

義妹生活

三河ごーすと

illust Hiten



Days with my Step Sister

presented by
ghost mikawa

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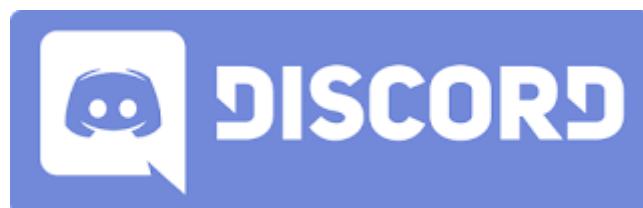
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義 妹 生 活

三河ごーすと

illust Hiten

(ふうん、浅村くんも

この番組好きなんだ。

私も見たかつたし、ちょうどいいかも)

(視線が気になる…

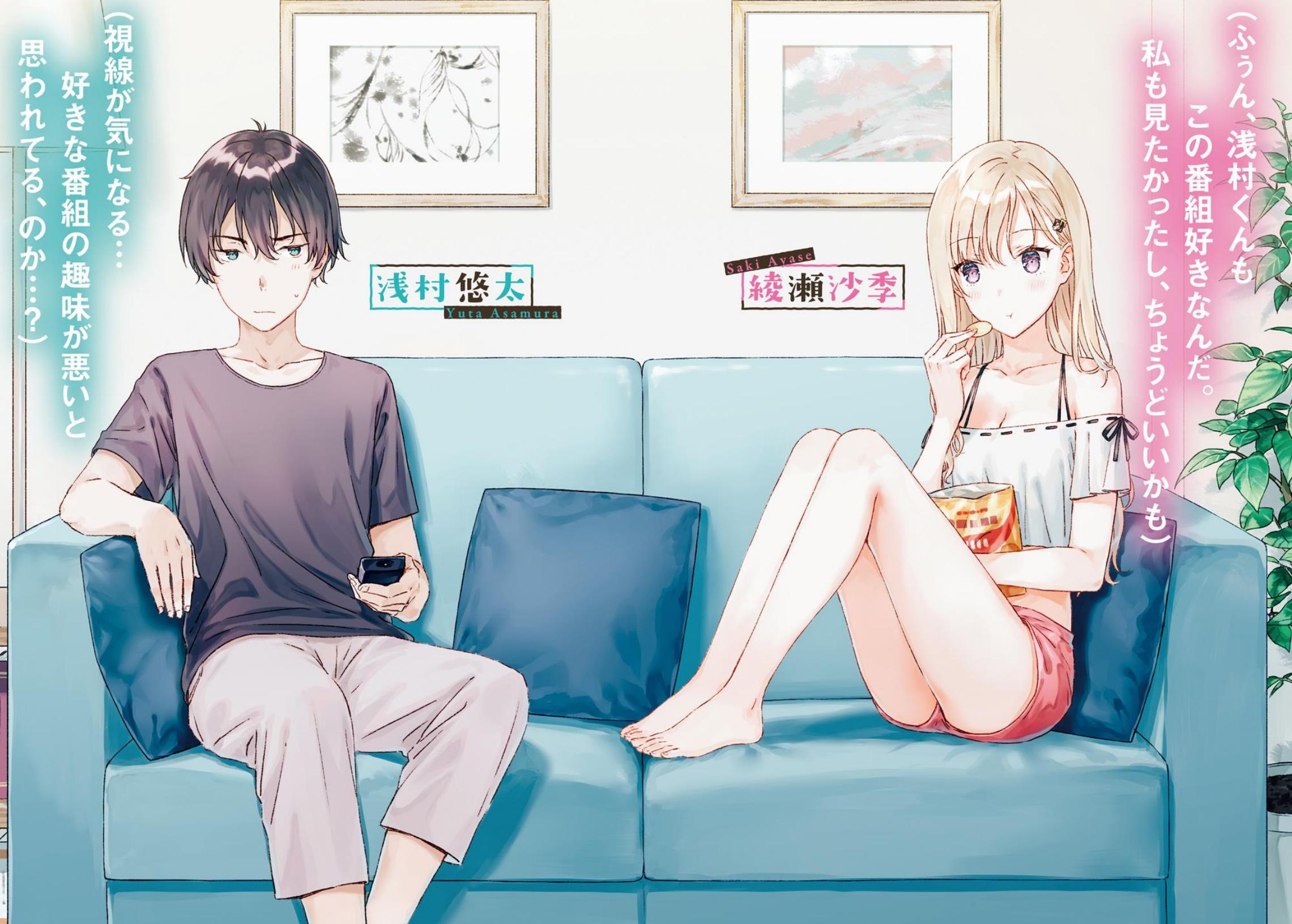
好きな番組の趣味が悪いと
思われてる、のか…?)



浅村 悠太

Yuta Asamura

Saki Ayase
綾瀬沙季



「ふーん。欲望はあるんだ」

「素直にそういう欲望がないかと言えばウソになる、かなー

「じゃあ、魅力なし……と。へーえ」

「私の下着は視線を奪われるほど魅力的だった、と」

「別にそこまでは」

体育の義妹





夜の義妹

After going through
the laundry, this is
basically the same
as a handkerchief,
isn't it?

I totally thought
you hated
girls or
something



So you
had a
Girl
you're
close
with,
huh,
Asa
mu
ra
-kun.

A
phone
call?

Sure,
go take
it.
I don't
wanna
restrain
you here
or
anything.
I don't
mind if
it's in
front
of me
either.



綾瀬沙季子

Saki Ayase

綾瀬 沙季

Ayase Saki

Second year in high school. Because of her mother's remarriage, she becomes Yuuta's younger step-sister. Because of her flashy clothes, she's often believed to be some delinquent, which is why she doesn't fully fit in her class.

If only all of humanity could be this dry and straightforward with other people.

Just like you and me,
Asamura-kun.

Ohhh, it's the rumoured Onii-san! You really were Asamura-kun from our neighbouring class!

Narasaka Maaya

Saki's classmate. Always energetic and meddlesome, she saw the solitary Saki and became her friend through endless bothering.



奈良坂 真綾



Asamura Yuuta

Second year in high school. Because of his father's remmarriage, he becomes Saki's older step-brother. He's your average high school student, but he keeps a certain distance to other people. Practically addicted to reading books.

浅村 悠太



Your father decided to get married

Asamura Taichi

Yuuta's actual father, and Sayki's new step-father. A lot of things happened with his previous wife, which is why they ended up getting a divorce. His relationship with Yuuta and Sayki is very



As always, thanks a lot. You really are reliable, Junior-kun.

読壳 莉

Yomiuri Shiori

University student, and Yuuta's senior at the bookstore he works part-time at. Always interested in other people, and openly supports Yuuta's 'relationship' with Saki.

Maru Tomokazu

Yuuta's classmate. Probably Yuuta's only real friend at school. Member of the baseball club, and an otaku.

丸 友 和



You got a little sister, right? You bastard of an Onii-chan.



Ayase Akiko

Saki's real mother and Yuuta's new step-mother. After her divorce with her previous husband, she focussed everything on work and raising Saki on her own.

Prologue

I can confidently state the following because I have experienced this myself: A younger step-sister is nothing but a stranger.

For an adolescent boy in his second year in high school, this is undoubtedly the greatest misfortune, and for a single family, the greatest blessing. Look at the non-blood related siblings in manga, light novels, and games, for example. With that as an excuse, the sister becomes the target heroine of the protagonist, and they end up in a relationship. If you were to take this logic for gold, then you'll definitely go through a lot of pain and suffering, and at the very end, you only get told to 'Protect your little sister', receiving a protagonist-like role.

Reality is always different. If you were to ask what exactly the difference from this imaginary step-sister to a real one is, then let me give you an example. Envision me coming home from my part-time job at a certain bookstore, running into my step-sister sitting on the living room sofa sipping on some hot chocolate. Our conversation would unfold as such...

"Welcome back, Asamura-kun."

"I'm home, Ayase-san."

That was it. Do you understand it now? There's no sweet and adorable 'Onii-chan~' to hear, nor any cold and salty 'Huh? Can you not talk to me, you shitty big bro?'. It's an exchange as flat as this earth, absolutely barebones with a greeting and nothing more. Both of us just live in reality, not going too far in, not moving away too much.

There's no heart-throbbing, flirting, excessive stimulus or respect, none of that sort between me and my step-sister. After living a solid

17 years apart, suddenly being told that you'll be a family starting tomorrow, there's really no special emotion or feelings to be held. If anything, the level of familiarity of two people having coincidentally been classmates for two years is probably higher than ours.

My name is Asamura Yuuta. I'm your average 17-year old, a second-year in high school. If one asked me why I would get a step-sister at such an age, then it's simply because my old man is too 'lively' for his own good. I can only respect him from the bottom of my heart to get married again at his solid age.

The moment I gained consciousness and thinking as a child, I experienced my parents fighting practically all day, so when I heard my old man saying he wanted to get a divorce, I could only nod to that. That idiot even apologized to me, saying it was his inability, even though I very well knew that my mother was cheating on him. Ever since then, I lived my days harboring no great expectations from the girls I dealt with.

The news hit me when I just grabbed my keys for my bike, putting on my sneakers at the entrance.

"Your father decided to get married again."

"Huh?"

"The other person is a very tolerable and charming Onee-san, so you're good with that, right?"

"Can't really tell what kind of person she is with those modifiers you're telling me."

"From the top it's 92, 61, 90."

"I wasn't telling you to use math instead...Think about how I feel, hearing about my supposed new mother's three sizes before I even get to see her."

“You must be happy to get such a stylish mother, right?”

“Not really, no.”

“No way...! Not being won over by me playing at your desires...are you really an adolescent boy? I thought something was off, actually...”

“Hey now. That sure is some awful impression you have towards your own son.”

It seems like people tend to get the weird idea when I say I don't have any special expectations towards girls, but I can still get excited at the sight of them, and when I spot a girl in her swimsuit at the pool, I get turned on. Just, even if you tell me like that, I can't exactly feel any passion towards the person who might soon become my new mother, the new lover of my old man, alright?

“Still, how did you even meet her, you're a solid 40 right now. At your workplace or something?”

“She works at a store I got dragged to by my superior. Seeing me broken and collapsed, she took great care of me, see.”

“Aren't you just being deceived then...”

I don't really want to throw out stereotypes like ‘All people of the night are bad’, but when my old man, who already went through some awful stuff because of a woman, tells me about this, then I can't exactly be hopeful.

“It's fine~ Akiko-san isn't like that. Ahahaha!” He said a phrase only someone being deceived would spit out so confidently, to which I could only return a sigh.

However, that was as far as I would go.

“If you’re happy, then so am I. I’ll just keep doing my thing.”

That’s what it means to not have any expectations. Since I don’t have any high hopes for this new life with a new mother, even if I get deceived, end up in misfortune, there’s no real sadness or pain.

“No, that won’t quite work out this time. You’ll get a little sister after all.”

“Huh? Little sister?”

“Yup. She’s Akiko-san’s daughter. She showed me a picture, but she really is a cutie.”

It seems like both my old man and that woman are going to remarry with this one. I guess that was one of the reasons they were attracted to each other.

“Here, look. Cute, right?”

“Well...I guess.”

He energetically took out his smartphone, showing me a picture. There, I could see a girl that was probably in grade school right now. Looked like she had a translated book from overseas on her lap, probably aimed at children her age. Apparently she wasn’t too comfortable with taking pictures, as she looked slightly flustered.

“Congrats. With this, you’re an Onii-chan!”

“I don’t know what you want from me, giving me a thumbs-up like that...Well, she definitely is cute, so it doesn’t feel that bad.”

Having a girl around my age as a little sister would have been a bit bothersome to deal with, but if she’s at that age, then things should be fine. And no, I’m not a lolicon. I’m just relieved that I don’t really

have to be too considerate towards her since she's that far apart from me in age. I do think she's cute, but again, no lolicon.

"And, we'll be having a meeting today at 9pm. Can you come meet us after work?"

"That sure is abrupt..."

"Well...I wanted to tell you, but I never really got a chance, so it's been a month already, and...here we are."

"There's gotta be a limit on how much you can postpone it!"

"I have no excuses, haha..."

That's the kind of old man he is. Not reliable at all, and yet gullible enough to blindly trust people. How can I not be worried?

"I get it, I'll be there. Best be thankful that I'm not some delinquent who stays out all night."

"I was never worried about that. I have full trust in you after all."

Seriously, how can you trust others that easily.

A new mother, a new little sister, a new family. These words filled my head, as I spent my time doing my work at my part-time job, while being instructed by my (beauty of a) senior. According to Devora Zack¹, multitasking is the pinnacle of stupidity, and only by focussing on one thing, you achieve results. This being the case, I focussed solely on my first contact with my supposed new little sister, which is why I messed up a few times at work, getting scolded by my senior in the process. Even though she recommended the book to me in the first place.

That being the case, when my shift ended, she still tapped me on the shoulder with an energetic ‘Go get ‘em, Onii-chan!’, making me realize that she was a kind person deep down.

Night arrived at Shibuya. It took a few minutes to reach Dougenzaka by bike from my part-time work, and I finally made it to the family restaurant my old man was talking about. During these times, the area would always be awfully crowded, and several groups of women stood in front of the establishment already. Judging from their words, they seemed to be complaining about the boyfriends they were currently going out with.

His clothes are lame, he doesn’t know how to treat a woman—one woman said, her body tanned while wearing flashy clothes, her hair in avant-garde fashion. Um, Lady? You look just as lame if you’d ask me, or how about telling your boyfriend face-to-face instead?

Then again, telling her that would do neither of us any good, so I just slipped past her, and checked my old man’s LINE message to search for the seat. I’d rather not get in too close contact with a flashy type of person like that, not to mention their high expectations towards other people. From here on out, I’ll be meeting my grade school little sister. Again, not a lolicon though. I’m just going to make sure that she doesn’t grow up to be like that.

“Hey, Yuuta! Over here.”

My old man most likely saw me look around the inside of the establishment, as he called out to me with his hand up. Feeling awkward since now half of the other customers were looking over at me, I quickly made my way to the table.

—The root of this discomfort plaguing me had already been planted there.

The more I walked forwards, the larger it grew, and by the time I stood at the seat in front of my old man to properly see the faces of my new family, this root had grown exponentially, blooming into a beautiful flower shortly after. Excuse me, but what the hell is going on here?

“Nice to meet you~ So you’re Yuuta-kun. I’m sorry to call you here right after your part-time work.”

“N-No, it’s fine. I’m Asamura Yuuta. So you are my father’s...”

“Yes, my name is Ayase Akiko. Fufu, I heard a lot about you from Taichi-san, but you really seem dependable.”

The woman—who named herself Ayase Akiko—called out to the bewildered me, and showed a gentle smile as she mentioned my old man. From her expression and gaze, I felt the charm of an adult. She was basically just like my old man had described her. At first I thought she was the type of person to loiter around in the city at night. But, Akiko-san didn’t feel that way.

However, that’s not important right now. The reason I was stuttering over my own words, the person who stole my gaze and attention, sat next to Akiko-san. I can see a resemblance to the person in the picture, really. She is probably the girl who will become my new little sister. That being the case, she looked astonishingly different from how I envisioned her.

“Come on, introduce yourself~”

“Okay.”

Urged by her mother, the girl, who had a high stature, long and almost sparkling blonde hair, with a silver piercing shining in her ear, showed me an odd smile.

“Nice to meet you. My name is Ayase Saki.”

“Eh, ah, yeah. Asamura Yuuta here.”

She gave a polite greeting, slightly lowering her head towards me.

—What the hell am I looking at here?

I can definitely see the resemblance. If someone told me that this is the same grade school girl I saw in that picture, I’d agree. However, only if one added that this is what she looked like **ten years after said picture**. Utterly flabbergasted, I looked at the Ayase Saki in front of me. A grade school girl? My ass, she’s a woman.

She had her hair styled in a fashionable way, but the color in itself was quite flashy, with accessories on her wrist and around her neck, piercings on her ears. Her clothes weren’t exactly licentious, but it was enough to openly show one shoulder. Because of the light inside the establishment, it was hard to tell, but I figured her make-up was probably on point as well.



In short, she looked like a stylish girl, a member of the extroverted world I thought I would never be involved with. Yet, the way she acted and greeted me made her seem like an adult with a proper amount of common sense, which only heightened this sense of discomfort plaguing me. For now, I decided to sit down next to my old man, and question him about this.

“Hey, this isn’t what I heard about, you know?”

“I mean, this is the first time I’m meeting her as well...I had no idea. Only had the picture to work with.”

“No matter how you look at it, she’s definitely my age.”

“She very much is. She’s 17 this year, a second-year in high school.”

“And you called her my little sister?”

“Your birthday is a week before her’s.”

“A week...”

Just one week? What does that matter, we’re the same age. In my head, I could see the image of a cute little sister, which I didn’t have to be considerate around, shatter into a thousand pieces.

“I’m sorry that it had to be this confusing. Saki just wouldn’t let me take any pictures of her now that she’s grown, so I only had an old picture~” Having guessed or most likely heard my conversation with my old man, Akiko-san put one hand on her cheek, and glanced at her daughter.

Since I’m not the greatest fan about having pictures of me taken, I can totally get behind that. What I don’t understand however is

Akiko-san. Why would she show my old man a picture of her daughter when she was in grade school?

“I’m often told that I have a sharp gaze, so taking pictures is a bit uncomfortable.”

“H-Huh, is that so.”

Saki—Ayase-san showed a troubled smile, but to me, she looked like a beauty appraised by everybody in this world. It’d make sense if it was me, who’s a bastard so normal you could find me anywhere, but I don’t really see a reason why she would avoid having pictures taken. That being said, that was just my own personal opinion, so I kept quiet about that. Wouldn’t want to force myself onto her.

“But, I’m relieved.” Ayase-san put one hand on her chest.

“About what?” I asked back.

“I was a bit worried that you might turn out to be a scary person.”

“Hmm, who knows? I feel like the really scary people put on a gentle face.”

“I heard a lot from Taichi-san just now. You’re working part-time to earn money for the university school expenses, right? I figured you’d be a diligent person.”

“Not even ten minutes ago, I got scolded by my senior at work for messing up again though.”

“What about you having excellent grades?”

“There’s a lot of clever criminals out there.”

“Ahaha.” Ayase-san covered her mouth with her fingers, and let out a giggle.

Our parents watched over this short conversation, and showed relieved smiles themselves. It seems as if the first contact with my future step-sister worked out just fine. The simulation I went through was quite a lot different from reality, but I think I did great considering the circumstances. With this, we should be able to get along just fine.

We spent until roughly 10pm talking about various things and future plans, and then decided to disband since the next day would have to begin early. My old man and Akiko-san wanted to quickly finish a round to the toilet, so Ayase-san and I left the restaurant early, waiting for them.

Even this late into the night, Dougenzaka never sleeps. Looking at the drunk men and women raising loud voices around us, I took a swift glance at the ‘little sister’ standing next to me. Because of her flashy outer appearance, she greatly resembled the people walking through Shibuya this very moment. She’s a ‘woman’ I would normally never get into contact with. But, judging from the conversation we had in the family restaurant, she seems to be much more clever than she previously shows.

Outer appearances are still only outer appearances. They don’t have anything to do with personality and etiquette. It’d be great if I could put it into simple words like that. However, that’s not the only reason I feel so comfortable around her. It’s something hard to explain—

“Hey, Asamura-kun, there’s something I’d like to talk about before our parents are back.”

“Something you can’t tell them?”

“Correct. Then again, it’s something I can only tell you.”

“I managed to build up this much trust after that short of a conversation? Am I actually that amazing?”

“From your humor, way of speaking, expressions, I feel no strong emotions. That’s why, I think you’ll understand what I’m trying to say.”

“Ahhh...”

That makes sense. Basically, she’s the same type as me. That’s why I felt like something was off. Thinking back on it, the words she told me that moment probably led to this decisive definition of our brother-sister relationship.

“I won’t have any great expectations from you, so I want you to do the same for me.”

You should be able to understand the meaning of that, right? — She added. Her eyes were fixated on mine, as she waited for my response. Of course, my answer had already been decided. To any other person, this might have sounded like a cold rejection, but to me, it showed the type of stance in a person I appreciate the most.

“This is probably a first for me.” I said with a smile.

“Yup, same here.”

“Then, let’s keep going with that stance, Ayase-san.”

“Thank you, Asamura-kun.”

Thus, my relationship with my new younger step-sister began.

1 Wrote a book in 2015, called ‘Singletasking: Get More Done – One Thing at a Time’

Chapter 1: 7th of June (Sunday)

“Welcome to our home! ...No, that’s not it. —Starting today, we’ll be living under the same roof, right! ...Hmm, that sounds a bit too creepy...”

With the countless cardboard boxes and new furniture in the corner of my eye, I looked at myself in the mirror, and repeated the same phrases to myself.

It was your average evening, roughly 5pm. I stood in a single room of this flat we rented on the third floor, located in the living district with the greatest deviation value in all over Japan (slight exaggeration). It was a 3 LDK¹ flat. For just me and my old man, it was definitely too big, but now it’ll surely end up too small.

For the past five minutes, I’ve been practicing my expression and words that I would show to greet the new family. You know, the entire premise of this is just ridiculous. I understand how my old man would take care of cleaning and preparing the room that will be used by him and Akiko-san. However, why would you send me, an adolescent boy, to prepare the room for the stranger that will become my younger sister starting today. That is one decision I cannot exactly follow.

“Weird...where did it go?”

“What’s wrong?”

My old man was walking up and down the hallway in a panic, so I called out to him.

“Ah, perfect timing. Did you see the febreeze anywhere?”

“Should be in the living room. I used it for the curtains yesterday.”

“Ah, there! Thanks!”

I heard the sloppy sound of slippers walking down the hallway, heading towards the living room.

“Why are you panicking like that **now**?”

“I was looking through the room again, but when I started cleaning, the scent just bothered me so much...I don’t want them to think I stink, you know...”

“What are you, a high school girl?”

“When you get to my age, that’s a critical hit, alright! You’ll see what I mean twenty years down the line, Yuuta!”

“I’d appreciate it if you had a bit more confidence in your own son, you shitty old man.”

Watching him walk back to his bedroom, febreeze in hand, his back curled up like a depressed cat, I let out a sigh. If you’re that bothered by it, why don’t you just keep at it each day? Then again, that’d probably be too cruel of a request towards an always-busy salaryman like him.

“My room is fine...right?” Thanks to my old man’s words, I started to feel slightly concerned myself.

I made the promise with Ayase-san that we wouldn’t expect anything from each other, but I still don’t want her to immediately suffer from the strong stench of a high school boy’s room. That being said, I regularly take care of the sheets, cleaning, and smell, so as long as my nose isn’t playing tricks on me, things should be fine.

As I was feeling satisfied at the results of my daily work, I was pulled out of my thoughts when the doorbell rang.

—So they’re here, huh.

“Yuuta~ Can you go for me?”

“Yeah yeah.”

Since my old man was still busy removing any possible stench from the bedroom, I made my way to the entrance instead.

“Sorry for the wai...t?”

“We’re here~”

I tried to be as friendly as possible. With a gentle smile, I opened the front door, only to beautifully freeze up. Greeting me was Akiko-san, both her hands carrying several department store bags. I could see food ingredients and other daily necessities almost falling out of the bags, leaving me quite shocked.

“Um, Akiko-san, what is this...”

“We’ll be in your care today, so I bought all sorts of things~”

“But, so much...? You really didn’t have to...”

“No need to be thankful, that’s not what happened.”

I heard a slightly annoyed voice. Standing behind Akiko-san was Saki—Ayase-san (her hands full with plastic bags as well).

“Mom is bad at saying no, so she got roped into buying all the recommended stuff from the employee.”

“Ah, so that’s why...”

“Hey, that makes it sound like I’m a good-for-nothing adult~”

“Am I wrong?”

“Ehh! That’s not true at all, right Yuuta-kun~”

She threw the ball at me. Honestly speaking, I don't really appreciate how she's so easy against proactiveness, but when she shows that childish pouting expression towards me, then all complaints just get drowned out inside my head. That being said, just lying about it would strain my consciousness. Especially so since Ayase-san was giving me a cold stare, almost as if she was telling me to not spoil her mother. It's tough being on two fronts, really.

"Don't just stand around there, come on in. I'll help you carry some things."

Hence, I just decided to ignore it. A wise man once said that in order to achieve happiness as a single person, you need the ability to sometimes ignore things. Akiko-san didn't even seem bothered at that, and just smiled at me, as she handed over the plastic bags.

"Thank you. You really are a reliable man."

"Ahaha." I gave a vague smile to her grateful words, and turned around.

I offered her and Ayase-san the new house slippers I bought recently, and invited them in. When we made it to the living room, Akiko-san raised an astonished voice.

"Mmmm, citrus fruit, what a pleasant scent."

"Huh, you actually keep it pretty clean." Ayase-san looked at the flooring and the furniture, and let out an appreciative sigh.

"Well, we just cleaned it in a panic. Normally we don't—"

"It's really just as Taichi-san told me. You really love to clean."

"—They say that a clean living area produces a healthy mind after all." I swallowed my previous words I was about to blurt out.

That was dangerous. From the sounds of it, that idiotic old man of mine acted like a saint in order to woo Akiko-san more easily. Knowing what he previously went through with women, and being aware that this could lead to a downfall really quickly, I instead decided to act for my Dad's happiness, and kept quiet that he was practically just lying to her.

Yet, Ayase-san was giving me a real dubious gaze at the same time.

“Do you always keep it this clean?”

“Of course. Every particle of dust deserves to be eradicated, that is our family motto.”

“That is some disturbing family motto.”

I wasn't lying by any means. I was just changing up a few words of the motto my grandmother in the countryside always talked about. I still remember her grinning as she told me.

“That's Taichi-san for you, I guess.” Akiko-san let out a giggle. “He always looks stylish and attractive, but to think he even kept his home this clean.”

“Stylish...My old man?”

“That's right. The first time he came to the store with his superior, he looked rather plain and unsophisticated, but the second time around he put on some cologne, and the brand of his necktie made him seem like a first-class business man.”

“Ahhhh.”

That reminds me, there was a time when he was putting a lot of money on clothes and perfume, right. I thought it was just to fit better into the world of adults, but to think it was simply to impress the woman he had interest in.

“H-Hey there, Akiko-san, Saki-chan!”

Speaking of the devil, my old man just came out of his bedroom. To my shock, he still held the febreeze container in his hand.

“Wah, you...”

Put away what you got in your hand right now! I’m doing my best over here to provide some proper follow up, but you’re ruining it yourself!—I tried conveying this with mere eyecontact. However, that did not work at all, as my old man just showed a smile like he practiced it in front of the mirror, and said the following.

“Welcome to our home! W-W-W-We’ll be living under the same roof from here on out, so let’s get awong!”

Awful. Nothing in my life felt more staged and fake than this. His choice of words was super bad, he even bit his tongue, and his arrogant face just hurt to watch.

“I’m so happy for the warm welcome~ Here, have some presents!”

“Isn’t that raw ham? Wonderful, let’s have a ham party later!”

...Well, I guess they’re a good match after all. Akiko-san doesn’t even bother picking up on the febreeze in his hand, and he just naturally accepted the mountain of goodies like it was nothing.

“Hey, Asamura-kun.”

“Hm?”

“I’d like to see my room. Could you take me there?”

“A-Ah, sure.”

Ayase-san and I left the luggage and shopping bags in the living room, heading to her new room.

“This is it.”

“Huh, so here...”

“I did prepare curtains and bed, but I didn’t know what color you preferred for the sheets, so if you would like to change them, feel free. I kept the table at the window-side but if you want to move it, just let me know.”

“Thanks. You really prepared everything...Ohh.” She swiftly walked past me, walking into the middle of the room.

Her tone was rather indifferent, but her eyes were brimming with curiosity, like a cat on a stroll at night. In front of me stood a perfectly normal girl now. Add to that her stylish hair and clothes, I couldn’t help but admire her beauty again. Whether it was shampoo, perfume, pheromones, or even the imagination of a virgin like me, a sweet scent filled the room that hadn’t been there before.

“It sure is big.” The girl turned around.

“Maybe. I think it’s fairly normal.”

“We previously lived in a run-down apartment. One room massing six tatami mats[▲], and I didn’t even have my own room.”

“So you had futons out, and slept in the same room...is it?”

Makes sense why their furniture is pretty much new.

“Not really. When I was sleeping, I could monopolize the room for myself. Back then, Mom was busy with work at night, so our lifestyle rhythm was practically the exact opposite.”

“I guess that must have been much easier than suddenly living with two men...I’m sorry.”

“...That is fine, but one thing...”

“What is it?”

“That.”

“Eh?”

“Why are you speaking so politely? Of course, if it’s some personal or religious belief, then that’s fine.”

I’m not part of some suspicious cult, alright. I just accepted society’s rules of using polite speech towards a person I barely met, as this has been engraved into my mind subconsciously at birth.

“Even if you ask me for a reason...”

“We’re the same age, so why not keep it a bit more relaxed? I don’t need you to be considerate or anything.”

“I was doing it exactly because we’re at the same age...”

“Huh? Isn’t it weird to be super polite towards classmates or friends?”

“That is just the logic of the strong, that doesn’t work for me.”

You have to remember that, in my 17 years of living, I barely had any contact with a girl. Especially with a flashy type like Ayase-san. She made it sound so simple, but for someone with prerequisites like mine, it’s not an easy hurdle to overcome.

“Really? Well, I’m not going to tell you what to do, Asamura-kun. I just didn’t want you to be overly considerate towards me.”

“I wasn’t planning on doing so, actually...Ahh.” Mid-way through my sentence, I thought of something.

We promised each other to not have any expectations of the other person. That happened on the first day Ayase-san and I met. I thought about that meaning, and asked the girl.

“I feel like it would be better to confirm that right away, but...Would you rather have me stop speaking so politely?”

“Honestly, it’d let me relax a bit more. I’m not someone important that deserves to be respected either.”

“Alright, then I’ll stop it.” I shrugged, as I said.

Ayase-san’s eyes opened wide in surprise.

“That was fast.”

“Well, treating you like a years-long friend will be impossible, but since you’re asking for it. Not to mention that it’s more comfortable for me as well.”

“I see. It’s just as I thought.” Ayase-san smiled.

Normally, her tone and expression was always dry and fairly cold, but for the first time I felt like I could see a soft spot of hers.



“It really helps that we can ‘adjust’ so easily.”

“‘Adjust’, huh. That’s one way to phrase it.”

That’s what Ayase-san and I just did. First, Ayase-san considered the idea that I might be part of some religious group that just uses polite language, and offered me to drop it because she didn’t need it. Then, I realized that it was her wish for me not to speak so politely, and when I gave the YES, she seemed relieved and happy.

Is this a normal conversation and communication you could find anywhere? I don’t know. But to me, from my own personal view, this was the first time such ‘adjustments’ happened. In most cases, the people you talk with request comprehension and sympathy.

If you don’t explain it, then I can’t understand your feelings! Why won’t you get it that when you say this, you’re making me angry!—And so on. Even though you can’t take a peek inside other people’s brains, they all ask for the impossible. That being the case, why not reveal your cards from the very beginning?

If you say this and that, you will make me angry. I treasure this and that. I see, then let’s do it like this—Don’t expect the other person to understand you, and search for information that can resolve the problem.

“If only all of humanity could be this dry and straightforward with other people. Just like you and me, Asamura-kun.”

“You can say that again.”

I don’t understand why you would dislike polite language. But, as long as I know that she feels that way, I can adjust, and make her feel more comfortable. It’s very impersonal, and mechanical. If all of

humanity would honestly adjust to each other's feelings, the world would be a better place, but society sadly doesn't work that way.

"When I approach my friends at school with that stance, they just laugh at me with a 'What is that, some contract?', and ignore it."

"That sounds rough."

"Yup. That's why I cut ties with all but one."

"Ohh...that's quite the act."

Can't judge if she's brave or just indifferent, really. But, seeing her tell me with a smile gave it an odd sense of credibility.

"I only cut off people that really deserve it, or aren't important. It's such a waste of time to deal with people of which I don't know when I could step on a landmine, and make them mad at me."

"Indeed...Talking about a waste of time, just standing around here isn't getting us anything done. Should I help you with your belongings?"

"How kind of you."

"Creating a debt early will help me in the long run. It's a win-win for me."

"How well-versed."

"Don't tease me like that, will you..."

"I was trying to praise you. Now then, what should I have you help me with..." Ayase-san looked around the room, looking for something. "First, I'd like to put away some stuff. Do you have a cutter?"

“Sure do.” I went back to my own room really quick, getting the cutter, and walked towards the cardboard box she was pointing at.

“Ah, just give them to me, I’ll do it myself.”

“Don’t worry, I told you I’d help.”

“No, that’s not the problem. In there—”

I heard Ayase-san’s voice at my back, but my hands already moved to open up the tape. Shortly after, the cardboard opened up slowly, revealing white fabric. That very moment, I regretted not listening to Ayase-san’s words.

“—are my clothes.”

“I really wish you would have told me sooner!” I turned my back towards the objects I had already seen, and frantically took some distance.

Of course, Ayase-san immediately laughed in the face of such a virgin-esque reaction.

“Ahaha, you don’t have to treat them like some cursed object. That hurt, you know?”

“Poison for the eyes, is what they say, right? For an adolescent boy my age, this is literal poison, in a lot of ways.”

“Only if I was wearing them a second ago. After going through the laundry, this is basically the same as a handkerchief, isn’t it.”

“Stop raising them up like that, I beg you.”

Even if I know that the object she’s waving is just white fabric, they still make me feel weird. I thought the two of us were relatively on the same level when it came to our values in human relationships, but I guess there’s a decisive rift between us after all.

“I’ll take care of my underwear, so could you put my uniform over there on the hanger?”

“I feel like a uniform is plenty stimulating.”

“Don’t get so excited, will you. There’d be nothing else for you to help out. Ignore it, and work.”

“Y-Yeah. I’m calm. Calm and collected.” I continuously told myself, and grabbed her uniform.

A shirt, a skirt, a cardigan, and all of these felt soft to a level where I only grew more conscious.

“Huh?” My hand stopped.

The leaf-green school uniform necktie entered my field of view, and I was assaulted by a feeling of deja-vu.

“This is...Ayase-san, are you attending Suisei?”

“Yup, correct. Are you shocked to see such a flashy girl like me attend a high-level school like that?”

“That’s not what I’m shocked about...I’m a student at Suisei as well.”

Suisei High. One of the many department schools of the Shibuya district, as well as the school with the highest rate of advancement towards the higher university, filled with honor students. Strict towards studying, as long as you manage to keep your grades high enough, you receive permission to even work part-time, and because of this flexibility, I chose this school.

To think the little sister I coincidentally happened to get after my father’s remarriage turned out to be the same age as me, and even attended the exact same school as I did. How more convenient can fate get? The only saving grace in all of that is the fact that she’s not

in the same class as me. How awkward would things have been if that was the case.

I was curious as to what reaction Ayase-san would make, and as it turns out, she seemed to be lost in thought about something.

“So Asamura-kun is from Suisei as well...Hmm...”

“...I kinda feel bad. My old man never really looked into anything.”

“It’s fine. Mom’s the same. No need for you to apologize.”

“Must be awkward though, right? I’ll try to act like we don’t know each other at school.”

“Huh? No, I’m totally fine with that. I mean, if you’re more comfortable with that, then so be it, though.”

“What do you—”

My words were interrupted by my phone buzzing in my pocket. I was wondering who would call me at a time like this, but it showed ‘Work’ on the screen.

“Sure, go take it. I don’t wanna restrain you here or anything. I don’t mind if it’s in front of me either.”

“We really get along, huh.” I said so, appreciating her words from the bottom of my heart, and stepped out of the room, accepting the call.

Since it was at a time like this, I figured it was because a hole opened in our shift plan, and they needed me to jump in to help. As a matter of fact, that’s exactly what it was, so I acted the usual Yes-man, and agreed.

Upon cutting the call and returning to the room, Ayase-san was focussed on her own work of putting away her belongings, only slowly turning towards me.

“What’d they say?” She asked, quite indifferently.

“They need me at work. Sorry, I can’t stay and help.”

“It’s fine, this was my job to begin with.”

Since this was an urgent situation, Ayase-san showed no signs of being bothered. Even though she’s a girl my age, a beauty, and has the looks of a gal, someone I’d definitely have problems with talking, the reason I can keep such a calm conversation right now is probably because of her calm atmosphere, and very sophisticated attitude. She doesn’t feel like a girl my age, but more like an adult.

“Then, I’m going.”

“Yup, take care.”

With a dry farewell, she returned to her work. The sight of her couldn’t be further away from what people imagined when they heard ‘little sister’. However, for me, this was a reason to feel relief, allowing me to leave the room with no complicated feelings.

The bookstore was located nearby the Shibuya train station. Stepping out of the Hachikou exit, walking across the scramble intersection with the various tourists and youtubers filming themselves and taking pictures at your side, it was straight ahead of you. With all the mobile game ads blasting your ears around you, once you get inside the eight-floor building, that’s where I work, as a bookstore employee.

I’ve always loved books ever since I was little, be it children’s literature or such from overseas, I tried practically every genre there is. I didn’t just read them, I practically consumed books. I bit into them, until I digested them. That’s why, working at such a place, with all sorts of new releases around me, was like paradise.

Books are great. Books show you all sorts of lives of other people. It offers an experience Asamura Yuuta would normally never be able to taste. Of course, it's not just stories. There's autobiographies, and business books as well. By reading many books, knowledge and experience fills your head, impacting it.

Narrow-mindedness, excessive pride and arrogance, narcissism. Through reading books, and the meta knowledge you get, you can avoid suffering from these embarrassing personality traits, and that's probably how I did it as well; Thanks to books.

An average grown person's brain weighs roughly 1400g. You would think that this is enough to make some room for common sense, and yet that isn't the case for many, which honestly leaves me terrified to think about.

If I hadn't read any books, I could have ended up like them as well.

8pm at night. I started working at roughly 6pm, and these two hours went by awfully fast after dealing with the usual weekend storm of customers. By the time the number of customers lessened, and I thought I could finally take a breath, just focussing on fixing book covers at the register, I was interrupted by 'that' kind of scenery.

"Woah, Lady you're, like, totally my type. I fell for you at first glance."

"Are you searching for a book?"

"Eh, how can you be this cute? How about we go for a bite after your work is over? When are you done?"

"I don't remember a name like that, could you give me some more details?"

"What are you talking about, lol. You're so funny, haha."

A flashy delinquent-type of a man was trying really hard to pick up a female employee. He didn't even pick up on the irony of the girl, not shrinking down at all. This is something of a familiar scenery here in Shibuya, but seeing it happen in an actual store, not to mention this fiercely, was a rare sight.

The one being picked up was the perfect example of a Yamato Nadeshiko¹ with long black hair. A literature girl, pure and proper—adding the idea of that to her beautiful appearance and sweet scent drifting around her, she was definitely on a different league from your average girl. Even during this (honestly pretty bad) pick-up attempt, she kept smiling gently, not breaking down in the slightest. It was perfect customer service. However, her eyes weren't smiling at all.

I really don't want any trouble, but...

With these thoughts, I headed over to the source of this noise, binder and list in hand.

“Yomiuri-san, there's something I'd need your help with.”

“Ah, yeah! What is it?”

“About the list of new arrivals. I don't know how to check it with the information from the PC.”

“...! Got it, I'll be right there.”

“Wha, hey!”

The girl seemingly understood what I was playing at, and walked away from that place, leaving behind a flustered man. He tried reaching for her slender wrist, but only hit the binder in my hand.

“Do you have any more business with **my Yomiuri-san?**”

“Eh?”

Of course, we aren’t in that kind of relationship. This was just an act to make that man give up. After freezing up with an open mouth, said man clapped his hands together, and suddenly lowered his head apologetically.

“I’m not that good when it comes to reading the mood, soz about that! Makes sense that a beauty like her has a boyfriend, alright.”

“Eh. Ah, well, yeah.”

Honestly, I was baffled. Judging from all the types of delinquents I’ve read about, I figured that he’d get aggressive, insult us, or anything of that sort, but he actually pulled away fairly easily. Then again, it might just be him.

“Bud, you better be treasuring her. Be happy!” He left behind a few words of encouragement, and stepped out of the store.

Now that the noise was gone, silence returned to the store. Realizing that we had drawn the attention from the other customers, I tried to hide my reddened ears, looked down, and returned to the register.

“Thanks, Junior-kun. You really helped me there. Also, if that guy was going to give up this easily, why was he even this obstinate to begin with...Right, my dear Boyfriend-kun?”

“Please stop that.”

“Let alone a night, our love barely lasted a minute? How sad.”

When it was just the two of us again, her customer service smile had vanished elsewhere, and she merely stuck out her tongue with a teasing grin. She had her nameplate stuck between her teeth, only now putting it on the right side of her uniform. There, I could read the name ‘Yomiuri Shiori’.

“Weren’t we supposed to keep the nameplate on us during our work hours?”

“It’s an ad hoc approach.” Yomiuri-senpai put one finger on her lip, showing me a wink, like she was telling me to keep it a secret. “Rules are there to keep the organization running smoothly, right? If he were to spread my name to others, we’d soon have a full store of people like him.”

“That does make sense.”



She clearly wasn't just a person that would let others play with her. Honestly speaking, I think that this creativity and wise thinking are her greatest charm, but I guess that most men in this world apparently don't agree with me.

"That makes it the third time this month, huh."

"It's only the 7th, so we're at a pace of every two days once."

"And the third time while being at work. How can I focus like this?" Yomiuri-senpai hid from the eyes of the customers behind the register, letting out a defeated sigh.

"If only they'd stop doing it inside the store. Whenever I try to help, you tease me right after...Then again, I'm used to it already."

"As always, thanks a lot. You really are reliable, Junior-kun."

"...I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you feel like you owed me something."

"It's fine. You're helping me a lot, so I really am." She laughed, and tapped me on the shoulder.

Yomiuri-senpai might seem like a prim and proper Yamato Nadeshiko, but when it's just us during the shift, she often jokes around like that, or uses a fairly casual tone. At first, I was a bit lost because of her vague sense of distance, and frequent skinship, but as soon as you understand that this is how her character works, it's easy to get along with her.

"You're as popular as always, I see. It's probably because you're that much of a beauty."

“Junior-kun...If you keep praising me this nonchalantly, you might end up like that person just now.”

“Don’t scare me like that, will you.”

“Well, I don’t think it’s because of my looks, Isn’t it just that I look easy enough with a bit of pushing?”

“Look easy enough...” Because of her direct and straightforward way of phrasing it, I was at a loss for words.

She looks innocent, sure, but she’s plenty of an adult, I guess. This town of Shibuya holds what you could call a heretical touch, giving men like that guy such a misunderstanding. I can imagine a lot of men here aiming at a lady who has no experience with men, able to be won over with a slight push. Not to mention that she never really holds back her words...

“Say, Junior-kun. I’ve been picking up some woman’s scent from you this entire time. Did you get yourself a girlfriend or something?”

She even has slight sadistic tendencies.

“Don’t joke around like that, please...But, do I really smell that much?”

“Brimming with stench. How many hours did you flirt around to amass that intense of a scent?”

“Let me leave early. I’ll go home and take a shower.”

“Ahhh, I was only joking. Don’t leave me aloneeee~”

I took a whiff from my clothes, and pretended to make my way home, when Yomiuri-senpai clung to me. Right now, it’s only her and me at work. Although we made it past the peak storm, having her do

the rest was too cruel. That being said, I only played around to begin with, and never really intended to go home.

“It’s just, you told me before, so I was wondering.”

“Ahhh...”

Now that she mentioned it, I did in fact ask her for some advice. After I found out that my supposed little sister was actually a girl my age, I was unsure on how to really treat her, and what type of attitude I should take. Since Yomiuri-senpai is the only girl around me that I can actually talk to easily, I asked her for some tips. Of course, I was teased, made fun of, and didn’t get any helpful information.

‘I can’t say much knowing only that it’s a girl. People have different personalities, hobbies, and values.’

That was her opinion, and it made perfect sense to me, so I couldn’t complain at all.

“And, how’s she? Cute?”

“I mean, I don’t feel too comfortable looking at her that way.”

“I know that you’re not the aggressive type who’d be happy about a situation like that. I’m talking from your objective point of view.”

“...I think she’s a beauty, yes.” I answered honestly.

I found it hard to say that. After all, she’ll be my family from today, so when I see her in such an objective way, a sense of guilt fills my chest, making me feel uncomfortable. In terms of human relationships, she’s someone who shares a lot of thinking with me, but she’s a member from a world I never thought I’d intersect with.

She’s got a great style, has a cute yet charming face, beautiful blonde hair, and the clothes and accessories she wears perfectly compliment her looks. She was clearly different from a background character like

me, someone who stood in the sun. Rather than feeling happy about any praise that I could give her, she'd probably just think of it as disgusting.

"Phew, living together with a beauty like that, you're a lucky one."

"Nothing will happen."

"Nutting will happen?"

"Can you not pull some abrupt dirty joke like that? It's a really bad habit of yours."

"I've always been in girls-only schools that entire time, so it can't be helped."

"My evaluation of girls-only schools is dropping..."

"It's the truth."

"...Seriously?"

"Well, it's up for you to believe it or not...you know?" She spoke like she was talking about some urban legend, giving me a wink.

Inside my head, I chose the latter. I wanted to keep my image of a yuri romance blooming at girls-only schools.

"Well, I'm a boy myself, so I get thoughts like that popping up in the back of my head. But, honestly speaking, I don't even have time to consider all these wicked thoughts."

"Hmmm?"

"Think about it. I'm living under the same roof with a member of the same age, and different sex. It's way too complicated for me, who never had any contact like this happen before."

"So I'm not even a girl in your eyes?"

“You’re a man at heart after all.”

“Ahahah! Heeeeey, isn’t that a bit too cruel! I mean, I can see where you’re coming from, but!”

“You’re like a friend, or a reliable senior.”

She always pulls dirty jokes as well...

“Ahahaha...haaaah...Phew...Alright, I get it. From that conversation just now, I figured out that your skill at dealing with girls is abysmally bad.”

“...I’ll refrain from any comment.”

Not like I could make any to begin with.

“Honestly speaking, I’m at a loss. What kind of attitude would be fitting for us as siblings? How considerate should I be of her? These worries fill my head, I don’t even have time to enjoy this situation.

“Just act like you always would, Junior-kun.”

“Won’t I just be hated because of this?”

“Do you hate my natural manners?”

“...Not at all.”

“See!”

“But, you’re a beauty as well, Yomiuri-senpai...Your natural manners and mine can’t even hope to compare.”

“That is some horrible self-evaluation you got going there. I actually like you quite a lot, Junior-kun.”

“But, you’re weirdo, Yomiuri-senpai...”

“Hey now, you’re using completely opposite words in the same breath there. But, I like that. Feels so artistic.”

“That’s exactly what I mean.”

Mid-conversation, her face turned into a critic’s, as she nodded to herself. According to her, as a literature girl, she is on constant search for beautiful rhetorics in her everyday conversations. I don’t get how this connects to her pulling some old man’s jokes during the day, but I swallowed that doubt.

As I was feeling slightly defeated at the idea that some middle-aged man was sleeping inside a literature beauty like her, Yomiruri-senpai walked away with a ‘Right’, only to come back with a book in hand.

“Here, I recommend this.”

“‘Science of Man and Woman’?”

“It’s psychological research put into data and advice on how to get along with other people—especially when they’re members from the opposite sex. This will turn into some great reference, right?”

“Sounds interesting at least.”

I swiftly flipped through the pages of the book, and said so. Just by looking at the contents, I realized that this would surely be a helpful book for me.

According to it, you need to understand the other person. Following that, you need to understand yourself. In order to achieve that, you need to gain an objective view of yourself. I’ve read something similar in other books before. That’s why I started working to see myself in an objective light, and this isn’t something entirely new to me. However, there was one part of the contents of this book that really caught my attention.

'If you want to get better at perceiving yourself objectively, then start writing a diary!'

It's a method that I could start using right away. Just from reading that, I felt interested. Yomiuri-senpai apparently picked up on that, and showed the grin of a succubus.

"I'll tell you, I tested the effects of that book, and boy did it do God's work."

"You used it before?"

"Lots of credibility, right? I mean, you and I are getting along just fine."

"Yeah, that's pretty convincing."

One realization means more than a hundred deductions. Rather than some fatty preaching about a diet, you'd much rather believe a former fatty who went through rigorous training and fitness plans. As a result, I decided to buy the book.

After the end of my shift, when I had finished changing back from uniform, I bought the book from Yomiuri-senpai, whose shift lasted until midnight. Unlike me, a highschool boy who was only allowed to work until 10pm, she still was locked up in there. I accepted the book from her, stuffed it into my bag, and just when I was about to leave, I turned around again.

"If some guy like before tries to hit on you again, give me a call whenever. My bike is always aching to roar."

For a second, Yomiuri-senpai seemed confused. That expression however changed quickly, as she showed a happy grin.

"How reliable~ Then, I'll call you, and then the police."

"Make it the other way around, please."

If you're going to call the police in the first place, then don't even bother contacting your Junior-kun.

By the time I made it home to my flat's parking lot, it was already 10pm. On my way home, I was balancing the bike with one hand, while looking for apps I could use to keep a diary, which is why the downloading took longer than usual. I stopped my beloved ride at the bike space, went up to the third floor with the elevator, when I was assaulted by a sense of guilt again.

Normally, I just came home at my own leisure, but I don't remember telling Akiko-san or Ayase-san about how long I would be out for my part-time work. I hope that my old man gave them a proper explanation, but I can't exactly expect some follow-up like that.

Keeping in mind the chances that my family might be asleep already, I carefully opened the door, and headed to the living room as quietly as possible. I could see light burning through the clouded glass door, so someone was still awake. Feeling my body tense up, I headed inside. As it turns out, Ayase-san was sitting alone on the sofa.

I figured it was hot chocolate or something along those lines, as faint steam came from the cup she was holding. She looked at her phone, expressionless, probably going through social networks. Maybe even messaging some people. Friends? A boyfriend? Being such a good-looking girl, and easy to talk to, both sounds very much possible.

"I'm home."

"Eh? Ah, yeah." She looked up from her phone, giving me a slightly flustered reaction.

Rather than it being just vague, it felt like she was taken by surprise, unsure what to say. Like a foreigner just asked her for directions in an area she wasn't too familiar with.

“...Ayase-san?”

“Sorry, I’m just not used to actually hearing that, so I was unsure how to respond.”

“Ahh...right. Because you were living completely different lifestyles.”

She mentioned that since Akiko-san was always working at night, their times to sleep never matched up, huh. When I first heard that, I just thought ‘I guess such families exist as well’, but realizing what exactly that meant now, I felt my chest tighten up.

“What’s that serious expression for?” Ayase-san showed a wry laugh.

Seems like my inner thoughts actually showed on my face.

“It’s fine. I wasn’t treated awfully or anything. She came home when I went to school, got some sleep and finished whatever business she had, and when I came home, she went off to work. To us, that was our normal routine.”

“You seem pretty close despite that.”

“We’re mother and daughter after all. Today, we got to go shopping together after a long time, it was pretty fun.” Or so she said, but her voice offered no special intonation, no expression on her face.

I was just listening to her reasoning, as she spoke of the past in an awfully dry tone. The reason I don’t sense any loneliness from her is possibly because she’s already used to it. We’re talking about a single parent, and a highschool student. I know I’m not one to speak, but I personally wouldn’t feel that much about not being able to see my parents for a while.

More importantly, it seems like I bothered her when she was busy on the phone. Feeling pathetic, and apologetic, I wanted to walk off and hide myself in my own room.

“I was thinking of taking a bath and then going to bed...”

“Go ahead. I’m fine with being the last on both. I always stay up late.”

“Alright, gotcha.”

As I made my way to my own room, preparing for a bath, I thought about Ayase-san’s last words. She was fine with taking a bath last. She was also fine with sleeping last. I mean, that makes sense if you think about it. She wouldn’t want a boy she barely met, let alone has to live together with now, use the bath water she just used, and by sleeping first, she made herself defenseless in the presence of an adolescent boy. If so, then the longer I take, the longer her night becomes.

—Guess I should to hurry and get my stuff done.

Deciding on this, it took me only ten minutes for my usual thirty-minute bath, and I used the other twenty minutes to empty the bathtub, fill it with fresh warm water. I don’t really know how to act around her yet, but at the very least, I wanted to make it as easy as possible for her.

As a result of this, although you might expect it after reading one too many romcoms, no heart-throbbing and exciting event happened during this first night of us sleeping under the same roof. Just as I have stated in the prologue of this story, a daily life with a step-sister differs greatly from what is shown in such material.

That being said, it’s not like I wasn’t aware of the opposite sex sleeping practically within the same few perimeters of mine, which is why I had rough time sleeping.

When I woke up the next morning, Ayase-san had already prepared everything herself, sitting in the living room, so there was no heart-throbbing exciting event to find either. However—

“Morning. Slept well?” She asked me.

“Thanks to you.”

“Same here. The bath was great, thanks a lot.”

—I could pick up Ayase-san’s charm as a normal human being through even such dry conversations, and although it might not be the same to all those fictional ones, I found myself thinking that this relationship wasn’t as bad either.

1 Combined living room, dining room, and bed room

2 Roughly 10 square meters

3 The perfect example of a Japanese wife, with long beautiful hair, a devoted housewife.

Chapter 2: 8th of June (Monday)

Of course, some heart-throbbing event of Ayase-san and me going to school together didn't happen. Finding out that we both are students at Suisei, she advised against this in order for no weird rumours to spread at school. Naturally, that was an absolutely correct choice. My old man and Akiko-san seemed to be aware of that, and decided against any sudden change of life, like changing our family names. Since that would have invited a misunderstanding, and the paperwork simply being a pain in the ass, I was pretty happy about that. This being the case, Ayase-san and I left the house at different times, heading to school separately.

The world is based upon a competitive society. To survive this harsh competition, one shall not complain nor boast, and show a hundred results.

That is the motto of our school. It states that results are more preferable than efforts, which means that if you can keep up your good grades or show excellent achievements with your club activities, you are allowed to keep a part-time job. Admiring this kind of freedom, I decided to take the entrance exam here at Suisei. It is a fairly high-level school, but I don't really have some university in mind, or any goal to achieve. I just want to make it to a relatively good university.

However, that wasn't exactly because I wanted to achieve something great, or aimed for something higher, but merely because I used my studies to evade anything problematic in my personal life. As a grade school student, I was told to visit a cram school. That happened before my old man got divorced. The person that was my mother tried raising me into a person who had greater social influence than my father, which is why I was told to visit a famous academic cram school.

—Only for me to feel discouraged during the trial attendance.

Mixed with the other children who were studying like their lives depended on it, I had a lot of trouble dealing with them and my studies, getting to the point where I would break down from the pressure just being forced to deal with them. That's the first time I realized in my entire life that I suffered from communication disorder. To counterattack that, I studied desperately, and raised my grades. Now that I am attending this high-level school, my grades are in the upper half, but back in middle school, I was in the top class for sure.

It's not that I was aiming higher, I just didn't want to attend cram school. Because of these efforts, I could avoid doing so. The only reason I went to work part-time on top of getting good grades is solely to show off to my old man that he didn't need to worry about me, as that sounded bothersome to deal with. That's why I don't even feel like I did anything great, nothing that deserves any respect, as I wasn't even working hard towards a goal. That's right, my trusted friend Maru Tomokazu was more of that type.

“Yo, Asamura. Morning.”

“Maru. Morning practice?”

This happened early in the morning, inside our usual classroom. Homeroom would only begin in ten minutes, and yet Maru already arrived at his seat in front of me. He had a knowledgeable look with his glasses on, wildly trimmed hair, and a well-endowed stomach. At first glance, you could call him a bit of a fatty, but that expression isn't exactly correct. When I found out that covering his body wasn't actual fat, but muscles, I almost fell off my chair. You really can't judge people based on their appearance.



“Course. There’s no day without practice.” He said with a sour look.

Maru’s actually part of the baseball club, and catcher as his figure might suggest. Naturally, he’s passionate about his club, but even the most passionate people complain about their field sometimes.

“That club is like a black company, right.”

“Guaranteed early start and always overtime. Competition, jealousy. Age doesn’t matter, skill is all that counts. At that point, it’s already a called game.”

“And you lost?”

“Sharp, aye. If you get into the baseball club without pure love for the sport, you’ll lose. Been used to utter exhaustion even before that, but...Well, I don’t expect others to understand what I’m going through.”

“Yikes, that sounds impossible to me.”

Maru took off his glasses, and brought out a case from his bag. Inside, he had a different pair, which he put on. One pair is sports-use, the other for his studies. It’s like he’s switching his equipment in an RPG. They apparently were damaged during practice before, so he started using two pairs respectively.

“That’s how it is. How’s your new life coming along?” Maru didn’t even hesitate to switch the topic.

Of course I’d tell my trusted friend about my father’s remarriage, and that I got a new family. Honestly speaking, I barely got any friends at school. After going through that hell of an academic cram school, my first-meeting communication hit rock bottom after all.

But, as for Maru Tomokazu, he's always been sitting close to me in class, and our interests in manga and anime lined up pretty well, so we just naturally became friends. You might think of it as being weird that he's in a sports club and yet otaku at the same time. Apparently, he got hooked on a popular baseball manga, and wanted to try it himself, which makes me lean towards him being an otaku. I mean, there's those otakus who are influenced by anime, and start visiting the gym, right?

But of course, the topic at hand was the fact that I got a new family.

"How, huh...Saying it in one sentence...It's different from what I imagined."

"You got a little sister, right? You bastard of an Onii-chan."

"Don't use that as an insult...And, even if you call it a little sister..."

"Can't get excited because you ain't blood related?"

"I'm not even seeing her as a little sister or step-sister to begin with." I said and remembered Ayase-san's face. "Rather than a little sister, she feels more like a 'Woman'."

"That's one lewd way to say it."

"That's the only way to say it. I honestly don't have any idea on how to approach her."

"Hmmm, I see. A 'Woman', is it. I guess recent grade school gals are on a different level."

"Grade school gals? What are you on about?"

"We're talking about your little sister, right?" Maru blinked in confusion.

I should be the one confused, hey...Oh, wait a second. I only heard that she was a grade schooler or middle-schooler, since that's what it looked like in the picture my old man showed me. Never corrected Maru since.

“No, that little sister is—” I spoke that far, only to stop myself.

She’s not in grade school, but actually in high school like me, not to mention attending this very school, and in the same school year. I don’t know in what class she’s in, but she’s a beautiful girl—Saying that would only tickle that guy’s curiosity, and the catastrophe would be preprogrammed. It’s not that I don’t believe him to be trustworthy either, I just can’t break my promise towards Ayase-san. I am a man who doesn’t blabber unnecessarily.

“Your little sister is...what?”

“My little sister is...different from what I imagined. Not like what I know from any 2D media.”

“Well, duh. You finally unable to separate reality from 2D now?”

“What do you mean ‘finally’? That makes it sound like I was always close to losing myself like that, so can you not?”

“It’s the truth, right?”

“Doesn’t mean you can just say whatever you want, alright.”

“Well, that’s my character.”

Oh I know. I’ve known Maru for at least more than a year now, so I’m well aware that his tongue is as sharp as a knife, swinging around relentlessly, and often aimlessly.

“Anyway, I’m not as excited as you think I’d be. If anything, it’s pretty exhausting, and hard to figure out what sense of distance to keep.”

“Figured as much.”

“Anyway, change of topic—Do you know a student called Ayase Saki?”

“Mm?? I mean, heard of her, but where did that come from?” Of course, since that came out of nowhere, Maru narrowed his eyes.

The network of information in sports clubs is more wide than you could imagine. When talking about girls—especially someone on the level of beauty that Ayase-san has, she’d surely be a spicy topic. Since I’m not interested in rumours and all that, I never put much thought into it, but before, Maru told me stories and rumours of girls I didn’t even know existed, so I figured it might be worth a try.

“Ayase, huh? Hmm...Why here of all peeps?”

“Well, you know, I just...She’s a beauty, right?”

“Better not.”

“Eh?”

“As your friend, I’m telling you that you’re wasting time and energy.”

“Wait a second. What are you on about?”

“It’s not in my interest to stand in someone else’s path of love, but...”

“I don’t remember asking you for love advice.”

I didn’t know why he would even come up with that, so I quickly interrupted him.

“I was wrong? I figured you’d gotten the hots for Ayase or something.”

“Are you crazy? There’s no way some beauty like Ayase-san would give a boy like me a glance, less a chance.”

She's a girl as attractive as a hand-crafted doll, with alluring blonde hair, and I'm the type of boy who gazes at himself in the mirror to realize yet again how boring he looks. Seriously, who'd even think of that? I sighed in disbelief. As I did, Maru gave me a look like he had something to complain about.

"No, it's the opposite. If you started dating Ayase, your own value would drop."

"...Haha, good joke."

"Ain't joking."

"Then what are you on about? There's gotta be a limit on how far you can take this overvaluing."

"I mean, I agree that she's got the style...But, there's also some rumours going around, see." He said it with a sour face. "I'm not really a fan of talking behind people's backs, but things are different if my trusted friend might be aiming for her. Ignorance is bliss as they say, but I can't stay ignorant now."

"Can you tell me more about that rumour?"

Of course, I didn't fall for Ayase-san by any means, but explaining anything regarding that would force me to reveal the fact that we're actually step-siblings now. Since that'd be even more annoying, I just let him keep the misunderstanding, and heard him out. Maru quickly observed his surroundings, and brought his face closer to me as he whispered.

"Ayase, you know...Apparently, she's...doing that...'Prostitution'."

".....Huh?"

"Blonde hair, piercings, always in an angry mood, not letting any people approach her. She's probably **the** gal of this high-level school

that stands out the most, especially with her frivolous atmosphere. There's even eye-witnesses that saw her come out of some suspicious buildings in Shibuya, or hotels nearby.”

“Huh, I never knew.” Not denying or accepting it, I only nodded along.

I can see why that kind of stereotype would be associated with her, just looking at her outer appearance. For the few times I talked with her, she didn't give off the impression of a person who would do such a thing, but I clearly don't know her well enough to firmly deny that rumour.

“I gotta say, it's pretty rare for you to believe in eye-witnesses like that, Maru. You're normally the one who doubts these sorts of rumours first.”

“There's a fellow in the baseball club who confessed to her.”

“Eh. Even though everyone is avoiding her?”

“I mean, rumours are rumours, but looks are looks. She's pretty popular. Though it's beyond me.”

“I see.”

“And, he was told from the person herself.”

“...Excuse me?”

“I'm exactly what the rumours are telling you. I don't intend on going out with anybody”, she said.” Maru tried to copy her way of speaking, as he explained to me.

It was clear that Maru didn't have the best impression from Ayase-san.

“What's the chances of the club member just making that up?”

“Can’t say for sure, but probably zero. Also, this ain’t the first time this happened. Other clubs say something similar.”

“So the opinion might be subjective, but the numbers scream objectivity.”

“Pretty much.”

There’s no guarantee that what they’re all saying is the absolute truth, but at the very least, it’s safe to say that Ayase-san responded like that to the confessions.

“Mmm...Pandora...”

It felt like I opened up Pandora’s box. First, you should look into the other person—is what it said in ‘Science of Man and Woman’, and I figured that would be the best bet to start figuring what level of distance I should have towards Ayase-san, but now I have even more problems to worry about.

Are these rumours true? If they are, do Akiko-san and my old man know about it? In the event that they don’t, should I be the one to report it?

...No, I shouldn’t. It’s not in my interest to believe rumours that have no proof whatsoever. At the same time, even if these rumours were true, I’m in no position to tell her off. If there’s actually some paid dating or the like going on, then if the people involved properly pay and supply, it’s their thing to worry about, and not my problem to worry about people I’m not familiar with.

Of course, there’s some annoying side to it now that Ayase-san became my family, but even if these rumours turned out to be true, I never thought of telling her off. More than anything, I’d just be sad if there was something or someone forcing her.

“So, Asamura, what about your card?”

“...What are you on about?”

“I showed you all my cards. Now show me yours. Why’d you suddenly bring up that Ayase?”

“Ah, well, I’ll leave it up to your imagination.”

“Huh? Hey now, don’t leave me hanging like that.”

“I’m not telling you ‘cause I don’t want to. I can’t. Just please, keep it at that.”

“Don’t you dare think you can just use some manga phrase to get me off your ass...Christ, this is what I get for giving you information.”

Maru complained, but I just let him vent some steam.

That’s what’s great about Maru Tomokazu. He knows exactly when to stop. My eyes drifted away from the back of his head, towards the window glass next to me. My own face, resting on my palm, was reflected in the glass, as my thoughts drifted towards Ayase-san.

I’m really glad that we aren’t in the same class. If I was in the same environment as she now, I’d probably worry to a level where I couldn’t focus on class. Of course, that’d happen the second I get home anyway, but I’d rather delay that for now. I guess that’s what being human is all about.

—What I wanted to delay happened shortly after. Namely, two hours later. Fate is always cruel, and indifferent. Every single Monday as the third period, we have P.E. class. Of course, the reason only made it worse. During this time period, our Suisei High’s ball sports festival is running close, so in order to make up for practice time, around the middle of the school year, two classes are mixed together. Of course, this practice happened to start on this very day.

“Here, take this! Secret Hit – Great Ether Serve! Oraaaaa!”

I found myself at the school-intern tennis court. Beneath the ashen sky, someone was screaming a secret technique that could come right out of a manga with a loud and straightforward voice. The owner of that voice was a girl, wearing P.E. clothes, as she was about to swing the racket.

She possessed bright red hair, a rather small stature, making her look like a small hamster. Although she's a girl from another class, even I knew her name—Narasaka Maaya. To compliment her, you'd say she's energetic, but on the other hand, she was known as the meddlesome rumoured class representative. Add together her energy that could supply a million energy drinks, and the ability to take care of other people like a grandma, as well as her fairly cute looks, she has friends all over the school, a normie standing atop other normies.



Of course, Narasaka-san is even known in our class, and since she sometimes comes to visit, I couldn't just ignore her existence either, no matter how hard I blocked off rumoured people.

Everyone, meaning the audience, onlookers, and even her opponent, they all looked up at the cloudy sky to trace the ball she had thrown, waiting for it to soar down again. One second, two seconds, three seconds passed.

"Hey, what are you doing!? That one flew off elsewhere, you know!?" Narasaka-san's opponent, another girl, was flabbergasted at that homerun, as she screamed in disbelief.

"Ahaha, sorry sorry!"

"Really...what kind of crazy serve was that?"

"Cause I thought that'd be cool, heh!"

"Don't you 'heh' me! You damned wench...! There there there there!"

"Noooo~ Don't grind my hair like that~"

Narasaksa-san was put in a headlock, the other girl grinding her elbow on her head. Two cute girls playing around like that sure was a sight. As a matter of fact, all the boys in my class were utterly focussed on watching this scene. However, I was different. I didn't even give this heavenly scene with two beauties a glance, and had my gaze directed at a single point.

There was a single individual standing in the corner of the tennis court, at a place where she barely stood out, leaning against the metal fence, outside the court. She wasn't even holding a tennis racket either, as I could see an earphone cord reaching up to her ears

from her jersey's pockets. She was merely listening to something, as she gazed up at the emptiness above her—It was none other than Ayase-san.

Never have I seen someone so openly slacking off. Since she didn't act like she was doing something bad, I thought for a second that she really belonged there. Nobody else seemed to be bothered either, as neither the students, nor the teacher gave her any attention, let alone warn her.

A high school girl that didn't fit in her class, doubted to be doing illicit things. If you took a picture of her, and made this the title, it would sum things up perfectly.

On one side, you had the students gleefully playing tennis, and then there was me, slowly approaching Ayase-san. I sat on the opposite side of the fence, acting like I was taking a break.

"Skipping class?" I called out to her.

Ayase-san removed her earphones with a dubious look, and slightly opened her eyes.

"That surprised me. Why're you just talking to me like this?"

"I mean, a familiar face is skipping class, of course I'd come check."

"Huh, so you're here as the lecturing older brother."

"No, not really. I'm not that good of a person to even have the right to do that. I was just surprised to see you chose tennis as well, Ayase-san."

"Maaya forced me into it. She wanted to try the same thing. Then again, that's not the only reason."

"Maaya is referring to Narasaka-san, right? Are you too close?" I looked over at the court, and spotted a red-haired girl chasing after a ball.

She sure stands out alright.

"Sure are. Then again, I don't think there's any girl who doesn't get along with her."

"A hundred friends, as they say, huh."

There's roughly 20 girls in one class. Adding all 8 classes together, you get 160. What a fearsome number.

"I don't think Maaya has that many friends, at least not those which she can relax around. It's like, she can get along with everyone even when they're not friends."

"Ah, I feel that." I was satisfied with that explanation.

"Asamura-kun, why did you decide on tennis?"

"Umm, do I really need to tell you? It's not something you'd praise me for."

"It's fine, I have another pathetic reason myself."

What is 'fine' about this? This ain't some card game where we try to win against each other in terms of whose reason is more embarrassing. But, since her gaze felt as sharp as an arrow piercing me, I saw no other chance but to explain it to her.

"Because the real deal isn't some group match."

Maru participated in soccer, basketball, and other team games. With tennis, there's not even doubles, so you only fight on your own.

"I really didn't want to play with others, so I chose tennis."

To those people who think ‘What is this guy even talking about?’, I congratulate you from the bottom of my heart. Please live on in happiness. For me however, I’m bad at expecting things from others, and living according to the expectations of others. Just by thinking that I might be pulling the team down, I feel sick. If I could live my life without these agonizing thoughts, how easy everything would be, I sometimes wonder to myself.

“Huh...We really are similar.”

That’s why, since she showed sympathy towards my pathetic words, it became like a confession that she was more of a loner herself.

“Ayase-san as well?”

“Yeah, well. The trigger was Maaya, but I didn’t want to play in teams anyway. You probably figured it out already, but I’m keeping my distance from the other girls.”

Even though it was something sad and regretful, Ayase-san spoke with her usual dry voice. I figured as much, since nobody gave her any attention, despite skipping classes while listening to music. Is she half transparent or something? For a second, I doubted myself, but I could perfectly make out her body, as even the faint fragrance of perfume drifted towards my nose. Becoming this aware of her, I felt embarrassed, and looked away again.

“Are you not fitting into your class by any chance?”

“Surprised?”

“Well, with a girl as stylish as you, I figured you’d be the center of class.”

“Generally thinking, yeah.” Ayase-san nodded. “I’m different though.”

I'm sure that a big reason for this must be the rumours, leaving aside what exactly they were saying. Most of the people at this school at least were dubious of her because of them.

"That being said, this position isn't as bad...I don't really care about the ball festival either. Feels like a waste of time. If they don't bother with me, I can use the time for myself."

"Listening to music?"

"Eh? ...Well, yeah." Ayase-san showed a slightly flustered expression, and looked away.

She's hiding something. There's clearly another layer to that reaction of hers, but I didn't want to be rude and pry too much, so I stayed quiet. The other person will tell you if they feel ready to. Trying to press that moment could just get you hated in the end.

"This time, I'll decide it for sure! Certain kill technique! Super Ether Serve!"

"The name didn't even change, lol."

I heard Narasaka-san's voice again, followed by that other girl's retort. How loud are their voices, oi. But, since I was thinking about Narasaka-san again, I turned towards Ayase-san.

"Aren't you going to practice with Narasaka-san? I feel like she invited you so that you can play together...or rather, against each other."

"Nah."

"That was fast, alright."

"I'm not needed after all. Maaya invited me while knowing that I'd just skip. Then again, this kindness is what makes her this popular, I guess."

Looks, skipping class like this, and her own words, all of these factors only played towards the rumours, and yet the atmosphere she gave off, and how she reacted, it completely dispelled all outside information. Just where or what is Ayase Saki's true self? In order to arrive at that answer, I still don't know her well enough.

When I came home from school, Akiko-san was just about to leave.

"My, Yuuta-kun."

"Ah...I'm back."

"Welcome home~ I made you some dinner~"

"Thank you very much...But, that wasn't necessary, you're about to leave for work, right?"

"That's right~ I just moved, but I can't relax a bit~" My step-mother put one hand on her cheek, showing a troubled smile.

She wore what looked like expensive clothes, revealing her shoulders, and the scent of perfume coming from her was strong enough to make me feel dizzy. It was like a butterfly spreading its charm for the world to see. If someone told me that she'd be jumping into the night city from now on, I would believe them instantly.

"Since my old man was always busy with work, I just eat whatever I can find for dinner, so you don't need to make food right before work."

"When it was just me and Saki, that was pretty much the norm, but now that we've started living together, I figured I might as well~"

“I wouldn’t want you to overwork yourself, so please don’t feel forced.”

“Well, I might probably have to rely on your kindness starting tomorrow...Saki can cook as well, so I guess I can leave it to you~”

Hearing these words, I could feel my ears twitch. I imagined the sight of Ayase-san cooking, and instinctively thought that it didn’t really match her image. And, now that I already thought about her, the rumours popped up in the back of my head. Maybe that’s why I just happened to blurt out the following words.

“By the way, where might you be working?”

“At the shopping district of Shibuya~”

“...What kind of establishment is it?”

“Ah, did you get some weird ideas just now? Come on~” Akiko-san pouted in a childish way.

Honestly speaking, she was dead-on. I didn’t plan on saying it, but a slight doubt did appear in my head.

“It’s just a normal bar, no indecent service whatsoever. Not to mention that I interact with customers across the counter.”

“You’re not dealing with customers directly?”

“In a certain sense, I do. I’m a bartender after all.” Akiko-san showed me a gesture of her shaking a drink.

Even I could tell that she was used to this, so I accepted her words.

“I’m sorry for getting the wrong idea. It’s just...”

“It can’t be helped, it does sound a bit suspicious~ Not to mention all the stereotypes people think of when I mention that I work at night.

You're a student as well, so it would be a bit troublesome if you knew what kind of establishments the city at night had to offer."

"That is true, yes."

Now that I think about it, there's no way my old man would try to win over a woman at some girls bar or host club. He's plain, normal, honest, and gullible. He wouldn't choose a woman from any shady place. It's been ten years since I gained consciousness, and I've continued to watch him, so I can say that with confidence.

"Anyway, I need to get going now, Yuuta-kun. Please do take care of Saki."

"Ah, yes. Take care."

Akiko-san gently waved her hand at me, as she walked down the hallway of the flat. She looked like a butterfly heading towards the night city? NO. She was more like a chihuahua walking around in the high grass at the public park. Yet again, I was shown just how off the mark stereotypes could be, and honestly speaking, often are. I watched Akiko-san disappear into the elevator, and opened the door to my home.

Inside my home—my own room, to be more specific, I should be able to relax and be myself, and yet I can't help but tense up a bit. Most likely it's because the area beyond the wall turned into someone else's territory.

The hallway, the living room, the bathroom, it wasn't just a safe space for me and my old man alone anymore. Being conscious of this reality felt like it'd be bad manners, so I focussed on the reference book on the desk in front of me. Studies are more important after all.

When I looked at the time again, a full hour had passed. What pulled me back to reality was the sound of the entrance opening. Following

that, footsteps moved down the hallway, entering the room next to mine.

“Welcome back.” I gave a faint greeting, but no response came.

Makes sense, there’s no way she could have heard me through the wall. Since I didn’t have any urgent business anyway, I just told myself to forget about it, and turned back towards my desk.

Across the wall, I heard footsteps walking on the floor, as well as the sound of the school bag dropping to the floor. Following that, the closet opened, and I could pick up faint rustling of clothes...

Ah, not good. I shouldn’t focus on her sounds too much, that’d be pretty disgusting, right. I complained to myself, and waited for Ayase-san to disappear from my head.

“Asamura-kun, can I come in?” However, right as she did, Ayase-san materialized in front of my room, knocking on my door.

“Ah, sure...”

For a second, I confirmed the inside of the room, and gave permission after seeing nothing dangerous out in the open.

“Excuse me.”

“S-So, what is it?”

“Ah, you’re studying. You’re working hard, I see. We’re not even in exam season.”

“About as much as any other student, I guess.”

I’m not always at home studying or anything. I do have the routine of reading some manga or playing games in between. But, when I do that, it’s either in the middle of the room, or on the bed. Since that

wasn't exactly a sight I wanted others to see, and because I was conscious of Ayase-san on the other side of the wall, I just happened to study.

"Aiming for a good university?"

"I don't think people would aim for a bad one."

"Yeah, you're studying and working part-time at the same time after all."

"Is that so odd of a thing to do?"

I don't think it's that rare to see students do that.

"I mean, you invest time to earn money, but you invest time in your studies to achieve greater results. That's why, I just thought that doing both at the same time is probably pretty tough."

"You think about some complicated stuff. I never really was that conscious of it." I shrugged my shoulders.

"Hmmm...So, by the way."

It seemed like something hard to say, as she averted her eyes, and played with her long hair strains. Maybe it was because of the light, or a different reason, but her cheeks looked more red than usual. Just because of that conversation just now, I could tell that the rumours about her at school seemed like nonsense. Sector clear, I'd say.

Ayase-san seemed like she needed a few seconds to mentally prepare, when she spoke up, determination in her eyes.

"You don't happen to know of a well-paid short work hours part-time job, do you?"

"Sector not clear!"

“Eh?”

“Ah, no, it’s nothing...” I regretted retorting mindlessly.

At least it was something vague. If I had screamed ‘Prostitution!', then I would have been done for.

“I want money, but I don’t feel like wasting too much time. Maybe an hour or two, and get like 10.000 yen for it.”

“With a normal job, you probably won’t get that.” I answered calmly.

For now, I decided to keep an iron face, and acted like I didn’t know about the rumours.

“I see. Guess selling is the only option.”

Can you not penetrate my armor right off the bat? We might not be related, but you’re still my little sister, and I really don’t want to hear what exactly you’re selling two days after we’ve become family.

“If you want to earn money, then sell yourself—that’s what it said in the book as well.”

What kind of book, oi. Why was that book in reach for a high school student anyway? Then again, I saw some books like that at my part-time work as well, so I can’t exactly complain.

“Um, Ayase-san, me saying this might be bad manners, but...”

“Sure, go ahead. I brought up the question after all.”

“I think that you should treasure your own body some more.”

“Why’re you making such a big deal out of it? There’s other people my age who do it as well.”

“Other people don’t have anything to do with this. What you do yourself is more important.”

“I am properly taking care of myself. That’s why I want to earn lots of money.” Facing me, who was trying to convince Ayase-san with an old man’s logic, she was surprisingly serious.

Paid dating, compensated dating, hidden account girl. I thought that all girls that were involved in something along those lines did it out of boredom or because they could. However, it felt like Ayase-san was clearly intent on doing this, as her words held strength and confidence I hadn’t seen before.

That being said, no matter how determined she may be, I still can’t ignore this. Even more so now that she had become my little sister. When I thought of Akiko-san’s request to take care of Ayase-san, I felt guilty that I wasn’t pushing harder.

“Can you say the same thing in front of Akiko-san?”

“...I can? If anything, she’ll probably praise me for becoming an adult.”

“That is some cursed direction of education.”

“Was it different for your family? I figured your father was happy when you started doing it yourself, Asamura-kun.”

“It’d be one hell of a problem if he was. It’s true that my old man is a helpless guy most of the time, but if a child of his would be doing that, he’d definitely be sad. Also...when did it become a premise that I was doing it as well?”

“Eh, didn’t you go there yesterday? Your part-time job.”

“...Part-time job?”

“Yup, part-time job.”

An odd silence was born between the two of us. We both apparently tried to figure out when we started talking past each other, tracing that red thread of our conversation, which led this silence to come into existence.

“What did you think I was talking about?” Ayase-san said, as she narrowed her eyes.

“Sex service with a great sum of money involved, or something like that.”

“.....Huh?”

Ayase-san’s voice turned cold like I had never heard before.

“Ahh, I see. So you thought I was into ‘Prostitution’.”

“I’m so sorry! I really am!”

After confirming that we had talked past each other, we realized that we both had gotten hungry, and moved to the dinner table. We found the orthodox food Akiko-san had prepared before she left, namely stir-fried vegetables with miso soup, and warmed this up on our plates. After we both took the first sip of our miso soup, Ayase-san spoke up with these words. Since I didn’t have any excuses, I could only clap my hands together, and lowered my head. Ayase-san seemed uncomfortable with that, sighing at me.

“Raise your head, will you. I know that this rumour has been going around. When you look like this, people just tend to get the wrong idea. Then again, I’m partially to blame because I use these rumours to avoid annoying peeps.”

“Ayase-san...”

It didn't feel like she was acting tough. This indifference probably led to all the misconceptions between her and her peers, and the bad direction the rumours took. But, something doesn't add up. She clearly stated that she was aware of how her appearance invites misunderstandings like these. So, why is she still choosing to dress like that?

She must have guessed that I was having doubts like these, as she stopped her hand from carrying some more stirred-up vegetables to her mouth.

"I get what you're thinking. Why would I wear these clothes despite being aware of what it did to my image."

"Well, yeah...I was a bit curious about that."

"It's my armament mode."

"Eh?"

"Nobody would go on to a battlefield with no weapons and armor, right? This is my armament to survive society." She put one finger on her ear lobe, showing off the radiating ear piercing.

Even for girls with the desire to look stylish, piercing a hole into their ears is a territory not many dare to enter. In middle school, you'd be seen as a hero by your classmates, and treated like a delinquent by the adults and teachers, it is a mysterious contradiction, really. It's metal with the size of a mere millimeter, and yet it holds so much power. In the face of that, the words I muttered were—

"Does it raise your defence? Or is it like a two-hit attack?"

"Pffft...you say some interesting things." She laughed at me.

I mean, my thinking speed couldn't keep up, and I just muttered convenient game terms that popped up in the back of my head.

“Well, something like that. The goal is to raise both attack and defence.”

“Sounds dangerous. This world we live in is at peace right now, you know.”

“Battles are fought nonetheless, just in places where you don’t see them.” Ayase-san sounded like she was a heroine involved in a war going on in the dark side of the world.

From here on out, I was thrown into a superpower battle world, blood being washed with blood—Of course, that didn’t happen, as I knew that she was just using a rhetorical answer.

‘To Saki and Yuuta-kun. Warm this up, and eat it together.’

I had previously removed that memo from the plastic film on the stir-fried vegetables, and Ayase-san’s gaze now drifted towards that paper.

“Did you run into Mom today?”

“Yeah, just when I got home from school.”

“She was really alluring, wasn’t she?”

“Well, yeah, I guess.” I returned an awkward answer.

Even if she has become my mother now, I’m not exactly sure how to praise her in front of my non-blood-related step-sister, which was her daughter. Because of this, Ayase-san gave me a long stare, only to let out a snicker. Then, she spoke up like she was going to tell me a ghost story.

“But, she’s a high school graduate.”

“Oh really?”

The ordinary contents took me by surprise a bit, which led me to give back a dry response. Ayase-san gave me a suspicious glance.

“You don’t think of anything about that?”

“...I don’t?”

“High school graduate, beauty, nightlife business, what if you had all these three conditions aligned?”

“Then I’d think of her as a high school graduate, a beauty, and someone who works in nightlife business?”

I don’t really get what she’s asking from me. Of course, I have my own ideas when hearing these singular words, but nothing special comes to mind when you take them together.

“Hmmm, Asamura-kun, your thinking is pretty flat.” Ayase-san said, and carried some more vegetables to her mouth.

I wonder why I can see a glimmer of happiness mixed in with her indifferent expression. Maybe she’s making fun of this sad virgin in front of her. I’m not too familiar with a girl’s heart to fully deny that.

“I think that kind of stance is pretty amazing.”

“I really appreciate your kindness towards virgins.”

Since she speaks her thoughts in honesty, I don’t need to be a mentalist to figure out her own stance, and it allows for easier communication.

For a moment, Ayase-san’s expression in her eyes turned gloomy. Maybe the word virgin was taking it one step too far. However, the next words coming from her mouth were more serious than I anticipated.

“I know of comments that aren’t as flat as that. As a high school graduate, a beauty, and worker in the nightlife business, she’s basically dumb in the head, and uses her looks as a weapon, earning money the illicit way—Something along those lines. I’ve seen Mom being treated and resented like that many times.”

“Nonsense, alright.”

Of course, there’s a trend of comparing academic history and looks. However, there’s no guarantee that this tells of a single person’s true self and value. Even if the macro point of view might be correct, you should be able to find many differences once you dive deeper into the micro territory. Just because people looking like that are often like this, it’s not a valuable way to approach a single individual. Those folks who can’t even understand that are often best ignored, since they are the ones who offer no value whatsoever.

—That’s what it said in a book I borrowed from Yomiuri-senpai. The influence of books is quite terrific. Even some high school brat like me can speak as if I had another person’s life experience on my shoulders and in my head.

Hearing these words from me, Ayase-san’s face flushed slightly red, and she showed a deeply appreciative gaze.

“Right, it’s nonsense.”

“Y-Yeah.”

“Not to mention that comments and views like them are unfair. It’s a logical development not letting you escape from.”

“For example?”

“When you’re clever, but you’re not attractive, you get labeled as a creepy but educated woman. If you’re not clever, but very attractive,

you'll be treated as a pillow business woman who used her body to reach her current position. They all just assume you used your body to get where you are, and when you work all on your own, you get ridiculed and receive pity for not having a man you can rely on."

"Ahh, I see...I understand what you mean."

"Happens to boys as well, I'm sure."

"Sure does. If you try to approach the girl you have feelings for, you get called disgusting, and blamed for sexual harassment, framed as a criminal, but if you decide to pass up on love, you'll get ridiculed for being a virgin."

"That sure sounds specific. Your own experience?"

"Read about it on social networks. Since I saw that first, I'd rather not have any experience with that myself, you know? Sounds like a pain. I'd rather not get made fun of because of that."

"I see, I kind of get it."

Listening to my thought process that could very well ridicule one of the most famous Aesop's Fables, The Fox and the Grapes, Ayase-san showed immediate sympathy. She probably realized that we both shared similar opinions, as her voice and expression softened a bit.

"That's why I'm using this armament."

We went back to the original topic.

"Become stylish to a level nobody can complain. Treated like a beauty from outsiders, creating an alluring self. Same with academic knowledge, school, work, I'll become a strong person. This is the first step. All these people who keep living according to their stereotypes, I'll make them shut up at once, see." She spoke with her usual indifferent tone, but a strong emotion was residing in her voice.

—The exact opposite from me.

I thought of it as bothersome to have a role pressed onto me, and ran away from it. Contrary to me, Ayase-san was ready to spit in the face of the entire world. However, I felt a sense of danger coming from that stance.

“Are you fine with that? That sounds exhausting.”

“If I can prove myself superior in exchange for stamina, then that’s perfect.”

Towards who? That doubt popped up inside my mind, but I didn’t want to be seen as some curious bastard, so I swallowed it. However, I thought that the reason she held such a sense of values unbefitting of her age might have been through the influence of real father, Akiko-san’s former husband. If that was the case, then I wanted to avoid stepping on that landmine.

Even I wouldn’t exactly be appreciative of someone who tried to find out about my real mother, so it’d be the logical conclusion to not do the same thing for the other person.

“Aren’t we the same, Asamura-kun?”

“I’m not as strong as you are, Ayase-san. I don’t feel like fighting the views of society.”

“But, at the root of it all is that you don’t want others to have any expectations of you, as you don’t have any of them, right?”

That is true. That’s why, when we first met at the family restaurant, we immediately got along with our own individual stances.

“The views of others, the expectations of others, in order to be freed from them, you need the strength to live on your own.”

“I see. I feel like I understand the reason why you’re searching for well-paid work.”

“Huh, you got good intuition.”

“I mean, with all these hints, even someone as dense as me could figure it out.” I shrugged my shoulders, and continued. “It’s so that you can live independently, right.”

“Correct...And, sorry.” Ayase-san said, and closed her eyes with a bitter tone.

I won’t ask as to why she would apologize there. For Ayase-san, who hadn’t been working part-time until now, the reason as to why she was now suddenly searching for a well-paid and easy job right around the timing she started moving in together with us, there was no digging and questioning necessary for it to become apparent.

Not relying on others, not expecting anything from others, it was all so that she could stand on her own two feet. The reason she became this desperate was because ‘strangers’ that she almost ended up relying on suddenly walked into her life, right after she decided to live on her own two feet.

“Honestly, there’s no part-time work that would allow you to easily earn money. Can’t say that my work at the bookstore pays well.”

“I see...” Ayase-san nodded, with a regrettable expression. “Then, I guess I can only give up.”

“You didn’t look into it some more?”

“If I put my time into searching for something, I have less time to study. I came here with no intention of working part-time anyway, so I’m here with zero clues. Of course, with the right time investment, I might find something, but the cost-performance relationship here is

looking too negative to me. I'm not that clever either, so I'd probably have to sacrifice either grades or part-time work."

"Huh. So that's why you came to me, who had experience with that business, in order to balance your lack of information."

It's not like I can brag about my amount of friends, but I might be better off than Ayase-san, judging from what I have heard. There's Narasaka-san, but besides that, it seems pretty hopeless.

"I might be able to help you with that."

"Really?"

"Yeah, I got a friend at school who hears all sorts of information."

Then again, he's my only friend.

"My Senior at work might know something as well. I have work tomorrow, so I'll ask them."

"Thanks. But, it'd be pretty unfair to have you work for me like that." Ayase-san took a sip from her miso soup, as she thought about it.

"Miso soup."

"Eh?"

"I want you to make miso soup every day."

As we sat around the dinner table, I gazed at the girl in front of me, who had been a stranger to me not long ago. Gazing at this irregular scenery, these words came out without me really thinking anything. Ayase-san kept her mouth to the bowl, and blinked at me in confusion.

"A confession of love?"

"Not at all."

I can't blame her, my words just now sounded like a proposal no matter how you looked at it. I mean, Akiko-san said that it'd be hard making dinner every single day. That would mean that I had to make it myself, and since I only lived with my old man until now, I was content with food from the convenience store. That's why I'm thinking... if I even have the time to prepare food when I have my studies, my part-time work, and want some time for myself as well. Also, how many years has it been since I had homemade miso soup, it's much more delicious than ready-bought.

All of these various thoughts mixed up inside my head, creating that one phrase I muttered in a daze.

"Well, I don't mind. I don't hate making food, and I'd say I'm pretty good at it. If anything, the costs compared to gathering information is practically zero."

Seems like she's okay with it.

"So, I'll search for information on how you can quickly earn money—"

"And I'll make food for you—"

Despite knowing that was bad manners, we both pointed at each other's faces, and confirmed this contract.

Chapter 3: 9th of June (Tuesday)

Morning. Naturally, some dramatic event like being woken up by my little sister did not happen. Even last night, Ayase-san went to take a bath after me, and only went to bed after I was already asleep. I bet she woke up before me as well.

“Big trouble, Yuuta!!”

When I stepped out onto the hallway, I ran into a clown wearing shaving cream as make-up. No, correction, it was my old man currently reading himself for work. His eyes were wide open, blood-shot even, as he frantically pointed towards the living room.

“What are you panicking for?”

“I was shaving just now!”

“Yeah, I can see that.”

“And then, I heard some suspicious sounds coming from the kitchen, so when I went to check it out...”

“Yeah?”

What is he, some murder witness? I barely suppressed retorting like that, when my old man continued with a quivering voice.

“S-Saki-chan...She’s making breakfast!”

“You say it like that’s some shocking development.”

“Because it is! I would have never imagined eating breakfast made by my own daughter!” I could see tears started to build up in the depths of her eyes.

I can tell that he’s happy, but can you not splatter foam everywhere?

“Alright...Just go wash your face, will you.”

“How cold of you. If only you could be as lovable as Saki-chan.”

“Lovable...as Ayase-san?” I imagined her dry and cool face, and tilted my head in confusion.

Of course, her face is cute. She’s definitely in the upper spectrum. But, this and being lovable are two different things if you ask me.

...As I was thinking something ruide like that, I pushed my old man back into the washing room, and headed over to the living room, when a delicious scent tickled my nose.

“Fried eggs?” I asked.

“It’s pretty orthodox, right. I figured you wouldn’t have anything to complain about something simple.” Ayase-san answered indifferently.

“I really don’t, but can I say one thing?”

“That beginning sure sounds like I’ll get to hear a complaint right after, but sure, go ahead.”

“Why are you making breakfast?”

She didn’t make it yesterday. I always thought that you could just live off of toast in some tea in the morning, never seeing the need for anyone to prepare anything.

“I mean, it’s for our contract.”

“Talking about yesterday? I thought we only decided on dinner.”

“I mean, we did, but I thought I might as well make breakfast. When talking about give & take, it’s my policy to have more on the give side.”

“I see...”

How upright—or, you could call it dry even. Ayase-san wore an apron above her uniform, with a frying pan in her hand. Being able to see your little sister cooking for you is a scenery every boy in this world could grave for. However, as always, the reality was much different than you would read or hear about.

I felt a bit guilty to only have Ayase-san work like this, so I thought about what I could do to help out, ending with me wiping the dining table. Ayase-san took a peek at me from the kitchen, and opened her mouth.

“...Thanks.” Giving her gratitude a bit more awkwardly than usual, she brought three plates with fried eggs on them.

I figured that this would be the least to do now that we’re family, but I guess that Ayase-san’s policies require her to thank me nonetheless. Following the fried eggs, she brought white rice and miso soup, which led the dining room to be filled with a pleasant and comfortable scent.

“When did you prepare that?”

“Last night before going to bed.....Well, it’s not that big of a thing.”

She said it like it was nothing special, but to me, it sounded like a pain beyond belief, so I had trouble even finding any words. Ayase-san and I sat down at the dining table, facing each other, clapped our hands together, and gave our thanks for the food, when my old man walked into the room, fully dressed. He sat down at the dining table with us, and ran his eyes over the food.

“I’m going to cry...”

“Ahaha, you’re exaggerating.” Ayase-san showed a wry smile.

I could see a different expression compared to the usual dry and cool one she shows me. Probably because it's towards an adult that she'll be relying on in the future. Looking at the distance, or the type of conversation, it feels less dealing with a little sister, and more like a wife that had just started living with us.

In the end, my old man kept blabbering on and on about how delicious the food was, and quickly left the house after he finished his own breakfast. Really, he's so much of a fast-eater. Then again, I'm honestly on the faster end as well, but this time, it just took me a bit longer.

“Is it bad?”

Of course, I didn't plan on saying the reason as to why that was, but Ayase-san gave me an anxious gaze, already reaching a conclusion of her own.

“That's not it.”

“You don't need to be considerate. I'll try to fix it if it tastes bad.”

“No, seriously.”

If I had to guess, she probably did this according to a recipe, not trying any weird arrangements at all, making sure that everything was perfectly put in its place, and the taste was great as well. Of course, if the taste really wasn't that great, it'd fit perfectly for all the stereotypical little sisters in anime and manga, but that wasn't the case here.

If so, then why are my chopsticks moving slower than usual? The reason was simple, and I explained it to her while stuffing some rice in my mouth.



“It’s just, I’m used to eating fried eggs with soy sauce...that’s why.”

That’s really all it was. The fried egg Ayase-san made was seasoned salt and pepper, not using any other ingredients. Of course, salt and pepper aren’t anything unorthodox, so I can perfectly eat these fried eggs, but when you let them suck up some soy sauce, they go down much easier, and that’s what I’m used to.

“Soy sauce with fried eggs...I never thought about that...” Ayase-san muttered.

If anything, I’m the one surprised that she ate her fried eggs with only salt and pepper. Ayase-san’s expression didn’t change much, but her voice made it sound like she was slightly dejected.

“Sorry, I didn’t even think about your tastes, and just made it like I would eat it.”

“No no no, this isn’t something you need to apologize for. If anything, I feel bad for not telling you beforehand, yet complaining as I do now.”

“I’ll ask next time.”

“Yeah, I’ll provide you with proper information as well.”

That’s why, neither of us said any more than that. We’re just two people trying to arrange things for the benefit and convenience of the other. Honestly speaking, it didn’t feel half bad. From an outsider’s perspective, our conversation might seem impersonal and robot-like. But, there I was, feeling a sense of relief and relaxation from this.

After spending this time together in the morning, Ayase-san and I left our home again at different times. It was a safety measure to make

sure no odd rumours would come into existence at school, as well as that we wouldn't get too close to each other. Although we're practically family, she still is a member of the opposite sex, exactly my age. Being considerate of each other in the home was one thing, but being aware of this on the outside could be quite exhausting.

You have to treasure the time you have of your own. Since we both respected this idea, I felt like we'd be able to get along just fine in the future as well.

"Between cryptocurrency and youtuber, what do you think is better?"

"I think it'd be better to drop it."

The time was a bit before the beginning of homeroom. In the face of the question I threw at my trusted friend Maru, he gave a cold and harsh statement.

"That's the catcher of the baseball club for you, quick judgement."

"Everybody would have reacted that way. Where did that even come from, Asamura."

"I'm looking for methods to effectively earn money with the shortest time of work needed."

I carefully chose my words, only conveying the bare minimum of information needed. I can't break my promise with Ayase-san, and I can't tell him about the conversation I had with her either, so I had to be extremely cautious. Of course, that wasn't enough to convince Maru at all, as he gave me a suspicious glance.

"Asamura...are you being chased by loan sharks or something?"

Why'd you come up with the worst-case scenario?

“I’m not wrapped up in some crime or anything. I mean, no matter what great corporation or business you might work at, it’s never really safe nowadays, and being a government official seems rough to boot. I’m thinking of saving as much money as I can right now.”

“That’s some early life plan you got there.”

“If possible, I’d like to go without paid dating.”

“That was in your range of options?...Hm?” From the depths of his glasses, Maru gave me a dubious look. “Yesterday you ask me about Ayase, today you’re searching for some shady part-time work...Don’t tell me?”

“No, it’s not what you think.” I immediately denied his thoughts.

Since I did that before he could even finish his assumption, it probably sounded more fishy than anything, but I couldn’t sit still without immediately shutting him down. Maru stared at me, as I swallowed my spit, only to slowly open his mouth.

“Give up on that. There’s nobody who’d buy a male prostitute, alright. Look at the mirror, dude.”

“...Phew.” I let out a sigh of relief.

I felt all tension in my body vanish, to a level where I didn’t even feel like biting back at that diss. Thanks for being so dense at times, Maru.

“You were just making fun of me inside of your head, right?”

“Not at all.” I lied flat out.

No, I wasn’t lying. I wasn’t making fun of him, I was thanking him. Stereotypes are something scary, I dare say. With glasses, and as a catcher of a baseball club, my dear friend seems skilled in

observation, and possessing great guessing abilities. Yet, he can't even imagine Ayase-san in the same context as 'Little sister'. This episode told me that this gal who was under doubts of doing paid dating could in no way be a 'Little sister' in the eyes of others.

"Anyway," Maru started his words, raising one finger to begin his lecture. "First of all, don't even think that you can make big money in a short amount of time by being a youtuber or doing cryptocurrency. That's naive."

"R-Really?"

"Of course. To make it big with that, you need to invest insane amounts of time. Just like with any sport, it's also a gamble as to how and where you hit the ball."

"Ahh, I guess that makes sense."

Since Maru, who practiced baseball for a long time now, was saying it, it sounded oddly convincing. However, at the same time as I found reason with his words, there's also a contradiction that caught my attention.

"But, if there's people who bet tens of years to finally earn lots of money, there's also those who can achieve that in barely a year, right? Just what separates the two? I don't think it's the time they invest."

"Since I'm not someone who earns ridiculous amounts of money, I can't tell ya, but there might be some trick behind it."

"A trick, huh..."

"Maybe just your mental attitude. Both my parents are history fanatics, so I've been told all sorts of stories from the Warring States period to the Three Kingdoms, so I got myself a lot of knowledge about that, but—"

“Sometimes you sound like Zhuge Liang, yeah.”

Through this one year I’ve been talking with Maru, I could see that he’s quite the tactician. During last year’s ball sports festival, he gathered information on the other classes, and instructed people. Thanks to that, our class managed to easily get first place. That might also be the reason as to why he’s on the seat of the catcher in his club.

“It’s really not that great of a deal, but...Well, I got the basics of war hammered into me.”

“For example?”

“That information and knowledge are your greatest weapon.”

“Know your enemy, know thyself, and you shall not fear a hundred battles?”

“Something like that. The enemy’s soldiers, the geographical location, weapons they like to use, and how many they have, actual experience in practical battle—they all sound like small details, but added together, they become strong weapons. But, even so, clever soldiers with axes can’t win against guns.”

“I see, so you’re comparing that to earning money...You’re saying that I lack knowledge about money?”

“Probably. I feel like the more you know about how society works, and the situation of the market, the higher your chance of success is?...No idea.” He spoke all knowledgeable, only to break down in the final moment.

It’s very much like him to give advice with his own examples, only to not make it sound like the perfect method in the very end. I carefully listened to everything he said, and made a mental note of it for later.

Once school ended, I drove off on my bike, and headed straight to the bookstore I was working part-time at. Located right at the front of Shibuya train station, a lot of youngsters as well as salary men and business people visited it, so the peak storm was at roughly 6 to 7pm. However, once you overcome that, things tend to calm down a bit, and the number of people on shift goes down to four.

Roughly at 8pm, two of those entered a break of an hour, so me and Yomiuri-senpai were alone. Said Yomiuri-senpai stood behind the cash register as she let out a yawn, as I—acted like I was working on the shelves, and instead searched for the book I was looking for.

First, I need knowledge about money. About the economy, running a business, and the construction of capitalism. Honestly speaking, the titles all sound fairly similar, so I can't really tell them apart, so I picked something that sounded somewhat trustworthy. I might as well take some magazines that could give me information about workplaces with lots and easy money. Looking it up on the phone is one thing, but I didn't want to run into some shady employer. Of course, the ones in magazines aren't exactly the safest either, but it's better to be on guard than on no-guard.

...Alright. I took the books with me to the register. There—

“Hey now, you’re on your shift, no storing books for yourself. .” Together with a warning voice, someone poked their finger at my shoulder.

Of course, it was Yomiuri-senpai.

“Ah, I’m sorry.”

“Just kidding~ Nobody cares about that rule, so don’t mind me. The store manager even does that. As long as you’re not storing some super popular novel, or a release, things should be fine~ Just think about it rationally, right?” Yomiuri-senpai laughed.

She might look like a Yamato Nadeshiko, but she's quite relaxed most of the time. I still remember how she would always complain that the second she stopped acting prim and proper, the number of confessions towards her went down drastically.

If you're that easy of a woman, then go color your hair and give other people that impression—was a frequent complaint, and I could understand that. In a certain way, she's the exact opposite of Ayase-san, which is quite ridiculous. Stereotypes are going down the path of destruction, huh.

“So, Junior-kun, what were you trying to buy?”

“Can you not invade my privacy like that?”

“That reaction...A lewd book?”

“I wouldn't dare buy porn magazines when I'm still struggling to even get along with my little sister...Also, I'm not even 18 yet, so I can't buy them anyway.”

“Then, just show me...what!”

“Ah.”

She stole the books from me when I let down my guard.

“Hmm...Hmmm hmm...Mmm??” She glanced at the various book covers, and showed a curious expression. “I had never known you were that keen on getting the riches. Were you always this self-conscious?”

“No, not really.” I immediately denied any such assumption.

That being said, revealing Ayase-san's personal wish felt bad manners, so I decided to only reveal the most important details.

“Once I graduate from high school, I want to move out, and live alone. That’s why I need to earn as much money as possible.”

“But, should you really be working part-time here then?”

Damn it, I can’t say anything against that...

“Um, well. The amount of money I have isn’t enough yet, and I enjoy working here because I love books, even if the pay isn’t that big.”

“Ah, I see.”

“Getting a new little sister at this age, I don’t feel like staying at my family’s place. Don’t wanna put too much pressure on them now.”

“I see?” She gave a comment with a rather blank tone and expression.

“Do you doubt me?”

“I understand wanting to stand on your own two feet, but your little sister being the reason is wrong, right?” She spoke with a fairly serious tone.

I was only with Ayase-san’s values, and even I was left surprised.

“It’s about my own feelings right?”

“I meant it like you’re inconsistent with your logic.”

“Can I not be?”

“I mean, it’s a waste.”

“Eh?”

The word coming from Yomiuri-senpai’s mouth took me by surprise, and my eyes opened wide.

“So that you don’t bother other people, such reasoning like that...I don’t think you can’t become a person who earns a lot of money just by reading all these books.”

“I’m sorry, but we’ve jumped so many steps of logic, I can’t follow at all. Could you say it with words that I could understand.”

“A sister your age is more of an asset. And, a lifestyle that doesn’t rely on that is like you’re just tying down your arms and legs.” She said it quite blankly, but it had a sharp tone to it.

In reality, Ayase-san is the one who wants to live without relying on me or my old man, but since I agreed with her ideas, the words hit straight in my heart as well.

“Why do you think money is necessary?”

“I mean, you can’t live without it?”

“Is that really the case?”

“Is that a rhetorical question? I mean, you need it. Clothing – Food – Shelter, these three are basic needs of us humans, and each requires money.”

That is capitalism.

“Hmm, I see. Then, let’s take it to the extreme. A baby that can’t earn money, will it just be left to die?”

“That really is a bit too extreme.”

“In reality, a baby can live on even without earning money, right?”

“Because the parents are paying for its expenses, yes.”

“That’s right, because it’s being helped...So, why can’t adults live like that? Isn’t that fine?”

“I don’t think it is.”

If everybody started asking for help, society would collapse, I’m sure. Adults are to protect the children, and once you earn your own money to stand on your own two feet, you will be protected by this society.

“I mean, there’s more adults who want to become babies again, right.”

“I don’t think you should generalize that.”

On social networks and wherever, I can see people treating 2D characters as their Mamas, or contents that show adults returning to children just as they wished for. But, even if you keep that in mind, you shouldn’t just generalize that this is the case for every single adult out there...Or, I at least hope that to be the case.

“I never said all of them~ But, the fact that such contents keep appearing more and more is because there’s people who actually wish for that, right.”

“That...is true, yes.”

“At first, every single one of us was a baby, and yet once we’re adults, it’s a no-go. Isn’t that even more cruel?”

“...I guess so.”

“This is another extreme, but if someone provided clothes, food, and a place to sleep at...if someone helped you like that, then you could live without money, right?”

“So a basic income different from money?”

“So well-versed~”

“Stop it already.”

I didn’t expect to be treated like some cool kid who used words they just learned recently. Not to mention that I heard about that term from a book Yomiuri-senpai lent me, so I don’t think she has the right to lecture me. But, she just showed a smile, not bothering with my thoughts.

“If you can’t live on your own, then you just have to ask someone else for help. Or, so I think at least.”

“Even if they end up as a burden?”

“There’s people in this world who like girls like that, you know?”

“As a personal interest, yes, but generally speaking...”

“Maybe that’s just not your type, Junior-kun.”

“...I don’t really get it.”

At the very least, I don’t think Ayase-san likes men who are like a burden...Or so I’d like to say, but I don’t know her nearly enough, so in both cases, it’s a question I don’t have the answer for.

“Anyway, that’s how money works. If you have it, great, and if you don’t, then you have to search for someone to help you. So that someone comes to your help when you need it, always be on the lookout for someone who might need help. I think it’s better to keep that thought in mind, than reading some extreme books like that.”

“I wonder.”

“You do that. In all the various companies of this world, there’s more competent employees than excellent company presidents.”

“That is one hell of a statement.”

“It’s the truth. The rich company presidents just happen to be good at being saved, that’s all, young man.”

“It’s pretty lame how you act like you know all of that.”

“A flower of a university student always as a sugar daddy or two.”

“Eh?” I subconsciously froze up.

Of course, it’s not that I had any feelings for her, but since she was always working in the same shift as me, I knew quite a few things about her. However, a shock is still a shock. Just like what happened when I heard about the rumours that Ayase-san might be selling her body. Maybe that’s just because I’m a virgin, I don’t know.

However, after a few moments of agonizing, Yomiuri-senpai showed me a grin.

“Just kidding~”

“You wench.”

My respectful language completely broke.

“A friend at uni does that. It really seems like people with a lot of money are good at asking others for help. Also, whenever I meet her, she has some new brand object with her. From clothes to a handbag to whatever, it’s honestly astonishing.”

“Wow.”

It felt like I took a glance at the darkness of a university student.

“Anyway, before relying on books like that, why not rely on your family first?” She gave me a wink, and started helping a customer who just came in.

In the end, I went home that day without buying a single book, completely influenced by that teaser of a senior.

“I’m back, Ayase-san.”

“Welcome home, Asamura-kun.”

As always, my step-sister greeted me upon my return home, as a stimulating scent of food ingredients tickled my nose. When I came to the living room, I spotted Ayase-san doing her work in the kitchen. I don’t know if she just came home, or if she just didn’t bother to change her clothes, but she wore an apron above her uniform, stirring around the contents of a hot pot.

“Good work at your job. Would you like to eat right away?”

“Thanks. I’ll get the plates ready.”

“Ah, you don’t need to, you must be tired from your work.” Ayase-san said, right as I took out a few plates.

Rather than being brother and sister, this feels more like we’re newlyweds...God, I sound so creepy. I ignored my cursed thoughts, and finished preparing for the dinner with Ayase-san, sitting at the dining table, facing each other. Today’s main dish was curry. A lot of vegetables were used, making it look like quite the healthy curry. On top of that, she even prepared some salad. When I carried some vegetables with spice in my mouth, my eyes opened wide.

“Delicious...!”

“I see, glad to hear that.”

An honest praise escaped my lips. Honestly, the curry was delicious enough that this was the only word to describe it as. It wasn’t something like an amateur made, only going along with the recipe, using market ingredients.

If you didn't use a variety of spice, and put detailed calculations into boiling the vegetables, you wouldn't make them this comfortable to bite on. Same goes for the rice, as it went down really smoothly.

Ayase-san showed a calm reaction as always, but I figured that she didn't dislike my praise, as the corners of her mouth went up a bit, while she carried some curry to her mouth. The second the spice touched her tongue, her eyebrows twitched ever so slightly, and I realized that even she had human expressions.

"I didn't think you'd make this great of a curry."

"I see. Then again, I'd give it 70 points."

"You can still go higher?"

"I didn't have much time to season the meat, so I can still make it better. Sorry about that."

"Season the meat." I just blankly muttered the words I just heard.

"Eh, what? You need me to explain that?"

"I have no knowledge about cooking...The best I know is that you cook both sides of the meat."

From my point of view, her knowledge of cooking makes her seem like she came from a different world.

"Well, sure." She said, and started her explanation. "When you buy meat from the market, the taste is still a bit meh, or the stench can be strong for the nose. Using salt, pepper, or garlic, the taste gets much better."

"Ohh...precious knowledge."

“Just stuff I picked up on the internet. Most things I just studied up on a recipe site.” She said it, stating that she learned most of this herself, without the help of anybody else.

It really made it apparent that her desire to live independently wasn’t just for show. Thinking that far, I had a few words of my own.

“About the method to earning money fast and easy.”

“I see, so you already looked into that.”

“Yeah. But, I couldn’t find anything. Sorry, even though you already had to make food twice for me.”

“...I see. Well, I figured it wouldn’t be that easy.” Ayase-san gently dropped her shoulders in defeat, but her disappointment wasn’t as deep as I assumed it would be.

I’m pretty sure that she went to gather information on her own before asking me, and realized that finding such a work would be too convenient to be true.

“I just heard about the special attribute of people who end up rich.”

“Huh, that sounds mighty interesting.”

“Even I was curious when I heard about it.”

There, I explained what Yomiuri-senpai told me, and that it’s important to rely on others. Having listened to me, Ayase-san’s eyes were radiating with curiosity.

“So you had a girl you’re close with, Asamura-kun.”

“Eh, that’s what you picked up from that?”

“Ah, sorry. It was just, you know, unexpected.”

“And now you’re making fun of me.”

“I said I’m sorry, okay.”

When I showed my discomfort of being treated like a virgin, Ayase-san showed a wry smile. Of course, my physical contact with girls so far is at a whopping zero, so Ayase-san wasn’t wrong either.

“I totally thought you hated girls or something.”

“No, not really. Why would you even think that way?”

“Since our situation was so similar, I figured that to be the case”

I see, so Ayase-san hates girls—Of course, I’m not going to joke around like that. Judging from her choice of words, she probably saw her parents not getting along. She never had any strong attachment to her real father, and is thinking something similar to me with my own real mother. Half of that is correct, as I was really bad at dealing with my real mother.

“But, this is this, and that is that. Just because you’re bad with one person doesn’t mean you start hating all women.”

“I see. That’s great, honestly.” Ayase-san said, admiring my words, and then continued with a light tone. “I ship it.”

“...What exactly?”

“You two. She’s got great style, is comfortable to be around with, and an older lady, right?”

“That is true, yeah?”

“I think you two are a good fit.”

“Ehhh?”

Since she told me with a teasing smile, I couldn't help but tense up. It's true that Yomiuri-senpai is an alluring beauty, with big breasts, and older than me, but I can never tell what she's thinking, and I cannot let down my guard around her. I feel like I can be myself around her, but when I'm exhausted already, talking with her can be a bit tough.

"Why do you look so disgusted? From what I've heard, she's clever, and a great person."

"Well, I won't deny that..." I closed my mouth.

I can't tell her that I'd be exhausted just by dating her, as that would make me so much of an asshole.

"Ahh, what to do." Ayase-san put down her spoon. "What she's saying is true, but I still want to become independent."

"You seem to be rushing a lot. You won't even rely on me or my old man?"

"No, you two are good people, and I'm sure you'd help me if I asked for help. But..." She waited for a moment. "Everything would have been easier if you two were bad people."

"What...do you..."

"Sorry. I shouldn't be saying that...Thanks for the food." her eyes opened wide, and although she still had some food left, she took the plate with her.

I felt like calling out to her when she practically ran away to the kitchen, but stopped myself. Not much time passed since we became siblings, but I could tell that she didn't want to talk about that topic any longer, even with my zero experience concerning women.

I feel like I'll be forced to go to bed with gloomy feelings again tonight. Coming to terms with that, I gulped down the rest of the curry. Yup, it really was delicious, although it was lacking a bit of spice for my tongue.

"I wonder if I'll be able to sleep tonight..."

—Starting from the conclusion, I could sleep just fine. The reason for that was Ayase-san, who came to my room when I was already in my bed.

"This is?"

"My aromatic candle and sleeping mask. I was worried that you couldn't sleep because of what I said earlier."

How considerate, really. Although she showed a dry way of speaking, and never flashed any expression, I could see her sympathy and kindness beneath that mask, and it felt like I learned another layer that Ayase Saki had to offer.

[1 Zhuge Liang](#)

Chapter 4: 10th of June (Wednesday)

The reason I never fully mention my morning way to school in my diary is simply because it is a never-changing scenery, offering nothing out of interest that any reader, basically me, could benefit from. In other words, if I mention my way to school like I do now, then it means that something stimulated my memories to the level of where I consider the incident important enough to write it down.

—As you might be guessing, today such an event had occurred during my way to school.

Generally, my methods on going to school consists of two basic variants. Walking, or going by bike. Walking distance from home to Suisei High isn't exactly long, so I can still take my time on the way, but when I have work right after school, I tend to use the bike. There exist exceptions however, for example when the weather is bad, and I decide to walk.

When there's a typhoon warning, snowy days, rainy days, or just the weather forecast saying that it'll rain, I don't force myself, and go by foot. There was a time when I chose to go by bike despite it having been raining for hours, which led me to become sick the next day. I won't make the same mistake twice. With this determination in mind, I don't rely on my bike, and always keep an umbrella with me on rainy days.

Today's weather forecast stated that the chance of rain was at a confident 60%, and beneath the cloudy sky, I was walking on fast feet, when my view stopped at a single point. In the midst of people waiting at the intersection's red light, glittering blonde hair shot right to my eye—Ayase-san. I could tell from her back even.

She had earphones in, as the cord reached down into her clothes. She might have been listening to music through the smartphone in

her pocket. She had a similar look during P.E. class, so maybe she just likes music? I guess all living beings called gals like listening to music. They're like a different race from me, I had no way of knowing. All I was certain of is that she surely wouldn't be listening to anime or western songs.

For a second, I thought of calling out to her, but I immediately buried that thought. The reason we leave the house at different times is to ensure that no weird rumours about our relationship would spread at school. It was to ensure our normal lives still before the official remarriage of our parents. That's why I decided to abide by our rules, and not call out to her on our way to school, where other students might be able to spot us.

However, the traffic light turned green. The people didn't move, and I stood still as well. Only Ayase-san started to walk forward.

"Ayase-san!"

"Eh?"

The sound of the engines reffing up completely vanished from my head, as I completely forgot about the deal we had. I couldn't allow myself to be slow. If I was one second too late, and something might happen—Even that very thought occurred to me only **after I started acting.**

"...!"

I fiercely pulled on her arm, which led her to stagger backwards. As I wasn't specifically trained in terms of raw strength, I couldn't stand my ground against the weight of a grown woman. As a result, both Ayase-san and I fell to the ground behind-first, right in front of the pedestrian crossing. Before our eyes passed the large cars after having been given the permission to drive thanks to the traffic light. I saw her death happen in front of my eyes. Taking away any joking

out of the equation, if I was one second too late, she would have died.

“.....”

“.....”

Ayase-san and I looked at each other, not uttering a word. It felt like time progressed slower than usual, as sweat came from every pore of my body. As the other people around us showed worried gazes, I stood up, and pulled on Ayase-san's arm, forcefully making her stand.

“Can you come with me for a second?”

“Eh...ah...yeah.”

We slipped past the other people around us, and entered a back alley with no people. What I was about to do would be something embarrassing for Ayase-san. That's why I decided to not progress in front of others, but rather in a secluded space. I looked left, I looked right, checking for no other people to be around, and faced Ayase-san when I was done.

“Just now.” I spoke with a calm, but clear tone.

I'm not her real older brother, not in the position to lecture her like I was someone better than her. That's why, when I heard about the rumours of her paid dating, or saw her skipping class, I didn't warn her. I doubt she would have cared either. I thought that Ayase-san didn't wish for that kind of relationship. However, this incident is different.

“I can't ignore the fact that you were about to die. Please, be more careful.”

“...Sorry.”

In the face of my calm and logical statement, Ayase-san showed a troubled expression, her voice quieter than usual. Watching that reaction, I gasped.

“Ah...Same here, sorry. I don’t want to sound arrogant or anything.”

“N-No, that was clearly my fault, so it’s fine.”

“Why did you just walk onto the street like that? The cars were driving towards us with such loud noises, and nobody around you moved either.”

“I was too focussed on listening...Sorry.”

“Listening? Ah, music? You were doing that before as well, right. I’m not going to tell you to stop, but I feel like it’d be better to hold off of that at least when you walk to school.” After everything I said, I still spoke in a lecturing tone.

Well, she was about to die there, so this much should be allowed.

“Music...Well...Ah.”

There, Ayase-san seemed like she realized something, as she put one hand on her ears. Realizing that something was missing, she panicked and looked down at her body. Through that, I caught on to it as well. One earphone head was still in her ear, but the other dangled down into her pocket. From that earphone head, I heard the music—Not quite. Rather, a foreign woman, speaking English phrases.

“English conversations?”

“...W-What about it?” She covered up her pocket, and glared at me.

For some reason, her face turned beet red.

“I don’t think it’s that big of a deal, but...Are you embarrassed?”

“.....”



I saw her shoulders shaking, only for all expression to vanish from her face. She walked out of the back alley, carefully confirmed her surroundings by looking left and right, and then walked over the pedestrian crossing. She seemed to have calmed down, but her ears were still a bit red.

“So you wanna practice English?”

“...Why are you following me.”

“Because I’m heading to school as well?”

Even without any ulterior motive, I needed to walk with her in order to get to school. That being said, I actually had an ulterior motive. Maybe it’s because she barely avoided death, and my heart was still racing from the fact, my ability to judge calmly utterly gone, but I couldn’t stop myself from wanting to see Ayase-san’s expression. This might just be the so-called suspension bridge effect, but I couldn’t calm down the curiosity burning up inside of me.

Ayase-san on her end didn’t seem like she was blocking me off, as she gave me a brief ‘Sure, do what you want’, and continued walking at a set speed.

“It’s just one part of my studies.”

“Eh, what are you talking about?”

“Weren’t you asking me about what I was listening to? The English conversation teaching materials.” She glared at me again.

I thought she just ignored me before, but apparently she grew interested in talking about it.

“Studying for exams?”

“That as well, but also thinking about the future, I guess?”

“Considering future workin places, huh.”

“Not like you’ll always stay in your home country.”

If I had said that, then Yomiuri-senpai would definitely tease me about it again, but when Ayase-san said it, it sounded oddly believable.

“But, why is there a need to be so embarrassed about it?”

“It’s like I’m a swan trying to look dignified, but doing flutter kicks below the water surface. Of course I’d be embarrassed.”

“Ahh...so that’s also an armament?”

“Yup.”

In order to become a strong girl who could live independently, she armed herself with the outer appearance of a delinquent-looking blonde-haired gal. That’s what she told me before. I guess she was listening to the same material during that P.E. class before. I mean, I don’t like the idea of skipping class, but in terms of grades and preparation for exams, P.E. is practically useless, and since she’s not excited for the ball sports festival either, participating is probably just a waste of time for her.

Judging that, she used that time to study more by using auditory studying materials, all in order to become a perfect and strong human being that excelled in both job and academic knowledge. The more I start to learn about her, the more it feels like a puzzle is being put together, and I gain a more clear overview.

We walked away from the main street, with the rows of buildings at our backs, as our familiar school came into sight. The number of older people or people in business suits around us started to lessen, as the greater percentage wore school uniforms like us, announcing the beginning of the school rush. Although I'm sure that they didn't know each other, with Ayase-san's flashy appearance, a lot of students from this high-level school directed their attention towards us.

"Don't tell anybody, okay.....See you." Ayase-san said, and started walking faster.

Maybe the eyes of the onlookers grew too many for her taste, or taking into consideration how kind she always was, she probably didn't want to trouble me in any way. Whichever it was, we'll be going along just as we promised. At school, we're like strangers.

"Yup, got it." I answered towards Ayase-san's back.

I didn't expect any response. Naturally, in a good way.

With all this action happening early in the morning, I was assaulted by a feeling of exhaustion like I had survived another day. Sadly, this wasn't a convenient story, but a cruel reality. An author would now see that this event was enough for one day, and swiftly jump over to the next day, but alas, I wasn't freed just yet. Following this intense first incident, both Ayase-san's and my feelings were completely disregarded, as we were forced to approach each other once again.

It was time for P.E. class. Today, during the first period, practicing for the ball sports tournament again, at the same tennis court. However, there is one difference from before.

"Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

"Maaya, you're hitting it way too high."

From a nearby court, I heard Narasaka-san's high-pitched scream, together with a cold retort from a female student, only that this female student had now turned into my step-sister that I knew somewhat well. Compared to before, when she was just leaning against the metal fence, listening to music—or rather, those studying materials, Ayase-san was now doing a rally with Narasaka-san.

I don't know what kind of trigger led to her actually playing with her friend, but she was now properly wearing P.E. clothes, showing some skilled plays with the racket.

“—yyy.....mura.”

She had her long blonde hair tied up with a hair tie, and the ponytail that resulted from this swayed left and right following all of her movement. Her bare arms were in plain view, as well as her thighs. Her muscles tightened up with every lively motion, revealing no needless movement, as she returned the ball with a sharp pass.

“—Heeeeyyy...What're...at...samura.”

For an amateur like me, I couldn't even tell apart if she was on a beginner's level, or entered the realm of a professional, but she did gather a lot of attention from the audience around her. Of course, since I was staring at her myself, I wasn't one to talk, but I think you should do something about boys and girls having P.E. together, it's so distracting. I tried to tear my gaze away, but her plays were just so charming that I could only stare—

“Hey, Asamura!”

“Eh? ...Wah!”

Together with my friend's enraged voice, I saw a round shadow approach me in the corner of my eyes, and when I readied my racket

in front of my face, the ball flew against it, repelled off of it, and hit me right on the forehead.

“What are you looking at? It’s not a baseball, but getting hit with that is still pretty dangerous.”

The student who came running towards me—my friend Maru Tomokazu, picked up the ball at my feet, and gently tapped himself on the shoulder with his racket. He’s acting cool again, that bastard.

On a side note, if you were wondering as to why Maru would be here even though he was doing the other sports before, then it’s simply because the soccer participants and practicing place have a promise to use the court, so once out of two times, Maru comes over to play here instead. Of course, he’s limited with what he can play here, but it’s rather than not getting any practice at all, which is why he’s glad to be here.

“Sorry, I was just lost in my thoughts.”

“Entranced by her, right.”

“You’ll be hated if you just blurt out the truth like that.”

“Probably, but that’s what life is all about. I don’t care about those who are bothered by it.”

That’s a catcher for you, he gives off vibes of the strong. Maru glanced over at the girls playing tennis, at a single individual specifically.

“Ayase? I told you to give up, didn’t I...”

“That’s not it.”

It’s true that I was looking at Ayase-san, but she’s still my little sister. I was saying these words in the way that she wasn’t someone I was

interested in, or even had feelings for, but apparently Maru got the wrong idea about that.

“So Narasaka, huh. Not bad, gotta say.”

“Again, that’s not what this is.”

“Don’t worry about it, Young Asamura. I recommend Narasaka. She’s energetic, accepted in the eyes of society, has good grades, and can easily make it into Waseda.¹ As a human person, she’s great value.”

“Aren’t you a bit too well-informed?”

“I get a lot of information about her, although in a different way compared to Ayase. If there was one problematic part about here, then it’d be that there’s way too many are gunning for her that you probably won’t even get a chance at all.”

Was it just my imagination, or did Maru blabber on quite fast when talking about Narasaka-san? I really can’t read his honest feelings, hidden behind those glasses. For a second, I thought he had the hots for her, but I really can’t see that guy of all people trying to woo a girl, so I stopped considering it.

“I really wasn’t looking at her in that way, but even if I did, I really don’t think I could win that war.”

“Haha, probably.”

“Not even with the follow-up of a friend?”

“Narasaka’s good at looking after others. I mean, she’s even playing tennis with that Ayase.”

“Feel like she’d be interested in the diligent and reliable type.”

“Nah, the opposite. She’d be attracted to those good-for-nothing men out there.”

“So you’re saying I have a chance?”

“...Are you being serious right now?” Maru gave me a real dubious gaze.

I thought I was being honest with myself, so I don’t know why he would react that way.

“Asamura. You’re not that no-good of a man you think you are.”

“So I’m even worse than I think?”

“You damned pessimistic bastard...”

Maru let out a loud sigh in the face of my wry smile. What followed that was the phrase you’d hear from a considerate housewife.

“Considering your age, you’re definitely standing out in terms of your cleverness. Got the smarts as well.”

“H-Huh, it sure feels disgusting being praised face-to-face like that.”

“No worries. I was telling you the reason why Narasaka wouldn’t even bother to look in your direction. If anything, I was insulting you.”

“Could you maybe try an approach that is neither praising nor insulting?”

I always appreciate Maru’s straightforward way of saying things, but there are times when a bit of restraint wouldn’t hurt. Not to mention that the chances I have with Narasaka-san don’t even matter to me, since I’m not interested at all.

“.....Mm.”

My eyes wandered over towards the two girls we've been talking about. Ayase-san apparently caught on to my gaze, and stared at me from a distance. That only happened for a moment however, as she quickly averted her face again. How clever, any long-term eye contact would evoke doubts with the other students, so she's keeping it to a minimum. However, there was one person who picked up even this faint moment. Indeed, Narasaka Maaya.

I understood how she'd be good at taking care of others. At the root of that was her ability to read the mood. Even in the corner of her eye, she picked up on Ayase-san's action, traced it, and saw me looking at them. Following that, she gently tilted her head, like she was questioning something. Yeah, I can see how cute she is. Makes sense why Maru spoke so highly of her.

But, I shouldn't keep looking forever. I'm ruining Ayase-san's considerate act here. In a panic, I looked the opposite direction.

"What was that about you not looking at her like that?"

"Seriously, drop it already."

"Hmm, well, you're a man as well, aren't you, Asamura."

"I feel like that way of phrasing things would invite a lot of misunderstandings."

"The complicated carnal desire of a high school boy."

"That choice of words makes it even worse!"

"Never expected you to be filled with so much lust, but don't worry. As long as you keep it inside your head, I won't judge you."

He totally gets it and is just teasing me about it, right.

“Alright, alright. Thanks for solving the misunderstanding, really.” I let out a sigh, and shrugged my shoulders.

Either way, both of the girls caught on to my gaze, so I can’t even argue back.

“You done now?”

“Ah, yeah, let’s practice.”

I somehow managed to get back on track, and used the rest of the time to focus on my practice. Taking the time for them to change into consideration, the girls’ class ended a bit earlier, and the next time I glanced over at the tennis court, all that was left was a single yellow tennis ball.

Together with the chime ringing, as if the sky couldn’t hold it back any longer, small drops of water came soaring down on the court, quickly drenching the ground with a different, brownish color.

“Seriously? Hey, let’s run, Asamura.” Maru called out to me.

“What do you mean ‘seriously’? It said 60% this morning, so it’s not that big of a shock.”

That being said, I didn’t want to end up drenched either, so I only returned that while running for the school building.

“40% is more than enough to bet on! How many 40% batters do you think exist in this world!?”

“I feel like that logic is not applicable here.”

Or, is he talking about the baseball club making bets during the game? I see, it might be the same math, but the sense of values can differ completely depending on your point of view.

“Asamura, hurry up! It’s getting stronger!”

Right before it started pouring for good, we made it inside the school building by a hair's breadth. Maru turned around, glaring up at the sky.

"For crying out loud. Guess it'll be muscle training for today..." He let out a sigh, only to sneeze right after.

The ground around the school building already turned dark brown, as the rain poured down mercilessly. The sound of the rain hitting the windows grew louder and louder.

"It's June alright, huh."

"Even if it's the rainy season, 40% is still 40%. I wanna hit some."

"Now now, just skip out on it today."

I watched Maru complain even though this was something out of his reach. Honestly, I'm so glad I have an umbrella with me, I should be able to make it home without ending up drenched.

—That's what I thought at that time.

Classes came to an end, but of course, the rain didn't stop. It's about what I expected. Of course, I'm not happy about it in the slightest, but whenever you wish for a premonition to be wrong, it almost always happens. The world is riddled with Murphy's Law.

Luckily, I had off work today, so there was no need for me to make my way to Shibuya. If anything, going home straight without a detour was probably the best idea. I was deciding on that during my walk towards the shoe lockers, when I spotted a similar figure. There was a single girl who gazed up at the rainy sky. Since she stood beneath the grey sky, her bright hair color stood out even more.

That's Ayase-san, right...Did she forget her umbrella? No way, it said there was a 60% chance of rain today. Was she also part of the 40%

hit-chance faction? Wait, she left the house before me, so when I was watching the weather forecast, she had just stepped out. I gazed at her from afar, and contemplated on what to do. I looked left, looked right, and confirmed that nobody was present. Seems like everybody decided to leave as quickly as possible. How clever.

I opened my student bag, and took out the folding umbrella. Since it was only that type of umbrella, it easily fit into my student bag, and I could comfortably choose if I wanted to bring it with me or not, as it barely turned into any baggage. Life is a continuous chain of choices—someone said before.

So that I wouldn't surprise her, I approached her with louder footsteps. Around three steps away from her, I stopped. This should be good enough for our distance, right? I don't have the courage to tap her on the shoulder. We're not both girls either, so am I even allowed to touch her body? If she were to scream, my high school life would be over. I cleared my throat, and opened my mouth.

“If you forgot your umbrella, we can share one?”

Her shoulders twitched ever so slightly. When she turned around, her golden hair swayed through the wind. Through a rare ray of sunlight through the cloudy sky, her piercing shone brightly for a moment. Her eyes slowly moved towards my face. It felt like a PC slowly booting up, when an expression appeared on Ayase-san's face.

“Eh?” Her eyes opened wide.

Why're you so shocked?

“Did you forget about me or something?”

“What are you talking about...”

“That's my phrase.” I was really worried for a second.

“So, what is it? Didn’t expect you to call out to me at school again.”

“Ahh, well, you know.”

I could tell she wasn’t angry. If anything, she seemed a bit doubtful. Thanks to the past few days of me dealing with Ayase-san, I started to become more skilled in picking up what her expression, or lack thereof, meant. Of course, I was intent of keeping my promise to act like strangers at school, but that didn’t mean I could just ignore her practically sitting in the rain like that. We’re still brother and sister in the end.

But, well, she’s clever as well, so she must be aware of that.

“So, what is it?”

The reason she still asked me like that is probably because of what happened in the morning, and indicated that she still felt a bit awkward. That’s what I want to think at least.

“Forgot your umbrella?” I asked her once again.

“Ah, yeah...Sure did.”

“40% batter, huh.”

“Eh? What?” Ayase-san tilted her head, but forgot about it and dropped her gaze down onto the umbrella in my hands.

“We gotta go back to the same place, so I figured.”

Ayase-san listened to me, and showed a complicated expression.

“Ahh...No, it’s fine. I’m waiting for a friend anyway. She got some business at the clubroom, so she’ll be right back. I don’t need any—”

“Then...” I cut her off. “Use this. If I run home, I’ll make it back without being drenched.”

—I don't need any umbrella, is probably what she wanted to say, but I just pushed mine onto her, put on my shoes, and jumped out into the rain.

I guess I was meddling too much. Maybe she thinks of me as annoying now. I mean, she did say she was waiting for a friend. Maybe they're going to share an umbrella. But, they might still get wet in the process. A girl's umbrella is pretty small after all.

The face of Ayase-san when I pushed the umbrella on her popped up in the back of my head. She looked shocked, as if she didn't expect that. There I was, thinking that me meddling was worth just for seeing that expression. It was another face of Ayase-san I hadn't seen before.

Maybe this is how we slowly start to become siblings, overlapping our own personal views, matching up with each other. That's what I thought as I ran through the rain.

The strong June downpour quickly drenched my school uniform. A cold liquid different from sweat ran down my back, entering my shoes, making my legs feel heavy, and whenever I took a step on the ground, a damp sensation responded. Beyond the silver-grey curtain, I could finally see my home, letting me sigh in relief.

I opened the lock, walked past the janitor's office, and took the elevator up to the third floor. Walking down the hallway as water dropped from my entire body, I finally saw the familiar door of our apartment. I opened it up, walked inside, and turned on the lights. My surroundings were filled with an orange color, when I finally muttered.

"I'm home...Yeah, right."

Of course, no response came. Instead, painful silence scratched my ears. I mean, I had known this, but neither my old man nor Akiko-san

would normally be home at this time. I thought I was used to that already, and yet here I was, feeling conflicted. I realized that I felt lonely at the fact that no response came.

I put down my bag on the dining table, and immediately moved to take a bath. Turning the faucet, the hot water came out right away. Now, I left it alone for roughly 15 minutes. In the meantime, I put my uniform on a clothes hanger, and stuffed my wet clothes into the washing machine. I added detergent and fabric conditioner, and let the machine do its thing. I heard the sound of water flowing inside, and the machine started to rumble.

“Oh, almost forgot.”

I gotta get some underwear ready, otherwise I’d have to walk back to my room with just a towel around my waist. Normally that small detail wouldn’t be important, but now I need to be mindful of that. I wonder how real siblings feel about that. Do they even care about that? No they probably do. They surely do...Right?

I waited until the bathtub was roughly half full with hot water, and moved inside. I stayed like that for another few minutes, just spacing out, and turned off the faucet once the water reached my shoulders. My skin hurt a bit because the water was still beyond hot, probably because I was running in the cold June rain. An exhausted sigh.

In a daze, I started thinking about Ayase-san’s request. A high-pay part-time job, huh. Since she’s willing to make both breakfast and dinner, going with the give & take principle, I need to find some work for her as well.

—When talking about give & take, it’s my policy to have more on the give side.

Ayase-san's words flashed up in the back of my head. Now that I have heard this, I can't just rely on it. I can sympathize with Ayase-san there. That's exactly why I need to find something quickly.

"Hmmmm..." I put one hand on my forehead, and thought about it some more.

In today's day and age, starting a new business might be a good starting point. Rather than being used, using others is the most profitable—is what I read on a book's binding before. So basically, something like a youtuber or uber eats...! No, that sounds like nonsense. Calm down, me. Not to mention that, being a student, nothing really comes to mind when I think of 'starting a new business' either. I don't know anything about society.

"Know about society, know about the market, huh..."

It's exactly as Maru said. There's way too many things I don't know. I feel like finding a job for her in this state is highly impossible. But that being the case, I can't just ask Ayase-san to continue making food for me, as that would stop things from being fair.

Of course, I can't cook like her. That's why I remembered her wearing the apron. The emotion I embraced when seeing her—She's cute. No, not that. Not exciting either. If anything, it was...Perfect. That's it.

Her long back hair she had tied up with a thread up to her neck, her view focussed on the work in front of her, as her knife went up and down rhythmically. Periodically, she would fix her hair, pulling it back behind her ear. Her fluent gestures repeated over and over, telling a story. In reality, she must have been cooking at home, where I would just go to the convenience store to get a lunch box. And, I figure it wasn't for her sake alone.

Neither my old man or I can cook. That's why I never felt the need to learn. But, the same couldn't be said about Akiko-san. Looking at the food she made on the very first day she lived with us, I got a clear idea that she always made food for her family. I didn't split that into good or bad, I just saw it as her personality. Even if Akiko-san had the personality to not make any food, I wouldn't have cared either way.

However, if, as a result of that personality, Ayase-san had to get store-bought food, I feel like Akiko-san would make food for her no matter what. Since she didn't want to bother her busy mother, Ayase-san learned how to cook herself. That was probably it.

Observation and thought process. Overlapping these, you can understand any person fairly well. Of course, only if you think of it as necessary.

“Armament, huh...”

When I was running away, she had continued to fight.

“I really want to find a well-paid part-time job for her...”

My thoughts eventually returned to that topic, but I was still without any plan of future action. If anything, my head started to feel hot because of all the thinking. I felt dizzy.

That's why I got out of the bath. I washed my wet hair with shampoo, washed my entire body, and left the washing room. The washing machine was currently in drying mode. I just let it rumble for now.

I put one some light room wear, and decided to leave my worries behind for now. I stepped out on the hallway, and a fresh breeze of air from the A/C hit my steaming body. My mood had greatly improved, and I was even humming as I walked into the living room, when I finally realized that I didn't even put on the A/C when I got home.

Two girls were present in the living room, turning towards me. One of them was Ayase-san, and the other...Narasaka-san? Why?

For a second, my mind turned blank. Wati, didn't I just...Oh no, I was just humming, right in front of them! A severe feeling of shame assaulted me, but my defensive operation didn't make it in time, as my entire head burned up. I was probably blushing furiously. Not to mention that it's not just Ayase-san. A super stranger, Narasaka-san, saw me like that. Oh lord, I want to die. Please kill me. My legs froze to the ground, and I couldn't move.

At the same time, Ayase-san's mouth was wide open, letting out a baffled 'Ah'.

"Sorry. Maaya just suddenly said 'I wanna come over to Saki's place to play'. I wanted to consult you beforehand, but I don't have your LINE ID, Asamura-kun."

That's why she couldn't warn me, huh. Ayase-san walked towards me, clapping her hands together as she apologized. What a rare sight. Maybe it's because she was in front of a good friend of hers. Narasaka-san seemed quite surprised as well, but she immediately switched to a smile.

"Ohh, it's the rumoured Onii-san! You really were Asamura-kun from our neighbouring class!" What an energetic voice. "Hey, hey, do you know about me? Did you hear about me from Saki?"

"Eh...Well." What should I even respond with here? "I heard you are on good terms."

For now, I gave a somewhat honest response. For a second after hearing my words, the color of Narasaka-san's eyes changed. I feel as if she said something like 'Ah, good terms, huh' with a very silent voice. I only saw her mouth move though. It looked like a bit before a serious face, like she was troubled? I don't think Ayase-san could

have been able to see that. However, this expression vanished immediately, as her usual smile returned.

“That’s right~! We’re super close! That’s why, let’s get along as well, Asamura-kun!”

“Okay...Let’s get along. So, did you get home dry?”

Looking outside, it was still raining buckets. It wasn’t on the level of a storm, but the raindrops were racing along the window glass.

“We’re totally fine! We both had an umbrella!”

“Is that so.”

“Even though Saki said she forgot hers.”

“I actually had it in my bag, just didn’t see it.”

Seems like she decided on that. I’m glad that it was just a folding umbrella, unable to tell if it belonged to a boy or girl.

“You clumsy girl!”

“Hearing that from you makes me feel dizzy because of a psychogenic reaction.”

“Why are you using so many complicated words! Also do you even use that expression nowadays?”

“Is it weird?”

“It is! But, whatever.” Narasaka-san jumped down on the sofa.

Because of that sudden movement, her skirt was lifted up, to which Ayase-san let out a sigh.

“Maaya. Underwear.”

“Ah!” Narasaka-san frantically fixed her underwear.

Following that, she gave me a stare. I didn't see anything, alright.

"Saki. This house. It's dangerous."

"Why are you talking like a robot now?"

"There's a man!"

"Asamura-kun sure doesn't look like a woman, yeah."

"It's a man! A man I tell you!"

"What about it?"

"It's dangerous! You can't even walk around with just a pair of panties!"

"I wouldn't walk around like that anyway. You do that at home or something?"

"Of course not! I am a lady after all." She said it with a real confident tone. "Still, so you're saying it as well."

"W-What exactly?"

"Referring to me with 'You'." Narasaka-san said with a smile.

"!" Ayase-san covered her mouth, but it was already too late.

She completely let down her guard, and started blushing.

"Huh, hmm, I mean, your father is very happy."

"You're not my Dad, okay!" Ayase-san retorted full force.

I see, so she normally referred to her with the normal 'You', is it.

"It took some time for you to call me like that~"

"Did it?"

“It did~”

“Don’t remember.”

“I properly remember!”

“You can forget about it.”

“Don’t wanna!” She said happily.

I don’t think she was happy because of the way she was addressed, but rather because she saw a glimpse of what’s inside Ayase-san, I’m sure. In this world, there are folks who mistake the phenomena as becoming closer as the same as being comfortable with someone, and start calling others with rude names to appeal how friendly they are. However, that rude way of addressing others is still rude no matter how much you turn it.

Since we call each other Ayase-san and Asamura-kun, we both agreed with that subconsciously. This way, we wouldn’t insult each other, and it allowed for easier casual talk. At the same time, Narasaka-san didn’t seem like the type of person to make that mistake. Or was she? I haven’t talked with her enough to really confirm or deny that.

Just, if Narasaka-san was that type of person, I really doubt Ayase-san would invite her into her home. That’s how I can judge she’s a trustworthy person. Observation and thought process, together they are the strongest.

“More importantly! Saki’s Onii-chan, say!”

“O-Onii-chan?”

Didn’t she just call me ‘Onii-san’ and ‘Asamura-kun’? I feel like taking back my previous statement.

“What are you getting embarrassed for, Onii-chan!”

“First of all, I’m not your older brother, Narasaka-san...”

“Come on, we’re good friends, so just call me Maaya.”

“I won’t! Also, you and me are still strangers, right?”

“Don’t bother with the small details, Onii-chan! You must be happy to have me call you like this, Onii-chan!”

“Not in the slightest.”

I figure that people who really enjoy that do exist, but I didn’t feel anything special. Though, Narasaka-san looks like some small animal, begging for attention. Also, I didn’t expect Narasaka-san to be this pushy. She didn’t seem to have the personality to be this annoying towards a friend’s older brother.

“...Stop...”

I heard a faint voice. Ayase-san had her face cast down, as she muttered.

“Hm? What happened, Saki?”

“...ssing.”

“I can’t hear you~”

“This is embarrassing, so quit it already! Whenever I hear your ‘Onii-chan’, I can feel shivers running down my back! I beg you, just stop it already!”

“Oh my, so you broke down first.”

Ah, I see how it is.

“So basically, you wanted to tease me, and have Ayase-san be embarrassed as well, right?”

“A-Ahahaha...Correct!”

“Don’t ‘Correct!’ me.”

Don’t point at me like that. Or rather, don’t point at people in general.

“Well, I guess I can stop playing with you for now, Onii-chan.”

“Forever, please.”

“That’d be such a waste. Hey, Saki, let’s call him ‘Onii-chan’ together, okay. Come on, one, two—!”

“Never!”

“Even though this would be the best possible event to really get along with him? You’re not using your changes accordingly!”

“Can you not categorize someone’s life into events? ...What are you even doing there?”

Narasaka-san opened up her sports bag beneath the desk, and took out something.

“Let’s play with this!”

“A game console?”

“Narasaka-san, bringing games to school is...”

“Not prohibited. You’re just not allowed to play.”

Isn’t that practically the same? But, when I asked her, she stated that as long as you didn’t play during class, you could carry it on you. Even playing between classes was something that happened often, as long

as you had someone stand on guard. As for the game console itself, it was a popular one that just came out.

“Saki, you said you didn’t have this one, right?”

“I don’t, yep.”

“I wanted to play together. So, can I connect this to the TV?” She said as she pointed at the 50 inch TV screen facing the sofa.

“...Sure.”

“I have some games we can play together. Do you have internet here?” Narasaka-san looked at me.

I figured she was asking me for the wifi password. Since handing over the wifi password was pretty much standard when visiting someone else’s house, I didn’t hesitate much, and gave my consent. Ayase-san handed her the memo with the password on it, and after setting up everything Narasaka-san came back to the sofa, as she looked at me.

“Wanna play with us, Asamura-kun?” She said, and took out the controller.

Let alone two, she had actually prepared three controllers. Is one for me? I guess this is how her personality shines. Just like Maru said, she was really considerate, and caretaking. She probably planned to have me join in from the very start. I glanced over at Ayase-san again, asking her what to do via eye contact.

“Haa...Well, the rain isn’t stopping, so come join us, Asamura-kun.” Ayase-san moved to the corner of the sofa, making some space.

“Ohh, so you want your Onii-chan next to you, I see.”

“Nevermind. Can you make some room over there then?” She moved her waist back to her previous position.

“Just sit between us! Asamura-kun, come on, two flowers in both hands, as they say!”

“I’d prefer the corner...”

“No can do. I’m not letting you off the hook!”

“Why are you acting like our sofa is suddenly yours, Maaya?” Ayase-san let out a sigh towards Narasaka-san, who was clinging to the sofa.

“I get it already, I’ll sit there.”

Seeing no other option, I sat in the middle of the sofa. You need to keep in mind that it was just me and my old man living here before. This sofa isn’t that big. Both of the girls, to my left and right, were practically inches away from rubbing against me. How can I stay calm like this? There’s a limit, alright.

“You smell really nice, Asamura-kun. So this is the scent of the Asamura Household’s shampoo, I see. That must mean, Saki as well...”

“As if we’d use the same shampoo. Common sense, ever heard of it?”

So that was supposed to be common sense, huh. I never thought of using a different shampoo and body soap from my old man’s. Guess I should keep that in mind next time I go shopping.



“I buy my own things. I’m a high school girl after all.” Ayase-san said, as if she saw through my thoughts.

“Then, let’s get this started~!” Narasaka-san said, and operated the controller.

A joyful music played, as I focussed on the screen. Even though this should be a familiar sofa to me, this must be the most uncomfortable experience I had so far. At the same time as I thought that, I remembered Ayase-san’s words. ‘Our sofa’ she said. These words made me a bit happy.

There, the console booted up. It was looking for the newest patch of the game. But, nothing could be found, and the game started.

“Is it...a scary one?” Ayase-san asked, slight tension mixed in her voice.

“It’s not scary at all~ It’s a cute one! Like a puzzle! You control these flappy people, and while holding hands, you make it through the goal.”

Narisaka-san pointed at the screen, specifically at the character that looked like they had no bones. By operating the controller, Narasaka-san’s character was thrown into the air, turned around, and landed on spikes put on the ground. Blood gushed from the body, as the character fell to the depths of the map with a scream.

“See, this is how they die.”

“So it is a horror game.”

“Again, it’s not! You can actually clear this stage. It’s only scary if you fail. Come on, Asamura-kun, hold this.”

“O-Okay.” I was given the controller.

“Listen. We have to work together here. This will be our first shared operation!”

“I don’t get it at all.”

“Forget about that! Let’s go!”

We died a thousand times. This is the first time I played that game, so there’s no way I’d be any good at it. And yet, Narasaka-san was celebrating it whenever my character fell to its death. She even shook my shoulders in some fake attempt to cheer me on, trying to make me fail even more. It’s honestly scary how close she is. She feels more like a little sister than my real step-sister.

“Haaaa, that was fun!”

By the time we were done, the rain had stopped, and Narasaka-san went home, seemingly satisfied.

“Sorry that she’s so annoying.” Ayase-san came back from seeing her off at the entrance of the flat, and said so.

“No, it’s fine.”

“Um...” She seemed hesitant with her words, leaving me a bit nervous. “Could we...add each other on LINE? To make sure something like that unfortunate happening from before doesn’t happen again?”

“A-Ah, yeah, sure.”

I had no objections to that. Indeed, it was all to avoid any possible misfortune. We’re family after all, it’s not weird in the slightest. When I opened up my friend’s list, I saw Ayase-san’s icon. She was

using a stylish tea cup as a picture. Just from that alone, you couldn't tell if it was a boy or a girl, which is very much like her.

"I guess this is an armament as well..."

"Did you say something~?" After we finished exchanging contacts, Ayase-san went to the kitchen, from where she now called out to me.

The sound of the kitchen knife hitting the cutting board stopped momentarily.

"No, it's nothing."

"Okay~ Dinner is gonna be ready soon."

"Got it."

The cutting sound resumed, as the gentle scent of miso soup tickled my nose. I reminisced about everything that happened today. For the fact that the day started with me running into Ayase-san during our way to school, the day continued to be full of events.

I saw Ayase-san during practice, when she made fun of Narasaka-san. Even though I had an umbrella, I ended up drenched from the rain. The moment where these two girls heard my humming was definitely the worst of today, and even after that, when we played the game together, I would have trouble finding something worthwhile there.

And yet, I felt oddly satisfied when I turned off my phone's screen, like I had gathered a lot today.

1 High-ranking university in Tokyo

2' Anta', a short-form of 'Anata', which is the informal and not very polite version of 'You'. The 'You' later is the normal 'Anata' version.

Chapter 5: 11th of June (Thursday)

Morning. Counting in Akiko-san, all four of our family were sitting around the kitchen table. Since Akiko-san came home late yesterday, or rather this morning, she should still be sleeping at this point in time.

“Summer solstice is around the corner, isn’t it~” She said, with a yawn.

She apparently woke up because of the sunlight being too bright. This being the case, I think it might be a good idea to install shading curtains in their bedroom. Since my old man probably never thought about it, I’ll tell him later.

“I’ll go get some more sleep later,” Akiko-san said, and yet kept standing in the kitchen.

At the same time, since my father didn’t have to leave for work early, he could leisurely read the newspaper on his tablet. Hence, we’d be eating breakfast as the four of us.

“Here, Dad, take care of that.”

“Gotcha.”

I gave him a tablecloth to wipe the table. With a grin, he wiped his own part of the table, as well as Akiko-san’s. After everything was sparkling clean, Akiko-san and Ayase-san started lining up today’s breakfast. Possibly because it was both of them cooking, we had a greater variety today. Lastly, they seemed to be preparing rolled omelette, atop a frying pan made for rolled eggs (brought by Akiko-san, as we didn’t have this before in our house), as they rolled around the long eggs using long chopsticks. It looked like a master’s work, as I didn’t even see eggs inside the finished omelette. Even

while sampling the miso soup, Ayase-san stared at Akiko-san's handicraft.

After we all clapped our hands together, thanking each other for the food, we dug in. Of course, we all reached for Akiko-san's rolled omelette first. The second I bit into the piece from my chopsticks, the juicy taste of sauce filled my mouth. This is different from the taste I expected...What is it?

"Delicious. But...wait, it's not...rolled omelette?"

"It's special Japanese-style."

Even though Akiko-san was the one who made them, Ayase-san gave me a response.

"Japanese-style rolled omelette?"

"Rolled omelette normally tastes like egg, right? If you want salt, then you just add that, and those who like it sweet can put some sugar in the mix."

"Sugar?"

"Do you not like sweet food? If so, then I'll leave it out next time."

"Ah, no...I'm fine with whatever. It's just, you can even make sweet rolled omelette, huh."

"Eh..."

"Hm?"

Even if you look at me like I was some alien, I can't give you a different answer...

"...You are attending cooking class, right?"

“Y-Yeah. But, we never made rolled omelette. It was always only fried eggs.”

“Hmmm. But yeah, Japanese-style rolled omelette you make by adding soup stock¹ inside.”

“Soup stock...So like a noodle soup base?”

“We’re doing it with white soy sauce, mirin², and sugar most of the time.”

She looked over towards the kitchen, at a specific white bowl. I see, since we only use salt, soy sauce, and sugar here, she, or rather, Akiko-san probably brought this with her.

“That’s why it tastes more like the soup stock rather than egg. Of course, sometimes it’s a bit more salty. If you want it more sweet, you use mirin. You can also use soy sauce, but then the rolled omelettes don’t keep their yellow color.

“You sure know a lot.”

“Saki-chan can make it as well. Maybe you can make some for Yuuta-kun since he liked the taste?”

“I can’t make it that well...”

“I personally like fried eggs.”

“...I see. I’ll make some if I feel like it.”

Basically, this is what was going on behind Ayase-san’s and my conversation. ‘You don’t need to do more work outside the contract. I don’t mind at all’, is what I said, to which Ayase-san responded with ‘Thanks, I’ll make some if I have the time’. As a result of that, both our own desires and opinions got through perfectly. Much better

than using some secret coded language, as that offered easier misconceptions.

Not realizing this at all however, my old man just kept praising Akiko-san's food until the end of time. Calling it 'most delicious in the entire world' is taking it a bit too far if you ask me. Are you just trying to flirt? With everybody else around? Can you not? You're totally ruining my motivation for the day.

I was searching for another topic in order to change the conversation, when I remembered something.

"Oh right, it's my turn this week for laundry, but can I just take Akiko-san's and Ayase-san's clothes for it?"

"Ah, that's..." Ayase-san started her words, but eventually gulped them down again.

I tilted my head, confused. It's rare for Ayase-san to fumble over her own words like that. Did I say something bad by any chance?

"Well, if you're okay with it, then I'd like to take care of the laundry all-together, Yuuta-kun." Akiko-san threw in.

"Eh? I can't do that."

After we've decided to live together as four, we split up the housework. A lot of things changed there already, but I can't just give her more responsibility...

"But, doing it for four people must be tough, right?" Akiko-san pressed even further.

With how desperate she seemed, even I started to pick up on something. Now that I think about it, having a man take care of a woman's clothes to the point of washing them, isn't that pretty insensitive? But, because I was so busy with trying not to burden her

anymore, I completely disregarded that. That was bad. Before I could take back my idea, Ayase-san was forced to explain it to me.

“Leaving even my underwear to Asamura-kun is a bit...well...A-And also, they need some special treatment compared to normal clothes. Do you know which to put in what laundry net?”

“Which in...what?” I added, but gave her an eye contact to apologize for making her say that.

“If you wash the bras just like that, they’ll change in shape, and the hook can get caught in the other clothes, right? That’s why there’s a special washing net for bras. When you have cute pa—inner underwear, the smaller decorations on it can get caught up with other clothes as well...”

Even in the midst of this awkward atmosphere, Ayase-san carefully explained the problem. Thanks to that, I understood how complicated washing a woman’s clothes really was.

“Also, don’t you split clothes which are more strong and weak in color? You do put clothes with three-dimensional objects on them into a different net, right? Otherwise they’d get peeled off.”

“Three-dimensional objects, you mean like drawings or logos stuck to the fabric?”

“Yup, that.”

“Ahh, that’s why they peeled off after every washing round.”

Hearing my words, Ayase-san held her head. She however quickly raised it again, and announced.

“With this level of knowledge, I cannot leave my clothes to you, Asamura-kun, so I will wash them myself.”

“Ah, yeah...Understood.”

Sensing the awkward atmosphere, Akiko-san spoke up with a gentle smile.

“I take care of Taichi-san’s clothes anyway, so why don’t I wash yours together, Yuuta-kun?”

Listening to these words, I imagined the scenery of her going through my laundry basket. Akiko-san will...wash my underwear? ...No way in hell.

“...I really understand how awkward you must have felt, Ayase-san.”

“Right?” She let out a sigh.

Yeah, I see how it is. Sorry about that.

When I opened the front door, I was immediately greeted with the roaring hammering of the rain hitting the windows and railing. We’ll be going together, is what Ayase-san said, and left the house with me, leaving me confused as to what happened. So far, she always insisted on leaving first. I mean, since she’s my step-sister, my little sister in this context, walking together to school isn’t anything weird...Or is it? I feel like it’d be weird for siblings to be on their way to and from high school. Or am I just thinking too deeply into it?

“There’s something I wanted to talk about.” Inside the elevator, on our way down, Ayase-san suddenly said that.

I see. That made sense. Of course, I had no idea as to what, but it was very much like Ayase-san to be direct.

“I wanted to apologize.”

“...Apologize?”

For what? I thought about our exchanges this morning. Did she do something worth apologizing for? I should be the one, after how insensitive I was...

But, Ayase-san stayed quiet even after we stepped out of the mansion. We walked along the almost empty street, our umbrellas lining up to protect us from the rain. It was the perfect time for us to talk about something more private, at least until we made it near the school.

The line of buildings was emphasized through the rain falling on it, as the both of us had to be careful of the passing cars, so that they didn't drench us because of the rain puddles at the side of the street. After stopping once because of that, Ayase-san slowly started walking again, as her face tightened up a bit.

"Anything discriminative, even subconsciously, is something I can't stand. That's why, I'm sorry." She said with a serious expression.

My face shot sideways, and I could tell that she was seeing this as an important conversation. She took a deep breath, and let it out.

"It's not impossible that you might be wearing lingerie from an expensive brand on you after all."

It is pretty much impossible though.

"Even though I always try to not fall into typical gender roles..."

"Wait, Ayase-san."

"Asamura-kun, I can see how you're taking care of your body. Even yesterday, you put your drenched clothes into the washing machine right away. I haven't seen you put in lip gloss or foundation, but you seem like the type who'd be very conscious about that."

"Calm down, Ayase-san." I walked in front of her.

In order to stop her rampaging thoughts, I needed to halt her movement, so that she could focus only on me. Through that, Ayase-san stopped, and looked up at me from beneath the umbrella.

“...Okay, I’ve calmed down.”

“Ah, sure.”

“Even if you prefer female clothing doesn’t mean you’re wearing it in reality after all.”

No good, she’s not calm at all.

“Just take a deep breath, and think about it. You saw the washing room of my home, right?”

“Hmmm...” Ayase-san dove into her thoughts. “Um...right, well, I saw shaving cream and razor. I didn’t find any cosmetics for women...I think.”

“Right?”

“But, your eyebrows have such a great shape.”

“Huh?”

“You must be taking care of them in some way. I didn’t see a comb, but you might be visiting a beauty salon instead—”

“A barber, yes.”

Do you really think a boy like me could just waltz into a beauty salon? Even if we’re living in the town of the young – Shibuya – that doesn’t mean that everybody is obsessed with cosmetics and brands. I save my money for books instead.

“Eh? Then, are your eyebrows natural?”

“That’s it, yep.”

Ayase-san stared at me.

“I can’t believe it...I’m so jealous...”

“I-Is it really that big of a detail?”

“...How vexing...” With these words, Ayase-san started walking again.

I stayed silent, and walked after her.

“Listen.” I spoke up.

“What?”

“About what you just talked about. You know, gender roles and that stuff.”

“Yeah.”

“Gender roles are that, right Acting out a role depending on the gender.”

Putting it simply, it’s that men act like men, and women act like women. That’s what gender roles refer to. What action is ‘like’ this or that gender is sadly decided by shared hallucinations and imaginations called the public, and we as small individuals cannot influence that logic.

“Correct. But, there’s no set limit that there can be only two genders, don’t you agree?”

“Well, yeah.”

Of course I would know about that. As long as you read books, you learn about all sorts of things, even if you want to or not. And, it often ends up in the news lately. I think with facebook, you can show up to 58 custom genders now. Became a recent topic after all.

On top of that, you can't just simply label as man or woman just going with DNA. Apparently, Ayase-san was thinking the same thing as me.

"The differentiation of humanity happens with the use of chromosomes, right..."

"The X chromosome and the Y chromosome."

"Yup. There's X and Y chromosomes, and by mixing them together, you get a sex. XX means it's a girl, and XY means it's a boy. It's a single chromosome out of the 46 we humans possess, with its X and Y variation. How many percent of the genome over all is that?"

Ayase-san said, regrettably.

"Well, it's clear that it's not that big of a difference."

"Because of that small difference, we're being pressed into a role."

In the midst of the pouring rain, only her voice reached my ears.

"It's the same with self-identification. There are people whose gender given to them through genes is different from their real one, and this has slowly been more in the public's eye."

I knew of the logic Ayase-san was speaking of. But, I was born as a boy, and in my mind, I'm a boy as well, so it's a bit hard for me to fully understand.

"Same goes for love. Men love, women love, both love, and both don't. Romantic feelings aren't normal, not foreseen by nature...You can both agree and disagree with that. It all comes back to the clothes we're decorating ourselves with. According to genes, you're a girl, you see yourself as a girl, and you like men, but when it comes to the clothes of the opposite sex...basically male clothes, it's not rare for women to like them. At the same time, it's not weird if a man were interested in wearing women's lingerie."

“Well, yeah.”

“And yet, in that one moment, I completely disregarded that possibility.” Ayase-san said with a regrettable tone.

Is this what I think it is? The macro point of view might be correct, but you can see differences when diving deeper into micro territory? Just because half of humanity is like this means that this person must be like that as well—is greatly flawed thinking after all.

Even in the event that I was a man wearing female underwear on a daily basis, nothing would have been different, like we’d be sisters washing our underwear. If I had to guess, Ayase-san probably isn’t bothered by the idea of having her underwear washed by her mother. However, that one moment today, when she thought of me washing her underwear, her biologically-induced sense of shame got the better of her.

Normally I’d forget about it with an ‘No problem’, but Ayase-san seems to be bothered about it. She’s always fighting after all. Facing these gender roles the public is constantly pushing onto others, she wants to carefully think everything through one by one. To me, who just let everything happen normally, acting indifferent, that looked awfully dazzling.

“Well, if you’re going to say that, then I should apologize myself. I felt embarrassed when I thought of Akiko-san washing my underwear.”

“It’s not a problem of how other people feel. I can’t forgive myself. That’s why I wanted to apologize.”

“Hmmm...” I thought about it for a second.

I can agree with her thoughts, but this diligent thinking is probably only making her suffer in the process. Is there a more comfortable way of thinking that doesn't deny her ideas, I wonder.

I could see the school gate in the distance. That would mean that the number of students around us would rise in number, and we couldn't continue talking like this.

"...It's like a reflex, right."

"Reflex?"

Sometimes I can't follow what Ayase-san is thinking at all. Then again, that's pretty fun in itself.

"Like, when you act before you think. That one"

"Ahh, that. When you hit your knee, your leg moves, something like that?"

"Exactly."

There are times when people act before their brains can keep up. When something flies towards you, you reflexively close your eyes. When you touch something hot, your hand pulls back before you tell it to.

"Humans have evolved to let their brain handle the thinking. So, why do we have this mechanism inside of us, is what I often ask myself." I looked at Ayase-san.

"That's...If they used the time to think during that emergency, they have less time to actually act, right?"

"Yep. When your life is in danger, your body reacts faster than your brain can keep up. I do agree that we as living beings need this mechanism."

“What was it...Ah, right.” The wise Ayase-san reached a conclusion before I could even fully explain it.

However, I still decided to follow through.

“Basically, it’s like a macro or a short-cut key in an app.” I said, and Ayase-san giggled.

“What an interesting example.”

“It’s easy to understand, so I like to use it. But, sometimes there are cases where even the macro can’t do anything. If you’re not aware of that fundamental logic, you can’t add a new one.”

“Right.”

“‘I just accidentally did that’—has an aspect to it that can’t be helped, I think. I’m sure that there’s something to gain even from a reflexive action.”

“But, prejudice gives birth to discrimination, right?”

“Then just fix your view? You reflected on your own actions. This being the case, I don’t think you need to worry about it any more than that. I feel like you’ll be able to become a person who can learn from these reflexive actions, and improve.” I said with a light tone, and a smile.

Only now did I realize that Ayase-san wasn’t walking next to me anymore. I turned around, to see her feet frozen to the ground three steps behind me.

“Ayase-san?”

Since she had her face cast downwards, I grew a bit worried, and called out to her.

“Asamura-kun, you...” Her voice was about to vanish in the pouring rain. “—**You understand me too well.**”

So...she said? She raised her head, and practically ran past me, not even giving me a glance as she did. She walked through the gate, inside the school, and quickly vanished out of my sight.

“What’s wrong, Asamura?” Until Maru tapped me on the shoulder, I stood still, just gazing at the direction she walked into.

The shoulder he tapped me on was oddly cold, drenched even. Even so, my mind was only filled with Ayase-san’s back that I had seen right before she disappeared.

Even as the final chime rang, the rain hadn’t stopped. Today is Wednesday, a day where I have to work. Hence, I would have to return home once, and then make my way to the bookstore in front of the train station. Doing that in the rain makes it multiple times more annoying. Maybe I should have brought the uniform to school, and head there directly.

I gazed outside the window, admiring the pouring rain. Of course, I don’t necessarily dislike the June rain like this. All the scents during the rain make it feel like summer after all. It’s just, on rainy days, I’d rather not have too much baggage with me. That being the case, the uniform from work I always take home with me, as it’s our policy that you wash it yourself when it’s dirty, I left it at home.

I could see the shoe lockers ahead of me. As I made my way there, my gaze subconsciously moved left and right. When I realized my own actions, I shook my head. No no no, there’s no way she’d be standing here again. She had an umbrella with her today.

“She probably went home already.” I said, and opened up the large umbrella in my hands.

The large black circle filled the area in front of me, blocking off everything. I put it on my shoulder, and stepped outside. Of course, there's the part of it raining ever since early morning, but I also wanted to bring another umbrella with me than yesterday, so that people who happened to see her with that umbrella wouldn't get the wrong idea. Maybe I don't need to be that worried after all, we're siblings in the end.

That being said, not even a week has passed since. Although, I do feel like I'm starting to understand Ayase-san a lot more. But, her words from this morning are still stuck in my head. With the rain pouring on the umbrella, I couldn't focus on my thoughts at all.

Shortly after, I made it back to the flat, and entered my home. Once inside, the obnoxious sounds of the rain swiftly vanished. I put down the umbrella to dry, and sighed. Although my body cooled down quite a bit, I didn't have time to take a bath. I had to make my way to work after all. Hence I headed to my room, passing Ayase-san's room in the process.

I didn't mean to peek inside, but since the door was opened ever so slightly, I could check out the situation inside. Room-drying colored underwear and clothes were defenselessly scattered on the bed. I guess that makes sense during the rain. I'd normally throw everything together and let it dry, but depending on the clothes, they can be damaged through that, so there's people who dry them like this.

That being said, to think I'd actually come to see such scenery in my own home. I can't keep looking at this, right. Since the laundry is drying, it's apparent that Ayase-san has come home, and it'd be hell if she saw me like this.

"Asamura-kun? You're home, huh."

“Eeek!”

A voice spoke up behind me, making me straighten my back in shock. I turned around.

“What’s wrong?”

“N-Nothing at all.”

“Really, alright then.” Ayase-san gave me a dubious stare.

“I-I got my part-time work so I’ll be going now.” I lightly waved my hand, and headed to my own room.

I still felt Ayase-san’s sharp gaze glued to my back, but I didn’t have the guts to turn around. I felt like an underwear thief for some reason, even though I just happened to spot it in the corner of my eye, and she herself said that underwear after the laundry trip is like a handkerchief, so I don’t need to feel any guilt with that...right?

I stuffed the uniform of my part-time work into my bag, stormed out of the house, and during the entire time I headed to my part-time work, not even the sounds of the rain drowned out my heart’s pumping.

I planned to immerse myself in my work. I wanted to remove all my memories from the previous incident. Especially that blue fabric I saw. I put on my uniform, added the name plate, and started working. Today, I was busy with organizing the inventory. We received some new novels that were released the other day, and they need to be put on the shelves, exchanged with those that didn’t sell.

Tomorrow’s Friday, and we get a great delivery of books, so we need to have everything prepared for the new deliveries as well. Basically, I need to keep the shelves open more than usual. Although we get rough predictions of how much a book will sell from the publisher,

there's no way to accurately pin-point the behaviour of the customers themselves. As a result of that, you almost never fully sell out the books that come in. Next time either. There's always books who stay as left-overs.

Ah, just like this one...When I was checking the light novel corner, I picked up a single volume. I was interested in that ever since it came into stock. I don't think it aimed to become a harem-type romcom, but there's a solid 48 girls on the cover, so I guess it turned out as one in the end. I think you got lost in your search for originality, dear author.

Even if the publisher and author assume that it will become a hit, there's still a chance that it won't sell at all. Many customers tend to be very conservative. I put that novel into a different pile, and continued with the sorting.

"You're storing them for yourself again~" When I turned around, Yomiuri-senpai stood there. "They'll just buy them back then, so as long as we can make some earnings, it should be fine—is probably what they thought as they stored them."

As a chain bookstore, it's been a trend like that, and yet I still don't think they'd buy such niche books. I mean, I like them so it's fine.

"Maybe it's just that there's people who buy these new releases every single month~"

"I wonder if someone like that exists."

Yomiuri-senpai looked at me with a grin. Eh, are you talking about me?

"Hehe. More importantly, Junior-kun, aren't you quite passionate about your work?"

“Can you not make it sound like I normally slack off the entire time? I’m working like always.”

“Really?”

“Am I acting weird or something?”

“I just happened to see a young man focus his everything on the work, so I wondered if something might have happened, I guess?”

“You sound like some far-away onlooker.”

“That sounds nice. I want to become like a stranger. That would mean I could forget about all the troubles in this world, *sigh.*”

When you sigh like that, I can’t help but feel more curious, you know that.

“What about you, Senpai? Did something happen?”

“Interested?”

“If there’s something that could get me interested, maybe.”

“Great response~ That’s what I like about you~”

“Again, can you not say things that invite misunderstandings?”

It’s really not fair to smile at me while you say that.

“I’m fine right now. Just knowing that you care is enough salvation~”

“Is that how it works?”

“That’s how it works. That’s also why.”

“Yes?”

“Take care of your cute little sister.”

“Ueh!?”

“If you made her angry, buy her something sweet on the way home.”

“I-I didn’t make her angry though.”

Not yet at least.

“Then, what did you do?”

“Nothing at all.”

“Nutting at all? That’s pretty extreme.”

“Listen here, we had the same dirty joke before, let’s not waste more pages on that...”

“Ahaha. Well, you can’t ignore her feelings, so if you don’t take care of it now, it might explode later.”

“Ugh...”

Since I couldn’t say anything else, I just quickly walked away to focus on my work again, seen off by Yomiuri-senpai’s grin.

“That person is just...Phew...” I faced the shelves again, as I muttered.

Even during such simple work like I’m doing now, you need to properly deal with any customer requests should there be any. As long as you wear the uniform of the bookstore here, customers will always come ask you for assistance. Most of them ask for the location of a book, which sounds simple enough, but they tend to do so without even looking into it themselves first. They don’t give you publisher, nor author, keep the genre vague, and yet ask you to pull it out of your sleeve.

Even if you tell me something like — It's a series where a lot of murders happen, I can't tell With that little information, I can't find the right thing no matter how earnest I might be willing to help. Rather than not being able to find it specifically, I find too many. Don't you have any more...hints?

A cat resolves the case.

A cat does?

I went to ask Yomiuri-senpai for help, and she immediately guided the customer to the right book.

"This one's pretty popular. It's weird for you to not know about it."

"Is that so?"

Mystery is actually outside my type of genre.

"I would have been lost if they said it was a dog though."

"Is there something like that?"

"Of course, something like this."

Wow, hats off to you, mystery author.

You get the gist. Taking care of pre-orders for new releases, extras of the magazine missing, or just children being lost inside the store, there's a lot to do as an employee. Doing my work like that, my shift already ended. I changed my clothes, gave my farewell to Senpai, and left the store behind me.

The rain had finally stopped, and thanks to the clear sky, I could see the moon between the valley of the buildings. Depending on the season, the way you see the moon is different. During the summer, when the sun stands tall, the full moon is staying low, and in the

winter it's the opposite. Since we're in the summer solstice, the full moon doesn't stand that tall, making it look like it got squished between the buildings.

There was still some heat left in the air, but the cool breeze felt great. As I was walking along the street, the phone in my back pocket vibrated. When I took it out, I saw that I received a new LINE message. I didn't even have to swipe to tell that it was from Ayase-san. It was her first message towards me.

'You saw it, right.'

I thought my heart stopped for a second. That was the worst possible one sentence to receive. I could tell what she was talking about even without any more context. I booted up the app, and confirmed the rest of the message. To sum it up, it would be as follows.

She was wondering what I could have done in front of her room, and eventually came to the assumption that I might have been looking at the underwear inside her room. She does think of the underwear as a handkerchief after it went through laundry, but since I was the target of that embarrassment this time, she wants to confirm the meaning of me seeing it—it seems.

Before the approaching interrogation and possible torture, I sent her a short message explaining myself, and hurried home. Seeing only her shoes at the entrance, I sighed in relief at the fact that our parents haven't come home yet. When I raised my head again, I saw Ayase-san looking down at me.

"I'm back, **Ayase-san**."

"Welcome back, **Asamura-kun**."

Even though we were saying the same thing, the intonation was absolutely different from before.

“Don’t just freeze up at the entrance.”

“Ah, yeah...”

I did tell her an excuse, but I wonder if she’ll even believe me...

“Go back to the room first.”

“Eh? Which room?”

“Are you still interested in my room?”

“I will be on stand-by in my own room, thank you very much.”

At a time like this, it’d be best to not argue back, surely. I went to my room, put down my back, and sat down on the floor, waiting for Ayase-san.

“Why are you sitting on the floor like that?”

“Well, I just felt like doing it.”

I couldn’t tell her that I was in preparation to prostrate myself. I don’t know if she’d forgive me then.

“Here.”

I raised my head, only to see a steaming cup in front of me.

“Eh?”

“Hot chocolate. I’ll take it if you don’t want it though.”

“N-No, I’ll...take it...” I said, and accepted the cup.

I do prefer coffee, but I’m happy about something warm now—Wait, is this what I think it is? I looked up at Ayase-san’s face, and as expected, her eyes were fuming with anger.

“So...about what you texted me.”

“Ah, yeah.”

“The door happened to be half open, and your eyes got pulled towards what’s inside. Then, when I called out to you, you ran away, huh.”

“That’s about it.”

“Because it could look like you were about to go inside to steal something?”

“Well...I...guess...”

“Even though they’re your little sister’s?”

“That is true, but...” My words got stuck in my throat.

If this was about my real little sister or mother, then it’d be embarrassing, but that would be about it. However in this case...it couldn’t be helped. This is only the 5th day since we’ve become siblings—The second that excuse came up inside my head, her expression relaxed a bit.

“Sorry, that just now was a bit unfair.”

“Eh.”

“By law, we are siblings, but that doesn’t mean you can’t suddenly act like a real older brother the second the law comes into play—at least not in your head.”

“...Yeah, I get where you’re coming from.”

The two of us are living under the same roof, and at the very least act like siblings, as a family. It is expected from us that we do that, and we cannot betray these expectations, nor do we have any plans of doing so. Because that would trouble my old man and Akiko-san. That being said, we can’t act like siblings who’ve lived together for all

of their 16 years. A human's thought process isn't some code that can be edited, or a program that can be rewritten.

It's a fact that we've been total strangers a week ago. Now, Ayase-san is saying that it's necessary for me to become aware of that. She always tries to be fair after all.

"But, now we're even. Let's just forget about this, alright?"

"Even?"

"I think that being entranced by my underwear was another type of reflexive action. This morning, I reflexively said those words. That's why, I'd say we're even. I think you're the type of person who can learn from these reflexive actions as well, just as you can believe that I can."

"I'm happy to hear that."

"By the way."

Hm?

"You're basically saying that my underwear was alluring enough to completely charm you, right."

"I never said that, no."

"Then, it's not alluring at all...is it. Huh."

"...Are you teasing me by any chance?"

"Now, who knows. But, I can't exactly leave this restless atmosphere going, right?"

"I...guess."

"You...definitely hold a certain desire towards possessing some of my underwear, right?"

“Urk...Well, honestly speaking, it’d be a lie if I said I didn’t have any carnal desires like that...But, I’m not going to do anything just because of that, okay?

“Hmm...So you actually have desires.”

“It’d be pretty troublesome if I didn’t. But, having them, and acting according to them is different.” I said with as serious of an expression as I could.

“Pfft. That’s right, I’m sorry for teasing you. Let’s just leave it at that for now.”

“Thank you very much...”

I gave her my honest thanks, and figured out just what she was trying to say. You can’t undo an emotion you once had. Even if that was just a misunderstanding. Her anger at me having seen her underwear doesn’t vanish. Instead of throwing this emotion at me, she instead explained as to why she was angry, and remained calm. What amazing anger control that is. Adjusting, huh...I’m still far from reaching her level.

“But, I’m glad.”

“Hm?”

“I didn’t want you to think that the design was weird. I might have needed to throw it away then.”

“...I feel like I’m starting to understand what kind of personality you have, Ayase-san.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, a bit.”

Listening to my words, Ayase-san showed a faint smile.

1 Made from fish and kelp, very traditionally Japanese

2 Type of sweet rice wine

Chapter 6: 12th of June (Friday)

Starting early in the morning, Ayase-san was avoiding me. I think she was at least, although I didn't understand as to why. Before I even got to the dining table, Ayase-san had already left, without saying a single thing to me. I don't get it. Last night, the last thing I saw from her was that smile. That moment, I felt like we had been close like never before. The more I thought about it, the less it made any sense.

If it was still raining, we could go to school together, which would allow me to ask her for the reason for this, but naturally, the weather betrayed me, as it was clear outside. Pedaling on my bike, I looked up at the sky, on this 12th day of June. It was almost worryingly blue. Indeed, fine weather during the rainy season, can you believe it.

While pedaling I tried to distract myself with the origin of this very 'fine weather during the rainy season' expression.¹ If I didn't do so, my head would be full of Ayase-san instead. I didn't even try to slow down on my way to school. I could still see traces of rain on the rows of trees I rode past. The drops of water on the tree branches fell down in a well-timed manner, and hit me in the face. Thanks to that cold sensation, my tired face was slowly waking up as well.

Maybe she's still angry because of the underwear incident yesterday. Thinking about the possibilities of that, I figured that her personality would lead her to directly tell me if she was angry still. Sadly, that made things even more confusing. Pondering about this, I made it to school already. I looked up at the sky again, but couldn't find a single cloud.

If I remember correctly, we had P.E. during the second period...Of course, it's practice for the ball sports festival again. As before, we'd

meet at the same location as before, the tennis court. Meaning, I would be running into Ayase-san again.

During the first period, I had modern Japanese, but as you might expect, I couldn't focus in the slightest, and I don't even remember what we even talked about. Eventually, the second period came around, and once everyone was gathered, I directed my attention over at the girls.

“Seryaaaaaaaaaa!”

As always, Narasaka-san was in top form. So was the ball, as it flew right over onto the neighbouring court.

“Maayaaaaa!”

“Ohhh, homerun!”

“Idiot!”

I don't remember there being a homerun technique in tennis. But disregarding that, I couldn't find Ayase-san in the group of practicing girls. Instead, she was once again leaning against the metal fence in the corner of the tennis court, earphones equipped. The only difference from before is that she wasn't looking into the void, but rather dwelling in her thoughts about something. With her face down, she had her eyes closed.

Come on, now I'm even more curious. I thought of calling out to her at the end of the class, but Narasaka-san wanted something from me first.

“Hey, Onii-chan.”

Are you calling me that at school as well? I felt the urge to throw in that retort, so random was that phrase of hers.

“Did something happen with Saki?”

For a second, I lost any possible words to return. Basically, from her point of view, it was obvious that Ayase-san acted differently from usual.

“No, I don’t know anything.”

“I see.” While crossing her arms, she walked towards the main building.

The girls waiting for her gave me a few glances, but nothing like you might be imagining is going on, okay?

“Hey, Asamura.”

“Hm? Ah, Maru.”

Turning around, there stood my friend Maru Tomokazu.

“What’s with that lifeless response?”

“I’m just exhausted from practice.”

“You’re not even out of breath, and there’s not a single dot of dirt on your clothes either.”

“You sure look closely, huh.”

Oh yeah, it seemed like Maru was properly doing his softball practice today. I could see dirt and sweat all over his body.

“What’re you staring at me for? You suddenly longing for my body or something?”

“I just thought that getting that through the laundry must be a pain.”

“Hm, really now. You know, if you paid me 10k, I wouldn’t be that hesitant to think about it.”

Pay...Eh, wait.

“W-Where did that come from!?”

“I’d do your exhausting day duty for you. From a leak in the ceiling to making a small pupp’s hut, I think that’s an affordable price, right?”

“Ah, that’s what you meant.”

“Asamura, what were you thinking?”

Can you really say that now?

“I hate to tell you, but since we live on the third floor of a flat, there’s no leak to be fixed, nor do I have any plans of adopting a puppy.”

“I see, what a shame. I thought it’d be some early cash.”

“Isn’t this completely different from what you said before?”

Weren’t you the one who told me the importance of knowing society, and knowing the market in order to earn money?

“Calm down aye, Asamura. I said ‘Early’ cash, you know. Birthday’s close after all.”

“Whose?”

Ah, he suddenly grew quiet.

“So basically, you’re trying to get together some money for someone’s birthday present?”

“If we don’t hurry, we won’t make it in time for the next class.” He turned his back towards me, and walked on ahead.

I see, so Maru has someone he wants to spend money on. Maru of all people, imagine that.

In the end, no chance came for me to talk to Ayase-san at school. Of course, I attempted to contact her through LINE, but...

'You seem down, did something happen?'

'Nothing at all'

She didn't even add a sticker (although Ayase-san didn't seem like the person to add some in the first place), and just gave me that blank response. After the final period of the day ended, I headed to my part-time work again. I was teased as always by Yomiuri-senpai, but nothing of importance happened, and I made my way back home again.

I opened the door of the front entrance. The gentle scent of miso soup drifted towards me from the kitchen, tickling my nose. So Ayase-san was home.

"I'm back." I let out a voice, and walked down the hallway.

"Welcome back...Dinner is ready."

I feel like the warmth in her voice is different...Maybe not? Maybe I'm thinking too deeply into it.

"Sashimi today?"

I looked at the table, spotting a blue plate with white garnish on it, as well as the red inner body of a fish, presumably victorfish.

"Yup. Finely chopped."

"Fresh is the best after all."

Seems like we'll be having classical Japanese dinner tonight. The miso soup had half-moon cut potatoes with seaweed in them. I'm sure that'll warm up my body. It was perfect for this rainy season. The small bowl had lots of cucumber as well. While Ayase-san lined

up the food on the dining table, I wiped the rest of the table, and prepared some warm tea.

“Thanks for the food!”

I started with the miso soup. I gently stirred up the surface with my chopsticks, and put the corner of the bowl to my mouth. As my nose picked up the scent of it, my lips tasted it.

“Yeah, your miso soup really is delicious, Ayase-san.”

“...I see.”

“How do I say it, I can taste the soup stock. That really makes it.”

“Of course, it’s miso soup after all.” She said with a slightly bothered tone.

“Not exactly.”

It’s not like I was never cooking myself. But, I could never create such delicious miso soup before. I couldn’t even hope to rival this one. I only found out the reason a bit after I stopped trying to cook, when I happened to read a book. After mixing the miso, you boil it. That’s how you create the scent. This scent mainly comes from fermented alcohol. Of course that’d jump when boiling. It’s just simple physics. If I had known about this beforehand, I might have kept my interest in cooking as well...

“Now then, let’s move on to the main dish tonight.”

“What an exaggeration.”

“It’s not, it looks really delicious.”

I put a bit of ginger on the victorfish, and carried a piece between my chopsticks, adding some soy sauce to it. This one piece I then stuffed in my mouth, and carefully chewed on it. The meat had a bit of

elasticity, and the more I chewed, the more the taste widened up on my tongue.

“Delicious.”

Next, I added some rice to the mix.

“This is great. Ayase-san, you’re such a great cook.”

“Listen, all I did was cut it...But, thanks. I bought it during a sale, so...”

“Ohh. So you went out of your way to buy it from a sale.”

“I want to save as much as possible.”

Oh yeah, if I remember correctly, since Ayase-san was made responsible for the cooking, she receives a certain amount of money from my old man. If she aims for sales, she can keep the money to herself, I guess.

There, I remembered something I wanted to ask before. However, thinking back on it, that apparently only acted as a trigger for what was to come later.

“Why are you this keen on saving money?”

Hearing my question, Ayase-san’s chopsticks stopped entirely. They wavered above the fish, going back and forth. Of course, I wasn’t going to tell her that this was bad manners, as she clearly wasn’t confused about what to get, but rather pondering what to say.

“I think I told you about this before, but in order to break free from random strangers’ eyes and expectations, I need the strength to live on my own.”

“So money is that strength?”

“Am I wrong?”

“No...I don’t think you are.”

It’s a fact that, without money, you can’t live your life freely. That being said, money isn’t everything. Even I could tell that this was just myopic.

“And yet, I just can’t earn enough money.” She let out a sigh.

She leaned forward with her head, which led her long hair to fall to the front of her uniform, on top of the apron. She put down her chopsticks, and fixed her hair.

“I’m looking for a high-paying part-time job, but...” I grumbled.

“It’s okay, I didn’t expect you to find one right away,” is what she said, but in the end, I’m the only one benefitting from this, and I can’t stand it.

“If there’s something you want me to help out more, just let me know. Or, you can cut corners with the cooking.”

“I am.”

“30 minutes in the morning, and one entier hour at night, you mean?” In the face of my remark, Ayase-san let out a hollow laugh.

“So you realized.”

“Everybody would eventually.”

Whenever Ayase-san is making food, she’s constantly glancing over at the clock. I doubt that’s only related to the cooking. There’s also the fact that she wanted information on a highly-paid but short part-time job solely for the purpose of having more time to study.

“Anyway, even if I know the recipe, I don’t plan on using any more time than necessary. That’s plenty of cutting corners.” She forcefully created an expression that probably meant to say ‘I’m a bad person’.

“Not really.”

However, when I said those words, Ayase-san’s facial expression changed to something similar to surprise.

“Why?”

“I mean, by constantly repeating something, you get better at it, right? That means that you can do more work at the same time as before, and the quality of what you’re doing can go up as well.”

“...What about it?”

“Even if you only offer that same one hour, you can create something even better—In this case, you have the chance to make the food even more delicious. In other words, the added value grows. And, since I have an exchange with you, I need to raise my added value. Otherwise, it’d be imbalanced.”

“That’s...”

“The case, yes. Right now, I don’t have anything to give you, Ayase-san. Sooner or later, I won’t be able to keep up.”

“If you’re going to say that, then aren’t all families in this world the same? Day after day, the values grow like that.”

“Because they are the same, yes.”

It’s not just cooking. There’s laundry, cleaning, sewing. All these ‘duties’ can make you even more skilled the more you do them. That’s why your salary goes up the longer you work at a company. That continues until your work becomes more sloppy and slower as resulted by you aging. The labours in a family are exactly the same.

“My Mom always made food for me all these years, and yet she didn’t even get 1 yen back.”

“These values don’t show until you get to the exchange. Until you outsource the values of the family’s hard work, you don’t realize. Only when you go for the payout do you understand just how much value it actually has. That’s the troublesome idea behind it.”

Because I was only reading books related to ‘Labour’ or ‘Earning money’, these complicated thoughts and equations kept gushing out of my mouth. If I’m not careful, I might just start assuming that I’ve become more smart, even though this is just borrowed knowledge.

“You and me, Ayase-san, we made an exchange on cooking and searching for high-pay part-time jobs, right? Now I realized how much the value of your cooking has gone up, which means that I need to find a way to raise my value as well.”

Ayase-san stayed quiet, seemingly thinking about something. I couldn’t hold back anymore, so I just blurted it out. In my mind, I had a solution, but it wasn’t exactly a likable one.

“...The food will get cold, so let’s eat. I already let in some hot water for the bath.”

“O-Okay.”

Before I could remark on that however, I was urged to move my chopsticks instead. The entire time we were eating, Ayase-san seemed like she was lost in thought, not even looking at me. I figure she came up with that unfavorable solution.

I was allowed to take a bath first, and after finishing mine, I let in some fresh hot water. I changed my clothes, and headed back to my room. Out of a whim, I decided to lay down on my bed, and read a book. Of course, I have some homework left to do for school, but there’s no reason to panic, as I still have Saturday and Sunday left. Right now, I rather wanted to focus on the light novel with the countless beautiful girls on the cover.

...I thought it was just some ephemeral work, but this is pretty interesting...Although, is there really a need for the protagonist to go out with all of his classmates...And...

“Ouch!”

Lost in my thoughts, I happened to drop the book, which fell directly on my face. In response, I let out a shocked voice. That surprised me.

“Well...Maybe I should just head to bed then...”

Apparently, my body was exhausted. I looked over at the clock, and it wasn't that late yet. Normally my old man would come back at this time, but there were no signs of anybody returning. Since it's Friday today, he might be off drinking something with colleagues. I just hope he's back with the last train.

Click, the lights in my room suddenly turned off. With another similar sound, the lights turned into night mode. I could see the light entering my room through the small gap of the door, as it opened momentarily. And then, silence reigned. Someone came into my room. Well, it has to be Ayase-san. I doubt a thief would randomly choose this apartment.

But, what does she want in my room? Turning the lights off even. Maybe she mistook the room? I was about to push up my body to say ‘This is my room, you know?’, but I swallowed these words right away.

“Asamura-kun, you're awake, right?”

Ayase-san approached me with these words, as the sweet scent from body soap tickled my nose. However, that wasn't the reason for my shock. I've experienced this several times after all. She would take the bath last, and sleep last. That is what she decided on, but that doesn't mean she wouldn't come talk to me. There were also times

when I went for some cup of water at midnight, and ran into her, wearing her nightwear.

Of course, that was pretty stimulating already for a high school boy like me, but the Ayase-san approaching me wasn't like that. I could hear the rustling of clothes, followed by them dropping to the ground. She was taking off her clothes. Since the lights were turned off, I could barely see anything. Only the lines of Ayase-san's body were emphasized.

The more she approached me, the better I could see her well-endowed chest, her slender waist, her long and slim arms reaching down from her bare shoulders. There was no more nightwear to hide her beautiful body. For those who haven't caught on yet, Ayase-san was only wearing her underwear. My eyes were drawn to her waist, which moved left and right at every step she took.

"Hey, Asamura-kun, there's something I'd like to talk about."

One step away from the bed, Ayase-san stopped.

"Something to talk about..." I let out a dumbfounded voice in the face of this situation.

Ayase-san took the final step, and put her hands down next to my waist. She looked at my face, and met her gaze with mine.

"Won't you...buy my body?" She told me at a distance close enough for me to feel her breath.

Thanks to the faint ceiling lights, I could see Ayase-san's face.

"...Huh?"

For a second, my head turned blank. What the hell?



“Hey, what do you say?”

“...W-What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I said. I’m asking if you won’t buy my body. Basically, in exchange for money.”

“.....”

“Because of what happened before, I understood that my body is good enough to get you excited, and...well...We don’t need to go all the way. You can just use it however you want.”

“Hey hey hey hey...”

“Thinking about it rationally, this is what I arrived at.”

You call this rational?

“Hear me out.”

“Ah, okay...”

My reason and rationality almost went down the slope to hell, but I barely managed to keep them with me.

“We’re in high school, right.”

“...Yeah.”

“That’s why, you know. There’s awkward deeds that you can’t do on your own, don’t you agree?”

Awkward deeds that you can’t do on your own? Is she talking about the kind of action that...you know, requires the genitalia of both man and woman? Well, I guess so...No, I can’t deny it. I’m not a saint or anything, I’m a healthy high school boy, so hiding it was practically

meaningless, but I still didn't expect to talk about that with a girl my age.

"Now that we live under the same roof, there's chances that we might run into each other, getting caught in the act."

"I don't want to think about it, but it is possible."

"That's where I thought. If it was troublesome to be caught in the act, wouldn't there be more merit for us to take care of each other's needs at set intervals, with permission from both sides?"

"How did you even arrive at that thought..."

"When you evaluated my cooking so highly, Asamura-kun..."

Met with this sudden change of topic, I was bewildered. Why were we suddenly talking about dinner?

"...I thought about it. If I were to ask for money in return for my cooking, I could earn money with not much work."

"That...makes sense."

I thought about that as well. I guess we both arrived at this rather unfavorable way to settle with things.

"Although it wouldn't pay that much, it could reduce my costs to the bare minimum."

"Sounds like a good idea."

And yet, Ayase-san shook her head.

"I didn't want to earn money through that. I would get too much from that, greatly imbalancing the give & take. But, I do want money. That's why I came up with something worthwhile that I could supply, and get money back."

“So basically, while searching for high-pay work, you decided to step into **night work** with a member of your family?”

She nodded. Her thoughts were racing in a dangerous situation.

“If we really did it, then I’m sure it’d be a bit awkward afterwards, but rather than doing it with someone I don’t know, I judged that it’d be much more comfortable to go all the way with someone as kind as you, Asamura-kun.”

So she even thought of doing it with strangers.

“Doing it like this, I wouldn’t feel bad for asking for too much money.”

I heard the sound of something popping inside my head. I raised my upper body, stretching out my hand. As a result, her shoulders twitched in shock. Just seeing that reaction, a strong sense of guilt filled my chest, as my mouth opened slowly.

“That’s the type of woman I hate the most, Ayase-san.”

“Eh...”

I hate slander and bad-mouthing. No matter the reason, I don’t want to hurt others through my words, and it hurts me just thinking about me saying this. However, I have to do it right now. I have to stop Ayase-san’s rampage this very moment.

The face of my old man and Akiko-san flashed up inside of my head. After everything he went through, being betrayed by his former wife, and being depressed about it, can I really just turn away from that? No. I felt relieved when I saw his blissful face, and I want to support him right now.

As for Akiko-san, I don’t know just what she went through, but there was probably some problem with her former husband, which is why

they got divorced. However, right now, she was living happily it seemed. If I went along with Ayase-san's idea, her request, and what came after that, it would yet again bring misfortune to our parents. I can't accept that.

We said we wouldn't expect anything from each other. We confirmed this stance the first time we met, and somewhat kept our sense of distance since then. In a way, I expected Ayase-san to not do something like this, which led to this situation in the first place, meaning that I broke the promise. However, speaking of the first breach, it was Ayase-san.

"Use your looks as an armament, wasn't that what you said?"

I don't know why Ayase-san was hell-bent on not being made light of as a woman, so focussed on being independent, but what she was doing right now was the exact opposite of that. She was the exact type of woman that would be belittled. I don't doubt her thoughts that this might lead to proper demand and supply. But...

That reminds me, paid dating and night work are like ephemeral actions, and you assume the people to do it are only in it for the quick money, but there's even clever girls who end up doing it, or so I've heard. It wouldn't be weird for them to trace the exact same thinking that Ayase-san has now.

However, this was too simple. And, it contradicts with her own beliefs. Those who keep their contradictions and bother other people with it...I can't come to like them. If she was some stranger, then I would be able to ignore that, but as family, as an older brother, I can't just leave her alone. I put the towel I had on me around her shoulders, ensuring that she wouldn't be cold.

“That’s not it. If you don’t find a method to prove yourself superior, unrelated to you being a man or woman, then there’s no meaning to it, right.”

“B-But, it would be a viable option even if I was a man. That’s why, armaments and whatever don’t matter.”

So she’d be doing the same thing if she was my younger brother? For a second, I imagined Ayase-san with a boy’s stature, but that invited plenty of problems by itself, so I quickly banished that thought from my head.

“I won’t take any sophism.”

“I-I’m sorry.”

Maybe it’s because I warned her with a cold tone, but Ayase-san showed a dejected reaction. From there, I spotted anxiety, and regret. Even though I’ve realized that she was the exact opposite of the person the rumours made her out to be, she almost acted according to them. Now I understand that she was ready to do everything for her desire.

I’m so glad...So glad that she tried it with me first.

“As long as you understand, everything’s okay. Also, I don’t mind...well, paying for your cooking. There’s just one problem.”

That is the reason why I thought of it as an unfavorable solution.

“Problem...?” Ayase-san gently tilted her head.

“If we keep up a monetary exchange inside our family, then the income of our family’s economy won’t rise.”

“...Meaning?”

“Our parents are really busy, so they can’t go shopping all the time. Except for expensive furniture and electronic equipment, we need to save money for the smaller things, on a monthly scale.”

“Right...”

“And, I’m working part-time myself. I can definitely pay you for the food. But, think about it. If I have to stop working because I get sick, or something along those lines, and I don’t get my monthly pay anymore, then you won’t be getting any more money either. However, can you really stop cooking from that day onward?” I continued. “As long as your source of income comes from within the family, it’s uncertain if you can really receive proper price for your hard labour.”

“That’s right...I never thought about that.”

“Of course, being paid from the family itself might have its merits. You definitely won’t get deceived in the process. When you get your money from the outside, you constantly have to be careful so that you don’t get paid less for what you deserve. But, even if it’s not that well-paid, I still think it’s better to get an objective value from an outsider, and ask for pay in that context.”

Ayase-san stayed silent, probably thinking about my words.

“That’s all the advice you get from me. Of course, I’ll help you look for something, but no more of this.”

“Okay...I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine.” I accepted Ayase-san’s apology.

There’s no reason to lecture her any further now that she had seen the error of her own ways.

“But, there’s something that we need to discuss.”

“Eh?”

“Honestly speaking, I didn’t think you were the type of person to do this, Ayase-san.”

“That’s...the same for me.”

“I think this entire incident happened because I never really understood you, Ayase-san. That’s why I want to know more about you.”

“...Right. I don’t like talking about the past, but I already troubled you like this...” Ayase-san closed her eyes and thought about it.

Letting out a sigh, she spoke of her past memories. This happened when she was a small child still.

Ayase-san’s father seemed to have been an excellent entrepreneur. However, because he was betrayed by his friends, he lost the company, suffered from an inferiority complex, and started keeping his distance from his wife and daughter.

“Inferiority complex?”

“Thinking back on it, my father might have been jealous. Mom always said that, as a high school graduate, she could only rely on this nightlife business, but hearing the opinions from her colleagues, she was pretty popular.”

“Akiko-san seems like she’s a great talker. She’s cheerful after all.”

“Yeah...I think my father was always a kind person. But, after he lost his company, he changed.”

At times he stayed away from this family, or spent time with a woman elsewhere. He basically stopped having any affection towards Ayase-san and Akiko-san. He stopped putting money into his

family, forcing Akiko-san to pay for all the money Ayase-san needed, which led to her grudge against her father. There was also the fact that, since his wife worked at the nightlife business, he was always dubious that she might have another man, even ridiculing her for that.

“Even so, that doesn’t just gratify the fact that he made Mom go through so much.”

That explains why she hates the idea of being belittled as a woman...

“I see how it is.”

Ayase-san looked up at me. “Asamura-kun?”

“Ah, well, I was just thinking how similar we were.”

“It was the same with your family as well, Asamura-kun?”

“Yeah, for a short period of time, my old man ended up with gynophobia for a while. I’m shocked to see him get married again. Maybe it’s thanks to Akiko-san.”

“Gynophobia? He?”

“Yep.”

“I see...”

So was that the same for you as well? — I heard her faint mutter, but I decided to ignore it.

“Ahh, that’s why he kept that odd distance to Mom...” She muttered.

Apparently she realized that I was keeping a bit of distance to Akiko-san.

“We really are similar.”

“Right.”

“Even the bad parts added together.”

I showed a wry smile, unable to deny her words.

“Well, we still have to get through this, including everything. As an older brother and little sister.”

“...As an older brother and little sister?”

“Yeah.”

Ayase-san let out a snicker, and removed the towel on her shoulders.

“Please treat me well from now on, Asamura-kun.”

“Likewise. Ah, I wouldn’t mind if you called me ‘Nii-san’ on the side...”

“Not happening.”

“Ehhh...”

What a shame. But, there’s no need to rush things. We’ll be siblings for a long time now.

“I don’t plan on going any further than this, Asamura-kun.” Ayase-san put the towel on the bed, and approached me with a smile. “Not. Happening.”

From her reddened lips, these two words hit my face like a warm breath. I get it already, sheesh. After all, my shared days with this beautiful yet oddly dangerous step-sister have just begun.

1 There's a small paragraph of him explaining the Japanese origin of that saying. I would need to add 5 different footnotes for this to even explain that, so just let me rewrite it here a bit

Chapter 7: 13th of June (Saturday)

The dining table was covered with a white cloth. The morning sunlight shining in front the windows drew circles beneath the plates. On top of the plates were full-moon shaped fried eggs, offering shares for my old man, Ayase-san, and...

“Careful with your hand.”

Hearing Ayase-san’s words, I removed the hand who was busy wiping the table.

“This is your share, Asamura-kun.” She said, and put down a plate in front of me.

This blue plate had rolled omelettes on it. When I poked at one with my chopsticks, the omelette rolled to the side, making it easier to eat.

“Is this...Japanese-style rolled omelette?”

“You seemed like you enjoyed it. Since it’s Saturday, I could take my time as well. Don’t expect anything though.” Ayase-san, seeming slightly flustered.

“I’m happy, thanks.”

“Saki-chan’s homemade food. How nice. Hey, Yuuta~ Give me some, okay~” My old man said, but Ayase-san interrupted him.

“It’s not that good for you to be jealous about it, really.”

“No no no, it looks great, so come on, Yuuta~”

Since he was looking at his step-daughter’s cooking so eagerly, I pushed some of my omelettes on his plate. Isn’t the omelette in front of him the exact same food?

“Yawn...Oh, everyone’s so fast.”

Picking up a sleepy voice I hadn’t heard before, I turned around. Akiko-san wore a gown above her nightwear, rubbing her sleepy eyes. She apparently hadn’t gotten around to making her hair yet, as some hair strands were still curled. This gave Akiko-san a more relaxed feeling to her, and I would even go so far as to call it lenient.

“What time is...it.” She turned towards the clock inside the dining room, only for her eyes to shoot open. “Eh, no way...”

Since it was Saturday today, we had breakfast later than usual. My old man didn’t have to leave early for work, and there was no school for Ayase-san and me. Of course, this was also in consideration towards Akiko-san, who would always come home late in the morning, severely lacking some sleep.

“You can sleep some more, Akiko-san. You got home late yesterday, right?”

“Taichi-kun...Ah, Saki-chan, I’m sorry to let you do it all on your own.”

“It’s fine. More importantly, Mom...your looks right now, it’s a bit too stimulating for Asamura-kun, and consider step-father’s feelings.”

“Eh...” Her gaze dropped down to her own appearance, only for her to let out a shriek.

Immediately after, she ran off to the bedroom again.

“A-Akiko-san! Wait a second, I need to talk about something!” My old man chased after her.

“For crying out loud, that old man.”

“Huh. Seems like she finally dropped that mask.”

“Really?”

“Then again, she deserves praise for keeping it up that long.”

Can I really just agree with a nonchalant ‘Right’?

“Just so that she doesn’t lose her honor right here, she only gets this careless right after getting up.”

I see. Well, I’m not the best at getting up in the morning .

“Maybe it’s thanks to the shading curtains.”

“Probably.”

Yesterday, we finally got the shading curtains from the delivery. They’re not only good against the sunlight shining in, but they also block off outside sounds, it seems, and they had insulation capabilities on top of that. That makes the summer cool and the winter warm. Thanks to that, Akiko-san should be able to get some more sleep. My old man was at the forefront of getting them, saying ‘If it protects Akiko-san’s health, then nothing is too expensive’.

Ker-chunk, two slices of toast shot out of the oven toaster, as Ayase-san turned towards it, and put them on a plate.

“Tell me if you want more.”

“No, this is more than enough.” I declined.

Seems like we’ll be having toast instead of rice today. Ayase-san put two more slices inside, which should be perfectly done by the time my old man comes back.

“Having rolled omelette and toast is a weird combination.”

“It’s not weird at all, Ayase-san.”

Add some more salad on a deep plate and consommé soup, and you have the perfect breakfast. Although it’s a shame that there’s no

miso soup. But, I guess she put that into the Japanese-style rolled omelette.

“Ohh, delicious.”

“Exaggerating again.”

“I really ain’t. Akiko-san’s was really delicious, but yours isn’t losing at all.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I guess I’ll make it again then.”

“Whenever you have the time.”

“Whenever I have the time.”

Our words practically overlapped, leaving us both in an awkward silence. We continued our breakfast for a while. That old man sure is late, we’ll be done by the time he’s back.

“I guess it’s already been one week.”

“Hm?”

“You said it before, right? Since you came on Sunday, tomorrow will be the first full week you spent with us here.”

“So what? Celebrate because of one week?”

“Honestly...doesn’t sound half bad.”

“Seriously?”

Since Ayase-san looked at me with a ‘What are you talking about?’ expression, I burst out laughing.

“Once that old man catches on, he’ll definitely bring it up anyway.”

“I guess...so?”

“He always liked that sort of stuff. But, we might be better off leaving the two alone for that.”

Since they both got married once before, according to their logic, they didn’t plan on any ceremony, or honeymoon.

“Ah, that sounds good.”

“Right?”

“What might you two be discussing here, Saki-chan, Yuuta?”

Right that moment, the two people in question came back.

“Nothing at all, don’t mind us.”

I’ll just tell him to take out Akiko-san for dinner later. With that timing, Ayase-san put the two slices of toast on the plate, and put this in front of my old man.

“Saki, I’m—”

“One slice, I know.” Ayase-san told Akiko-san.

She put another two slices of toast into the toaster. I guess that the final slice must be for her then. With give & take, her give share would always be bigger, and she would always get everything last. I see, even with these small details...

“Only one slice for you as well, Ayase-san?”

“Can’t eat that much in the morning.”

“I’ll try to remember that.”

“Thanks.”

Adjusting to each other is important after all.

“You two sure get along now.”

“They’re like real siblings.”

“I’m happy to see that~”

Akiko-san and my old man both narrowed their eyes. I’m happy to hear that it looks that way. Everything was about to break down last night after all.

Once we finished our late breakfast, the sun shone brightly outside the window. White clouds passed through the blue sky, telling you yet again that summer was around the corner. The temperature was going up as well, although not enough to put on the A/C, so I opened up a window.

These few clear days were in the middle of the rainy season. The wind coming from the open window carried a comfortable breeze through the four of us, filling the room with a natural scent.

Epilogue: Ayase Saki's Diary

7th of June (Sunday)

When I said that I was relieved, I really meant it.

I could tell just from meeting him then that he wasn't a bad person.

At the same time, he felt very considerate.

He's willing to put in new hot water in the bath after he's done with his.

I didn't expect him to be a student at Suisei though.

8th of June (Monday)

Asamura-kun called out to me at school.

Contrary to my expectations, Asamura-kun is a very flat and even person.

I don't like the idea of him just taking the rumours about me at face value, but I know that it can't be helped. I know what I look like to others after all.

I was angry. Yet, he accepted that I was angry.

He might be the first person I ever met who was willing to adjust to me like that.

9th of June (Tuesday)

Memo: Asamura-kun likes his fried eggs with soy sauce.

From today onward, I will be cooking food.

Asamura-kun is going out of his way to search for a high-pay part-time job for me, so I will provide him with breakfast and dinner.

He apologized for not being able to find anything, but I knew that it wouldn't be this easy.

Especially asking strangers for help.

If I could do that...

10th of June (Wednesday)

Urk, so embarrassing...

To think he would hear that.

I don't want to look lame, so I try to keep my hard work a secret.

Maaya came to visit us. She's as noisy as always.

The three of us played together, and laughed a lot. How long has it been since I laughed like that.

We exchanged LINE contacts.

It's very much like Asamura-kun to keep a scenery picture as his profile picture.

Thanks... for the umbrella.

11th of June (Thursday)

I have to pay more attention when I dry my underwear in my room, yep.

Underwear is just like every other piece of clothing. How could you be so entranced by it, Asamura-kun...

Luckily, he didn't try anything vile with it.

But...

He said he won't do anything. He admitted to having desires like that, but stated that having them and acting according to them is a different problem.

I couldn't agree more.

Whenever I hear his opinion, I realize that I always sympathize with it. That's probably why I feel so relaxed.

Asamura-kun is dangerous.

He understands me too well.

12th of June (Friday)

Asamura-kun got angry at me for the first time.

In the heat of the moment, I even told him about it. Even though I didn't want to remember it again. Yet, it looks like he experienced something similar to me. I didn't ask what exactly though.

We talked a lot, but there's things I couldn't tell him.

I was willing to sell my body...because I was scared of being indebted to Asamura-kun.

13th of June (Saturday)

At night, Asamura-kun and I ate dinner as just the two of us.

Mom and step-father went off to have dinner as the two of them.

Asamura-kun was the one who came up with it. Shows again that he is considerate even about the smallest details.

That's exactly why I can't call him 'Nii-san'.

Once I start calling him like that, I'll definitely rely on him all the time.

That is one thing I cannot allow myself.

I'm sorry, Asamura-kun.

But...whenever I call him Asamura-kun, deep inside my heart, another emotion starts to rise up, different to me calling him a big brother.

It's a feeling I haven't ever experienced, and I can't put a name on it either.

I only realized that I became conscious of Asamura-kun.

It makes me feel uncertain, even gloomy.

Even when I go to bed, I have trouble sleeping recently.

If I don't listen to calm music, in order to heal my brain cells, then my hands and feet won't relax. Unable to fall asleep without listening to music, how can I even hope to become independent when I'm like this? I feel pathetic.

...Just what is this feeling, really.



Afterword

Mikawa Ghost Afterword

Thank you very much for picking up the novelized version of 'Gimai Seikatsu'. I am the responsible author for both the Youtube version as well as the novel, Mikawa Ghost. My main profession is writing novels such as the one you are reading right now, but this time around, I challenged another type of way of work that could invade your private lives.

The contents of this novel weren't drastic or dramatic, merely portraying the days passing for our characters Asamura Yuuta and Ayase Saki, and what changes we can spot there.

Of course, the contents you can find on the Youtube channel are all important to the world of the characters, but there are some other developments that I wanted to show off in this novelized shape, which depicts that these two have gotten closer than we might think.

Now, my thanks. Dear illustrator Hiton-san, Nakashima Yuki-san who voices Ayase Saki, Amasaki Kouhei-san who voices Asamura Yuuta, Suzuki Ayu-san who voices Narasaka Maaya, Hamano Daiki who voices Maru Tomokazu, video director Ochiai Yuusuke, as well as all the important stuff of the Youtube channel and editors for this novelized version, I thank you very much. This book has come into existence thanks to all of you!

Finally, to all you readers and fans of the videos, I would be happy if you continued to support 'Gimai Seikatsu' in the future as well!

Nice to meet you. I am the responsible
illustrator Hiten.

Congratulations on the novelization of
'Gimai Seikatsu'!

It is truly an honor for me to be
involved in such a wonderful project.
I already feel blessed for having my
illustrations go along with acted voice
lines on the official YouTube channel.

Really, thank you so much!

Let's enjoy the upcoming developments
together!

By the
way, I'm
part of
the soy
sauce
faction.

Hiten

ILLUSTRATOR
HITEN AFTERWORD



Short Story: The Season of Cherry Blossoms and Encounters

Whenever cherry blossom season comes around, I, Ayase Saki, always find myself pondering one thing: Why is everyone so happy about new beginnings? During the new school term, when I hear the joyful and high-pitched laughter of the other students, it feels like I'm just watching them from a different world through a glass window, despite us being in the same plane of existence.

New environments are more troublesome than blissful. After all, if your surroundings reset back to a blank slate, you're forced to show the people around you what kind of person you are.

I've devoted my time to become stronger and more independent so that I wouldn't be underestimated. I want to be able to live my own life and future alone. That's why I never felt like making any friends. I let them think that I was hard to approach and get along with so that they would then leave me alone out of fear or annoyance. After all, that makes it much easier for me. Yet, once spring arrives, I have to do it all over again. That's why I can't stand this cherry blossom season.

“Cherry blossom viewing, huh?”

Right after passing through the school gate, large cherry blossom trees stood around me, as if to greet the incoming students. When I looked up at them, I remembered a conversation I had with Mom.

‘One of the bar’s regulars invited me to go to a cherry blossom viewing. Would you like to join us, Saki?’

‘Hmmm... I’m good. I don’t feel like I would be excited about that sort of thing even if there were other adults around.’

'My, what a shame. I wanted to introduce the daughter I'm always bragging about.'

'You sound awfully close to that person.'

'Oh my. I don't really think that's true, though.'

I knew she was being intentionally evasive. As of late, I had realized that Mom was talking about this man pretty often. Although we don't get to spend much time together because of our disjointed lifestyles, and we're hardly able to eat breakfast or dinner together, we try to tell each other about what's going on. About her job, about my school, about how my studies are coming along, about stories from her work that aren't quite everyday occurrences, even just about how cold the weather is recently, or how the cherry blossoms had started to bloom. All in all, they were fairly common, harmless conversations.

After she and Dad started to live apart, and especially after they got a divorce, she barely spoke about any men at all. I figured she might have given up on relationships for the time being, but from the sound of it there seems to have been some kind of development I wasn't aware of. While I felt happy for this change, and genuine joy that she was feeling better, a feeling of loneliness assaulted me, like I was being left behind.

Right when I was about to pass beneath the cherry blossom trees, I stopped. At the stairs next to the entrance, there was a bit of a darker area in the shade. I could see a single male student with his back to the wall there, his calm eyes fixated on the book on his hands. He had black hair and a medium build, the exact opposite of typical flashy highschool boys. Instead, he seemed calm and collected.

Even as the other students passed him by, gleefully chatting, he had no reaction whatsoever. He simply continued to read. It almost

looked like he was separated from the outside world by an invisible but thick glass film.

“Like a comrade in arms.” I muttered.

However, my voice didn’t reach him. Thankfully, I must admit. If some random girl suddenly said something weird like that, he would surely be perplexed. Worst-case, he might even assume that I’m hitting on him.

In the first place, calling out to him would be a course of action contradictory to his desires. He had clearly drawn a line between himself and all the people who would find joy from new encounters in this fresh season. He must be like me, not desiring any human relationships with people too close for comfort. That being said, simply knowing that there was someone who had a similar mindset to mine caused me to feel a bit more relaxed.

In the end, I walked past him into the entrance, not saying a single word to him. Naturally, I don’t know his name, and I doubt I’ll remember his face too well. Even if we run into each other again, I’m sure that I wouldn’t even recognize him.

Typical of this cherry blossom season, it was a time of new encounters. At this point in time, nobody knew that this was the first encounter of the two who would eventually become step-siblings.

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