

Chieko and Akemi's Adventures

Chapter 1: Do Good?

Chieko was determined to do good. As she walked into the fifth graders' classroom on a hot summer day, her gaze swept her thirty-one classmates, and she felt deep down to her toes that today she would find someone to do a good deed for.

The day before she had read a terrible story of a girl who had no friends, and who was bullied by her fellow students because of her freckles. In a desperate attempt to be accepted, the girl had undergone cosmetic surgery to have the freckles removed, but due to an allergic reaction to the anesthetic, she had fallen ill. Chieko understood the girl's feelings completely. Why, she herself would do *anything* to be accepted.

Chieko was interrupted from her reverie as the teacher entered the room and class began. But every now and then, she would look around and wonder who should be the recipient of her good deed that day.

"Chieko, does that sound good?" Chieko sat up and sheepishly asked the teacher to repeat the question.

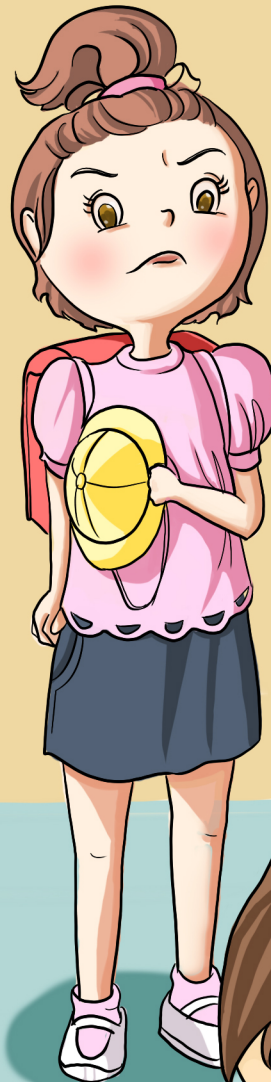
"I'm assigning you and Akemi as buddies for our camping trip."

That's right. We were discussing our camping trip to Hakodate-san. But who is Akemi? She looked in the direction the teacher had pointed, and in the far corner, a girl with shoulder-length hair was gazing her way. The girl's eyes were partly hidden by a set of bangs. *She's the only one in my class whose name I keep forgetting,* Chieko thought.

"Of course I don't mind," Chieko said in her brightest voice and biggest smile. *This will be my good deed! I will befriend Akemi, who may not have any other friends.*

"Akemi?" prompted the teacher.

Akemi shrugged her shoulders. "Sure," she said.



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"So, you've got Akemi as a buddy, huh? Too bad," said Yumi, who sat next to Chieko during lunch break.

"Why do you say that?" asked Chieko.

"Well," said Yumi, always ready to give out information. "Everyone knows she's a little strange. Did you hear about the time she brought a lizard to school hidden in her pocket? And about the time she walked around the track during the 200-meter race? She doesn't have any friends—and no wonder!" Yumi laughed.

Chieko nibbled on her fish and rice and wanted to tell Yumi that she was going to be Akemi's friend. It was difficult, though, to tell Yumi anything she didn't want to hear, so Chieko changed the subject instead.

When school was out for the day, Chieko waited for Akemi, who soon walked out the door of the classroom, schoolbag and hat in hand.

"Akemi, wait up!" said Chieko, putting on her best smile. "Could we walk home together?" she asked.

Akemi glanced her way. "You're Chieko, right?"

"That's right."

They passed through the gate of Shinagawa Elementary School, and to Chieko's relief, Akemi said something first.



"Do you like hiking?" she asked.

"I don't know. I haven't hiked much. I suppose it's okay as long as we're going somewhere cool."

"You looked like you had won the lottery when hiking was mentioned, so I thought you really liked it or something."

"Oh no," said Chieko, and she took a deep breath, deciding to be honest. "I was happy because I was paired up with you. I want to be your friend. Do you mind? Could we be friends?"

The light turned green and the girls crossed the street. Chieko, feeling worried, and Akemi, looking puzzled.

"Why?" asked Akemi once they were on the other side of the street.

"I thought..." Chieko hesitated; this was not going as she had expected. She fiddled with the string on her school hat. Akemi waited.

"I thought you might like to have at least one friend!" Chieko blurted out, and then put her hands over her mouth in horror. Akemi's eyebrows shot up, but she said nothing. They walked in silence again for a while.

After a while, Akemi smiled and said, "Okay, let's be friends. I'm warning you, though, everyone says I'm a little strange."

"Doesn't it bother you that you're called strange?" asked Chieko. She knew she would mind if people said such things about her.

"Nope," said Akemi confidently. Chieko wondered if she had picked the right person to do a "good deed" for. Akemi certainly didn't look distraught and bullied. Oh, well.

They parted on the corner of Block 5 with a "See you at camp tomorrow!" Chieko watched Akemi turn the corner to her house, carelessly swinging her yellow school hat on a finger. *Perhaps this is the beginning of a friendship*, thought Chieko. That at least was a good thing.

Chapter 2: The Hike

Early the next morning, two buses holding Shinagawa Elementary School's fifth grade class and their teachers rolled out of the school gates beneath lowering clouds and gusts of warm, wet wind.

The students were seated with their buddies in the bus; songs were sung and games were played.

"Don't you like to sing?" asked Chieko when she noticed Akemi looking out the window in silence as another peppy song ended.

"Sure, I like singing. I don't know this song, though."

"You haven't watched that television show?"

"I don't watch any television. My parents don't encourage it," confirmed Akemi. "It is a funny song. I like it."

"You don't watch ANY television?" Chieko almost yelled. "What do you do in your spare time?"

"All sorts of things," replied Akemi. "I like hiking for one. My dad takes me hiking a lot."

"You're so curious—and mysterious. Like someone in a book."

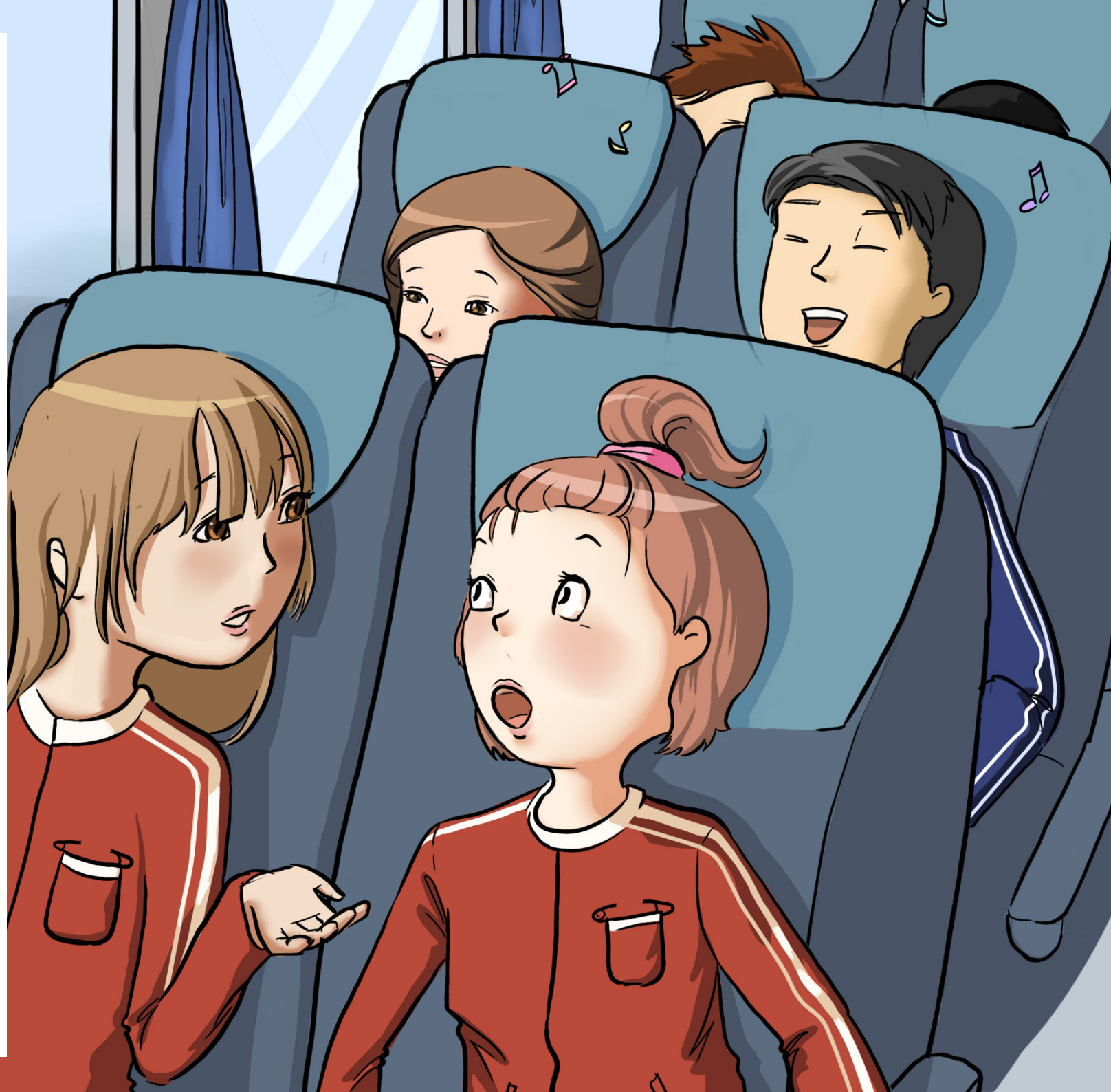
Akemi gave Chieko her best "mysterious look," they both burst into giggles, and they continued on the bus ride in good fellowship.

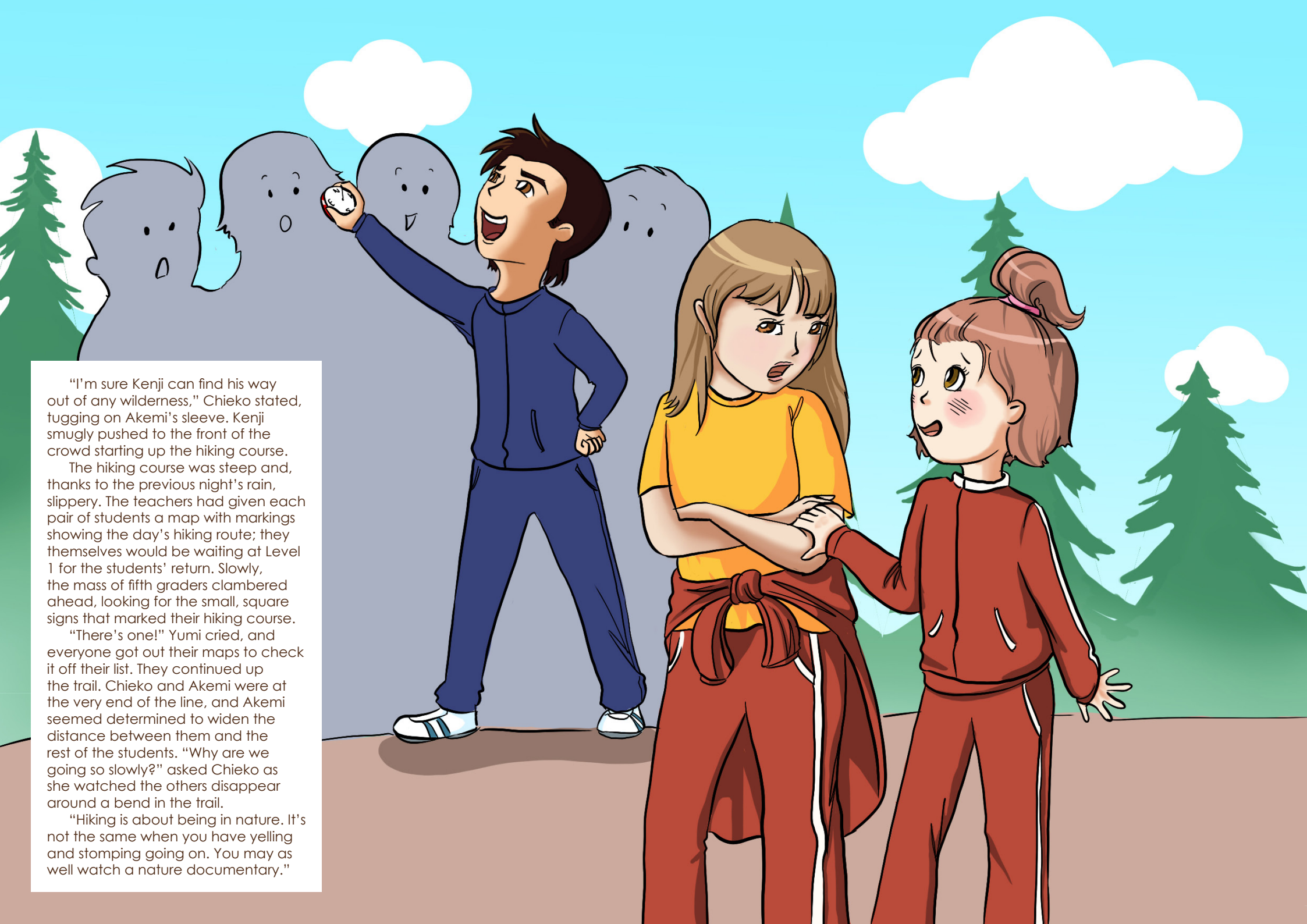
That night it rained hard and the tents leaked, much to the horror of the teachers and the delight of the students. By morning, however, the rain clouds had been blown away, and the sun was bright and hot, leaving the foothills and forest around Hakodate-san fresh and misty.

As everyone gathered at the start of the hiking trail, Kenji, a fellow student, was loudly lecturing on the skills and equipment needed to become a master hiker.

"I always bring a compass wherever I go," he said, holding up the instrument and letting the sun glint off of its shiny surface. "That way I never get lost. And I know how to tie eleven different kinds of knots, and I have some spare rope in my backpack in case someone needs rescuing."

Akemi rolled her eyes and snorted loud enough for Kenji to hear. He glared at her.





"I'm sure Kenji can find his way out of any wilderness," Chieko stated, tugging on Akemi's sleeve. Kenji smugly pushed to the front of the crowd starting up the hiking course.

The hiking course was steep and, thanks to the previous night's rain, slippery. The teachers had given each pair of students a map with markings showing the day's hiking route; they themselves would be waiting at Level 1 for the students' return. Slowly, the mass of fifth graders clambered ahead, looking for the small, square signs that marked their hiking course.

"There's one!" Yumi cried, and everyone got out their maps to check it off their list. They continued up the trail. Chieko and Akemi were at the very end of the line, and Akemi seemed determined to widen the distance between them and the rest of the students. "Why are we going so slowly?" asked Chieko as she watched the others disappear around a bend in the trail.

"Hiking is about being in nature. It's not the same when you have yelling and stomping going on. You may as well watch a nature documentary."

Akemi stopped Chieko and pointed. Chieko spied a flash of blue near a rock on the side of their hiking trail. A lizard stared at the girls; its beady eyes were like gemstones and its tail was long but very still.

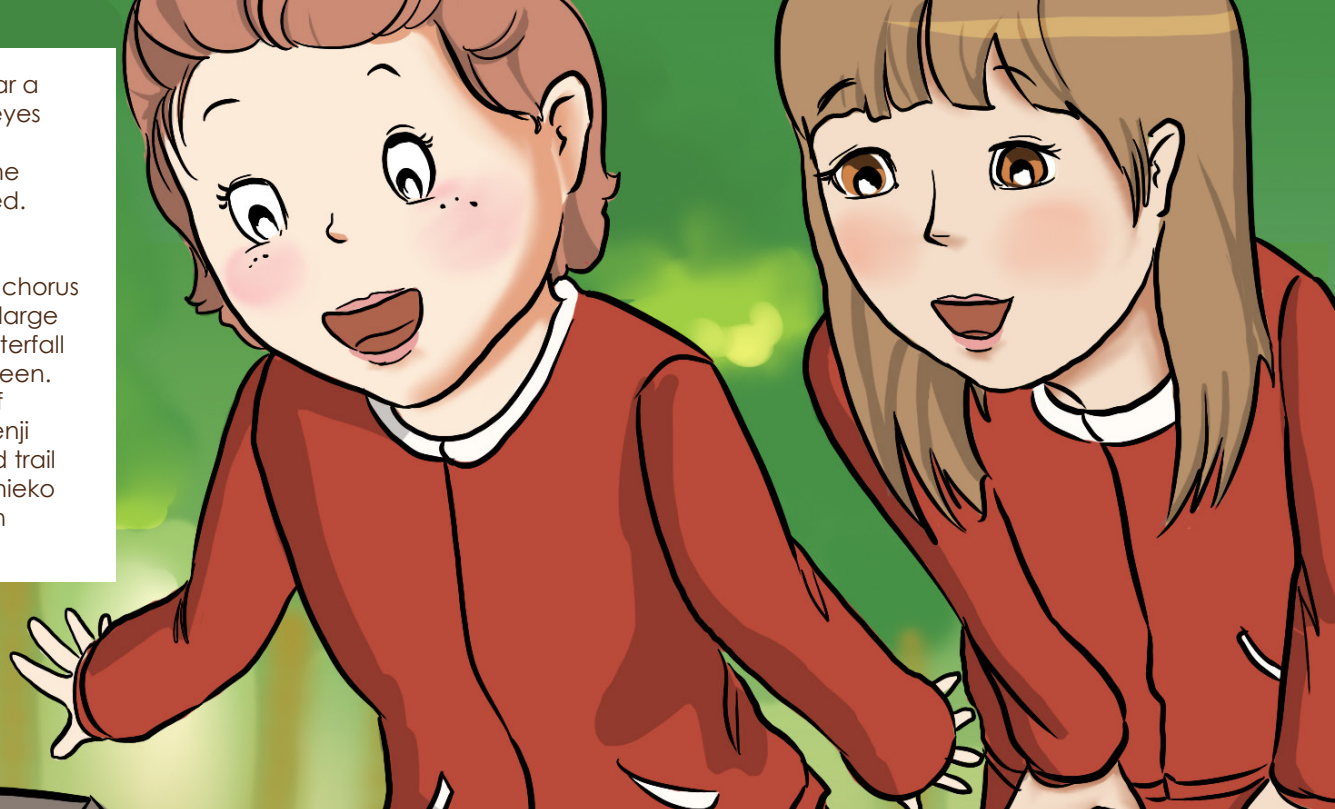
Faintly, from up ahead, someone yelled, "LOOK, A SQUIRREL!" and the *thud, thud, thud* of excited hikers sounded afterwards. The lizard escaped.

"See what I mean?"

"Yes, I think I do."

They walked together in silence under the shade of pine trees and a chorus of cicadas in the background. The trail led across a swollen stream with large stones at intervals for getting to the other side. Close by, there was a waterfall with a pool full of tadpoles, the tiniest wriggling things Chieko had ever seen.

They were surprised when they managed to catch up with the rest of the group only ten minutes into the hike, and were just in time to hear Kenji declare, "Don't worry about the sign! It's this way." He took the left-hand trail and everyone began to follow him. Once again, Akemi lingered and Chieko stayed with her. As Yumi and her buddy passed them, Yumi whispered in Chieko's direction, "Be careful, Chieko. Akemi is likely to get you lost."



Chieko opened her mouth to defend Akemi when she noticed Akemi staring off into the trees. It didn't seem like she'd even heard Yumi's taunt.

"Akemi," Chieko called. "Everyone's started off again."

Akemi looked around. "Good," she said. "We'll take this road." She started down the right-hand trail, but Chieko stopped her.

"Why aren't we going with everyone else?"

"Because everyone else is going the wrong way."

"How do you know?" asked Chieko.

"I hiked Hakodate-san with my dad last year. That other road is a roundabout route right back here," said Akemi, beginning to skip and hop. Chieko had to jog to keep up.

"Why didn't you tell the others they were taking the wrong road?" asked Chieko as they scrambled over a log that had been washed onto the trail by the rain.

Akemi tossed some pebbles in the air and caught them. She thought for a while and then said with a frown, "They all would have followed Kenji anyway. Maybe after they find out he was wrong, they won't believe everything he says."

"What's with you and Kenji?"

"He's mean! Do you know what he did? We were playing portball¹ at the beginning of the term and Kenji was team captain as usual, and I had a perfectly good strategy to gain a point, and I told him so." Akemi's brow furrowed.

"And?" prompted Chieko.

"He laughed at me and said it was a stupid idea!" growled Akemi. "He's the stupid one."

Chieko couldn't think of anything to say. She looked up and spotted another square sign.

"Look there's the sign. We are on the right trail. I'm glad you're good with directions."

"Thanks," said Akemi with another of her small smiles.

¹ portball: a game commonly played in Japanese elementary schools.

Before long, the hiking trail came to an end and they checked their names off the teacher's list. No one else had arrived, and they sat for almost an hour before the others finally emerged from the woods after having to double back to the original route to follow the signs. Kenji looked sheepish, and the teachers looked relieved.

"Maybe," Akemi conceded, "I should have told the others about the right trail. I will next time."

They shook on it.

"You know," mused Chieko, "I *did* have more fun not going with everyone else."

Akemi beamed.

Chapter 3: I Challenge You...

It was the last week of September. Teachers were putting up flags and stringing huge paper flowers into garlands for *undoukai*, their school's Sports Day, which was a week away.

Akemi walked briskly, following the faint strains of music to the back of the school, past a teacher who was putting fresh chalk lines on the running track, and sidling through some bushes into the small courtyard where the school kept chickens, two rabbits, and a peacock.

Chieko sat on the steps leading to the school's back entrance, playing "It's a Small World" on the trumpet. She stopped and lowered the instrument quickly.

"Oh," she sighed in relief, "it's you."

Akemi flopped down next to Chieko and fanned herself with her hat. "Yes, it's me. Why do you hide back here to play the trumpet anyway? You're very good."

Chieko blushed, "How can you tell?"

"Well, if anyone manages to make music instead of making people want to stuff cotton in their ears, they must be very good indeed. Are you going to try out for the solo part in the band?"

"Oh, no!" said Chieko hurriedly. "Everyone knows Yumi will get the part. Her older sister got the solo last year, and I heard Yumi say she was sure she would be chosen this year."

"Prove everyone wrong then," said Akemi. "You should at least try out and give Yumi some competition."

Chieko shook her head.

"If Yumi gets the part, you know she'll brag about it and be smug for months, and I won't be able to stand it, and I'll say something nasty to her and she'll tell the teacher and I'll get sent to the principal's office *again*. Wow! I came up with a good, solid reason for you to save me, on the spot, without time for preparation ... that's quick thinking!"



"But," said Chieko, "Yumi is also my friend. If she doesn't get the solo part, she'll be furious. I don't mind just being a *part* of the band."

"I don't think your friendship with Yumi should have anything to do with it. You're good enough to do the solo part, and as your friend, Yumi should be as happy for you to get it as you would be for her. Promise you'll give it a try?" urged Akemi.

Chieko fiddled with her trumpet.

"I guess I could, for your sake," Chieko said reluctantly.

"Oh, yes," agreed Akemi.

"...to keep you from going to the principal's office *again*..."

Akemi nodded.

"I'd almost be doing you a favor."

"Absolutely."

"So, in return, you're going to join the portball team for *undoukai* next week."

"Wait, what?!"

"Everyone knows you hate doing things in a group. So you are going to prove everyone wrong."

"But—"

"If I'm going to put myself out there and try for the solo part, you're going to join the portball team and enjoy it!"

"Is this another of your *good deed* things?"

"So? My first try didn't turn out like it was supposed to, even if we did become friends."

They glared at each other for a few moments. Then, Akemi stuck out her hand. Chieko wedged her trumpet under one arm, grasped Akemi's hand, and shook it firmly.

"It's a deal."

Chapter 4: Undoukai

"Over here! Pass the ball! I'm open, Kenji! Pass the ball!"

The ball whizzed toward her. Akemi was so surprised, she almost didn't catch it. Though it was a close call, she immediately sent the ball flying toward the "port," a large wooden box on which one of their team members was standing behind the opposing team.

Goal!

Everyone cheered and gave high-fives, and Akemi awkwardly gave a thumbs up to Kenji. Kenji blinked, astonished at Akemi's display of encouragement, and turned away quickly.

Kenji passed Akemi the ball three more times during practice that day, leaving her with something to think about when she left the field.

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Chieko stood at the entrance to the music room and pressed her ear to the door. There was silence on the other side. She opened the door, and after a furtive look this way and that, crept to the notice board and scanned the list of people trying out for the solo part. Yumi's name was on the top of the list. Chieko signed her name at the bottom and crept back out.

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TO THE CAPTAIN OF THE
PORTBALL TEAM . . .

*Cheer me up
when I'm down*

"All my plans are ruined!" Akemi told Chieko as they walked home from school together that same day.

"What was your plan?"

"I was going to..." Akemi squirmed, "...do something, but anyway it won't work anymore because Kenji isn't as bad as all that."

"Are you trying to say Kenji isn't a bully?"

"No," Akemi said. "He still isn't 'nice.' He's just not as mean as I thought he was."

"How frustrating," said Chieko, chortling.

"Yes. My plan was to make Kenji quit as captain." She saw Chieko opening her mouth. "Never mind how. I would then tell everyone my strategic plan for the game. They would hopefully, finally listen to me, and we would win the game."

"You could just go to Kenji and tell him your plan."

"He won't listen."

"You said he wasn't as bad as all that."

Akemi flushed. "The last time he didn't take my advice, I, um, kind of played a trick on him." That was all Akemi seemed willing to say.

"You can't say that and not tell me what you did!"

"I put my lizard tail collection in his desk," admitted Akemi sheepishly. "And you know how he hates lizards."

"Ohhh," said Chieko, suitably impressed.

They were both silent the rest of their walk home, but before they parted, Chieko whispered something into Akemi's ear.

To Kenji's surprise, the next morning he found a square of paper on his desk with one paragraph of typewritten text that read:

*To the captain of the portball team,
I respectfully suggest Hiro-san be put near
the port, even though he is shorter than Misako-
san. Since Hiro-san is also on the basketball
team, he knows how to catch better. Since
Misako-san is so tall, if she is on the left center of
the court, she can pass the ball backward and
forward and even shoot for the box.*

Sincerely,

A well-wisher

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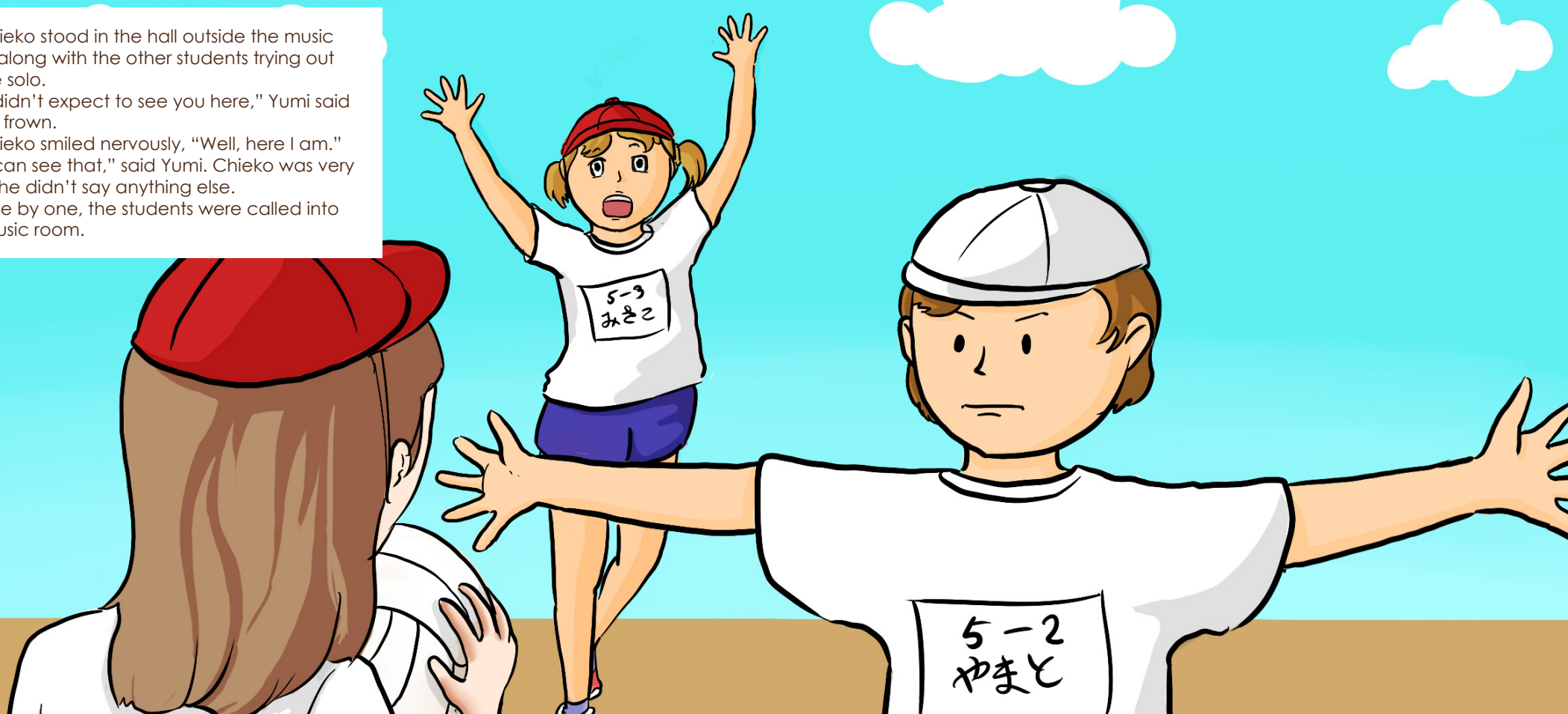
Chieko stood in the hall outside the music room along with the other students trying out for the solo.

"I didn't expect to see you here," Yumi said with a frown.

Chieko smiled nervously, "Well, here I am."

"I can see that," said Yumi. Chieko was very glad she didn't say anything else.

One by one, the students were called into the music room.



When her turn came, she stood in front of the music instructor and tried her best to shut everything from her mind. The first note came out wobbly, but as she reached the second bar, she gained confidence and forgot all about Yumi, and even the music teacher. She just played.

"Thank you," said the teacher when she had finished. "The results will be posted on the board in front of the music room on Thursday."

Chieko wanted to yell! To shout! To curl up in a corner and shiver! To jump up and down and say over and over again, "I did it! I did it! I did it!" Instead, she thanked the teacher and left the room, clutching her trumpet tightly to her chest. When she was sure no one was looking, she did all those other things.

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Undoukai was the most important event of the school year, superseded only by Graduation Day. Everyone's family, everyone's friends; in fact, the whole town would join in. Colorful flags fluttered on strings across the track and field, paper flowers hung in garlands everywhere. There were *yakisoba* stands, sports drink stands, cotton candy stands, and hot dog stands.

Each grade was divided by classes into four teams: a red team, a white team, a blue team, and a yellow team.

From first grade to sixth grade, students gathered in lines to try to get a huge ball from one end of the school courtyard to the other.

Track races, jumping contests, and soccer matches were among the sports competitions being held, and for the fifth graders—portball.

White team, Akemi's team, was going up against Blue team. On the White team's box stood Hiro, and to Akemi's delight, he caught the majority of the balls thrown at him, keeping the White team from falling behind the Blue team as the game drew to a close.

Akemi brushed sweat from her forehead and looked at the scoreboard. White and Blue were tied. The whistle sounded and the ball was bounced to the Blue team. Kenji, with a theatrical yell, intercepted a pass, but was soon surrounded by opponents from the Blue team.

"Pass it here!" Akemi shouted from the other side of the court. Kenji did so, and as she caught the ball several thoughts whizzed through her mind. *I can take a shot from here, but I'm pretty far from the box. I might score, but I might also miss. Misako is closer to the box, and she's taller too.*

She passed the ball to Misako, who sent it hurtling over the heads of the Blue team toward the box. But had she thrown too high?

Hiro jumped. His hands grasped the ball, and as he landed he tottered on the edge of the box. He swayed there for agonizing seconds and then regained his balance and threw the ball into the goal.

The timekeeper stopped the game.

The White team threw their hats into the air and cheered madly.

Akemi, although embarrassed by it later, threw her hat up in the air and jumped and shouted as loudly as everyone else.

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The school band played twice: once during the opening of *undoukai* and again at the closing ceremony.

Chieko stood on the stage with her trumpet ready; she could hardly believe it. In the crowd, Akemi and her parents waved and smiled, and beside her Yumi glowered.

She stepped forward and began to play the first notes of *Akatombou*, a folk song about a red dragonfly.

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Akemi and Chieko sat on the edge of a large cement plant pot and swung their legs in the cooling air.

"I forgot to ask," said Akemi, "what Yumi said after you got the solo part."

"She didn't really say anything," said Chieko. "But she quite conspicuously didn't invite me to her birthday party."

Akemi patted Chieko's shoulder.

"I found I actually don't mind," said Chieko. "It's funny, I thought I would."

"I thought that too, about joining a team, but it was better than I thought."

"I guess we've both tried something new and liked it," said Chieko.

"How about," said Akemi mischievously, "going to school tomorrow dressed up like ninjas."

"I'll do it if you show up the day afterwards in a long skirt," said Chieko.

"Never."

The girls laughed and watched the sun go down over the gently swaying flags and the track and field.

