or whatever, he hasn't said a single word about joining the swim club.

“I won't do club activities.”

Haruka murmurs it. As if to drown out those words, Kisumi sticks his chopsticks in the rough Salisbury steak with his chopsticks and points it towards Asahi.

“It's not playing.”

“O-oi. You're making the ketchup fly.”

Asahi leans back.

“Ah, sorry.”

After eating the Salisbury steak in one bite, he continues again.

“I don't know about the swim club, but everyone's serious in the basketball club. There's morning practice on Wednesday, and the practice contents are super hard, just so you know. Even Makoto said

that the fundamental training's tough. You'll know if you'd try joining temporarily once. I'm sure Asahi would admit defeat."

"You bastard. If I let you talk, you get so full of yourself. If you insist so much—"

"Here's the club application form."

"Like I'd fall for that trick again."

Somehow, it seems like he seriously fell for that trick earlier. Asahi filled his mouth with spaghetti.

"After we eat, I'll prove it to you on the field. I'll show you the difference between us!"

Say it after you eat. Don't drop bits of food on a person's desk.

"Fine. — What about you, Haru? I'll invite Makoto, too."

"I'll pass."

He replies as bluntly he could. He doesn't want to be persistently invited.

"Makoto said that he can manage both with Swimming Club."

"You can do both?"

"Yeah, the captain said it was okay."

That's not it, the question is if Makoto himself can allow doing something so half-hearted.

Asahi speaks while scattering ketchup sauce again.

"Stuuupid. That's just while he's a temporary member. Once he officially joins, of course he'll think that he's theirs."

Kisumi waves the Salisbury steak about again.

"That's not true!"

"It sure is!"

If they're having a barren argument, can't they do it elsewhere? The top of his desk is covered in ketchup. Not in a mood to mention it, Haruka turns his eyes towards what's outside the window while eating his rolled omelette.

Suddenly, he saw someone running on the field. Maybe they're a third year. They have a good physique. Good enough that he can tell how thick his arm is even above the jersey.

"Oh, it's Natsuya-kun."

Asahi says, following Haruka's gaze.

"Do you know him?"

"He's the captain of the swim club. Name's Kirishima Natsuya-kun. We were at Bandou SC together, but he quit last year."

— Kirishima Natsuya.

It was a familiar name. When he first took part in a tournament, he saw that name. Since then, he hasn't seen it. It must be difficult to manage both with the swim club after all.

"Hey, look, Haru."

Asahi furtively guides Haruka with his gaze. A few girls gathered by the window and were saying something while pointing at Natsuya.

"The girls are madly in love with Natsuya's running figure. Natsuya-kun's cool, huh."

Asahi pursues Natsuya with an admiring look on his face. While thinking that if he likes him so much, he should hurry up and join the swim club already, Haruka tosses the last piece of *kinpira gobou* in his mouth.

The lively lunch break ending, Asahi and Kisumi finally left. Wondering if every day is going to be like this, Haruka was wiping off his desk with a tissue paper while feeling fed up.

"Nanase-kun!"

Hearing a voice above him, when he looks up, Tomo was standing there. He doesn't think he's done anything to be scolded for.

"What?"

"I'd like you to help with something, could you come to the home economics room?"

There was a forcefulness in those words that wouldn't take no for an answer.

"Is home economics next?"

While knowing that it's a futile attempt, he tried a meager resistance.

"It's work for the cooking club. It's the club I joined."

Why does Tomo joining the cooking club mean that Haruka has to help? Not even given the chance to ask that question, Haruka was half-forcibly dragged away.

When they reach the home economics room, two girls who seemed to be first years were putting up a stepladder.

"We were told to put away the equipment, but we can't reach high places. Nanase-kun's tall."

There had to be other tall guys. Haruka tried recalling everyone who was left in the classroom, but indeed, no one notable was left. Kisumi took everyone along with him.

Thinking that there's no point in struggling after coming this far, Haruka decided to quickly get the work over with. Locking in place the stepladder that the girls had put up, he climbs up with the pot in one hand.

"Is it okay here?"

“Yeah, they said that it’s fine to put them in the empty steps.”

Randomly setting down the pot, white powder fluttering, it rained down on Haruka’s head. When he looks at the top of the shelf, a half-used bag of wheat flour sealed with a clothes pin was left there. How long has that been here? He got curious, but thinking that it has nothing to do with him, he decided to pretend that he didn’t see it. Even if mold mite were to breed in it, it’s not Haruka’s fault.

“Next, this one, too, please.”

When he takes the bowl from Tomo, he saw the pool through the window. Having climbed up the stepladder, the pool is just visible from that angle. The outside pool that has spent a winter was pitiful. Dead leaves and trash floating on the surface of the water that’s stained green, it’s turning into a swamp.

A number of people in jerseys were by the poolside and doing weight training. There were some who laid out mats and were doing sit-ups or push-ups, and there were some who used a tube to train their pectoral muscles with. They went as far as using full-fledged equipment like bench presses and bullworkers.

Suddenly, he stopped on Makoto’s figure among them. Holding a dumbbell in each hand, he’s doing lifts.

If they’re on the poolside, could it be the swim club? Taking a better look, the captain, Natsuya, was also there. He’s sure that he told him that he joined the basketball club, so why would Makoto be mingling with the swim club? Maybe Kisumi hadn’t invited Makoto. It’s entirely baffling.

“Nanase-kun—”

“Ah, sorry.”

Prompted by Tomo, Haruka got back to work. The wheat flour fluttering every time he put down something, he was bothered every time he could see Makoto through the window.

—What in the world could he be thinking?

After school, there was a committee meeting for the library assistants, they received an explanation about the contents of the job and the rotation. The library committee president was a boy with a fair complexion called Serizawa Nao, he filled the role of presiding over the meeting in an oddly elegant way. He’s fair-skinned but apparently he’s in the swim club. He mentioned it in his self-introduction. From beginning to end, thanks to him explaining the essentials well with a bright smile, he was able to understand it for the most part. Then, he learned that there’s unexpectedly a lot of work for the library assistants.

Of course there’s the work at the counter like lending and returning, but there’s also sticking the category labels on new books, taking the replaced books to the storage, and when the return of the books is delayed, apparently they have to go and remind the person. They dust and clean the floor every day, and it seems that on days when the weather is good, they dry the books in the sun.

In addition, they arrange the questionnaires and requests based on which they hand in the applications of the books desired for purchase, and make things like 'News from the Library Room'. What's more, for the book report that's published there once a month, all the library assistants have to submit one and the president Nao chooses from them.

After they received a general explanation, while they were observing the actual procedure a little, the announcement informing them that it was time to leave school began to air.

"That's all for today. I explained a lot of things all at once, so I think it must be difficult, but it's fine as long as you learn little by little through the daily work. Well then, let's end it with a handclap—"

When Nao says it, everyone claps, it scattered to each classroom.

Going back to the classroom where no one was left, when he takes his bag into hand, he heard Satomi's huge sigh.

"Nanase-kun, did you memorize all that?"

"I don't know until I actually try it."

"I came forward as a candidate just because I liked books, but I might be regretting it a little now."

"It's not like we have to everything at once, it's fine if we remember one by one. The president Serizawa said so, too. Leaving that aside, it's already time to leave school."

"Yeah....."

Haruka left the classroom together with the heavy-hearted Satomi.

On their way to the school gate, Satomi let out a small 'ah' and stretched out her hand.

"Nanase-kun, your head....."

"Hm?"

Thinking that there's something stuck in it, he tried brushing it off himself.

"Not over there, here."

When Satomi stood on her toes to brush it off of Haruka's hair, white powder fluttered. It's the white flour from that time.

"Thanks."

Just in case, he brushes it off himself.

"Nanase-kuuun!"

Hearing a voice from far away and turning around, Tomo was running towards them. She's holding a small packet in her hand.

"I'm glad. Haa, haa. I thought of giving it to you tomorrow, but, haa, here, eat this if you'd like.

The small packet held out to him, he ended up taking it by reflex.

“What is it?”

“Cookies baked in the cooking club. When I told the senpais that you helped, they told me to take it.”

“Aah.....”

“Thank you.”

He didn't do anything much in particular, but he'll take it if she's giving it to him.

“Thanks.”

When he was about to start walking after saying his thanks to Tomo, he's called from far away again and turns around.

“Haru—”

Makoto and Aki came running while waving their hands.

“Did you have a library committee meeting? My club activities just ended, too.”

Which club activities. If Aki's with him, then maybe it's the swim club after all. He doesn't really know what Makoto's thinking.

“Mine just ended, too. Then I met up with Tachibana-kun.”

Which means that maybe it's the basketball club. When he thought of questioning Makoto about it, somebody slipped right past Haruka and nearly crashed into him. In a flash, he dodges by taking a half step back.

—It's Kirishima Ikuya.

While walking with quick steps, he directs his gaze toward him for just a second. From beneath his long eyelashes, his piercing eyes shining darkly shoot through Haruka—.

Without stopping his feet, Ikuya shifts that gaze to Satomi.

“Satomi—”

He keeps walking towards the school gate like that.

“Ah, wait, Ikuya-kun.”

Satomi running in a jog after Ikuya who's going out the school gate, only an odd silence remained.

Makoto softly raises his up-slanting eyebrows.

“Then, let's go home, too.”

Encouraged by those words, Haruka and Aki begin to walk, too.

“I'm going this way.”

After Tomo says it to Haruka, she ran off in the opposite direction.

“Okay, thanks for this.”

When Haruka says it, holding up the packet, Tomo waved her hand from behind while running.

“What’s that?”

Makoto asked.

“A cookie.”

“Aah, from the cooking club, huh. They shared some of it with the swim club, too.”

When Aki says that, Makoto directed a look of disbelief towards Haruka.

“Hmm. Why did Haru get it?”

Explaining it is a pain.

“There was some left over, so they said they’re giving it to me. More importantly, Makoto, what were you doing at the poolside during lunch break.”

Makoto raised his brow as if he’s surprised a little, then he went back to the usual smile right away.

“So you were watching, Haru. —They let me join the swim club’s muscle training.”

He could see as much. He’s asking about the circumstances.

“Why?”

“In the corner of the field, there’s a basketball hoop, right? People were playing there.”

“Kisumi and the others?”

Kisumi said that he’s inviting Makoto, that must be it. Asahi was also supposed to have been there.

“Yeah. And then, the swim club was doing muscle training, and when I was staring at them, someone called out to me asking ‘are you interested?’”

“Who?”

“The swim club’s captain. He was running.”

He means Natsuya. It seems that that running was also meant to be a patrol to hunt for targets to persuade.

“And then, I was invited to give it a try, but when I said that I’m in the basketball club, he said that it’s for experience.”

During the trial period, they have a system where they’re allowed to experience other clubs as well. Nevertheless, it’s a little sad that experiencing the swim club is weight training. He thinks that it’s a swim club precisely because of swimming, but it can’t be helped that it’s a little too early for that. However, what’s even sadder is that the swim club took Makoto away from Kisumi and the others.

“What about basketball?”

“I told them properly that I’m leaving for a bit.”

How frivolous. He wonders if he was always this frivolous of a guy.

Aki cuts into the conversation with a cheerful voice.

“Are you joining the swim club?”

“They just let me experience it a little. But muscle training sure is amusing. They praised me that my muscles are good.”

It’s just the muscle training, huh.

“Did Yazaki do it, too?”

“Nah. The girls don’t have practice at lunch. Hey, Tachibana-kun. Join the swim club. Nanase-kun, too. Then let’s all swim together again. I’m sure it’ll be fun.”

“Umm, I really have to think about it. Basketball’s amusing, too, and muscle training has its appeal, too. Ah, they said I can do muscle training tomorrow, too. Haru, won’t you do it too?”

“No, I’ll pass.”

He declines Aki’s and Makoto’s invitation at the same time. At any rate, he’s a little worried if it’s alright to compare basketball and weight training. Once again, he doesn’t understand Makoto anymore.

“By the way, that Kirishima guy earlier—”

As Haruka suddenly changes the subject, Makoto and Aki’s smiles turn cold.

“What kind of guy is he?”

It’s rare for Haruka to take an interest in others. It’s natural that Makoto and Aki look at Haruka like it’s unexpected. He himself thinks that it’s unexpected. However, he’s curious. Those eyes—

“If I’m not mistaken, he’s the guy who talked about how the swim club, right?”

To that question, Makoto hesitantly replies.

“Since then, I haven’t talked to him..... But, he’s always alone. With a sullen expression, he looks out the window.”

“I don’t really get it yet, but it feels like all the girls find it hard to get close to him, I guess.....”

Aki adds carefully.

Piercing eyes shining darkly..... He’s seen it somewhere before. He’s not sure where it was, when it was, and if that was Ikuya at all, but he definitely remembers seeing those eyes.

“Hey, Haru. Are you going to the Swimming Club today?”

Makoto asked.

“Nah, it’s gotten late so I’m not going today.”

Formerly, he thought that he wanted to swim, even if it was for just ten minutes. And yet he doesn't think so today. Could it be because it doesn't heal nor release him anymore? Or perhaps.....

"We can still swim if it's just for a short while."

"It's fine for today. I have to buy equipment and food for Makkou anyways. Makoto, come with me."

A part of the responsibility for keeping it lies with Makoto, too. At least going shopping with him is a natural obligation.

"Yeah, okay. —Ah, Makkou's a dog. It's being kept at Haru's house."

Makoto explains to Aki.

"Wow, show it to me next time. Well then, I'm going this way. See you tomorrow."

Smiling, Aki waves her hand.

"Uh huh."

"Byebye."

After they saw Aki off, Haruka offered the small packet in his hand to Makoto.

"Give it to your siblings."

"Are you sure? But, somehow it's....."

"Don't be modest."

"I'm not being modest, it's just a matter of feelings....."

"I've already accepted the feelings."

".....Yeah. Alright, then I'll take it."

If he hadn't know about the white flour, he surely would've eaten it deliciously. But Haruka had already ended up knowing. He just prayed that the heat had sterilized it.

Once they went back home, they headed to the home center by bicycle. It's for the sake of buying together the things Nagisa had taught him about yesterday. Leash, collar, doghouse kit, food, food bowl, sheets, brush, shampoo. It became quite the load. It was the right decision to bring Makoto along.

Starting tomorrow, he has to take it on morning walks and shampoo it. Since they can't carry a built doghouse, they decided on a kit that needs assembly. He has to build that doghouse, too. He's getting a little fed up with all the things that take up time.

The next day, he put the leash and collar he had just bought on Makkou. It's for the sake of taking him on walks. He thought that it wasn't going to like it, but not behaving like that in the slightest, it obediently let him.

“Alright, good dog.”

Like Nagisa had done, he took the dog’s face in both hands and shakes it around. Makkou proudly puffed out its chest and barked at Haruka.

When it began to dawn, the boats that have finished fishing return to the port one after the other. Seagulls were trying to perch on the end of their white masts. Because the boats were moving, the masts sway irregularly, too. Even so, while expertly making fine adjustments, they lightly perched down on the end of the masts.

While admiring that they’re clever creatures, Haruka ran through the port with Makkou.

After they reached the coast, they go down to the beach. He thought of trying something out with the meticulously well-trained and outgoing Makkou. Is it just behaving like it’s been trained, or is it really a dog with a lot of guts—.

Taking off the leash, Haruka walked until the water’s edge. There, he turns to Makkou. Perhaps because it’s waiting for an order, it stares at Haruka and stays put. Or perhaps the breaking waves frightened it.....

“Come here.”

Reacting to Haruka’s voice, Makkou began to run with great vigour. As if he’s trying to run away, Haruka runs along the water’s edge. When Makkou catches up to Haruka, he ran on the seaward side. Even when the waves break close to it, it kicks up without hesitation. Reacting to the splashes that Makkou raises, the rising sun that shows its face from the edge of the mountain lets loose its light like fireworks. Turning into small grains of light and bursting open, it dissolves into the morning air filled with the scent of the seawater.

Running until the end of the coast like that, he stopped there. When Haruka’s heavy breathing evened out, Makkou ran back in the direction they came from. Then, coming to a stop before it went too far, it turns back to Haruka.

— Come here.

Makkou was provoking Haruka.

“You little—”

When Haruka starts running, Makkou runs away too, kicking up splashes. While tripping on the sand, nevertheless it chased after him with full strength. The splashes Makkou raises hitting Haruka, it sprinkles on his face. It’s doing it on purpose. Occasionally turning around, a mischievous expression floated on Makkou’s face.

Forgetting himself, Haruka laughed in the morning sun. It’s been a while since he’s felt like this. As he thought about when the last time was, he thought that it wasn’t in that distant of a past. He feels the same way he did in the water just barely a month ago.

On the early morning coast, basking in the morning sun and the splashes, the two smiling faces running were bursting with brightness.

When he gets home from school, he set about building the doghouse right away. Since it's a kit, he didn't need to use a saw and he just had to drive in the nails, but it had more parts than he expected, so it didn't seem like he could finish before the day was over. So, he left the rest for the next day and decided to shampoo the dog instead.

Pulling out the hose from the bathroom, he pours hot water on it. Even during that, Makkou behaved properly. When he dries him off with a bath towel, a lot of Makkou's fur stuck on it, so it became 'Makkou exclusive'. When he brushes it, it squinted its eyes like it was feeling good.

The next day as well, they made a round trip to the coast for the morning walk. It'll become pretty good training. Tripping on the sand makes it hard to balance, and on top of that, and since he consciously has to raise his legs higher, it became training for his abdominal muscles and dorsal muscles. Haruka thought that rather than running long distances, perhaps he was more suited for running short distances that applied a load to him. More than conserving his strength, letting it burst came naturally to him.

When he gets home from school, he set about building the doghouse right away again. Perhaps because they were attracted by the sound of nails being driven in, Makoto's siblings came by and started playing with Makkou. Not knowing how it should handle the small twins, Makkou is at a loss. Seeing that it's acting strange, Haruka's lips unintentionally slackened.

"You're as skillful as ever, Haru."

Before he knew it, Makoto's club activities were over and it was time for him to get home. It seemed like he could somehow finish the doghouse before the day is over, but he ended up taking the day off from the Swimming Club. He has to go the health center and animal hospital tomorrow. It seems like he'll be taking another day off.

The following day, after registering at the health center, the dog was vaccinated at the hospital, and it ended up turning to dusk already with just that. It's just a bit before the sun goes down that he finally arrived at home.

Climbing up the stone steps, passing through the first *torii* and turning left, when he passes by the *chouzuya*, Nagisa was in front of his house. Standing still with his bag in his hand, he directs a sunken look towards Haruka. Up until now, he's seen that expression momentarily, but it's really only for a moment, he returns to the usual innocent Nagisa right away. That was Nagisa. However—

"Did you come to see the dog? His name's Makkou—"

"Why aren't you coming?"

Interrupting Haruka's words, Nagisa's eyes stare directly at Haruka. The setting sun shining on the side of Nagisa's face, it felt like he could see through to the depths of his eyes.

"Why didn't you come?"

Like they're flowing from the depths of its depths, tears fall from Nagisa's eyes.

"No one's there, you know. I'm swimming alone. I wasn't put in the free relay or the medley relay, I'm swimming alone."

He was, lonely. He's already taken a break from the Swimming Club for four days. During that time, Nagisa endured loneliness. He endured it alone. There was no need for him to see deep into his eyes. Nagisa is always just the way he is.

"Even so, Mako-chan and Haru-chan aren't coming, and I missed you."

Nagisa clung onto Haruka's chest. Clinging onto him, he silently cried.

Haruka acknowledged what he was feeling for the first time.

—Loneliness.

In the water where neither Rin nor Makoto are, he felt loneliness.

Nothing's changed with Nagisa. Instead of crying, Haruka took a break from the Swimming Club. He ran away from the loneliness. He was running away. Just now, he acknowledged that for the first time. —He couldn't help but acknowledge it.

Haruka let Nagisa cry as much as he wanted until a bit before the setting sun reached the horizon. After that, he told him he'd see him home by bicycle, but Nagisa shook his head.

"I won't do..... something like this anymore. Sorry, Haru-chan."

Leaving just those words, Nagisa ran off. Descending the stone steps, Nagisa's figure traversing the port was visible from Haruka's house. The sea dyed by the setting sun illuminating Nagisa in red, his long-stretching shadow leaving its traces kept endlessly swaying in the port.

Chapter 3 – Promise

Since there were absentees in the P.E. lesson, they adjusted the number of players for basketball, so Haruka and Makoto played in the game on the same team. It's not a coincidence. The P.E. teacher, who is also the advisor for the basketball club, planned it. As evidence, Kisumi and Asahi, as well as Ikuya were on the opposing team. When all's said and done, you could say that it's an 'ability inspection of the notable guys'.

"Haru, over here!"

Makoto calls for a pass while running. However, Ikuya was sticking close to Makoto. Including the passes that he made in the first half, since Ikuya's marking him, most of them are blocked. Compared to Makoto, there's a considerable height difference between them, but he was covering it with so much momentum that it can't be felt.

It'd be okay to aim for a 3-point shot from here, but thinking that at long last Kisumi is standing in the front, he decided to slip past him. It's a good opportunity to try out if the dribble he had used before to slip past Ikuya works against Kisumi.

Haruka speeds up at once—.

“Like I’d let you go!”

Asahi came cutting in all of a sudden. He was supposed to have been underneath the hoop until just now, yet he’s coming back already. He tries to dodge Asahi right away, but he can’t make it. As a last resort, he starts to do a drive by force, prepared for a foul.

“Uwah.”

“Ouch.”

Asahi and Kisumi came into contact. He tries to open up that gap, but without a moment’s delay, Ikuya came in to block. However—.

The bound pass that Haruka tossed behind his back crossing over to Makoto who had become free, it beautifully made a jump shot.

“Kisumi, it’s your fault!”

“It’s because Asahi cut in.”

Exiting the gym, the performance review meeting began. Makoto slips past Haruka who’s squinting his eyes from the sunlight.

“Haru, I’m going ahead. Because Music is next.”

He wonders why he says every little thing, but he’s gotten used to it.

“Oi, Haru. Don’t think you could slip past me with something like that.”

Reflecting Asahi’s displeasure, his spiky hair sharpens.

“Really, it’s a disgrace. Haru has no choice but to join the basketball club now.”

The sunlight glints off of Kisumi’s white teeth, the wind strokes his silky hair.

“He said he’s not joining. Right, Haru?”

He thinks he’d be okay with joining.

It’s not that he’s discovered a special meaning in basketball. However, there’s no meaning in swimming now, either. If he’s swimming meaninglessly, then it’s the same as playing basketball meaninglessly. It may still be better, if at least Makoto is there.

Speaking of which, Kisumi has invited him many times, but Makoto hasn’t ever invited him yet. He had only invited him to the swim club’s weight training once. It could possibly be because Makoto hasn’t made up his mind yet, either.

“Haru and Makoto—”

Kisumi says while walking next to him.

“I thought that you two might be like brothers, but maybe that’s not quite right, huh.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“You understand each other on a much deeper level, or rather, it’s like your hearts are connected—”

“We’re just childhood friends.”

He breaks off the arbitrary delusions in advance. He can’t stand weird ideal-like things being pushed onto him. He doesn’t understand anything about Makoto. Why he’s doing something like basketball. Why he’s doing something like weight training. Why he can be fine without swimming. Haruka didn’t understand any of it.

Makoto can get along well with anyone, wherever he goes. Naturally blending in before he knows it, he ends up attracting people. There’s no doubt about it, he’d surely do well whether it’s basketball or swimming. Even if Haruka’s not there.....

He passes by in front of the spiraea. The small white flowers in round clusters were swaying. Haruka thought that it was just like them. Each of them in a cluster of something, they’re blooming by trying to crowd together. They can’t live unless they cluster together while leaning on each other’s shoulders. They can’t do something like live while harboring their loneliness.

While wondering if he was such a weak being, Haruka gently averted his eyes from the spiraea swaying in the sunlight.

After tying Makkou outside of the entrance, he goes into the Swimming Club. It probably wouldn’t run away without being tied, but apparently he must. Nagisa said that that’s the responsibility of a pet owner. When he goes out to the pool after changing, Nagisa came to coil around him with a happy look on his face. He seems to be happy, but the innocence he had before was gone, it even seemed like it was tinged with sorrow.

“Hey, I’m going to swim in the 50m and 100m breast.”

It seems that the results of the previous tournament were taken into consideration.

“What about Haru-chan, and Mako-chan?”

“Makoto, probably won’t take part. If he intended to, he’d be training a little more.”

“.....Yeah, that’s right. — What about Haru-chan?”

After his expression sunk once, Nagisa asked with his smile returned. When he wonders if that smile will sink again, his chest hurt a little.

“I won’t enter, either.”

He uttered it without having prepared an answer for when he’s asked why. But Nagisa nodded, still directing a smile towards him.

“There are a lot of tournaments, huh. It must be hard to take part in all of them.”

Perhaps he had predicted it to an extent. It was predictable. Haru took several days off, using Makkou as a reason.

“I’ll go and cheer for you.”

“Really? Alright, I’ll try my best!”

Pulling the rubber of his goggles with a snap, Nagisa returned to the elementary school group. Averting his gaze from Nagisa’s retreating figure, when Haruka puts on his goggles, he dived into the pool like that.

He feels the water. They can mutually acknowledge each other. Accepting, and being accepted. However, it didn’t heal his heart. He was no longer being released from the unpleasant things and the ties.

What could Nagisa be wishing for from swimming? Swimming fast, swimming enjoyably, winning..... Or, the same as Haruka, could it be feeling the water?

Suddenly, he remembers Rin. Like how Haruka is alone, like how Nagisa is alone, is Rin alone again, too? Among people who can’t even understand what he’s saying, what could he be thinking?

After thinking that far ahead, he stopped thinking about it. Alone or not, Rin has a clear goal. Apart from swimming fast, there shouldn’t be anything for him to think about now. He had departed with his dream urging him on. He can’t possibly have the spare time to think about unnecessary things.

Surely, Rin is only looking ahead. While feeling envious of such a Rin, Haruka let his body slip inside the water.

The day before Golden Week began, after Haruka spent a lively lunchtime with Kisumi and Asahi, he went to the pool. Wondering what kind of training Makoto was doing, he got interested in trying to take just a little peek.

However, not a single person was doing training on the poolside, there were only several people scooping the water’s surface with what looked like bug-catching nets.

“A potential applicant?”

When he turns around, the swim club’s captain, Natsuya was there before he knew it. Apparently having run today as well, he’s wiping his sweat while the thick chest of his jersey falls and rises.

“No, I’m not..... What are they doing?”

When Haruka points at the pool with his gaze, Natsuya showed a smile that burned into his eyes.

“It’s the biology club. The water will be drained from the pool after school today, they’re gathering specimens before that. Apparently there are euglenas, parameciums, daphnias and dragonfly larvae in it.”

Oh, he gets it now. No wonder they’re merry about it. From the biology club’s point of view, even the pool that’s like a swamp would be a gold mine of research material.

“What about the muscle training today?”

“We’re taking a day off from it today. — You must be Nanase. From Iwatobi SC.”

It’s not particularly something to be surprised about. He remembers him, too. In the first tournament he swam at the end of his fifth year, Natsuya participated, too. They were in different age groups, but he remembers watching him while thinking that his swimming is dynamic. He hasn’t seen him since that tournament. According to Asahi’s information, he ended up quitting the Swimming Club.

“I am.”

“Are you taking part in the next tournament?”

It’s the tournament at the end of Golden Week.

“No, I’m not.”

“If you’re not taking part in it, won’t you try joining the swim club? So far, there’s only one potential applicant among the first year boys. It’s OK to stay at the SC, too.”

Potential applicant..... Could it be Makoto? Attracted by the weight training, he might have decided to join the club. He had a feeling it would end up like that. The ‘land’ doesn’t suit Makoto. It can’t be that he can stand to not swim. It’s true for both Makoto and Haruka.

Suddenly, Nagisa crosses his mind. At the same time, Rin flitted through his mind. If he swims in the water where Makoto isn’t there, feeling loneliness again, he has a feeling that he’d be envious of Rin. He hated himself like that. He didn’t want to be someone who envied others. He always wants to be like himself. He wants to keep being stronger than anyone else. If it’s for the sake of that, he can even shake off Nagisa’s sunken expression. He can endure the pain in his chest, too. It’s for the sake of being like himself, being strong—.

“But I only swim free.”

“That’s just like you, huh. When you swim, you at least hear rumors. — Fine. In exchange, I’ll have you enter in all the free events.”

Though Haruka didn’t grasp the meaning of that, he still nodded in assent. He didn’t want to undermine what he had decided just now for a trivial matter.

“Also, try to use honorific language when speaking to your senpais. I don’t mind if it’s only to the extent you can.”

“—Yes.”

While staring at the days that are starting anew, Haruka couldn’t help but feel something vividly boil deep in his chest.

He was told that the next day, which was the first day of Golden Week, the pool would be cleaned starting in the morning. They’re returning that pool which had turned into a swamp to its original form. It got him a little curious that Natsuya was wearing an oddly happy expression when he was talking

about it. He couldn't possibly be chuckling to himself because he was able to secure the work force for cleaning, could he.....?

Finishing the walk he calls training that has already become a part of his daily routine, he leaves the house after taking a shower. Makoto wasn't at the bottom of the stone steps. It's not like they had promised. There was no solid evidence that he had been there, either. It's just that he had thought that he'd be there, like usual.

It's possible that he doesn't know yet that Haruka joined the swim club. He might've gone ahead, or maybe he's still taking it easy at home. At any rate, thinking that they'd meet later, Haruka started walking towards the school.

When he goes out to the pool after changing into his P.E. outfit which consisted of shorts and a short-sleeved shirt in the changing room, the cleaning had already begun. The water spouting out so high that he thought it was a fountain, the pool echoed with the lively voices of those running away from the water, and the laughter of those who watched them run. A rainbow is arcing in the sky above.

"Yo. So you came, Nanase."

Natsuya's smile was drenched in water. Somehow, it seems like he had joined in on the playing a bit. Nevertheless, 'so you came' was a fine thing to say. Perhaps he thought that he might not come.

"Ooi, everyone--"

Natsuya yells facing towards the pool, but because of the commotion, it seems they don't hear him. They keep playing with the water. Sharply breathing in, Natsuya puffed up his thick chest.

"Gather round!"

Both the noisy voices and the rainbow in the sky disappeared as a voice that makes your ears hurt boomed. From inside the pool, and from the poolside as well, people come gathering one after the other. Aki was also among them. Maki and Yuki, who had been on the same team in elementary school, were also with her. With a seemingly surprised look, they're pointing at Haruka.

After making sure that everyone had gathered up, Natsuya yells, putting his hands on his waist.

"Listen up, you all. The water's drained but don't be careless. The pool is the pool. You'll get hurt if you screw around. Be serious!"

'Even he.....'. 'He himself.....'. 'In the first place, he.....'. The individual voices complaining reached Haruka's ears, too. When he puts together the words that he hears in bits and pieces, it seems that Natsuya was having the most fun.

"This is the first of our new faces for today."

If he's first, then perhaps there are other new faces. It seems that Aki and the girls aren't new faces, since they've been participating in practice for a while now. In that sense, Makoto isn't supposed to be a new face either, but he can't find that Makoto.

"Nanase, introduce yourself."

“I’m Nanase.”

“Your first name, too.”

“.....I’m Nanase Haruka.”

He says it in a small voice, looking to the side a little.

“Okay, cheers!”

After Natsuya’s shout, the applause erupted all at once. Aki and the girls’ smiles are blooming, too. He doesn’t know how many new faces there are today, but do they do something so bothersome every single time? Just imagining it makes him feel anxious.

“Saying this in advance, but Nanase only swims free.”

A small ripple noisily rises.

“He’s from Iwatobi SC, he has past results, too. I don’t know the reason, but it seems he only swims free at the SC, too. Well, it’s like that. Think of it as a fixation. However, I’ll have him enter as many free events as possible. I had him join on that condition.”

The questioning expressions spread evenly. Only Aki and the girls are smiling for him.

“Go on, you say something too, Nanase.”

Natsuya nudging him, he only takes a half step forward.

“Please treat me well.”

When he lowers his head after bluntly saying it, he heard a thin applause. He fully understands that he’s not really welcomed.

“That’s all, return to your posts!”

Noisily, they all disperse while talking. Aki returned to her post as well while waving her hand at Haruka.

“Nao!”

The called boy came, carrying a deck brush.

— Serizawa Nao.

He’s that fair-skinned library committee president. It seems that Nao remembers him as well, he directed a friendly smile towards Haruka. Speaking of which, he gets the feeling that he smiled during the entire the library committee meeting. It’s not from familiarity, maybe his face is like that by nature.

“He’s Serizawa Nao, a third year. I mainly have him work as the manager. I also have him work as the trainer for the first year boys, so have him teach you all sorts of things.”

“Looking forward to it, Nanase-kun. We met during the library committee meeting, right?”

“Yes.”

Haruka curtly replied.

“Don’t rush, do it leisurely. Here, the brush.”

He’s not rushing anything in particular. Where was he looking to think that? While doubtfully staring at Nao’s smile, Haruka accepted the deck brush. Wondering if he has to clean with that, he looks at the inside of the pool. Several people were scrubbing the wall and floor while covering it in detergent. It’s already turning into a sea of bubbles.

“It’s your first time cleaning a pool, right?”

“Yes.”

He replies after Nao asks him.

“Moss and algae are fairly stubborn, right? If you just scrub, the roots remain, so you scrub after putting algicide on it. Then you leave it like that for a while, and scrub again. Afterwards, when you’ve used a shoe-washing brush and dust cloth to polish off the small places, you flush water on it and we all check. Then, you thoroughly wash off what’s left, and we’re done after rinsing it off again. It’s like that, so it’ll take until today evening to finish.”

Oh, he gets it now. He understood what ‘don’t rush, do it leisurely’ means. He just has one question.

“What’ll we— What are we going to do about lunch?”

“Huh? Didn’t you bring a bento?”

“.....No.”

“Natsuya!”

“Ah, sorry, forgot about that. I’ll give you half of mine.”

“It’s fine. I will get Makoto’s.”

Natsuya and Nao look at each other.

“By Makoto, you mean Tachibana Makoto?”

Natsuya asked.

“It looks like he’s not— he is not here yet.”

“The trial member period ended yesterday. Only the people who actually joined are here today.”

He doesn’t follow. It’s almost as if Makoto didn’t join—.

“— Did he say he’s joining?”

It seems that Natsuya has also noticed that something’s out of place in the conversation.

“No, he did not.”

“Nao, call him and make sure!”

“Sorry. I haven’t asked for his number.”

“What are you doing? I told you to properly secure the work force, didn’t I?”

Natsuya and Nao look at Haruka.

“Aah, I know it.”

“Good. Call him right away. Let’s go, Nanase, Nao!”

When Natsuya ran off, someone came out from the changing room.

“Chiiissu.”

It’s Asahi. In a swimsuit, neatly wearing the cap, too. He doesn’t know what sort of appeal it has, but he’s even put on the goggles. It seems that the first year potential applicant boy was Asahi.

“I– will be in your care from today! I’m Shina Asahi-ssu. Nice to meet you!”

He went ahead and started his self-introduction, but it’s out of the question for them to bother with that. Natsuya and Nao slipping past Asahi, Haruka hands him the deck brush as they pass by each other.

They wouldn’t be rushing if they just want him to join. If it’s to make sure, then it should’ve been fine to do so tomorrow. In other words, they just want to secure the cleaning personnel as work force. While thinking that in that case, that’s what yesterday’s invitation was for after all, Haruka kept running after Natsuya.

“Jeez, Haru. Haa, haa. If you’re joining the swim club, haa, then tell me, okay?”

It was after the sun had climbed quite high that Makoto breathlessly arrived. Haruka replies to Makoto while cleaning the pool’s floor with the deck brush.

“It’s because of doing confusing things like muscle training.”

“So, what was it, that phone call. ‘I joined the swim club, so make two bentos, please.’ It made no sense at all. Then, after that, Nao-senpai and the captain……. I was panicking, you know. Really.”

Makoto wipes the sweat off his forehead with his hand. It seems like his breathing had finally calmed down. As if he had been waiting for the right timing, Nao calls Makoto.

“Tachibana!”

“Yes?”

When Makoto goes over to Natsuya, starting a gathering right away, he was introduced as a new face.

“He’s big, but he’s a first year. Hahaha.”

While lightly slapping Makoto on the back, Natsuya laughs. He heard voices from here and there saying ‘we know’, ‘we know’. They’re already on familiar terms with him from when he came to experience the club.

“Please treat me well!”

Makoto lowering his head and receiving applause, the farce came to an end with that.

Aki waves her hand to Makoto and Makoto waves back. Yuki and Maki, who were at the Swimming Club, are waving their hands, too. Nii Satomi was among Aki and the girls. It seems she joined today. Apparently, she came while they were making the phone call and Natsuya introduced her right away as a new face after they returned. Completely unreserved, she's delightfully talking to Aki and the girls. However—.

Satomi was supposed to be Kirishima Ikuya's friend. He's heard from Makoto and Aki that Ikuya doesn't think too highly of the swim club. And yet, why did she join? Ikuya's eyes as he slipped past Haruka at the school gate are still burned into his retinas. Those piercing eyes shining darkly.....

Taking a deck brush into his hands, Makoto came down to the bottom of the pool.

"If Haru was going to do club activities, then I intended on doing them together, you know. I have a hard time if you don't tell me properly. Really."

"What'll you do about basketball club?"

There's supposed to be practice in the afternoon today. If he were to participate in that practice, it means he joins.

"Ah, I met the advisor just now, so I told him that I'm joining the swim club."

The basketball's advisor is also the P.E. teacher. But, all things considered, it's frivolous. That frivolity will surely hurt someone one day. It's possible that right around now, Kisumi might be bearing a deep wound. When he thinks of that, he pitied Kisumi a little.

"Shiina-kun joined too, huh."

Asahi was single-mindedly absorbed in the work, his back turned to them and facing the corner. Wearing his swimsuit, and firmly wearing even the goggles.

He should leave him alone, but Makoto approaches Asahi. Since it can't be helped, Haruka follows after Makoto.

"Hey, Shiina-kun."

Asahi turns around. Even though he's wearing goggles, he can tell that he's sulking. As evidence, he doesn't even give a reply.

"This guy's okay with being called 'Asahi'."

It's not like he asked, but everyone calls him 'Asahi'. Most likely, it's Kisumi's influence.

"Then, Asahi-kun. Let's work hard together, okay?"

Curling his pouty lips, Asahi murmurs.

"Why did Haru join? After how much I told him that club activities are just playing."

"Wouldn't have joined if I knew Asahi did. Actually, why'd you join the club activities that are playing?"

“Shaddup.”

At a disadvantage, Asahi went back to work again. Then, when Haruka and Makoto were about to start working, Asahi mumbled to no one in particular while scrubbing the floor.

“About the tournament, what’re you doing?”

In these cases, Makoto is the one to reply.

“This time, we didn’t enter the tournament.”

“Are you quitting Iwatobi SC?”

He keeps scrubbing with the brush while saying it.

“We’re not quitting, but I guess we’re focusing on club activities for the time being. What about Asahi-kun? You’re at Bandou SC, right? You were in the medley relay in the previous tournament, huh?”

Asahi’s back twitching, the brush stops moving.

“.....You remember?”

“Because you were in the lane next to ours.”

When Asahi raises his head and looked hard at Makoto, a voice suddenly called Haruka.

“Na-na-se-kun!”

When Haruka turns around, he was sprayed with water out of the blue. Unable to even react to something so overwhelming, he ended up getting hit with it right in the face. It’s a complete surprise attack. When he looks, Yuki and Maki were holding the hose and laughing. What a great welcome this is. Behind Haruka, Makoto and Asahi got mixed up into it.

“Hey, you first years over there! No playing!”

While being scolded by Nao, Haruka oddly accepted that Asahi did the right thing by wearing his swimsuit.

Chapter 4 – Start

He runs with Makkou on the shore while basking in the morning sun. The wind from the sea feels pleasant. The weather’s nice today, too. The temperature had risen enough to make you think that it was the beginning of summer. It’s the ideal weather for the first day of practice.

Yesterday’s pool cleaning lasted exactly until the evening, in the end, they finished with all the members covered in bubbles and soaked to the skin. Apparently, it happens every year.

That exhaustion ended up getting blown away to somewhere while he was running with Makkou.

After the walk, he leaves the house after taking a shower. Makoto was waiting at the bottom of the stone steps.

“Let’s go.”

“Okay.”

Making the expectations grow for the days that are starting anew, Makoto’s smile reflected the morning sun.

Joining up with Asahi at the school gate, after they got changed in the changing room, Nao-senpai came to them when they came out onto the poolside.

“Morning.”

Wearing a jersey, he raises his hand while smiling. He’s heard that he’s the manager as well as the trainer for the first years, but will he really not swim?

“Zaa-ssu!” [Note: Since the previous chapter, Asahi is adding –ssu near the end of his sentences as a verbal tic. It doesn’t really mean anything, but he only does it at the swim club. Here he’s shortening ‘good morning’ down to one syllable and adding it. So from here on out, I’ll mark his sentences that have a –ssu in them with a *.]

Yelling, Asahi lowers his head very deeply.

“Good morning.”

Makoto saying it, Haruka lowered his head, taking advantage of the opportunity,

“From today onwards, I’ll be teaching you a lot of stuff, so I hope we’ll get along. To begin with, bowing when you enter the poolside.”

Beside them as he’s saying so, upperclassmen come out and make a bow.

“And then, bowing again before you leave to go home.”

“Is there a *kami* in the pool?”*

Asahi asked.

“You can think of it like that, but it’s for the sake of focusing your mind. It means that after bowing, you don’t lose focus until you bow again.”

“Hoo hoo. Basically, it’s to throw our heart and soul into practice, huh.”*

“That’s part of it, but the most important thing is to make sure we don’t injure ourselves. We’re not on soil, and it’s not a wooden floor, either. Because a pool is water and concrete. Even the smallest accident could take your life. That’s why we focus ourselves by bowing.”

“Oh, I see.”*

“Then, let’s get going.”

Nao started to walk, Haruka and the others followed after him after making a bow.

While looking at Nao from behind, Haruka felt by intuition that he’d probably be fast if he were to swim. He’s been thinking about it since yesterday, but it’s almost as if there’s no waste in his posture. Carrying

himself as flexibly as a cat, there wasn't the slightest gap. It was like he was constantly prepared to react even if a foreign enemy were to attack him.

While walking, Nao looks back at them over his shoulder.

"Since I'm also the trainer, I'll call everyone by their first names, okay? You're all fine with Asahi, Makoto and Haruka, right?"

"Uissu."

"Yes."

Asahi and Makoto answer. Haruka didn't give a reply.

"What about Haruka?"

He was reminded to reply, but Haruka kept walking in silence. He leaves the follow-up to Makoto.

"Um, excuse me. Could you call Nanase 'Haru'?"

"Why?"

"He doesn't really, well, like his own name....."

Nao stops and turns towards Haruka. Then, he stuck out his fair-skinned, smiling face.

"It's the name you got from your parents, so you should treasure it, okay?"

Chills ran down Haruka's back. He may be smiling, but his gaze is freezing cold.

"Also, say that kind of thing yourself, okay? Haruka."

"..... Yes."

He unwittingly replied. No, he was forced to reply. While being bewildered by a weird intimidating air, Haruka couldn't fathom Nao.

Showing a satisfied expression upon hearing that reply, Nao started walking again. Then he stops in front of the equipment room. There was a piece of paper stuck to the door that had 'The heart of swimming is in the little things' written on it.

"'The heart of swimming is in the little things.' It's the swim club's motto. It means that those who neglect the minor details will never become faster. For example—"

Nao opens the equipment room's door.

"It means that cleaning and putting things away, taking care of the equipment is also a part of being in the swim club."

In the equipment room, there were things like kickboards, pull buoys and paddles placed on the rack in order. Underneath it, the lane marks were nicely rolled up and the muscle training items were also crammed in storage there. Nao took out the flags used for backstroke and the pool noodles from among them.

“You can freely use what’s in here. All three of you are from an SC, so I don’t think explanations are necessary, but put the ones you used back to where they belong. That’s the only rule you have to keep. Okay?”

“Yes.”

“We’re going to stretch out the flags and the marks, so bring it over.”

Pointing at the lane marks, Nao handed the flags to Haruka.

It was a short-course outdoor pool with the coat of paint peeling off here and there, and its concrete surface peeked out. It’s not a hindrance for swimming, but he’s heard that the concrete’s durability ends up dropping if the paint peels off. In that sense, it might be a good idea to repair it soon. The poolside’s concrete also giving off a dingy color, the fence surrounding it was completely covered in rust.

It’s not just the fence. Roughly most of the iron-made things were rusty. As expected, only the handle attached to the starting block was giving off the sheen of stainless steel, but the concrete wall at its base had the marks of having been repaired. Unable to bear the load, it might have fallen off.

It seems like there’s plenty of chlorine in the pool, just by standing on the poolside, it gave off a strong smell. He understands that they’re being careful since it was the biology club’s paradise until the day before yesterday, but he gets a little worried about it being harmful to the human body. About all that chlorine and the micro-organisms that may have survived, too.

At the thought of it, Tomo’s cookies were charming. While thinking that he should’ve eaten it, Haruka stretched out the flags.

“Okay, good work.”

When they finished stretching out the flags and lane marks, Nao thanked them while smiling brightly.

“Then, let’s decide on the leader next.”

“Leader?”*

No wonder Asahi asks back. Natsuya’s supposed to be the swim club’s leader.

“Iwatobi Middle’s swim club is split into the boys’ section and the girls’ section, and we establish a ‘section’ for each year. In short, there are six ‘sections’, and each of them has its own leader. Practices are also carried out by ‘section’ units. So, the one we’re choosing now is the leader of the first year boys’ section. By the way, Natsuya is both the swim club’s leader and the third year boys’ section’s leader, it can be confusing so we call him captain. —Asahi’s fine, right?”

“Uissu.Wait, for what?”*

“First year boys’ leader. Because Asahi was the first to submit the application form.”

Haruka wondered if it was alright to decide based on such a reason, but on second thought he didn’t particularly mind.

“You’re fine with..... me?”

Asahi looks at Makoto.

“I think it’s fine. You’ve got energy.”

Asahi looks at Haruka.

“I’m fine with it, too. You’re the animal caretaker representative anyways.”

“A-animal caretaker representative?”

“There’s a soft-shell turtle, right? In the water tank. Study the way it swims and tell us about it.”

“Aah..... Then, I’ll presume upon your kindness, —I’ll humbly accept!”

He gave a salute to Nao.

“Even though I said leader, you won’t do anything difficult. Bringing the practice schedule that each section decided on, you just decide on the assignment of the lanes.”

It seems that depending on the practice schedule, they swim together with other groups sometimes. They can only have the lane all to themselves for when they measure times, in most cases, while multiple people swim lined up in a row, they cross each other on the left and right of the same lane. Unless they do it like this, they wouldn’t be able to have all the members practice in this cramped pool.

Since it was their first day, in the sense to get them used to the water, they didn’t mind if they swam freely. Rather than the water, it’s the water’s quality that they have to get used to. While shaking off the sensation of the chlorine and micro-organisms coiling themselves around him, Haruka let his body slip into the water.

On the third day after joining the club, they held practice by focusing on the start.

“Let’s try the track start. The one where you position your feet in front and behind.”

Same as the crouching start in track and field, kicking off your leg that’s behind, you dive in with a low posture as if you were to break into a run.

“Don’t bend your knees too much. Rather than the strength, be conscious of your reaction time.”

He tells them to shorten the time from the start signal to their foot in front leaving the block to within 0.7 seconds, but he can’t tell the time down to such detail. For the time being, they all try diving in.

“Everyone, you’re too slow from when the whistle blows until you start. Your postures are stiff, there’s too much waste. Got it? First, take a deep breath then breathe it out all at once. At times like this, you breathe out everything, such as your ‘straining’, too. Try doing it.”

Being told by Nao, the three of them try doing it.

“After you breathe out, focus your attention on the spot underneath your belly button. Your body’s center of gravity is there, so your body is supposed to feel like it’s steady if you focus your attention on it. Then, firmly push that center of gravity down.”

Again, the three of them try doing it.

“Ah, it’s a bit different, huh? It feels like the sole of your foot is stuck to the ground. You feel all the weight of your body on the sole of your foot. Then you move into the starting stance, still feeling that weight. Feeling the weight means that the ground is pushing back just as much, so you leap by using that counteraction.”

They try doing it, but they can’t tell if they’re doing it right or not.

“You can’t tell, huh.”

Nao said it, smiling brightly. Was he making fun of them?

“It’s fine if you can’t tell. You’ll be able to in time. But, this next thing is a bit important. After you breathe out, while thinly regulating your breathing, turn your whole body into your ears. Like that, keep your nerves focused so you’re always ready to move.”

He understands it less and less.

“I don’t get it. What is this?”*

“The basics of martial arts. It’s a method to draw out your reaction speed to maximum. All the sports players do it. Simply put, it’s ‘relaxing and concentrating’.”

Somehow, it’s not that he didn’t understand, but that he didn’t have the realization of doing it well. Makoto is also puzzled, knitting his up-slanting eyebrows.

“But, I can’t tell if I’m doing it or not.”

“It can’t be helped, huh. Then, come this way.”

Nao went to the equipment room and instructed them to bring out the training mat. Then, he took out a plastic bottle cap from his jersey’s pocket, put it on the middle of the mat and sat down before it with his legs bent beneath him.

“We’ll do ‘karuta grabbing’ now. Haruka, sit there.”

Haruka sat down with his legs bent beneath him, facing Nao so that the cap was between them.

“Keeping both hands on the mat, lightly raise your waist.”

Oh, he gets it now. It certainly is the stance for ‘karuta grabbing’.

“Makoto, blow the whistle. On its signal, the one who brushes away the cap first is the winner. Alright?”

Haruka nods. In short, it’s a test for ‘relaxing and concentrating’. Then, if you can react faster than Nao, it means that you will pass.

“Makoto, any time’s fine.”

Nao assumes his posture with a softness that reminds him of a flexible cat. Haruka’s ability to concentrate rising, energy is leisurely released from his body.

Whistle—.

The cap disappeared. Haruka's hands are still on the mat.

"I win, huh."

Saying it while smiling brightly, Nao goes to pick up the cap. He didn't understand what in the world just happened.

With a 'hahaha', Asahi laughs.

"Nao-senpai. Haru's the weakest among us. I'll go up against you next."*

Pushing Haruka out of the way, Asahi sits down.

Whistle—.

The cap flew away. Both hands down, Asahi slowly lifts his head. He was looking at Nao with a gaze like he's looking at something of unknown origin. Did he make a face like that, too? He probably didn't. Nao brightly laughs.

—He's fast.

He doesn't mean the 'karuta grabbing'. Haruka was convinced that if Nao were to swim, he'd surely be fast. And yet, why doesn't he swim? Why is he being the manager? What in the world— is he.

That day, they finished just by playing 'karuta grabbing', but ultimately, no one had won against Nao in the end. Forget winning, they couldn't even react.

The last day of Golden Week. Haruka and Makoto were at the Hiyori Swimming Stadium. They're there to cheer for Nagisa. It was the first time they came here not as participants.

"Be sure to come. Don't say you've got club activities or something, okay? You absolutely *absolutely* must."

He reminded them countless times, and luckily or unluckily, they had a day off from club activities. They say that even coming to cheer is encouraging. If Nagisa asks them to do that for him, he has no reason to decline, but it's not like the cheering's going to make him faster.

"It's Nagisa's turn soon. The 50m breast. Ah, look, he came out."

Nagisa was where Makoto was pointing to. He's walking towards the starting block.

"Good luck, Nagisa!"

Leaving the cheering to Makoto, he was absent-mindedly looking at Nagisa. Climbing up onto the starting block, Nagisa's body looked noticeably delicate, he has a feeling that he's uneasy in some way. Could it be because the other swimmers are big?

They dive in simultaneously on the short buzzer sound. Nagisa's head surfaced slower than the other swimmers'. It seems like he didn't make it in time to correct his start.

"Nagisa! Nagisa!"

Makoto's shouts of encouragement were also in vain, they reached the goal in roughly the same order as they were in right after the start. He misses the cut.

There was still time until the next 100m one, so he stared without really looking at the other races. To kill time, he tries measuring the start's timing.

Breathing out, he concentrates his mind to beneath his belly button. While thinly regulating his breathing, he focuses his nerves. Then, the start—.

Haruka was able to react faster than any of the swimmers. It's only a matter of imagination.

"Hey, these are middle schoolers now, right?"

Asked by Makoto, he looks at the member listing. There a few names of second years' that he recognized.

"Looks like it."

"I felt their start to be slower, though....."

He looks at Makoto. Knitting his brows, he was making an expression like he's puzzled. Apparently, they were thinking about the same thing.

"Haru, you try it, too. Nao-senpai's start. Look, the next race is about to start."

It's the 100m butterfly. There was a tall and lanky person. A swimmer from Sano SC that Rin had belonged to. If he remembers correctly, his name is— Yamazaki Sousuke.

The swimmers assume their posture.

Start—.

"How was it? Haru."

"Slow."

"..... It really was, huh."

Since club activities had begun, the first year boys' section had only done 'karuta grabbing' and start practices, nothing else. They only single-mindedly repeated the practice to shorten their reaction time. Thanks to it, it seems like all three of them had cleared the 0.7 seconds. This is just according to Nao's measurement. They didn't really realize it themselves.

"I wonder what this is."

Makoto uneasily asks. There's no way he'd know.

"It's an illusion."

"Yeah, maybe it is....."

"Let's make sure of it in the competition against Sano Middle."

Next Sunday, they were going to have a competition against Sano Middle School. As he had pledged, Haruka planned on participating in five free events and two relay events. Makoto will be swimming in the short distance back and breast. By the way, Asahi is only in the 100m fly.

“Right. That’s for the best, huh?”

When Makoto finally showed a smile, somebody called out to them.

“Are you Nanase, by any chance?”

He looks at them while wondering who he is. He was a stranger. Judging by the fact that he’s wearing a jersey, it seems that he’s a swimmer from somewhere.

“I am.”

“I’m Narukawa Sakuyuki from Bandou SC. I swam in the medley relay in the previous tournament, do you remember?”

“I do.”

It’s a half lie. He remembers his name, but not his face. He was on the same team as Asahi.

“You didn’t enter this tournament, huh.”

“Because I started club activities.”

Usually, Makoto would be the one to answer. But Sakuyuki’s gaze is directed only towards Haruka. Without a single blink, a challenging look—

“Iwatobi Middle’s swim club?”

“That’s right.”

“I heard Asahi’s doing club activities, too. Shiina Asahi—”

“He’s there.”

“Then, pass on a message. That I’m looking forward to meeting at the competition next time.”

When Haruka doesn’t grasp the meaning of it, Sakuyuki showed a smile.

“I’m in the swim club at Sano Middle.”

It seems that he’s in both the swim club and at Bandou SC. He was satisfied.

“That guy Asahi doesn’t show his face at Bandou SC at all anymore. He always did play hooky a lot, though…… How’s he doing, did he learn how to swim?”

Not understanding the meaning of the question, he looks at Makoto. Makoto was tilting his neck to the side, too.

“Narukawa-kun, by that you mean —”

When Makoto began to ask, the announcement informing them to convene aired.

“Gotta go. See you later.”

Leaving behind a perplexed Haruka and Makoto, Sakuyuki turned his back to them and ran off.

After the tournament was over, Haruka and Makoto were walking towards the place they had promised to meet at. They're meeting up with Nagisa. There's a large park around the stadium, there were a lot of families and people walking their dogs. There's a big fountain where a path lined with plane trees ends with benches around it to enclose it. Nagisa was sitting on one of those benches, helplessly hanging his head.

He kept intently staring at his own feet even as they approached, it didn't seem like he had noticed them at all. After a dove suddenly flies away, he finally lifts his face to the sound of its wings.

“Ah, Haru-chan, Mako-chan.”

His usual energy was gone.

“That was close, Nagisa.”

When Makoto says it, Nagisa looked down again. That method of consoling him will only have the opposite effect. Even as an empty compliment, that couldn't be called 'close'. He couldn't even ask about the glimpse of the swimming he had shown in the medley relay. As if he were a rusty machine, he was merely swimming clumsily while creaking.

“You know, I don't know anymore, how I should swim.”

From Nagisa's turned down face, a single teardrop fell. Putting his hand on Nagisa's head, Haruka musses it up. The same way he always does it to Makkou.

“If you want to become faster, you just have to practice.”

Haruka said while feeling the contradiction of it coming from himself, who had never thought about wanting to swim faster. Nagisa lifts his face and Haruka takes off his hand. Nagisa was looking up at Haruka, without making a move to wipe away the tears streaming down his cheeks.

“..... That's not it. I can't feel strongly that I want to swim faster.”

He can't find the words to say. The same goes for Makoto. Knitting his brows, he was just looking at Nagisa's face.

Suddenly, hearing the footsteps of several people running up to them, he turns around. Four sixth-years from the Iwatobi Swimming Club were running towards them. Silver medals swayed triumphantly on their chests.

They had stood on the winner's podium in second place for the medley relay.

“Nagisa!”

Kai, who had swum the breaststroke, shouted while running and Nagisa stood up. While the four of them were gasping for air, they come up to Nagisa.

“You, haa, don’t just go home as you please, haa.”

The silver medals shone brightly, the rays of the early summer sun glinting off of them.

“What happened? Kai-kun.”

“Why, haa, I’m, haa, moving away.”

Getting too straight to the point, he can’t follow the conversation. In fifth grade, Kai swam against Nagisa in the time trial. That Kai says he’s moving away.

“When…… when are you moving away?”

“Next week. Haa, somewhere far away.”

Riku, who swam the free, takes over after him.

“Today was the last time we swam with Kai. So, we all absolutely wanted to win and kept practicing for the relay.

Kakeru, who swam the backstroke, is next.

“But it wasn’t because Kai’s moving away that we made him a member. It’s because unlike Nagisa, he’s even. You’re absurd when you’re fast, but there are times you swim like today and you’re too uneven.”

Wataru, who swam the butterfly, grins.

“And that’s why Kai wants Nagisa to swim the breast. In the medley relay.”

“Eh, me?”

Kai puts his hand on Nagisa’s shoulder.

“You’re the only one, no? I’m counting on you to take my place.”

Nagisa’s eyes shone for a brief moment, then he casts down his eyes again with an air of loneliness.

“If this is how it is, I wish I had talked to Kai-kun more. It’s always after everything is over that I notice. In the previous relay, I knew it was going to be the last time that I swim with everyone, but it didn’t feel real at all…… And after it, I wished I had swum a whole lot more.”

“If you have the time to think about things like that, then first of all, get rid of your unevenness. If you don’t produce results, you’ll regret it more.”

To Kai’s words, Nagisa raises his face.

“Learn to be able to swim in a stable way, no matter what the circumstances are. Put your teammates at ease.”

In Haruka’s eyes, Kai and Rin overlapped. He remembers the burden he ended up putting on Rin as he tried to cover for Haruka when he broke down in the race. That’s what the Rin at that time seemed to be saying to Haruka.

“Yeah.”

When Nagisa exaggeratedly nods, Riku yells.

“All right, then starting now, let’s have a strategy meeting for the next tournament!”

“Okay!”

Three of them replying, they all run off at once. Nagisa looked up at Haruka’s face.

“Hurry up and go. They’ll leave you behind.”

“—Yeah!”

Waving his hand to Haruka and Makoto, Nagisa ran through the path lined with plane trees with full force. It seems that Nagisa’s cheerfulness is amplifying from gaining the energy called companions. That energy strengthens Nagisa’s feelings. Then, when the feeling of wanting to swim faster rose to its limits, the true power sleeping within Nagisa awakens.

Haruka and Makoto saw them off until their figures running on the path lined with plane trees became small.

“Then, shall we go home, too?”

Nodding to Makoto’s words, when he was about to start walking, suddenly there was a voice calling Haruka.

“—Nanase.”

When he turns around, there was someone lanky standing there for who knows how long. —It’s Yamazaki Sousuke.

“Why didn’t you enter?”

Today is the first time he talks to Sousuke. Nevertheless, he spoke to him as if they’ve known each other from before. No greetings or self-introduction, either.

He can more or less read how the conversation will unfold. Who’s faster, who wins, he’ll tell him to swim for the sake of satisfying such ridiculous pride. If he wants a taste of superiority, he should do it elsewhere. Even without going out of his way to direct his rival spirit towards Haruka, there are a bunch of guys faster than Sousuke. For instance, he entered the 100m butterfly and free and he missed the winner’s podium for both. This is what it’s like to go up to the next age group.

If he stays silent, Makoto will probably reply for him sooner or later.

“Ah, we started club activities, and we haven’t been swimming at the SC much.”

That’s how it is.

“Ohh, I see. So you started club activities.”

He thinks that the way he says it is unpleasant. A scolding smile rose to the edge of his mouth.

“Is Iwatobi Middle that strong?”

Sousuke doesn't avert his gaze from Haruka. The same as Sakuyuki earlier. Every last one of them looks at him with challenging eyes. He can't stand to take on every single one of them. He left the rest up to Makoto.

"Last year, it looks like they were a breath away from making it to the regional tournament."

"Not nationals, regionals? Is the environment better than at Iwatobi SC?"

"It's a regular short-course outdoor pool..... Ah, but there's a lot of muscle training items."

"Then, does it have a good coach?"

"For the coach, we have a trainer in charge of us."

"Oh, is it someone with past results? Like a past representative of Japan?"

"Our third-year manager."

Sousuke bursts out in laughter.

"Doesn't that mean that he's not very good at swimming so he was turned into a trainer?"

Something snapped and surged up within Haruka.

"Don't say something so underestimating."

"Who's underestimating who!"

Sousuke responded to Haruka's words. Without even trying to hide it, he bares his emotions.

"Have you guys even thought about Rin's feelings? Have you thought about what kind of feelings he's swimming with right now? Can you be faster with that? Did you think Rin would be satisfied with that!"

When he's exposed by Sousuke's strong gaze, without Haruka aiming to do so, energy is released from his body out of its own will.

"It's not like I'm swimming for the sake of pleasing Rin in particular. I swim for myself. It has nothing to do with you."

Sousuke pushes back that energy.

"— Don't screw with me!"

In a fluster, Makoto comes between them.

"C-calm down a bit. Both of you."

Though he's in a fluster, he's somehow taking it easy. It might be his up-slanting eyebrows that seem good-natured that make him think that.

"It doesn't really mean that we quit Iwatobi SC, we'll take part in tournaments in the fall again. Practice really is tough."

Ku. A small noise escaped from Sousuke's mouth as he's gritting his teeth.

“Don’t forget it. Rin’s feelings of wanting to swim with you guys. I won’t forgive you if you do something halfhearted, just to be clear.”

Turning on his heels and with his resentment exposed, Sousuke took his leave.

He thinks he resembles Rin a lot. Not his appearance or his words, but the feeling of irritation is exactly the same. The energy he released isn’t cooling down yet. He thought that it was exactly the same, right down to the feeling of the ripples noisily rising in his chest.

Taking a deep breath, Haruka looked up at the sky just once.

☆

It’s a blue sky, he thinks. After he parted from Haruka and Makoto, Sousuke was looking up at the sky while he was walking down the path lined with plane trees. When he lets his breath out together with what has accumulated in his chest, his feelings calmed down just a little.

He wonders why he ended up getting so worked up over it. Perhaps it had irritated him that they didn’t enter? Perhaps he had felt a sense of lacking from them starting something like club activities? No, it’s not just that. He had felt resentment towards himself that with a loss against Rin, he even ended up losing the chance to repay the debt. Then he ended up overlapping Rin with Haruka.

Without knowing it, Sousuke was smiling bitterly. At best, he took it out on him for no reason. From Haruka’s point of view, what a terrible backlash it is. However, when he thinks of Rin’s feelings, he couldn’t stand to not say it after all.

He remembers Rin from that day. —Unusually, powder snow was fluttering about.

At the start of December last year, on a day that got awfully chilly, on the way home from the Swimming Club, he was walking beside Rin while stepping on the snow that had thinly piled up.

“I decided to go to Australia from April.”

He says it in a light voice, like he’s going on a trip or something. He wasn’t surprised. He figured he’d say something like that one day. It’s just that he said it a little earlier, and going somewhere a little farther than he thought.

“..... I see, got it.”

“I’ve told you about my Pops before, right?”

“He sunk on a ship..... that story?”

“Yeah. Pops swam when he was a child, too, and according to Grandma’s stories, it seems that he dreamed of becoming an Olympic swimmer.”

“So, in his stead, Rin is going to make that dream—”

“No, it’s not like that. It might be, but I haven’t definitely decided on it yet, I don’t even know if I have the competence for it or not.It’s just that, if I were to dive in in a place like that, I thought I might feel like chasing after Pops’ dream.”

He thinks it’s just like Rin. He feels envious of that Rin, who can run off with such a vague motive. Within Sousuke, there was nothing like that.

“It’s full of fast guys. For sure.”

“I’ll prove to them that there’s no talent that can surpass hard work. But before that, there’s one more thing—”

Perhaps he started to say ‘I still have left to do’, but their conversation ended there at that time. Thinking that when he wants to, he’ll probably say it again sooner or later, he didn’t urge him on. When the time comes, he’ll hear it eventually. — And that time came three days later.

It was on a Sunday morning when Rin came over to Sousuke’s house, the sun peeking out its face for the first time in a while. It was a rare occurrence for it to snow, continuing for three days, it had created an unfamiliar, pure white sight.

“I decided to move to Grandma’s house. I’m going to Iwatobi.”

He says it with an excessively happy face. He should at least be a little more apologetic about it.

“..... I see, got it.”

He feels like there were a lot of things he wanted to say, things he wanted to ask. But he knows the words he’ll reply with to what he says, and reality won’t change by what he asks. It’s just that Sousuke should come to terms with it inside himself.

“Before I go to Australia, I wanted to swim in Iwatobi no matter what. I want to try being on the same team with those guys. Where Pops swam— at Iwatobi SC.”

“Is it for the sake of chasing your Pops’ dream?”

“Dunno. But, maybe, if I swam a relay with those guys, I feel like I could meet Pops.”

“Why a medley relay?”

“Because when Pops was in sixth grade, he won the medley relay.”

He said it in a way like he wouldn’t understand unless he said it.

“In the next tournament, we’ll have a showdown in the medley relay, huh.”



“Nanase is free, so Rin is fly, huh.”

“I wonder if it’ll be like that. Ah, Sousuke, you swim fly, right?”

“Better than you, at that.”

Rin laughed with a face brighter than the snow reflecting the light.

The third day after the New Year began. They had their first swim of the year at Sano Swimming Club. And it was also the day that Rin was leaving. It was also because people were lively around Rin, but Sousuke didn’t talk to him at all. He didn’t know what he should say anyways and it felt like they had already talked about everything that they ought to.

After they left the Swimming Club, too, he walked with Rin in silence. Maybe Rin was thinking the same thing? He was probably thinking it. That’s why he didn’t say anything. There was no need to talk about anything.

“Later, then.”

“Okay.”

That was the end. It was still before April when that happened.

Sousuke looked up again at the blue sky that the plane trees narrowed.

He wonders how far this sky could be stretching.

He’s sure that it could stretch endlessly.

He thought— that it could stretch.

Chapter 5 – Forward

On the first day after Golden Week was over, he was on duty as the library representative. Haruka and Satomi, who had their club activities taken into consideration, were put in charge during the lunch break, so they went to the library room after finishing their lunch in ten minutes.

“Your work is to put the returned books back onto the shelves, do you remember how to look at the classification number?”

Nao, the library committee president asked with a soft smile. He thinks that the library room does suit his fair skin better than the pool.

“I remember.”

Haruka answers. Satomi was just looking at Haruka, looking like she has no self-confidence.

“Then, you may use the cart there.”

After saying only that much, Nao went back to the counter. In the acrylic box, there were about thirty books that have gone through the return procedures. Though the consecutive holidays did just end, it’s a considerable amount. When he looks at the classification numbers, most of them were Japanese

literature, so putting the whole box on the cart, Haruka decided to head towards the Japanese literature shelf first.

“Nanase-kun, what did you read?”

Satomi asked while putting a book back on the shelf. She’s talking about the book report. Once a month, the library assistants have to submit a book report to be published in the ‘News from the Library Room’.

“‘The Old Man and the Sea’.”

“Uwah, Hemingway? That’s amazing.”

He doesn’t know if it’s amazing or not. He doesn’t know who Hemingway is, either. He just randomly read something that was on his father’s bookshelf.

“What did you write in the book report?”

“I wrote that it was wasted effort.”

“Wasted effort?”

“It took him days and he caught a huge fish, but it ended up getting eaten. Of course it’s wasted effort.”

“Aah..... Na-Nanase-kun, what else do you read?”

“Stuff like ‘Moby Dick’ and ‘The Crab Cannery Ship’.”

“Th-that’s amazing. What was it like to read them?”

“In ‘Moby Dick’, his foot got eaten, and the harpoon seemed painful, too. ‘The Crab Cannery Ship’ seemed smelly.”

“Aah... I-I, I like reading books, I read a lot like ‘Anne’ [of Green Gables] and ‘Pippi’ [Longstocking], but I’m in middle school now, so I tried challenging myself with ‘The Makioka Sisters’. By Tanizaki Junichirou. It was difficult at first, and I didn’t really understand it, but when I thought that it was somewhat like ‘Little Women’—”

“I’ve read Tanizaki, too.”

It seemed like she’d keep chattering on and on, so he’ll break her off for now. She doesn’t talk much in the classroom, yet she talks a lot here. She must really like books. But you have to be quiet in the library room.

“Ohh, what did you read?”

“‘A portrait of Shunkin’.”

“Uwah, that’s the ultimate pure love, huh. I thought of reading it.”

“But, it seems painful.”

“.....”

After that, Haruka and Satomi kept working in silence. Thanks to Satomi having become quiet, they made good progress, by the time they finished putting away the Japanese literature, the acrylic box's contents had decreased to half.

When Haruka began to push the cart a little as he was going to move to the next shelf, someone blocked the way. When he lifted his gaze to see who it could be, Haruka gulped.

—Kirishima Ikuya.

After glaring at Haruka once from beneath his long eyelashes, he transfers that gaze to Satomi.

“Ikuya-kun—”

Why are you here? Why are you glaring at me with those eyes? Satomi's confusion emerged in her voice.

“Satomi—, why'd you join the swim club?”

“I-Ikuya-kun, in a place like this.....”

“Why!”

Ikuya's powerful voice resounded in the library room and Nao showed his face from the counter.

“Oi, be quiet. —Hm? You, you're Kirishima, huh. Natsuya's little brother.”

After looking at Nao, Ikuya returned his gaze to Satomi and when he began to say something, Makoto and Aki came into the library room.

“He's here. Tachibana-kun, over there!”

Aki points her finger and the two of them come running.

“Hey! Don't run in the library room!”

Scolded by Nao, Makoto notices them.

“Ah, Nao-senpai. And Haru, too—”

He doesn't really understand the situation, but it looks like they were both chasing after Ikuya. Turning around his heels and leaving a dark gaze, Ikuya pushed Makoto aside and ran out of the library room.

To Haruka and the others, who are following Ikuya's back with their eyes, Satomi suddenly apologizes.

“I'm sorry.”

As he wonders why Satomi is lowering her head, this time Aki apologized.

“I'm sorry. I ended up saying it.”

He can't follow the conversation at all. Nao is looking at the two of them with a puzzled expression, too. And so, sending a glance to Makoto, he requested an explanation.

“You know, Kirishima-kun seemed lonely at his seat, so I spoke to him. Asking if he's doing club activities. Then, he told me he's fine without it because he goes to a Swimming Club.....”

Aki takes over after him.

“I was nearby so I overheard, and I said that if he goes to a Swimming Club, then what if he joined the swim club. That his friend Nii-san joined, too.

And then, Makoto takes over again.

“Then, Kirishima-kun stood up all of a sudden and asked ‘Really?’. So, when I nodded, he ran out and we hastily chased after him.....”

He more or less understood. If he gets involved any further, nothing good will come out of it. In order to get back to work, Haruka pushed the cart. If he does something like this, he won't be able to finish during lunch break. As he tried to slip past Makoto with hurried steps, he grabbed his arm.

“Nii-san, would you mind telling us?”

Keeping her gaze cast down, Satomi nods to Makoto's words. She should've refused. It feels like his grabbed arm will end up getting numb. Makoto's overdoing the weight training a little. Could he be planning on becoming a body builder or something?

Like she had resolved herself, Satomi lifted her face. Then, she started to talk after taking a deep breath.

“Ikuya-kun and I are childhood friends because our houses are close. The swim club's captain, Natsuya-kun is Ikuya-kun's older brother, and we call him Natsu-nii, the three of us played together a lot since we were little. We often ate at each other's houses and had sleepovers, too. Right after we started going to elementary school, Natsu-nii suggested that we go to a Swimming Club, and from then on, the three of us started going to Bandou SC. Natsu-nii and Ikuya-kun's dream was to swim in the relay together at the Olympics.....”

Remembering the distant past, she smiled a little, but she came back right away and the smile disappeared.

“They attended, having a dream like that, but a year ago, Natsu-nii quit the Swimming Club. It wasn't because of club activities, he said it was for Ikuya-kun's sake..... Ikuya-kun doesn't have any friends. He can't get along well with people.....”

To cheer up Satomi who was casting her gaze down again, Nao directed a soft smile towards her.

“If Ikuya can't make friends, why did Natsuya quit the SC?”

Satomi firmly grits her teeth and lifts her face again.

“Ikuya-kun gets angry easily over the smallest things. It seems that he can't stand it when he's teased or about to lose a contest..... But after he got angry, he always feels terribly down about it, and wondering why he got angry, it seems that he starts to really hate himself. That's why he can't really make friends, and doesn't try to, either. He says that even if he becomes friends with someone, he'd be hated again anyways.....”

The end of her sentence trembled. Maybe it's a painful memory for Satomi, too, and not just Ikuya. Taking a breath, Satomi breathes it out along with the feelings she's been keeping sealed up.

“So that’s why, even though the three of us were always together, Natsu-nii said that because he’s there, he’ll forever be babying Ikuya-kun, so he quit the Swimming Club. By leaving Ikuya-kun, he tried to get him to stand on his own feet..... From Ikuya-kun’s point of view, it seems that he could only think of it as him betraying their dream, and ever since then, it looks like they haven’t talked to each other properly..... Even at Bandou SC, they won’t put him in matches because he gets angry when he loses, so he gets needlessly irritated..... And despite all that, because I joined the swim club where Natsu-nii is, I think he couldn’t forgive me for it. I’m really sorry for making you all worry so much.”

Satomi deeply lowers her head again. Both Makoto and Aki just steadily watched Satomi. All they could do was watch.

Nao lightly peers at Satomi, who was keeping her head lowered.

“It’s not Nii-san’s fault. It’s because Natsuya is running away. He’s scared of facing his little brother. He may not look like it, but he’s timid. I’ll tell Natsuya. That he ought to face him properly.”

Encouraged by Nao’s soft smile, when Satomi lifts her face, a single teardrop travelled down her cheek.

While lamenting over it in his heart that lunch break will be over shortly, Haruka vaguely felt his left arm that got its circulation cut off had gone numb.

After school— As Haruka and Makoto were walking down the hallway on their way to club activities, they heard Satomi’s voice.

“I already quit Bandou SC!”

It was an unusually loud voice, so Haruka decided to turn back without hesitation. But as he was about to turn around, he ended up getting grabbed by Makoto again. He’s flabbergasted: why is this guy so meddlesome? As Haruka gives up and is taken along, it was Ikuya’s voice that they heard next.

“Why!”

“I decided to try my best at the swim club. I want to swim with Aki-chan and the others!”

This is that rumored ‘lover’s quarrel’ thing. One shouldn’t interfere. Aki was there, too, beside Satomi. Turning down his long eyelashes, Ikuya looks like he’s going to cry at any moment.

“.....Why. Why is it coming to this. We were always together until now, weren’t we? Why are you leaving me all of a sudden!”

“Sorry, Ikuya-kun. It’s not that I came to hate you, really. But, it’s because I have things that I want to do, too..... I want you to understand.”

“I don’t get it. Why does Satomi—”

“By being babied, there’s no moving forward.”

It wasn’t the kind of line to say while Makoto is grabbing onto his arm, but he couldn’t help saying it.

Ikuya and Satomi look at Haruka. None of his business— you could say. He thinks so himself. Makoto and Aki look at Haruka like they weren't expecting it. The one who most thinks that it's unexpected is Haruka himself.

"..... Someone like Nanase, what do you know about it!"

It's a reasonable opinion. He doesn't know anything.

"Ikuya-kun."

Satomi reprimands him. But Ikuya's eyes didn't leave Haruka. His gaze that releases a dark and piercing light shoots through Haruka.

—This is it. It's those eyes!

There's no doubt about it. It's just as he had expected it. He has the same eyes as he did at that time. Haruka received that gaze head-on. Then, he returns it head-on. He can see it. He can see all the way into the depths of his eyes. While a gloomy 'darkness' coiled around him, Ikuya was struggling. Screaming like he's going to cry at any moment, he was painfully grimacing.

— It's the same. As me at that time..... Ikuya is me from that time.

"What does Nanase know! Like you could ever know!"

Ikuya began to run to try to get away from Haruka's eyes.

"Ikuya-kun!"

He shakes off Satomi's voice who's hot on his heels. When Satomi runs to chase after Ikuya, Makoto and Aki followed after her, too. If Ikuya ran away with all his strength, they probably can't catch up.

Haruka was remembering the day when Rin announced that he's going to Australia beneath that cherry blossom. He thought it was distasteful. He thought that he can go off to wherever he wants to. Then, he got overly irritated.

He wanted to hurry up and sink his body in the water, he thought. He wanted to hurry up and be released from this irritation, he thought. He wanted to be healed by the water, he thought. He wanted to escape into the water, he thought—.

The moment he realized that he was escaping into the water, he felt like he was going to collapse. He tried to deny that weak self. — Then, he rejected the water.

Continuing to deny it, beyond that rejection was a gloomy 'darkness'. There he was, staggeringly walking in that abyss. He was wandering while being tormented by hopeless self-hatred. Hesitating, shaking, he was struggling.

His eyes from that time overlapped with Ikuya's eyes. That's why he couldn't help saying it. Having said it doesn't mean that something would change, but he wasn't capable of leaving his self from that time alone.

Ikuya is unmistakably the Haruka from that time.



Ikuya ran. He was running frantically. Satomi's voice doesn't reach him anymore. Nevertheless, he kept running. His emotions had no outlet unless he was running. It doesn't mean that something becomes unbound just because he ran. But it seemed like his chest would end up bursting unless he ran.

Why doesn't Satomi understand? Why's she trying to leave him? The resentment that had nowhere to crash into swirls in the depths of his chest again.

— By being babied, there's no moving forward.

Haruka's words are brought back to his ears. It's not that he was angry or scorning him. He just inexpressively stared at Ikuya. With a gaze that seemed to be looking somewhere far off into the distance.....

When those eyes stared at him, he felt his heated emotions rapidly cooling down. While understanding that he's peeking into the very depths of his eyes, he couldn't avert his eyes. He thought that he didn't even mind being looked at. Is it possible that maybe, he wanted someone to look at him? Perhaps he wanted someone to understand. There was something in Haruka's eyes that made him think that.

As his feelings cooled down, he suddenly came to hate himself. It's always like that. Denying his self that had gotten heated up, he's embarrassed that it ended up happening. While knowing that he'll feel down about it like that, but he still can't hold back the heated feelings.

Ikuya, who had suddenly regained his calm from Haruka's gaze, couldn't stand to be there anymore and started running.

— By being babied, there's no moving forward.

Was he being babied? Using his irrepressible emotions as an excuse, were Satomi and Natsuya just babying him? Or was he babying himself? He had never thought about it.

It's due to his own weakness that he can't hold back his emotions. He was able to acknowledge that. He had no choice but to acknowledge it. Using that weakness as an excuse and becoming defiant, was he babying himself? If that's the case, if he were to become stronger and overcome that babying, where in the world would he be advancing to?

— There's no moving forward.

That's what Haruka said. Was Haruka being babied by something, too? Could he be overcoming that and trying to move forward? For Ikuya, what would moving forward be? Is it swimming? Is it living on his own? He doesn't know. There's no way he could know.

— Damn!

He's irritated at himself for not knowing anything. Where in the world is Haruka trying to advance towards. It's possible that maybe, the path that Ikuya has to choose is there, too. He wanted to know.

He thought that it was worth to at least know. Even if he has to join the swim club where his older brother who had betrayed him is—.

While struggling in the darkness, Ikuya was trying to reach out his hand towards a faint light.

“Natsu-nii.....”

While eating dinner, Ikuya called his older brother’s name. He hasn’t once called that name for a few months, or at the very least, not since entering middle school. With the curry rice scooped up, forgetting to carry it to his mouth, Natsuya opened his eyes wide. Even while he loudly swallows what’s in his mouth, his eyes don’t leave Ikuya. His eyes couldn’t leave him.

“Natsu-nii. I decided to join the swim club.”

Natsuya, who had his eyes wide open, opens his mouth, too. But no words come out of it.

“It doesn’t mean that I’ve forgiven Natsu-nii. Or Satomi for doing as she pleases and quitting the SC..... But for the sake of moving forward, I have to join the swim club no matter what.”

“Fo-forward.....”

That’s all Natsuya said at last.

“I’m moving forward. For the sake of proving that I’m not the me anymore who was babied until now—”

“Ikuya.....”

After he put down his spoon, Natsuya suddenly stood up and turned his back to Ikuya.

“Didn’t you say that the swim club is halfhearted playing?”

“It’s not, is it?”

“No. Not at all. Practice is tough. Brace yourself.”

“I got it. Natsu-nii.”

“Also, call me captain at school.”

“Got it.”

“Also, Nao’s the trainer, ask him for advice with anything.”

“Got it.”

“Also, be the first one there tomorrow.”

“Got it.”

“Also....., also....., do your best!”

“..... Yeah.”

From beneath his long eyelashes, Ikuya was staring up at him Natsuya, whose shoulders were shaking and still had his back turned to him, with the same gaze as before. With the same gaze as when the three of them were aiming to go to the Olympics.

☆

When Haruka and Makoto went out onto the poolside after making a bow, Ikuya was unexpectedly there. He was doing warm-up exercises in the corner. Haruka looks at Makoto's face. Makoto shook his head. It seems that he wasn't informed of anything. So he looks for Satomi. She was in Aki's group. Though she's in a circle of friendly conversation, it seems that she's worried about Ikuya and she anxiously glances towards him. He tries to meet Satomi's eyes, but as expected, she just shook her head.

"Why's he here?"

Asahi, who came later, asks Haruka. Speaking of which, Asahi is a member of Bandou SC, too, same as Ikuya. It's impossible for them to not know each other, but he hasn't once seen them talking. It seems like they're not new acquaintances, either.

Maybe it has something to do with yesterday's trouble? It's right after yesterday. There's no doubt about it being related to yesterday, he thinks, but he didn't have the faintest idea as to what affected him and how that it came to this. Thinking of it simply, he might've followed after Satomi, but he's sure that he hated the swim club after his older brother had betrayed him. Based on those circumstances, how did he reach a compromise for him to be attempting to do the 'halfhearted playing'? Haruka had no way of knowing. The only certainty was just the hunch that Ikuya joining the club will drag Haruka into bothersome things.

The fearless Makoto walks up to him. Nothing to be done about it, Haruka and Asahi followed after him.

"Kirishima-kun joined the swim club, too, huh. Let's do our best together."

Ikuya stares intently at Makoto's held out hand. Without missing that his right hand moved slightly, Makoto half forcibly grasped it.

"Let's do our best. Together."

".....I swim for myself."

While Makoto is grasping his hand, he looks away and turns down his long eyelashes.

"And Ikuya's fine. It'd be confusing if we're with Natsu....., the captain."

"Yeah. Then, call me Makoto."

Showing a smile, Makoto raised his up-slanting eyebrows.

"Ikuya. What did you do about the SC?"

Using Haruka as a shield, Asahi says it. Letting go of Makoto's hand, Ikuya directed a stern expression towards Asahi.

"Same goes for you. You haven't been coming lately, have you?"

"Club activities just started, so I was takin' a little break. You, it's because of that, that Bandou SC won't let you participate in matches, so you joined the swim club, right?"

"What did you say? That's rich, coming from the one who peed himself!"

"I-I didn't pee myself!"

"You're embarrassed that you peed yourself in the medley relay, so you can't show your face at the SC, can you!"

"Same goes for you, I bet you got violent and got kicked out, didn't you!"

"What!"

"What!"

When Makoto tried to step in to stop them, a whistle blew, as if to announce the end of a futile match.

"You first years over there, don't argue!"

Nao comes walking over while scolding them.

"Sheesh, what are you doing? Line up over there for a moment."

Though he told them to get in line, there's only four of them. For the time being, Haruka and Makoto stepped in line between Ikuya and Asahi.

"Though it looks like I don't need to make introductions anymore, Ikuya joined the club today. This has a huge significance. It means that in the first official match of the season, in the time trial by grade, the first year boys' section can freely swim in the relay. You're glad, right?"

He directs a bright smile toward the four of them, but no one gives a reply. Why do they have to be happy just because they can swim the relay?

"Ah, yes. We're glad."

Makoto is sensible enough to give a reply.

"Even so, you mustn't be hasty. Don't think we'll start practicing for the relay all of a sudden."

In all likelihood, no one's thinking that.

"One step at a time, we'll do it from the basics. Now then, since we practiced by putting emphasis on your reaction time during the consecutive holidays, today is its continuation, the push off. After you finish the warm-up exercises, let's try it one person at a time."

After the warm-up exercises, once they finished some of the chores, they entered the pool and taking turns, they tried kicking off from the wall. It's a drill they often do at the Swimming Club, but Haruka

hasn't done it much. Since he thought that it doesn't matter as long as he can swim, he mostly didn't participate in the basic exercises.

Before they did too many, the whistle blew and Nao instructed them to get out of the pool. And now they're in a line again.

"No good, no good. You're all totally useless. You have to stretch 10m at the minimum. First of all, the wall kick is completely wrong. I told you that at the start, you concentrate your mind below your belly button, did you forget already?"

While walking, Nao bumps his fist below the belly buttons of the four of them in line.

"Here, here, here, here. Your body's center, your body's center of gravity. First of all, you concentrate your mind there. Then, what was it that do you do next? Makoto."

"Yes. Uhm, dropping your center of gravity, you feel your weight on the entirety of the sole of your foot."

"Correct. And what does feeling your weight mean? Asahi."

"Uissu. Ui.....Ui....."

What, is he French?

"What does it mean? Ikuya."

"I wasn't taught this, but is it being able to kick off strongly?"

"Yes, as the conclusion. Then, why was it that can you kick off strongly? Haruka."

"Counteraction."

"Correct. It's because you're receiving enough of the surface's counteraction, isn't it. Now, in the wall kick, did you do that? Of course no one did it. For your information, the turn's propulsive force comes 100% from the kicking power. Consider it as practice for that. After kicking off from the wall, what was it that do you do next? Makoto."

"Uhm, you straighten out your body and make a streamline."

"No one was doing that, were they."

"Eh?"

"Or was that supposed to be it? Then, all of you, on the spot, straighten your bodies into a streamline!"

Staying in line, the four of them raise both their hands and make the streamline posture.

"Makoto, you're sticking your chest out too much. You're too conscious of trying to stretch out your spine. Asahi, don't look up. Like that, you'll end up receiving the resistance with your face. It's like, you thrust the top of your head in the direction you're going. Ikuya, pressing your arms against your ears, both your hands overlap. It's like, you draw your shoulder blades close. Your feet, too, closing your knees, your toes overlap. Be conscious of becoming a single pole. Your hip tightens, too. Haruka, — oh, overextension, is it. I see, it's suitable for the free, right?"

Looking at Haruka's feet, Nao approves of one person.

"Alright, keep maintaining that state and do a hundred jumps on the spot!"

When the four of them are at a loss, Nao began to shout orders.

"Let's go, okay one, two, three. Line up your toes and stretch. Okay four, five, six. Feel your weight on the sole of your foot. Okay seven, eight, nine. Higher. Okay ten, eleven, twelve. Jump up straight, Asahi. Okay thirteen, fourteen, fifteen....."

It sure was intense to do that a hundred times. If people outside the club were to see this practice, it must've looked very strange. But they only minded that at the beginning, from halfway through, they didn't even have the leisure to feel shame and the like. Even so, it's quite the feat because somehow, they all went through with it.

When the four of them conked out, Nao dealt the final blow.

"The swim club doesn't conk out on 'land'. All of you, in the water! A hundred push offs!"

".....Yes."

The four of them give a reply with no strength.

As Haruka straightens up, taking off his hands that he had put on his knees, he was called by Nao.

"Ah, Haruka will train something else. Come this way."

"Yes."

While feeling Asahi's envious gaze, Haruka followed after Nao and he was taken to the opposite side of the lane.

"Do you know what biaxial swimming is?"

Nao asked him. He knows that such a swimming style exists, but not because he had been taught. He's just seen something like its theory in a magazine that was at the Swimming Club.

"Just the name."

"Can you do it?"

If he remembers correctly—, he gets the feeling it wrote that creating an 'axis' from both his left and right shoulder to his waist, it feels like swimming stickily.

"Haven't done it before, but maybe."

"Alright, let's try one of these then."

No explanation, no instruction, nothing. Reluctantly, Haruka entered the water and tried to kick off from the wall. His body quickly stretches out. It stretched lightly and more easily than usual. He didn't intend to be conscious of it, but he felt the wall's counteraction on the sole of his feet more than ever. And, more than ever before, he didn't feel the water's resistance. Could it be because he's correctly making the streamline? Perhaps it's possible that the jumps earlier are effective. In that case, as Nao said, it

means that he wasn't doing it until now. Then, it means that just now, he has suddenly become capable of doing it. It's hard to suddenly believe, but as long as it's not an illusion, the precision of his push off has certainly improved. That's what it feels like.

He starts moving his feet, but he doesn't do the rolling. Creating an axis from his left shoulder to his waist, he does the stroke with his right arm. Then, in the timing from the recovery until the entry into the water, he does the stroke with his left arm. While feeling it to be somewhat clumsy, he swims until the middle and returns again.

"Good. At least the feel of it shows. Looks like you can swim it."

Haruka lifted his face from the water's surface.

"Don't really get it, though."

"Haruka, will you try the biaxial front crawl for a while?"

"Doesn't really matter."

"I think that biaxial probably suits you better."

"Maybe."

He has no realization of it. He doesn't know what he's basing it on to say that, but if Nao tells him to do it, then he thinks he'll give it a try. He has a feeling that good will come out of it he goes in the direction Nao is guiding him. He has no solid evidence. It's just that he vaguely feels that way.

"Also, it's been bothering me for quite a while now, you're forgetting to use honorific language."

Being coldly told that with a bright smile, chills ran down Haruka's spine in the water.

In the traditional crawl, there's a single axis in the center of your body and you swim with the image of making that the center and revolving around it. Because you alternately move your shoulders up and down it's a swimming style that seems to have become a little slanted, in which the upper half of your body rises from the surface of the water and the lower half sinks.

In contrast, in the biaxial crawl, since you swim while maintaining horizontality, it felt like your whole body was floating in the place where it skims the surface of the water. By having an axis on both the left and right side of your body, it becomes a flat swimming style, but it seems that by doing it that way, you can swim without breaking the streamline.

"Arms straight ahead. As far as you can. After your fingertips enter the water, you bend your wrists right away. Then, while being conscious of the high elbow, you paddle the water without pausing, with a feeling like you're digging through the earth."

Just like a mole, he thinks. The catch after entering the water certainly was more like 'earth' than water. In the pull's first half, he greatly feels the resistance. Not just on his palms. He feels a heavy resistance on his whole arm. Perhaps it means that he gains as much resisting power as there is resistance. Until now, in the latter half's movement, he had the image of paddling out the water, but in the biaxial

crawl's latter half, conversely, he doesn't really put strength into it. That's why, during the latter half's action, he is already entering one arm into the water, so it gives the image of endlessly revolving. Rather than cutting the water, it felt like digging through it after all.

"Good, Haruka. It's like *gattsu, gattsu*. Don't idle your arms. Swiftly transfer the axis."

Somehow, it doesn't feel like he's swimming. It might be because he's not used to it. He doesn't feel the water. Before acknowledging and accepting, he's swimming while thinking about every little thing, so he didn't even have the leisure of feeling those things. At the very least, if he's unable to swim naturally, forget feeling, he can't even get carried away with the speed.

But, he thought it was easy. He can easily move forward. He was easily capable of strongly being conscious of moving forward. It's a sensation he hasn't had until now. Beyond this sensation, there might be something unknown. It was a vague something he couldn't even grasp the premonition of, but he felt the possibility. It might be worth pursuing.

"Alright, that's all for today. The push off group will focus on push offs tomorrow, too. Biaxial for the biaxial group tomorrow, too. Put away the equipment after the cooling down exercises and you should go home without delay. Dismissed."

"Yes."

Among the four boys' matched replies, Asahi's voice was especially exhausted. The 'uissu' reply is also indistinct.

"Aah, my foot's feeling cramped."

"Aren't you mistaking it for feeling like you're about to pee yourself?"

"Shut up....."

It seems he doesn't even have the strength left to argue against Ikuya.

As Haruka is picking up the kickboards, Nao came to give him a helping hand.

"Haruka sure has a good sense of rhythm. You still have room to improve."

Since he's here, he decided that he might as well ask about what he said earlier.

"When we were making streamlines, what was that about my feet?"

"Hm? Aah, you mean the overextension?"

"What is that?"

"It's bending your knees backward over 180 degrees. Look, Haruka's knees."

He points at him and he takes a look. He hadn't minded it before until now, but it certainly was bending backward a little.

"If your overextension is big, you can bend your leg like a whip, so it's suitable for swimming styles like the free. But it's easy to injure so be careful."

Ridiculous, he thinks. If you can be faster by something like that, no one would have a hard time. They would just have to earnestly do stretches that make their knees bend backward.

“That aside, Haruka, did something happen with Ikuya?”

“Not really.”

“He was always looking in Haruka’s direction.”

He knows. He was being looked at. He made sure not to meet his eyes. They weren’t the eyes that released that dark light, but they certainly were looking at Haruka. It’s Makoto’s fault. Makoto always does meddlesome things, so Haruka is dragged into bothersome things.

Lifting the kickboards he had picked up, Haruka gazed up at the sky praying that nothing else will happen anymore.

Chapter 6 – Splash

Roughly by the third day after Golden Week ended, Haruka had committed to memory the names and faces of the upperclassmen for the most part and he was gradually starting to get used to club activities, too. He couldn’t swim as spaciouly as at the Swimming Club, but he came to understand that if they think it out with each other, he can practice within limitations; and individually, they each have their clear task, so he came to understand that if they deal with it systematically, even if he only gets a short practice time, he can still obtain sufficient results. In that sense, the role that communication fulfills was big, it was necessary for the entire swim club to act as a single team. Disturbing the team’s harmony ends up leading directly to the whole club’s loss. He steadily understood that, too.

Above all, the first years’ practice time was short, they often had to give a helping hand with Nao’s main job as manager, they measured the upperclassmen’s times and partnered up with them for calisthenics quite a lot.

For the sake of securing even just a little practice time, Haruka and the others came earlier than the upperclassmen, quickly finishing up the chores was their first priority. Inevitably, it became the first years’ role to unlock the changing room.

“Oi, Ikuya. That’s my shelf.”

In the changing room, there were just spaces partitioned off with a wooden frame which can’t even be called lockers, they didn’t have doors, so of course it’s not like they had names written on them, either. That’s why each of them could use whichever one they liked, but the places they used were kind of decided by grade, every single person had their favorite spot.

Apparently, the spot Ikuya was using happened to be Asahi’s favorite.

“That’s not decided, is it?”

“I always use that one.”

“Then use another one today.”

That's the usual. He's become accustomed to this futile bickering before long, too.

"Quit it, you two. We don't have the time to argue. We have to get ready quickly, or the senpais will get here."

Makoto, who acts as the mediator, goes to a lot of trouble every time, too. In the end, it seems that Asahi gave in and used another shelf, but unable to get over it, he grumbles under his breath.

"For someone who joined late..... Nao-senpai entrusted me to be the leader."

He would've been better off ignoring it, but Ikuya talks back.

"For someone who swims slowly."

"You said it now, you bastard!"

"Wanna have a showdown? In free?"

Asahi's back flinched as he began taking off his shirt and for a moment, he stopped moving. His expression can't be seen. But he goes back to taking off his shirt right away and his spiky head appears.

"I don't swim free."

"How come? Why?"

Ikuya amusedly presses him for an answer. Indeed, he hasn't ever seen Asahi swim the crawl. Of course, all they're practicing now is stuff like starts and push offs, it was about the first five minutes when they could swim freely.

"You're so annoying. I don't swim it, the free."

As Asahi answered like it was a bother, the second years suddenly called out to him.

"Oi, Shiina. What's the meaning of that? You don't swim free?"

It's the second year boys' leader— Yazaki Shouta.

It seems that while they were dillydallying, the upperclassmen had arrived. Half-naked, Asahi goes rigid.

"Uissu, um, well, Haru..... Nanase only swims free, so, by me not swimming free, it'd provide balance—"

"You got the captain's permission, I presume?"

His voice is rough. Nervous, Asahi's face stiffens.

"N-no. But, Haru—"

"Never mind Nanase. We're talking about you right now."

Asahi ducks his head from the voice that has gotten much rougher.

"M s'rry!"

He doesn't know what he's apologizing for, but it's obvious that his ulterior motive is to apologize anyway and avoid trouble.

"Alright, then today, swim with us. I'll run it by Nao-san."

He's telling him to participate in the second years' practice. But the first years have their own task, too. He thought that no matter how much Shouta said it, he won't get permission, but Nao easily gave his consent to it. But only for the 400m free. Taken by the second years, Asahi's eyes seeking help were truly pitiful.

The second year Shouta and Miyano, along with Sugawara, stood in line with Asahi in between them, they're going to go all out at swimming free. Unless he has swimming ability, he'll be separated from the front, and nudged from behind.

"It's a practice method called 'circuit'. While putting pressure on each other, its purpose is to improve your swimming ability, but likening it to how a bird pecks at its prey, it's also called 'pecking'."

Nao explained it to them, smiling brightly. Considering Asahi's nervousness, he wonders how he can say that with such a face. If he intended to refuse, he should've been able to do so on many occasions. Or could it be that he's amused by it? Those cold eyes make him wonder what kind of person he is.

Nao told Haruka and the others to observe them. There's a huge other crowd of spectators. About half of them are in the water, the rest were looking from the poolside with keen interest in their eyes.

The four of them entered the water and Shouta made the start first. Next, Asahi kicks off from the wall. Voices of excitement broke out from the pretty good start. Miyano follows after him, then Sugawara.

Shouta starts doing the stroke and quickly pulls ahead. No, he didn't pull ahead. Asahi isn't reaching forward. Still doing the push off, he isn't attempting to swim. His propulsive force eventually weakens and Miyano ends up catching up to him.

"Oi, what're you doing? Swim!"

"S'rry, s'rry!"

Scolded by Miyano, Asahi apologizes and restarts in a fluster. This time, he began the dolphin kick after the push off. As he's thinking that it's quite a long dolphin kick, he ended up swimming to the wall like that. Miyano shouts at Asahi again, who had lifted his face and was taking a deep breath.

"Oi, Shiina. It's the free. The crawl. Do it seriously!"

"S'rry, s'rry!"

Perhaps because they found Asahi submissively apologizing to be strange, small laughter was rising from here and there on the poolside. But in the next moment, he sees an unbelievable spectacle with his own eyes and that jeering disappears.

After making the turn, when Asahi begins the crawl from the push off, huge splashes went up. He swims while raising huge splashes with his hands and his feet. So many splashes went up that Asahi's figure could no longer be seen, and in the end he disappeared. The splashes disappeared before he has progressed much after making the turn, and Asahi stood still there. It's an impossible spectacle. He

could only think that he was screwing around. But, roughly breathing with his back, it didn't look like Asahi was screwing around at all.

Miyano and Sugawara both stopped swimming and were looking at Asahi. Perhaps because he sensed the bizarre mood, standing in place, Shouta turned to look at Asahi.

"S'rry....."

Asahi restarts again and raises huge splashes. Then, he stops right away.

"S'rry....."

He swims again. Then, he stops right away.

"S-s'r.....ry."

Asahi's voice chokes up. Maybe he swallowed some water. Or.....

Repeating the same thing over and over again, he reaches Shouta.

".....S'rry."

"That's enough. You're getting in the way of practice. Get out."

Shouta said it quietly, directing pitying eyes toward Asahi. Climbing out onto the poolside with no strength, Asahi walks to the changing room. Until his retreating figure disappears, no one could take their eyes off of Asahi.

Nao starts walking along the poolside that has fallen silent. Seeing that, Haruka and the others followed after him. When they entered the changing room, Asahi was sitting straight with his legs bent beneath him, facing the corner of the wall. He still has his goggles and cap on. Hanging his head, no one had the words to say to him.

Raising his up-slanting eyebrows, Makoto looks at Haruka.

"Haru, what Narukawa-kun said....."

Haruka nods.

— How's he doing, did he learn how to swim?

He finally understood the meaning of what Sakuyuki said now.

Nao directs a soft voice toward Asahi.

"Why didn't you say it?"

He means the fact that he's become unable to swim the crawl. It's not that he can't swim. Asahi was definitely swimming. Overtaking Haruka in the preliminaries of that tournament, Haruka overtook him in the semifinals. It's highly unlikely that he doesn't remember. Everything about that tournament is burned in his arms. All of it, vividly.....

"Since when?"

Nao understands it, too. That it's not that he can't swim, but he's become unable to swim. Not replying to that question either, Asahi kept facing the corner of the wall and sat straight with his legs bent beneath him. Then, words spill in a murmur.

".....Why did Haru come joinin' the swim club..... Even though I told him so much that club activities are just playing."

It was a voice that seemed like the corner of the wall was about to swallow. Getting a feeling that at this rate, Asahi would end up disappearing, too, he calls his name without thinking.

"Asahi—"

Asahi turns to Haruka.

"It's your fault! If Haru didn't join, I woulda practiced properly and become able to swim. It's Haru's fault that....."

Grimacing while still wearing his goggles, he turns back to the corner of the wall. Then, as he was, he rocked his back for a while.

"Oi, hurry it on up. I'm going ahead, Haru!"

Yesterday, he seemed to be feeling down enough that he thought he might quit club activities, and in spite of getting Nao concerned about him enough to ask 'do you want to go home?', Asahi completely went back to the way he was. It made him feel with deep emotion that Asahi might have various aspects, too, but it seems that he gave him too much credit. He's sure that Asahi's troubles must be made up of a single cell.

Carrying his bag on his shoulder, he and Asahi joined up with Makoto where they came out of the classroom. Ikuya isn't there.

"Ah, Haru, Asahi."

"What about that guy?"

"He went ahead. That aside, Asahi, are you okay?"

"Stuuupid. Nuthin' was wrong with me to begin with. I rise from the ashes like a phoenix."

If nothing was wrong with him to begin with, there's no need to rise from the ashes, either, is there, he thinks. Rather than a phoenix, this guy's probably a planarian. He learned it in science class today. It doesn't die even if it's cut, apparently it's a creature that increases into two. Cutting off yesterday's Asahi, it must've been left at home or something. The one here is a different Asahi.

When they reach the changing room, Ikuya and Shouta were talking about something. Asahi hides behind Haruka's back at once. After Shouta cast a glance at Haruka and the others, he returned his gaze to Ikuya.

"Alright?"

“.....Yes.”

From beneath his long eyelashes, Ikuya was glaring at Shouta’s back as he left.

“What happened?”

Makoto asks.

“It’s me today.”

“Eh, why? Doing the ‘circuit’ again?”

Asahi shrinks back upon hearing that word.

“Remember how I said ‘club activities are just halfhearted playing’ before?”

“Yeah. During the flower observation, right?”

“I said that to the second years, too.”

“Eh, eh, why?”

“Before, they said ‘you’re the captain’s little brother, so you’ll be joining the swim club, right?’ to me.....”

“Uwah. That sounds bad.”

Makoto holds his head in his hands.

“So, today, they told me to take back my words from that time, and I said I’m not taking them back because I don’t know yet. Then, just now, he said he’ll teach me if it’s halfhearted or not.”

“Uwah, uwah, uwaah. —Ah, that’s it. What if you tried asking for advice from Nao-senpai?”

“He said Nao-senpai already approved of it.”

“Eeeh, then, what’ll you do?”

It’s not even a question of what he’ll do—.

“No choice but to swim, is there? It’s just 400m anyways.”

That’s how it is.

It’s right after yesterday. The spectators of the swim club grew even larger, there were no more than five members who were practicing seriously. Under Nao’s instructions, Haruka and the others were also told to observe.

He’s seen Ikuya’s free many times. He thinks that something like with Asahi won’t happen, but it’s a matter of whether he can keep up with the second years or not. A tense atmosphere hangs over the entire pool. The captain, Ikuya, was also standing on the poolside, his arms folded.

“Let’s go.”

The same as yesterday, Shouta takes the lead. When Ikuya kicks off the wall after him, the spectators lightly stirred. Indeed, it's a pretty good start, he thinks. Especially his streamline is beautiful.

When he begins the stroke from there, the spectators clapped in applause just from that. It's thanks to Asahi having lowered the hurdle so much. Miyano swims after him, followed by Sugawara. After the 25m turn, he's separated from Shouta a little, the space behind him began to get clogged up. Drawing nearer to him bit by bit, at 50m he ended up getting caught up to at last and during the turn, he got tangled up in Miyano.

"This is what happens when you swim like a slowpoke—"

"Damn!"

Crying out, Ikuya slapped the water with both hands. Miyano swallowing his words, the spectators fall silent. While releasing a dark light from beneath his long eyelashes, Ikuya continues slapping the water. Two, three, four times.....

Keeping his arms folded, Natsuya gave a roar of anger loud enough to make their ears hurt. Stopping his movements, Ikuya looks up at Natsuya. The dark light from Ikuya's eyes cool down.

"Haa, haa, I get it."

Regaining his calm, Ikuya begins swimming again. Perhaps because what they just saw was so hard to believe, the spectators were still as silent as a grave. In that atmosphere, Makoto forms a megaphone with his hands and shouts.

"Hang in there! Ikuya-kun!"

As if she sympathized with him, Aki sends cheers, too.

"Ikuya-kun! Give it your all!"

When Maki, Yuki and the others shouted out after her, one after the other, voices supporting Ikuya rose from among the spectators.

"Go! Ikuya!"

"Go for it, go for it!"

"Fight! Ikuya!"

Asahi, who was restlessly looking around each time a shout of encouragement was given, yells in a fluster, too.

"Ikuya! Swim!"

He's already swimming. This planarian is just getting swept up in the mood around him, but in any case, the second years have entirely ended up being treated as the away team. Miyano isn't saying 'swim faster' anymore, either. No, it's become unnecessary for him to say it. After they passed 100m, Ikuya was no longer being pecked at. He thought that Miyano might be holding back, but that doesn't seem to be the case. The gap between him and Shouta ahead of him was no longer opening up, either.

When they pass 200m, it was Ikuya who was threatening to catch up to Shouta this time and 'ooh'-ing voices of wonder escape from the spectators. When he cuts down the difference between him and Shouta at the turn, the spectators' voltage soars even higher, the cheers of encouragement towards Ikuya were getting bigger and bigger. The members swimming in the pool were only the four of them now.

"Go, Ikuya!"

"Fight, Kirishima!"

"Ikuya-kun, give it your all!"

Satomi cheers with all her might, almost bursting into tears.

Pushed from behind by that voice, Ikuya suddenly rises. Shouta finished swimming the 400m when he was about to catch up with just a little more, and Ikuya swam up to where he lifted his face. Suddenly, applause breaks out. Unable to swallow the situation, Shouta takes off his goggles and after confirming that it's Ikuya, he turns to Miyano. Miyano and Sugawara both gasping for breath, they were trying to finish swimming the 400m at last. Ikuya having gotten a lead on them, they must've been in a hurry. Because they put in useless strength halfway through, their forms had crumbled.

Makoto reaches his hand out for Ikuya, who was trying to climb out onto the poolside.

"Good work."

"Haahaa, thanks."

Grabbing Makoto's hand, Shouta shouts and stops Ikuya as he's being pulled up.

"Oi, haa, haa, what about paying your respects?"

Only half pulled up, Ikuya looked down at Shouta with a dark gaze.

"Haa, haa.Thank you for the race."

Ikuya, who had climbed out onto the poolside, perhaps because he hadn't regained enough of his strength to endure gravity yet, sank to the ground on the spot. Satomi and Aki run up to Ikuya.

"Are you okay? Ikuya-kun."

Aki deeply lowered her head to Ikuya, who was nodding to the concerned Satomi.

"I'm sorry, Kirishima-kun."

Still lying on the ground, Ikuya wonderingly looks up at the top of Aki's head. Not just Ikuya. Everyone who was there turned their questioning eyes to Aki's incomprehensible action.

"Why's Zaki-chan apologizing?"

Asked by Makoto, Aki finally lifted her face. Then, she directs an unusually strict gaze towards Shouta, who was climbing out of the pool.

"That's my Onii-chan."

Oh, he gets it now. Both their last names are 'Yazaki'.

"Eh!"

"Eh!"

"Eehh!"

It would've been acceptable that Makoto and Ikuya are surprised, but what could Asahi be surprised about? He can't have properly even had a conversation with Aki before.

"You see, Onii-chan was at Iwatobi SC from third to fourth grade of elementary school. But he quit right before Nanase-kun and Tachibana-kun joined, he played soccer until 6th grade, but—"

Cutting her words short, she looks at Shouta again. Diving in from the starting block, he was raising splashes on the water's surface.

"Somehow, it looks like it didn't go well for him, so he quit that, too. But it was too late to go back to the SC, so he joined the swim club..... After Onii-chan joined the swim club, he was really motivated and practiced a lot. Seeing Onii-chan like that, it seemed fun, so it made me feel like joining the swim club, too."

He more or less understood Shouta and Aki's case. Now that he understood it, it has nothing to do with him. Attempting to go back to practice, when Haruka slightly attempted to move his toes, Makoto's strong grip bit into his arm.

"But, it doesn't look like he's having fun now, huh....."

Makoto asks, still holding Haruka's arm.

"I think he's being impatient. The first years are all experienced, he might be worried that his spot as varsity swimmer will be taken. Like when he was playing soccer....."

Ridiculous, he thinks. He's not swimming because he wants to be a varsity swimmer. If he wants that, he'll let him have it. If it weren't for his promise with Natsuya.....

The whistle blew.

"First year boys, gather round!"

In front of the equipment room, Nao gives the order. Speaking of which, he heard that a tool called heavy jump rope is coming in. Could it be more muscle training items? While praying that Makoto's grip won't get any stronger, Haruka headed towards the equipment room.

The water's surface calmly stretched out on the empty pool. All the members of the swim club had climbed out onto the poolside, only Haruka and Shouta were standing before the starting blocks. They're going to begin a 'one-to-one fight' now.

"Haruka, try swimming a 'one-to-one fight' against Shouta now."

It was the day after Ikuya's 'circuit' that Nao announced it to him, when he was stretching out the lane marks.

There's a tradition at the Iwatobi Middle Swim Club called 'one-to-one fight'. Instead of betting something, or the loser having to do something and the like, it seems that its purpose is to open up to each other in front of everyone by praising each other's efforts.

But if all sorts of emotions get entangled into it, it seems that there have been several cases where the loser does end up quitting the swim club, and in the past few years, they had only permitted it as a graduation commemoration event for the third years. Not to mention, there was no such precedent in the past of a 'one-to-one fight' between a first year and a second year. That was a given, for the second year it was obvious that they'd win, and if they were to lose, that's exactly why nothing but disgrace would be left. What's more, if the second year suggested it, he can't avoid the criticism if he acts childish about winning. Taking it that far, if they want to save face for the upperclassmen—.

After Haruka heard the gist of it, while thinking that he's gotten caught up in something trivial, he asked just one question.

"Can I swim not biaxial?"

"It's fine, whichever way is easier to swim."

He was smiling brightly, but Nao's eyes weren't laughing.

"However, swim for real. That's manners."

Thirty minutes later—, Haruka and Shouta were standing in front of the starting blocks.

Prompted by the signal, he steps onto the starting block and concentrates his mind on his body's center of gravity. Firmly pushing it down, he takes up the track start posture while feeling his weight on the entirety of the sole of his foot. Putting his fingertips on the edge of the starting block, creating a posture from which he can move at any time, he turns his whole body into his ears and waits.

Whistle—.

Kicking off his foot that's in the back, he leaps in low. He lands on the water from his fingertips. He slips his body into the water while making a streamline. He really has gotten faster, he thinks. The way he felt the water was completely different from how he had until now. It's trying to accept Haruka to the point of being impetuous about it. When he starts the stroke, he felt energy naturally emanating from him. It's a sensation he hasn't felt in a while. No, he had the realization that he was swimming far more naturally than ever before.

Could the biaxial crawl practice be having some sort of effect? That might be it, too. But instead of something technical like that, Haruka was feeling that his involvement with water is changing within him. It was probably part of the process that it didn't heal him or release him from his ties anymore. From now on, it's possible that he'll awaken to some sort of new sensation. While feeling something close to a premonition, Haruka kept swimming.

Making the turn, he passes by Shouta. That made him remember, he was swimming with Shouta. It's not that he forgot. It's just that he didn't feel him. It was only the two of them in the pool, but he couldn't

feel Shouta. What could Shouta be feeling, thinking in the water? Or could it be that he isn't feeling anything? If Shouta were to harbor some kind of emotions towards the water, even if they were feeble, they should be conveyed to Haruka. But he didn't feel anything. Nothing is being conveyed to him. It was a sensation as if he were swimming with a mechanical doll.

Still not feeling Shouta, Haruka touched the goal with his hands and lifted his face. Having reached the goal later, Shouta lifts his face and holds out his right hand to Haruka over the lane marks. Haruka grabs his hand and they wordlessly exchanged the mechanical handshake.

The swim club members, who were holding their breath on the poolside, perhaps because they had lost their voice from such a cruel spectacle, they even forgot to clap and just stared at the two of them.

Chapter 7 – Limit

Sano Middle School is at the third station away from Iwatobi, by riding the train that only comes twice an hour. Although it's within the same city, both the scenery and the air were totally different on the mountain side. Leaving the station, a hill road with a steep slope suddenly appeared, konara oaks and maples were growing thickly on both sides, trying to close in. The birds' chirping is noisy enough to be harsh to the ear. The white-eyes, nightingales and the like were one thing, but besides that, sparrows and difficult to distinguish small birds were restlessly crossing between the trees.

"Hey, Zaki-chan."

Makoto asked Aki, while climbing the hill road with the sunlight filtering through the trees onto it.

"What happened to Yazaki-senpai today?"

Now that he said it, Haruka noticed, too. Shouta's figure wasn't among the Iwatobi Middle Swim Club walking on the hill road in a line.

".....Yeah."

Unusually, Aki hesitates to say.

"He was at practice yesterday, wasn't he? Is he feeling sick or something?"

The meddlesome Makoto is attempting to poke his nose into something unnecessary again. It's always Haruka who's struck by the chance blow.

"Well, Onii-chan got banned from club activities....."

"Eh?"

Surprised, Makoto gasps. Haruka looked at Aki's face without thinking, too. Could it be the fault of the 'one-to-one fight'?

"After practice ended yesterday, it seems that Onii-chan swam in the Musogawa."

The Musogawa is a class A river [specified waterways of special importance protected by the government] that flows from Kuragakeyama into the sea. It's pretty wide and since it's abundant in

water quantity, it's also well known as a body of water that forms a diverse ecosystem. However, if there's even just a small amount of rainfall, that abundant water quantity proves to be its ruin and the water level rises right away, so swimming in it has been prohibited for quite a while. Since several rivers are confluent with it, it isn't rare for it to change into a turbid current in the blink of an eye, either.

"And so, it became a big enough commotion for the police to come running, the school summoned our parents, he got banned from club activities for three days and suspended from the next tournament....."

"Why, in a place like that....."

Makoto can't continue. He realized that it's a foolish question. There could only be one reason.

"I think he was being impatient. But it's not Nanase-kun and the others' fault, you know. Really, don't worry about it. It's just that Onii-chan did as he pleased, he was impatient and did something stupid. In the first place, he's been like that from way back. Always ordering people around, he acts all self-important right away. Just because he can swim fast, even though it's nothing that great at all....."

Even without hearing it from Aki, they would've found out about it eventually. That's why Aki tried to let them know as softly as possible beforehand. So that Haruka won't feel responsible. Believing that that's her duty as his little sister, she just carried it out.

However, no matter how she tries to phrase it, no matter how she tries to patch it up, this fact can't be changed.

—Haruka had cornered Shouta.

He's glad that he got to hear it from Aki's mouth. Glad that he got to hear it not from anyone else, but from Aki. Aki's feelings, who was thinking of her older brother, got through to him properly from those words. That's precisely why they have to face each other. As long as that exists as fact, even if he tried to run away, even if he tried to evade it, it would be the same thing. Remaining within Haruka, now that it has taken root, he has no choice anymore but for them to face each other.

He could've refused the 'one-to-one fight' on many occasions. He should've been able to quit club activities, too. And yet, he didn't do that. He was fixated on it. He was fixated on club activities and the free. That's why he wound up doing the 'one-to-one fight'. His own fixation had ended up cornering Shouta. Haruka strongly felt so.

".....Haru."

While climbing the hill road with the sunlight filtering through the trees onto it, Makoto spoke Haruka's name just once.

When they arrive at Sano Middle, two club members were awaiting them. Greeting them with a "Good morning" in a loud voice, Iwatobi Middle returns a "good morning". After delivering the messages filled with nervousness, such as "We're pleased that you have come today" that sound like they're at an old hotel, they were lead away with a "please come this way".

Sano Middle School's pool was indoors. It was recently rebuilt, so the walls and the floor were still shiny, there wasn't a single spot that was peeling off or rusting. A training room was added to it as an annex,

but it wasn't exclusive to the swim club, they used it together with the other clubs. It seems that the rugby club is using it today.

Even after stepping inside, it didn't smell. Since it's indoors, microorganisms probably don't really germinate here. Or they could be using 'good chlorine'.

"Hi there, thanks for coming."

The captain of Sano Middle's swim club came out and met them with a smile.

"Looking forward to today."

Exchanging an enthusiastic handshake with Natsuya, the club members of Sano Middle welcomed them with applause, too. Narukawa Sakuyuki and Yamazaki Sousuke's figures were among them as well. And, for some reason, Kisumi is showing the whites of his teeth beside Sousuke.

When the applause stopped, they each began to renew their old friendships. As an annual event, the competition against Sano Middle is held at the very start of the season. Apparently, its objective is to deepen their friendship with each other and to let the first years gain the experience of a match. Besides that, it had become customary to let the first years swim in their specialty event.

All the matches are held as one-on-one match races. The times are measured, but only the outcome counts as points, the one who has the most total points will be the winner of the year. For about a decade, Iwatobi Middle was far ahead in the lead.

The second and third years meet not only at the competition, but several times in matches, too, and it seems that some of them go to the same swimming club, so it's a pretty amicable atmosphere.

There were a few faces familiar to Haruka, too. Three of them walk up to him.

"Oi, Kisumi. You, why're you over there? Ahha. Then, you're a spy for Sano Middle, huh. So it means you were trying to dig for our information. How about that, bull's-eye, isn't it!"

Asahi points his finger at Kisumi with a triumphant look. While combing up his silky hair, Kisumi ignored Asahi's nonsense.

"I didn't mention it? I'm from Sano Elementary. I moved to Iwatobi when I became a middle schooler. That's why I have a bunch of friends here. Right, Sousuke?"

Kisumi over-familiarly puts his hand on tall and lanky Sousuke's shoulder. Sousuke's gaze was fixed on Haruka for a while now.

"I'm only in the 100 free today. Can't say's a surprise, since I just joined."

It seems that he had joined after that tournament. His motive is clear. Quite the trouble he went through, he thinks.

"I'm in the 100, too."

When Haruka said that, Sousuke showed a happy smile.

"I see, looking forward to it."

He holds out his right hand. It's a huge hand, he thinks. There's no reason to refuse. He grabs his hand. He felt their energies flowing into each other's body.

"Nanase's free, huh. Sounds good. Don't pee yourself like a certain *someone*, Sousuke."

When Sakuyuki said that while looking at Asahi, his spiky hair slightly wavered. Sousuke looks down on Sakuyuki.

"Who would? What about you, are you okay with the 100 fly?"

Asahi's hair reacts again. Asahi was going to swim in the 100 fly, too.

"If it's the 100 fly, then you're together with Asahi, huh."

Makoto says something unnecessary. Sure enough, the look in Sakuyuki's eyes changed.

"Asahi."

"Wh-what is it?"

Having his name called by Sakuyuki, Asahi answers with his gaze still dropped. All this time, he wouldn't look at Sakuyuki directly for quite a while now.

"Come, to practice. You'd get faster if you wouldn't skip, ya know."

"I'm not skipping. Just taking a break since I started doing club activities."

He answers in an uncharacteristically small voice.

"You have good reflexes and stuff, so you can reach a decent level right away, but because you're always satisfied with that—"

"Shut up! I don't want someone like Sakuyuki tellin' me that!"

From Asahi's angry voice, the once lively poolside fell silent, the gazes gathered on the owner of the voice. Sakuyuki speaks in that stillness.

"Did you learn how to swim? —The free."

The stillness freezes. At the very least, the swim club members of Iwatobi Middle all knew the answer to that.

".....Shut up."

After saying it like he was spitting it out, Asahi averted his eyes and turned his back to Sakuyuki like that, then left.

"Hey, hey, Kisumi. If you were from Sano Elementary, you know Rin, don't you? Matsuoka Rin."

In the awkward mood, Makoto said it as cheerfully as he could. The mood turned amicable again from it, the poolside returned to being as lively as it was. As if the thing with Asahi hadn't happened.

"What do you mean know him, we were in the same class. Until partway through sixth grade, though. Right, Sousuke?"

“Uh huh, until he went to your place.”

Oh, he gets it now. It's that Kisumi knew, too, is it. He knew, and approached Haruka and Makoto. No, it's precisely because he knew that he approached them.

Showing no signs of having noticed that, Makoto cheerfully speaks.

“Really? What an incredible coincidence, huh. What was Rin like?”

“What was he like.....”

Kisumi and Sousuke look at each other.

“In a word, easily gets carried away, I guess?”

When Kisumi says it, Sousuke nods and takes over.

“Yeah. And he was kind of an irritating guy.”

“Right. Kinda irritating, huh? Rin.”

Kisumi agrees. On that matter, Haruka has the same sentiment, too.

“Uhm, what else, I wonder.....”

It seems that it wasn't the answer Makoto was expecting. Kisumi gets a thoughtful look on his face, and with that expression, he speaks in a murmur.

“Self-centered, and hates to lose.”

“That's for sure. For someone who cries right away, he always spoke his mind.”

Haruka agreed with Sousuke's supplement, too.

“Ah, and also.....?”

Makoto, who's bad at giving up, asks again. Could he be hoping for a beautiful memory or something? He should just try recalling his own memories. On top of twisting them around his little finger as he liked, he did as he pleased and went off to somewhere. Supposing that there was some kind of good memory, it's obvious that something like that was washed away long ago.

“That's right. He was always trying to show off in front of girls, wasn't he? Sousuke.”

“Aah, that's right. Also, he got mad when we called him 'Rin-chan'.”

No objection to that. That's about it for memories with Rin. These two have truly perceived Rin correctly. Makoto fell silent and didn't try to ask anything more than that.

In general, after they each renewed their old friendships, there was an explanation about the competition's progression. There are 8 long-course lanes in the pool. Since they're one-on-one match races, there are four matches held side by side at the same time. In the form of making the start one at a

time from the pair that is ready, they're called up depending on the conditions. Regarding all events, they're held one match at a time, the plan is to finish all the contests in three hours.

Haruka stands on top of the starting block. Beside him must be a first year. They're awfully nervous. Beside them is Makoto. It's the 50m breaststroke.

The person in charge of the start stood behind Haruka.

"Boys' 50m free, taking place. On your marks."

Concentrating his mind on his body's center of gravity, he firmly pushes it down. While feeling his weight on the entirety of the sole of his feet, he pulls back his foot that's in the back, and with his fingertips on the starting block, he turns his entire body into his ears and waits.

Whistle—.

He kicks his foot from a low posture. He was able to make a start that he himself feels is good. Then, he lands on the water. The water quickly accepted him. He starts the stroke from the flutter kick. While being conscious of the axis on the left and right, he goes digging through.

Nao had told him to swim the biaxial crawl today. Since he's swimming in five free events and two relay events, if the burden on his body were to be considered, it was decided that the biaxial crawl which he can swim relatively easier would be good.

All of a sudden, he felt Makoto. Makoto was conveyed through the water. Without a sound, without a ripple. Makoto himself is conveyed to him. It seems that he had made the start this very instant. It's a good start, he thinks. Not because he saw it. He knows from Makoto's sensation that's being conveyed.

Rapidly stretching forward in the end, Haruka reaches the goal. Having waited for his opponent to reach the goal, he climbed out onto the poolside after shaking hands. Iwatobi Middle, which has successfully won its first battle, is getting very excited. As if it's boisterous merrymaking. Then they got excited again when Makoto reached the goal.

When he holds out his hand to Makoto, he raises his goggles after staring at it, then he happily raised his up-slanting eyebrows after looking up at Haruka's face.

"Here, grab on."

"—Okay!"

Grinning from ear to ear, he grabs Haruka's hand without going easy on him. Pulled by a strength that can't be imagined from that face that has childishness left in it, he nearly loses his balance, but he somehow manages to keep his footing and pulls him up.

"Thanks, Haru."

"Did you make sure?"

He means the start.

"It's amazing, this thing. It's totally different from before."

“Alright then.”

Haruka turned his gaze towards Nao in his jersey. He’s cheering with all his might. He wonders why he doesn’t swim. Or, is it that he can’t swim.....

Walking along the poolside, Haruka headed towards the 200m’s start.

“Boys’ 200m free, taking place. On your marks.”

Kicking off from the starting block on the whistle, he lands on the water. He starts the biaxial stroke from the flutter kick. He produces most of the propulsive force for the crawl from his arms. He feels a heavy resistance on those arms. It means that he gains as much propulsive force as the amount of resistance.

Extending the axis that he had created from his arm to his waist, he digs through the distant water, the even more distant water with perseverance. While feeling the counteraction on the sole of his feet at the turn, he rapidly stretches forward and at the same time as gaining new momentum, he tightens his body and makes a streamline.

But it’s still somewhat clumsy. Perhaps his balance is bad, or his rhythm is bad, he couldn’t strongly feel the water. They can’t properly acknowledge each other’s existence. It might be because he’s always preoccupied by his form. In any case, it was certain that he’s just not used to swimming with the biaxial crawl yet.

Right after he cut into the remaining 50m after the last turn, his speed dropped with a jerk. It was time to pay the price for swimming by brute force. It’s proof that seemingly easier to swim, it was putting an extra burden on his body. Even so, somehow managing to finish swimming, he was able to wait for his opponent and shake hands.

Climbing up onto the poolside while he was gasping for breath, he takes off his goggles and heads towards another lane. Asahi and Sakuyuki’s butterfly was just about to begin.

“Boys’ 100m fly, taking place. On your marks.”

On the whistle, they both kick off from the starting block. Asahi’s leap is good. Asahi’s point of landing on the water is farther, too. When he surfaced, he was in the lead by half a body.

However, Sakuyuki gains on him with the stroke. He gradually draws close, but Asahi pulls ahead again at the turn. But one head’s worth of a lead is the best he can do.

They lined up perfectly the moment they cut into the last 20m. Both of them must be in considerable pain. It becomes a test of endurance from here on out.

“Asahi, go!”

Among the many shouts of encouragement, there was one especially loud voice. —It’s Kisumi.

“Asahi! Asahi! Asahi!”

With a look that's unimaginable from his usual composedness, he was repeatedly shouting Asahi's name. As if he were pushed forward by that voice, Asahi pulls ahead.

"Asahi! Asahi! Asahi!"

Each time Kisumi shouts, Asahi comes up. It's not just his imagination. Kisumi's voice was definitely pushing Asahi forward.

"Asahi!"

Rapidly stretching forward in the end, he reaches the goal. Sakuyuki gained up on him well, but Asahi managed to hold on by a narrow margin. When Asahi sprung up and pushed up his fist, Kisumi pushed up his fist the same way.

Roughly breathing while exchanging a handshake, Sakuyuki says something and Asahi retorts with a "shut up". It's not like he heard it, but Asahi's speech patterns aren't that varied.

But—, he thinks. Even though he couldn't find any points that would become a problem as long as he's looking at his butterfly, why could it be that he can't swim just the free? Or perhaps, why did he become unable to swim it?

—It's your fault!

Perhaps it was caused by something of Haruka's. Did he say something, did he do something? Though he tries to recall what happened since he started middle school, other than being followed around to the point of being annoying, he couldn't remember anything like it.

The 400m free went miserably. He intended to swim by taking into account the consumption of his physical strength, but from after passing 300m, just swimming became the most he could do, let alone feel the water. It seems that because he hasn't been able to master the biaxial crawl yet after all, he's putting in too much strength.

At practice, he swims 2000m and 3000m even, but that doesn't mean he goes all out. In a match, he consumes two, no, three times as much physical strength than at practice. Not to mention, it's Haruka's first time swimming in a long-course for a match. He was forced to keenly realize his inexperience at biaxial swimming and his greater lack of physical strength than imagined.

When he reaches the goal, his third year opponent was waiting for him. After shaking hands, he climbs up onto the poolside. There was no applause directed at Haruka.

With no time to take a break, the 1500m is called up. While receiving the explanation that he'll be swimming it after the 100m backstroke ended, he was guided to the lane.

Makoto was standing in that lane. Entering the water on the long whistle, he disappears from Haruka's sight.

"Boys' 100m back, taking place. On your marks."

Whistle—.

Makoto started late. Not compared to his opponent. He was late compared to Haruka's senses. He wasn't making use of Nao's start. Could it be out of his element for backstroke? While thinking about such things, he looked at Makoto's swimming.

Mostly lined up, he makes the 50m turn. Makoto's kick is good. Unlike at the start, he was able to make good use of the counteraction. Continuing to swim with a slight lead, he rapidly stretched forward at the end and disappeared from sight. Iwatobi Middle burst out in excitement and he saw just the tip of Makoto's pushed up fist.

The excited Iwatobi Middle. Ikuya was at its very edge. Keeping those darkly shining eyes directed at Haruka, he's standing still, trying to hold back his anger. Satomi, who's standing beside him, says something while calming him down, Ikuya bit his lip and looked away from Haruka.

Ikuya isn't participating in this competition. Part of it is that entries were already decided before Ikuya joined the club, but also Natsuya probably didn't let him take part.

It's just that he didn't understand the reason why he's glaring at Haruka because of that. This is this and that is that, he's just faithfully completing his promise with Natsuya. Including the following 1500m, he still has to swim in four more events. That was the 'condition' for the sake of only swimming free.

Thinking that far, he suddenly came to realize something. Ikuya may not know about this 'condition'. Even if he knows that he only swims free, unless he knows that there's a 'condition' for the sake of that, it's natural that he's doubtful as to why only Haruka is swimming in multiple events. Maybe he thought that he's being treated to odd partiality based on his past results from the Swimming Club. It's a terrible misunderstanding.

Concerning this 'condition', there was a possibility that Satomi didn't know, either. At the time of the pool cleaning, she came later than Haruka. Unless someone had told her, it means that she doesn't know. Thinking that he has to mention it to Makoto, Haruka climbed onto the starting block.

"Boys' 1500m free, taking place. On your marks."

Breathing out, he gathers his consciousness on his center of gravity. His body reacted at the same time as the whistle. Instead of going through his brain from his ear, he mirrored the signal that was transmitted as sound with his body that he had turned into his 'ears'. There's no error. After that, he just has to make his body that reacted land in the water.

However, he only kept the lead for a little while after the start, from there, he ended up drastically slowing down. Even he knows that he's not making a proper streamline. After he lost the lead to his opponent, he was rapidly separated, in the end he's starting to get a lap behind. There was nothing, neither regret nor humiliation. The leisure to feel things like that were blown away to somewhere. Mustering his physical strength that's about to disappear, somehow he keeps going forward, forward. That was the only thing he could think of.

His arms are heavy. He can't capture the water's resistance. The water escapes. He ends up letting it get away. Even though he understands, he couldn't do anything about it. No matter what he does, the loss just keeps becoming greater, he can't catch the water at all.

His chest is in pain. His lungs greedily demand oxygen. It's not enough, no matter how much he sends in. It doesn't satisfy them. It can't catch up to the amount of oxygen his exhausted muscles consume.

It feels like his feet are about to tear off. His muscles scream. His joints creak. The water coils around him like seaweed, it tries to seal his movements. Even if he tries to shake it off, it insistently clings to him and doesn't let go. He moves his feet by mobilizing everything, his abdominal muscles and dorsal muscles, too. Moving them is the most he can do, it was no longer turning into propulsive force, either. And yet, he keeps moving them. He keeps swimming. By swimming, he managed to stay afloat with difficulty.

Tightening his body, he strains to try and make a streamline, but he can't cut the water nor slip into it. While just floating like a stick, he could only move his limbs so that he won't drown. By floating, he was somehow able to preserve his heart. He was just barely able to keep preserving his heart that was on the verge of breaking.

He finally struggles on to the goal. A hand stretching out to him from the poolside, he tries looking up through his goggles. It was the third year from Sano Middle whom he swam together with.

"You tried hard."

His gaze was kind, just as if he were looking at a child who had just begun swimming.

"Thank you..... for the race."

When he climbs up onto the poolside, he sank, even his heart being pulled by gravity. He didn't want to remain as a being whom others were concerned for, he thought. He wanted to keep being his strong self, he thought. His chest is close to tightening from the humiliation. At last, he was trying to recover to the extent that he could feel that.

He remembers that relay. He was swimming while rejecting the water, tormented by resentment that had nowhere to go, unable to spit it out or swallow it, he could only endure the unpleasant feelings towards himself. The emotions from that time are vividly revived.

After bowing to the third year who had pulled him up, he headed to the next lane.

—Next was, the free relay.....I think.

"Nanase!"

Called by Natsuya who had his arms folded, he somehow manages to put up with his feet that seem like they're about to stagger and walks.

"That's enough, forget the relay."

Could he have been concerned about him being tired? Or perhaps, could he be scorning him for making an unfulfillable promise? That guys who can't even keep their promises shouldn't have cocky obsessions.....

"I will swim. I can still swim."

Natsuya points to the pool with his eyes.

“It’s already begun.”

Among the big shouts of joy, the second year Miyano was swimming the free. A ‘ku’ sound escapes from the corner of his mouth.

“I will go for the medley relay.”

“What’s a guy who can’t swim saying? That’s rude towards your opponent.”

He sinks in the humiliation. Endlessly, endlessly to the bottom of the chaotic swamp.....

He thinks of his lack of physical strength as cowardly. He wonders if becoming fixated on it was ridiculous pride. Haruka unconsciously chewed his lip.

“Swim just the 100 free.”

“Eh?”

“It’s their wish. They want to swim with Nanase no matter what.”

Sousuke was where Natsuya was looking. He’s looking at Haruka with glaring eyes. He wonders if he could swim it. He wonders if he could swim in a way that would satisfy Sousuke. Would he have enough strength left for just that? Staring at his right hand, he tries to clench it.

“.....Yes.”

There’s no strength in it.

The only part he could do properly was the start. As for the rest, he barely managed to move his limbs that had gotten as heavy as lead, it’s as if the exhaustion from the 1500m hadn’t left him at all.

The muscles all over his body feel like they’re about to cramp up. His joints creak. A mere 100m distance was far enough to make him feel faint. The water increases in mass like a swamp and the viscous resistance gets bigger. That becomes heavy shackles and consumes his physical strength. He can’t shake it off nor pull himself free from them. Fighting against it, defying it, struggling, he endures it. They were all actions far off from ‘swimming’.

When Haruka arrives at the goal, he sparsely heard an applause that had become cold. Sousuke’s figure wasn’t in the neighboring lane any more. He had climbed out long ago. With this, all the contests for today’s competition came to an end. In short, the 100m free was the star contest that crowned it. No wonder that it becoming such a disgraceful match put a damper on it.

“Good job, Haru.”

Unable to bring himself to grab Makoto’s held out hand, he climbs up by himself. Gravity thudding down on him, he somehow withstands being pulled back and managed to climb up onto the poolside.

Walking while making sure not to drag his feet that had gotten heavy, he tears off his cap and goggles. He wanted to hurry up and get away from here. He wanted to hurry up and go where no one's gaze reached him. He wanted to hurry up and be alone, he thought.

Suddenly, someone stands in Haruka's way. When he lifts his face that he had cast down, Sousuke's lanky body was there. Without even a smirk, he holds out his right hand to Haruka. It's a huge hand.

When Haruka tries to lift his heavy arms, seizing his hand by force, Sousuke jerked him close.

"Come with me for a bit."

Saying it in a voice low enough so only Haruka could hear, Sousuke started walking towards the changing room.

"Haru, can you walk?"

Having Makoto be concerned for him, he feels irritated. Not towards Makoto. Towards himself. While feeling irritated by his cowardly self, Haruka followed Sousuke's lead.

There was no one in the changing room. That's the way it's supposed to be. The announcement of the results will be held now. Haruka steps into the changing room and Makoto followed after him.

"What's the meaning of this? Nanase."

Sousuke said it while taking something out of his locker. He can't answer. It was impossible to answer.

As he's staying silent, Sousuke walks up to him and stood in a position to be face to face with Haruka. Then he stretches out the fingertips of his right hand and places it Haruka's left shoulder. They're long and thin fingers. Wondering what he's trying to do, when he tried to brush off that hand, Sousuke's fingertips tapped Haruka. His balance slightly breaking, he tries to withstand it, but standing firmly on his feet isn't working, his center of gravity drifts backward. Taking two, three steps backward, the back of his knees hit the bench. Dropping his waist and sitting down like that, he almost falls backwards with too much force remaining.

"Haru!"

Supported by Makoto, he somehow managed to avoid falling down, but he ended up making terribly sorry display of himself.

"You sure had the gall to swim against me like that."

He grits his teeth in humiliation. It'll only be an excuse, no matter how he tries to patch it up. It's all caused by Haruka's trivial fixation. There was nothing for him to do other than grit his teeth.

"I swim for myself.' Nanase said it that time, didn't he? To think of what kind of swimming it is..... If you're just playing, do it elsewhere. When you're up against me, come at me with all you've got!"

He doesn't care what he says. He just swims for himself. He can't stand it when people arbitrarily create illusions and push them on him. Or could he be intending to scorn him? If it's humiliation, he's had enough of a taste to the point of hating it.

Borrowing Makoto's shoulder, Haruka stood up.

“If you’re done, I’m going back. It’s time for meeting.”

“Wait.”

Sousuke calls him to stop.

“There’s no talent that can surpass hard work.’ It’s what Rin said before going to Australia.”

While saying that, he held out the envelope he had in his hand. It’s..... air mail. Taking his hand off of Makoto’s shoulder, he looks at the envelope held out to him. The letters ‘Rin’ caught his eyes.

—Rin.

“Read it.”

Accepting it from Sousuke, he takes it out of the envelope and unfolds it. Spanning two pages of writing paper, it was completely filled with characters written in pencil. There were also traces here and there of revisions made with an eraser, it shows that it was written with hard work.

Things about life in Australia, the swimming club and such were written in the letter. That they don’t understand each other, so he made free use of body language. That there were fish he’s never seen before on the dining table. That it’s autumn right now. That kangaroos were common. That one third of Australia is desert and Ayers Rock is in the middle of it. That he was moved when he climbed Ayers Rock. That they’re all fast guys. That he keeps losing every day.....

“Every day is a series of frustration. I’m scared of it, that I’ll end up getting used to it before long and the frustrating things won’t be frustrating anymore. But, I absolutely won’t give up. I won’t get discouraged. I cry sometimes, but I’ll absolutely become faster. I’ll become faster than anyone!”

Then, about that relay—.

“I haven’t forgotten not one thing. I remember it all. Him from that time, he’s swimming in front of me now, too. Like him, I wanna swim fast like Haru!”

Haruka couldn’t take his eyes off of that one sentence. Forgetting even to blink, he kept his eyes fixed on it.

Makoto, who was peeking at the letter from beside Haruka, lightly raises his up-slanting eyebrows.

“We can’t let ourselves lose either, huh.”

To those words, Haruka nodded without a sound.

On the hill road continuing from Sano Middle to the station, everyone walked speaking only a few words. The occasionally heard voices having a pleasant chat were more or less reserved. Since it’s just past noon, the sun is still high in the sky. When there’s as much solar radiation as today, it makes them actually feel it on their skin that it’s the start of summer. That sunlight passed through the leaves of the konara oaks and maples and drew a speckled pattern on the road.

While descending on the verdant hill road, Haruka recalled the letter’s contents again and again.

— I wanna swim fast like Haru!

He's not fast. He's never once thought of wanting to swim fast. And yet, what is this sense of humiliation? Making a disgrace of himself, having others be concerned for him, feeling resentment, it's making his chest tighten.

If he could've swum fast, could he have been spared from feeling like this? No, it shouldn't have been necessary to swim fast if he weren't fixated on it in the first place. Because he was fixated on the free, he wound up making a promise with Natsuya, and he ended up being made to swim a distance that his physical strength fell short of. If he weren't fixated on the free, Shouta would also—

Passing through the hill road that the sunlight filtering through the trees created patterns onto, they go through station's ticket barrier and come out onto the platform.

"Over there, we often played basketball."

Kisumi points his finger. From the platform where they're waiting for the train, a basketball court next to the railway track was visible. It's a small court for street ball. The hoop with its net beginning to tear off is placed there.

"If you ask the station employees, they let you use it for free."

That's why the torn net is left there.

"On the way home from school, Rin and Sousuke often played, too. Ah, how nostalgic."

Perhaps because he laid their own figures over the small court, Kisumi gently smiles, looking fondly at it.

"Rin and Sousuke were always on different teams, to show their competitiveness."

That's how it would be, if it's those two. The way they get fired up right away is very similar, he thinks.

"Rin's good at dribbling and stuff, he always went for the shot head on, and Sousuke always slapped it down."

It reminds him of playing basketball with Makoto just a little. He entirely blocked Haruka's shots, too.

"I suppose that got Rin pretty frustrated. He said he'll grow taller, he drank a lot of milk and whenever he had time to spare, he was always practicing jumping. He did a training where he went up the stairs by skipping a step, but the teachers scolded him, telling him to stop because it's dangerous. He often ran on the way to school, too. Even when he was told that he's bothering everyone, he didn't care at all."

He's shocked by how he hasn't grown at all since then.

"I joined the basketball club, but—"

Kisumi switches to talking about himself.

"Probably, it was more fun in those days, I think. Rin was there, Sousuke was there..... When Rin transferred, I heard it was because there were some fast guys at Iwatobi. But no matter how much he wanted to be on the same team, you don't usually go as far as changing schools for that, do you? Right before graduation, at that. I always wondered just what kind of guys they are. But, Rin's feelings..... I get

it now. I've thought about what it would be like if Haru and Makoto, and also Asahi were in the basketball club. If we were on the same team. It would've been really great, if that were so..... But now....."

When Kisumi dropped his gaze to the tracks, the announcement informing them of the train's arrival aired. What could Kisumi be wishing for from basketball? Is it winning, is it having fun, or could he be feeling something special from basketball? He might have a fixation, like Haruka. But if you don't win, there's no point to fixations. Unless you win, a fixation is no more than just self-indulgence.

Before he knew it, he had replaced Kisumi with himself and while he was about to be shaken by the wind from the arriving train, Haruka stood still on the platform.

Chapter 8 – Light

Their practice task on the day following the competition was the dolphin kick.

"Everyone, do you understand what the role of the dolphin kick is? You don't, do you. It's poor. Too poor."

When they climbed out of the pool after the five minutes of free practice ended, Nao abruptly told them that.

"Makoto. You're not an orca, so what're you doing, making such big swings. Asahi, you use your knees too much. By trying to kick strongly, it breaks your balance. Ikuya, your upkick is weak. The propulsion force is used during the upkick, too. Haruka, you swim too gracefully. Work the pace for the dolphin."

He's impressed by how closely he looks at their individual details.

"Everyone, do you know what 'wave-making resistance' is? The thing where the resistance increases when you make waves on the water's surface."

When they take a breather, it's due to that that they perform it in as small movements as possible. He knows that much.

"Where's the place that receives that wave-making resistance the least? Haruka."

"Sky."

"Right. It means it's at the moment of the dive that you accelerate the most. But, humans can't fly, so you land in the water at some point. What do you do then? Asahi."

"Uissu. Swim."*

"The problem's where you swim. But wave-making resistance is born on the water's surface. What do you do in that case? Ikuya."

"You submerge. Can't breathe, though."

He answers in a displeased manner. He's been like that all day today. Could he still be dwelling on the competition?

“That’s how it is. Like I had said just now, since you accelerate the most at the moment of the dive, you have no choice but to decelerate afterwards. Suppressing that deceleration as much as possible, it’s the dolphin’s or the Vassallo’s role to maintain the initial velocity’s momentum. Then, when should you surface? Makoto.”

“Eh, that’s a hard one. There are three answers.”

“That’s fine, say them all.”

“Well, first, when it became faster to swim normally after the momentum from the dive is used up.”

“That’s right. Not limited to the dive, it’s the same for the turn, too.”

“Also, when you’ve gotten to 15m.”

“Because there’s the rule that you can only do the dolphin or the Vassallo for 15m.”

“And when you can’t breathe anymore.”

“In short, consulting your lungs. It’ll change depending on whether it’s the short or the long.”

Makoto lays his hands on his chest and nods. Could he be consulting his lungs without delay or something?

“Also, as for the breast’s dolphin, you should think of it as support for the sake of changing over to the stroke. Because if you unskillfully try to gain propulsive force, on the contrary, your balance breaks and the resistance will end up getting bigger.”

In the breaststroke, just one dolphin kick is allowed after the start and the turn. Indeed, you can’t expect propulsive force from just a single kick, and in the breaststroke’s case, it’s easier to gain propulsive force by doing the kicks normally.

“So, how do you kick for the dolphin? Asahi.”

“Uissu. Like this, *bata-bata-bata*.”*

“You understand..... the feel of it. Small and swift, huh.”

“Uissu!”

“Then, keeping all this in mind, fifty dive practices!”

“Ui.....?”

It’s not only Asahi who’s at a loss for a reply. Fifty isn’t usual. If the four of them were to do two hundred dives, today’s practice will end with just that. They look at Nao’s face. He was smiling brightly.

After that, they resolvedly repeated the dive over and over again, but given that the neighboring lane became empty, they were told to suspend their practicing.

“Shall we hold a race? 50 free. Without forgetting that the dolphin’s the task. Also, Haruka does biaxial, okay?”

“Yes.”

Among them replying in harmony, Asahi cast his eyes down to the pool with a serious expression. Nao is concerned about Asahi.

“Asahi, you can do the fly.”

Lifting his face, Asahi sucks in a breath and equips his goggles.

“I will go with the free!”

Asahi stood on the starting block and Makoto climbed up onto the one beside him. Then, on Nao’s whistle, they cut into the start. Their reaction time is roughly the same. Landing on the water, they start up the dolphin kick from the push off. Makoto rises to the surface and begins doing powerful strokes. Late, Asahi surfaces, too, and starts the stroke. Big splashes go up. Same as before, he halts after swimming a little. When the splashes settle, Asahi was standing there. Swallowing a rough breath, he cuts into the restart right away.

Asahi is trying to move forward. Asahi is trying to face the free. He had resolved himself to face it, he thought as he looked at that swimming. Little by little, he gets the feeling that the distance is growing. Little by little, he’s moving forward. Little by little, Asahi was reaching forward.

When Makoto starts the dolphin kick after the quick turn, Nao nodded a little. Is it for Makoto’s kick, or is it for Asahi’s resolve.....?

After Asahi reached the goal while intensely breathing heavily, Haruka and Ikuya cut into the start. Even though he didn’t do the ‘karuta grabbing’, Ikuya’s reaction lines up with Haruka’s. There’s no excess in his push off after landing in the water. Staying lined up, they start the dolphin kick.

Creating an opening in the water, Haruka slipped his body into it. It’s going nicely, he thinks. He was able to accept the water nicely. He shifts to the biaxial crawl like that. Then, with a smooth movement, he carves into the water while switching over the axis.

If it were as usual, it would be around here that he no longer feels the water, but today he was capable of sustaining it. Could it be because the dolphin kick’s precision had increased? He feels like the start’s momentum is still left over in some place.

Quick turn at 25m. While feeling the counteraction on the sole of his feet, he and Ikuya pass by each other. He feels Ikuya. Could Ikuya be feeling Haruka, too? When he casually reached out his sensory feelers, he suddenly felt a strong energy and his chest became agitated. Experiencing an unprecedented feeling of wrongness, uneasiness crosses through him. Noticing that that energy is ‘darkness’, cold shudders ran down his back.

— It’s the ‘darkness’ from that time.

Rejecting the water, trying to deny his weak self, the depths of darkness he wandered in. That ‘darkness’ is being conveyed to him through the water. Not feeling it, but forcibly being made to feel it. Trying to attack him, it’s attempting to capture Haruka.

Unable to withstand that bizarre sensation, Haruka stopped swimming. Then, coming to a stop, he slowly turns around. Ikuya was standing. While standing at the edge of the lane, he was glaring at Haruka. With darkly shining eyes.....

—Why.

Why, with this timing, he wonders. Did Haruka do something? Did he make him feel something?

“It’s your fault.”

A low voice escapes from Ikuya’s mouth, like a spell.

“It’s your fault that I can’t be in a match.”

— Wrong.

He’d be fine without being in matches. It’s not like he’s swimming for the sake of such a thing. It’s not like he’s fixated on such a thing. If it’s causing an argument, he’ll give as much to him as he likes. He doesn’t want to fight over something like that.

“Just because you’re a little fast—”

“Ikuya!”

Natsuya’s angry voice echoing over the pool, the other sounds disappeared. The sound of diving in with a splash, the sound of kicking up water, the sound of someone talking, even the sound of the wind disappeared and silence came.

Keeping his eyes glued to Haruka, Ikuya grits his teeth once with a lot of force.

“.....Ikuya.”

The instant Haruka uttered his name, the ‘darkness’ from Ikuya’s eyes disappeared all of a sudden. Then, a feeble Ikuya appeared instead. Frightened of something, he was shaking in the depths of his eyes, as if he were seeking help. In the depths of his eyes, Ikuya was frightened.

Ikuya tries to climb out onto the poolside. While looking at Haruka with frightened eyes, he tries to distance himself.

“Ikuya-kun!”

Satomi runs up to him. Ikuya starts running to try and shake her off.

“Wait, Ikuya-kun!”

Satomi chases after him and Makoto starts running, too, while apologizing to Haruka.

“Sorry, Haru. I forgot to tell Ikuya-kun.”

He means the ‘condition’. He talked to Makoto about it this morning. Told him to tell Ikuya.....

Could that be it, he wonders. Could such a thing have awakened a ‘darkness’ within Ikuya?

— Wrong.

Something lurking inside Haruka made it do so. Is it that something is lurking inside him? Had something of Haruka's made it so? Arrogance, conceitedness, pride, or — 'darkness'.

His heartbeat leaps greatly.

He wonders if such a thing was within him again. That time, when he realized that abhorring the water and rejecting it was the same as depending on it and taking refuge in it, accepting himself as he was, he was supposed to have decided to acknowledge each other. That was his intention, but could it be that he was harboring it again? To think that that 'darkness' had responded to Ikuya's 'darkness'.....

It's not like he can say that's it for sure. But he couldn't deny that it isn't so, either. He can't deny it. It's impossible to deny the 'darkness' inside of him. He gets the feeling that if it were given some sort of motive, it's going to come to life right away. It was impossible to deny the existence of such 'darkness'.

That 'darkness' had awakened Ikuya's 'darkness'. Haruka..... made it do so.

"Later, Haru. I'm gonna stop by the book store."

On the way home from school, Makoto waves his hand and turns to the right. Tests are coming up soon, so he's going to buy reference books. He didn't have the spare time to tag along, nor was it a distance that was 'right nearby', either. Haruka thinks it would be faster to go home first and go by bicycle, but Makoto said "I'm there in no time if I run". He's going through a lot of trouble.

After that incident, Ikuya came back, accompanied by Satomi and Makoto. Perhaps because he had cried a little, he apologized to Nao with his eyes reddened. When he passed by in front of Haruka, he just said "sorry" in a small voice without even trying to look him in the eye. They had a misunderstanding, and now it was solved. He decided to think of it as such. Haruka, and probably Ikuya, too.....

Turning left after he's gone ahead a little, he comes out on the road where a lot of cars pass. Going in to the supermarket beside that road, he comes out carrying a shopping bag in hand that has croquettes in it. Then, he returns to the usual road again.

Walking until the spot where he can see Misagozaki Shrine, he suddenly stopped. Someone lanky was sitting down at the very bottom of the stone steps. Sitting while looking like he doesn't know what to do with his long limbs, he's looking at Haruka.

"Hey."

A keychain was dangling from his raised right hand. A familiar, flat dolphin plate is swaying. It's the one he bought on the school trip to the aquarium. It was supposed to be attached to his house key.....

When he looks at it suspiciously, Sousuke slowly stood up and threw the keychain back to Haruka.

"Dropped it in the changing room yesterday."

Receiving it, he turns over the dolphin. Haruka's name and address were written on it.

"Did you go out of your way to bring it to me?"

“On the same occasion as paying a sympathy visit. I thought Nanase might still be conked out.”

His exhaustion disappeared during club activities.

“Come up.”

“It’s fine, I’m going home right away.”

Haruka holds up the bag to show him.

“Come and eat croquettes. Let me at least thank you.”

“.....I see. Then, I’ll take you up on that.”

Ascending the stone steps, turning left at the first *torii*, they slip past beside the *chouzuya*.

“But, having your address written on the keychain is kinda like saying ‘please come in’ to burglars.”

Makkou comes out from the doghouse and stands on guard against the lanky Sousuke. When Haruka rubs its head, perhaps because that had finally calmed it down, it seems that it was able to understand that he was a human, even if he was lanky.

“It’s not locked.”

He opens the front door and goes in the house. Too bad for Sousuke, but he has never used his house key before. That’s why he didn’t notice that he lost it, and he didn’t really mind that he didn’t have it.

“Aren’t there people home?”

“My father’s living away for work. My mother’s a part-timer at the supermarket.”

He hated being alone in the house since he was an elementary schooler, so after coming home from school, he went to the Swimming Club right away. After becoming a middle schooler, or more precisely after Makkou came, he didn’t do that anymore.

Seating Sousuke down in front of the tea table, he takes out a plate and sets down two croquettes and chopsticks. He remembered that he has to feed Makkou, too.

“Is it safe from burglars?”

He’s still bothered by it. In contrast to his appearance, he’s faint-hearted.

“My mother made them. Do you prefer sauce? Soy sauce? Or perhaps ketchup?”

“Oh. Uhm, *tonkatsu* sauce if you have any.”

While thinking that soy sauce is tastier, Haruka stretched his hand into the depths of the tea cupboard. While thinking that it hasn’t been used in a while but it’s hopefully still okay, he takes it out and hands it to Sousuke.

“Here you go.”

“Thanks.”

Noticing that he hasn’t brought out tea, he opens the refrigerator.

“Oh, this is delicious. Still warm, too.”

Haruka accepts his praise with his back turned.

“Uh huh.”

When he takes out the barley tea while thinking that it goes without saying, his eyes fell on the tupperware. Inside it, there are bamboo shoots and boiled butterburs. While he’s at it, he took that out, too, and carried it to the tea table. After pouring barley tea into the cup, he opens the tupperware and puts it down.

“I made it yesterday.”

Sousuke’s chopsticks stop, he looks up fixedly at Haruka’s face.

“.....Nanase made it?”

“That’s right.”

“This?”

“Uh huh.”

After becoming a middle schooler, on the days his mother came home late, it was up to Haruka to cook. The recipe stuck onto the refrigerator, detailed notes were written on it, supposing that Haruka will make it. He was taught the basics of cuisine during spring break for the most part, so even when he made it alone, he had hardly ever messed up. The important thing is to concentrate on cooking. To feel it with your eyes, your ears, your nose and your tongue. To have no doubts about what you felt.

Sousuke was staring intently at the inside of the tupperware. Then, he took his eyes off of it in a huff and sunk his teeth into the croquette again.

“I hate bamboo shoots and butterburs.”

He says it bluntly. Haruka pulls back the tupperware, and after turning his back to Sousuke, he picked up a bamboo shoot between his fingers and put it in his mouth. The *dashi* [soup stock made from fish and kelp] and soy sauce nicely dyeing it, they’re drawing out the sweetness of the bamboo shoot.

After Haruka had put the tupperware into the refrigerator, not feeling like looking at Sousuke’s face, he gazed at the recipe. Looks like it’ll be sweet-and-sour pork tonight.

“That letter—”

Sousuke says it. When Haruka turns around, Sousuke was putting sauce on the second croquette.

“The truth is, it was addressed to Nanase.”

It’s about Rin’s letter.

— *Like him, I wanna swim fast like Haru!*”

That one sentence doesn’t leave his head.

“After reading it, I did think it was kinda weird, it’s too one-sided for it to be addressed to me. It’s written as if he’s not expecting a reply. Knowing my loyalty, that can’t be.”

Since he went out of his way to deliver the keychain, he may indeed be loyal, but if that’s the case, he should’ve taken a bite at least, he thinks.

“He wrote ‘him’, right? There, if you look closely, it was erased and rewritten, it’s faint but you can read ‘you’.”

Sousuke sinks his teeth into the croquette. Haruka was no longer able to take his eyes off of Sousuke.

“He tried sending it to Nanase, but he got embarrassed. But, since he took the trouble to write it, he sent it to me, I’m sure of it. —No, it’s Rin. He might’ve gone as far as assuming that I’d show the letter to Nanase. Haha, that’s just like him.”

While saying that like he’s amused, he takes another bite from the croquette.

Could he be telling him to swim? For as much as he’s suffering, could he be requesting for Haruka to swim, too? Could he be telling him to keep swimming in front of Rin? As always, he’s a self-indulgent guy, he thinks.

“See, it was in the third year of elementary school that I joined Sano SC, and he was already swimming fly. I was forcibly invited by Rin. So then, since he forcibly tried to teach me, in the end I always said ‘shut up’. But even so, he really was faster, and since what he’s saying isn’t wrong, I had him teach me again for the time being, but he was kinda irritating, so I said ‘shut up’ again. After repeating that for about a year, I could put up a good fight. In the end, basically he’s the one I learned how to swim from. Thanks to that, stuff like my timing for the breathing and the way I swing my arms is exactly like his, it ended up becoming a habit I can’t shake off.”

Putting the last piece in his mouth, Sousuke washes it down with barley tea.

“Aah, that was delicious. Thanks for the meal. Oh right, Nanase was doing biaxial, huh?”

“Only for about a week so far, though.”

“Wow, getting that far in a week, that’s very good.”

“Don’t really get it, though.”

“So, that start, what is it?”

He means ‘Nao’s start’. Since it’s bothersome to explain, he took a plastic bottle cap into his hand and he loosened the faucet’s handle a little. Then, he sets the cap down in the middle of the room and sits down with his legs bent beneath him in front of it.

“It’s ‘karuta grabbing’.”

Urging Sousuke to sit down as well, he sat face to face with Haruka.

“Is it alright like this?”

“Pushing down both hands, you lightly raise your waist.”

“Like this?”

“The faucet’s loosened, so one drop of water falls from it in about ten seconds. That’s the signal.”

“Uh, uh huh.”

They get ready. The water drop falls. Haruka brushes away the cap. Sousuke looks at Haruka with a dumbfounded expression.

“It disappeared.....”

While hearing Sousuke’s murmur, Haruka picked up the cap.

“We did this all throughout Golden Week.”

“Again, do it again!”

“Don’t be so hasty. I’ll teach it to you now.”

After Haruka briefly explained ‘Nao’s start’, he showed it by putting it into practice several times. No matter how many times they did it, Sousuke couldn’t move in the slightest, both his hands staying pushed down.

“The rest is learning by repetition.”

Picking up the cap, he brings the ‘karuta grabbing’ to an end.

“Oh, oh. Awesome. The coach at Nanase’s place is awesome!”

“He’s manager and trainer.”

“Sorry!”

Keeping the ‘karuta grabbing’ posture, Sousuke lowered his head. Before, he had looked down on Nao. He’s probably apologizing for that, but he didn’t need to go as far as kneeling down.

“I’ll tell you in exchange—”

Sousuke raises his head.

“I’m practicing the biaxial now, too, give the ‘2LR stroke’ a try. It’s a practice where you do the stroke twice left and twice right at a time. You can’t do it unless you put your weight on the axis, so it’s perfect to capture the feel of it.”

Haruka raises the corner of his mouth a little.

“Sure you should be telling me that? Don’t blame me if you lose.”

Standing up while he keeps his eyes glued to Haruka, Sousuke raises the corner of his mouth, too.

“Who’s gonna lose? Come at me with all you’ve got next time.”

The right hand he holds out is huge, he thinks. He didn’t want to have a heated handshake with such a hand, but he had no reason to decline, either. When he grabs his hand, Haruka’s energy and Sousuke’s

energy flows into each other's body and he heats up, all the way to his chest. They were able to recognize each other as opponents they can't lose to. That's why he didn't want to shake hands.

Seeing off Sousuke until the front entrance, they part with a 'see you later'. The setting sun was about to sink into the horizon. He remembers that he has to feed Makkou and goes outside. From between the dogwood and longstalk hollies, he could see Sousuke running through the port. His long and lanky shadow grew even longer and swayed.

—Next was..... the 'Time Trial By School Year', huh.

As he absent-mindedly thinks about such a thing, Makkou gave a bark and reminded him of its food.

Since the first exam period after starting middle school was upon them in a week, club activities were on a break. It's been a while since they went home when the sun is still high.

"Let's go to the Swimming Club."

Haruka said it while squinting his eyes from the sun high up.

"Eh, aren't you going to study?"

"For what?"

"For what', for the test."

"The test is about what we learned in class, right? We already did at school, didn't we?"

"We did. We did, but you have to at home or—"

"Why are club activities on break?"

"So that every can study for tests—"

"You're coming, to the Swimming Club, right?"

"..... I'll come. I'll come, but..... I think that Haru should stop thinking about everything according to his standards."

He doesn't get what he's talking about, but at any rate, they're going to the Swimming Club for the first time in a while. It hasn't been long enough to say that it's nostalgic, but thinking of being able to swim at his own pace, he did look forward to it.

Once he gets home, he changes clothes quickly, stuffs the necessary things into his bag and leaves through the front door. Unfastening Makkou's leash, he stuffed that into the bag, too.

"Let's go, Makkou."

Running ahead after giving a bark, it goes down the stone steps. When Haruka goes out onto the stone steps after it, Makoto was fooling around with Makkou.

"Haru, are you going to run at high speed today, too?"

“Obviously. Let’s go.”

“Okay.”

The early summer shines down on them running through the port. When they come out onto the road alongside the coast while stepping on their short shadows, the strong wind blowing from the sea struck Haruka’s cheeks. Dashing through that wind, they became a new wind and ran through to the other side of their limits.

After tying Makkou to the leash in front of the Swimming Club, Haruka and Makoto went in to the entrance hall. They get changed in the changing room and come out onto the poolside as usual. Getting a feeling that something is missing, wondering what it could be, he knew right away once he tried thinking about it. It’s the smell. It hadn’t even caught his attention until now, but the Swimming Club’s water was so clean that chlorine wasn’t necessary. That’s why there aren’t any euglenas, nor does any algae grow. Not to mention, there wasn’t a single dragonfly larva and such.

As he gives his gratitude for the blessed environment, Nagisa showed up.

“Yahho! Haru-chan, Mako-chan. It’s been a while. You know, I’m swimming in a medley relay again.”

Nagisa has completely returned to his former self. At the same time as he’s relieved, he also became a little worried whether he’s matured a little.

“Wow. That’s great, Nagisa. But what’ll you do about the *konme*?”

The one who ventured to ask what shouldn’t be asked was Makoto.

“You see, I’m taking a little break from the *konme*.”

“Even though you were expressly practicing the fly?”

“You see, for the fly, well, I decided to get Rin-chan to teach me. After all, I’d be better at it that way. You know, when I do the fly with Rin-chan, after practice, he always praised me, saying ‘you got better at it’.”

It seems that Nagisa has no intention of swimming the butterfly his whole life. Also, it doesn’t look like he has any intention of maturing, either.

“You..... don’t know when Rin’s coming home.”

Makoto answers seriously.

“He said he comes home a few times a year.”

“Who did you hear that from?”

“Well, I sent a letter.”

“Eh!”

“Eh!”

Lured by Makoto, his voice came out by accident.

“You sent a letter to Rin? What about the address?”

“It was written on the register of names.”

“That’s.....”

That’s his address in Japan. If he were to guess, the situation is that Nagisa’s letter was forwarded to Australia by Rin’s family.

“And then, a reply came.”

“Eh!”

“Eh!”

He was lured by Makoto again.

“What did he write?”

“First of all, to go to a field, catch one, put it in an insect cage and observe it carefully. And also to not forget the leaves for food, either.”

Ridiculous. Haruka turned his back and started walking.

“Nagisa, in the letter, what did you—”

Putting on his goggles, he stands on the starting block.

“You know, I wanted to get better at the fly—”

After landing on the water, he raised small splashes. It’s going nicely, he thinks. He nicely slipped into the opening from his fingertips. He firmly and strongly feels the water. It’s trying to accept Haruka to the point of being impatient. Then Haruka accepts the water as well. They strongly feel each other’s existence. They’re not becoming one body. They’re not understanding each other. While being of a different nature, they mutually acknowledge that existence.

After swimming 2000m, when he lifts his face, Makoto held out his hand to him. He grasps it while thinking that it’s a huge hand. Though it’s also a huge hand, unlike Sousuke’s rugged one, it felt like it was gently wrapping around him.

“Thanks.”

“Not biaxial today, huh. It sure has been a while, seeing Haru’s graceful swimming.”

“Nao-senpai’s not here anyways.”

Once in a while, he wants to feel the water with all his heart.

“That ‘While the demon is out’ thing?”

— Demon, huh.....

That may be so, he thinks. If it's Nao, he gets the feeling that it's likely for it to be the case. If it was revealed that he's really a demon, it oddly seems like he could be satisfied with it.

"Makoto, won't you swim?"

"I did swim. 2000m, just now."

"Not like that, won't you have a contest against me?"

"Ohh....."

Makoto looks at Haruka like he's a rare animal.

"I'll swim biaxial."

"I guess we can. So Haru says that kind of thing, too."

"What?"

"Winning and losing, stuff like that."

"I mean swim for real. Let's go."

As Haruka stands on the starting block, Makoto stood in the neighboring lane as well.

Breathing in deeply once, he concentrates his mind on his center of gravity while breathing it out.

Haruka's thinly regulated breathing overlaps with Makoto's breathing and they quickly synchronize.

Firmly pushing down the center of gravity he had concentrated his mind onto, he senses his weight on the entirety of the sole of his feet.

Keeping up his waist high, he pulls his foot that's in the back.

He calmly counts the breaths.

Once.

The synchronized breaths turning into energy, it begins to circulate his body.

Twice.

The energy that filled his body burns.

Three times—.

Haruka and Makoto kicked off from the starting block at the same time.

They leap out with a low posture like a carnivore.

Landing on the water—.

Once he enters the water, he could feel Makoto even more strongly.

Adjusting his posture, he creates the streamline.

Now that they're swimming side by side, he understood Makoto's thoughts perfectly.

— Haru is feeling for me.

He could strongly feel him, more than through any words, more than through any gaze, more than through any contact.

He kicks the dolphin kick bit by bit.

So that he won't receive the wave-making resistance, he glides on the very border of the water's surface.

Near 15m, he switches over to the flutter kick and starts the stroke.

Stretching his arms out along the axis, he directs his consciousness forward, forward.

The water's flow suddenly changing, he felt Makoto quickly fading away.

Just as he thought, it wasn't enough yet. It's still not sufficient. He hasn't been able to make it his yet.

He thought that if he swims for real against Makoto, he could recall that relay in even just a glimpse, but even that was beyond his power. It's not like he forgot. It's just that it's not being revived as a sensation. He can't see the sight he saw at that time. Could it be that it's still hopeless with Haruka's biaxial crawl? It's still, not sufficient. It's not enough. It doesn't reach. Is it technique? Is it sensation? Or is it the heartbeat that throbs heatedly.....?

For now, just barely feeling Makoto was the most he could do.

"Haa, haa. Then, I'm going home, okay?"

Makoto says it at the bottom of the stone steps.

"Eeh, haa, Mako-chan, you come, too. Haahaa."

Nagisa said that he wanted to come over to his house, so he came home with them.

"Now, really, haa, let me study. Haahaa. Later, Haru."

"Uh huh."

Haruka replied with his back turned while ascending the stone steps. As he ties the leash to the doghouse, Makkou comes and sits still. Rubbing its head, he ties the leash to its collar, too.

"Come up."

"Okay."

Nagisa only replied and began to fool around with Makkou. Even if Nagisa hugs it or rubs their cheeks together, Makkou sat without looking displeased. It's a well-trained dog.

Leaving Nagisa and going into the house, when he comes out after quickly washing off the sweat with a shower, Nagisa was making himself at home in the middle of the living room.

“Nagisa, you taking a shower, too?”

“Nah, I’m good. Hey, when are you guys having your next tournament?”

Haruka opened the refrigerator.

“Who knows, I wonder when. I think it’s after the tests.”

“Can I go cheer?”

Taking out the barley tea, he pours it into two cups.

“I think it’s okay, but why?”

“As thanks, for coming to cheer for me.”

He just went to see him and didn’t cheer. And it didn’t have the kind of results that would need thanking.

“I’ll let Makoto contact you later.”

Handing one of the cups to Nagisa, he drinks down the other cup of barley tea in a single gulp.

“Thanks.”

During the time Nagisa’s drinking it while making a sound in his throat, Haruka opened the refrigerator again, he takes out a pan and puts it on the fire. It’s the ‘squid and pumpkin stew’ he made yesterday.

“Aah, that was delicious. I’ll leave the cup here, okay?”

“Okay.”

Nagisa leaves the cup on top of the tea table. While hearing that sound behind his back, Haruka began stirring the pan’s contents with the long chopsticks.

“You know, they say that when I swim, my arms stretch. Riku-kun said so. Rin-chan told me the same thing, but they sure say weird stuff, right? Even though that can’t be true.”

Since he made the fire stronger, he can’t take his eyes off of it. It’ll end up boiling if he’s careless.

“Riku-kun’s enthusiastic about practice. He swims the whole time without breaks.”

The squid will get hard if it overboils, so it needs special attention.

“When Wataru-kun does the fly, he doesn’t really take a breather much. Said it’s faster that way.”

Small bubbles formed.

“Even though you get tired just by swimming the fly regularly, it’s pretty impressive that he swims without breathing, isn’t it?”

Stopping the fire when the air bubbles became big, he serves the squid and pumpkin on a small plate.

“Kakeru-kun can swim 25m with the Vassallo, you know.”

“Wanna eat?”

He puts it on top of the tea table.

“Yeah, thanks. Hey, 25m with the Vassallo.”

His mother had told him it was too sweet, but it should be just right for Nagisa.

“I wonder how he breathes? Though he’s in the water.”

Taking up the chopsticks, Nagisa eats a bite of the squid.

“Do you know what an upkick is?”

Putting down his chopsticks after eating a bite, he slowly stands up.

“It’s where you lift your foot for the dolphin.”

Looking at him while wondering where he’s going, he opened the refrigerator’s door.

“Sometimes, I do it during the breast, they say.”

Rummaging with a rustling sound, he takes out the mayonnaise.

“Riku-kun’s telling me to do the upkick from the beginning.”

He pours that mayonnaise over the ‘squid and pumpkin stew’.

“I’m doing it unconsciously, so I don’t get it.”

He pours mayonnaise.

“So then, Riku-kun told me to practice the dolphin, so that’s what I’m doing now.”

He eats the squid.

“Even though it’s not the fly. —Ah, it’s delicious. You really can’t have squid without mayonnaise!”

Averting his gaze from the spectacle that’s hard to endure looking at straight, Haruka started washing the cup.

Since the exam period is starting tomorrow, classes ended with just the morning ones. Using Makoto being at home as a good opportunity, his little brother and sister, who had come home from kindergarten, said that they want to ride in the rubber boat, and the boys had set them sail from the shore just now.

Just one part of the boat’s bottom was transparent, so they can see into the sea like they’re looking through swimming goggles. It’s fine that they bought it in advance for summer, but it seems that the twins can’t wait and they’ve been wanting to ride in it for a long time now. But—.

“Why do I have to come along, too?”

“Because it’s too much trouble to blow it up alone.”

“Why does it have to be today?”

“Because it’s not often that it’s such a windless day.”

Indeed, it’s rarely this calm. You could maybe even say that it’s perfect rubber boat weather. But for someone who rejected his invitation to the Swimming Club because he’s studying, he can’t understand Makoto’s nerve for making him help without batting an eyelid. Makoto’s soft when it comes to his siblings. It’s not something that began now, but he really couldn’t help but think of it as unreasonable.

“Don’t go too far—”

They reply to Makoto’s voice with a ‘yees’. There are oars attached to the boat, they’re rowing by both of them holding one each. Just in case, they’re wearing floats so it’d be fine if they drop it, but today there seems to be no worry about big waves rocking them, either.

“Haru. We haven’t swum in the sea for a long while now, right?”

Suddenly, Makoto says it, his gaze directed towards the sea. Haruka stopped himself before saying that it’s because Makoto doesn’t swim in it.

“You know, during that tournament, I was swimming in the sea. Even though it was a pool, all around me was the sea. I thought that swimming in the sea felt good. In the big sea, I became a sea creature and swam.

— A sea creature.....huh.

If it’s Makoto, such a thing might be possible, too, he thinks. Even if he was told that he’s borrowing the form of a human, he probably wouldn’t be surprised.

“What sort of sight did Haru see?”

He doesn’t answer. He can’t answer. He doesn’t know how he should express it. Without answering anything, he just stared at the yellow boat.

“Haru swims like a dolphin, no? Like a dolphin, like you’re feeling good. When you’re swimming, haven’t you thought before that you might be a dolphin?”

No. He hasn’t once likened himself to another creature before.

“I wonder if I can see it again. That sight.”

Makoto is staring much farther than the boat. To the even farther side of the horizon.....

The oars start dropping from the boat. His siblings are engrossed with looking at the inside of the sea and it seems that they haven’t noticed.

“Makoto, the oars are falling.”

“Ah, they are. —Oooi, don’t drop the oars—”

In the instant his little brother turned around to reply, the oar ended up falling. He tries picking it up but his hand doesn’t reach, so he tries pulling it up with the other oar, but that ends up falling, too. Even

without oars, they should've rowed with their hands, but they both panicked and ended up bursting into tears at last.

"I'll go tell someone and have them bring out a boat."

Haruka stops Makoto, who was about to start running.

"It's fine. It'd be troublesome if it becomes serious. Let's swim."

After easily taking off his shirt, when Haruka looks at Makoto, he had his eyes fixedly cast down on the sea, keeping a stiff expression. 'Let's go' on the tip of his tongue, he swallows his words.

—Still.....huh?

Averting his eyes from Makoto, Haruka threw himself into the sea. It wasn't a big enough distance to call it swimming, he reached them right away and returned to the shore with the boat after retrieving the fallen oars. — He looks at Makoto. He was standing still, his eyes still cast down on the sea.

".....Sorry. Haru."

— Don't worry about it.

Maybe he should've said that. Averting his eyes from Makoto, who drew his up-slanting eyebrows together like he could burst into tears at any moment and was lightly trembling, Haruka picked up the shirt he had cast off.

The first day of tests ended noisily. Checking their answers if they got it right or wrong, they're swinging from joy to sorrow. Even though they'll know if they get back the exam papers, he thinks it strange as to why they're fretting about it. When Haruka comes out of the classroom, Makoto and Aki were just coming out of their classroom, too. On their way home with the three of them, the topic was nothing but the test, too, and he was put off by it. Not feeling like joining the conversation, Haruka walked after them while absent-mindedly gazing at Minogaseyama that was in the process of thickening its greenness.

"See you later."

When they part with Aki and he loses his conversation partner, the smile disappeared from Makoto's face. He continues walking silently, with slightly downcast eyes. He was like that this morning, too, Makoto's trying not to look at Haruka. There was no need to ask why. It's no use asking. Because Haruka can't do anything about it.

Without conversation, by the time he's lost count of how many early-summer breezes have blown through, words spilled from Makoto's mouth in a whisper.

".....Because Haru's here, I'm being spoiled."

"Is it about yesterday?"

It can't be anything else. He asked, knowing it.

“I’m frightened, of something that doesn’t even exist. I’m..... a coward, for being frightened of something like that. I took it into my head on my own, I dreamed it up on my own, I’m frightened of it on my own. I’m a hopeless coward.....”

“Don’t worry about it anymore.”

Makoto stops and looks at Haruka. Drawing his up-slanting eyebrows together, he quivered his lips slightly.

“Haru’s strong, so you might not understand. You wouldn’t understand the feelings of a no-good elder brother—”

Haruka stops as well and looks at Makoto.

“Makoto.”

Makoto’s eyes were peering into Haruka’s eyes. Knowing that his eyes are being peered into, he shows him to the depths of his eyes.

“Don’t say that anymore.”

Makoto nods slightly to Haruka’s quiet voice.

“Sorry.Looks like I said something kinda weird.”

Makoto took his eyes off of Haruka and started walking quietly again.

What in the world could Makoto be fighting against? What could he have dreamed up, in the water, in his heart? What should he do to release Makoto from that suffering? Would Haruka..... have the strength for that? Would he be capable of it? Though he doesn’t even understand anything about himself.....

A lukewarm wind blowing, it passed by while making waves in Haruka’s heart that were poised between sorrow and unease.

Not even feeling like inviting Makoto, he went to the Swimming Club alone that day. He thought he’d try out Sousuke’s ‘2LR stroke’.

Diving into the pool, he lightly tries doing the stroke. Oh, he gets it now, it certainly is as Sousuke said. Unless his weight is on the axis, he can’t keep balance well. If he strays even a little from the two rails, it feels like his balance would immediately be about to break.

Just normally swimming the biaxial crawl, he had rarely ever felt his balance break. Even if his rhythm is briefly disturbed, he can correct it right away. Whereas for the 2LR stroke, if his first stroke is instable, it results in greatly upsetting his rhythm on the second stroke and he has to redo it from the streamline. In that sense, he thought that it becomes just the right practice for checking the biaxial swimming’s form.

However, it didn’t require much time for him to become able to swim with a smooth form. By the time he had finished practicing for the day, he had completely grasped the sensation and such things as breaking his balance didn’t happen anymore.

Short of breath, he goes home with Makkou. When he does, as if he had been seen, the telephone rang. It's from Makoto's mother. She says that Makoto had gone out and hasn't come home yet. After informing her that he didn't come to the Swimming Club, he put down the receiver.

The scarlet of the setting sun shining in through the window quietly stretches into the house. Feeling something like a strange trepidation from that red color, Haruka rushed outside like he was being hurried.

Coming out the first *torii*, he looks down. Makoto's bicycle is left at the bottom of the stone steps. He hasn't gone far. Haruka climbed up to the second *torii* that's at the very top of the stone steps and went out into the shrine. Misagozaki Shrine's grounds weren't wide enough to survey, just a small shrine stood there, while seeming like it's about to reach the end of its days.

Going round the back just to be sure, he looks down at the sea from the gap between the Japanese zelkova and the maple. There was nothing other than the waves hitting the rocks and breaking with a flash of white.

The sun sinking in the west, it was already trying to fall into the horizon. He got the feeling that if it gets dark, it'll turn into trouble. The dusk makes people uneasy. Thinking that he has to look for him before it becomes serious, Haruka ran down the stone steps.

When he went into the port, there were several white masts, each casting long shadows while quietly swaying. He runs while making sure to peer into every single boat, every so often there were just seabirds resting their wings, but there wasn't a single human figure.

Like that, he runs out of the port chasing his own shadow and goes out to the breakwater. The complicatedly tangled tetrapod was being washed by the waves while half sinking itself into the sea. Once in a while, the anglers take a seat on it, but no one's there today. Going until the edge of the levee, after going in a circle around the small lighthouse that will cast light before long, he retraced his steps to the concrete straight road.

Crossing the pier, by the time he came out onto the road alongside the coast, the streetlights were starting to light up one by one. It's a small port town, but if one person felt like hiding, it makes them realize that anything can happen. Or, did he leave town already.....

As he's running on the road alongside the coast, he could see a silhouette at the very edge of the beach where the streetlights didn't reach. The lighthouse's light illuminates that silhouette for just an instant.

"Makoto—"

Going down to the beach right after shouting, Haruka ran with full strength. It's the beach he always runs on with Makkou. He's supposed to have gotten used to running on it, but he's tripped up. His balance breaks. He can't run as fast as he wants. It's frustrating. It's irritating. Only his feelings become rash.

The second flash of light illuminates Makoto again. He stood still, facing the sea. The rising tide was already trying to reach his feet.

"Makoto!"

He shouts once more. He runs while shouting. Makoto reacted at last. He turns just his neck towards Haruka.

“.....Haru.”

It was a dull voice. Haruka reaches him at last, breathing roughly.

“Haahaa, I looked for you.”

His eyes remaining hollow, Makoto shows a smile.

“You found me unexpectedly fast.”

Could he have been intending to play hide-and-seek or something? He wants that to be it, he thinks. He wants something ridiculous like that to be it, he thinks.

“Haahaa, what were you doing. With something like this.”

“.....I thought of going to a place where Haru isn't.”

Haruka's heart leapt. Where was he trying to go. What was he trying to do. What would've happened if he were a little slower.

“.....Why?”

Asking that was the most he could do.

“Will I be alright even if Haru isn't here?I wanted to make sure of that.”

Raising his eyebrows, he shows a lonely smile. Makoto was fighting all along. He was suffering, all along. In a place where Haruka's thoughts couldn't possibly reach.....

“Would Haru be alright even if I weren't here?”

He can't lie to him anymore. He can't deceive him. He can't trick him. Neither Makoto, nor Haruka himself.

“— I wouldn't have looked for you if I were.”

“Right.”

Makoto laughs. He was the usual Makoto. The amiable smile with up-slanting eyebrows. He came back to being the usual Makoto. To Haruka's side—, he came back for him.

“Don't worry me so much.”

For now, just that is enough, he thought. If Makoto's here, just that is enough.

“Yeah, sorry. Haru.”

Quickly getting away from the surging waves, Makoto starts walking. Haruka walks side by side with Makoto. For just a moment, the lighthouse's light illuminated the two footprints remaining on the dusk coast.

Chapter 9 – Road

It was on the last day of the exam period that the ban on club activities was finally lifted. When Haruka and the others came out onto the poolside after making a bow, unexpectedly, Nao was there in his swimsuit. Opening his legs to 180 degrees, he's sticking his chest flat to the ground.

"Nao-senpai,you gonna swim?"*

Asahi asked.

"Yeah, just for fifteen minutes."

Keeping his legs opened and twisting his body at the waist, Nao answers benignly. If he can swim, why hasn't he swum until now, why only for fifteen minutes, what is he swimming for? He had so many questions that he couldn't count them, but no matter what he intends to do, Haruka got excited to no small extent that Nao will swim.

"Makoto, a contest with back. 25m."

"Eh?"

Raising his eyebrows, Makoto is surprised.

"It's precious time. Don't waste a single second of it."

"Y-yes!"

Makoto's reply echoed over the pool.

After the two of them scrupulously did the warm-up exercises, they entered the water and took a hold of the starting grip. Pressing their feet against the wall, they firmly pull their bodies in. A moment of silence. The expectations towards Nao's swimming rise.

Whistle—.

The two of them kicked off from the wall. The way their bodies stretch out is different. The point where Nao lands on the water is farther. When he starts doing the Vassallo from the streamline, that difference opens even wider and he reaches the goal with a few strokes after surfacing. It wasn't the kind of difference that comes with a super short distance of 25m. Why hasn't he swum until now? That question arises again.

The two of them climb up onto the poolside and Nao removes his goggles. Then, after he looked over the four of them, he showed a bright smile.

"What happened? All four of you look like you were bewitched by a *kitsune*."

He'd feel relieved if he'd get it over with and tell them that he's a *kitsune*. What in the world is Nao?

"Do you understand the difference between Makoto and I in that start just now? Asahi."

"U-uissu. Nao-senpai stretched out like *pchoo*."*

"Then, where does that difference in stretching out come from? Ikuya."

“Tachibana’s legs did not finish stretching out.”

“Why don’t they finish stretching out? Haruka.”

Even if he’s told to say why, it’s not something he knows unless he asks Makoto.

“He couldn’t make use of the counteraction.”

He thinks that’s what it results in, but—.

“Makoto, why were you scared?”

“Eh?”

“Did you think you’d hit your knees or something?”

“.....”

Makoto loses his words. No wonder. He doesn’t get the meaning of what he’s saying.

“When you kick off from the wall, the muscles of your thighs aren’t being useful.”

For the backstroke’s start, there’s an order for stretching your body, first you stretch your waist, next your knees, and lastly, you have to kick off from the wall, but in Makoto’s case, because he’s kicking off from the wall before his knees stretch out, he can’t transmit his strength well.

“By pushing your knees into the wall, even though you’re putting strength into your thigh muscles, you have a feeling like your knees would bump into the wall and you get scared.”

“But, I’m not scared or anything.”

“Then, try doing the start once more.”

Entering the water after Nao tells him to, Makoto takes hold of the starting grip. Firmly pulling his body in after pressing his feet against the wall, he stretches out his body all at once. Lifting his face after landing on the water and lifting his goggles, Makoto lifted his up-slanting eyebrows.

“My knees,I didn’t push them.”

“See?”

Nao enters the water as well after saying so and shows him an example. It was a beautiful start. He stretches out, with the flexibility of a leaping fish. Nao lifted his face.

“Because your body is toppling backwards, no matter how much it feels like your knees are about to bump into it, they don’t. The point is, you’re just scared of the illusion.”

“Yes.”

After he specially coached Makoto for a while, Nao left the pool. His time is up.

The next day, Nao was absent from club activities.

“First year boys’ section, gather round!”

Upon Natsuya’s order, Haruka and the others, who were on the poolside, assemble.

“How is it, have you gotten used to club activities?”

“Uissu!”

Asahi was the only one who replied directly. Rather than that, Nao weighs on his mind.

“Uhm, is Nao-senpai absent today?”

Makoto asked, without trying to hide his puzzled expression.

“Starting today, he’s taking a break for a while. That said, he’ll show up next week though.”

“Did, something happen?”

He went into the pool yesterday. He swam. It’s no wonder that Makoto feels uneasy about what in the world happened.

“It’s an eye surgery.”

Natsuya shows a smile while pointing at his own eye. He can’t laugh. If it’s a joke, it’s in bad taste. If it isn’t, he wants a proper explanation as to what’s going on.

“Huh? Haven’t you heard?”

“We haven’t heard anything. Yesterday’s..... Because of yesterday’s practice—”

Natsuya curbs Makoto’s attempt at pressing on.

“Wait, wait. I give up. Did Nao really not say anything?”

“He didn’t!”

Makoto jumps even at Natsuya’s murmuring which seemed like he was talking to himself.

“Okay, I get it. Well then, if you’re so worried, go and pay him a visit.”

Makoto looks at Haruka’s face. If he wants to go, he should. He wouldn’t particularly need to seek Haruka’s permission for it, he thinks.

“I’ll go too!”

“M-me too!”

Ikuya and Asahi responded sooner than Makoto. If the three of them go to pay him a visit, Haruka can have the lane all to himself. It looks like today he’ll be able to swim at ease for the first time in a while. As expected, swimming all jumbled up isn’t his cup of tea.

“I get it, I get it. Go, the four of you. However, it’s during club activities, so go by running. Also, I have handouts and marked tests, take those with you, too.”

The hospital on the cape is straight ahead on the road alongside the coast. Although called straight, it seems to be a road made by curtailing the slope of the mountain, it curved along the coastline, full of twists and bends. There were quite a few ups and downs with a tough incline, the bus that occasionally comes painfully spewed out exhaust fumes, too. A rock reef spreading out on one side, sometimes the sea water submerged the road during the high tide. On the other side, the rock surface that curtailed the mountain rose perpendicularly, red pines and such were growing here and there.

While listening to the sound of the waves breaking on the rock reef, Haruka and the others were running on the road alongside the coast that lead to the hospital on the cape. The four hot breaths are swept away by the sea breeze and disappear.

Makoto's expression is stiff. Could he be thinking something like "maybe it's due to yesterday's practice"? Even if that's the case, it's not something for Makoto to fret over. It's something Nao had decided for himself.

Haruka was feeling as downhearted as Makoto. At last, it was his chance to have the lane all to himself, so why does he have to receive the treatment of being in the same boat, he couldn't help but think of it as unfair.

"Both of you, don't worry. It must be a cold or something, anyways."

Asahi says light-heartedly. Would a cold affect someone's eyes? That's a very interesting theory.

"I hope so."

The good-natured Makoto plays along with Asahi.

"That aside, did you see Nao-senpai's tests? It's incredible, they're all 80-90 points."

It seems that Asahi greatly lacks the concept of privacy. He had firmly sworn that he won't say careless things.

"I wouldn't have gotten scolded if I'd gotten that much, too."

"There's still Japanese left, no?"

Makoto says, forcibly brightening his sullen face.

"I'm sayin' that Japanese's the most problematic. Especially the last question."

"What does the writer want to say? That one?"

"Yeah, that. It's like, how should I know, right? If you got something to say, say it clearly. Plus, that's a text we didn't do in class."

"How is it for Ikuya-kun? That question, did you get it?"

"Nah, I'm not too confident about it."

"Me neither. Haru?"

"Probably, I guess."

“By probably..... you mean you got it?”

“Yeah, probably I guess.”

Asahi comes closer while running.

“Did you get it, Haru? Tell us, the answer.”

“You’ll know it when we get back the marked tests.”

“Ahha. The truth is you didn’t get it, huh? What a show off.”

He doesn’t even get offended from Asahi telling him that.

“Tell us. Haru.”

The gloominess had disappeared from Makoto’s expression. Could he have gotten distracted by such a ridiculous conversation?

“Ikuya-kun wants to hear it, too, right?”

Prompted by Makoto, Ikuya answers brusquely.

“I’m interested in Nanase-kun’s answer, too.”

— Interested.....huh.

What sort of interest could Ikuya have towards Haruka? Ever since that incident, he had no longer directed those darkly shining eyes towards Haruka. However, it doesn’t necessarily mean that the something lurking inside Haruka won’t provoke Ikuya’s darkness again sometime. What Ikuya truly has an interest in, is it that something not even Haruka himself can fathom, or is it the ‘darkness’..... perhaps.

“In the first five lines, it took up social problems, right?”

Haruka slowly starts explaining and the three of them nod.

“Then, the next four lines analyzed that scientifically, didn’t it?”

“Yeah, yeah. It certainly was like that.”

Asahi and Ikuya both agree with Makoto’s interjection.

“The last three lines is the influence it has on people’s mental state.”

“Yup. I wrote that, I wrote that. But, you sure do remember well, Haru.”

Asahi is annoying. Won’t he stay quiet at least when he’s explaining it to him?

“It ends with that. Basically, that question has no ‘summary’.”

“Indeed.....”

Ikuya takes on a pensive look.

“If it’s done like that, what they want to say from each of their viewpoints differs.”

“I wrote the influence on the mental state that’s at the end.”

After Makoto says it, Asahi and Ikuya continued.

“For me, it’s social problems. It’s the pattern where the conclusion is at the start.”

“I wrote all three. It was hard to write it in small characters, though.....”

“Which is correct? Haru.”

“None.”

“By none..... you mean none of them are correct?”

“The correct one is in the unwritten ‘summary’.”

Asahi sharpens his spiky hair and pouts while he’s at it.

“You can’t get it if it’s not written, can you?”

“So, it’s telling you to guess it.”

“Uwah, what’s with that? Trick question?”

It certainly is twisted. However, if you recall what was in class, you can see where it’s coming from.

“—Things differ, depending on the side you look at.”

“Ah.”

“Ah.”

“Ah.”

“It’s various aspects!”

The three voices come together.

“Damn it, I’ve been had. This was totally a strategy so we can’t get a perfect score.”

Asahi complains and Ikuya joins him.

“It seems like something that teacher would do.”

Then, Asahi draws close to Haruka and pleads to him.

“Haru, please. Get a perfect score and get payback for us.”

The test is already over.

“I’ll leave you behind if you say ridiculous things.”

Haruka raises his pace and the three of them adhere to that pace. While a wind blows on the road alongside the coast, the four hot sighs become a single lump and they ran past it.

Although they were overtaken by four buses, they finally arrive and pass through the gate. Looking at that gatepost, he learned for the first time that the hospital on the cape has an official name. At the start of this year, he was in the care of this hospital. It might be because of it that Makoto's expression is stiff.

The four of them were completely out of breath. The sea breeze that occasionally blows is pleasant. While wiping off his sweat, Haruka looked up at the white building.

"Let's go."

Without saying it to anyone in particular, Haruka started walking.

After reaching the ophthalmology ward, when they peeked inside, Nao's bed was the innermost in the four-person room.

"Why, it's you guys. All four together."

Unexpectedly, or rather, as he thought, Nao was well. There's no IV, no bandages, no ECG, no nothing. While thinking that he himself seemed more like a sick person when he was there, Haruka was looking at Nao's pale face.

Makoto takes out the variety of handouts from his bag.

"The captain told us to bring these."

"Natsuya did?"

Accepting the handouts, he lightly nods after quickly glancing through them.

"It was too troublesome for him to bring it himself, huh. Oh well. Instead of here, shall we go to the lounge?"

Nao got off the bed in a light manner and he began to walk with flexible steps. It's that cat-like manner of walking with no gaps. He couldn't think that a sick person generally walked like that.

There was no table in the lounge, only a sofa was placed by the wall of the not too wide space. The big gate they had passed through earlier is visible from the window.

Nao bought five cartons of juice from the vending machine outside the lounge and handed it out to them.

".....*Azaasu*." [Asahi extremely contracting arigatou gozaimasu.]

While saying it modestly, Asahi quickly bows his head. Haruka accepted the juice, too, while thinking that if he's going to say it without spirit, he should just normally say "thank you very much". Since arriving at the hospital, Asahi's been like that all along. All along, he walked by trying to hide behind Haruka and the others. It's that so-called "caught up in the mood" thing.

"It's retinal detachment."

Nao said while sitting down on the sofa after having finished handing out the juices. From the unfamiliar disease name, their eyes gather on Nao. Nao put the straw into the carton and drank just one sip.

"I did it in the autumn of my second year. I thought it was maybe a little hard to see, but I figured it would get better sooner or later and left it alone, which was a bad idea. It kind of felt like trouble so I went to the hospital, then I was suddenly told to get myself admitted. When they told me that I might not be able to swim anymore, it sure was a shock..... Natsuya forcibly invited me to join the swim club, but you see, I got completely hooked on it....."

Could it mean that Nao can no longer swim? In that case, he wonders why he's still in the swim club. Yesterday, the fact that he swam, what in the world was it?

"Drink the juice."

Told by Nao, they individually said "thank you for the juice" and put their straws into the carton.

"I did aikido until the sixth grade of elementary school. Concentrating your mind below your belly button, that's the basics of aikido. It's something I learned for the first time once I tried it, but there are plenty of parts that work for swimming, too. In aikido, I mean."

While thinking that's what that way of carrying himself with no gaps was, Haruka put his mouth on the straw.

"Aikido is a type of martial arts where you don't use your muscle strength. You fight while making use of your opponent's strength and turning your own weight into strength. Swimming isn't a combat sport, but you properly have an opponent. For example, at the time of the start, placing your weight on the starting block, you're meant to make use of that repulsive force anyways, and when you're swimming, you turn the water's resistance into propulsive force, right?"

Oh, he gets it now. Indeed, having the muscle strength doesn't necessarily make you fast. If anything, he becomes unable to feel the water when he swims by relying on his muscle strength. During the competition, he was keenly forced to realize it.

"You're not progressing by force, you read the flow of the water. How the water flows. What you should do to get a lot of strength from it. Once I realized that the more you think about it, the more profound it is, I was beside myself with joy how interesting swimming was."

Nao drinks just one sip from the juice.

"I said to turn your whole body into ears at the start, right? That's one kind of 'selflessness'. The ultimate goal of martial arts, it's when you lose yourself and without thinking anything, you move the way you felt. I think that possibly, it could be the ultimate goal of swimming, too. If there's a 'selfless swimming', if I could attain that, maybe I'll reach the ultimate state that's beyond things like swimming fast and winning and losing. It was around then that I started thinking about such things."

Nao has a distant look in his eyes. He's showing his smile like usual, but there was a cloud in that expression which seemed to include sorrow. Reflecting Nao's feelings, even the lounge's air becomes heavy. In that, Makoto asked like he couldn't bear to put up with it any longer.

"—The surgery,are they going to, cut and stuff?"

In the lounge that had fallen so silent that it seemed like he could hear Makoto's heartbeat, Nao's laughter suddenly echoed.

"Hahaha. Did Natsuya say surgery? Can't be helped, huh. They're just treating it with a laser. So I actually wouldn't need to be hospitalized, but middle schoolers are still children, so they think I wouldn't listen and rest even if they tell me to."

Makoto leans forward and a little bit of juice flows over from the straw.

"Yesterday's,due to yesterday's swimming, it's my fault....."

He probably wants to ask if he overdid it when he tried teaching backstroke to Makoto, but that's not it. If he were intending to overdo it, it wouldn't have been necessary to delimit his time to fifteen minutes, and if he were to overdo it in the same way, he ought to have participated in the competition. And the fact that he was hospitalized the day after the exam period indicates that it was planned in advance.

"No, no. This was prearranged. After the treatment, I have to keep still for about two weeks, so I consulted the hospital's doctor and it was decided that swimming for just fifteen minutes would be fine. However, no dives and turns."

"Why, did you go so far....."

"For the sake of providing a proper objective for Makoto. I'm the only one in the club who's made the back their signature style, and I thought it would be better to make you realize the difference in your objective before the 'Time Trial By School Year'. So, Makoto's objective for the time being would be me. Haha."

The juice swiftly flies out from Makoto's carton.

"I'll, I'll try my best! I will definitely master what Nao-senpai sacrificed his health for to teach me!"

"Oi oi, you're exaggerating. Even with the treatment this time, it's just to be on the safe side, I'm already mostly stabilized."

"Then, does it mean that you will become able to swim?"

Asahi and Ikuya also lean forward from Makoto's expectation.

"It depends on the course of the treatment, but I'll become able to swim by the summer."

Makoto's up-slanting eyebrows softly went up, Asahi's spiky hair gently swayed, Ikuya was relieved beneath his long eyelashes.

"However, dives are forbidden."

Makoto thinks a little.

"Then, only the back....."

Ikuya takes over after him.

"But, if it's the back, that's Nao-senpai's specialty—"

Asahi stands up.

“It’ll go well! Yesterday’s back was the best!”*

Nao shows a bright smile.

“Right. I forgot to mention it, but the grade leaders move up.”

“Huh?”

“At this rate, when you become third years, it means Asahi will be the captain.”

“Eh, eh, I’ll be……captain……?”*

Perhaps because his knees gave away, he fell back on the sofa again.

“It’s fine. Since I appointed you. The free’s fine, too. When I was told that I might not be able to swim, I felt down, too. I worried over it for about half a year, but, when I thought that I really do want to swim with Natsuya and the others, I was able to become serious. No use in being impatient, is there? Then, I took on a positive outlook. Asahi, take your time without being impatient.”

“Uissu!”

Why are there tears in his eyes?

“Also Makoto, you worry too much about people. You can be a little more selfish. Your exchanges with Haruka, it’s almost like you’re his guardian. It’ll make people think that you’re a busybody.”

“Eh, really? Haru.”

He directs his gaze outside the window. If he answers honestly, it might get complicated in the future.

“Also, Ikuya. Believe in your companions more. If you keep yourself withdrawn in your shell, you’ll never be able to change. At long last you joined the club for the sake of changing, so try revealing it all. If it’s these guys, they’ll accept it from you.”

Ikuya turns down his long eyelashes and hangs his head. Saying it is simple, but putting it into practice requires a certain resolve. Both revealing it and being revealed. He thinks that if possible, he’d prefer it if he reveals it where Haruka isn’t there.

“Lastly, Haruka. If you’re fixated on something, stick with it until the end. Don’t worry about the competition’s results. Natsuya was irresponsible, too, by saying ‘enter in all the free’, but the next official match you can do that in is just the ‘Time Trial By School Year’. For the rest, it’s restricted to two or three events per person.”

He has no interest in matches and records, but it was humiliating that he became unable to swim. It was agonizing that for someone who doesn’t have the endurance, he was looked down on because he’s fixated on it. And more than anything else, he couldn’t stand other people being concerned for him. He couldn’t forgive his weak self.

“Next time, I will swim properly.”

Nao abruptly draws a breath.

“Natsuya has a childish side to him, too, so he was just being stubborn, but that has no meaning at all. — I get it. I’ll tell him.”

“— No, next time I will swim it all.”

Nao’s smile disappeared from Haruka’s strong tone. Makoto, Ikuya and Asahi also look at Haruka. While knowing that they’re looking at him, he doesn’t avert his gaze that’s directed at Nao.

“Haru, Nao-senpai’ll say it for you, so.....”

“I’ll swim—, all of it!”

Haruka’s strong intention pushes aside Makoto’s words. He didn’t want to be someone who people are concerned about. He swims for the sake of that. For the sake of continuing to be his strong self.

By the time they came out of the hospital on the cape, the sun was beginning to sink to the west. If they take it easy, it seems like they’ll end up going past when it’s time to leave school. Haruka and the others hurried on the way back.

Other than the occasional bus passing by, it’s a road that cars mostly don’t pass on. Thanks to that, they were able to concentrate on running. He wanted to think only about running. Chasing away both Nao and swimming from his head now.

All of a sudden, words escape from Ikuya’s mouth.

“I’m,no good.”

His rough breathing is mixed with it.

“When I’m about to lose,I become unable to take it anymore.”

“..... Ikuya-kun.”

Makoto spoke his name, hoping to console him.

“Being teased or something,is no good either.”

Waves crashing against the rock reef, the sea water containing air turns into foam and scatters.

“Being scolded,is no good either.”

The flock of sea birds that were resting their wings on that rock reef took flight simultaneously.

“I can’t,control it on my own.”

They approach the slope’s steep uphill part.

“Even when I’m playing,I get angry and go home.”

‘25% slope’ was on the sign.

“Because I’m like that, I can’t make friends, either.”

Rather than running, the sensation is closer to crawling.

“Natsu-nii,abandoned me, too.”

As if to mock them, a bus passes by.

“Before long,Satomi, too.”

His muscles screamed before the peak.

“I-Ikuya-kun. It’s... all... right.”

If he’s in pain, Makoto should also stay quiet and run, he thinks. Just how good-natured is he?

“So—”

He’s impressed that he can still talk.

“So, I’llbe like Nanase.”

His name coming up out of the blue, Haruka felt like his knees were about to give in.

“Facing forward,I’ll r-u-n!”

They overcame the peak at last. He was in so much pain that it seemed like he could hear an auditory hallucination. So that he wouldn’t have to hear any more unnecessary things, Haruka accelerated on the descent.

He only heard the sound of cutting through the wind.

He thought it was fine like that.

☆

By the time they had returned to the school, the announcement urging them that it’s time to leave school was already airing. All four of them were heaving their shoulders with their breathing while they were drenched in so much sweat that you’d think they had ran through a downpour. When they went up to the pool with their breathing still rough like that, Natsuya stood there with his arms folded.

“Why, that was quick. I was just thinking of carrying all your stuff to the school gate now. Hahaha.”

After laughing carefreely, he looks at each of the four’s faces, who were still gasping for breath.

“It looks like you ran seriously. Well done, well done. It’s already time to leave school, so hurry up and go change.”

“Uissu!Haa haa.”

Asahi walks to changing room, Ikuya and Haruka follow after him.

Makoto—, kept facing Natsuya.

In his rough breathing, Makoto stood face to face with Natsuya. His feelings solidified when they were running. He has to say it no matter what. He had resolved himself that he has to say it now.

Haruka calls out to Makoto.

“Let’s go, Makoto.”

“Go on ahead. Haa haa. I’ll go right after reporting to the captain.”

He answers, keeping his gaze directed towards Natsuya. After waiting for Haruka’s presence to disappear into the changing room, Makoto brought up the subject to Natsuya.

“Why, did you push away Ikuya-kun? Haa haa.”

Keeping his arms folded, Natsuya was looking at Makoto. Almost as if he were waiting for Makoto to regain his breath. ‘It has nothing to do with you.’ If he were told that, that’s all there is to it. However, still looking Makoto in the eye, Natsuya answered head-on.

“It’s to— make him stronger.”

“That’s a lie. Haa. You ran away. Haa haa.”

Makoto’s breathing becomes rough again. Apart from running, hot breath wells up from deep within his chest.

“.....Maybe. When I’m by his side, I sometimes think that I might get hit at any moment. Maybe I was running away from myself. But it’s also true that I thought he’d become independent if I did that.”

“But, haa, that’s precisely why, you shouldn’t have pushed him away. Haa haa.”

“What would’ve been better, what would’ve been better to do, no one knows that. But, in the end, nothing has changed, so it might be just as Tachibana said.”

Makoto edges up to Natsuya.

“Wrong—. Captain, you don’t understand anything. Ikuya-kun’s trying to change. He’s trying to move forward.”

Natsuya undoes his folded arms.

“Forward.....?”

“Ikuya-kun is trying to break out of his shell. He is trying to become companions with us!”

“Ikuya is.....”

“If I were pushed away from Haru, if it would turn into that, I’m sure that I wouldn’t know what I should do anymore. Feeling disheartened, I might end up crying. I might blame Haru as to why it happened.I know very well that I’m depending on Haru, but..... but, because of that, I want to become a strong person who may be relied on by someone. Ikuya-kun’s trying to become strong, too. I’m sure that we become strong while relying and being relied on. After all, we’re already companions, so—”

Natsuya turns his back to Makoto and puts his hand on his waist. The evening sun sinking, a scarlet light shone on Natsuya's back.

"That's why,that's why, please properly accept Ikuya-kun head-on!"

Makoto bows his head to Natsuya's back. Keeping his hands on his waist, Natsuya sniffed once.

"I got it. I'll face him properly.Tachibana."

Called by his name, Makoto lifts his face.

"Yes."

"Ikuya, I'll entrust Ikuya to you.To think, that he could..... make friends....."

After that, he just stood still without a word, exposing his trembling back to the setting sun.

☆

"You see, even though I started club activities thinking that I'll make tons of memories, I'm swimming to get faster again."

When Haruka left the changing room carrying Makoto's stuff, he joined up with Aki there. While being suspicious of Natsuya standing still with his back turned, he instinctively judged that it'd be better not to get involved, he gave Makoto his stuff and urged him on by saying "let's go home". In the end, it turned out that Makoto will go home in his sweat-drenched jersey, so he ended up stuffing his change of clothes into his bag.

"Even though I quit the Swimming Club because it wasn't fun to always think about swimming fast."

"You mean you aren't having fun now?"

Makoto asks, reeking of sweat.

"I don't know. I wonder what it means to swim and have fun. How is it for the senpais? Even though they lost so much in the competition, they laughed on the way back. Weren't they frustrated?"

He remembers walking on the hill road with the sunlight filtering through the trees, while being drenched in humiliation. It wasn't just Haruka. Most club members were walking in silence. However, it's not that everyone was walking with few words spoken. Occasionally, it was moderate, but he could hear voices having a pleasant chat, too.

"Of course, they must've been frustrated. But, doesn't it mean that winning isn't everything?"

"You mean that they're satisfied just by swimming?"

"It's not like that, I think it's that we could properly put forth all the practicing we did until now in the match. Crowding together in a cramped space, being mindful of each other, being considerate, encouraging each other. Doing it like that, we all tried our best."

He wonders if that's fun. If they swim wishing for such a thing. Maybe that's as good as it gets for things like club activities.

"That's just constraining and stifling."

Unable to even swallow the words that came out of his mouth without thinking, Haruka turned his face away from Makoto and Aki.

"Aah, I see—"

Aki said while breathing out the air in her chest, facing the sky.

"That's right, huh. It's as Tachibana-kun and Nanase-kun said."

Unable to grasp the meaning of her words, he looked at Aki's face without thinking. Haruka contradicted what Makoto had said. How could she have interpreted that? Aki was looking at the sky with a smile still on her face.

"I remembered. That relay. I was uneasy, but I could become strong if I was together with everyone. Companions—"

Aki directs her smile from the sky towards Haruka and Makoto.

"Even when it's constraining and stifling, — companions are warm, aren't they?"

Slightly early, the sunflowers bloomed.

While running on the winding road alongside the coast, Haruka was heading for the hospital on the cape. He's not alone. Makkou's with him, too. Because of that, his pace is faster than yesterday.

There was no school today and club practices were finished in the morning. So then, after going home and changing into his jersey, he decided to run and take Makkou along with him.

On the way home yesterday, he had accelerated, intending to leave Asahi and Ikuya behind. In spite of that, they caught up to him right away. He had clearly felt that he's lacking in stamina. Thinking that he'll take the same road if he's running anyways, he thought that he'll visit Nao if he's going until the hospital on the cape anyways. That's all it is.

Having tied Makkou outside the hospital, when he peeks into the hospital room after he regains his breath, Nao greeted him with a fair-skinned smile. Neither surprised, nor his expression seeming like it was unexpected, he was just quietly laughing. Then, without saying 'thanks for coming' or asking 'alone?', he got down from the bed, and signaling 'come with me' with his eyes, he began to walk with steps like a cat's.

When they sat down on the sofa in the lounge, he offered him candy. He doesn't even ask 'want some?'. After lightly bowing his head, Haruka takes one and tosses it into his mouth. A sour taste that was somewhere between lemon and orange spread.

"It sure is easy to be with Haruka."

Those were the words he uttered at last. He looks at Nao while tasting the candy, rolling it around.

“I don’t have to be concerned about you, you don’t make pointless conversation, you’re quick on the uptake.”

Once again, he rolls it around in his mouth and makes a sound with it instead of replying.

“The treatment is this evening. Until then, I was told not to exert my eyes, so I can’t read a book, I was just about to get bored.”

Like finding a ship when one needs to cross, a friend in need, or perhaps a moth flying into the flame — it’s something like that.

“Haruka, put your hand out for a bit.”

He holds out his right hand as he’s told. Nao takes his hand and turns his palm upwards. Could he be intending to read his palm or something?

“I’m going to push down Haruka’s hand with my index finger, so try stopping it.”

He wonders what kind of game this is. However, his opponent is Nao. He focuses his mind.

“Here I go.”

As soon as Nao says it, Haruka was dragged down from the sofa. It wasn’t his hand that was pushed, or his shoulder that dropped, his entire body was dragged down. He looks up at Nao’s face. He was laughing.

“This is aikido’s ‘breathing power’ technique, where you change your weight into strength. Just now, I put my entire body weight into my index finger.”

That explains the reason why he can’t support it with just half an arm. He doesn’t know what kind of principle it is, though.....

Haruka looked at his hand while sitting back on the sofa.

“It’s not muscle strength or anything like that, you turn your heart and body into one. Your own weight as well your opponent’s strength, by making use of it all, you don’t use any excess strength at all. That’s the basics of aikido, you see.”

“My strength? Just now, I only put out my hand—”

“You put in effort so you wouldn’t be pushed, didn’t you? If Haruka hadn’t resisted, I wouldn’t have been able to push you.”

“Ah.....”

Oh, he gets it now. Indeed, he was bracing himself.

“There’s something called ‘spirit of harmony’ in aikido, if you become one with everything in the universe, you can feel the flow of ‘energy’. For the sake of that, by throwing away all your desires and fixations, you have to lose your own self, you see.”

“That’s the ‘selflessness’”

“Quick on the uptake, huh. But what the ‘spirit of harmony’ seeks is beyond that. ‘Making a man live without fighting.’ There are no desires or fixations, so there’s no need to fight, either. That’s why there aren’t any competitive matches for aikido. Not winning or losing, it’s a type of martial arts where you pursue your own self. That’s aikido.”

“..... It resembles the ‘one-to-one fight’.”

“Haruka, you really are quick on the uptake. The ‘one-to-one fight’ is unrelated to victory and defeat as well, because its goal is to acknowledge each other by praising each other’s efforts. After trying it, what did you think? About the ‘one-to-one fight’.”

After the competition, Shouta came back to the swim club. However, he hasn’t spoken a single word to Haruka. It’s not like he’s avoiding him. It’s just that there was no need for it. If he were to be asked if the mentality of the ‘one-to-one fight’ is being reflected by that, it seems to not be the case. For both Haruka and Shouta.....

“I don’t know, yet.”

“Right. Even I, who had set it up, am still not sure if it was a good thing to do or not.”

— Set it up?

“When Shouta said that he wanted to do the ‘circuit’ with Ikuya as well, I was already thinking that there’s no choice but to do a ‘one-to-one fight’. If he does a ‘circuit’ with a first year twice, voices within the club saying that it’s ‘bullying’ may or may not arise, too. In the sense of overcoming that as well, I thought that it had to be done.”

It’s not that Shouta had wished for the ‘one-to-one fight’—.

However, if that’s the case, wouldn’t it have been better if he hadn’t consented to the ‘circuit’ from the start?

“You could even say that Asahi not swimming the free without a reason certainly disturbs the harmony of the group. Like Haruka, if he had said it when he joined the club, something could’ve been done about it though..... If I were to reject that request, the third years would’ve ended up sticking up for the first years. It would’ve been fine if we’d always be here, but we won’t be next year. When that happens, they’ll move up to being third and second years, still at odds with each other. That absolutely won’t do. It sets a bad example to the new first years, too, and it’ll affect the club’s survival.”

Oh, he gets it now. That’s why he consented to the ‘circuit’.

“However, I intended to shoulder all the responsibility. No matter what the outcome is, properly following up on it is the role of us third years. That’s what I thought. But I never expected that Asahi can’t swim the free..... It would’ve been better if he had told us properly. —After that, I went to Asahi’s house.”

Does he mean that he made a home visitation? That explains why Asahi’s revival was fast.

"I properly followed up after Ikuya in the same way, too. Because I thought Natsuya wouldn't do anything anyways."

"Yazaki-senpai too.....?"

"I intended..... to have followed up. Shouta was my mistake. After that swimming of Haruka's was showed off to him, nothing I said would've reached his ears. My follow up was..... lenient."

Nao tightly closes his lips and his gaze drops to his own hand. He tightly clenched that hand.

"My swimming?"

When Haruka asks, Nao lifts his face and shows a smile. A smile that's a little more clouded than usual.....

"Since it had completely dazzled everyone's eyes. Not because it's fast or anything of the sort, I guess you can say it's a kind of swimming that attracts people, in any case, it wasn't ordinary. Captivating everyone, so much that they even forgot to clap."

"My..... swimming did?"

It wasn't that they had lost their voice from the cruel spectacle—.

"It's no wonder that Shouta was impatient after swimming against something like that. I don't remember when, but one time, I had talked to him about a training method in Australia where they swim against a flowing pool. Shouta remembered that, huh....."

"Because of me, Yazaki-senpai had—"

It's not just Shouta. Asahi being unable to swim the free, the 'darkness' haunting Ikuya's heart, all of it is caused by Haruka. Even Makoto told him that he wants to go to a place where Haruka isn't. He might be that kind of existence. Just by being there, he ends up hurting someone. The 'darkness' inside of him ends up cornering people. There's no need for him to be fixated on the likes of the swim club. There are several other places to swim. Even if he can't swim, it's not really.....

Haruka crushed the candy that had gotten small before he knew it with his molars.

"It's not Haruka's fault. It's my fault."

Nao says quietly, then with remorse in it. Even his clouded smile was gone already.

"I thought that by doing the 'one-to-one fight', if they revealed everything, they can become serious. I thought Shouta would properly acknowledge his own capabilities and he'd start again from there. The senpai-kouhai relationship isn't about being fast or slow. It's not formed by something like that. It's about what sort of experience you accumulate, what sort of hardships you overcome. That's what true strength is. I thought of wanting Shouta to learn that, too. But, my follow up was lenient. That's my responsibility."

Nao bites his lip and turns his eyes down from the deep regret. However, no matter how much Nao feels that the responsibility is his, no matter how much he regrets it, it can't wipe away the blame within Haruka towards himself.

“I thought that for swimming, it’s fine to swim as I please. That it’s enough if I can swim the way I like.But, in that cramped pool, if everyone ends up doing that, there’s no way it’d turn into practice. Doing club activities, understanding stuff like acting as a group, and even so there’s me who only swims free.....”

“It’s okay. You don’t have to worry about that. If you’re fixated, stick with it. You should make those around you acknowledge it with the strength of that conviction. Well, just that swimming is enough for it.”

“..... But, it’s my fault that both Asahi and Ikuya—”

“How is it for Haruka?”

To block Haruka’s words, Nao overlapped him with a strong tone.

“Doesn’t Haruka need them?”

“..... I don’t know.”

“It’s easy to run away. All you have to do is turn your back and throw away everything. It ends with that. But, try accepting it just a little. Then, have them accept it.”

It’s what Haruka feels from the water. It’s not becoming one body, nor understanding each other. Just accepting each other’s existence—.

Nao suddenly smiles.

“But, the truth is that I’m hesitant, too. Seeing that swimming of Haruka’s, wondering if the way you swam until now really was better..... Your talent, it’s more than a swim club—”

“I—, will swim with the biaxial!”

Looking at Nao’s eyes, Haruka said clearly. Clearly, for the sake of conveying that this is his own intention. For the sake of conveying to himself the strong intention that he won’t hesitate anymore.

With a soft smile, Nao nodded. With an endlessly kind, soft smile that seems to envelop Haruka’s strong intention in its entirety.



Chapter 10 – Feel

— Before practice begins, I'd like you to come to the back of the pool.

Summoned by Ikuya, Haruka unwillingly walked after Makoto and Asahi with a reluctant expression. It's bound to be something bothersome anyways. It stank of the presentiment that he'll get caught up in something useless.

When they went to the back of the pool, Ikuya was standing there with a serious face. There's a hole dug at his feet, and a cookie tin is placed inside it with its lid off. And a bunch of photos in Ikuya's hand.

"Everyone, thanks for coming. Now, I'm going to break away from the past. So, I'd like you to see it through."

Oh dear. Just as Nao had told him, it seems that he's intending to reveal himself. He leaves the complaining to Asahi.

"Why do we gotta see it through? S'thing like this."

"Aren't we in the same first year boys' group?"

Ikuya's long eyelashes quiver.

"Like I care. Do it alone!"

Makoto grabbing his arm as he tries to turn on his heels, Asahi grimaced.

"All right, Ikuya-kun. We'll see it through properly."

From Makoto's words, Ikuya's stiff expression suddenly softens.

"Okay."

Ikuya puts one photo into the cookie tin.

"Sports day."

Then, he puts in another one and another one.

"Amusement park. Playing in the sand. Bath. New Year's. Kite flying....."

There were three people in every photo.

"This is a photo of when Natsu-nii won a competition for the first time. This is when Satomi's essay won a prize. And this is when my picture got the Mayor's Prize."

It was a photo where they were holding a portrait of the three of them. Each of these are probably filled with memories, he thinks. He understands the sentiment, but couldn't he put them all in at once? Also, he thinks that Makoto doesn't need to nod after every single one.

"I thought that it's enough if the three of us are together. I thought that I can live with just the three of us. I thought that I didn't need anyone else. I thought that I... don't need something like friends."

While saying that, he puts in photos one by one. Watermelon splitting, and a photo of eating that watermelon. Tanabata, fireworks, the Milky Way. The stars don't show on it, but it was written as such on the border of the photo.

"But, I've decided to stop being fixated on the past."

Pancakes, ice cream, *takoyaki*.

"From now on, only forward—"

Snowman, snow hut, snowball fight.

"I'm going to gaze at only the future!"

Photo of a pool.

"And when I graduate, the me who has grown will dig up these photos!"

Photo of a pool. Then, a photo of a pool again.

"Me, who'll have grown enough that everyone can laugh away that I used to be fixated on the past—"

Putting a close-up of the three of them in last, he puts the lid onto those smiles. While making the ends of his long eyelashes glimmer just a little, Ikuya covers the cookie tin with dirt.

Makoto is watching over Ikuya with a kind look in his eyes.

Perhaps because he was influenced by Ikuya's ceremony, Asahi is unusually tight-lipped with an earnest look on his face. All of a sudden, that Asahi raised his voice.

"I—. I overtook Haru in the medley, ya know."

He's been told many times.

"Then, in the semifinals, Haru overtook me..... At that time, I didn't understand what I was overtaken by, at first. It sounds weird, but I really thought so."

Ikuya looks up at Asahi with wet eyelashes and Makoto gently releases Asahi's arm.

"When I was overtaken, Haru's lane shined. Some kind of big light came at an incredible speed, I was overtaken like *pchoo*, I got surprised, swallowed water, sank cuz of it, and pee—....., forfeited....."

Asahi doesn't look at Haruka's face. He wouldn't look.

"Uncool and miserable, I was ashamed to look everyone in the face,and then, I became unable to swim the free."

— It's your fault!

It felt like he's shouting that again.

"Until I become able to swim it again, I'm not going back to Bandou SC.I can't go back."

Ikuya had finished covering it with dirt, and as he's about to say something while standing up, he swallows it. Perhaps it was consolation, or sympathy, or maybe words that he was about to direct towards Haruka.

— It's your fault.

Ikuya's voice that sounded like a spell is revived in his ears.

"I played hooky a lot to begin with, so, probably no one's worried, I'm sure they think it's just as usual."

The feeling that he wants them to think that is in his words.

"Ya know, I was pretty good in the SC, even if I didn't practice much. I didn't remain until the finals, but I thought it's fine like that and doesn't really matter. There's a name for this kind of thing, right?"

King of the castle. Frog in a well. Planarian stuck to a rock.

"At the competition, Sakuyuki told me. Why do I continue swimming even though I've become unable to swim. Why do I continue, for someone who hates practice.I don't know why, either. He told me to come to practice if I like swimming, but I don't really get it.I can't remember the first time I swam the free. I wonder how I swam it. I wonder what I should do so I can swim it again....."

Asahi drops his gaze onto the soil where Ikuya had buried it. Makoto gently put his hand on his back.

"Sometimes, I become unable to swim, too."

Asahi and Ikuya direct their eyes towards Makoto. Raising his brows, Makoto was showing a good-natured smile.

"I get hopelessly afraid of the water, and when that happens, I become unable to swim anymore."

Makoto's hand leaves Asahi's back, and he tightly grabs onto just the bottom edge of Haruka's clothes.

"You know, a little while ago, too, the rubber boat my siblings were riding in was carried away by the sea..... But, I was scared and couldn't go save them....."

Still smiling, Makoto's grip gets stronger.

"In the end, Haru saved them for me. I can't do anything unless Haru's there."

After tightly gripping once more, Makoto releases his hand and directs his gaze toward Haruka.

— Haru, what do you think?

Makoto asks a question. He can't answer. He doesn't understand anything about Makoto.

Asahi looks at Haruka while the wind makes his spiky hair sway.

— Haru, why do you swim?

If there's a reason for swimming, he's given it up long ago.

Ikuya stares at Haruka, with light still gathered on his long eyelashes.

— Nanase, where are you trying to move towards?

He doesn't know if there's anything beyond swimming. He's just swimming, feeling the water.

While understanding that the three of them are asking him questions, Haruka turned to the side and averted his gaze. He thinks it's ridiculous. He doesn't know what they're expecting, but he's getting the worst of a stray blow. He got caught up in quite the confession tournament. —He can't go along with it.

“Makoto, let's go to practice.”

Only saying that much, Haruka turned around on his heels and started to walk.

“.....Haru.”

While hearing the sound of Makoto's footsteps coming along with him, he felt it on his back that the other two were standing still. If they want to be there, they can stay there until they're satisfied. It has nothing to do with him.





On the way home after practice, perhaps because she had sensed Ikuya's refreshed mood, Satomi asked somewhat delightfully.

"What happened? Ikuya-kun."

"What?"

He says on purpose. It's showing on his face, he himself knows that much.

"Did something good happen?"

It did. His new self took a step and his companions accepted that from him, he thinks. Probably.....

"I decided to become strong. I vowed that to Nanase and the others today."

Satomi smiled from Ikuya's words bubbling with hope.

"Really? I'm happy. You finally came back to being the Ikuya-kun you used to be. Aiming for the Olympics with Natsu-nii—"

She was about to say 'Like you did back then', then swallows her words.

"I am. Because it's our dream, right? For the three of us."

"—Yeah!"

Satomi replied vigorously and cheerfully. It really is good when Satomi's cheerful, he thinks. A sunken expression doesn't suit her. However, it's none other than Ikuya himself who had made her make such an expression. At the same time as feeling a pain in his chest when he thinks about it, he felt something like a sense of duty welling up that he must protect that smile.

"For the sake of that, I left the past behind."

"The past?"

"I buried old photos behind the pool."

"Photos?"

"Photos with the three of us in them. I've stopped being fixated on the world that was just the three of us. From now on, I'll walk with my new companions—"

"What kind of photos?"

Satomi's words cover the end of Ikuya's sentence.

"Uhm, like the sports day, the summer festival, the pool, the bath."

"—Bath?"

Satomi's expression becomes clouded and she stops.

"When we were little, we often went in together, didn't we? It's a picture from then."

Ikuya stops as well and directs a smile towards Satomi.

“Nanase-kun and the others saw that?”

“Yeah. Everyone saw it through. That’s why we’re already companions—”

Before he finished saying it, all of a sudden Satomi’s open hand flew at him.

“Idiot!”

Her dry voice echoes and Ikuya holds his cheek. Without even knowing what happened, Satomi suddenly began to run towards the school. Still holding his cheek, Ikuya watched Satomi’s retreating figure for a while, but concluding at last that Satomi must be in a bad mood today, he decided to go home alone.

The Ikuya at this time had no way of knowing that another day, he’ll be standing still at the back of the pool, having discovered the tin’s dug up hole.

☆

“Captain!”

When Asahi ran up to him while shouting, Natsuya turned around with a sun-tanned smile.

“Ohh, it’s Asahi.”

“Can we go home together?”*

It was the first time Asahi went along with Natsuya on the way home. He had several chances, but being reserved taking precedence after all, he couldn’t really muster the courage for it. However, he has a just cause today. He had something that he must report to Natsuya.

“That’s rare. What happened?”

Asahi looked up at Natsuya while he’s gasping for breath.

“There’s something I have to tell Captain, no matter what. The truth is, today—”

When Asahi talked about Ikuya, Natsuya turned his face away, pressing the inner corner of his eye.

“Ikuya..... to you guys.....”

“Yes. It’s kinda like he’s matured— Huh? Captain, you crying?”*

“I-idiot. There’s no way..... I’d cry.”

“You *are* crying. Your voice’s choked up.”*

“..... Don’t tell Ikuya.”

“Alright, but in exchange, can I run together with Captain for the noon training?”*

Even after becoming able to swim in the pool, Natsuya doesn’t miss out on the training during the lunch break. Nowadays, he’s gotten so famous that there isn’t a single first year who doesn’t know him.

“Like Captain, I wanna get the girls’ attention, too!”*

In spite of it being an extremely impure motive, Natsuya’s consent came easily. Although it was a dirty trick that took advantage of his weakness, with no self-awareness of it to begin with, Asahi was innocently frolicking with a *yahhoo*.

☆

While walking on the road that runs parallel to Minogaseyama’s ridgeline, he found the blue buds of hydrangeas beneath the eaves. When he looks up, while thinking it’s that season already, a swallow was trying to build a nest on the edge of the eaves. In the sky, swallows that held straws in their beaks are restlessly flying about. While looking at the swallow cutting through the wind, Haruka was hazily remembering the way home from the hospital.

While cutting through the wind coming from the sea, the four of them were running. Even though it’s not like they were competing for something, they ran with full force. When he thinks of that, he laughs at it, though it’s quite late now. That it’s almost as if they were like children.

“Hey, Haru—”

Suddenly, Makoto calls for him and he returns to reality.

“Don’t you think that we’re like water?”

Makoto says while following the swallow with his eyes.

“With no defined shape or anything, it can change in any way it wants. Waves rise just by the wind blowing, it becomes disturbed while it raises small splashes, but while mixing together and clashing together, it creates a single shape.”

Unconsciously, Haruka was following the swallow with his eyes, too.

“I thought that unless Rin and Nagisa are there, we can’t do something like that ultimate swimming anymore. That even if we’re on the same team, we wouldn’t be able to have the same feelings.”

Speeding up so much that he can’t follow it with his eyes when it comes close, it disappears from his field of vision.

“But, that’s just forcibly trying to decide my own shape, isn’t it?”

How many swallows could there be in this sky? After it disappears from his field of vision, it appears anew again.

“If we’re water, there’s no need to be fixated on shape. If we’re water, I’m sure, that with Asahi and Ikuya-kun, we can become the greatest team—”

While replacing each other, mingling together, they’re flying around right and left.

“That’s what I think.”

Makoto squints his eyes at the sky. What sort of future could he be drawing in this sky? What sort of dreams could he be laying over these swallows flying in the sky?

All of a sudden, he thought that the swallows restlessly flying around were like themselves. Both the future and dreams, they might be beyond the point where they flew around until their endurance ran out. What it's shaped like, what it smells like, what its touch is like, he doesn't know yet, but.....

While looking up at the sky sparkling from the light of early summer, Haruka squinted his eyes just like Makoto.

☆

After Sunday's practice ended, Haruka and the others were in the gym. Kisumi was taking part in a basketball game, so Makoto forced them to accompany him. Asahi got entangled into it as well, he's standing beside Haruka with a sour face.

In the practice for the relay's exchange, they dived in over 50 times. They've long surpassed the limits of their endurance. No wonder that Asahi's grumbling about wanting to hurry up and go home. Ikuya had something to take care of, so he cleverly succeeded at escaping with Satomi.

Making their reaction time '0'. That was the day's task. Capturing the rhythm of the partner you're doing the exchange with, it's practice where they measure the timing for starting. A delay of 0.7 seconds comes up if you began the movements after the touch. If there are three of those exchanges, the loss becomes 2.1 seconds.

For the relay, there's no need to be at a standstill at the time of the exchange, it's okay to build up momentum, but if you build up too much momentum, there was also the possibility that the start's timing will be slightly off. You can save about 0.2 seconds by building up momentum, but if it ends up being slightly off, it'll end up losing its meaning. Nao's theory was that if that's the case, it's more reliable to reduce the reaction time to '0'. Anyway, they repeated the 25m x 4 relay over 50 times, while being conscious of entering the water by matching their timing, rather than diving in farther or diving in stronger. His endurance as well as his nerves had ended up being thoroughly worn down. He doesn't have any spare energy left to be interested in Kisumi's basketball.

"Kisumi came to cheer for us, didn't he?"

Says Makoto. He has no recollection of asking him to do so.

"Uwah, a shot got in again. They suck."

It's only natural that Asahi grumbles. In just the first half, they're down by about half as many points. Ahead of the game between the regulars, they're holding an exhibition match with the first years, but the difference in their abilities is too much. They're unable to do anything right, not the dribbles, not passes, not the shoots. On top of that, Kisumi was completely isolated. No one passes to him.

"Go, go, let's go."

"Go, go, kiss me."

"Please, love me."

"Please, kiss me."

"Geh. What's with that gross cheering? If it was me, I'd die of embarrassment."

Unusually, his opinion was identical to Asahi's. It seem that the girls in the class had all established a cheering squad for Kisumi.

"Look, Kisumi cut into the ball's way."

Makoto says happily. However, the outcome has long been decided. No one's trying to run any more. Kisumi's the only one who's enthusiastic about it. Even if he rushes into the drive-in, his allies aren't coming. If he waits, he'll only be surrounded by the enemy. So he attacks by force as a last resort. He's clearly asking for a foul, but only the ball was beautifully taken from him and Kisumi fell over, drawing attention to himself.

Standing up right away, he turns to defense. His opponent doesn't hurry to attack any more. He goes up, while leisurely making the pass. Kisumi leaps into that pass and strikes the ball. The ball went bouncing in the court. Kisumi chases after it. Somehow catching up to it, he shifts into the attack like that, but he's blocked again and falls down, drawing attention to himself. Then, he stands up again and chases the ball. He's running out of breath, his feet trip up.

"Kisumiii!"

It was Asahi.

"Kisumiii! Ruuun!"

His breathing rough, Kisumi looks at Asahi.

"Run! Ruuun, Kisumiii!"

Kisumi nods with a fresh smile playing on his lips. Then he chased the ball while making his silky hair sway.

The shot his opponent threw missed. Kisumi seizes that ball—

Stretching his arm out even while he topples, he somehow keeps it.

"Kisumi, over here!"

Kisumi sends the pass towards the voice without hesitation and he struck his body hard. Kisumi tumbles down onto the floor.

And yet he somehow tries to stand up while grimacing from the pain. After the ball that Kisumi sent was passed through three times, it was sucked into the hoop.

"Hey Kisumi! You did it!"

When Asahi leans forward and waves his hand, Kisumi replied by showing the whites of his teeth.

"Haru, look."

Where Makoto's gaze was pointing to, Kisumi was exchanging high-fives with his teammates.

"They became a real team, huh? Kisumi and the others."

"Aah."

He nods to Makoto's words. It felt like he understood a little why Kisumi is playing basketball.

Chapter 11 – Believe

Asahi shoveled in his 'fried rice bento' with tremendous force, and stood up with his cheeks stuffed like a squirrel's.

"Starting today, I'm doin' the noon training."

He sends grains of rice flying while putting away his bento. He'd like him to say it after eating. No, before that, he wants him to stop eating here. If he's in a hurry, he should've eaten at his own seat.

"See you later."

"Yeah."

Kisumi waves his hand with a smile and after he watches Asahi leave, he asked Haruka.

"Noon training?"

"The swim club's land training. Makoto does muscle training and stuff, too."

"What about Haru?"

He wouldn't have minded if he could swim, but he has no interest in training on land.

"I've got library committee member stuff."

"But you're not on duty today, are you?"

"I write the book report in the library room."

"Wow, book report? Looking forward to it. The one for 'The Old Man and the Sea' before was awesome. Starting from 'I can only say that it's wasted effort', and rounding it off with 'it's something an old man shouldn't do', it's just what you'd expect from Haru."

Nao published it in the 'News from the Library Room'.

"Even though you're not praising it at all, it sure put me in the mood to read it."

Thanks to it, 'The Old Man and the Sea' has been completely reserved for the next three months.

"What book is it for today?"

"Lemon." [Short story by Kajii Motojirou]

"Ohh. So, what'll you write in the book report?"

More importantly, he's been curious about Kisumi's bento for a while now. Tomato sauce on something that looks like chicken. In that sauce, finely chopped onions and something green. It's not the 'avocado' from before.....

"This? It's chicken sauté. The green is pickles."

Kisumi put up a screen with his own body and he dealt out a portion for him on his bento's lid while making sure that the others wouldn't see.

"Now, quick!"

An odd sense of urgency hangs in the air.

"Okay."

Since he went through the trouble, he decided to try eating it. The chicken was kept on fire until it was slightly burned, so even though the exterior is crisp, the inside is juicy. Although it felt like the tomato sauce is somewhat sweet, it's enough to match the sourness of the pickles well. —It's good.

"Delicious, right?"

"Yeah."

"—So, what'll you write in the book report?"

"If you're going to fantasize, do it at home'."

Kisumi giggled.

All of a sudden, the voices of the girls eating their bentos by the window came rushing into Haruka's ears.

"He's running again."

He knows without looking out the window. It's Natsuya.

"I heard he's the swim club's captain."

"Even though it's so hot, it's a wonder how he runs, huh."

"Really, just looking at him makes me feel like I'm roasting."

"Nowadays, being hot-blooded's not popular."

"Annooooying."

Oh, he gets it now. It looks like there's a big disparity between society's values and Asahi's values.

"Look, look. Another person came."

"Annooooying. Even though one is roasting enough, they're increasing."

"At this rate, what'll we do if they keep increasing?"

"Uwaah, I couldn't stand that."

"Hey, isn't that our idiot?"

"It really is."

"You mean he's annoying, for an idiot?"

“This sucks!”

Hang in there, Asahi—.

“Nanase-kun’s going to the library room, too?”

After he finished eating his bento and wiped off his desk, he was about to leave the classroom holding the writing paper and the book when Satomi called out and stopped him.

“Let’s go together.”

Satomi holds up and shows him her writing paper and book. It was titled ‘The Grave of the Wild Chrysanthemum’ [in English: The Wild Daisy, written by Itou Sachio]. Looking at the ‘grave’ in the title, it’s probably a book that moves you to tears. Since Satomi’s reading it, it can’t possibly be horror, he thinks.

While walking in the hallway, Satomi looks at Haruka’s book and asks.

“How do you read it?” [The book’s title is written in complicated kanji that Satomi doesn’t recognize.]

“‘Lemon’.”

“Wow, another book that looks difficult, huh. Is that person famous?”

He doesn’t know.

“They’re already dead.”

“.....”

They walked in silence for a while, but Satomi opened her mouth again as they were climbing up the stairs.

“You know, Ikuya-kun’s really looking forward to the next tournament.”

The topic changed from ‘Lemon’ to Ikuya.

“After practice, if he has even a little time, he goes to Bandou SC.”

It seems likely that that’s why he turned down going to cheer for Kisumi.

“Looking at Ikuya-kun, I started thinking that I can’t let myself lose, either—”

Could she be swimming at Bandou SC? However—.

“Didn’t you quit?”

Satomi shakes her head a little.

“I didn’t. I couldn’t really leave Ikuya-kun to be alone, so I couldn’t quit.”

“Then, why?”

Why did she say that she quit at that time?

“Natsu-nii told me to. To swim in the swim club for a while. I was very hesitant, but I kept telling myself that it’s for Ikuya-kun’s sake..... But while I was watching Ikuya-kun be with Nanase-kun and the others, I realized that it was wrong.”

“Why?”

“Because, he’s so lively there. Ikuya-kun’s a little awkward, he closes off his heart because he hates people, but that’s not it, I think he’s just timid a little. Because if he has people like Nanase-kun and the others, who’ll understand him properly, even he can make friends.”

Properly..... That’s pretty questionable. Besides, when did they become friends?

“Even without thinking about making him stronger by pushing him away, I realized that Ikuya-kun’s getting stronger little by little and that I don’t need to worry or anything. That it’s okay, little by little, little by little—”

Satomi finishes climbing the stairs and shows Haruka a smile while lightly panting. Only as if to say “I can’t let myself lose, either”.

While walking in the hallway side by side, they happen to pass by the front of the home economics room. Through the open door, he saw Tomo climbing up the stepladder. Could she be trying to get a pot or something again? If they use it frequently, they should just store it lower.

“Listen, there’s something I’d like to ask Nanase-kun.....”

When Satomi began speaking to him in a small voice while looking down like she was bashful, all of a sudden, he noticed that the stepladder’s lock was undone, and Haruka went inside the home economics room.

“It’s dangerous if you don’t lock it.”

His timing for speaking was bad. Tomo, who had finally laid her hands on the pot by stretching herself, ended up breaking her balance in the moment she was surprised, and because of that, only one side of the stepladder became loose. Inevitably, the unlocked stepladder opened up, and holding the pot, the only thing Tomo could do now was fall.

Tomo screaming. Haruka breaking into a run. White flour dragged by the pot and taken down. ‘Lemon’ thrown away.

The fall is 1.2m. As long as you don’t hit your head, you won’t get injured too badly. Haruka had judged that he can’t support her with just his arms, so he slid his entire body beneath Tomo. He catches the falling Tomo by making sure to take hold of her shoulders, the pot bounces onto the floor, the white powder flutters. The din of the collapsing stepladder and Satomi’s scream. And, the wheat flour densely enveloping them like it had exploded.

“Are you alright?”

He's supposed to have protected her upper body. Haruka caught Tomo's shoulders in his arms. However, there was a possibility that she hit her legs or waist. Perhaps because she hasn't grasped the situation, Tomo stares at Haruka's face in blank amazement.

".....Nanase-kun....."

"Can you stand?"

"Eh....."

Tomo shifts her eyes to the sight of the white flour fluttering. With that, it seems that she had comprehended the situation she's in at last. Taken aback, she separates herself from Haruka.

"Can you stand?"

Haruka asked again.

".....Yeah."

Tomo stands up. While looking at her do so, Haruka pulled out his right foot from underneath the stepladder.

"Does it hurt anywhere?"

".....No."

He's relieved. He can't stay lying down on the floor forever where the wheat flour is fluttering, so when Haruka tried to stand up as well, a pain ran through nearby his right ankle.

"——ck." [This is the guttural, breath stoppage > half-sound that can't actually be transliterated.]

He involuntarily falls to his knees.

"Nanase-kun!"

Tomo and Satomi shouted at the same time. He curbs Satomi who runs up to him with his right hand.

"I'm alright. I lost my balance a little— ck."

As he tries to stand up, the pain runs through again. This time, he somehow managed to not fall down, but he can't put his body weight onto his right foot.

"The nurse's office! Nanase-kun, the nurse's office!"

Tomo takes Haruka's left hand, she puts it around her shoulder and holds Haruka.

"O-oi. Wait—"

"Nii-san, Nanase-kun's book!"

"Yes."

Without even waiting for Satomi to pick up 'Lemon', Tomo began to walk.

"I can walk on my own, so—"

“Don’t talk! I’ll have you treated right away!”

He ended up being turned into quite the seriously injured patient. At any rate, it seems like Tomo was okay. While walking as he borrowed her shoulder, Haruka was feeling relieved about that. Haruka was taken to the nurse’s office while also feeling relieved that incidentally, that wheat flour hasn’t been used again yet.

By the time club activities began, the pain had already subsided. It seems like the latest poultices are quite effective. When he takes off the bandage, the smell of the salve spread in the changing room.

“Haru, are you alright? What if you went to the hospital?”

Makoto’s meddlesome habit peeks its head out.

“Hey, what’s that?”

Why’s Asahi surprised now, when they’re in the same class?

“Did you break it?”

It seems like Ikuya thinks that you can swim even if you have a broken bone.

“A bruise. It’s better now.”

Haruka took off the poultice and tried taking a look at the spot he hit. It’s turning glaringly blue, but there’s no pain.

“Haru, isn’t it swollen?”

He wants him to stop acting as if he were his guardian.

“It’s nothing.”

“Have them examine it at the hospital.”

As he turns around while thinking that they’re persistent, Nao was standing there. Come to think of it, he had heard that he’s coming to school starting today.

“There’s no pain anymore.”

“It’s swollen, isn’t it?”

“It’s just turning a little blue—”

“What did the school nurse say?”

“.....That it’s a temporary treatment.”

“In that case, go to the hospital.”

The match is close. He can’t take a break because of something like this. He hasn’t even completely mastered the biaxial crawl yet.

“Doesn’t matter, I’m alright.”

“Why is Haruka diagnosing that on his own? Do you have medical knowledge!?”

He’s overwhelmed by Nao’s strong voice. With that, he realized it at last. That Nao’s talking about himself—.

He worsened his condition with an easy self-diagnosis, and he was tormented by strong feelings of regret for half a year. Those feelings were in his voice, and he didn’t let Haruka have a say on the matter.

It was diagnosed as “just a contusion” at the hospital and the same kind of poultice was put on it as in the nurse’s office. Since it was okay for him to swim as long as he didn’t have any pains, he participated in the next day’s practice. When he reports it to Nao, he told him “call it off for today”, and Natsuya was also concerned about him, saying “swim lightly and get out early”.

The match is the day after tomorrow. Harboring an irritation in his chest that was poised between impatience and frustration, Haruka dived into the water.

While being conscious of his center of gravity, he lightly creates a streamline and he lightly begins the dolphin kick. While lightly accepting the water, he lightly tries swimming 1000m with the biaxial crawl.

All of a sudden, he took notice of something. Perhaps because he had swam lightly, perhaps he had succeeded at Sousuke’s ‘2LR stroke’, or perhaps he had merely reached that kind of period. In any case, he had come to realize that he was concentrating too much on the axis. Smoothly performing the transfer of the axis is nothing more than the means of it, not the purpose. The biaxial crawl is for the sake of swimming fast.

When he came back to it, biaxial crawl or not, whatever way of swimming it is, he realized that there’s no change in the fact of “swimming in the water”.

He nearly laughs at such simplicity, even forgetting that he’s swimming.

Suddenly, the water came seeking Haruka. Haruka responds to that and releases his feelings. The water comes rapidly. He doesn’t need to hold back anymore. No bewilderment, either. No hesitation, either. They’re just mutually acknowledging each other. He’s just accepting it, and having himself accepted—.

When Haruka finishes swimming 1000m, a hand was held out to him from the poolside. It’s Ikuya. Beneath his long eyelashes, he speaks curtly.

“Don’t push yourself too much.”

There’s no pain in his foot. There isn’t even any sense of discomfort. The blue bruise is just embarrassingly vivid.

He grabs onto Ikuya’s hand.

“Thanks.”

He may have a small stature, but the force he pulls him up with is strong. It’s proof that his lower body is well-balanced.

“I heard from Satomi. The tale of Nanase’s heroic deed.”

It’s because they spread such rumors that Tomo is feeling down. Each recess, he’d like to become the one asking about her condition.

“Nao-senpai says to get out for today.”

He looks at Nao. It seems like he’s coaching Asahi’s butterfly. He’s impressed that after swimming for only two years, he can coach with just that. Perhaps he likes swimming very much, or perhaps he’s of an inquiring mind. Anyhow, he can’t help but acknowledge the accuracy of his coaching. Their swimming ability is making huge advances.

“Tell Nao-senpai I’m doing just 100m more.”

After entrusting the message to Ikuya, Haruka climbed onto the starting block once more.

“Got it.”

While listening to his curt reply with his back turned, he equips his goggles and cuts into the start. While fluttering in midair, he felt Ikuya’s gaze. It neither bares a sense of rivalry like Rin’s and Sousuke’s, nor was it a sugary gaze like Nagisa’s. Much less like Makoto’s guardian gaze, either. He’s trying to face that something inside of Haruka. That something, which Haruka himself doesn’t understand, either.....

Haruka slipped his body into the water so that he’ll shake off Ikuya’s gaze.

☆

While waiting for Natsuya to finish swimming, Nao was taking shelter in the meagre shade of a tree, so as to avoid the sunshine that has gotten strong. Natsuya’s free is dynamic as usual. With a stroke that used his well-muscled body to the fullest, he was striking the water like he was trying to expel the power he has too much of. Nonetheless, he’s not forgetting the sensitivity that was conscious of the moment, either. Organically mobilizing each and every muscle in his entire body, just for the sake of advancing forward, he’s sublimating that power. That was his way of swimming.

Natsuya, who had finished swimming at last, puts his hand on the poolside and stretches up. His strained muscles reflected the early summer sunshine and made small beads of light scatter. Then, he unashamedly displays his well-tanned body under the sun and he walks up to Nao while he lets countless rays of light drop on him.

—Damn.

He’s flaunting himself, he thinks.

“Don’t slack off. Manager.”

Natsuya shows the whites of his teeth. When Nao holds up his palm, Natsuya bumps it with a snap and splashes scattered.

“Looks like you’re in great shape.”

“I suppose. What about you? The surgery went well, didn’t it?”

“Treatment, not surgery. It’s not whether it went well or not, it was just in case. It’s because Natsuya talks about it in that way that the first years come with a grim expression.”

“I see, my bad. But, thanks to that, you got to talk about all sorts of things, didn’t you?”

Is that what he was aiming for? Or maybe it was the handouts?

“I suppose.”

“It’s because Nao doesn’t talk about himself much.”

It’s not like he was hiding it, but he didn’t really like self-pity or self-glorification.

“That’s not it, though.”

“So, when can you start swimming?”

“Depends on the checkup in a month.”

“I see. It looks like you’ll be good enough on the whole, huh. — What about Nanase?”

“I had him get out for the day.”

Nao leads Natsuya with his gaze. Haruka was just about to bow to the pool.

“How are the first years doing?”

“As you’d expect from a bunch of experienced swimmers. My superficial knowledge might be reaching its limits soon.”

Without measuring up to them only with what he himself had mastered, he made it this far while somehow fooling them by reading a large number of technical books and visiting senpais who had graduated. However, it doesn’t necessarily mean that such pretense won’t flake off one day. Even today, his true character might come to light.

“Does it seem like Asahi will be able to swim the free?”

“It looks like he was capable of becoming serious with the ‘circuit’. Now, he’s practicing eagerly. Setting speed aside, he can somehow manage around 100m, I guess.”

“I see.”

He’s heard that he’s started to do the lunch break running with Natsuya. As long as he has those positive feelings, there’s probably no need to worry, he thinks. Guys who overcame pain and stood up are strong.

“He’ll become a good captain.”

“I see.”

Natsuya nods while he smiles with evident satisfaction. He looks at Nao after he tightens that relaxed expression.

“How’s he doing?”

“I’m thinking of putting him in the match the day after tomorrow.”

“Does it seem like it’ll work?”

“It looks like he’s balanced already.”

“How does he look?”

“He has the temperament of a prodigy, with that. But it looks like the person himself hasn’t noticed.”

“You think so, even if it’s you looking?”

“His sense of balance is good. No other first year has a streamline as beautiful as that.”

“I see.”

“Also, his breathing, I guess. He’s probably not aware of it, but he’s doing a way of swimming where he doesn’t raise his heart rate. So his speed doesn’t drop even on long distances.”

“I see.”

“He’ll become faster. —Ikuya.”

Perhaps because the early summer sunshine has gotten stronger, the light reflected in Natsuya’s eyes shines brighter, it’s wavering like it’ll overflow at any moment. When he’s being looked at with those eyes, he can’t even say something like “faster than you” as a joke.

“.....I’m counting on you.”

Those words were probably the most Natsuya could do, he thinks.

It was afterwards that the three first year boys came over to where they were.

☆

Souhei was driving the pickup truck used for deliveries, heading towards the sea. Putting only the elbow of his tanned, thick right arm out the window, he was laughing beneath his stubby beard wavering in the sea breeze, forgetting himself.

It’s the first time he’s driving on this road, since the tournament in March. At that time, it was the last match Rin swam in Japan, so he forcibly tried to drag out Rin’s grandmother, Kyou. Telling her to see it through not as Toraichi’s mother, but as Rin’s grandmother.

When he remembers what happened then, he couldn’t help but feel embarrassed.

“It’s not Tora. It’s Rin. I understand the feelings O-Kyou-san piles up, but ain’t it O-Kyou-san’s duty to properly look at your grandchild trying his best? You’re not looking at Tora. It’s Rin. O-Kyou-san, you’ll be looking at Rin instead of your son, Tora.” [In the past, it was common to add the ‘o-’ honorific prefix to women’s names.]

He thinks he may have said things that sound a lot like a lecture, but seeing Kyou gazing happily at Rin as he’s swimming, he decided to think that it was for the best.

As for Souhei, he had a hard time and retired in the semifinals. His son Asahi ended up sinking while he was swimming. Asahi was considerably gloomy, he didn't eat properly for a few days after it, either.

"I've become unable to swim the free....."

When Asahi told him that, he thought he'd surely end up quitting swimming. That's the kind of guy Asahi is. He tends to get tired of things soon, he has no perseverance for anything. To boot, just by dabbling in something a little, he acts as if he's knowledgeable. He didn't intend to force him into doing it. He should do it if he wants to, and if he wants to quit, that's fine, too. Anyway, it's all the same no matter what he does, if it's with half-baked feelings. If he wants to do another sport, that's also fine, and it would be even better if he'd say he'll concentrate on studying, but he gave up on it since he can't expect that.

"I was overwhelmed by the swimmer swimming beside me and sank." That's what he said. Indeed, that was astonishing. He can nod to Asahi's words of "the lane shone". Not that it was fast, it was a kind of swimming that directly shook the hearts of the people watching. It would've been all the better if he could've swum beside it.

Though he had heard that Rin transferred schools to chase after him, that added up, too. He's Toraichi's child, after all. If something like that had been in front of his eyes, there's no doubt that Toraichi would've shown his interest. No, not just interest, he would've probably shown everything, a rebellious spirit, competitive spirit and hostility, too.

— Nanase Haruka.

He's in the same swim club as Asahi in middle school. And, he'll participate in the tournament the day after tomorrow—.

Kyou's house came into view. Enduring the wind coming from the sea, while it's tormented by the tide's erosion, nevertheless it was built so it confidently sticks out its chest. As if it were Kyou herself.

When he parks the car, Kyou had just come out of the sea and came walking, dripping wet.

"Working hard, eh, O-Kyou-san?"

The pearl diver's *isogi* [the white clothes female divers wear] still suits her well, he thinks. She's retired, but he hears that voices wishing for her return are coming from the fisher's union. It seems like she'll become the last pearl diver in these parts.

"Oya, this is rare."

The *isomegane* [special type of face-mask goggles they use] she had pushed up onto her head was reflecting the early summer light to the point that it was blinding. There are sea urchins, turban shells and the like flopping in the *isotarai* [big round wooden basket they use] she held in her hands. She didn't look like she's past her 60th birthday at all.

"Once 'n a while, gotta offer an incense stick for Tora. Since he was the type to get lonely easily."

Kyou suddenly laughs and cutting across in front of Souhei, she opens the front door.

"Gou—, we have a guest. Serve the tea, would you?"

“Yees.”

He heard a cheerful reply coming from inside. It seems that Rin’s sister came over to play. So it means that the sea urchins and the turban shells are a gift for her.

“Lately, she comes over to play on the weekends. Since Rin left, she thought I’d be lonely. Quite the elderly treatment.”

While saying it like it isn’t really that much of a nuisance, she goes inside the house. Souhei followed after her as well.

There were four mortuary tablets lined up on the *butsudan* [family Buddhist altar]. Toraichi on the left, with Toraichi’s father beside him. Kyou’s father and mother on the right. All three men were taken by the sea when they were young. In spite of that, Kyou didn’t try to leave the sea. She lived, loved, hated, feared and healed together with the sea. For Kyou, there’s no doubt that the sea was being alive itself.

The trophy and plaque that Toraichi earned were lined up beside the *butsudan*. A number of them are ones he swam with Souhei.

“It’ll be eight years now, huh.”

He mumbles, facing the *butsudan*.

“Since we finished the *shichikaiki* last year.” [The 6th anniversary of someone’s death. It has the number 7 in it, because the year they died counts as the 1st.]

Kyou was standing behind him, having gotten changed before he realized it. Her head is tied in a bath towel. Two cups of green tea were placed on the table.

“Gou—, prepare the hot plate, okay?”

“Yees.”

At the entrance, he could see Gou carrying the hot plate. She knows everything, it seems.

“Don’t burn yourself.”

“I’m not a kid anymore.”

The tone she returns resembling Kyou’s, Souhei unintentionally ended up smiling beneath his stubby beard.

“So, what brings you here?”

Kyou sits down and carries the green tea to her mouth.

“Nanase-kun’s swimming with my Asahi. They’re in the same swim club, apparently.”

“Hoo, that child and Souhei’s child.... When is it?”

She took the bait—. He feigns calmness, so that she won’t realize that he thought that.

“It’s the day after tomorrow, O-Kyou-san, what would you say to coming with me?”

Kyou takes another sip of the green tea.

“Telling me to see it through in Rin’s stead this time?Fine. Come pick me up.”

Relieved, he relaxed his shoulders. As Souhei picks up the teacup, Kyou spoke in a murmur.

“Because it’s the child Rin even transferred schools for to chase. But you know, when I heard he’s transferring for such a reason, I was surprised.”

“Yeah, that’s true. Rin’s ability to take action is admirable. —Has he contacted you?”

“A letter, once. It seems he’s doing well.”

“Then I’m glad. Though Rin used to be a crybaby, huh.”

“He still hasn’t changed.”

A sudden smile bubbles up from Souhei’s mouth.

“Asahi probably doesn’t remember Rin, huh. When we went to the pool with Tora, they raced each other. Whose child can swim 10m first.”

“Hoo. Something like that happened, eh?”

“Rin and Asahi were both still in kindergarten, and though it was before they attended swimming school, it sure was amusing. They both got more worked up over it than their parents, and they were absorbed in practicing. So then, they both became able to swim in just a single day, so Tora and I said they’d become good swimmers like that—”

Unexpectedly, his voice choked up. Turning around towards the *butsudan*, he turns his back to Kyou.

“You haven’t changed at all since the old days, either.”

He smelled the scent of the shore. Could the turban shells be cooking on the hot plate? Without saying that the smoke is stinging his eyes, Souhai stayed facing the *butsudan* for a while.

☆

Natsuya’s shout of “gather round” echoed over the pool. As big as his lung capacity is, his voice is huge, too. Even the soccer club on the grounds is looking this way.

“I’m announcing the members for tomorrow!”

The members for the ‘Time Trial By School Year’. There’s no limit for the number of events one person can participate in, but only one person per school can participate in the same event. For each event, the ranking is decided by only one measurement, the events with many participants are measured by splitting them into several heats. That’s about it for the general rules.

“First year boys’ free. 50 and 100, Nanase!”

“.....Yes.”

Haruka replies while being suspicious. What is he intending to do about the remaining free—.

“200, Asahi!”

“Uissu!”

The club members make noise about Asahi swimming the free.

“400, Ikuya!”

“Yes.”

Ikuya clenches his fist a little. This is supposed to be his first race.

“1500, Tachibana!”

“Yes.”

Makoto and Ikuya raised their palms and high-fived each other. It seems that somehow, they had a talk where Haruka had no knowledge of it.

“Relay. Asahi, Ikuya, Tachibana, Nanase!”

“Uissu!”

“Yes.”

“Ah, yes.”

Due to Asahi having jumped the gun with replying, the club members break out in sniggers from their unaligned voices.

“Medley relay. Back— Tachibana. Breast— Ikuya. Fly— Asahi. Free— Nanase.”

“Yes.”

Excluding Haruka, the other three’s voices align. Haruka was just glumly standing still.

“Next, first year girls—”

During the members getting announced, Haruka stealthily left the circle of club members. Feeling irritation at the fact that people were concerned about him and that they decided things as they pleased, when Haruka was about to go off, Nao called Haruka to stop.

“Haruka—”

He stops his feet. However, he didn’t feel like turning around to Nao’s bright expression.

“Yesterday, after Haruka went home, they came and made a direct appeal. To Natsuya and I.”

“Direct appeal?”

Involuntarily, he looks at Nao over his shoulder.

“They said they’ll all shoulder Haruka’s conviction.”

“My..... conviction?”

He wonders what he's talking about. Is it a misunderstanding, a delusion, or a simple misconception? Anyway, he has no recollection of having a conviction. Supposing that he did, why would it be necessary for them to shoulder it? He thinks they can't possibly be seriously worried about his foot injury, but if that were the case, they're going through a lot of trouble. It seems that somehow, Makoto's worrywart tendency is contagious.

As a hand is placed on his right shoulder, he turns around. Makoto was standing there, with his up-slanted eyebrows smile.

"Rely on us more."

Asahi ran past him with a strong slap on his left shoulder, he turns around to Haruka while waving his fist.

"We'll show you how firm the first year boys' group's unity is!"

After Asahi passed through, Ikuya appears and directs his straight eyes towards Haruka.

"We're companions, aren't we? —Haru."

Oh dear. They're free to interpret his fixation on the free as his conviction, but he's astonished as to just how meddlesome they are. Things like companions are only constraining and stifling after all.

While Haruka thinks about things like that deep in his chest, he was faintly curving up the corner of his mouth.

Chapter 12 – Accelerate

The clear sky spread endlessly. It's always like that when they come to the Hiyori Swimming Stadium. It was always sunny. He thinks it's better when it's sunny.

"Mmm."

Makoto stretches, facing towards the cloudless sky.

"It's good that the weather's nice today, too, isn't it? Haru."

On sunny days, Makoto's voice is cheerful. An even more cheerful voice comes running at full speed from the path lined with plane trees.

"Haru-chaan!"

Grabbing Haruka's jersey with the force he came running with, he uses it as a brake and stops.

"Haru-chan, Mako-chan. Morning!"

"Nagisa, you came."

Makoto's happy voice bounces all the more cheerfully.

"'Cuz I promised. Right, Haru-chan?"

“Uh huh.”

He forgot what kind of promise it is.

“So today, we’ll all cheer a lot for you.”

Nagisa’s companions are lightly bowing their heads from beneath the plane trees. Seeing as they’re carrying their swimming club bags, it seems that they intend on going to practice after cheering.

“Uh huh.”

“So, come and cheer when it’s my time again, okay?”

Haruka looks at Makoto. Still smiling, he was nodding to Haruka. It means he’s telling Haruka to reply himself. Perhaps because it can’t be helped, he gives up.

“.....Uh huh.”

A reply that’s a bit on the small side.

“See ya later. Good luck!”

While waving his hand, Nagisa went running back to where his new companions are.

“Looks like Nagisa has entirely gotten familiar with them, huh?”

“Uh huh.”

While looking at Nagisa blending in with his companions, Haruka and Makoto started to walk again.

“Haru, were you worried?”

“About Nagisa?”

He had recently realized that just worrying about Nagisa is a waste.

“That’s the kind of face you were making.”

“I did?”

He’s the kind of guy who puts mayonnaise on stewed squid.

“At heart, you’re relieved, aren’t you?”

“Certainly not.”

He had already forgotten Nagisa’s face from when he decided to join the swim club and had shaken him off.

“You can’t show an uncool side, huh.”

Makoto’s relaxed voice is tinged with power.

“—Uh huh.”

Haruka quietly emitted energy from his body.

Sousuke was standing in front of the locker room, leaning his back against the wall. Folding his long arms like he's finding them to be slightly unmanageable, he's slightly smiling.

"Yo."

His gaze was fastened onto Haruka. Makoto looks at Haruka. It means he's telling Haruka to reply.

"Uh huh."

Reluctantly just giving a reply, he passes by in front of him.

"To Rin—"

It seems that he won't let them get away with passing by. Stopping, he looks up at Sousuke's face.

"I wrote a letter. About the competition."

"So what?"

"That Nanase's not a big deal."

"And then?"

"A reply came from Rin."

"What was it?"

"He said not to make light of you so much."

"Then, you shouldn't. We—"

Haruka's gaze becomes a strong energy and pierces through Sousuke. Sweating only a single drop, Sousuke withstands it.

"Today, it's the 100 free and medley relay for me. For Nanase?"

"The 50 and 100 free. Also, the relay and medley relay."

"Don't completely exhaust yourself again."

"The start?"

"I've made it my own."

"Alright then."

Haruka cautiously removed his gaze from Sousuke and went inside the locker room. Makoto follows after Haruka while saying 'see you later'. His heartbeat is awfully agitated. He can't restrain the thing squirming deep in his body. When he thinks that perhaps Sousuke had stirred him up, there was vexation as well, but he thought that it also resembles the exhilarating feeling after he swims with full force. It seems like it won't calm down for a while.

"You're slooow, Haru!"

Asahi's voices echoes through the locker room. Embarrassed, he started wanting to pretend that they were strangers.

"Over here, over here."

Ikuya beckons to Haruka and Makoto.

He thinks they're probably allowed to use any part of the locker room, but since there's no end to people losing their keys and such, it was decided that Iwatobi Middle will group together to use them. He's heard that Nao as manager will keep the keys altogether. Having arrived in advance, the first years are saving places.

Perhaps because he had arrived very early, Asahi had already completely finished changing, he even has his goggles equipped. Sakuyuki came to visit that Asahi.

"You're pretty early. Asahi."

"Y-y-you're Sakuyuki! You, what the heck did you come here for. Ahha, then you're doing recon, huh!"

Why is he saying theatrical lines? Even Sakuyuki bursts into laughter.

"Don't laugh, if you got business with me, hurry up and say it."

Told by Asahi, Sakuyuki holds back his laughter.

"Nah, it's not so much as business, I was just wondering what Asahi's swimming."

His face is still relaxed.

"Tch. The 200 free, the relay and the medley relay's fly."

After clicking his tongue, Asahi unwillingly answers.

"Wow. So you've become able to swim the free."

"Oh shut up. If you're done, go away."

"I'm doing the 100 and 200 fly. And the medley relay's fly."

"What about the free?"

"If I knew Asahi was going to swim, I would've entered."

"Like I said, my specialty's always been the free. The fly's a bonus. If Sakuyuki's my opponent, then it's just perfect with the bonus."

"I'm looking forward to it. See ya."

Even after Sakuyuki's figure had disappeared to the other side of the locker room, Asahi didn't remove his gaze for a while. If he has his goggles on, could he see Sakuyuki through the lockers? As he's looking at Asahi, it started to seem possible for him to be under such an illusion.

The participating swimmers gathered on the poolside and there was an explanation of the competition order after a simple opening ceremony. Apparently, the competition will proceed in the manner of separating the boys and girls in each grade and finishing all the events, then changing to the next group. By doing it that way, they can substantially save the time and trouble it takes for them to convene. In other words, there are six groups in total.

In order from the shortest, they swim the free, breaststroke, backstroke and butterfly, but the free has four events and the others have two each, so they swim the 50m and 100m free consecutively and the individual medley comes in between the 400m and 1500m free. It seems that the free relay and medley relay follows after them.

For each event, there's just one time trial, so there are no preliminaries or finals. Anyhow, the ranking is determined just by their times. Since the matches with many participants are divided into heats, not all swimmers compete directly as a result.

The opening ceremony having ended, cheering broke out all at once from the spectator stands when the swimmers began to leave. Among them, they can hear the voice of 'Iwatobi' noticeably louder.

"Haru, look."

Told by Makoto, he looks up at the spectator stands while walking. —Shouta was there. Standing at the head of Iwatobi Middle's cheering squad, he's raising a loud voice.

"Shouta volunteered as the cheering squad leader."

Before they knew it, Nao was walking alongside them. As always, he carries himself like a cat. The managers also lined up for the opening ceremony and the closing ceremony.

"Since he caused trouble for everyone, he asked to let him be the cheering squad leader at least."

Near Shouta, Kisumi and Tomo are also there. Nagisa and the others were there as well, a little bit farther away.

"When Shouta was summoned by the school, they also called Natsuya. Apparently, talk of suspending club activities and prohibition from external matches came up, too."

He involuntarily looks at Nao. It's the first time he hears about this.

"Natsuya refused to back down, saying that it's his responsibility. That he doesn't care if he has to leave the club, to at least spare the swim club."

He had no idea at all that it became such a serious matter. He looks at Makoto. Makoto was shaking his head, too.

"It seems that Shouta apologized while crying all along, and it was decided that just this time, they'll overlook it. With Shouta's 'ban from club activities for three days' and 'suspension from the next tournament', of course."

"Haru....."

Makoto murmurs with a worried voice. He's concerned about Haruka. That after hearing this, Haruka might take it to heart that it's his fault.

Haruka stops and looks at Nao. Nao stopped as well and looked at Haruka. He slowly shifts that gaze to Shouta. Putting a megaphone to his mouth, he was chanting in a loud voice.

<<Of Iwatobi where we gather Oh passionate youths Your adolescence that only comes once Color it with splashes>>

It's the Iwatobi Middle Swim Club cheering song.

<<Wild breaths Untiring training Let the power of believing fill you>>

He's heard that the successive generations of senpais created it bit by bit.

<<Make your blood boil Make your roars thunder Now is the time to show your true worth>>

That adding to it bit by bit, it was completed while being revised.....

<<Aah The heart of swimming is in the little things>>

Nao returns his gaze from Shouta to Haruka.

"Shouta is trying to do what he must do, what only he can do. If Haruka is worried about Shouta, then sympathize with the current Shouta's feelings. Accept his feelings."

Haruka nodded to Nao's words without speaking. Then, just now, he was ready to face all of it: Shouta's feelings, Nao's feelings who's thinking about Shouta, Natsuya's feelings who tried to protect the swim club. That resolve turns into energy and fills his body.

"Let's go, Makoto."

Makoto's up-slanting eyebrows gently arched.

"Haru—"

Now that he had resolved himself, all that's left is swimming with all his might.

Prompted by the long blow of the whistle, Haruka climbed onto the starting block. After deeply breathing out once, he concentrates his mind onto his center of gravity and firmly pushes it down. Then, while thinly regulating his breathing, he felt his weight on the entirety of the soles of his feet.

"Take your marks!"

Pulling back his rear foot while still keeping his waist high, he puts the tips of both his hands onto the starting block and turning his whole body into his ears, he waits.

Start—.

His body reacted sooner than he thought of it in his head. Receiving power from the starting block, he dives in with a low posture.

He could hear Shouta's voice—. He's calling Haruka's name. Pushed by that voice, he felt like he could fly anywhere. He felt like he could fly even without wings now.

Landing on the water further than anyone else, he adjusts the streamline's stance. The start's momentum was still in effect. As its proof, the water forcefully comes seeking Haruka. Responding to that request, he begins the dolphin kick. Cutting the water, he slips his body into that opening.

Surfacing from the flutter kick, he begins the stroke. He swims by changing the water's resistance into propulsive force. The two steady axes carried Haruka's body for him like rails.

He feels the water—. The water is feeling Haruka. While they're both of different nature, they were able to mutually accept that existence. They're acknowledging each other. Mutually deeply, deeply.....

Lightly touching the goal with his hand, he lifts his face. Loud shouts of joy erupted. Then, a whirl of applause. Shouta's voice calling Haruka's name. Kisumi's voice. Tomo's voice. Then, Nagisa's voice.

"Haru-chaan!"

Makoto's voice. Asahi's voice. Ikuya's voice.

"Haru!"

Removing his goggles, he looks up at the noticeboard. Right beneath 'First Year Boys Free 50m', his name was there. 'GR' in red letters after his time. It seems that somehow, he had broken the first years' tournament record.

The 50m is only for the free, so they were called up for the 100m right away and he was guided to the third heat's group.

In the neighboring lane, —is Sousuke.

"Yo, that was perfect."

"I wonder how it would've been, if you were there."

He diplomatically tells him that it would've been a close match if Sousuke had swam.

"Pff, I'll prove it to you."

He's saying that in the race they're going to swim now, he'll prove to him that his real ability is greater than his.

"I won't lose, though."

He has no intention to be fixated on winning or losing. It's just means that if Sousuke wishes it, he'll swim for real.

"That's good."

He means to come at him in that spirit. It means that it won't be interesting if he doesn't.

"Take your marks!"

Turning his whole body into his ears, he excludes all his senses except for his hearing.

Start—. His reaction time is approximately simultaneous with Sousuke's. They float in midair like they had synchronized. Raising small splashes, he lands on the water. Dolphin kick from the streamline. Haruka narrowly pulled ahead. However, Sousuke's true value is from here on out. Just when he thinks that he forcefully came gaining on him, he easily jumped in front of Haruka.

— He feels him.

He was able to feel Sousuke to the extent that his skin tingles with electricity. And he understood from the undulations being transmitted that Sousuke is feeling Haruka, too.

Sousuke makes the turn ahead of him. For a moment, their eyes met.

— Come.

Sousuke provokes Haruka. He doesn't even need to be told. He releases all of his energy at once.

He's being heated up. His hands, his feet, his body are burning red. All the water that touches him instantly evaporates.

— He's fast, isn't he?

Rin—.

— Sousuke is me.

He can hear Rin's voice.

— If ya wanna overtake me, overtake Sousuke.

He intends to, even without being told.

— He'll show you. That there's no talent that can surpass hard work.

He has no recollection of swimming out of talent.

— Sousuke can't be overtaken.

No, he'll overtake him.

— Because he's me.

Sousuke, is Rin.

— That's why.

That's precisely why.

— I absolutely can't lose!

Haruka, who bore an intense heat, releases a bluish-white light. At last, he became an extraordinary ball of energy and pierced through the water vapor shrouding him—.

Touching the goal with his hand, Haruka lifts his face. In the neighboring lane, Sousuke lifted his face as well and breathed in deeply. That Sousuke holds out his hand over the rope. When he grasps it, while thinking that as always, it's a huge hand, he felt Sousuke's lingering energy flowing into him. Again, Sousuke's supposed to be feeling the same thing, too.

Iwatobi Middle's cheering squad suddenly erupted and was repeatedly calling Haruka's name. Haruka accepted those cheers and he was intently feeling yet another new energy filling him.

Asahi's nervousness had reached an extreme state. It's the first time in his entire life that he's been this nervous about swimming. In the first place, nervousness comes from thinking 'what'll I do if I lose', so as long as you don't bother about the outcome, it's no different in any way from practice.

In Asahi's case, he was satisfied just with becoming a representative. So that's why he didn't need to bother about the race's outcome, and he became a swimmer as long as he swam normally in that qualification race, so the essential element of being nervous wasn't anywhere.

But it's different now. It's not about whether he'll win or lose. It was a bigger problem of whether he'll be able to swim or not. Asahi's unease was in the single point of whether he'll be able to finish swimming a mere 200m or not.

On the long whistle sound, he climbs onto the starting block.

—Wh-what was I supposed to do again?

He can't remember how to do the start. He tries to calm down and remember, but seized by unease and fretfulness, he simply can't concentrate.

—What was it. How was it that you breathe again?

He tries taking a breath but thinking that it's different, he tries breathing out.

—Ah.

When he breathes out, his mind naturally concentrated onto his center of gravity. He remembered it with his body, not by theory. As long as he could grasp the first cue, his body moved voluntarily for the rest.

“Take your marks!”

He waits for the signal in the track start's stance. Before he knew it, his nervousness had disappeared.

Start on the short electronic sound. He lands on the water while thinking that he leapt well. Then, he rapidly pulls ahead with the dolphin kick. Drawing it out like that until around 15m, he begins the stroke. The moment he surfaces, he had established a lead of one body's length ahead of the person coming after him. However—.

That's as far as his powerful attack goes. The splashes that rise higher than necessary conceal Asahi's body. He can't keep his balance properly. His body stiffening up, he loses his rhythm. Although he thinks

he has to swim more smoothly, he uncontrollably ends up putting power into it and it becomes a frantic way of swimming.

He panics that he has to take a breather. He doesn't know the timing. Even though his body is supposed to remember it, he tries to think about it with his head so much that he becomes far too confused. Having lost their balance, his limbs move irregularly, and barely managing to keep himself from sinking was the most he could do. Not intending to sink, he earnestly continues to struggle. Discovering a specific rhythm amidst that struggling, he somehow swims while clinging to that rhythm.

Exceeding 100m, he entered into uncharted territory. He becomes uneasy, wondering how far he could go with this way of swimming. The fear that he'll sink again raises its head. Shriveling up from that fear, he ends up losing his rhythm more and more. His body becomes heavy amidst his impatience that cannot be helped. Wondering if he'll end up going under at this rate, the feeling resembling giving up increased its depth, and at that time—.

“Asahi—, don't give up!”

— Haru?

He could hear Haruka's voice. He can't mistake it for anything else. Even if he's among the splashes.

“You, can swim!”

— I, can swim?

“Believe in me, Asahi! You can swim!”

Suddenly snapping, he felt power come welling up from deep down in his body. That power evoking a sense of duty in him that he must swim, it inspires Asahi. They had all decided to shoulder Haruka's conviction. Nevertheless, it can't end in a place like this. It must not end in a place like this—.

He stopped thinking. He leaves it to his body. He leaves it to the power that comes welling up. While raising high splashes, Asahi still moved forward. He was somehow able to push his body forward.

At the last turn, he rapidly stretches out. He begins the last stroke from the dolphin. He's not in a hurry anymore. He's not afraid anymore. Driven by a strong sense of duty, Asahi continued swimming.

His fingers touching the wall, he realized that he had reached the goal at last. Clinging to the grip, he heaves his shoulders up and down with his rough breathing. He couldn't think about anything anymore. Both his energy and his endurance bottoming out, he was just barely able to cling.

Out of the blue, a hand is held out to him and he looks up. Through his goggles, Haruka was wavering. When he grabs onto that hand, he was pulled up by a strong force. Having regulated his rough breathing on the poolside, he tries to stand up somehow. By then, he finally realized that Haruka's wavering because there's water in his goggles.

“You put up a good fight. Asahi.”

Being told that while he's still wearing a surly expression, he relaxes. It was the usual Haruka. The usual Haruka was saying things that weren't typical of Haruka.

“I,thought I was gonna pee myself again.”

Letting his head droop, he put it on Haruka’s chest. It didn’t seem like he’d be taking off the water-filled goggles for a while.

Ikuya, who had cut into the start at the top, begins the stroke. However, even before he’s gone 50m, he was overtaken on the right, and right after it, he was overtaken on the left, too. Then, another person overtakes him.

In spite of that, Ikuya didn’t run out of concentration. His mind isn’t rushing. The thought that he’s shouldering Haruka’s conviction made Ikuya stronger. Now that he had ended up feeling the heat of what he shouldered, he can’t go back anymore. Also forgetting that this is his first race, Ikuya simply kept swimming in earnest, aiming for the 400m goal.

He’s swimming for someone’s sake—. It’s not for the sake of parading his own power, nor for the sake of craving the limelight. There’s no unease towards being made light of, nor fear towards being scorned. Without being tormented by strong feelings of inferiority, he wasn’t driven by feelings of remorse. He’s simply swimming for the sake of what he shouldered, just for the sake of that heat.

He thought that he can swim. He thought that he’ll swim it for him. He thought that he must swim. As long as he continues feeling Haruka’s conviction, even if it may be a fragment of it, he had the confidence that he’ll finish swimming with heated feelings.

When he passed by the 300m point, the swimmers going ahead of him fell back one by one. It’s not that Ikuya moved up. Putting too much confidence in their ability, the swimmers who had raised their pace too much became unable to keep up. In the last turn, Ikuya gets power from the wall and rapidly stretches out. However, he doesn’t reach. The last bit of effort left doesn’t shorten, no matter what. The impatience that he can’t catch up finally brings forth irritation.

— Damn. Why can’t I catch up. Even though it’s only one more bit of effort, why doesn’t it shorten!

His irritated feelings change into indignation. His blood vessels condensing, his blood flow speeds up and his heartbeat begins to get disturbed.

— Damn! Damn! Damn!

“Ikuya—, listen up!”

It’s Haruka’s voice—. Even though he’s swimming, even though he’s concentrating so much, he was able to catch just that voice.

“If it’s the long, you’re faster than me!”

— That goes without saying. Don’t say something so obvious!

“You’re faster than me!”

The conviction that Ikuya is shouldering comes flowing into his body, carrying even more heat. Making a point of being pushed up by that energy, he accelerates infinitely. Ikuya's body, his arms, the tips of his fingers rapidly stretched out and touched the goal that continues towards the future—.

When he raises his head over the water's surface, the audience suddenly became excited. He turns around to the noticeboard. His name was there in third place on the overall ranking.

"You did your best. Ikuya."

From the poolside, Haruka held out his hand. Behind him, Makoto and Asahi are there, too. Both of them were smiling. As always, Haruka was expressionless.

"Thanks."

Holding on to that hand, he's pulled up. While he's being pulled up, by chance, he caught sight of Natsuya in the spectator seats. Turning his back, he's standing firm with his feet set apart. It felt as if his back was slightly trembling.

— It's alright now..... Natsu-nii.

After saying that to his brother in his heart, Ikuya jumped into the middle of his companions.

Makoto stares intently at the water's surface. He hasn't been able to completely wipe away his anxiety yet. However, it's not that he was feeling a distinct unease. It's not that he has a presentiment or is feeling agitated. It's just that the unease is drifting vaguely.

"Don't worry. Makoto—"

With the timing as he's about to head to the starting block, Haruka called out to him.

"I'll swim with you."

With that one phrase, he felt the unease disappearing as if the fog's clearing.

"—Yeah!"

After he replied with a smile, Makoto vigorously climbed onto the starting block.

"Take your marks!"

Makoto gets set while thinly regulating his breathing.

On the short electric sound, they start simultaneously—.

He lands on the water while being aware of his mind which he had concentrated onto his center of gravity. He begins the dolphin kick from the streamline. He swims while staying conscious of his center of gravity during that, too.

What's important at 1500m is 'retaining the correct form'. When you get tired, your elbow falls down and breaks your form, which ends up making it easier to receive the water's resistance. That's why it was necessary to strongly be conscious of your center of gravity. Preventing the disturbance of your

form by doing that, you can swim naturally without straining yourself. After that, it depends on how you can make that concentration hold out until the end. If you end up disturbing your mind even slightly, it'll result in consuming your physical strength there and then. With long distance, strong mental power and stamina was constantly required.

Throwing away the awareness that he's competing, he maintains his own pace. He was thinking about only that. Both impatience and belligerence are forbidden. Entrusting his body to the water, not straining himself in the least, he keeps carving the correct rhythm inside his self. In the monotonous rhythm, he repeats monotonous movements. A monotonous sight flowing on the other side of his goggles, he only heard a monotonous sound. Water and splashes. Wall and floor. And, his own breathing. That repetition lures Makoto to a world of loneliness, inside time that seems to last an eternity.

Suddenly, he was thinking of Haruka. When Haruka swam 1500m, was he in the same loneliness, too? He swam like he was in pain while breathing hard. He wonders if he had no form, no center of gravity, no rhythm, nothing at all. Both his arms and his legs ought to have felt like they were about to be crushed from the exhaustion. There's no doubt that he felt the 1500m to be endlessly far away. He thinks it must've been difficult. He thinks it must've been frustrating. Perhaps, he might've not even had the leisure to feel such things.

In the monotonous rhythm, as he was thinking about what the loneliness Haruka felt was like, Makoto ended up straying into an abyss of deep thoughts.

Abruptly, there was a momentary gap. It was truly one moment. As if it had been intently aiming at that gap, a dark shadow starts squirming on the bottom of the water. Makoto's body trembled with shivers.

— No. Don't come!

Chasing after Makoto, the squirming shadow crawls on the bottom of the water and the trembles of his body become more intense.

— Don't come! Don't come! Don't come!

Terror—. His concentration breaking off, his center of gravity crumbles. Becoming unable to retain his streamline, his form is disturbed. Thinking that he must escape, he feels impatient. His chest hammering, his breathing becomes painful. His breaths can't keep up. He can't..... breathe. His breathing..... His breathing.....

— Aah, it might be no use.

A feeling akin to resignation is spreading. Eventually changing its form to despair, it snatched the strength from his body. He's swallowed by the water. He's being dragged to the bottom of the water. For Makoto, who had lost even his willpower to resist, there was nothing he could do anymore.

— Sorry, Haru.....

“Makoto—”

Haruka's voice—. Even now as he's about to be swallowed by the water, that voice is the only thing he doesn't fail to hear.

“Don’t forget. I’m with you!”

Right. Haruka said that he’d swim with him.

“I’m swimming with you!”

He’s swimming with him. Haruka is swimming with him. He was able to become strong just by thinking like that. He was able to stay with strong feelings. Brushing aside both resignation and despair, a hot lump comes welling up from the depths of his chest.

Passion—.

With a strong vector, Haruka’s thoughts fill up inside of Makoto.

— You can swim. You can still swim!

He felt the shadow that was squirming at the bottom of the water recede all of a sudden. When he thought it might’ve faintly swayed in the end, its form disappeared like **it was** being erased.

Oh, that wasn’t so bad, he thinks. If Haruka’s with him, he could swim. He should’ve just swam with Haruka at that time as well, he thinks. It feels good in the water. He feels that he’s being healed by the water. While strongly feeling that he’s being accepted by the water, Makoto continued swimming. In that case—.

I’ll accept myself, too, he thinks. If Haruka’s with him, he ought to be able to do it. There’s nothing he can’t do. He can overcome anything. If he’s with Haruka, he can accept anything—.

Swimming until the end with his feelings put into it, Makoto touched the goal with his hand. Lifting his face from the water’s surface, he breathes in deeply. When he looks up, Haruka’s face was there. Facing towards Makoto, he’s holding his hand out. Makoto lifted his goggles and stared straight into Haruka’s eyes. It felt like he could see through to the depths of his heart. Then, while feeling that he’s being looked at, he strongly gripped the outstretched hand.

The first year boys’ relay was about to begin at once. The announcement prompting them to convene and the swimmers gather up at the start’s location.

“Can you do it? Makoto.”

Haruka asked Makoto, who was still keeping his hands on his knees and breathing roughly with his back. Perhaps because it was difficult to even speak, Makoto gives a reply only by nodding. If Makoto says he can swim, Haruka didn’t have the room to interject with an objection.

He looks at Asahi. Sticking out his thumb to Haruka, he grins.

He looks at Ikuya. Beneath his long eyelashes, he nods straightly.

Each of them are flooding with so much exhilaration that can’t be controlled in their body. That’s what Haruka felt. Accepting those heated feelings, he quietly releases energy.

“Let’s go.”

Haruka and the others powerfully stepped forward, towards the scene of a new decisive battle.

As part of the free relay's second heat, Asahi got on to the starting block.

"Take your marks!"

He waits for the signal in the crouching start's stance.

Start—.

Haruka was chasing Asahi with his eyes, while thinking that it was a good start. Dragging out the long dolphin kick to its very limit, he begins the stroke while surfacing. He has— no speed. However, he no longer raised big splashes like he did until now, either. Even compared to the earlier 200m, he's distinctly getting better. He is getting better, but even so, he was last.

He shows his tenacity in the turn, but it falls short after all. He connects to Ikuya while trailing getting outdistanced. His reaction time is— minus 0.3 seconds.

It was a false start. They're disqualified at that moment.

While watching Ikuya climb onto the poolside, Haruka was feeling something inscrutable. Even during practice, he has not once seen Ikuya fail the start. Was he impatient, was he nervous, or.....

Makoto spoke to Haruka in a small voice.

"I might be overthinking it, but—"

Makoto's gaze stays fixed on Ikuya climbing onto the poolside.

"Out of concern for us, it might be that he did a false start on purpose."

Considering Makoto's stamina, who had swum on long distance, it certainly is reckless to swim the free relay. There's no swimmer on any team who had swum 1500m. In the first place, there was no reason that Haruka and the others had to swim the free relay. If only it weren't for Haruka's fixation and his promise with Natsuya.....

After this, the medley relay begins with an interval held between. By then, a bit of Makoto's stamina may recover, too. Could it be that Ikuya was concerned about that? Supposing that's the case, why does he have to be concerned about even Haruka? Makoto said 'us'. When he thought that he has no recollection of anything that warrants concern, all of a sudden, it occurred to him.

"Because of my..... injury?"

Makoto raises his up-slanting eyebrows and nods. Haruka took a look at his own foot. Indeed, the blue bruise still remains vivid. However.....

It's ridiculous, he thinks. Looking at the race earlier, it'd be easy to at least tell if it was the swimming of an injured guy or not. What's more, no matter how much he thought of Haruka's fixation as his conviction, there's no need to commit a false start. It's something that can be settled if Ikuya were to say "I'm not participating".

Haruka decided to conclude that Ikuya didn't do the false start on purpose. It's Makoto's making too much of it. He decided to think of it as such.

"Sorry."

While apologizing curtly, Ikuya takes off his cap and goggles, and looks at Haruka from beneath his long eyelashes with upturned eyes. They weren't those darkly shining, piercing eyes. Without showing a smile or looking sorry, he was only looking at him bluntly. Unable to read his true intention from that expression, Haruka could only look at Ikuya, who was dripping with water.

"This jerk. Making a waste outta my swimming."

Sticking out his fist, Asahi lightly hit Ikuya's chest. Then, he puffs out a laugh.

"It'll be the next one, the next one. Let's redeem ourselves in the medley."

Makoto turns around to Haruka while placing his hand on Ikuya's and Asahi's shoulder.

Asahi sticks out his right fist towards Haruka.

Ikuya's strong will dwells in his eyes staring at Haruka.

Even though they were disqualified by the false start, the team's morale hasn't dropped. If it was blatant concern, he wonders how it must've been. Could he have rejected being companions again?

It's ridiculous, he thinks. It's not like you swim faster from a sense of camaraderie. Companions are constraining and stifling,and yet they're oddly warm.

"Let's go."

After turning on his heels, Haruka was quietly feeling energy start to burn within his body while walking.

Between the free relay and the medley relay, they're taking a brief interval. It's because there are often cases where people inevitably end up holding two positions at the same time, due to it being difficult to get eight swimmers ready from one school, much less from just the same year. Making use of that interval, each team was doing calisthenics, receiving advice from the senpais and the like.

Haruka and the others were called by Nao as well, they came to the border between the pathway and the poolside.

"Up until now, you did well. Only the medley's left. Swim with all your heart!"

"Yes."

"A swimming team is a once-in-a-lifetime encounter. It's not like you can always swim with the same members. Not to mention, even throughout the season, this is just about the only tournament where you can team up from the same school year. That's why it'll be at this tournament a year later that the four of you can team up again."

"..... Yes."

“If even one of you is missing at that time, swimming with these members will eternally— be gone.”

Sweat streams down Haruka’s back. Gradually seeping out, it streams and falls down. He was finally able to sympathize with what kind of meaning this tournament held for Shouta and the second years. It wasn’t supposed to be a tournament purely for the sake of measuring times. It’s the same for Nao and the third years. There’s no doubt that it held a meaning for each of them.

That’s what becoming unable to swim is. Basically, that’s what swimming as a team is. Even if there are other places to swim, these members are only here.

Just once, Haruka tightly gripped his fist.

“It’s all right. Nao-senpai. Despite what we look like, we’re pretty persistent.”*

Asahi says something he sort of understands, yet sort of doesn’t.

“That’s right. Survive persistently. Live through it boldly. Keep living audaciously. If you want to swim again with these members, do it with that much determination. Don’t be perturbed over small things. Have a strong will!”

“Yes.”

Nao’s feelings are strongly conveyed. Then, he learns the meaning of a once-in-a-lifetime encounter. It makes him realize that the fragility, the fleetingness and the lonesomeness of companions comes along with its glasswork-like brilliance, too.

“Next year, the year after that, for the sake of swimming with these members as well, make sure to burn the relay you’re going to swim now into your hearts. Make it something unforgettable. Show us— something unforgettable!”

“Yes—”

The four voices match up. The feelings of the four of them overlap each other. The relay they’re going to swim now brings a big meaning. For the sake of making it unforgettable as well, they can’t lose. For the sake of burning it in as well, they must win by all means. For the sake of making the feeling of swimming with these members again into a certainty, they have to overcome their limits. They were able to be strongly aware of that.

The medley relay’s convening is announced. The spectator seats are getting excited and he could hear the cheering song Shouta sings one stage louder. Eventually it becomes a big chorus, dragging the second and third year club members into it as well.

It turned out that Iwatobi Middle and Sano Middle had the start in the same first heat. He can see Sousuke’s lanky figure, too. He was slapping his body here and there. He’s heard from Makoto before that it stimulates your muscles. When he asked if you become faster, he said by about a few tenths of a second. It seems that it’s effective, if it’s people who swim with a narrow margin between them.

When the time came to enter the course soon, Sousuke called out to Haruka.

“Rin’s feelings, I finally understood them.”

“What?”

“The pressure of being gained on by Nanase.”

“That is?”

“While swimming, my skin tingled. That was the first time.”

“So?”

“— But, I’ve already experienced it. Next time, I won’t let you overtake me!”

“Only if you can swim ahead of me.”

After lightly saying it, Haruka raised the corner of his mouth. Responding to that, Sousuke also smiles fearlessly. After staring into each other’s eyes for a few seconds, prompted by the whistle, they split up and went towards each of their courses.

While doing the pre-start warm-up exercises, Makoto spoke to him.

“Hey, Haru. When you joined the club, did you really think I’d joined the swim club?”

Staying bent forward, Haruka suitably replied while wondering why he’s bringing it up now.

“Yeah.”

Makoto asks while turning his hands joined behind his back over his head.

“Didn’t you think that even if I hadn’t joined, if Haru joins the club, I’d join as well anyways?”

Saying it mostly categorically, he raises his up-slanting eyebrows.

“I wonder how it was. I forgot.”

While pressing his chest against his overextending knees, Haruka ambiguously replied.

— I wonder how it was.

He whispers it again in his heart.

It doesn’t really matter which it was. If Makoto wants to think so, then it’s fine like that. If he wants to feel a bond by tying a coincidence to inevitability, he thinks it’s fine.

After the series of short whistles, Makoto enters the water on the long whistle. Then, on the next long whistle, he takes hold of the grip and presses both feet against the wall.

“Take your marks!”

Firmly pulling in his body, he waits for the starting signal.

— Push your knees into it.

In the moment Nao's voice crossed his mind, the short buzzer sound resounded.

His body reacts. Stretching out his lower back, he pushes his knees with the intent of hitting it against the wall. Receiving enough force from the wall, Makoto jumped into midair. He feels the ephemeral soaring to be an eternity. Farther, farther than anyone else—.

He begins the Vassallo after landing on the water. In the backstroke, you can't speed up as much as in the crawl or the butterfly. Due to that, the role that the Vassallo fulfills becomes bigger. Switching to the flutter kick just barely at 15m, he surfaces while beginning the stroke.

He could hear great cheering. Amongst that were voices calling his own name, too. While taking a breather with the recovery's timing, he tries to check the other lanes. There was no one. He doesn't know how much of a lead he's opened up. However, no matter how much is opened or isn't, what he had to do was the same.

— Reaching to my companions, faster than anyone!

While thinking about only that, Makoto struck the water.

At the 50m turn, he rotates while twisting his body. Pressing the sole of his feet against the wall, after he's confirmed that he had accumulated enough force, he sends forth that power all at once.

While greatly feeling the water's resistance, he passes by the other swimmers. He begins the Vassallo, making sure to pierce through that resistance.

All of a sudden, it smelt like the tide. Though he was in the water, he was able to feel the scent of the seawater in his nose. He's swimming in the sea, he thought. He came back to that sea again. The blue sky was swaying beyond the surface of the sea. Even through the flowing water, he can clearly tell how blue it is.

—Hi there.

When Makoto begins to surface while greeting it, the radiant sky welcomed him. Reflecting that sky, the sea glistens. While shining like a diamond and softly billowing like a marshmallow, it gently wrapped around Makoto.

He was able to accept his new companions, he thought. He clearly came to feel that they were able to become a real team. That's precisely why he can see this sight. That's precisely why he feels it. That inside Makoto, Asahi, Ikuya and Haruka are strongly existing—.

The existence of his companions turns Makoto into a creature of the sea. That unwavering bond burns into his heart. Flapping his tail fin, making his body undulate, he swims faster than any creature inhabiting the sea. He was able to strongly think that he must swim fast.

To that place, where his companions wait—.

Ikuya was standing on the starting block while synchronizing his own breathing to Makoto's. Keeping his mind collected on his center of gravity, he motionlessly waits for that time. Matching it to when Makoto's arm firmly stretches out, he enters the start's movements. Measuring the timing, he pulled back his rear leg. While affirming that Makoto's hand touches the wall, he thrusts out his front leg. His reaction time is, "0"—.

"Ikuya—"

While fluttering in midair, he heard Makoto's voice. He's pushed by that voice. Creating a streamline after entering the water, he cuts through the water and advances. One pull and one kick. He surfaces while restoring his balance with the dolphin kick. Grabbing the water, he kicks the water. Changing the water's resistance into propulsive force, he breaks through the water. He doesn't let anyone catch up to him. Ikuya swam with those strong thoughts.

At the 50m turn, he receives power from the wall. One pull and one kick. Reading the water's movements, he taps into the water's flow. Pulling the water towards himself, he takes in the water. And then while changing the water's resistance into propulsive force, he accelerates again.

All of a sudden a 'memory' flowed in the water.

— Satomi.

Then, another one.

— Natsu-nii.

They're not the photographs he buried that day. The memories inside of him are flowing past him one by one. They're all things that aren't worth mentioning in particular.

Satomi was standing, Natsuya was running, Ikuya was hanging from the horizontal bar. Satomi was reading a book, Natsuya was drinking barley tea from the spout of the kettle, Ikuya was painting a portrait of the three of them. Recollections of a carefree daily life that couldn't even be called memories. Such things are flowing in the water, one after the other.

Though it's the trivial daily life, each and every one of them were all precious things. They weren't something he could throw away or forget. He must carry them all. The memories that will increase one by one from now on as well, the strength to carry them all, precisely that strength was necessary.

The future is on top of the entire past. He had finally come to realize it now.

Amongst the flowing memories, the faces of his companions are mixed in. Asahi was spiking his hair and spouting curses, Makoto was touching Ikuya's shoulder with his big hand, Haruka was looking at him with an unfriendly expression. Yearning for that something shining in those eyes, in the depths of those eyes, Ikuya reaches out his hand.

For the sake of moving forward—. For the sake of knocking on the future's door—. For the sake of burning it into his heart—.

— Come, Ikuya!

While thinly regulating his breathing, Asahi waited for Ikuya. The starting block tries to push back the weight of his body. While holding it down by sheer strength, he sharpens his senses.

— Come, come, come.

Ikuya's hand extends. Then, the last pull.

— He's here!

He kicks his rear leg. He doesn't see Ikuya's hand. His senses tell him the timing.

— Here I go!

Thrusting his front leg, he flutters in midair.

“Asahi—”

— I can hear ya, Ikuya!

Creating a streamline after landing on the water, he begins the dolphin kick.

— Woohoo!

As if he's uncorking the frustration that had pent up from the free, he begins the stroke.

—This is it, this is it, this is it!

His body leaps. He's light. If he puts his mind to it, he thinks that maybe he could fly until the wall on the other side, like a flying fish. The sense of liberation that seems to pierce through him is rapidly setting his body free.

— Sakuyuki!

Sakuyuki, who's in the same heat, dove in just now. He didn't see him. He felt it to be so.

— How's this, Sakuyuki. I'm fast, aren't I? Can you catch up?

It was until elementary school that Sakuyuki was faster at the butterfly. It's different now. He ended up learning the joy of being able to swim. He ended up learning the meaning of swimming with companions.

— Every day, I've been practicing. I haven't skipped.

No matter how much he swings his arms, no matter how much he strikes his feet, it doesn't feel like he'll run out of endurance.

—This is what it's like, when I get serious.

One after the other, new power comes welling up, unlimitedly, endlessly.

— Sakuyuki....., it's thanks to you.

He asked why he doesn't stop swimming. He told him that maybe he likes swimming. He couldn't deny it. He couldn't help but admit it. That he likes swimming—.

He doesn't know why he likes it. He doesn't remember when he started liking it, either. However, if it's something he likes, it won't do to give up. Now that he's admitted it, he was able to resolve himself to it.

All of a sudden, he remembered the first time he swam the crawl. The crawl that his father had just taught him. When they couldn't even take a breather properly yet, they competed over who could reach 10m first.

— Competed? With who?

He forgot who. He forgot, but it's a guy who ticks him off. Just against that guy, he doesn't want to lose, he thought. He puts in power; like hell he'll lose, that's for sure. Rotating his arms to the limits of his power, he kicked his legs. However, his breathing doesn't continue. One more pull to go. One more kick to go. Until that line. Until that line—.

The moment when he thought he'd finished swimming, he was picked up by his father. He didn't understand why, but he cried. That guy was also picked up by his father and was crying. Both of them were sobbing.

— What's with me? I've liked swimming ever since then, haven't I?

As he thinks that, it made him laugh. As he thinks that, a new power came welling up.

— Wait up, Haru!

He calls his companion's name.

— Cuz I'm heading there now!

No one can catch up to him, that's the thought he conveys to his feet. He'll reach there faster than anyone, that's the thought he fills his arms with. While feeling his strong bond with his companions being burned into his heart, Asahi accelerated, aiming for the goal.

And now, he crosses over a new line—.

While waiting for Asahi on the starting block, Haruka had his eyes turned towards Sousuke, who was in the same heat. The Sousuke he sees through his goggles is lankier than usual.

— Sorry. I'll be making the start first.

While synchronizing to Asahi's breathing, he emits energy from his body. Then, without the slightest error, Haruka soared—.

“Go, Haru—”

He's pushed by Asahi's voice. Not just Asahi's. Makoto's voice and Ikuya's voice, too, push Haruka. He could hear Shouta's voice, Nagisa's voice and Kisumi's voice, too. Changing those voices into energy, it combusts in the depths of his chest.

He lands on the water, with his body heated up. Shrouding vapor. Strong feelings that can't be stopped. Burning those feelings into his heart, he becomes a single ray of light and goes piercing through.

Waters that come forcefully closing in on him. He was able to accept all of it. It's not like they're becoming one body. It's not like he's being jostled, either. He feels the water. With his skin, his eyes, his heart—.

And then, without doubting what he felt, he acknowledges it all. While both of them are of a different nature, they strongly and mutually acknowledge the significance of existing.

Makoto had said that they're like water. That may be so, he thinks. The sight that he's seeing now was tells of that more than anything.

A sight that he can't see alone, no matter how he swims. A feeling that's unfulfilled alone, no matter how he improves. A speed that he can't bring into being alone, no matter how much he desires it.

Then, he shakes off even that high speed—

— Rin. What sight are you seeing?

Haruka condensed the energy he was releasing into his center of gravity.



In accordance with the energy's pressure increasing, it began to dazzlingly shine inside of Haruka. That strong light gradually becoming bigger, it envelops his entire body.

All of a sudden, the sight around him disappeared. Both the water and the cheering having disappeared, Haruka was swimming in pitch-black darkness and silence, while glowing like a deep-sea fish. Haruka continuing to swim in a world where there's no up or down, nor even the flow time.

In the end, even the light he emits from himself disappears, and Haruka himself is disappearing.....

Then descends —nothing—.

Chapter 13 – Hope

While leaning against the train's door, Haruka was gazing at the scenery passing by through the train window without really looking. The coastline that goes on endlessly, and the sea spreading beyond it. Reflecting the light of the sun that had begun to sink in the west, the sea's surface was sparkling as if it were scattering the light.

The train of two cars was sparse with passengers, the rear car was reserved for Iwatobi Middle. Using that as a good excuse, the noisy voices are resounding boisterously inside the car. Asahi, Ikuya, and the others were in high spirits and not minding their matters in the least, enthusiastically singing the cheering song they had just learned.

<< Of Iwatobi where we gather Oh brave-hearted youths >>

With Asahi and Ikuya at their center, the chorus's ring widens.

<<The dreadfulness of the water Kicks up your adolescence clamoring with great power >>

Putting their arms around each other's shoulders, they begin to sway from side to side.

<<The prayer we offer The wish that's granted Let it reach your heart The ardent voice >>

When he sighed as he can't keep up, Kisumi came around to where Haruka was.

"Haru, won't you sing?"

"We're on the train."

Kisumi giggles at Haruka's response.

"It must be nice for Asahi, huh?"

Thinking that he misheard him, he looks at Kisumi's face. Lightly combing up his silky hair, his eyes were turned towards Asahi.

"He's free, straightforward, and always cheerful. Really, he has a lot of things I don't. Cuz me, I'm always just trying to look good. So you see, that's why..... I end up admiring the natural Asahi a little."

Haruka shifted his gaze to the singing Asahi. He wonders if he has an aspect like that, too.

“Kisumi-kun, come over here.”

It's the girls in their class. It looks like they don't have any interest at all in cheering for the swim club, perhaps Kisumi had invited them or something. As proof of that, Kisumi is obediently pulled by the hand and taken away. Turning back to Haruka while being taken away, he said “later” and showed the whites of his teeth.

Perhaps Kisumi hadn't noticed the difficulty of looking straight at yourself yet. While facing the train's window, Haruka was thinking about such things.

“That was good swimming, Haruka.”

When he turned around, Nao was standing there. As always, his steps are like a cat's.

“Thanks.”

Because he was taken by surprise, it ended up becoming a bit of a curt response.

“The medley relay, wasn't it the ‘selfless swimming’?”

Nao says it mostly categorically. What basis does he have to say it? He doesn't care if he has any or not, but it was unpleasant to have something like a weird false image being pushed onto him.

“I don't know, but I think it was different, probably. I felt and thought a lot of things. But—”

“But?”

He was about to say “Just the last bit might've been that”, but stopped. Supposing that's the case, only Haruka can comprehend what Haruka felt. Even if he's asked what it was like, he didn't have the confidence that he could explain it well.

“Nao-senpai—”

Haruka turns around to stand face to face with Nao.

“What is it?”

“Could you hold out your palm?”

Haruka raises the index finger of his right hand. Nao nodded as if in full understanding of the situation, and held out his right hand.

“Sure.”

Pressing down his index finger on Nao's palm, Haruka made his index finger directly link to his body's center of gravity. Then, keeping his concentration gathered, he firmly pushes down his center of gravity. His weight turning into power, it was transmitted to his index finger..... Or it was supposed to have been, but Nao's hand doesn't budge an inch. Calmly, he stopped it.

“You pass. That's impressive, Haruka.”

Nao says quietly, and in some way happily.

“.....Thank you very much.”

While lightly bowing his head, Haruka had mixed feelings. It was supposed to prove that he had gotten closer, but on the contrary, it ended up showing off the difference between them. It became impossible again to guess the distance between him and Nao.

All of a sudden, his shoulder is grabbed from behind and he turns around. Realizing that it's Shouta, Haruka was distraught to no small extent.

"Nanase—. In the next tournament, I'm taking the free. I definitely won't let you have it!"

While being glared at by Shouta, he felt his feelings becoming lighter. Now, that fighting spirit is more comfortable than anything. Responding to Shouta's passion, Haruka nodded with force.

Even after letting go of Haruka's shoulder, Shouta still glared at him without a single blink.

"When I swam with Nanase, I gave up right after the start..... It's pathetic, but I was overwhelmed by your swimming."

He wonders if that's why he didn't feel Shouta when they were swimming. But, is such a thing possible? A thing like being overwhelmed by someone's swimming and giving up.....

He looks at Nao. He was just directing a soft smile towards them.

"But, I won't give up anymore. I won't give up ever again!"

Flames dwell in Shouta's eyes. Still directing a gaze hot enough to burn towards Haruka, he doesn't take his eyes off him. Scorched by the fighting spirit that seems to gradually burn and stick, a single drop of sweat rolled down Haruka's cheek.

Pushing Shouta aside as if he's a nuisance, two cheerful smiles appeared. It's Aki and Satomi.

"Nanase-kun. See, I'm frustrated that I couldn't win. But you know, I'm having a lot of fun now."

Aki shrugs her shoulders and shows a smile. In a "weird, huh?" way.

"Cuz having done everything I could, I gave it my all. It'd be a waste if I were to regret it."

"I think so, too. Swimming is kinda fun!"

Aki and Satomi say it together. Indeed, there's no point in regretting it. It's nothing other than rejecting the effort you've built. It wasn't supposed to have been easy enough practice that they could simply reject it.

"But you know—"

Says Aki.

"I don't have regrets, but I do have a lot of tasks." [callback to their 'tasks' at practice]

Facing each other, they shrug their shoulders again and laugh. Two flowers bloomed.

From far away, Maki's and Yuki's voice called them.

"Zaki, Nii-chan!"

“Yeees.”

After replying, Aki waves at Haruka.

“Then, see you later.”

“Uh huh.”

After watching Aki go, Satomi asked Haruka with a bit of a serious expression.

“The photos that Ikuya-kun had, did Nanase-kun see them, too?”

She must mean the ‘memories’ that were put into that tin and buried.

“Yeah.”

“The..... the bath photo, too?”

“Bath?”

He ponders over it a little. Wondering if something like that was among them or not, he realizes that it was.

“The one with the three of you in it?”

“Eh, you saw it?”

“Yeah, I saw it.”

“Oh no. That’s so embarrassing.”

Satomi covers her face with both hands. It’s not even a question of embarrassment, they were about kindergarten-aged.

“There isn’t really anything to be embarrassed about, is there. Ridiculous.”

“Ridiculous—”

Satomi lets go of her face and her cheeks turn crimson.

“After seeing a person naked, how dare you say—”

Her voice is loud. The club members’ gazes gathering on them, the lively train interior falls silent. Satomi had noticed that and her crimson cheeks turn even redder.

“Now, now.”

Natsuya comes forward and tries to diffuse the situation.

“Inadvertently peeking into the changing room happens often in the swim club, doesn’t it? Hahaha.”

His dry laugh is hollow. Voices saying “nope, nope” are rising here and there, and using the chance of Natsuya getting accused with “have you seen it before?”, Satomi went back to Aki and the others as she got her blush under control.

So that they pass by each other, Tomo comes running with short steps. Haruka was watching her, while thinking that whenever the train sways, she sometimes came close to staggering. She's gripping a small package in her hands.

"Nanase-kun. Was your foot alright?"

He's slightly weary that she's still bothered by it.

"It was nothing, really."

"I'm glad. You see, I made this as an apology. It's not much, but eat it if you'd like."

The contents of the offered package are probably cookies.

"Thanks. You cheered all along, didn't you? I could hear it properly."

When he accepts it, she nodded and said "yeah" with a happy expression.

"Hey, Haru. What did you get?"

Asahi, who had finished singing the cheering song, comes near them. Right behind him, Makoto and Ikuya were there, too.

"Cookies."

He looks at Tomo after replying. Tomo sighed like she's saying "it can't be helped, huh", and she nodded a little with a smile. It means "you may eat it with everyone".

"Ooh, cookies."

"Let's eat it."

After Haruka had handed over the packet to Asahi, he opened it without reserve and lost no time in tossing one into his mouth.

"S'good. You guys eat some, too. It's delicious!"

Makoto and Ikuya also picked up some of the offered cookies. Haruka took just one, too, and tried tasting it. He thinks it's delicious. He lightly regretted that maybe he should've eaten the cookies from that time, too.

Ikuya approached Haruka, and he whispered in a small voice that couldn't be heard by anyone.

"Haru, thanks."

"What for?"

"I feel like I was able to change thanks to Haru."

Without knowing what he's talking about, he stares at Ikuya's eyes.

"It's Haru's eyes. Thanks to those devoted eyes, I was able to change."

Getting told that with a serious face, he somehow contains himself from almost bursting into laughter.

“I see. Well, thanks.”

When Ikuya was about to say something to Haruka’s noncommittal reply, Asahi came cutting in.

“One day, I’m gonna knock down Haru, just so you know. And then I’m gonna make him kneel down before me!”

He sticks his index finger out at Haruka. If it’s a declaration of war, he should say it after eating the cookies. Bits of food are scattering. Besides, why does he have to kneel after losing? He hasn’t seen anyone do that before.

“Haru—”

Makoto stands before Haruka, with his up-slanting eyebrowed smile.

“Hey, it was like how I said it, wasn’t it?”

He means when he said that they’re like water.

“That we can become any shape we want.”

“Aah.”

After nodding, Haruka showed a smile to Makoto just a little.

All of a sudden, light shines through the train window and he involuntarily squints his eyes. When he looks out, the setting sun was about to sink into the horizon. While swaying between the waves, it’s dyeing the sea red.

Where are they about to head to from now on? What are they aiming for, what will become of it? No matter how you try thinking about it, it’s something you don’t know. There are no promises or anything of the sort. Like that setting sun, there was no proof anywhere that they’ll be able to shine again tomorrow.

For the time being, he tries thinking about tomorrow.

— I have to wake up early again and run with Makkou.

Even though it was a trivial thing, when he turns his eyes towards the future, he was able to feel brighter with that alone. He thinks that’ll do for now. As long as he has the feeling to face forward, that is enough.

Because precisely that feeling — is hope.

Afterword

Supported by everyone's warm encouragement, alongside offering my deep gratitude for having arrived at the sequel's publication, I have never been happier that my work truly was loved by many people.

Upon writing the sequel, I experienced a stifling sensation that's like being on the verge of getting crushed by unease, whether I could live up to everyone's huge expectations or not. However, right after I began writing, I realized that it was an absurd fear. Indifferent to the writer's unease, Haruka and the others were passing days filled with liveliness as always. Even while being bewildered about a new life, nurturing the courage to look hard at themselves, they were vigorously moving forward. The writer just had to copy and depict them as they're advancing with all-out efforts, gazing only forward while running, while stumbling, and sometimes while falling over and drawing attention to themselves.

In the course of writing, I noticed that "the eyes changed". Both Haruka's and the writer's eyes. I thought that the way of looking at things, the way of thinking or the way of feeling things is changing compared to before. That wasn't the type of thing like growth or evolution, much less something as prominent that can be called a transformation. Perhaps it was something only trivial that ought to be called a "sign". However, I certainly felt that "the eyes changed".

Perhaps the meetings with others and the changes in environment had made it so. Or perhaps, facing the fact that they had been averting their eyes, it could be that they had gotten the resolve just a little bit to accept what they have been consistently refusing. In any case, I feel it is certain that at least the attachment towards living has gotten stronger.

Anyways, being a middle schooler means you eat often. Regardless of whether you're hungry or not, "if there's something, you eat". Eating is living. In other words, the attachment towards "eating" is also attachment towards "living". Then the strong feelings towards living become energy in the end, and intensely burn as the origin of everything. It can't help but burn.

Before I knew it, I could no longer take my eyes off them, living vigorously. No matter what kind of talent they have, no matter what kind of potential they're hiding, it has nothing to do with it. I could only think of portraying the current them to the maximum. Not even the writer knows what they're swimming for and what awaits them beyond it. While feeling the violent throbbing of their heartbeats and their rough breathing, all I could do was keep writing, driven by emotions. Once I had been touched by the strong energy they release, I didn't need to hesitate anymore. They were so overflowing with liveliness that I had no time to hesitate.

It would make me happier than anything else if the many people who have read this work have sympathized with Haruka and the others even a little bit.

In closing, I would like to kindly express my gratitude to everyone who had given their efforts and to the companions who are connected by eternal friendship.

2014. Summer breeze weather, Ooji Kouji