

Chapter 5 — Almost Something

Hazel POV

(Part 1)

I start noticing things I shouldn't notice.

Not because they're hidden.

Because I didn't care enough before to look.

Nanami arrives earlier than usual today.

Not by much.

Three minutes.

But it's not the time that matters.

It's what he's doing before he sits down.

He's talking to someone.

That alone is wrong.

Nanami doesn't talk.

At least—not casually.

He stands near the entrance of the study room hallway, speaking to a girl I don't recognize.

Short exchange.

Controlled posture.

Neutral expression.

But it still counts as interaction.

Eden notices before I do.

Of course she does.

Her entire personality is built around detecting problems before they fully form.

"Ooooh," she whispers beside me. "That's new."

"It's not," I say immediately.

She tilts her head. "That looked like new."

"It's irrelevant."

But my eyes stay there longer than they should.

The girl laughs lightly.

Touches his arm briefly.

Once.

Then leaves.

Nanami doesn't react.

Not visibly.

But he does something I only notice because I've been forced to notice him recently.

He adjusts his sleeve after she walks away.

Small motion.

Almost nothing.

But not nothing.

I don't know why that irritates me.

I don't like that it does.

"On time," I say when he finally steps inside.

"Early," he corrects.

But today—

There is a delay before he says it.

Half a second longer than usual.

I notice immediately.

I hate that I notice immediately.

He sits.

I sit.

Eden sits.

The structure continues.

But something is off.

I open my notebook.

He opens his.

We begin.

Except I'm not fully focused.

That is new.

Nanami corrects me once.

I fix it immediately.

But I don't look at the problem.

I look at him.

He notices.

Of course he does.

"You're distracted," he says.

"I'm not."

"You are allocating attention externally."

That phrasing annoys me more than it should.

"I'm fine," I say.

"No," he replies.

Simple.

Flat.

Certain.

That certainty used to feel efficient.

Today it feels... directed.

Like he's deciding what I am instead of observing it.

Eden leans forward.

"Oh this is already spicy," she whispers.

I ignore her.

But I still feel the earlier moment repeating in my head.

Nanami talking to someone else.

Nanami being touched.

Nanami not reacting.

And me noticing.

I don't like the order of those thoughts.

At some point, Eden stops pretending to behave.

"So," she says loudly, "who was that girl?"

Nanami doesn't look up immediately.

"She asked a question," he says after a pause.

"That wasn't an answer," Eden replies.

"It was sufficient."

Hazel: "It wasn't relevant."

Eden looks at me.

"Oh it is," she says.

I glare at her.

"Why would it be relevant?"

She grins.

"Because you looked like you were thinking about it."

I wasn't.

At least—

I wasn't supposed to be.

Nanami finally looks at Eden.

"Noise is increasing," he says.

Eden gasps. "I'm noise now?"

"Yes."

"That's rude."

"It's classification."

That word again.

Classification.

Like everything is just labeled.

Filed.

Sorted.

I don't know why that bothers me more than it should.

We continue.

But my focus keeps slipping.

Nanami notices faster now.

Not my mistakes.

My pauses.

My delays.

My recalibration moments.

"You're not following sequence," he says once.

"I am."

"You're not."

I hesitate.

That hesitation is answer enough.

Eden leans back.

"This is the part where she starts thinking too much," she says.

"I always think," I reply.

"No," she says. "This is different."

Nanami says nothing.

But I see him watching me longer than before.

Not correction-focused.

Not problem-focused.

Observation-focused.

That shift is subtle.

But I feel it.

And I don't know why I feel it so clearly.

At one point, I make a mistake I would normally catch immediately.

He corrects it.

I fix it.

But I don't let it go.

Instead, I ask—

“Who was she?”

The room changes.

Not physically.

Not audibly.

But the structure of silence changes.

Eden looks between us like she just got front-row seats to something she didn't expect.

Nanami pauses.

That is rare.

“I don't know her name,” he says.

That should end it.

It doesn't.

“Then why were you talking to her?”

“Contextual requirement,” he replies.

“That doesn't answer—”

“It does.”

I stop.

Because it does.

And I hate that it does.

Eden smiles slowly.

“Oh,” she says softly. “That's interesting.”

I don't like her tone.

I don't like that I asked.

I don't like that I care enough to ask.

Nanami resumes working.

Like nothing happened.

That somehow makes it worse.

The rest of the session feels unstable.

Not externally.

Internally.

I make fewer mistakes.

But I also make more pauses.

Nanami notices all of them.

Eden notices everything else.

It feels like I'm being observed from two different angles.

One analytical.

One chaotic.

Both accurate in different ways.

At some point, Nanami says:

"You're overcorrecting."

"I'm not."

"You are compensating for external distraction."

I look up sharply.

"I said I'm fine."

"No," he repeats.

Again.

Like earlier.

Like always.

That word—

No.

It doesn't leave space for argument.

It just removes it.

I stand at the end of the session faster than usual.

"Same time tomorrow," I say.

"Yes," he replies.

But this time—

There is no delay.

That should comfort me.

It doesn't.

That night, I sit in my room longer than I should.

Textbooks open.

Unread.

I keep thinking about the girl.

Not her face.

Not her voice.

Just the fact that she existed in Nanami's space without friction.

And I didn't.

That thought is irrational.

But it persists anyway.

I close the textbook.

Stare at the ceiling.

And realize something I don't want to admit.

This stopped being just tutoring a while ago.

I just didn't notice when it changed. The next session feels wrong from the moment it starts.

Not visibly.

Not structurally.

Everything is still in its correct place.

But I can feel the difference anyway.

Nanami arrives at 3:52 PM.

Eden is already inside.

Of course she is.

But today, she is not sitting.

She's standing near the window like she's waiting for something to happen.

That alone should have warned me.

Nanami walks in.

He pauses briefly when he sees her standing instead of sitting.

Just a fraction.

Then continues forward.

"On time," I say.

"Early," he replies.

But there's a delay again.

Not long.

Not obvious.

But I notice it.

Eden smiles immediately.

"I feel like today is going to be fun," she says.

"No one asked," I say.

"That's never stopped me before."

Nanami sits.

I sit.

Eden does not sit.

That's new.

And wrong in a way I can't fully explain.

We begin.

But I don't open my notebook immediately.

Instead, I look at him.

He notices.

Of course he does.

"You're not starting," he says.

"I am."

"You're not."

I hesitate.

Then open it.

But the hesitation already happened.

Eden watches it like she's watching a trigger event.

"Ooooh," she says quietly. "There it is."

I ignore her.

But I don't ignore what she means.

Because I understand it.

And I don't like that I do.

Nanami corrects me once early.

I fix it.

But my focus splits again.

Not evenly.

Unevenly.

Like something is pulling attention away in pieces.

That "something" is sitting in the room.

Not doing anything.

Just existing differently today.

Eden.

She is watching both of us.

Not equally.

Not randomly.

Strategically.

I notice that Nanami notices her noticing.

That thought is almost too complicated to process cleanly.

I don't like it.

"Focus," Nanami says.

I blink.

"I am focused."

"You are divided."

That word again.

Divided.

Like I'm no longer single-threaded.

Like something is branching.

I don't respond.

Because I can't tell if he's right.

That bothers me more than anything else.

At some point, Eden breaks the silence deliberately.

"So," she says, "I saw someone else talking to you yesterday."

Nanami doesn't look up immediately.

"Yes," he says.

"That was fast," she replies.

"It was unnecessary to delay confirmation."

Eden grins.

"Was she pretty?"

Silence.

Not normal silence.

Compressed silence.

I feel it change instantly.

Nanami stops writing.

That is new.

He doesn't look at Eden first.

He looks at me.

That should mean nothing.

But it doesn't feel like nothing.

"I don't evaluate irrelevant variables," he says.

Eden tilts her head.

"So she's irrelevant?"

"Yes."

Another pause.

Then she smiles wider.

"That's interesting," she says.

I don't like her tone again.

I don't like the way she's looking at me more than him now.

Like she's watching my reaction instead of his answer.

I don't react.

I shouldn't react.

But something inside me tightens anyway.

We continue.

But now everything feels slightly off-center.

Nanami is still precise.

Still controlled.

Still unchanged in execution.

But his attention shifts slightly more often than before.

Not toward Eden.

Toward me.

That should be expected.

It isn't.

Because it happens more after her question.

Not before.

After.

Like reaction is now part of structure.

Eden notices it too.

Of course she does.

She always notices patterns forming faster than they should.

"This is kind of funny," she says softly.

"What is," I ask.

"You two."

Nanami speaks at the same time I do.

"We are not—"

Then stops.

For the first time.

Actually stops mid-pattern.

That shouldn't happen.

Silence drops.

Even Eden doesn't speak immediately.

Nanami looks down briefly.

Then back up.

"We are not what," he finishes.

But it's different.

Less automatic.

I notice that immediately.

And so does he.

That realization sits between us longer than anything else today.

At the end of the session, I stand first.

Too quickly.

Nanami notices.

Of course he does.

"You are leaving faster," he says.

"I'm not."

"You are."

I don't respond.

Because he's right.

And I don't want to confirm it.

Eden walks beside me as I leave.

But she leans in slightly.

"Did you notice?" she whispers.

"Notice what."

"That he looked at you before he answered me."

I stop walking.

Turn to her.

"That means nothing."

She smiles.

"It means everything if you think about it enough."

"I don't."

"Yes you do."

I turn away immediately.

But my pace is faster now.

That's the problem.

Because she's not wrong.

And I hate that I'm aware of that fact.

That night, I sit in my room longer than usual.

But I don't open my textbooks.

I think instead.

About silence.

About pauses.

About the way Nanami looked at me before answering.

Not long.

Not dramatic.

Just enough to register.

And I realize something I don't want to admit.

I am no longer only reacting to him.

I am reacting to how he reacts to everything else.

And that is no longer tutoring.

That is something else entirely.

Something I don't have a name for yet.

But it's already changing the way I think.

And I don't know how to stop noticing it.