

Before we go home

By Basket

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Outside the School Gate

A boy, dressed in a navy blue school uniform, stood outside the gate, his brown messenger bag hanging over his shoulder, the strap crossing diagonally in front of his chest before hanging alongside the height of his hip.

The sun's shone brightly in the sky, its pale yellow light coloring the entire area, covering it with a persistent heat haze that blurred anything too distant. There was barely a single cloud to block the light, leaving its rays to mercilessly brighten and heat up all in its path. Alongside it, a faint breeze tickled the air on occasion, carrying the last remaining petals of the sakura that still remained from Spring. The sound of birds chirping above, flying from one tree to the other, carried like music in the air.

The boy, a Shiba Inu of light, cream-colored fur, wiped his twitching brow with the cuff of his jacket. His stature, a little shorter than average for boys his age, allowed him to blend in entirely with the crowd of students leaving campus. On the other hand, however, his build, already solid and seemingly well-defined even through the layers of fabric that covered it, was outside the norm compared to other children not quite as involved with sports.

They're late. He thought to himself with annoyance, resisting the urge to grab his phone from his bag and play with it to pass the time. More than anything, he didn't want to become too dependent on his phone. Instead, he chose to diligently follow his mother's instructions to avoid becoming addicted to it. *It's boring, though.*

From still within the school ground, the sound of distant shouting and quick steps echoed. The boy turned around to peer inside, the blank look never leaving his face.

He saw two other boys rushing in his direction, smiles spreading across their faces as they saw him. The stockiest of the two was a red panda with deep, amber eyes that always twinkled with curiosity – delicate features framing his still chubby and poofy face.

The other boy was a magpie, his feathers black, white, and blue. Built more ruggedly than his friend and near on par with the Shiba, he was the tallest of the trio. His smile was devious, overflowing with mischief.

"Sorry, Aki," the red panda muttered, stopping and leaning against the wall to catch his breath, beads of sweat forming atop his forehead and rolling down the bridge of his nose. Akiyoshi quickly pulled a handkerchief from his jacket's front pocket, reaching with it to gently wipe his friend's face, causing the boy to smile. "Thank you. And, again, sorry. Kota screwed around during class clean-up, and we got held back.

"I did not!" the bird protested, glaring at his friend with his sharp beak pointed at the panda's direction.

"Yes, you did! You started slapping the blackboard erasers against each other, and we got chalk dust everywhere!"

They both glared at one another, growling.

The scene, now all too familiar to Akiyoshi, had stopped being funny a long time ago. The Shiba grimaced, putting a hand on the shoulders of the other two boys and forcing them apart.

"Come on, don't go picking a fight now," he sighed. "If you do, I'm seriously going to go to my club."

"Wha- No fair!" the magpie protested. "You go there all the time. We barely get a chance to hang out now."

"Then behave," Aki glared back at the taller boy, causing the magpie to shiver from head to toe, backing away from the canine.

"Yessir!"

"So... do you have any idea where you wanna go, Uta-kun?" Aki turned to the red panda, flashing a self-satisfied smile for only a brief second before returning to his otherwise neutral expression.

The red panda, Uta Uzaki, smiled. He reached into a bag similar to Akiyoshi's, pulling out a crumpled piece of paper which he promptly pushed toward the canine.

"Tada! Look at this!" he beamed enthusiastically, presenting some sort of colorful flyer which Aki needed to take a step back to properly read. In there, he saw what seemed to be a special promotion that was being sold at the local arcade. One that would start today and last until the end of the week.

"Arcade? I dunno about that," Aki raised an eyebrow, staring at the paper with great interest despite his attempt to appear neutral.

"Eeeeh? Why not?" the magpie, Kota Akiyama, crossed his feet in front of each other, leaning back and placing both hands on the back of his head. "It's a really good promotion."

"Yeah. But only if you buy more than 5000 yen in credit. That's a lot of money," Akiyoshi pointed out. "And even then, it's just 10%. You don't really get a good discount unless you buy 20000 yen or more, at which point it increases to 30%."

"Yeah, but the machines are half-price too per round!" Uta leaned forward, protesting energetically.

"True. But if you look carefully, there's an asterisk here along with some tiny text that says 'On select machines.'"

"Really? No way!" Kota snatched the flyer, pushing his face up-close to read it, his eyes wide. "Maaaaan. You're right!"

"I know I'm right. That's why I said," Akiyoshi brushed the statement aside. "Do any of you have anywhere close to the amount we'd need to even get the discount?"

"Uuuuh... I have 800 yen with me," Uta meekly replied.

"1000 here," Kota added.

"... So you're saying I'd need to drop at least 3200 yen for us to get a 10% discount?" Aki's brows stitched together in a tight frown, looking between his two friends with annoyance. "Yeah, not happening."

"Awww, come on! We'll pay you back!" they both joined together in pleading. However, the Shiba remained staunchly against the idea, shaking his head sideways.

"No way! That's more than my week's allowance!"

"Yeah, but you have that... Uhm... what did the teacher call it? A saving's account?" Uta's eyes glanced upward as he tried to recall a specific piece of information.

"That's something you open in a bank," Aki said. "I don't have that. I just keep the money I don't spend in a little box in my room."

"So, you do have money?" Kota asked, suddenly seeming very interested in the conversation.

"Uhm... I have *some*," Aki hesitated, taking a step back and looking down at the ground.

"How much?" the magpie insisted, causing the Shiba to bite his lip, hesitating to answer.

"... About 16000 yen."

"Whooooaaa," Uta muttered, his eyes going wide with wonder and awe. "We could get so many credits with that."

"Yeah! If you have that much, then what's the problem?" Kota added, his smile widening. "We could spend *weeks* in the arcade and not run out."

"Absolutely not. Nuh-uh!" Aki took another step back, glaring at his friends. "That's over a year of savings. I'm not spending it all on games."

"What? Why not?" they both whined, wide-eyed, and slack-jawed, finding the idea impossible to comprehend. "Isn't money for spending?"

"If I spend it all now, then I won't have any later if I need it for something."

"What would you even need it for?"

"I don't know. There might be an emergency."

Kota and Uta scoffed, glancing at each other as they smiled derisively, the idea utterly foreign to them.

"Come on, it's not a big deal. If we want to get a lower price, we need to use it. It's just money, anyway," the red panda urged, his tubby tail swishing back and forth behind him, making a sweeping motion just a few inches above the ground.

"It's because you think like that that you don't have any money in the first place," Akiyoshi sighed, shaking his head once again. "I'm fine paying up to 2000 yen. No way am I going over that on my own. I don't even play that many games when we go to the arcade."

"Aww, come on!" the magpie complained, leaning forward until his face was hovering eerily close to the Shiba's own, making the smaller boy back away to avoid the sharp beak that now loomed far too close for comfort. "Then, we'd be short and wouldn't get the special sale price!"

"I said, no!"

They both whined, looking down at the floor and kicking at their feet, clearly unhappy with the decision. Uta's lips quivered as he tried to think of an alternative or argument to use. Still, every attempt consistently fell short as he could think of nothing to convince the Shiba.

"What if I did your homework for a week?"

"Then I'd learn nothing from it."

The red panda's eyebrow twitched. *Right. He's the kind of weirdo that actually likes doing his homework*, he thought, amused.

"Uuh... I can't think of anything," he finally muttered after a long, drawn-out period of silence, sighing in defeat and disappointment.

"Good, because I'm not using all my money no matter what you say," Aki's lips curved up into a slight smile. "Maybe you guys are the ones who should learn to be responsible with your money."

"Pass," Kota responder almost immediately, holding up his feathered hand in the air. "Hey, if we can't go to the arcade, how about we get some ice cream?"

"Do you only know how to do things that cost money?" Aki frowned, his question eliciting barely a shrug in retort.

"I could go for ice cream," Uta smiled, nodding energetically.

"I think I'd prefer to get a crepe..." the small Shiba muttered, glancing downwards and away from his friends, feeling his face grow slightly flushed.

"A crepe? That's so girly!"

He was promptly teased by both of his friends, causing his embarrassment to intensify.

"Ice cream hurts my teeth..."

"Then don't bite it," Kota spoke matter-of-factly, blinking a few times at what he thought was an obvious answer.

"I *don't* bite it. Having something that could in my mouth just makes them hurt."

"Maybe you should go to the dentist?" Uta asked, cocking his head to the side.

"I did. He gave me a special toothpaste to use and everything."

"Just toothpaste? That's boring. Couldn't he have put metal plates on your teeth or something?" Kota said.

"Why would I ever want to have metal teeth?"

"Who wouldn't want to?! It'd be so cool. You'd be like a cyborg!"

Aki stared at his friend silently for multiple seconds, unable to come up with a kind response. *If you have nothing nice to say, don't say anything*, he thought to himself, remembering one of the many lessons he'd been taught by his mother from a young age.

Deciding that the entire conversation was too bothersome, he merely turned around, walking away from the pair, who hesitated for a second in their surprise before rushing to catch up with him.

"Oe, Aki, where are you going?" Kota shouted. "Don't leave us behind like that!"

"I'm going to the shopping district to get a crepe. You're free to do whatever you want."

"Wha- You're ditching us?!" the magpie asked, offended.

"Oh. You mean the 'Marukawa Crepe' stand in the shopping district?" Uta asked, looking at his friend with curiosity. After a couple moments without showing any clear response, Akiyoshi nodded. As soon as he saw that, the red panda laughed. "Ooooooh, the one that's right next to 'Kourin Ice Creams & Shakes'."

The magpie blinked a few times, walking alongside both of his friends. Then, it finally clicked in his head. He laughed loudly. "So that's what it is? You were still planning on going out with us, after all."

"Shut up," Aki looked away, his cheeks growing a light tinge of red, barely hidden by his fur.

"Hey, Aki, why don't you treat me to some ice cream then?" Kota teased, poking Akiyoshi's cheek with a cheeky grin and causing the Shiba to glare at him in response.

"Buy your own!" the smaller boy barked back, baring his teeth.

"Guh... Did I make you mad?"

"... I'll treat Uta-kun, though," Aki continued to glare at the bird. However, as he began to speak, his glare turned into a sly smile.

"Huh? What's up with that?!"

"Thank you, Aki-kun!" Uta giggled.