

7



# 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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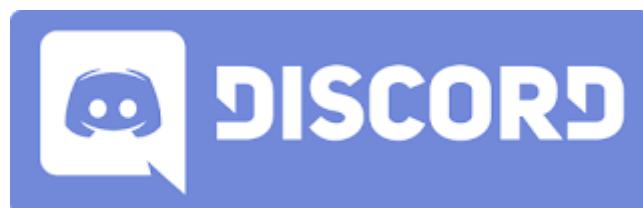
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# 義妹生活

7

三河ごーすと

*Hiten* Hiton





Happy Valentine!!

「わお。このホテルだったの？ なんて偶然。時間ある？」

振り返ると、ペットボトルを片手に微笑んでいる女性がいた。

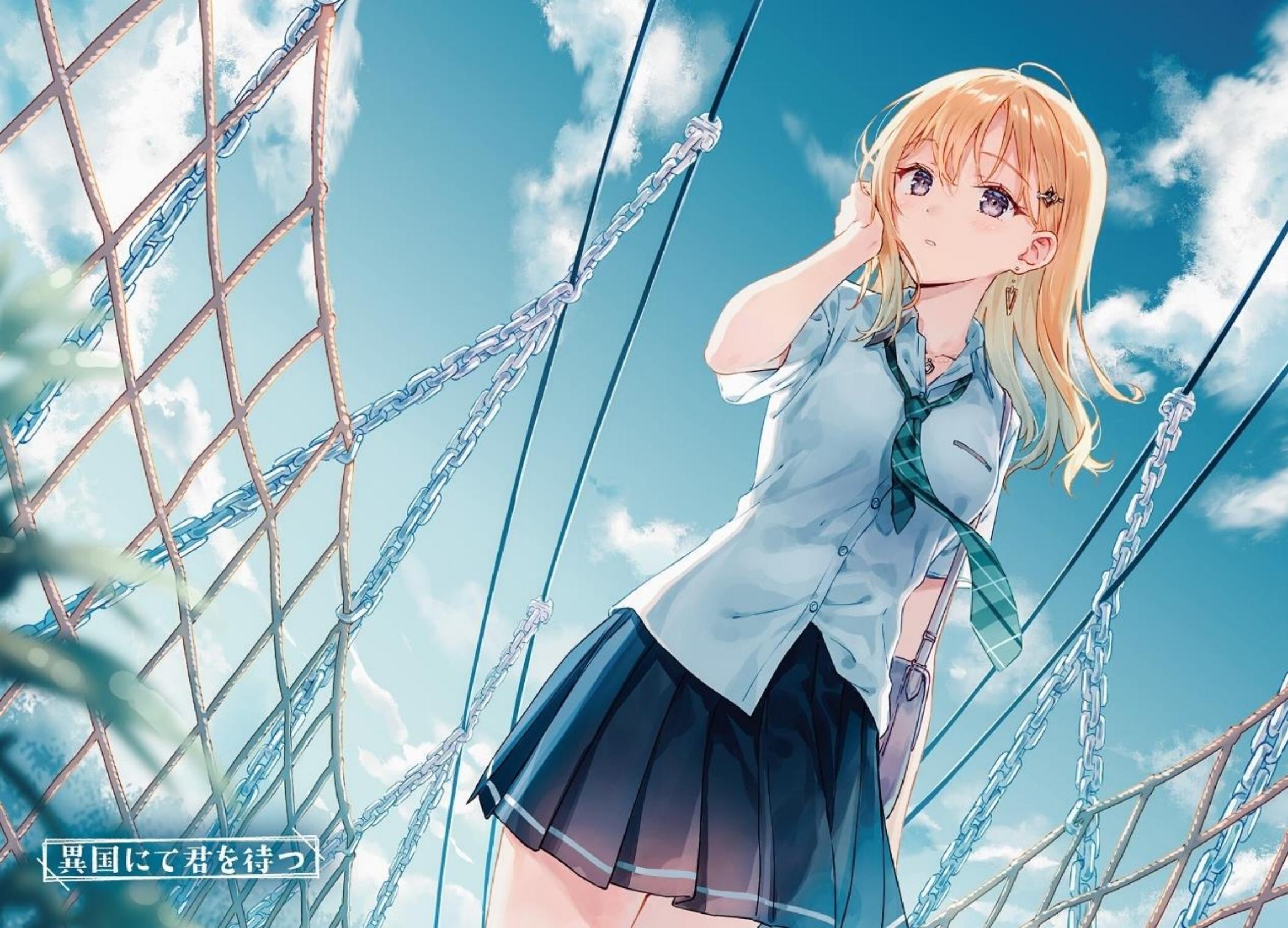
メリッサだった。

『ええと……』

彼女の抱えている籠には  
飲み物やらポテチやらが  
山ほど放り込んであった。

Melissa

メリッサ



異国にて君を待つ

# DISCUSSING THE UPCOMING OVERSEAS TRIP



We ended up going to Singapore, but are there any places you'd like to visit?



You won't get far with that. Forget about the airplanes for now.



Why?

I feel like New York and Los Angeles have the most advanced culture.



That's nice. Maybe check out the Hollywood sign while you're there?



I'd like to see it at least once. Take in the scenery around it, too. Sounds great.



Oh, wow. I didn't know you were into that sort of stuff, Asamura-kun.



Germany, France, Egypt, Peru, and then...



I'd love to see their old castles in person.



Oh, right. You love those sorts of things.



I think it'd be nice to travel to lots of places and see all sorts of cultures.



I guess I have to get used to traveling by plane if I want to tag along with you...



Don't force yourself, okay?



It's just my personal interest. I'd rather not drag you along if you're not interested.



I see... Yeah, I don't want to tie you down, either, so I guess we don't have to always travel together.



That's right. We should do what we think is best.



At least within Japan, I'd love to make plans for visiting various places... together.



Yep.

Hm?

Yeah.  
Let's do that.



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## ***Prologue: Asamura Yuuta***

The solid snow filling the world slowly vanished on the 12th day in February, bringing us to Friday morning. I opened my shoe box with my hands numb from the cold and a voice called out to me right as I changed into my indoor slippers.

“Morning, Asamura.”

When I turned around, I saw my good friend Maru greeting me with a mysterious smile.

“Morning, Maru. No morning practice today?”

“The snow’s forced us indoors, so we stopped early. But you’ve got zero hesitation, eh?”

“Huh?” I didn’t understand what Maru was talking about, so I let out a dumbfounded voice. “What do you mean?”

“I was just admiring how you opened your shoe box without even a moment’s pause.”

“Is that... bad?”

“Normally it wouldn’t be. However... look.” Maru’s gaze wandered towards a boy from the class next to ours.

He seemed hesitant to open his shoe box for a moment. But once he did, he faintly sighed, but still loudly enough for me to hear.

“February 14th falls on a Sunday this year, right?”

“Ah, I see.”

I was well aware that February 14th was known as Valentine’s Day. In the Christian religion, it’s seen as a day when you present the people you care about with something that comes from the heart,

and this has been passed down even to Japan. Except it somehow changed into a day where women would give men chocolate. Lately, it's been getting a bit loose in that regard (or rather has returned to its roots), where boys and girls both give chocolate to the people they care about. And since this day fell on a weekend this year, it means that chocolate is being handed out either today, Friday, or on the day itself.

"There might be chocolate waiting in your shoe box, so you'd normally hesitate for a moment before opening it. But I just swung it open without a care in the world, huh?"

"Exactly."

"But does that really happen? Finding chocolate in your shoe box, I mean."

I don't recall having ever received chocolate that way, nor have I heard of it happening to anyone around me. And in this day and age where we care so much about hygiene, putting food into a shoe locker of all places seems very unsanitary and meaningless. Not to mention that a high school boy's shoe box isn't exactly a prime example of a clean environment. A letter is probably the only thing you'd want to risk putting in there.

"That's a valid argument to be sure, but... Asamura, thinking about hygiene on Valentine's and trying to make it realistic... is not how most boys think."

"You... think not?"

"Your brain might understand the logic behind it, but you can't shake that small glimmer of hope. It's perfectly normal to assume that there might be... No, that there must be at least one girl who likes you."

“That’s not normal at all.”

“But all of us boys are somewhat crazy. Thus, it is normal.”

“What flawed logic.”

We reached our classroom during our discussion, and I subconsciously glanced around to see if the atmosphere felt different or not. In short, the air in the classroom was somewhat calm, and not too many people were talking about Valentine’s. That’s probably because Suisei High is more of an advanced school than average. However, throughout the day, I’d see girls giving each other chocolate, or boys receiving chocolate if they had a lot of female friends. However, the couples we knew of didn’t actually give each other chocolate in the classroom. I wonder why not? Eventually, the final bell of the day rang, and Maru turned around.

“What’s gotten into you, Asamura? You’ve been looking around with a weird look on your face all day.”

“Weird look...? It must have been pretty obvious if even the person sitting in front of me noticed.”

“You had the face of a philosopher.”

Now hold on. I’m not Socrates, Platon, Nietzsche, or Satre, you know? Also, I wasn’t wracking my brain *that* much.

“I wasn’t trying to solve world hunger or anything. I was just thinking that even the couples who are openly dating don’t give each other chocolate in front of everyone.”

After hearing that, Maru gave me a dubious look.

“Asamura... That statement basically reveals your underlying assumption that all couples are perfectly fine with openly flirting with each other in front of others, you know?”

“That’s...”

*Not true*—I wanted to say, but then the faces of my old man and Akiko-san came to mind. That *is* true, I guess. Any kind of romance I’ve seen lately has just been those two.

“...a possibility, I guess?”

“Hey now... Do the couples you know just brazenly hug and kiss each other even in public?”

“I haven’t seen anything like that... But if they did, it wouldn’t surprise me.”

I don’t know if my old man and Akiko-san kissed each other while going on a date through town, but I wouldn’t be surprised if they at least locked arms while walking... Though, as the son, I’d rather not be having fantasies about my parents’ love life.

“You’ve probably watched too many American movies. In fact, couples like that will get teased if they simply walk next to each other. Showing any kind of skinship is way too embarrassing.”

“Embarrassing... Yeah, that makes sense.”

The reason Ayase-san and I don’t do these things must be that we’re embarrassed... right? It feels like that’s the case, but also not really. I faintly remembered what happened when we visited my father’s family over New Year’s. After I made my point clear to my grandfather, I went back to my room and went to bed, only for Ayase-san to touch my back and say “Thank you, Yuuta-kun.”

I’ve never had any complaints about Ayase-san becoming my little sister. Realizing that she heard my discussion with my grandfather made me feel flustered, but I was happy that my genuine feelings reached her. There was still a risk of our relatives finding out about us, and our parents could have come back any time, and despite this

danger, Ayase-san moved closer to me and sought out physical contact. Along with what she said, how could I not feel anything at that?

Ayase-san didn't say anything else afterwards, and she quickly returned to her own futon, but my heart was racing so fast that I had trouble sleeping. Despite the danger of possibly being seen we indulged in physical contact. It made me wonder why Ayase-san had done something so risky. It's not very like her to do such a thing, but I felt happy that we could bond in that way.

The argument Maru made about my subconscious assumption played back in my head. Deep inside my heart... Could I possibly want to be that open with our skinship in front of others? And am I just feeling embarrassed, which is why I won't?

"Asamura, someone's calling for you," Maru's words caused me to raise my head.

I spotted a girl peeking inside our classroom at the door. It turned out to be Ayase-san's good friend from her class, Narasaka Maaya-san. She waved her hand at me, beckoning me to come over, so I said goodbye to Maru, and he went on his way to his club.

"Narasaka-san? How can I help you?"

"Come with me."

She took me to the lower stairs near a storage shed in the corner of the floor. To my surprise, Ayase-san was already waiting there.

"Maaya wouldn't shut up about giving this to you..."

"Giving... what to me?"

Narasaka-san turned toward me with a smile.

“I’d rather not have your adorable little sister get all jealous at me because I gave you chocolate in secret. So here you go!” She handed me a wrapped package she hid behind her back and held it out towards me while explaining herself.

“This is your Valentine’s present!”

“And this is from me. Though it’s nothing special.” Ayase-san also handed me a wrapped package.

She’s not giving it to me at home... but at school? I mean, it’s not that big of a shock, since she probably couldn’t argue against Narasaka-san.

“Um... Thanks.”

I always wonder if I should open presents like this right on the spot, but there are times when seeing my reaction will make them happy, so I at least checked first.

“Can I open them?”

“Of course! There’s no love letter in there or anything.” Narasaka-san said with a smile, so she’s probably telling the truth.

“Then I’ll start with yours,” I ripped the wrapping off of Narasaka-san’s Valentine’s present, revealing store-bought chocolate.

And to completely kill off any potential sweetness, she even wrote “Obligatory” on the cover.

“It’s the perfect example of obligatory chocolate that won’t cause any possible misunderstandings!”

“Thanks. That makes accepting this obligatory chocolate much easier.”

“Right? I’m amazing!”

With that done, I moved on to Ayase-san's gift. I could immediately tell that it wasn't store-bought and that she put a lot of effort into her chocolate. In fact, it looks more like chocolate truffles, so I'm unsure if I could call this simple chocolate by any stretch of the imagination. She even scattered what looked like flakes on the outside of them.

"You made these just for me?"

"Wooow! Saki, that must have taken forever! Did you make the feuillantine yourself, too?"

"Of course not. I bought it and sprinkled it on the truffle."

"Feu... What now?"

"Feuillantine. It's what's on the round chocolate. There's a lot of names in the business, but it's what you get by lightly toasting a raw crepe and then delicately grinding it."

"I see. So like baked rice crackers but ground into powder?"

"Y-Yeah... Something like that. Though explaining it that way will only ruin the magic of Valentine's and turn it into the nice neighbor lady's candy, so stop it. But it looks great, right?" Narasaka-san asked.

"Wait... Is that why the kitchen lights were on late last night?"

"W-Well, yeah. This much is normal for siblings, right?"

So Ayase-san said, but I couldn't tell if that was true in the slightest. To be honest, this is the first time I've ever even gotten homemade chocolate, so I don't know what kind of emotion to have right now. And judging from Narasaka-san's reaction, it must have taken ages to make this.

“It’s nothing much, really,” Ayase-san said and averted her face, clearly flustered.

Narasaka-san watched this from the sidelines and then whispered to me.

“Not bad, Asamura-kun. Maybe you’re a lot more of a player than I took you for?”

“I haven’t the foggiest idea what you’re talking about.”

Why would receiving chocolate as a present make me some kind of playboy? I can’t follow her thought process at all.

“What are you talking about?”

“I was just saying how much of a hardworking person you are, Saki. Well, with an older brother like him, I guess you’d wanna try hard!”

“I didn’t do it because it’s Asamura-kun...”

“Reaaally now? Well, that’s fine. Anyway, that’s the mission accomplished. You’re free to go home now, Big Brother~”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“See you later, Asamura-kun,” Ayase-san said and turned her back toward me, walking away.

Left behind, Narasaka-san jogged back to me.

“The field trip is soon, right?”

I nodded slightly, although I didn’t know what exactly she was going to say.

“I’ll do my best so you two can walk around together.”

“Huh? Together?”

"You'll be lonely if you can't be with Saki, right?"

"N-Not at all, don't mind me."

"There's no need to be modest! It's your first trip with your adorable little sister, right?"

Actually, we had already gone through that when we visited my old man's hometown, but if I said that, I might hint at anything that happened between Ayase-san and I. Though when I see Narasaka-san grinning at me like that, it makes me worried that she might have possibly realized that there's been some form of change in our relationship already. I somehow managed to play along and satisfy Narasaka-san, but after she finally left, I could feel myself dripping with sweat, realizing how much I was panicking deep inside. At the same time, though, I didn't feel too bothered by Narasaka-san's teasing. Instead, it made me happy... and fuzzy inside. So... if this really is happiness, why am I feeling the need to keep the amount of skinship with Ayase-san to a minimum?

I grabbed a piece of the chocolate truffle and stuffed it into my mouth. The feuillantine gave it a crusty sensation when chewing on it, and the chocolate melted and filled my mouth with sweetness.

# **Chapter 1: February 14th (Sunday) – Asamura Yuuta**

Morning arrived. Specifically, 8:07 am. Since it was Sunday, I could allow myself to sleep in a bit longer than usual. The sun shining inside from the window illuminated the faucet in the bathroom. I bit down on my yawn as I turned the lever towards ‘warm’ to counteract the coldness against my bare feet and warmed up my face with the water. After that, I opened the door to the living room with a “Good morning.”

“Morning, Yuuta.”

“Good... yawn... morning, Yuuta-kun.”

My old man and Akiko-san were already present. As for Akiko-san, she seemed fairly sleepy. It looked like they had finished their breakfast already and when I looked over at the dinner table, I saw two plates of breakfast wrapped up in plastic. As was typical for our weekend menu, there was ham and eggs with salad and miso soup. Normally you’d have toast with such a meal, but my old man has completely fallen victim to Akiko-san’s miso soup, which is what created this odd combination. Then again, once you get used to it it’s just as good.

“...Hm? Where’s Ayase-san?”

“She’s still sleeping.”

“Maybe she was up late studying again...”

I guess I should wait for her. Eating alone won’t make it any more delicious, at least.

“I don’t know when she’ll get up, so just eat without her.”

“Well... Okay, I’ll do that.”

“I’ll heat up the miso soup for you.”

“Thank you,” I answered as I slid the slices of bread into the toaster.

After that, I placed the ham and egg inside the microwave to warm it up and removed the wrapping, picked the toast out of the toaster, and sat down at the table. Shortly after, Akiko-san brought me the miso soup.

“She was sleeping in the living room. With her earphones in, too. She didn’t even hear me come home.”

I munched on the toast as Akiko-san told me about last night. Even if she got home early from her bartending job, we’re talking 3 am the earliest. Was she up studying that late? According to Akiko-san, she had her earphones in with English texts in front of her. I understand that we have the field trip coming up, which will mean she won’t be able to get as much studying in, but that’s still pretty amazing.

Though it’s rare for Ayase-san to sleep in the living room like that. She’s usually careful to not lower her guard when she’s at home, but I guess that maybe this means she’s showing more trust in us? My old man and Akiko-san got married and they moved in with us back in August. If she really is starting to feel like we’re her family, then I’m happy. Well, she’ll get up soon enough, I bet.

“Time to dig in.”

I poured some soy sauce onto the ham and eggs, placing it on my toast with my chopsticks. The most important thing here is to keep the egg yolk all clean and in the center of the toast. That makes for the perfect setup. I bit into it. The closer to the center I got, the more egg yolk I obtained with each bite, and the soup-like consistency mixed with the crunchy texture, filling my mouth with the taste of

egg. Eating it like this without losing any egg yolk is actually the real pleasure and—

“You really do eat like Taichi-san, Yuuta-kun.”

“Pffft! Cough! Cough!”

“Oh my. Here, have some water.” She handed me a cup filled with water.

“Th-Thank you...”

“You’re welcome. Make sure to slowly eat and take your time,” Akiko-san smiled as she sat down across the table, resting her cheek on her palm. “But really, you two look identical.”

“R-Really?”

I was never that aware of it, but it would make sense. Plus, I never really take a good look at my old man when he’s eating, either. And with that timing, Akiko-san clapped her hands together.

“Today is Valentine’s Day, right?”

“Um... yes?”

“Then... Here you go!”

She handed me a wrapped box. I had been wondering what that one was about when I saw it on her seat on the dining table when I was getting my breakfast. Upon a closer look, I could see a ribbon wrapped around it, signaling that it was a present. I hesitated for a moment but thanked her. I guess this is the final line of obligatory chocolate—Mother chocolate. To think such a minor thing could make me realize that I actually have a mother now. And as I was getting emotional, I heard my old man’s voice from the sofa.

“What about me...?”

It seemed like he hadn't gotten his present yet. But... that's all the presents I saw on the table. Meanwhile, Akiko-san looked at my father's empty seat, then looked at him, and just let out a baffled "Huh?" in response.

"No waaay..." My old man sighed in disbelief, and Akiko-san stuck out her tongue.

"Hee hee. Just kidding, I have something for you," she said and opened the refrigerator.

She then took out a white rectangular box and offered it to him. My old man placed this box on his lap and opened it, revealing a chocolate-colored cake.

"It's chocolate chiffon cake."

"You made that just for me?"

"It's a special event, so we need to make it memorable, right? I made sure to keep the sugar levels to a minimum so you don't have to worry about your stomach when eating it."

"H-Haha... Oh, man. You didn't have to say that," my old man grumbled as he scratched his nose in a bashful way.

Really, she's the exact opposite from my birth mother. My mother was what you could call a 'good-for-nothing,' always changing how she acted simply based on the person she was dealing with. To me, my biological mother is a failure, whereas Akiko-san is an understanding woman. Then again, I don't think Akiko-san is purposefully buttering us up, either. I think that just shows how human relationships don't work based on that.

Though she did go out of her way to make a cake especially to please my old man. And that's something Ayase-san would regularly do, too. I guess they really are mother and child.

“I’ll make some more coffee. And I’ll grab a knife, fork, and a plate.”

“I’ll handle that, don’t worry.”

“Thank you, Taichi-san.”

“That’s my line. Happy Valentine’s, Akiko-san.”

“Yes. Happy Valentine’s.”

The two looked at each other, as their gazes looked like they melted away as if they were chocolate. This caused me to remember when Maru told me that I’m assuming it’s normal for couples to flirt around in front of people... and I have to say, my thoughts about it were correct. At least in front of their family, these two do not hold back. And while trying my best to not look over toward the kitchen, I calmly munched on the rest of my toast.

Morning classes at my prep school ended, bringing us to lunch break. I left the prep school building and made my way to the nearest convenience store to buy lunch. Upon entering the automatic door, I was assaulted by a wave of red. Left and right, top and bottom, everything was Valentine’s chocolate. At the top was a collaboration from a super famous store, which girls my age were admiring. Next, someone who seemed like a salaryman bought the cheapest packs that had like 50 pieces of chocolate in each, probably to hand out at work. I passed by the shelves and headed deeper inside the store, wondering what I should eat. Since I’d like to save up some of my allowance for the field trip next week, I probably shouldn’t go all out. That means... This. I grabbed a package with one salted onigiri and headed for the self-service register, standing behind a tall woman.

“Ah, I just finished, so please go ahead... Oh, what a coincidence.”

The person who turned around was actually a fellow student at my cram school who I knew quite well.

“Ah, Fujinami-san.”

“Imagine this. Also, sorry, I’ll get out of your way.”

“It’s fine.”

I scanned the barcode and finished the payment with my smartphone, only to hesitate as I was about to put it into my bag. Fujinami-san saw this and spoke up.

“If you’d like to eat it at the prep school, I can carry it for you,” she opened her plastic bag from the convenience store.

Inside were several sandwiches, some bread, as well as cafe au lait.

“Erm... Thanks. I can carry the bag if you want.”

“One single onigiri isn’t that heavy. Well, if it makes you feel better, then I’ll take you up on that offer.”

I dropped my onigiri inside the bag and accepted it from Fujinami-san. We then left the convenience store and headed to the food court in the prep school. It was actually fairly crowded because a lot of other students were using it, too. We spotted two open seats and sat down next to each other, and after I pulled my onigiri out, I handed the plastic bag back to Fujinami-san.

“Thanks.”

“Don’t mind it. Thanks for carrying the bag.” Fujinami-san took everything out of the shopping bag and folded it, using it as a lunch mat as she placed her food and cafe au lait on it.

She must have realized that I was staring as she looked at me.

“This is just my personal custom. I plan to use it as a trash bag after I’m done.”

“It’s okay. Sorry for staring.”

“It’s fine. Also, while we’re on the subject of curiosity, I have a question. But it’s totally okay if you can’t give me an answer. The reason you didn’t want to put your rice onigiri inside your own bag... did you refrain from doing so because you didn’t want it to get in contact with everything else?”

“Ahh... Um, not really. It might be a bit hard to understand, but I’ve got my part-time job at a bookstore after this.”

“Okay?”

Her face was basically asking ‘What does that have to do with anything?’

“And it can get pretty stressful during work.”

“When a customer is just venting their stress out on you?”

“That too. But to me, it’s the shoplifters. No matter how careful you are, no matter what you do to try to stop them, there are always people who have to just steal stuff.”

“Wouldn’t setting up surveillance cameras inside the store solve that problem?”

“The fact that I distrust customers is what causes the stress to build up. Normally, they would be crucial for our business. But when you work part-time in places like these, you learn to doubt other people.”

“I had no idea that could happen.”

“I’ve only been told by my senior at work, so I don’t know if this would be common or not. However, she told me not to look away from customers who enter with a large bag, especially if it’s already opened.”

“Like a sports bag?” Fujinami-san looked at the bag at my feet.

“Exactly. If you had a plastic bag like you’d get after a purchase, you can tell what’s inside there, and it changes shape.”

Compared to that, something like a Boston bag is a lot more solid, allowing you to slide in a book or two and nobody would be able to tell from the outside. And once they zip up the bag, it’s totally impossible to notice. That’s why customers like that should be the absolute focus when they happen to enter. But the idea of being doubtful of others like this can weigh down heavily on you, chipping away at your mental health.

“Ah, I see. So even if you’ve paid for it, the employees won’t know if you actually paid for it or not. And even if you aren’t doing anything evil, you can’t help but be conscious of the way other people are looking at you.”

I nodded.

“I just built up a natural resistance towards putting items in my bag. But I don’t feel right taking a single onigiri to the cash register either.”

But I didn’t think she’d just see through my momentary hesitation that easily. If not for her offer, I probably would have held the receipt with the onigiri in hand while leaving the store.

“That makes sense. But on that note, I’m surprised that’s enough for your lunch. I assume you don’t eat much?”

“Actually, our school’s got a field trip next week, so I want to save money.”

“A field trip... during this cold season?”

“Well, I don’t know. My school does it every year, at least.”

Once again, I didn't know if this was common or not. But I think there's usually a field trip in your first summer when you're in your third year of middle school. Since Suisei High is supposed to be a preparatory school, they most likely didn't want to have it in the students' third year so they could focus on their exams.

"Where are you going? Kyoto or somewhere around there?"

"Singapore."

"Overseas? That's a surprise," she muttered with an impressed voice, but I don't think it was that weird for a school like ours to choose an overseas location. "I'm... a bit jealous."

It seems like her school didn't have a field trip like that.

"Well, even if we had that, I wouldn't have been too sure about participating or not. Plus, that's money better saved for tuition fees."

I wasn't dense enough to tell her a few words of sympathy. I would bet that she wouldn't be happy even if I tried to say something about it. In that way, she's probably a lot like Ayase-san.

"For that reason, once I can afford it financially in university, I'll travel overseas a lot. Go here, go there, meet all sorts of people."

"I bet it'd be fun if you can communicate with them."

"I'm fairly good when it comes to English, so I should be able to get by. Are you good with foreign languages, Asamura-kun?"

"I don't think I'd handle myself too well with English conversations."

"Really? That's a surprise. Your grades are fairly good, no?"

Just because I've been practicing communicative English for my exams doesn't immediately transfer to actual speaking skills. I don't do listening practices on the regular, either. Speaking of which, I

suddenly remembered that Ayase-san fell asleep late because she was studying English last night.

“Are you able to speak English well, Fujinami-san?”

“Somewhat, yeah.”

“That’s amazing.”

“Comes with my environment, so it’s not all sunshine and rainbows.”

According to what she had told me before, she’s living with her foster parent she calls Auntie. And from the sounds of it, one of the people she looks after is from South Asia, someone who speaks English quite well and often, and this person owns a restaurant which Fujinami-san regularly visits.

“At first, I had no idea what they were even saying. But while trying to talk with them, I acquired that skill naturally.”

“You learn from what is around you without realizing it, huh?”

“I think it’s just getting used to it, rather than just learning. When taking a trip overseas, there are things you can’t experience without speaking the language. Though that’s just how I see things. Well, even if you manage to hold a conversation, being able to get your thoughts and feelings across is an entirely different question, and some things are easily lost if you get too fixated on conversation alone.”

“For example?”

“That you lose track of time, for example,” Fujinami-san said. She put her trash inside the plastic bag and tied it closed.

Only then did I realize that hardly anybody was left in the rest area. When I checked the time, I started panicking. I barely had two minutes left until afternoon classes started.

“Fair enough.”

“W-We should hurry. I’d rather not waste tuition fees by missing classes.”

We rushed down the hallway as I thought to myself that there were still a lot of things to be learned from conversations like these.

Prep school classes ended for the day, and the sun had already set by the time I left the building. I put on the neck warmer I had received from Ayase-san and rode my bike to the bookstore near the Shibuya train station. The wind hitting my cheeks was awfully cold to the point that just blinking brought me close to tears. I didn’t even want to imagine how cold it would be after my shift. Maybe I should stop taking the bike to work at least during these cold days.

I stored my bike at the usual parking area and entered the building with its blessed interior heating, which made a sigh escape my lips. After that, I headed inside the bookstore’s employee area. After I was done changing into my uniform, I stepped out into the sales area to take a walk around and see how the shelves and tables were looking.

“Oh, Junior-kun!”

My senior at work, Yomiuri Shiori—Yomiuri-senpai called out to me. Since she hasn’t changed yet, she probably just got here.

“Good eve—No, good morning, is it?”

“Why are you wishing me a good morning this late?”

“Haven’t you told me before that the industry asks for such a greeting?”

“...Yes, I did say that. Aren’t you a diligent one, Phelps-kun.”

“...And who would that be?”

Knowing Yomiuri-senpai, it’s probably some character from a novel, but I really wish she wouldn’t make random references without even checking if I knew what she was referencing.<sup>1</sup>

“Who might it be? Those memories have been deleted automatically.”

“I don’t think you should do that.”

In other words, she isn’t even bothering to remember.

“Heh heh heh... Oh? Where’s your little sis?”

“Her shift has just ended.”

Ayase-san worked from 10 am to 6 pm today, and I’m here for the shift after hers. I think she’s gonna be done changing any minute now. Since she’s gonna use some of the money she’s been saving on the field trip, she’s been taking pretty long shifts on the weekends for the latter half of January. For that reason, she’s also done working earlier than usual. And that led to us working fewer days on the same shift. I explained all of this to Yomiuri-senpai as we walked toward the office.

“Oho, the field trip? Sounds nice. I’m jelly.”

“That’s why Ayase-san and I don’t have any shifts next week.”

“That’s a painful lack of workforce we’ve gotta compensate with. Then again, February’s usually pretty relaxed. But that sounds nice.”

I'm out here worrying about employment as you are just fooling around. No fair!"

"It's not like I can help it. Still, even you worry about work in your future, huh?"

"What are you implying?"

"You seem like the type of person who can separate work and hobbies, so I figured you'd be fine with wherever."

"Well, duh. I can read no matter my job."

Bingo.

"Even so, I need a job that pays well enough to fund my book addiction. That much I know, so... Junior-kun, what kind of job do you think would be good for me?" She said this while pointing to her nose.

"Knowing you, I think you'd succeed at whatever you do."

"You're not getting anything from me with empty praise, you know?"

"Do you have any preferences, then?"

"Hm... Either working at a bookstore, moving on to a publisher, maybe becoming a streamer or celebrity. Just anything for a quick buck, really."

It sounded so serious in the beginning...

"I think you could pull off all of that," I said honestly.

She's pretty enough to get confessions on the regular, and she's a talented student who'll graduate from Tsukinomiya Women's University. Even the part about becoming a celebrity sounds doable when talking about her.

“Pull off all of that... huh?” She sighed with a somewhat profound tone. “Oh, well. I’ll leave the worrying for later. Still, without your little sis, it’ll just be me and you hitting the cash register today. Then again...” Yomiuri-senpai looked around inside the store. “At the moment, it looks like we’ll probably be bored for most of that.”

“Yup.”

Despite the fact that it was Sunday, the bookstore wasn’t too crowded. February in Japan is the period when the season and its environmental changes are the harshest. With the climate freezing, so do the demands, as there are regularly fewer goods being sold. Books are no exception to that, and most books experience a severe drop in sales other than manga magazines and super popular works, as well as an author’s newest releases. The same goes for bookworms, because other than those crazy ones who read on exam days, you usually hold off on reading much.

“Anyway, let’s get today over with, Junior-kun,” Yomiuri-senpai waved her hand at me as she disappeared into the changing room.

As for me, I went to the office and greeted the manager. If there’s anything he needs done right now, he’d usually ask me. And as expected, he wanted me to help carry the returns when I found time while taking care of the cash register. All deliveries and pick-ups from the wholesaler stop during the weekend. Returns and deliveries usually happen together, and we’re full of cardboard boxes with returns.

Put simply, lots of physical labor awaits me. I agreed to his request and then made my way out into the store area. Not even an hour later, the store was almost completely empty and devoid of students and salarymen, leaving us bored. The mountain of returns was taken care of, too, and even if we stood at the cash register, we were waiting for customers to arrive. Looking at the time, I still had

another hour left. In the end, both Yomiuri-senpai and I were just standing around.

“I’m so bored!”

“It is a slow day, yeah.”

“Hey, Junior-kun? Where’s your field trip gonna be, anyway?”

I told her pretty much the same thing I had explained to Fujinami-san earlier. That we’re heading to Singapore, and I’m saving up allowance for that. Despite the fact that speaking with the locals will probably be fun, I’m not confident in my conversation skills.

Needless to say, we spoke in a quiet voice and helped out any customers as needed. That being said, this kind of conversation was to be expected since we had nothing else to do.

“The field trip and Valentine’s... Smells like youth, eh?”

“Where did the topic of Valentine’s come from?”

“Shibuya’s full of couples, so I figured that was enough of a segway.”

“So many prejudices...”

“Did you get any chocolate, Junior-kun?”

“Huh? Ah, no, well. Just from family, that’s about it.”

Ayase-san and Akiko-san are family, so they don’t really count, and Narasaka-san emphasized the fact that hers was obligatory chocolate. Now that I think about it, Fujinami-san didn’t even bring up the conversation of Valentine’s, but that’s probably her way of keeping a comfortable distance. Either way, I didn’t want Yomiuri-senpai teasing me as always, so I kept things vague.

Eventually, my shift ended and I returned to the office. Yomiuri-senpai had her break around the same time, as she came from the

changing room with a small bag. She took out a small red box and handed it to the manager.

“Manger, here’s some duty chocolate.”

“Oh, thanks a lot, Yomiuri-kun.”

Duty? Not obligatory? I tilted my head in confusion, and Yomiuri-senpai approached me, giving me a small red box, too.

“Here, obligatory chocolate.”

It was the same chocolate she gave the manager, leaving me a bit bewildered.



“What’s the difference between duty and obligatory chocolate?”

“The feelings packed into it?”

“Why does that sound like a question?”

“I’m saying that the type of feelings packed into the chocolate is different!”

How does that even make any sense? What’s there to pack into?

“Affection?”

“Yet again, another question...”

“You write it with the kanji for ‘Obligatory’ but read it ‘Love’.”

“I don’t think there’s any correlation between the two.”

“I’m just trying to cope with stress at work by being a good senior and supporting my junior.”

“That’s just the early stages of power harassment, you know? Also, don’t use your junior for stress relief.”

“But I wanna go overseas, too! Sob, sob. Hey, Junior-kun... Won’t you hire me as a guide for your field trip?”

“If you’re that confident about your language skills, you should probably apply to an official company for that sort of thing.”

“I’m not good enough to call myself proficient, at least. And my department doesn’t have too many people who are able to speak English well, either. Though they can at least work their way through a text.”

“Really?”

“Most modern dissertations and essays are written in English, yep. So we have to make abstracts—basically short summaries of the papers. Put simply, when looking for papers and so on, we go through all the abstracts to look for one that could be useful for our argument.”

“I... see?”

“And those abstracts are usually in English, too. You’ll end up reading a lot of English abstracts and then reading through the longer papers, also in English. That’s why—”

All this abstract and abstract talk is making my head spin, quite frankly.

“We have a lot of students who can read normal papers and longer texts just fine. Also, those who go to graduate schools can usually hold proper daily conversations. But the average student usually doesn’t reach that level. Kudou-sensei could talk all day in English, at least. She knows we all can’t stand it and is trying to make the seminars English-only. Last time, she was grinning to herself as she talked about making the regulated exams full of reading and questions that are completely in English...”

University sounds rough. Or maybe that professor just has a screw loose. I can’t tell. I felt sympathy for her as I asked her for some tricks when it comes to English conversation.

“That’s a question, all right. Well, practice makes perfect in the end, I guess.”

She was basically saying the same thing as Fujinami-san.

“A foreign-owned top-class enterprise usually has their written exams entirely in English. Both reading and answering, that is!”

“For real?”

“That’s why I think it’d be best for you to get some language work in. And if you can read a foreign language, you can work through the various books and texts you’d like to read before they get translated. You can read all the cool science-fiction novels before Hollywood turns them into movies!”

“Ohh!”

“And if you can have decent conversations...”

“If I can do that...?”

“You can enjoy the movie in real-time with all the other views across the world!”

“Oooh!”

“And it’ll even help you in your job! Well... probably?”

“O-Ohh...?”

That last part wasn’t as convincing as it probably should have been. But either way, I gratefully accepted her advice and listened until she went back to work. I then left the bookstore and headed home.

I stowed my bike and then went inside the flat. Since it was a Sunday night, there was no particular reason for me to do so, but out of habit, I went to check if we’d gotten any mail. Seeing that it was empty, I didn’t waste much time and took the elevator up to my apartment. Announcing my return with a quiet voice, I opened the door.

“Welcome back.”

“Huh? Ayase-san, you were studying here?”

I was greeted by Ayase-san, who was sitting in the living room working through some English texts.

“You mentioned that a change of location could be a good change of pace, right? I was feeling a bit out of it, so I decided to study here.”

“I’m glad I could give you some advice. But first I’m home.”

“Yeah.” Ayase-san took off her earphones. “Would you like to eat dinner?”

I finally nodded and thanked her. As always, my old man was asleep, and Akiko-san was at work. When I placed my sports bag in my room, I remembered something. I took out the obligatory chocolate I had received from Yomiuri-senpai and placed it inside the fridge. It might still be the cold season, but leaving it inside a heated room for too long will cause it to melt.

“That...” Ayase-san muttered while looking at my hands.

“Ah, yeah. I got this from Yomiuri-senpai. It’s obligatory chocolate,” I responded and showed her the box.

“Ah.”

“Hm?”

“No, it’s nothing. I was just impressed that a university student like her could afford to buy branded chocolate... This is obligatory chocolate, right?”

“At the very least, it’s not duty.”

“Come again?”

“It’s probably another Yomiuri Joke if you ask me.”

Ayase-san seemed just as confused as I was, but I don’t have the confidence of explaining just what exactly Yomiuri-senpai is thinking on the regular. However, when it comes to her, she apparently mixes the answer to a complicated puzzle with an equally difficult joke, so

it's a bit hopeless. Either way, I placed the sports bag in my room and went back to the dinner table.

"It's almost done. I just have to warm it up a bit."

"No worries." Ayase-san was busy warming up the white stew leftovers from the afternoon. I prepared the tableware, as well as the rice in a small bowl.

With perfect timing, Ayase-san placed today's main course down as I sat down with my rice bowl in hand.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome. Just give me a moment, there's one more thing."

"Hm?" I looked at the food in front of me.

There were the vegetables and chicken from today's white stew, with rice and boiled seaweed. Honestly, that was more than enough for a late dinner like this. But to my surprise, a small bottle was placed in front of me.

"...Shichimi?"

"Yep. This is everything."

"...Huh?"

Now I was even more confused. I'm part of the soy sauce faction, so all I need is soy sauce to give my seaweed that extra flavor.

"The dessert's gonna be sweet, so I figured a bit of spice would mix in better."

"I think... it's plenty good as is?"

"You can just use it as you see fit. Anyway, I'll go back to studying," she said and turned her back towards me, grabbed her stuff, and went back to her room.

This made me start thinking. Maybe shichimi just goes with white stew really well? I tried a bite with that anticipation, but it didn't make it any more delicious. In the end, the day came to a close without me understanding what that was all about.

1 Not too sure, either, but my guess is the character Phelps from one of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's short stories called [The Adventure of the Naval Treaty](#).

2 A common Japanese spice mixture containing seven ingredients.

## ***Chapter 2: February 14th (Sunday) – Ayase Saki***

A faint metallic sound remained in my ears, but it took me a few seconds to realize this was the sound of the door closing. I slowly opened my eyes and checked the clock next to my pillow... 8:54 am. Almost nine, huh? Well, it's Sunday, so I can just take my... Wait, I can't take my time! I've got a shift starting at 10 am. I completely overslept! The instant that realization hit, I threw the blanket off me, which caused cold air to hit my body, sending a shiver down my back. I wanted to reach for the AC remote, but even those few seconds I desperately needed.

"Huuup!" I gathered energy from my outburst and took off my clothes.

Normally, I'd wait for my room to warm up a bit before changing, but if I do that today, I'll end up running late for sure. If everything goes according to my calculations, I should get there 15 minutes before my shift starts. Assuming I run all the way, of course. In my head, I drew my course of action to make it in time, matching the time reflected on my digital clock in the corner of my eyes, moving my arms and hands in unison. I didn't even have time to think of a proper outfit for the day, and I just went with a matching set of clothes to save myself time.

I stuffed my accessories into my sports bag—because I could still put them on at work—and ran to the bathroom. I brushed my teeth at the speed of light and checked my hair. Yep, no bed hair in sight. But seriously, this just makes me want to have a large mirror in my room! Anyway, I washed my face and checked the scent of my skin. If I don't like it, I usually add some deodorant alongside my perfume, but I don't have time right now. I'm looking fresh, too. Probably because I slept so soundly... Too soundly, you could say. I think

Yomiuri-san said she needed moisturizer when she began attending university.

I went back to my room to check if I had my phone, wallet, and everything else I needed and put on my coat. To guarantee higher speed, I stuffed my scarf and gloves into my bag and dashed out of my room.

“Saki-chan.”

A voice called out to me so I turned around. My stepdad jingled his car keys around his fingers and stood up from the sofa.

“I’ll drive you there.”

I wanted to decline with the reason that my blunder of oversleeping shouldn’t trouble other people, but I swallowed those words.

“Um... Thanks, that’d be a huge help.”

“No problem,” he gave me a happy smile, which made my chest hurt.

While rushing to the flat’s parking lot with him, I started thinking to myself. It’s not like my blood-related father is the only person who could ever be my father, but looking at the categories inside my head, Asamura Taichi had only been ‘Mom’s husband’ until a short while ago. And it was the same for Asamura Yuuta. We were simply living together, nothing more. However, when we went to visit the Asamura Family over New Year’s, both stepdad and Asamura-kun worked their hardest so that Mom and I could fit in with our relatives. They acted as pillars for that.

And because that happened, I wanted to do the same for both of them in case they went through something similar. Basically, I wanted us to be a family. He’s a stranger no longer. Taichi-san is my stepdad. And while thinking about this, I slid into his car.

“Did you put on your seatbelt?

Oh, yeah. He asked the same thing during New Year’s. I panicked and tried to put it on but it got stuck.

“I-I did.”

“Good, then let’s roll. I can just drop you off in front of the bookstore, right?”

“Yes.”

The car accelerated, and I was pressed into the seat. When walking this way, it’d usually take me more than ten minutes, but thanks to this, we’ll be there in no more than five. This should be easy.

“Thanks again.”

“I’m going to pick up Akiko-san after this, so I might as well.”

“Ah, is Mom out shopping?”

“Yeah. That’s why I figured I could use this as a chance to show off how good of a father I am.”

He’s going out of his way to say that so that I don’t need to feel bad about this. He’s such a kind person. Mom really managed to land a good catch with him.

“Even so... Thank you, this is a huge help.”

He’s someone that Mom can rely on. And if I had to guess, the same goes for him. That doesn’t mean you’re completely in your family’s care, and more that they trust each other. I think Asamura-kun said something about this before... about properly relying on others. Until now, I’ve always actively tried to avoid doing so... but it’s been half a year since then.

We were quickly moving away from the flat we live in. That's where Mom and I moved to. And the advice came from his senior at work, all for me. It all began with Yomiuri-san.

"It's fine, we'll make it in time."

"Ah... Yes." I gently rubbed my cheeks.

I'm about to start my shift, which is a job that involves me having to deal with customer requests. I can't look stiff in front of them. And if I had to guess, I was looking tense right about now.

"I was just... remembering some bad memories."

Stepdad looked at me and tilted his head. I'm sorry for giving such a weird response.

"Well... you seem very passionate about your studies. You're staying up late every day, right?"

He wanted to clear the awkwardness in the air and had changed the topic, I guess.

"Um, well... I was getting a bit engrossed with English conversations."

"Conversations? Are you struggling with them?"

"Not exactly..." I gave him a bitter smile. "I wouldn't call myself proficient, but I think I'm doing all right. It's just... we're heading to Singapore next week, so..."

"Ah, your field trip is right around the corner, isn't it?"

I nodded.

"And... It's also for my entrance exams. However, the reason I want to focus on it right now is that I'd like to be able to speak it as well as

possible when I'm over there. I've been practicing my listening skills for some time now, it's just..."

Stepdad listened to the end and nodded.



“Actual talking skills aren’t something you can just acquire by studying day in and out, after all.”

“Yes, that’s true.”

“But... isn’t that good enough? You’re not just studying for your entrance exams, after all. The vocabulary and language are used to communicate, so the motive of wanting to converse with the locals is admirable if you ask me.”

I’m not used to being praised upfront like this, so it made me feel rather bashful.

“I would have preferred to improve a bit more, though.”

“I mean, the field trip isn’t as big of a deadline as the entrance exams will be, so it’s fine if you use this as a test run.”

“That’s true.”

“Just don’t overdo it. Akiko-san will worry too much if you don’t get proper sleep.” He told me with a worried tone, so I nodded along resolutely.

And at the same time, the car stopped. We had reached the building with the bookstore.

“Have a good shift.”

“Thank you... Oh, yeah. I put chocolate in the fridge. It’s addressed to you, so you should be able to tell which one it is.”

Seeing Stepdad’s happy smile when I closed the door once again gave me the resolution to treasure this family of mine.

Work passed surprisingly quickly, and it was time for me to head home. I went to the office and informed the manager that I was leaving, and he praised me with “Good work. You did a great job today.” It’s probably because I worked extra hard since I almost arrived late. But since I didn’t expect these words, I was a bit surprised.

I replayed his words in my head while changing in the changing room, making me realize that I’d been getting a lot of praise today, especially from my elders. And to think that it was all for areas that I wasn’t even consciously working towards. That reminds me, someone during my shift was handing out obligatory chocolate, and yet I didn’t have any interest in that stuff and never saw it as necessary. But thinking back on it, the manager never saw me as just Asamura-kun’s little sister, and had called me “Ayase.”

I regretted not giving him some chocolate as a token of my gratitude. And at the same time, I was baffled to find myself thinking about this stuff. I’ve always assumed I would never be concerned about my gratitude and feelings towards other people, and yet—I was about to leave the changing room, but right when I was gonna open the door, Yomiuri-san walked in.

“Oh! You actually were here already. We almost missed each other by a second.”

“Good mor... No, good evening, Yomiuri-senpai.”

“My apologies, dear Phelps-chan.”

“Huh?”

“I won’t force you to head out for mission impossible, so can we just go back to our regular ‘Good evening’?”

I had no clue what all that was about, but since she clapped her hands together in prayer, I had trouble declining.

“Ah, sure. Good evening.”

“Are you on your way home right now?”

She stepped past me to enter the changing room, only to beckon me inside once again. She had a large department store bag hanging down her shoulder, and she took out two small bags.

“Here, I’m sharing the goods. I’ve got some candy. Got any preferences?”

“How are they different?”

“These ones are sweet. And these are spicy.”

...*Spicy candy?*

“They’re red pepper candy. I got them from a friend who came back from a trip.”

Ahh. That’s why she said ‘Sharing the goods’ earlier. Still, I understand the idea behind salty candy (which is actually sweet), but red pepper candy is just... spicy, no?

“Don’t sweat the small stuff. It’s an interesting bunch, so go get ‘em! One time I got durian candy, you know?”

The one with the pungent smell?

“Exactly. And it wasn’t even that fruity sweetness you’d expect. It was more like the scent was packed inside the candy itself. Just eating one made my tongue go numb from the bitterness!”

“...I’ll take the red pepper candy, thanks.”

I'll let someone else take the sweet candy. And I'm a bit interested in the idea of spicy candy, myself.

"Here you go. All right, that's all done. Now I won't be on the receiving end of your jealousy for giving your older brother chocolate."

"I wouldn't act that way."

Who would get jealous over that? Also... I see. She's gonna give Asamura-kun some chocolate later? I guess that makes sense, since they're colleagues. Yup, nothing wrong with that.

"Anyway... I'll be heading out, then."

"Oh, one more thing! You're away on your field trip next week, right? I'm so jelly! Have lots of fun for me, too, okay?"

"Thank you very much. I'll do that."

I stepped out of the room, only to then realize something. Did I... ever mention that we had a field trip next week? While walking through the front store, I snuck a glance at Asamura-kun. I imagine she must have heard it from him. And he's gonna be on a shift with her right after this...

Today is February 14th, which means I got to see lots of couples walking around Shibuya and its vicinity. They must be all out on Valentine's dates, I'd imagine. Well, Maaya would probably say something like 'If you wanna go on dates, do that on Saturday!' but I guess that's not necessarily the case. I see lots of couples, in fact. Upon arriving home, Stepdad and Mom were eating dinner together. I hadn't seen that in a while.

"Thanks for the chocolate. It was delicious," Stepdad said and thanked me as he spotted me entering.

That comment earned him an exasperated sigh from Mom, probably because he ate all of her chocolate cake, too. Maybe I should have given him something else with fewer calories. And while eating the white stew from this afternoon that Mom heated up for me, my thoughts once again drifted towards Asamura-kun and Yomiuri-san, wondering what they were doing right now. And then I realized that I... didn't like the fact that the two of them were together right now. Was I always this greedy and selfish of a person?

This emotion continued to stay somewhere deep within my heart, even after I moved to my room to study, so I couldn't focus at all. I shook my head left and right. I can't keep going like this.

"I should study somewhere else," I said out loud, grabbing my study items and leaving my room.

After moving to the living room, I restarted. I put my earphones in, trying to clear my head from any unnecessary thoughts, and instead focused on English. I placed a few English texts in front of me while listening to a recording of them at the same time. I wanted to try to understand what I heard without relying on the transcript. In other words, I wasn't going with a direct translation but instead attempted to understand the English I heard with my own English. After all, people who speak English don't take the extra step of translation inside their heads.

However, saying is easy; doing is hard... Wait, no. That was too Japanese again. Let's see... *Easier said than done*, was it? I have to rephrase what I hear in English... But I don't feel like I'm *doing* that at all. English conversations are so complicated...

*'I mean, the field trip isn't as big of a deadline as the entrance exams will be, so it's fine if you use this as a test run.'*

I remembered what Stepdad said, replaying his words in my mind. Language and words are there to be used for communication. To understand the thoughts and feelings of someone else, as well as to express those things to someone else. It'll become an important part of my future, not just for exams. Just doing what I can isn't good enough. And finally, I started to think more and more in English, as the Japanese vocabulary disappeared from my mind. And yet, my heart was in such disarray that I didn't even notice that the door to the living room had opened.

I raised my head and uttered the first thing that came to mind. The fact that it turned out to be Japanese is probably an indication that your mother tongue will always be stronger than any secondary language acquired.

“Welcome back.”

Standing in front of me was Asamura-kun with a sports bag hanging down his shoulder. He must have just gotten home from work. I took out my earphones and stood up. While doing so, I glanced at the time on my phone... Oh, it's pretty early. If I had to guess, Asamura-kun probably came home right after his shift ended.

“Would you like to eat dinner?”

He nodded in response, so I began preparing everything. Thankfully, Stepdad didn't eat much of the white stew, so there was plenty left for Asamura-kun. He went to his room, only to turn around and return to the kitchen. Without a word, he opened the fridge and was about to place something from his bag inside it. I happened to catch a glance of it and called out to him.

“That...” My gaze was glued to his hands.

Needless to say, he was holding chocolate. It must be from Yomiuri-san. She made it obvious that she would give him some. Meanwhile,

Asamura-kun wasn't too flustered. He just stated what I expected, showing me the chocolate he received. However, the package looked oddly familiar.

"Ah."

It was a popular brand of chocolate where even one small piece was expensive enough to buy a whole sweet bread slice. As a high school student, it's not something I could afford to buy just to hand over as obligatory chocolate. Without really meaning to, I asked "This is obligatory chocolate, right?" only to immediately feel embarrassed at myself. It's not just that I wanted to make sure, but even more so that I was doubtful if I could even forgive any other answer than that. I had no idea I could be this narrow-minded. And to finish it off, Yomiuri-san's face popped up in the back of my head.

'With this, I won't be on the receiving end of your jealousy for giving your older brother chocolate.'

This is just as she predicted it. I opted to cut our conversation there and focus on preparing his food for him. Other than the main white stew, we had seaweed, as well as other boiled vegetables from the fridge. It's pretty late, so anything lighter that's easier on his stomach should be better here. Stepdad didn't eat much because he had Mom's cake and my chocolate, so there's even some dessert left over for him. And... there's the red box inside the fridge. The chocolate. After I put all the food on the table and Asamura-kun thanked me, I ran my mouth again.

"Just give me a moment, there's one more thing."

He tilted his head in confusion as I placed a red bottle in front of him.

"The dessert's gonna be sweet, so I figured a bit of spice would mix in better," I added as a miserable excuse. "You can just use it as you see fit. Anyway, I'll go back to studying," I said, almost sounding like I

wanted to escape, and returned to my room with all my studying items.

Sitting down at my desk, I held my head in despair.

“God... I’m so pathetic.”

In front of me was the small wrapped candy Yomiuri-san had given me. I took it out of the plastic and stuffed it into my mouth.

“Mgh, spicy!”

Really... just what am I doing?



## ***Chapter 3: February 16th (Tuesday) - Asamura Yuuta***

The sounds of balls slamming against the wooden gym hall floor reverberated inside my head. Each time, I could hear the ear-splitting screeches of the students' shoes as they slid along the ground. And despite this being the 5th period of the day, a voice energetic enough to shatter all the tension set itself apart from these sounds.

“Give it to me!”

A single boy ran towards the basket. At first glance, his body may have seemed dull in movement because he wasn't slim-built. Still, as if to betray this first impression, the boy wearing glasses dashed as fast as the wind, wearing armor made of muscle as impressive as you'd expect from the catcher of the baseball club despite only being in his second year.

“Maru, carry it home!”

With my shout, Maru accepted the orange ball I threw towards him, swiftly making it past the opponent's defense, bending his knees to crouch down. However, like a spring that was finally free after being pushed down, his legs stretched out and he jumped high into the air. The ball he held in both hands quickly moved to only his right, as he went for a layup, the ball leaving his hand—

“Like hell I'll let you do that!”

Right before the ball departed from Maru's hand, another hand appeared and slammed down against his. Immediately after, a sharp whistling sound filled the air.

“Foul!”

Landing on the ground, Maru made a devilish grin, and the boy who caused the foul could only grit his teeth in anger. With the free throw given to him, Maru secured the victory for us and walked to the outside of the court as he gasped for air.

“Great work out there.”

“Thanks. Though I can still keep going.”

As the exact opposite of Maru, many other boys had sunk to the ground, completely out of steam. They groaned in pain and exhaustion, and the teacher complained about how they simply didn’t get enough exercise. Meanwhile, the other half of the gym hall was being used by the girls, who were busy playing volleyball, filling the air with their own screams and cheers. The one who was the loudest was, to nobody’s surprise, Ayase-san’s friend Narasaka-san.

I’m pretty sure I just heard her scream about her finger being broken or whatever. She probably got hit the wrong way by the ball (since if it was really broken, it’d cause a major uproar), but volleyball can still be a pretty tough sport.

Maru also glanced over at the girls. “We’re gonna be off for our field trip starting tomorrow, eh?”

Hearing that, I sighed. That also means it’s flight time, too.

“What’s that sigh for, my friend?”

“I’m scared.”

“What?”

“Do you know why planes can fly in the sky, Maru?”

“Bernoulli’s law, right? Through the upwards and downwards movement of wings, the air flowing on the surface of the wing is

sped up—or rather, changed—which can allow you to create a difference in pressure. This atmospheric pressure becomes lower when it's up, and higher when it's low, generating a force that pushes the object upward. This is what's known as Bernoulli's theorem, and it explains how dynamic lift is created. In short, by changing the conditions, you can change the flow of the air by moving your wing flaps up and down. I do understand the framework of how you change the flow of air, but explaining that takes a long time and is a pain. Wanna hear it anyway?"

"We're having PE right now, so I'll pass."

I'd rather get a lecture about that right before a physics exam, to be honest.

"Well, it's perfectly normal to be scared of drowning even if we float in the water, and although we know that there are involuntary muscles that keep our heart moving, we're still afraid that our heart might just stop one day. That fear isn't logical, which it doesn't have to be," he said and laughed, forcing another sigh out of me.

That's absolutely right. I accept how it all works, but I can't just accept it and simply not be scared.

"I keep thinking about the worst-case scenarios. What if we actually fall from the sky?"

"The odds aren't zero, but in return, it's also a possibility that the sky's gonna fall onto earth tomorrow, ending all life here. Granted, it's not the best comparison."

"I get where you're coming from, but..."

*Now hold on. How's the sky gonna fall on us?*

“If you’re worried about an elevator you’re about to take crashing into the ground, you’ll just be exhausted whenever you leave the house.”

“I mean, I’m used to elevators. But this is my first time traveling by plane.”

“You’ve just gotta get rid yourself of your fears by imagining how fun it’ll be once we’ve landed. Imagine how great you’ll feel once you’re finally off the plane again.”

“Seeing the fun... huh? Do you have something like that?”

“Naturally. There are lots of casinos in Singapore, right? I’d love to check one out myself.”

“I highly doubt that’ll work out for you.”

Granted, casinos in Singapore aren’t illegal... But you have to be of age to see one from the inside. And if you’re not 21, then you’ll have to pay a criminal fine.

“How do you know that? The laws might just change tomorrow and change the age of adulthood from 21 years to 17.”

“Yeaah... I wouldn’t bet on those odds.”

And if such a major change were about to happen in Singapore, we’d probably be seeing that in the news.

“However, my dear Asamura, things like gambling are illegal in Japan, even if you are of age, right?”

“That’s also true.”

“Why is it that some places allow and some places prohibit these things, even though they entail the exact same action?”

...Ah, crap. I shouldn't have brought up that whole "Why do planes fly" nonsense. As usual, a switch in Maru's head was flipped and now he's trying to argue about anything and everything. Despite us being on break during PE class, he was now warming up to talk about laws and all that.

"Um, well... Isn't it because of the intricate history and origin of the countries in question?"

I think I read something like this in a science-fiction novel before. Because of a certain disease, the male population has been drastically reduced, pretty much eradicated, which forced the women to rebuild the country, and the female shogun was given a male harem, as a polygamous system was established in that world. I think the existence of these circumstances is what led to the creation of a law like that. That's why certain laws get passed, while others get rejected.

"So basically, the rules of society aren't absolute, and if the circumstances change, so may the rules?"

"I... guess?"

"Then it's perfectly possible for casinos to open up to people above the age of 17."

"That... is a leap, I think."

In fact, your leap just brought us five seasons past where we currently were.

"There's nothing vaguer than regulations and laws related to age, Asamura. Even in our beloved Japan, you were regarded as an adult at 20 years not too long ago. We've gone down two whole years now."

"That's true... But we're talking about a leap of four years in your case."

"What I'm trying to say..." Maru said and stood up to grab a ball that came rolling his way.

He slammed it on the ground a few times, switching between his left and right hand to skillfully control the ball's movement. Can I just point out how unfair it is that he's skilled at baseball and even pulls off this at least when playing basketball? I stood up after Maru, trying to steal the ball from him as he dribbled left and right. He, however, stepped backward and easily evaded me.

"I'm over here. I'm not gonna let you take it this easily."

"I wonder how long that confident smirk of yours will last... though!"

"Close, but no cigar."

Maru pulled another faint to evade my approaching hand, turning his back toward me and blocking me from reaching the ball, using his body as a shield.

"This ain't fair. I request a handicap."

"What are you blabbering about? On the court, we're all equal."

"If it's a 1-on-1 between someone skilled at sports and someone who isn't, then I stand no chance."

"Basketball is outside my range of expertise. We've got the same level of experience."

"But not when it comes to the general amount of exercise... Ugh!"

I tried to slip behind him, but even as we exchanged these lines, Maru carefully avoided my approaching hand. Talking like this while

playing basketball is just too much. I stopped in my tracks and gasped for air as Maru continued to dribble.

“Anyway, Asamura.”

“Hm?”

“What I’m trying to say is that... prohibiting something because I’m too young is a regulation I can’t accept.”

And what a Maru-like reason it was.

“I get where you’re coming from.”

“Sure, there’s bound to be people who ruin their lives by gambling. However, if that is so bad, then you should prohibit it as a whole for all ages. However, it’s just four years. What difference do these four years make in the end?”

Was he that desperate to check out the casinos?

“Isn’t it because young minds can be influenced much more easily by alcohol, cigarettes, or drugs?”

“I would agree if we limit this to younger children and elementary school kids. However, we’re 17 now,” he said as he started dribbling toward the inner ring of the field.

I see how it is. Maru wants to be treated like an adult. While switching the ball between his left and right hand, he continued dribbling. He’s only five meters away from the basket, so I had to quickly chase after him—But that turned out to be impossible. I managed to graze his back only a bit, but that was all I could do. He stepped forward once, twice, and then... He stretched out his legs and arms, throwing the ball towards the basket. It drew a beautiful arc mid-air, and it landed inside the metal ring and down the net.

Landing on the ground again, the ball bounced a few times until it ended up at the wall.

“Anyway, all I’m saying is that, at 17, I think it’d be fine to let us take responsibility for what we want to do.”

“I get what you’re trying to tell me, but even if you line up flawed argument after argument like that, we still won’t get inside Singapore’s casinos. And also—” I continued while gasping for air and recounting how many steps he had just taken during that layup.

“Traveling is against the rules.”

“Saw right through me, eh?” Maru laughed. “I know, I know. I was just joking... about the casinos.”

6th period was our last homeroom. We sat together discussing the last few details about our upcoming field trip—Or put simply, we just blabbered about whatever we wanted. We did have to sit together in our trip groups, but there really wasn’t much to discuss. Not the day before the trip, at least. We had already decided on our rough plans for our free time, and the school had their own schedule for the rest of the time, so this was just our last check, so to speak. Our groups for our free time were made up of six people. Usually, you’d have three boys and three girls.

“So... Our general highlights are the Mandai Zoo and the night safari on the second day. On the third day, as long as we don’t stray from Sentosa Island, we’ll probably be given a lot of freedom. We can buy souvenirs and just enjoy the scenery.”

“Nice work, Leader Maru! I’m glad our group’s plan is so relaxed.”

“I gathered all of you like this because I knew you’d say that,” Group leader Maru grinned, earning him a round of applause from the other group members.

I preferred a more chill schedule like that, so I didn't mind. I can't say I'm too good at forming a concrete schedule and keeping it tight and on time.

"Is there anything else we have to check?"

"Oh, right. Make sure you set up your phones correctly. You really don't want to rack up a crazy bill because of this. Other than that, make sure to keep in contact and be on time when we have to gather up."

Once more, all group members, including me, nodded. With that done, our group meeting ended, and we simply waited until the final bell rang. Other than the people on cleaning duty, the rest of us were now free to go, so I grabbed my bag and made my way to the front entrance. Granted, I didn't have to rush anywhere since I had taken the week off from work, but I wanted to make sure I had everything packed for tomorrow. When I stepped out into the hallway, I realized that nobody was there. Nobody had left their respective classrooms, and yet I could hear their voices reaching me. I imagined they were still discussing things for the field trip. I could feel how excited everyone was. Which is fine, of course, but I was worried they'd all end up exhausted before the real trip even began.

Upon arriving home, I took out everything I had already packed in my suitcase I bought just for this trip to make sure I wasn't missing anything. Along with the general list of items we needed, Maru had also shared a personal list he made for our group. With my phone in one hand, I went through everything on the general list, as well as the documents Maru made as I packed them into my suitcase. Usually, Maru's pretty relaxed, but the checklist had all of the important things on it. Especially cash, passport, and phone were highlighted as very important items.

If it's just a sightseeing trip, you don't need a visa to enter Singapore. All you need is a passport. However, that won't count if the passport's about to expire. You need to have at least half a year of leeway for it to be valid. Our homeroom teacher warned us about that a while back, with a lot of folks nodding along, so I'm guessing they regularly travel overseas.

And surprisingly, there were a lot of them. This is my first trip overseas, as well as my first time flying on a plane, so I'm simply riddled with fear and terror or what would happen if we crashed. And the fact that I'm far more inexperienced than the people around me only adds to my feeling of restlessness. Since I was getting close to breaking point, I once again remembered Maru's words earlier.

'You've just gotta get rid of your fears by imagining how fun it'll be once we land.'

I grabbed my phone and searched for some more information about Singapore, just so that I had something to look forward to. Since I'd finished packing all my luggage, this was about all I could think of to relax until we actually take off. After that, I was reading some of the digital book releases I had bought when I heard Ayase-san calling my name. When I checked the time on my phone, I realized it was probably about dinnertime. I responded through the door and left my room. Looking inside the room, I saw Ayase-san placing the food on the dining table.

"Sorry. I was so engrossed in my book that I didn't realize what time it was." I hurriedly sat down on my chair as a bowl of steaming hot rice was placed in front of me.

"*Let's eat!*" Ayase-san said in English with a teasing smile.

I was a bit bewildered, but since that line was fairly simple, I had no problem understanding what she meant.

“Um...” I asked with hesitation. “Let’s eat?”

Ayase-san smiled once again. It seems like I nailed the translation. Granted, we say *itadakimasu* when starting our meal and *gochisousama* when we’re done, but these two generally don’t have a direct equivalent when it comes to English, so *Let’s eat* is probably the closest thing. Satisfied with my response, Ayase-san switched to regular Japanese.

“I’ve been working hard on my listening and hearing this past month, so I felt the urge to test myself.”

“Um...?”

“How about we try to talk only in English for a while?”

Ah, that’s what this is about.

“I’m not too sure if I can pull that off...”

“*Let’s try!*”

Hm... Well, it might be a bit embarrassing, but only Ayase-san and I are here right now.

“G-Got it... Wait, no. *OK*,” I nodded. In response, Ayase-san smiled again and then suddenly switched to English.

“*Are you ready for your school trip?*”

I was hesitant for a moment, but I was able to analyze each word in my head and grasp the meaning. Following that, I responded.

“*Of course, I am ready.*”

“*Where are you going in your free-activity time with your friends?*”

“Ah... *We are going to Singapore Zoo in Mandai on the second day and Sentosa Island on the third day.*”

I somehow managed to respond, but I heavily relied on easy vocabulary, probably butchering the grammar as I did so. Since Ayase-san was speaking slowly, I could figure out what she was saying, but when it was my turn to talk, I couldn't speak as calmly and naturally as she did. And while saying it out loud, I realized that I only remembered the local names and places with my Japanese accent. I wonder how it'd sound locally? If I said it as I would to my friends here, would they understand Mandai or Sentosa? I might have to adjust that if I end up taking a taxi somewhere, for example.

We continued to discuss our field trip for a while longer when Ayase-san changed the topic to the food in front of us. I tried my hardest to keep up with her, frantically translating the words she said into Japanese inside my head, finding the English equivalent when speaking.

*“Is dinner good?”*

*“So good! Especially this... uh... AJI-OPEN is excellent!”*

The moment I finished my sentence, Ayase-san burst out laughing.

*“I’m sorry... But translating *aji no hiraki* to AJI-OPEN is hilarious.”*

*“I mean, I didn’t know how to phrase it on the spot.”*

*“Aji here is horse mackerel,”* Ayase-san explained with beautiful pronunciation.

*“Horse mackerel? Like, a horse carriage horse? H-O-R-S-E?”*

*“Exactly. That’s how you spell it. And the *mackerel* part is the fish mackerel.”*

*“How confusing.”*

“I mean, I’m pretty sure foreigners would be even more confused to see the kanji 鯖 for mackerel and 鰈 for horse mackerel. We’re more used to it with the kanji, after all.”

“That’s true... If I called it a horse-ish mackerel, would English speakers think of horse mackerel?”

I mean, what even is horse-ish mackerel in the first place?

“There’s a lot of possibilities. At least according to what I looked up, you can add the *horse* to the beginning which then creates the -ish automatically, or it can also mean that the origin of the word is Dutch, but I don’t know which is which.”

“So there’s no guarantee that calling it mackerel from the horse will get across, either.”

Words sure are complicated... But there’s also some fun in that.

“And continuing from there, *aji no hiraki* would be *horse mackerel, cut open and dried*.”

“*Cut open*? Like, sliced open, huh? And then dried.”

“Exactly.”

“I’m surprised you knew that.”

“Actually, I was looking it up just now while making the miso soup,” she grinned like a little child, showing how resourceful she could be. “Either way, I wanted to learn some more vocabulary related to food and cooking. Especially when it comes to ingredients or when you’re out shopping. It’ll be useful if I end up cooking outside of Japan.”

Even so, I don’t think you’d look up the origin of a word just for that. I can’t tell if she’s too diligent for her own good or just thirsty for knowledge.

“Are you thinking of studying overseas?”

“If it becomes necessary. Right now, I have no such plans.”

Since we returned to Japanese, we just continued like that. Of course, that makes it a lot easier for me.

“Your English pronunciation sounds so clean, Ayase-san.”

“Really?”

“I still think I just sound like a Japanese person speaking English, so I’m not sure if the locals will even understand me.”

And she had a much easier time responding to what I said. Oh man, now I’m even more worried about our trip. I told this to Ayase-san, and she had a pensive look on her face.

“Responding... Well, I’m just trying to think in English as much as possible when I listen to it. Though I don’t think you need to be so pessimistic about it.”

“Really?”

“English is used by people across the whole world, so it makes sense that accents vary. It’s definitely not on the level of something you have to worry about,” Ayase-san said and finished up the conversation by saying “I hope we manage to properly talk with the locals on our trip,” and she finished drinking the after-meal tea.

Granted, I was worried about my pronunciation, but I guess I can leave that aside for now. Just as Maru said, I’ll look forward to all the joys starting tomorrow. While we were busy cleaning up the table, my old man came home. He said he’d take his bath tomorrow morning, so he urged us to take our baths now and head to bed.

And since we had to get up at 4 am, we didn't have enough time to take long baths either. I myself got out relatively quickly, put in new water, and finished changing. Then I knocked on Ayase-san's room to tell her that the bath was free. Once I received a response, I returned to my room. Oh yeah, the hair conditioner my old man and I were using is almost completely empty. If I'd known that, I would have bought a new bottle while shopping for the necessities for the field trip. And since my old man's sound asleep right about now, there was no point telling him. Akiko-san was still working, too. And I doubt I'll have time to let her know tomorrow.

...I guess I should just write a note to them about it. I wrote a brief message on a piece of paper and placed it on the dining table. After that, I went back to my room and made a last-minute struggle to look up local names and their pronunciation, but I eventually just gave up and started reading some more of the books I owned. By the time I was done with that, it was already past 9 pm. I figured I might as well head to bed now, but then someone knocked on my door.

"Are you awake?" It was Ayase-san, whispering.

I was a bit bewildered and I wondered what she wanted as I opened the door.

"Could you come to my room?"

"Your room?" I nodded and looked around outside my room.

"Hurry." She grabbed my hand and pulled me out of my room.

The door to our parents' bedroom was closed, and only a faint light illuminated the living room. We headed further than that, past the living room. Right now, my old man should be sound asleep. We had one room and two doors between us. This far away, he shouldn't be able to hear us as long as we don't talk too loudly. And that's fine, but we decided to act as particularly close siblings when our parents

were around... Actually, that's not correct. We decided to act as close siblings in front of them... which is why it should be fine as long as they don't find us.

Maru had asked me if I assumed that all couples were fine flirting around in front of others. And for us, who had confirmed our feelings for each other, even I felt like we weren't doing too many things that lovers would do.

In the end, I was dragged inside my step-sister's room. The light was turned on, and it was as clean as I remembered it. What first stood out to me was a red suitcase standing near the left wall, which presumably held Ayase-san's luggage for tomorrow. Right after I entered, Ayase-san turned the key to her room horizontally and locked the door. While I was standing there confused, her arm reached for the light switch next to the door. With a clicking noise, the bright light inside the room vanished, only leaving a dimming ceiling light to illuminate the darkness. In this state where I could only barely make out her silhouette, I mentally prepared myself with my back toward the door. Shortly after, I heard a voice close enough I could pick up her faint breathing.

"Asamura-kun."

"Yes."

I could somewhat guess what she wanted to say. Thinking back on it, ever since we went on that first shrine visit, we hadn't even held hands or anything of that sort. Even so, we could see each other practically daily, and there were lots of times we could eat dinner with just the two of us. However, with the upcoming field trip, as well as being in different groups, we probably won't even get to see each other too much for the next four days... probably.

“We might not be able to see each other for the next four days, right? So, well...” She spoke hesitantly, and the words slowly left her lips.

“Wait. Can I say what I want to say first?”

“Then let me, too.”

“Erm... How about we say it at the same time, then?”

“Okay.”

We paused for a moment and then spoke up as our voices overlapped.

**“I want to kiss you.”**

**“I’d like to...kiss you.”**



We both laughed at the same time and then whispered to each other. Saying ‘We can’t do this for a while, huh?’ and ‘That’s true’ as we moved our faces closer to each other. The scent of soap drifted up from Ayase-san’s body, tickling my nose. Inside this darkness, Ayase-san’s fingertips touched my chest. She moved close to me so that I could smell her hair a few centimeters away from me. Subconsciously, I placed my hands on her shoulders. This action was to reaffirm her existence, and at the same time, it symbolized my restraint to go any further than this.

At the same time, Ayase-san placed her hand on my shoulder, too. While only relying on her faint silhouette, I pressed my lips on hers. Once a few seconds passed. I could feel her put more strength into her hand on my shoulder as she pressed on it with her fingertips. This ended up being the signal to separate our lips. Ayase-san let out a faint breath that made my brain freeze completely. Her body moved away from my hands, and I returned to my senses.

“Good night.”

“Good night... Ayase-san.”

After returning to my room, I pressed my eyes shut inside my bed. I was worried that I might not be able to sleep after that.

## **Chapter 4: February 16th (Tue) - Ayase Saki**

Ten minutes before the bell rang, I was already seated in my seat. It was my morning routine, so to speak. Assuming nothing else got between me and my ritual, I would open my textbooks, open my notes, and read through everything once more to help me mentally relax. I've been doing this ever since middle school. However, in my second year in high school, there was always something that got in the way.

“Sakiii!”

And that something's name was Maaya. She's been at it for a while now, but it seems like the more seasons pass, the greater the level of energy she keeps up every morning to talk to me. I wonder why. I can't fathom it. Oh well...

“Class is gonna start, you know?”

“What are you talking about?!”

“...Huh?”

“The bell hasn't rung yet, right?”

I mean... it will ring in five minutes max. And isn't that the point at which you should prepare for the next class?

“Seriously, what? Our field trip starts tomorrow, right?!”

...Wait, am I the weird one?

“It's the one and only field trip in high school, remember?”

“That is true.”

“How could I not be excited about that? I can’t just sit still. I wanna jump up and dance! That’s how crazy excited I am!”

“I think that’s just crazy, yeah.”

“Not at all! Gaze at it, Saki! Let me show you the world!”

So she said as she wrapped her right arm around me. I followed her movement and looked at the other students. They were all sitting in circles, talking about this and that. I swear, class is about to start... And looking over, I even found a group of six, boys and girls alike, totally excited. The person in the center must be Shinjou-kun. Our eyes happened to meet and he waved his hand at me. But... why did he remind me of a puppy who looked up at me all happy when we were on a walk?

“Shinjou-kun’s really nailing it as the group leader.”

“Ah, right. Also, I’m impressed. You know who’s in all the other groups?”

“I remember every single group and member of this class.”

That is impressive. I don’t really have any friends, so I didn’t even know what to do when we had to get into groups, but she’s completely different from me. I just spaced out until she got invited by Maaya herself. Still, I don’t really see any reason to get this excited. But when I told Maaya that, she just sighed at me in disbelief.

“Whaaaaat?!”

“...You’re exaggerating again.”

“Saki, do you really get it? We’re going overseas! It’s so out of the norm for us! And you’re basically living with your classmates for a

few days! There might even be a love or two blooming amid these special circumstances and environment.”

“We’re not living inside a novel.”

“You just don’t get it! Just like heroes of justice have their goodwill pre-installed, we youthful 17-year-old girls have a healthy interest in love hankered deep inside of us! And what awaits us in a foreign country is a blossoming love... as well as a farewell!”

So a breakup is still gonna happen?

“That’s what transient love is all about. Ever seen ‘Roman Holiday’?”

“Sure.”

I know the basic gist. I’ve studied all the famous works, after all. And on that note, a blooming love, huh? It’s just a single trip, so I’m not sure if such a thing will really be born only to disappear immediately after. Asamura-kun and I started living together eight months ago, and it took us about five months from becoming interested in each other to confess our feelings. From then on, the other three months passed without any major change. In fact, with this field trip coming up... won’t we end up more distanced than we’ve been before?

We’ll be apart from each other. And we might not even get to see each other for the next four days. Upon realizing this, I became aware that I was feeling a lot more anxious about this than I would have liked to admit. Every time I think about him having fun with his classmates in his group, a gloomy feeling fills my chest. But feeling like this isn’t healthy. It’s not good for me. I should think about something else.

Since this is just a regular field trip, I should find a simpler way to enjoy it. And the original goal of a field trip is to learn. I should find an academic drive for this field trip. Any wicked thoughts should be

expelled. My maiden-in-love train of thought switch flipped off. A student's main motivation should be to study. There's nothing to be anxious over. Nothing at all.

"Hey, Saki! How do I say 'Hey lady, wanna grab some tea with me?' in English?"

Huh? That sure came out of nowhere. But either way, I booted up my English mode and thought about it.

"...*Young lady, why don't you drink tea with me? Maybe?*"

"I see, I see."

"Who are you going to invite with that?"

"I'm not inviting anybody. I just needed to know in case I get invited! And, what about *I'm sorry, I'm actually waiting for someone*, then? Wooo!"

What's she getting so excited for? But alas, her fantasies continued until the homeroom teacher entered the classroom and reprimanded her. Recently, this is what my before-class routine has become.

Classes ended for the day. Since I didn't have any work, I just had to make my way home.

"Hmm..."

After passing through the school gate, I looked up at the white and cloudy winter sky. There was still plenty of daylight left, and quite some time until evening would arrive. Which makes sense, since we were halfway through February. From here on out, afternoon time would stretch out more and more. And the long nights I dreaded during the winter days would grow shorter and shorter. Finally, the plums will grow, cherry blossom petals will fill the trees, and we all will become third-year students—and examinees.

Once the field trip ends, I'll probably have to put even more attention and focus into my studies. Maybe I won't even get much time to go to the pool. Or watch a movie. Or do some window shopping... Will all my time be stolen away by my studies?

"Well, that's to be expected from an examinee," I blurted out.

And as I caught myself feeling like that, I shook my head to get rid of these thoughts, sighing along. Wanting to hang out with others... I never would have imagined myself to one day wish for these things. It must be Maaya's influence. Or possibly even—No, I shook my head again. All this thinking is just pulling me down. I can't be feeling down with the field trip right around the corner.

While making sure I walked on the corner of the road, ensuring I didn't get in anybody's way, I took out my phone, opened my map, and checked where I currently was. Hm... Tomorrow, we'll be overseas... Overseas, huh? I typed "Embassy" into the search window. Immediately after, I was shown various embassies here in Japan.

"Ah, there's one near here."

It's called the 'Denmark Embassy.' I clicked on it and checked the details. Going from the school near Shibuya station, you have to cross Hachiman Street, and then walk for about ten minutes. The distance says it's around 1 km away. It's not too far of a walk there, and it's also not too far from our flat, either.

Well, it'll at least clear my head, I guess. I made my way to the embassy in an attempt to get excited about the field trip, but that didn't really work out too well. It's more like practice. Granted, Maaya would say something like 'Why not go to the 'Embassy of the Republic of Singapore,' but that's an hour away on foot. It's not close enough for me to just nonchalantly walk to. That's why I went with

the Danish Embassy. It took me on a different route than I would usually walk to our flat, so I first made my way to Hachiman street to the south.

After passing the Shuto expressway Shibuya station, I made my way farther. I know I live here near Shibuya, but I don't know all the street names by heart, so I periodically stopped and checked the map again. Once I came across Hachiman street, I made my way south until it met up with the old Yamate street. From there, I returned to the Shibuya side and eventually reached the embassy. It was an old building made of brick. Judging from the number of windows I could count, it seemed to be three floors tall. The side facing the road was slightly curved, creating a space for cars to park.

The sign at the front read 'Denmark Embassy' in Japanese, with large English text on the top, reading *Royal Danish Embassy*. Since I encountered unfamiliar words in that, I first looked them up. A direct translation would be 'Denmark Kingdom Embassy', huh? Oh, right, Denmark's a kingdom, isn't it? I could see the coat of arms on top of the logo. A red ellipse framed the portrait, and there was a crown and a shield inside... A crown, even! It really set in then that Denmark was a kingdom.

The world is a vast place and there are countless things I don't know of. I was just fine indulging in this feeling of experiencing something foreign when I realized that a lot of the people passing by were giving me dubious glances. I guess I must have stood out a bit since I was just staring at the building for a while. I stopped looking up at the building and turned around. I instead glanced down at the opposite side of the street, spotting a cafe directly adjacent to a national bookstore chain. They even had benches there. I might as well take a break there, I figured. I looked for the pedestrian crossing to then make my way back to that cafe.

I imagine it must have been because I was near the embassy, but I could clearly pick out a lot more foreigners passing by. And I saw a lot of couples consisting of a Japanese person and a foreigner in these groups. It's a familiar scene I'd often see when walking down the entertainment district in Shibuya, but the frequency is a bit higher here. I wonder what it feels like to go out with someone who speaks a different language and has different traditions than you. But then I realized that people from the Kanto and Kansai region are also quite similar in that regard. It's probably a byproduct of places where there's lots of traffic.

And in fact, all people are different. Asamura-kun and I might have a lot in common, but we differ from each other in a lot of ways, too. How we eat our fried eggs, for example.

*“Excuse me.”*

I heard a voice calling out to me, which was immediately followed by my realization that it was English. Turning around, I saw a blond man who should be around Stepdad's age. He was even wearing faintly-brown sunglasses. I returned his gaze, and he started asking me something in English. Since he spoke a bit too fast for me to follow, I was lost in thought for a moment. Thankfully, he repeated himself but at a slower pace, which allowed me to directly translate what he was asking me.

‘I’m looking for the embassy. Could you help me?’

Since the word *Embassy* popped up, I figured he was probably about the only one around here.

‘Do you mean the Danish Embassy?’

‘Yes! That’s right! Do you know it?’

‘Let me show you the way,’ I said as I walked back the same way I came.

I guided him to the embassy, and he thanked me several times. Honestly, I didn’t do anything that major. In fact, I was worried if he understood my English.

‘I’m sorry if my pronunciation was a bit hard to understand,’ I said with an apologetic tone as we were about to separate again.

‘Hm? It wasn’t an issue. At all.’

‘Really?’

‘You spoke very clearly, which made it easy to understand. And even if English is used globally, there are a lot of different accents and dialects. Once you get used to that, it’s easy to understand most of it.’

Even the stiff pronunciation I felt I had could be regarded as just another type of accent, and he said there was nothing I should be apologizing for. Considering he even tried to cheer me up, he was really a polite person. On my way back home, I once again realized that some things can only be understood by interacting with others. And firsthand experience is the best teacher. This might be the reason we have field trips in the first place. And this realization allowed me to look forward to the field trip a bit more.

Once I made it back to our flat, I saw that Asamura-kun was busy preparing for tomorrow. I had to follow his example and get everything checked. Then again, I had already packed most of my belongings, so I just had to do one final look over everything. And once that’s done, we should probably eat dinner. Since this was our first trip overseas, Mom said she’d make dinner today and breakfast tomorrow for us. After checking everything over, I called out to Asamura-kun through his room door. Immediately after, I got a

response, saying he'd be right there. I finished preparing everything on the dining room table. I scooped up some rice from the cooker and put it inside a bowl, placing it in front of Asamura-kun. And then I decided to test him a bit.

"*Let's eat!*"

Asamura-kun hesitated, his eyes blinking at me in confusion.

"Um... Let's eat?"

I'm glad he understood me. Actually, I was probably feeling a bit excited at the fact that I had managed to properly talk with that blond-haired gentleman from before.

"I've been working hard on my listening and hearing this past month, so I felt the urge to test myself," I said and suggested we try to talk in English for the rest of our dinner.

Asamura-kun agreed, so we switched to English. However, that didn't mean I was suddenly super confident in my English skills, and I wasn't too confident in my pronunciation, either. That's why I chose to keep the topic limited to our field trip. Where are you going? What are your plans? Are you looking forward to something in particular? After listening to all his answers, I realized I had pretty much just questioned him about his group's plans for the trip. Surprisingly enough, some of the places they planned to visit were on our list as well, so we might actually run into each other.

And at the same time, a certain thought crossed my mind. I realized how fun it may have been if we got to enjoy this trip together... and that it might be a bit boring. After all, I won't get to eat dinner with Asamura-kun like this for the next few days. Not to mention that we won't have any shifts at work together, either. We'll walk to Narita together, which is where all the classes are going to meet up for departure, but once we get to the airport, we'll have to say goodbye,

since we're in different classes and groups. I won't even be able to see his face for the next four days.

After a while, I switched the topic from the field trip to dinner today. Asamura-kun made me burst out laughing because he tried to awkwardly translate a word he didn't know the English equivalent of. And with that as a signal, we returned to speaking regular Japanese. I think I may have laughed a bit too much because Asamura-kun seemed really concerned with his "Japanese person's pronunciation." In my mind, I gasped. It's exactly what I'd been worried about when I spoke to that gentleman. He's worried about the same thing as me.

That's why I told him exactly what that man said to me earlier. The English speakers in this world all have their own accents and dialects, so it's fine if your pronunciation is a bit off from the "norm." Even Japan has dialects that are incredibly difficult to understand, so to repeat what that man said, it's most important to speak slowly and clearly. In that regard, Asamura-kun should be fine. He should just do as he did with me during dinner, and he'll be fine for the field trip. That's how I tried to cheer him up, and I'll be going in with the same mindset.

We finished cleaning up the dishes when Stepdad came home.

"Would you like me to warm up your dinner?" I asked him.

"You've got your field trip starting early tomorrow, right? Just get ready and head to bed. Don't worry about little old me," he said and smiled.

"Okay... Thanks a lot. We'll do just that."

"Yeah. Also, I've gotta wake you both up at 4 am tomorrow, right?"

Both Asamura-kun and I nodded. Of course, we planned on being up by then, ourselves. And since Mom was coming home around that time, I don't think there was any chance of us oversleeping.

However, Stepdad asked about our schedule a while back and promised to wake us up in time, and said that he'd even drive us to the train station if it looked like we'd be late. And since he offered to take his bath in the morning, Asamura-kun and I went to take ours now, with him taking his first.

I headed back to my room to do one final check. I got my passport, and I even packed the 'Trip Guidebook — Doujin Version'...although I'm still lost about what this doujin version is about. It's probably another of her weird jokes. But that should be all. I'm pretty sure I haven't forgotten anything.

At around the same time, Asamura-kun finished his bath, so I took mine. Once that was done, I immediately headed to bed and closed my eyes. And yet, the only thing on my mind was the ridiculous exchange Asamura-kun and I had during dinner. I mean, come on. Translating *aji no hiraki* as AJI-OPEN! How could I not laugh at that? A snicker escaped my lips, passing through the quiet room and eventually disappearing into the night. These exchanges weren't anything special. Just clumps of words. And yet, they made my chest feel so warm and puffy.

And yet, I was once again reminded that we won't be able to see each other for a while once tomorrow came. Recently, Asamura-kun and I haven't exchanged that much skinship... like hugging... or kissing... But we can only really be together at home, where we live with our parents. And in front of them, we have to act like we're just close siblings. And when we made that promise, that was exactly how I felt.

However, this field trip will last four days and three nights. Finding any chances to even engage in any physical contact will be pretty hard. And for this field trip, the groups are generally split up into three boys and three girls. Asamura-kun is going to walk around Singapore with other girls from his class... and I won't be anywhere near him.

I kicked the blanket off of me and got up, putting on a thin jacket over my pajamas. I'm scared of catching a cold like this right after my bath. After that, I quietly opened the door to my room and looked outside. I headed to Asamura-kun's room, knocked on his door, and took him back to my room again. I closed the door and then turned off the lights. We both voiced our desire... that we wanted to kiss, and we agreed. The moment I called out to him myself, I started to feel guilty that I was just using him to satisfy myself, but when he stood in front of me, I couldn't turn back anymore.

He placed his hands on my shoulders, allowing me to feel his warmth passing through my body, enveloping me in a sense of relief. I also placed my hand on his shoulder. Since he's a good bit taller than me, I had to stand on my tiptoes to reach his face. And through our lips pressing against each other's, I could feel his burning heat. I subconsciously put more strength into my fingertips, and his face moved away from mine. The sensation of his lips on mine slowly began to fade, and as I was riddled with a sense of longing, I muttered a few words.

"Good night."

"Good night... Ayase-san."

After this brief exchange, Asamura-kun returned to his room. Inside my bed, I touched my lips and realized that this hazy and gloomy feeling inside my chest had yet to subside completely. What's going

on with me? Will I be able to be apart from him for the next four days and three nights?

## ***Chapter 5: February 17th (Wednesday) – Field Trip Day 1 – Asamura Yuuta***

I heard a sound that pulled me out of my dream and back to reality in my dark room. The alarm I had set earlier was ringing. I hurriedly stopped it and turned on the lights inside my room. The legs I stretched out beyond my blanket immediately felt cold. It was currently 4 am during the mid-winter season. It was still two more hours until the sun would start to rise. However, we had to meet up at Narita Airport at 7 am. In other words, we had to leave the house at 5, or we wouldn't make it in time.

That being said... Man, it's cold. Since I set the alarm early enough to give myself a reasonable buffer, I can just take my time and—My thoughts were interrupted as someone hammered on my door. It was my old man asking "You awake in there?" which made me gasp. That was close. I almost fell asleep again.

"I'm awake!" I responded.

I jumped up from my bed and started changing. I barged inside the bathroom to wash my face, only to almost bump into Ayase-san. She had already finished her makeup and everything, as you'd expect of her. We exchanged quick greetings and passed each other. I finished washing my face and brushing my teeth in about five minutes. We seated ourselves at the dining table at around half past 4 am, perfectly on schedule. Akiko-san, who had come home not too long ago, was still wearing her work clothes as she prepared breakfast for us.

"Shouldn't you be getting some sleep, Mom?" Ayase-san asked, but Akiko-san just returned a smile.

"It's no problem. I can get enough sleep after I see you two off. I actually left work earlier than usual because I wanted to see you one last time before I don't get to see you again the next three days," she said and pushed a large plate our way.

On top of it were ten rice balls, all wrapped with seaweed.

"Here you go. I figured something simple to eat would be best, so I went with rice balls. They're packed full of delicious goodness. I'll get out the miso soup, too."

"Thanks a lot."

"Thanks, Mom."

Ayase-san and I both thanked her in unison as we started eating. Meanwhile, my old man sat down across the table, swallowing a yawn.

"Do you think you can make it in time?"

Ayase-san and I nodded. We stuffed our cheeks with rice balls and drank the miso soup. Our goal was to take the Yamate line that passed through Shibuya station at roughly half past 5 am. Once we finished our breakfast, we checked our belongings one last time and then left the apartment.

"Don't rush too much!"

"Be careful, okay?"

My old man and Akiko-san saw us off with cheerful voices as we stepped inside the elevator. I took out my phone and checked the time. It was 5 am flat. If nothing bad happens, we should make it in time. As the elevator slowly descended, both Ayase-san and I sighed in unison. We dragged our heavy suitcases to Shibuya station and then checked ourselves one more time as we sat inside the train.

“Think we’ll make it?”

“Should... be fine,” I responded to Ayase-san’s question.

We have to change trains once in Nippori, but as long as nothing causes a delay, we’ll arrive at the 2nd building of the Narita Airport at 6:40. That should bring us to our gathering point in time.

Since the sun hadn’t even begun to rise, the inside of the train was completely empty. The seats were still cold as Ayase-san and I sat down next to each other. Normally, we’d pretend to be strangers during a situation like this, but with our first trip overseas about to happen, neither of us could afford this much leisure. At the same time, it was probably because we were fine if people found out that we were siblings... as long as we’re careful to not reveal that our relationship goes beyond that.

...Or so we made excuses as we moved together like this as we sat together until the train reached Narita Airport. We pulled our suitcases along as we hurried to the gathering point. From the long elevator ride, we walked down the sparkly-clean floor that lit up from the ceiling lights, onwards to the meeting room. From afar, we could see our school’s familiar uniforms, so we split our paths here. Sure, we didn’t mind if people found out, but we weren’t exactly trying to help them find out, either.

Ayase-san’s back was starting to grow more distant with each step, as I stood still to create a slight distance between us. The students of Suisei High split up into their classes and formed lines, and I spotted a large boy in the line for my own class—It’s Maru. He saw me approaching and raised his hand to wave at me.

“Morning, Maru,” I greeted him and stopped right after him in line.

“Yo! Sure took your time, eh?”

“I still think I’ve got plenty of leeway, though.”

When I answered his remark, he pointed at the outside of the meeting room.

“What are you saying? Do you even know how many plane take-offs you missed so far?”

It seemed like Maru’s heart was tickled by the romance of the airport.

“The sun’s only slowly starting to rise. Just what were you looking at, anyway?”

“Asamura... You don’t understand the beauty and graciousness of an airport at night, do you? The two lines of guiding lights blink like Christmas lights, as the plane’s nose slowly pushes upward into the sky, with the wing and tail lights of the planes gradually growing smaller until they vanish completely. And such beautiful scenery has been on repeat here.”

“What a poet. That’s what you were watching this whole time?”

“I was keeping the line in check so I couldn’t watch.”

Then what was the whole point of that comment?

“By the way, do you know the movie ‘Airport ’75’?”

“Haven’t heard of it. Is it set at an airport or something?”

“It’s a movie where the pilot can’t control the steering of the plane any longer and they have to perform an emergency landing.”

“Could you not?”

I’d rather not hear about any air disaster films right before boarding a plane. After this quick banter, the head teacher of the student year

repeated the same usual safety warnings to us endlessly, and we finally started to board the plane. We moved through the small testing area that had been recently built to check for any illnesses and then spread out inside the airport. The bigger luggage was checked by personnel and placed on the corresponding lane, which would now be loaded onto the plane. It's farewell to all that until we safely land again. I just hope it doesn't end up as lost luggage—basically belongings or other objects that didn't get loaded on the plane for various reasons.

And thinking about that, I realized how nervous I had really been about this whole trip. Then again, this'll be my first time going overseas, as well as my first time taking a plane somewhere. By the time we finished checking in, it was already 8 am. We had roughly one hour left until departure. After our carry-on luggage went through the x-ray check, we then had to go through the metal detector. Taking off our shoes for this was honestly pretty annoying. What about the people who like to wear those super difficult-to-tie big boots on their trip? And why am I worried about those people in the first place?

With all that cleared, all of Suisei High's second years started walking toward the boarding gate. Then again, with this many people, we only moved along at a snail's pace. But we were slowly making our way towards the plane. Ayase-san should be somewhere inside this crowd, but since our classes are different, I couldn't see her.

"Sure is huge, though."

One of the boys walking next to me—Yoshida, who'll also be a part of my group on this field trip—commented, which made me turn to my side and look outside the window. Sunrise today was at around half past 6 am, which was a good 90 minutes ago, so we could clearly see what was going on outside. Spreading endlessly outside the

window was the runway. Seeing the planes that you'd normally witness soaring through the sky moving like cars on the ground sure felt weird. Even the one closest to us looked exactly as I'd imagined, but it was much larger than I had imagined. It's just as Maru said. These things are huge. The employees walking alongside the planes simply looked like ants gathering around a cake. But when I said that aloud, Yoshida gave me a dubious look.

"Cake? Are you hungry or something?"

"It's just what I thought of. That's the kind of scale I pictured."

"Asamura, you say the funniest stuff sometimes."

"Really? I think it's perfectly normal."

After talking with Yoshida and the people from my group some more, I realized that using comparative speech and metaphorical expressions isn't exactly what most people do. The few friends I have like Maru or Yomiuri-senpai are all a lot smarter than me, and our conversations always end up this way. And even Ayase-san, who might have struggled with Japanese a bit here and there, is the kind of person to hold psychological and ethical thoughts, so our way of speaking and what we talk about really resemble each other.

To me, Yoshida, who struggles to keep up with metaphorical expressions, is the exception... But that's probably true for both of us. Either way, we might not talk to each other much normally, but I wanted to take this chance to get to know people I rarely speak with. And when I think of having to talk with the foreigners I'm about to meet, then this isn't a big problem at all.

"It seems like our luggage goes up there."

Maru's comment made me look up, and I saw a luggage space above us. It wasn't a line of pipes like you'd see in a train, but more like a

locker with a separate door for it. And I could tell that taking it out later would be a pain. But I'm guessing that this is to keep the luggage tight and secure in case the plane shakes. But how much would it have to shake for that to happen?—is a thought that crossed my mind, but I quickly shook my head. I wonder if they'll let us open these lockers mid-flight? I kinda doubt it. I'd like to keep at least my phone and nausea medicine close to me... Oh, right. I have my knapsack. It said in a guidebook that keeping both hands free as a tourist is a lot more convenient. While I was thinking this, Maru bumped his shoulder against mine.

"Hey, give me your luggage, I'll put it in there."

"Sorry, give me a second."

I handed him my larger bag after taking out all the things I'd need, placing them in my smaller carry-on. Now I shouldn't have to go through any of my other luggage mid-flight. And with a glance around me, I could tell that other passengers were preparing themselves the same way. After we switched places, Maru placed my suitcase inside the luggage locker. After that, I sat down on my seat and placed my bag on me.

I sigh escaped my lips as I sunk deeper into my seat, glancing outside and listening to the sounds I could hear around me. The small grumbling sound I could pick up between my classmates' chattering must be the engine. It really feels like the plane's been vibrating this whole time. And if it can make a lump of metal like this constantly shake, then the power it packs must be amazing—A lump of metal, huh? Can it really fly?

Yet again, I found my nerves on edge. Maybe I should just close my eyes and sleep right away. I checked the time shown inside the plane, which told me there were still 15 minutes left until takeoff. That much time plus my severe lack of sleep means I might really be

able to doze off. I took my phone out of my bag to check something and just then Maru spoke up.

“That’s a waste, Asamura. You’re going to see this for the first time, so make sure you don’t regret missing out on it later.”

“But I might regret seeing it, too.”

“The fact that it’s your first time is more important. It’s the same with anime and novels, right?”

I guess that’s true. Even if you read a novel with a shocking revelation or plot twist at the end, the impact is only really significant the first time you read it.

“Once you get used to it, taking off in a plane just becomes mundane. And the scenery outside will just look like either Narita or Haneda.”

“Really?”

“I think so, at least.”

Hey now, that’s awfully vague. And his broad statement that everything will eventually look the same and thus lower your admiration for it is probably just a rephrased explanation of what it means to get used to something. That’s sort of boring, actually. Normally, it should be different every single time. Like a takeoff in the morning should have its perks compared to landing in the evening, and so on. Even just departing with clear weather like we had right now should be fundamentally different from taking off during bad weather.

Similarly, even as the days change and time moves forward, the gaze I have when looking at things around me changes. As such, every scene I see should be a tiny bit different. And even so, at one point, you start feeling dull towards that change, and start saying that

everything feels the same, so treasuring this ‘first time’ is probably more important than I gave it credit for.

Finally, an announcement came over the plane’s loudspeakers, stating that we were about to take off. Making excuses once again, I fought against the fear creeping up within me and looked outside the window. Since we were seated a bit behind the wing, I couldn’t see too far ahead of me, but plane windows are relatively small to begin with, so there wasn’t much to gaze at. At the start it was just like a car speeding up. I could just see much farther outside the window. The distance to the small forest and tiny buildings in the distance didn’t feel real.

I heard that a plane speeds up to 3000km/h when it’s about to take off, which means we’re reaching the same speed as the bullet train with such a giant object... But it still felt pretty crazy. Man, I’m even being pushed inside the seat... Oh? Are we speeding up even more? I looked outside the window again and saw that the ground was flying past even faster. This is... a bit too fast, right? The ground looked like it had just melted into a grey paste.

While I was pressed further into the seat, the scenery outside the window changed. The head of the plane had gone up into the air, the view outside turning into pretty much only just sky. With my back still pressed into my seat, I realized this pressure must be even crazier if I was on a rocket. I tasted the sensation of being a part of a science-fiction novel as the plane completely took off the ground.

“The view down low’s amazing.”

“Down low?”

Hearing Yoshida’s comment, who was seated behind me, I looked out the window on the right side, which offered us a view of the ground. Overwhelmed, I let out a voice of admiration. All the

buildings and roads had shrunk to the point where it was impossible to distinguish them apart. The forest reminded me of broccoli, and it turned more into a lump of green, the trees inside the streets like small dots of green on a large map. My feeling of solidity had vanished completely, too. I swallowed my breath as we slowly moved further away from solid ground. Even the smaller roads began to vanish as only the bullet train's railroad stood out like a blood vessel.

And right after, the entire view turned white, making me realize that we had just passed through a cloud. The sights in the far distance vanished inside this grey-ish world, and the wing next to the window periodically vanished and reappeared. This continued for a while, and we finally made it out of this white mush and into a world like we had just dove straight into the water. The entire view outside turned blue. The plane had become a lot more stable compared to before, but we were still going up. As the plane moved through the blue sky, a gaze downward revealed the Pacific Ocean adjacent to the coastline. This was normally something you'd only get to see on a map: The contour of the archipelago reaching from Ibaraki to Chiba, with Inubousaki as its summit.

“It really is... like on the maps.”

This really is something I've only seen for the first time. I'm glad I got to see it for myself.

“What are you blabbering about now, Asamura?”

“I mean, I was just impressed that it has the same shape as all the maps I've seen.”

“If a map didn't reflect the accurate geographical state, then what else would we believe in...?”

“I'm saying that it only set in just now.”

“Great experience, eh?”

“Yeah, that’s right. I would have missed out if I didn’t see this.”

Maru grinned like he had been proven right, but I glanced outside the window once more. I’m thankful I got to experience this, but... I really wish the plane wasn’t shaking quite as much during the liftoff.

Soon enough, I fell asleep, only to be woken by Maru shaking me gently. When I opened my eyes, I realized that the plane had landed and was already taxiing down the end of the runway.

“You kept your seat belt on that entire time. Wasn’t that uncomfortable?” He asked with a bewildered sigh.

“Well, I fall asleep a lot in my dad’s car. Though he gets angry at me sometimes because when the copilot falls asleep, it makes the driver just as sleepy.”

Now that I think about it, Akiko-san was talking with my old man the whole drive back during New Year’s. I guess that was her way of looking after him.

“You slept for seven whole hours, though.”

“I slept that long?”

“Like a rock.”

That means I must have pretty much slept the whole flight. And if memory serves me right, that’s how long the flight was supposed to be. I don’t remember eating anything, either. What a shame. Still, I took out my smartphone and checked the time—3 pm. Hm? We departed at 9 am, so... only six hours have passed? But then I remembered that it was because my phone matched the local time here in Singapore, and there’s a one-hour difference between Japan

and here. In Japan, it should be 4 pm right about now, and evening. But since we traveled west, we still had plenty of sunlight left.

I heard that the highest temperature recorded in February could be above 30°C. Since we were still inside the thick airplane, I didn't feel much of the sunlight from outside, but I did feel a faint warmth. Probably because we came from Japan, where it's mid-winter right about now. We were told we could remove our seatbelts again after the safe landing, so I did just that, got up, and looked around. Everyone was preparing to get off the plane. The classmates sitting next to the aisle in the center of the plane were grabbing their belongings already.

"Maru, Asamura, here you go."

Maru and I accepted our sports bags from the person sitting near the corridor.

"Aye."

"Thanks."

And once we gathered all our belongings, we thanked the flight attendant standing next to the gate who saw us off and entered the airport ahead of us.

Singapore Changi Airport—What was the difference between this airport that greeted us at 3 pm local, and the Narita Airport that saw us off a few hours ago? To be honest, I couldn't tell any difference, to the point that it made me wonder if we had really gone overseas. The only difference was the strong sunlight entering through the windows.

"This really is Singapore, right?"

"Are you still half-asleep, Asamura?"

“But...”

“Do you see any Japanese around you?”

...Ah. That is true. Back at Narita Airport, there were signs translated into countless languages to really show off that it was an international airport, but unlike there, I couldn't find any Japanese signs or kanji anywhere. In fact, the majority of signs I spotted were in English, followed by Chinese. Seeing these two as the majority was also probably why this was regarded as an international airport, but here in Singapore, the official languages are English, Malay, Chinese, and Tamil, so that's probably all it is. Then again, other than the alphabet and kanji, I don't know any other foreign writing systems, so I probably just don't consciously notice them.

“It really feels like we made it overseas,” I voiced my genuine feelings, but Maru just gave me a dubious look along the lines of ‘Only now?’.

We took the same procedures as during our boarding process but just in reverse, as we lined up at the Changi Airport waiting area. After a moment, the head teacher guided us to the hotel where we would be staying (and thankfully all students got their correct luggage). We took a bus leaving from the airport, which took us along the coast for the next twenty minutes.

The hotel where we were to stay was about two floors tall, split into buildings separated between boys and girls. And one room fit three people, which meant that Maru, Yoshida, and I would be staying together. That was the main reason we were told to form groups of six consisting of three boys and three girls. And while we traveled to the hotel in our bus, I was finally allowed to take in all the scenery around us. More than anything, each country has its own unique smell. For example, staying overseas for a long time only to return to Japan makes the scent of soy sauce and miso even stronger.

However, if it's your first time visiting a country, you'll probably struggle to figure out where this distinct smell is coming from. You'll only realize that something is different from your home country. And since your sense of smell is the sense that adjusts the quickest, this discrepancy vanishes as quickly as it came. Finally, we reached the hotel room. We placed our belongings and moved everything we needed into our smaller personal bags.

"Make sure to register for the free Wifi here," Maru said, as Yoshida panicked and asked how that worked. "Didn't I write it down for you in the guidebook?" He grumbled, but Yoshida just played it off with a clumsy smile.

I had already finished setting that up when we arrived at the airport. In Singapore, the government offers a free wifi service, actually. It's mostly used for public institutions, but traveling students like us should probably set it up right away.

"Anyway, let's head out, Yoshida, Asamura."

Led by our esteemed group leader Maru, we went back down to the lobby, spotting the gathering of Suisei High's 2nd-years, then joined our own class, and finally split up into groups. The teachers then told us when dinnertime was and told us when we had to be back at the latest, all the typical stuff. Granted, I doubt these warnings reached most of the students who were already beyond themselves with excitement, but the guidebook had all the detailed information marked down anyway, so it shouldn't cause any problems... probably.

Plus, the first day consisted of the whole student year visiting three tourist spots that the school offered as options, so we won't be moving around independently, either. And to reach these places, we had to take the shuttle buses here. Basically, we'd head somewhere,

then we had some amount of free time to check out the area, and then we'd gather up to take the bus out again.

We met up with the three girls from our group and then hopped on the bus. The first stop for today was the National Museum of Singapore.<sup>1</sup> It was a western-themed building consisting of two floors with a large round dome on top of the center building. That could be a planetarium or an observatory, but I'm not too sure. Or is it just shaped like that as an architectural choice?

By the time we reached the front of the building, it was already 5 pm. In Japan, this was around when the sun would set. But in Singapore, that only happened at roughly 7:20 pm, so we had plenty of sunlight left.

"The history gallery closes at 6, so we should start with that first," Maru suggested, so we followed suit and made our way to the history section.

At the entrance, we ran into another group and stayed with them. The guide who just sent off a group of tourists then turned towards us with a smile. I figured they'd be showing us around while speaking English, but...

"Good evening, everyone. You must be the students from Japan, correct? My name is Wan, and I will be showing you around now. It's a pleasure to meet you."

To my surprise, the young man greeted us in fluent Japanese as he began the tour.

"His Japanese is a lot more fluent than what I could manage with my English..."

I had to agree with Maru's comment, but that wasn't the end of the surprises. After the guide finished showing us around, he then

greeted another group of students with flawless Chinese, beginning his explanation with what I thought for sure was a native accent. Upon witnessing this, even Maru was surprised. Just how many languages does this legend speak? After thoroughly enjoying the gallery until closing time, we had 15 minutes until the next shuttle bus would arrive. We figured we might as well check out the museum's inner garden, so we took a stroll there.

Around the same time, the sky began turning orange from behind the eastern bloc. The sharp sunrays had gotten weaker compared to earlier this day, but the temperature of the air showed no signs of cooling down, and I could feel a bit of sweat building on my body by just walking. The humidity was also fairly high. Though it's not as bad as Japan's summer season, at least. The girls in our group were busy discussing which sunscreen to use. As we made it through the grassy path and returned to the museum's front entrance, we spotted a crowd of people. Wondering what that was about, we approached them, and we heard someone singing from the center.

"A street performance, eh?" Maru said, and the girls said they wanted to check it out. "Well, we don't have too much time left, so it's better than heading off elsewhere."

Receiving permission from the group leader, we entered the ring of people. Inside the crowd was a woman with a guitar on her lap, sitting on a plastic chair. A cord was connected from the guitar to a nearby speaker. At her feet, she had a small box for money, filled with coins and bills.

"What a soothing voice..."

"And she's so pretty!"

I heard the girls whispering nearby, and I had to agree. She had long, blonde hair and almond-shaped, black eyes. Her facial features were

very good-looking, probably of south-Asian origin. Her body possessed a healthy and natural tan, which earned her admiration from men and women alike. And it seemed like she was singing in English... In fact, I felt like I had heard this song before.

"With recent SG acoustic guitars, it's either about getting in the masses or going your own way. And with this familiarity, it's why she's getting viewers like this," Maru commented.

"Do you know the song?"

"It's pretty famous, y'know? Pretty sure you must have heard it before. It's 'El Cóndor Pasa,' made known worldwide by Simon & Garfunkel. It was originally a south-American song of the people, but you sometimes hear it played at schools in Japan when classes end."

I swear, Maru's otaku knowledge reaches into the weirdest specific areas at times. Well, I could tell that it was folk music from South America, at least. As for the woman, she had a great vocal range, and even an amateur like me could tell how good she was. After that first song ended, she switched to one with a sharper rhythm.

"You know this one, too?"

"No clue. It's probably music from around here, no?"

Around here... means Singapore, huh? But instead of sounding like a popular song that could make it overseas, it felt more like folk music again. The volume of her voice almost felt like it was pressing against me, as it filled me with vigor. The way she played her guitar was also more radical than before.

"I see how it is. Drawing people in by playing a familiar song only to then reveal the real deal," Maru spoke like he was analyzing a military move.

A round of applause came from everyone, as several people put some money in the box in front of the woman. Since you'd rather see people doing something similar online to receive donations, it felt a bit old-school to witness such a street performance. But I'm glad this tradition hasn't died out.

"Melissa... huh?" Maru narrowed his eyes as he muttered something to himself.

That sounds like a foreign name.

"The singer?"

"Yeah. Though I'm not entirely sure."

Tracing Maru's gaze, he was looking at a sign standing next to the woman, which had a bit of information about her written on it. I'm shocked he could read something that small.

"You mean that small text up there?

"No, that's too small. I'm guessing it's some kind of permit to perform here. If you don't display that at places like these, you get taken in by the police. But the one below it has her name, see?"

"Yeah."

So he was talking about the sign. I would have loved to listen some more, but since our bus would be arriving soon, we had to return to the parking lot. And by the time the entire sky had turned orange, we made it back to the hotel.

Today's dinner happened in the restaurant located in the lobby area on the 4th floor. Since you could get there from both hotels, this is where the boys and girls grouped up again. It was a buffet, which also had Japanese food, but I wanted to take this chance to try out some foreign dishes. What was especially good were the southern

fruit dishes. They had a lot of fruits that hadn't quite made their way to Japan yet. Though I guess mangos have become more common over the past few years. I used the wifi inside the hotel to look up the ingredients while filling my plate. Flat peaches, rambutan, mangosteen, and sugar-apples... I wonder if they'll ever find their way to Japan.

"Everyone, please lend me an ear while you enjoy your dinner. I'd like to once again repeat the safety orders—" The head teacher's voice interrupted all private conversation.

Unlike today, tomorrow we won't be going to places the school suggests. Instead, we'll be dividing into smaller groups to check the places we as a group had decided upon, which was why the teachers were especially pushy with their warnings. After we finished dinner, we were free to return to our rooms and take our baths, as well as head to bed after. Until it was lights-out time, Maru and Yoshida went adventuring inside the hotel. Those sporty folks really have endless endurance, I swear. I, for one, was tired, so I stayed in my room. I let the indoor AC cool my body as I gazed at the scenery outside the window.

I'm guessing it's because the day started late, but the lights in the town were still on for the most part. Looking down at it like this, the scenery wasn't all too different from Japan's major cities, and yet I was currently in a completely foreign country. It honestly didn't feel real. I think my old man mentioned something like this before. Something like he never would have expected me, his own son, to be heading overseas for his field trip. Back in their generation, the schools in the Kanto region generally went to Kyoto or Nara, I think. I was told that transportation and communication were a lot more limited back then, but I guess to him, he never would have imagined that we'd travel this far for a simple field trip.

“Then that means...”

The generation after us—our children—will travel even further. Even beyond just overseas... In the distant sky, I could see the moon slowly beginning to rise. But even so, I don’t think we’ll be traveling there anytime soon. Though it is the closest place in space from our perspective. Or maybe humanity will surpass all my expectations, and I’ll be sitting down with my children to tell them how “simple” things were back in our days... Also, why am I just blindly assuming that I’ll be having kids? There are a lot of other things to take care of before I can even think of that. I shook my head to rid myself of these thoughts and thought back on the day.

It was a stressful day, that’s for sure. Together with my very first plane flight, I encountered so many odd things that made me stop and think, and not just once. But even so, we just went from point A to point B and wandered between buildings and vehicles, so I can’t really say I’ve got to know Singapore already. If there was any difference compared to Japan that I felt, then it must be the plants and vegetation growing here. The shape and color of flowers, the growth of green around me, and the way the trees were formed all had slight differences compared to what I was used to in Japan.

And this was the overall biggest difference I picked up throughout the day. Probably because it’s a lot farther south than where I was used to. Other than that, I think the scent of air is different. And the sounds of my environment when walking down the street, as well as the music playing in public. And the letters on the billboards all around me. The cars driving down the street, the modern buildings, and the interior design of the houses aren’t too big of a difference.

What about smartphones? Tourists weren’t the only ones who came to the museum, and I bet a lot of people from Singapore came to visit there, too, but they all used their phones as cameras or

dictionaries, which made me realize that some things never change no matter where you go. Nowadays, electronic devices like phones are a necessity no matter where you live.

And during that train of thought, my gaze dropped down to my phone. The LINE icon entered my view. Ever since we split up this morning, Ayase-san and I haven't seen each other. We may be staying at the same place, but our classes are different, and so are our activities. Since I get to see her face daily, I'm now beginning to feel like something is missing.

I tapped my finger on the LINE icon and booted up the app. I clicked on Ayase-san's profile picture inside the row of chats, reading the last message we sent each other. I wonder what she's doing right now? Since we had free wifi here, I played with the idea of sending her a message. But I stopped myself, figuring that she might be having fun talking with Narasaka-san and the others in their room. Getting a message during that time might make the others suspicious... or maybe I'm just thinking too much? It could just be from her parents or a friend, right? And on top of that, I remembered what we did just yesterday.

*'We might not be able to see each other for the next four days, right? So, well...'*

We used the fact that our parents wouldn't be able to see us as an excuse, riddled with guilt, but we still couldn't hold back our desires. If so, then maybe Ayase-san might be feeling lonely because I didn't send her a single message throughout the day... And more than that, I just want to hear her voice. If I can't even get that, then I'd at least like to talk a bit. When we were all walking around together this afternoon, I didn't really have much time to think about all that, but now that I'm sitting here alone like this, this desire came dwelling up inside of me.

But she's with Narasaka-san. And considering how sharp she can be, she might just go full detective mode, saying stuff like 'Hey, who was that? Is it your older brother? It must be, right! Man, you sure are loved, you damn little sister!' by simply hearing the notification from Ayase-san's phone. And then she'd go into full teasing mode.

"That's... entirely possible."

I could easily see her say that. Then again, not sending her a message for that reason is a bit strange. I can't be hung up on Narasaka-san if it means making Ayase-san feel lonely. So for that reason, I should really take the initiative here. Right as I went to start typing a message, the door swung open, with Maru and Yoshida barging into the room together with a loud 'We're back!'.

"I-I'm back..."

Maru gave me a dubious look as he saw me acting flustered.

"That's our line, right?"

"Sorry, I misspoke. Welcome back."

"Aye, that we are."

"You should have come with us, Asamura. The convenience stores here are hella interesting!" Yoshida said, swinging a plastic bag around.

It seems like they visited the convenience store on the hotel premises. A bit ridiculous that their final destination to adventure this new world would be a regular convenience store. They then went to the table in the room and spread out the contents of the bag, which turned out to be sweets.

"...Don't we have most of these back in Japan?"

"They're actually a bit different."

From then on, Maru and Yoshida told me about all the exciting discoveries they had made in this foreign hotel, giving me no opportunity to return to typing my message. Eventually, it was time for lights out, and the first day of the field trip came to an end.

1While looking this up, I spotted a Museum of Ice Cream. Boys, we're going to Singapore. <https://www.museumoficecream.com/singapore>

## ***Chapter 6: February 17th (Wed) – Field Trip Day 1 – Ayase Saki***

I was actually a bit worried if I'd get enough sleep the day before we departed. However, the moment I closed my eyes, my consciousness immediately drifted into the deep abyss. I felt bliss and comfort inside my fluffy and warm bed, drifting right between experiencing a dream and sleeping. In retrospect, I don't know if I even had a dream or not. But eventually, my eyes opened to the darkness of my room, not to mention before my alarm even rang.

Instead, I could hear the faint rumbling of the air conditioner. It seemed like the timer worked exactly as I had planned, and I didn't feel cold even when poking my arms and legs out from beneath my blanket. This should be good enough, so I pushed myself up from the bed. Immediately after, I remembered the events of the previous night and faintly touched my lips as a snicker left my mouth. I must have been grinning there.

But this isn't the time to be dwelling in memories. I have to get changed right away. When I finished my makeup, I happened to run into Asamura-kun just as he entered the bath. It seems like he finally woke up. His face still looked a bit drowsy, making me worried that we might actually be cutting it fairly close. We then ate the rice balls and miso soup Mom made. It was as delicious as ever, but I was worried the seaweed from the rice balls might have gotten stuck to my teeth. I decided to not open my mouth too much in front of Asamura-kun before I got to check in the mirror.

With lots of time to spare, we left the house behind us. We took the Yamate line from Shibuya station, changing trains at Nippori station as we headed to Narita. Once there, we just had to wait until our stop, so we should make it on time. Sitting inside the train, I took a glance at Asamura-kun's face next to mine. He was yawning

constantly, so he must be really sleepy. I can tell he's trying hard not to doze off. Our shoulders happened to bump into each other's, and he quickly sat straight up again. Each time that happened, he apologized to me, but I wouldn't have minded if he just leaned against me and slept a bit. This early in the day, the train we were in was mostly empty, and I didn't spot any familiar uniforms either.

Eventually, our train reached the second building of Narita Airport, just as planned. And with that, we rushed to the meeting area. Spotting a group of students with our uniforms, Asamura-kun stopped and said 'Okay, let's split up here.'

"Be careful during the trip, yeah?"

"Same to you," I nodded.

I left Asamura-kun behind me and headed for my class. Shockingly enough, the faster I distanced myself from him, the slower my strider became. Because if I meet up with my class, we'll have to stay separated this whole trip. The... entire time.

"Hurry up, Saki! Over here!" Maaya was waving at me at such velocity I could almost hear her arm cutting through the air.

A smile escaped my lips. We can already see each other, so I don't get why she's in such a rush. The third girl in our group is Satou Ryouko-san, and we have three somewhat noisy boys as well. Right before I joined their group, I turned around one last time to look for Asamura-kun, but I couldn't find him any longer.

A bit off-topic, but my good friend Narasaka Maaya's communication skills are tremendously strong. She's like the queen of communicating. I don't think there are too many girls in the world who actually manage to attain 100 friends without much effort. Not to mention that it's not limited to boys and girls. She can get along

with just about anybody. And yet, surprisingly enough, she was currently busy shooing away the boys approaching us.

“Hey, you guys! Don’t try to get into our girls’ group! Go have fun with your other rowdies!”

She waved her hands to scare away the three boys that were part of our group, standing in front of me and Satou-san as if to protect us. And then, she turned towards all the other girls, warning them.

“Be careful of those guys who are getting excited just because it’s a field trip!”

The girls laughed amongst each other, and the boys could only give wry smiles in response. After that, she turned toward us.

“Listen up, Satou-san. If those boys get too close, then you just have to tell me. I’ll give them a good scolding!”

“Okay. Thanks... Narasaka-san,” Satou-san narrowed her eyebrows and gave a warm smile.

“Same goes for you, Saki!”

“I think I’ll be fine.”

I know how other people see me. Granted, I’ve been making good progress at fitting into the class, but it still seems like they’re a bit scared of me. You can’t blame them with how I look.

“Don’t let your guard down.”

“Urgh, yes.”

She suddenly gave me a stern expression, which left me a bit baffled.

“You’re going to be a wife someday, so take good care of your body. Unless I can be the lucky guy. I bet you’d look great in a hakama.”

“That’s not happening, okay?”

Why does she have to always take her jokes one step further than the necessary level to make her feel satisfied? See, even Satou-san is laughing at us. But at the very least, that joke seemed to have helped her relax a bit, because she stopped looking like a scared cat. I’m guessing this was Maaya’s intention in the first place. Our group of six had two problem children who weren’t too skilled at dealing with boys (namely Satou-san and I), as well as two boys who’ll be held under control by the third boy in our group. She then warned those two troublemakers to give Satou-san and me a bit of relief. Really, I can’t beat Maaya.

“Sorry about these two, Narasaka-san. Come on you guys, the boys’ line is over here, remember?”

He grabbed the boys and took them back to the line. With him, they should be fine, too. At the same time, the teachers stepped in front of the rows and began guiding us. Some students were cheering in excitement from time to time, but most of us were following along in a docile manner. A lot of the people here had never even been overseas, meaning they were more worried than excited. And they listened to the vice-principal’s words cautiously. After all, it’d be bad if they weren’t allowed on the plane. The same went for me, too.

I was actually fairly nervous during the time we waited to board the plane. But once boarded, it wouldn’t be any different than taking the local bus somewhere. The announcer inside explained the regulations in English, Chinese, and Japanese, which was a fresh feeling, but then I remembered that the bullet train did the same with just English and Japanese. And after that, it was the same as heading for Kyoto or Nara. Talking, eating snacks, and laughing while sometimes getting scolded by the teacher. Well, I’m not really good when it comes to pointless chatter.

Satou-san seemed to be the same in that regard, which made me appreciate the existence of Maaya even more. If not for her, we'd have spent the next 7 hours in absolute silence. And I was grateful that I got to sit next to the window. If the conversation gets too much for me, I can just look outside the window. Seeing the scenery below us change into what you'd see on a satellite picture, it finally set in that we were heading overseas. And it was my first time, too. I could feel my heart beating a bit faster than usual.

I set up my phone to match the timezone and started reading through the guidebook when Maaya suddenly started talking about wanting to watch a movie. I guess if one person starts watching a movie, the others can't just continue talking. And Satou-san and I were quiet, anyway. But, I guess this was just Maaya trying to be considerate again. Telling us that we didn't have to force ourselves to talk.

In the end, we watched a popular mystery anime's newest installment. A young boy in elementary school was wrapped up in a murder incident and even managed to resolve it himself. Granted, it seemed a bit ridiculous, but other than that, it was an enjoyable watch. And around noon, people started eating the food they packed. The flight attendant even walked down the corridor with a trolley, repeating the old and well-trained phrase that I always wanted to hear once.

“Beef or chicken?”

It was a simple English exchange that couldn't even fully qualify as a conversation, but it helped me realize that we really were heading overseas. Needless to say, I answered chicken. It has lower calories, after all.

Eventually, we reached Changi Airport in Singapore. After arriving at the hotel, we finished our check-in, and then our group headed to

the museum. Granted, that was only the case for the start and end. We walked through the museum in groups of 3 without the boys. Satou-san must have a lot more trouble with boys than I do, because she was visibly relieved at that. And I personally just wanted to leisurely walk around myself, so I was more than happy with the arrangement. Though I feel bad for our homeroom teacher, who wanted us all to have fun in a bigger group, boys and girls alike. I told Maaya about that and she responded—

“Kindness begets kindness, Saki-chan,” she said and stuck out her tongue.

“...You just wanted to say that once, right?”

No evil is to be found in our dear group leader. Though to be pedantic, that saying means you adjust your attitude towards someone else depending on their actions. In this case, it would mean that we could walk around as a big group, assuming the other party was willing to do that, but the boys with ulterior motives would have hell to pay instead. So it’s not exactly how she probably meant it, but that’s also very much like Maaya.

Sadly, the guide for the museum spoke fluent Japanese. It feels like I wasted all this time learning English terms and names just for this tour. This isn’t how our entire trip is going to be, right? What if my answering ‘chicken’ on the plane will be the highlight of my English conversation usage?

We headed back to the hotel, finished eating dinner, and took baths. The room assignments were split up by groups, meaning I’d be sharing a room with Maaya and Satou Ryouko-san. We’ve been in the same class for almost a year, but I never heard Satou-san speak this much.

“I’m really sorry, I thought you were a bit of a scary person, Ayase-san.”

“Don’t worry about it! She might look that way, but she’s actually an adorable little sister who keeps bewitching all older brothers in the world! Amazing, right?”

“Why are you saying this, Maaya?”

“Ayase-san, you have an older brother?”

My heart skipped a beat. Maaya, what are you doing?!

“Ah, well...”

“Nope! But she sure loves acting like a younger sister! It’s her younger sister attribute!”

“...Okay?” Satou-san seemed confused.

Sorry about Maaya, her explanations don’t make any sense, right? In fact, I don’t get it either. What’s that even supposed to mean?

“All girls in the world can be split into two categories. If they are little sisters or if they’re not!”

“Well, duh?”

It’s either A or B. With that thought process, you can split every group or idea in two.

“Well, having siblings can be pretty stressful. They’re so loud all of the time,” Maaya said.

Her argument makes sense. She’s got a few younger brothers.

“But you won’t be lonely, right?”

"Well... that is true. But usually, it's a battle to even take a bath in peace. That's why today has been so peaceful!" Maaya said and Satou-san smiled in response.

I listened to their conversation while getting up and making my way to the window to check out the view. Today has been fun, and I can confidently say I learned a lot of new things. But once things calm down like this, I keep thinking how fun it would have been to experience all of this with Asamura-kun. Ever since we said goodbye this morning, we haven't seen each other once.

Maybe... I could go meet him. I could just contact him via LINE since we have free wifi here. I want to meet him. I want to see his voice. Or at least, hear his voice. And once that desire started to burn up inside of me, I had trouble containing it... Why can't he just text me first? I opened up our chat and glared at my screen, about to move my own finger.

"Sakiii! Stop standing around there and come join us! You should only enjoy such beautiful scenery with a charming young man at a bar with a glass of wine in hand!"

"Maaya... When did you turn into such a middle-aged man?"

Maaya pressed her hands against her chest like she had been shot and fell backward onto her bed.

"N-Narasaka-san, are you okay?"

"I'm done for... I was killed by Saki... I have to use the pocky sticks here to write my final message..."

"Huh? Huh?"

"Stop troubling Satou-san," I flashed a bitter smile and returned to the two of them.

Maybe Asamura-kun is currently enjoying time with his friends, so I wouldn't want to ruin his fun simply because I was feeling lonely... yeah. And with that out of the way, the first day of the field trip came to an end.

## ***Chapter 7: February 18th (Thu) – Field Trip Day 2 – Asamura Yuuta***

When I woke up, I was first bewildered by the color of the ceiling above me. It wasn't the same as the one I knew from back home, but rather faintly green which threw me off-guard, but I then remembered I was still on the field trip.

"It's breakfast time."

I heard Maru's voice so I turned around. Both he and Yoshida had already finished changing, which made me frightened for a moment. I checked my phone to make sure—6 am. Huh? Our planned departure today was 9 am, and breakfast starts at 7. Why are they all packed and ready?

"On days with morning practice, I'd be done eating breakfast around this time."

"Exactly."

...You goddamn muscle brains.

"Asamura, we're going adventuring. You join us."

"...I'll pass. You two have fun without me."

Maru and Yoshida set out for stage two of their adventure, and I took my time to change and finish my trip to the bath. I returned to the bedroom and took my phone off the charger, placing it into my pocket. In doing so, I spotted the shape of the outlet—realizing that it was a BF type with three holes. Weirdly enough, this was the final nail in the coffin that made me realize we were outside of Japan. That reminds me, this happened last night, but some of the boys happened to forget their adapter, which created a bit of short-lived panic. We had a few people like that in our class, too. That's when

Maru came to the rescue and lent out some of the extra ones he had brought with him.

He was treated as a hero just for that. And I was yet again impressed by how well-prepared he was, even for the smallest of dilemmas. Or did he anticipate this and buy several in advance? There's no way, right? The place we ate breakfast was the same as last night's dinner, so I easily found my way. Once again, we had another buffet to freely choose from.

Though I decided to keep it light in the morning, so I built my meal around a good and reliable piece of toast. Especially since I mostly ate meat last night, I opted to go with a small salad for today. Maybe I'm thinking like this because I'm so used to the regular Ayase-san cuisine at home. I looked around with my tray in hand, and I spotted the tall-as-always Maru, with Yoshida next to him. Sitting across the table from us were the three girls from our group, so we said our good mornings. That's the most important thing, after all.

"Listen up, my friends."

While we were eating, Maru suddenly raised one hand and asked for our attention. Huh?

"What happened to you, Maru?" Yoshida gave him a dubious look.

Understandably so, since I don't think Maru had ever spoken in such a fashion before.

"Just listen to me, you guys."

"I mean... we are?"

The three girls were just as confused.

"For the second day, we'll be walking around various places as a group."

“Yep,” Yoshida said and I nodded.

“We know that, but what about it, Maru-kun?” The leader of the girls’ group asked Maru.

“Basically, it’s possible that we might run into a different group that made similar plans to us. That’s why I want to ask you all this.”

“Well, there aren’t many places we could choose from, after all.”

“Exactly. It wouldn’t be a surprise if we ran into someone else. And I said to Ryou-chan that we might end up meeting. I hope we do!”

The girl mentioned that a friend of hers in a different class happened to almost have the exact same plans as we do. Our schedule for today was to visit the zoo this afternoon, followed by the night safari later tonight, which was located right next to the zoo. They’re both supposedly pretty popular spots.

“Indeed, they are popular. That’s why it wouldn’t be weird for us to run into another group, right?”

Everybody else nodded. Right, he’s got a point there. But why would he bring up that with such a dramatic tone?

“You get that, Asamura?” Maru grinned at me.

“Yeah...?”

“Good, good.”

Either way, after our group gathered at 9 am like planned, we took the shuttle bus and headed to the zoo located in the Mandai district. It was located north of the hotel, and it should take us around 20 minutes. In the meantime, we had a guide on the ride to tell us a bit about the area. More specifically, about the history of Singapore, its development, as well as social problems like water supply and

whatnot—all of that in perfect Japanese. Just like on the first day, I wasn't sure if this was a good or bad thing, since we technically came here to learn English. Well, I don't think I'd understand too much if the whole tour was just in English.

At first, he fed us some general information about Singapore. The total surface of Singapore was a bit bigger than the 23 districts of Tokyo. The hotel where we stayed was located to the south, and the Mandai area was to the north. They were about 20km apart, which was comparable to the distance between Shinagawa station and Akabane station. I don't know if he's just familiar with Japan itself or if he looked it up because he knew about us beforehand, but I was thankful for it.

And then eventually, we spotted our destination in the distance: The Singapore Zoo in Mandai. We got off at the parking lot and went directly to the entrance. Everything was growing green, making me feel like I had just waltzed inside a jungle. I could even hear birds chirping inside, too. And all this time, Maru seemed to be panicking about something. Muttering like it was about time and whatever.

"I don't think we're on such a tight schedule here, though...?" I muttered, wondering what he was talking about since the only thing that had set closing times was the shop.

"Oh! If it isn't Asamura-kun from the class next to ours! What a total **coincidence!**"

I heard a familiar voice, which caused my mouth to open wide like a fish waiting to be fed. Is that... Narasaka-san's group? I was thinking that the group near the entrance looked familiar, but I didn't think we'd run into them here. Ayase-san even turned around and gazed at me in disbelief.

Singapore Zoo. That's what is said on the sign, written with alphabet letters... or rather, that was what the letters placed on the front entrance said, but I didn't have time to think about that right now. Looking at Ayase-san, and how she stared at me, I'm assuming that she didn't expect us to run into each other here. And that's when I remembered that I never even asked about her group's plans over the course of this field trip. I guess I didn't see any reason to ask in the first place, since I didn't think we'd be able to spend time together. However, Maru—and probably Narasaka-san, too—knew about it.

"This feels like a set-up," I whispered to Maru.

"I didn't force anything here, so don't you worry," he responded by saying something that only made me worry more.

Maru then walked towards Narasaka-san's group with another step, speaking up.

"My, oh, my. If it isn't the famous Narasaka-san!"

"Oh! It's Maru Tomokazu-kun! What a coincidence!"

"That it is!"



They suck at acting, god help me. But even so, Maru turned around towards us, as Narasaka-san turned to face her own group.

“It seems that we happened to run into another group by sheer coincidence. I assume this must be fate, so we shouldn’t fight it and instead, walk around the zoo together. How does that sound?”

“I don’t mind. And that’ll make it more lively, too!” Yoshida happily agreed.

The girls from our group nodded along, too.

“I’m okay with that. And I’m pretty sure there’s gonna be other groups walking around anyway.” She raised her hand above her face to block off the strong sunlight shining down on us as she looked around.

Just as she said, I could see several other students from Suisei High.

“I don’t mind. Let’s all walk around as a big group!”

“Ryou-chan! I’m glad we could meet up!” said one girl as she landed a high-five with one girl from Narasaka-san’s group.

The docile-looking girl called Ryou-chan smiled, too, saying ‘I’m really happy.’ That means her friend’s group turned out to be Ayase-san’s group. Who could have imagined? Well, if a few groups from the same school choose the same location to visit, then it’s not too odd for something like this to happen. I guess I can just write this off as a coincidence... No, it’s too convenient.

“Maru, are you friends with Narasaka-san?”

“She’s friends with everyone, remember?”

That... is a valid argument, but that's not what I meant. It just feels like we've been played. We lined up to buy tickets, and I continued to question Maru about this so-called coincidence, but he just explained himself along the lines of "We checked the places the other group wanted to visit, so we figured we might as well meet up here." Thinking back on it, he was oddly pushy when it came to the zoo. I didn't think too much about it since it was a pretty popular spot to visit. And since Ayase-san wouldn't be with us, I figured I might as well go with a more relaxed place to visit like the tourists we were.

"I'll go buy the tickets," Maru said and moved up to the ticket window.

He offered the money he received from us and bought tickets for six people. On the opposite side, Narasaka-san did the same for her group. They were acting like genuine group leaders, huh? Compared to myself and how much I'd struggle just getting all that together, I had to respect them once more. After that, we all received our tickets and entered the zoo. And with our large group of twelve people, we didn't have much time for idle talk, so we walked through the front gate.

The zoo located here in the Mandai district was quite large. According to the pamphlet we received, it covered a solid 28 hectares—which is a bit hard to grasp, but it's basically six times the size of the Tokyo Dome. The only zoo I remember visiting was the one in Ueno. And that's three times the size of the Tokyo Dome. In other words, this one here is double the size of the zoo I was used to... Man, what a behemoth. And inside all this space, there was a large area that was as naturally subtropic as possible, filled with animals living as they would in the wild, which we watched from afar.

They also set up fences and canals to keep the animals contained but they were mostly located in hidden areas so that they could be perceived as naturally as possible. It eliminated the feeling of being caged in for the animals, and they seemed to be living pretty leisurely lives here. Unrelated to that, despite our relatively large group size, we immediately got along pretty well. Probably thanks to Communication Queen Narasaka-san and Caretaker Overlord Maru. As for the meaning of caretaker... he was basically just looking out for others. And these two were doing the heavy lifting.

“Everyone! I’ll make a group!”

Under Narasaka-san’s order, we all got together and joined the LINE group she made.

“All right, then check this out first,” Maru continued, as he sent a picture of the zoo map to the group.

While looking at it, we checked where we were currently located.

“This map is in Japanese, too?” Yoshida pointed out, positively surprised.

Other than English, it also had text in Chinese and Japanese. I’m guessing they must get a lot of tourists from Japan here since they went through all this effort. And on that note, we could also use the wifi here. The range of the free wifi and digital progression here in Singapore was not half-baked, that’s for sure. Maru continued to explain today’s course of action and shared our schedule.

“I don’t think it’s enough for you to get lost, but this place here is pretty big. If you get separated from the others, make sure to let us know via LINE immediately.”

“Okaaay.”

Everybody responded in unison.

"Then let's check out the white tigers first!" Narasaka-san declared as she took the front spot.

The rest of us followed after her. Most of us had already forgotten about being in different classes as we engaged in conversations left and right. Since everyone seemed to be having fun, I guess this would be a job well done for Narasaka-san and Maru. Everyone's having fun, huh? Considering my own personality, this whole idea of forming a group to have some fun together feels so alien to me. I don't think I'd ever come up with that idea myself. I know how much of a self-centered person I am. But after we all went to the pool together last summer break, I realized how important it can be to interact with others.

Of course, I wouldn't be struggling this much if I could immediately put that realization into action. But this also led me to appreciate Maru and Narasaka-san more. They brought up whatever topic card they had on hand, allowing both our groups to immediately mix well. In fact, it was the exact opposite of what Ayase-san and I loved to do, namely act independently, which allowed us to just be swept along without sinking too much. However, there is one pitfall I can't fill in.

Whenever I ended up talking to Ayase-san, and whenever she happened to talk to me, one of us would then be blunt for a bit and cut off the conversation. I think it's really weird that we could talk for hours on end when we met on the daily, but as soon as we were thrown into this irregular situation, we immediately ended up making things awkward. But at the same time, we also felt that we might just not stop talking at all if we got the ball rolling once. And if that happened, we'd basically single-handedly ruin Maru and Narasaka-san's effort to ensure that everybody could talk with everybody in our large group of twelve people.

And yet... I want to talk to her. I want to hear her voice. These feelings were so strong that I might not be able to stop if it finally happened, and then it wouldn't take long for the others to find out just what kind of relationship we were in. For example, if we were talking about this or that and someone joined in by saying 'You two are pretty close, huh?', then I'd already be at a loss for words, making it pretty obvious. That's why I'm trying not to talk to Ayase-san too much, and she seemed to be doing the exact same thing. As a result, we've been doing just fine talking to our other classmates, but only when it came to a conversation between the two of us, things got awkward and cut off immediately.

"You two sure have gotten close!"

Ashida's voice caused my heart to skip a beat.

"Maru... When have you and Narasaka-san even spoken before this?"

Oh, it wasn't about us.

"I mean, we're group leaders."

"Yup! And as group leaders, we should get along with the other leaders, too!"

"...Is that how that works?"

"Yeah."

"Yup!"

"Well, if you guys say so," Yoshida was convinced fairly quickly.

To me, it was confusing more than anything. I don't know what led to them being on such friendly terms, but if it was all because they were group leaders, then Maru should have been in contact with the other groups, too. Now that I think about it, both Maru and

Narasaka-san know that Ayase-san and I are stepsiblings. That's the connection they have. They know our secret. Though I highly doubt Maru knows about my romantic relationship with Ayase-san, and the same should be the case for Narasaka-san... *Should*, yeah. But even so, what if they were discussing us amongst themselves at one point? And then they set up this whole situation on purpose?

While pondering that, I looked at Maru and Narasaka-san again. Maru was looking down at his phone, checking the exact way we were going and sharing info in our LINE group. At the same time, Narasaka-san used all her conversation skills to bring all twelve group members together under a single topic—Maybe I'm reading too much into this?

Even if they were worried about us getting along as siblings, they don't seem the type of people to go out of their way to such an extent to make sure everything was proceeding smoothly. I don't think they'd force two people together to ensure they were doing all right. If they were, Maru probably wouldn't be able to carry the team with him, and Narasaka-san wouldn't be the Communication Queen that she is. In fact, it looks more like Narasaka-san views everyone equally, and Ayase-san and I are just members of the group. Even now, she threw a new topic at both of us.

"What animals do you two like?"

"Sloths."

"Tigers, I guess."

"That's unexpected. You seem like a devoted person to me, Asamura-kun. I figure you'd readily help make food if the need arose. Don't you agree, Saki?"

"...I think he's like a sloth," Ayase-san mumbled.

“Oh?! Really now?! Asamura-kun, how’s it feel to be compared to a sloth?”

“I don’t really know what you want me to say to that.”

“I’m not calling you lazy or anything,” Ayase-san said to me.

“I know that.”

“Okay, good.”

We said to each other, only to gasp and go silent again. With that, another conversation died off. Meanwhile, Maru and Narasaka-san sighed at the same time.

“I... really like crocodiles! Graaah!”

“I don’t think crocodiles growl like that.”

“Well, I understand why you like tigers, Ayase.”

“Right? She’s so cool!”

“Y-You think so?”

She seemed to not expect that compliment, and her reaction was rather flustered. Narasaka-san’s comment made everyone laugh, too. And it’s thanks to these follow-ups that Ayase-san and I won’t ruin the mood the group has. We walked around a lot inside the zoo until evening arrived when we moved to the night safari next to it.

The night safari opened at 7:15. Since this was also the time that the sun would set during this season, the sky outside had begun to turn orange. The far sky to the east had even turned dark. This night safari existed so that visitors could observe the animals in their natural habitat at night. And because it starts pretty late, it closes at midnight. Needless to say, we students won’t be staying that long.

"We'll be eating dinner here, but lights out is at 10, so we don't have too much time," Maru said.

And with that, we headed to the 'Creatures of the Night' show, which was a popular live show at the night safari. The idea was basically to introduce the animals that the visitors will be able to see during the safari. We could even hear the growls and sounds of animals from all sides. I couldn't tell if they were wild beasts or just birds. But the sounds surrounding me made me realize that even the wilderness at night could be fairly noisy. The show ended after around thirty minutes, and since we'd all gotten hungry, we decided to eat something at the restaurant.

It was designed like a regular buffet store, as we could enjoy a bit of relaxing music from the stage in the back. In the corner of my view, I saw a woman playing the guitar and singing. However, I wasn't too bothered by that since I was busy grabbing food. I took my tray to our table where everybody else was already busy eating.

"What a beautiful voice," Maru muttered.

"Hm?"

"Must be local music."

I followed Maru's gaze, looking at the woman playing on stage. And then I realized it. Her appearance and voice felt familiar to me.

"Isn't that the lady from yesterday?"

Only our group reacted to Maru's words, as Narasaka and her group were asking what was going on. I believe they were at the museum yesterday, too, but they must have missed her.

"She was singing yesterday in front of the museum," I said, but right as I did, the woman finished her act, and another person took her place.

She then moved towards the counter and spoke to the bartender. Immediately after, she received a cocktail glass filled with an amber-colored fluid. She then sat down on the chair and looked around... only for her to get up and walk towards us. Huh? It took me a second to realize that she was standing in front of us already, speaking perfect English. Narasaka-san listened and then nodded.

“What did she say?” Maru asked Narasaka-san.

“No clue.”

“Hey...”

“Um... *Lady, you want something?*” She said with broken, Japanese-sounding English, as she flapped her arms up and about.

Or rather, it was pretty much just Japanese.

“Narasaka, you might want to try English pronunciation, but that’s not enough if you only rely on body language. Weren’t you good at English?” Maru asked, but Narasaka-san just awkwardly laughed.

“On paper, yeah. And didn’t you have a higher grade than me?”

“Because I hate losing. But we both can’t speak it in the end.”

“Learning it and applying it are two different things, after all.”

“How frustrating... She came out of her way to talk to us, so we should at least—”

“Hold on, Maru. She’s pointing at us while saying something,” Yoshida commented.

She pointed at us and kept talking in English. Since we weren’t able to respond, she must have realized that we came from overseas. If so...

"Maybe she's saying stuff like 'Who are you?' or 'Where are you from?' and so on?" I said, when I heard someone speaking English from our side.

In response, the woman's face shot toward the source of that voice. She continued speaking English at a rapid speed. I was already struggling to keep up, but if she speeds up faster than that... I grew worried, but there was someone in our group speaking English at break-neck speed, too. The moment I realized who this familiar voice belonged to, Narasaka-san was already cheering while saying 'You're amazing, Saki!' ...Wait, that was Ayase-san after all? I turned around and saw Ayase-san speaking with the woman in very decent English.

...She didn't speak this fast when we practiced before, right? Maybe she was just holding back for my sake? I don't think she improved her English that much in a single day, at least. All members of both groups stared at her talking with the woman.

"Ayase-san, you can speak English?" One of the boys from their group asked.

"I used relatively simple vocabulary. Asamura-kun's assumption was fairly spot-on, too. She's asking where we came from."

"Weee aaare earthliings." Narasaka-san held one hand on her throat and tapped it while speaking, creating a legendary otaku joke in real time.

...Which was funny and all, but I'm pretty sure she's from earth, too.

"Narasaka, don't go causing problems that will have intergalactic consequences down the line."

I highly doubt this will escalate that far, either way. And everybody here is from earth, no?

“Maru-kun! I was just trying to ease everybody into the conversation using a bit of humor!”

“There’s a time and place for everything, and here we’ve got neither condition cleared. More importantly, what did you tell her, Ayase?” Maru asked, to which Ayase-san gave Narasaka-san a dull smile.

“That we’re from Japan and currently on a field trip. Don’t worry.”

“Boooring!”

“Maaya, I swear... What if she gets the wrong idea? And on that note, her name is Melissa Woo-san.”

Hearing Ayase-san’s comment, Maru grinned to himself, saying “I guess I was right!” He was probably referring to the name he read yesterday.

“Merry-san?”

“No, Maaya. Melissa. Melissa Woo-san. She was curious how we young visitors felt about her singing and wanted to hear our impressions.”

Someone from our group sighed in admiration. The woman called Melissa, who seemed to be a bit older than twenty, continued to smile as she sat down at an open seat at our table.

“She’s really curious about our impressions now.”

“Could you translate it for us, Ayase?” Maru asked and Ayase-san nodded.

“I don’t mind. I’ll do as best as I can.”

“Hm. Well, life works in mysterious ways, and this is a chance to experience a bit of intercultural exchange. How about it, everyone? Do you have anything to say to Melissa-san?”

“It was bootiful and wandaful!” Yoshida said.

Hearing that, Melissa-san grinned. I guess she managed to understand that.

“It worked!”

“Can you really call that a success?” Maru made a wry smile as he looked at me.

“What about you, Asamura?”

“Um... Well. I heard her sing yesterday. I think that was folk music. I thought that her singing voice was a treat to listen to. Does that work, Ayase-san?”

“Let me try.”

I tried to keep it short and simple to allow for easy translation, but was that good enough? But my worries seemed unnecessary, as Ayase-san swiftly translated my statement into English. Melissa listened to Ayase-san to the very end and then showed a radiating smile. She then looked at me and fired off a barrage of quick-fire English. I’m guessing she was happy, at least. After that, the other group members voiced their impressions, which were translated into English by Ayase-san. Granted, she couldn’t pull off any complicated expressions or phrases, but she tried her best while glancing up at the ceiling once or twice while forming the English text in her head. Even so, Melissa happily listened to every word Ayase-san said.

“Done!” Narasaka-san suddenly shouted.

Wondering what had happened, I looked over at her. She was holding her phone out towards Melissa-san, tapping on the screen. When she did so, a robotic female voice spoke English. It was a pretty long English text in comparison to what we said, but Melissa just happily smiled.

“Was that a machine translation, Narasaka?”

“Yup! I just wrote everything I thought in there and it read the English translation.”

“I didn’t even think about trying that.”

What a convenient day and age we live in.

“I guess we should have just asked Maaya from the start,” Ayase-san said.

“That’s not true at all, Saki! This bad boy might seem convenient, but all nuance is lost in the process. Communication doesn’t only rely on words, but also intonation and expression, right?”

Bad boy... Is she referring to her phone? Or more accurately, the app she used? But that does make sense. Whenever Ayase-san told Melissa about our impressions, she not only conveyed the words, but her expressions also changed accordingly. When she said how impressive Melissa’s voice was, she spoke with an exaggerated tone, and when she mentioned my folk music comment, she had a somewhat distant gaze. If there’s no “avatar” to convey emotions alongside those words, then machine translation like this is heavily limited.

“You think so?”

“Exactly! And she seems thankful, too.”

Melissa stood up and walked up to Ayase-san’s seat, putting her hands on her shoulders as she whispered something to her. She did seem happy as she slapped Ayase-san on the shoulder. It seemed to hurt a bit, and Ayase-san flashed a wry smile. And then, Melissa raised her head as a tall man called her name. Her face lit up further as she clung to him. Immediately after, all of us gasped in shock, as the girls cheered and we boys were at a loss for words. Melissa and

the man, presumably her lover, shared a passionate kiss without a warning.

“In a public space like this...!”

“Calm down, Yoshida. It’s a kiss. It’s a greeting,” Maru tried to relax him.

“But...”

“You boys! Stop staring!” Narasaka-san immediately reprimanded the other boys.

“I’m shocked you can stay this calm, Asamura-kun.”

“I’m surprised myself, really.”

Yeah, that really happened out of nowhere. I was wondering how they could do that in front of others without feeling embarrassed. But at the same time, I realized that this scene felt oddly familiar. Familiar because there is a certain newlywed couple openly flirting around in front of their adolescent daughter and son. No doubt, they’re a couple completely head over heels for each other. Granted, they weren’t hugging or kissing in public like the couple in front of me. Remembering our parents, this kind of scene right now wasn’t anything unbearable, either.

Granted, that didn’t just magically erase the embarrassment. However, Melissa’s kiss felt even more... natural. Like it was part of the daily life of the animals we watched all day. Once Melissa and her boyfriend separated, she turned towards us one more time and said something. According to Ayase-san, she asked where we were staying. We mentioned the name of the nearest bus stop, to which she mentioned that the place she stayed was fairly close. And as a result, we even took the same bus home. As for the man she kissed, he didn’t come with us. They apparently lived in different directions.

And until we reached the bus stop in question, we were on the same ride.

During that entire time, Ayase-san and Melissa were discussing something in English. Reaching the hotel we split up with Narasaka-san's group and the other girls in the lobby, but all the way back to our room, Yoshida would keep going on and on about how crazy that kiss was. I'm honestly worried that all his experiences and impressions today were just overwritten by that final scene. Then again, some of the girls were blushing even all the way back to the hotel.

Personally, rather than feeling flustered from witnessing the scene, I actually realized something self-explanatory. This is what it means to be lovers. And with that thought in mind, I was reminded that our visit to Sentosa Island tomorrow was mostly free time. And I think that Ayase-san's group was also going there. And I remembered having fun spending a bit of fun with her group today. Right as I snuggled into my bed, my phone vibrated. When I saw the message that popped up on my screen, I felt my heart jump. It was from Ayase-san.

*'I'd like to walk around Sentosa Island tomorrow with just the two of us. Do you think that's possible?'*

That question caused me to gasp. Immediately after that came another message, saying that it should be fine since we don't have to walk around as a group and that it's mostly free time anyway. So they had similar plans to our group? I remembered what Maru said during the last homeroom a few days ago.

*'On the third day, as long as we don't stray from Sentosa Island, we'll probably be given a lot of freedom. We can buy souvenirs and just enjoy the scenery.'*

And the other group members appreciated the relaxed schedule, too. I just assumed I'd be walking around with Maru. How could I have known that Ayase-san's group was similar in that way? Maybe Maru and Narasaka-san set this up so that people could spend time with others from different groups. No, I'm reading too much into it again. I read through Ayase-san's question and pondered it.

I do want to see her, but if I wanted to slip out from the group, I should at least let Maru know. I don't think I need to give him the exact reason, but there's a good chance he'll ask me to buy souvenirs and whatnot. Then again, he knows that Ayase-san and I are siblings, so if I said I wanted to walk around with her for a bit, he probably won't mind. When I looked over to my side, both he and Yoshida were sound asleep. I then proceeded to type up a response.

*'Got it. I'll tell the people in my group, so I'll let you know if we can meet up and everything else tomorrow.'*

Immediately after I sent that message, I got a read notification and a simple 'OK' came back. I decided to tell Maru once he was awake. And then I'll tell Ayase-san where we can meet up before we get to Sentosa Island. For some reason, I felt relieved, and sleepiness assaulted me. Even so, I felt like I had forgotten something and couldn't quite drift off into sleep. After a bit of thinking, I realized the difference between my message and Ayase-san's.

She told me her genuine feelings. That she wanted to walk around with me. And yet all I cared about was the schedule and everything around it. I didn't tell her how I actually felt. I glared at the time reflected on my phone... 10:30 pm. Maybe she was asleep already. And I might wake her up with my response. But even so...

*'I also want to walk around with you, Ayase-san.'*

I took a deep breath to prepare myself and pressed the ‘Send’ button. I quickly got a read mark to my message, as well as an emote of a sneaky cat grinning at me. Honestly, I felt like this was the first time she had ever used an emote. But at the same time, I was relieved and finally succumbed to my sleepiness.

That night, I had a dream. I was looking at the same kiss scene I had witnessed a few hours prior. But the faces of the two people kissing had turned into mine and Ayase-san’s instead.

## **Chapter 8: February 18th (Thu) – Field Trip Day 2 – Ayase Saki**

Today was the second day of the field trip, and chaos ensued right after I woke up. My eyes opened to Maaya sitting on the bed next to me brushing her hair, and she suddenly said “Let’s walk around with Asamura-kun and the others today,” leaving me completely baffled. *What’s she on about?* I thought to myself.

“What are you on about?” I asked without much hesitation.

“Exactly what I said. Are you okay with that, Ryou-chan?” Maaya asked towards the bed on the opposite side of hers.

“Hmmm?” Satou Ryouko-san blinked at Maaya with a drowsy gaze.  
“Who... is Asamura-kun?”

“The boy in another class’ group. There’s Maru-kun, Asamura-kun, and... Remember what I said? That group’s also the one with your friend in it, right?”

“Ah... Yeah. Okay, sounds good.” She still seemed half asleep when agreeing here. Is this really okay?

Also, it sounds like they discussed this beforehand.

“Maaya, I didn’t hear about any of this!”

“Because I didn’t tell you!”

“Why not?!”

“A surprise is no surprise if you don’t keep it a surprise, right?”

Why do we need surprises on an already stressful field trip? And I thought we were supposed to stick together as a group today.

“We have to stay in our groups again today, right?”

“Yup,” Maaya nodded and flashed a truly innocent smile—in other words, one that you definitely could not trust. “And today, our group is heading to the zoo and night safari.”

“I know that.”

“It just so happens that Maru-kun’s group is also going to the zoo and night safari today! What a wonderful coincidence!”

“Hey.”

“And thus... We students from Suisei High might as well move together in a large group to foster the relationships between students and give yet another crucial meaning to this field trip... is what happened.”

“That didn’t *just* happen, did it?”

“Hm? Did I say something weird? Ryou-chan, what do you think?”

“Nope, not at all. Being able to spend time with people I’m friends with makes me happy, too.”

Oh, right. A friend of hers is in Asamura-kun’s class. But... really? Asamura-kun’s group and ours are going to walk around together today. But what about my feelings? What about my loneliness of not being able to see him for this entire trip? ...And is this really okay?

“Can you really just decide that?”

“I mean, you were there when our group decided on our schedule, right?”

“Ah.”

I focused my brain to try and remember. Our group consisted of Maaya as the leader, paired with me and Satou Ryouko-san, as well as two rowdy boys and one more boy who'd keep them in control. When we turned in our group's schedule, our homeroom teacher was happy to have Maaya with us, so I'm guessing they just put all the problem children together. I'm well aware that I'm not very good when it comes to adjusting to others. That's why I'm genuinely thankful to Maaya. And at the same time, I remember her working out information and details about every possible place we could visit, asking all the group members where they wanted to go. All we did was simply pick where we wanted to go. In that sense, we should really be thankful to Maaya. But even so...

"I'm glad he's got enough charisma to push for the popular spots. Though I did say we should meet up if our spots overlapped."

"To whom?"

"It's amazing to think all the places we wanted to visit matched up so beautifully!"

Ah, she didn't want to tell me. I wonder who it is? Asamura-kun? No, he would have told me something.

"By the way, we're also heading to Sentosa Island together tomorrow."

"Tomorrow as well?"

"Yup. Isn't that right, Ryou-chan?"

"Yeah. Makes me happy."

"As for the boys... Well, they don't know each other too well, but Maru-kun should be able to handle them."

“...Maru-kun is Asamura-kun’s friend, right? I didn’t know you were friends with him.”

“We’re both group leaders, after all.”

Is that really as convincing of a reason as she made it out to be?

“Anyway, I’d like to get to know the boys in their group. And I need to warn our boys to not bother the girls in their group too much.”

...I see. So she had it all planned out from the start. After she finished her hair, she leaned towards me and whispered.

“Now you’ll always be together with your brother, right?” She put one hand on her mouth and snickered like a witch.

“Maaya! Geez, I can’t believe you!” I burst out in anger, and Satou-san twitched in shock.

I swear, look what you caused, Maaya.

“S-Sorry about that.”

“It’s okay...”

“And with that out of the way, let’s have some fun at the zoo today! It’s time to eat breakfast first though, but after that, it’s ‘let’s go Singapore!’” She finished it off with yet another clunky English pronunciation at the end as she jumped off the bed. “All those cutesy animals are waiting for us!” She said while raising her fist into the air.

I just shook my head and shrugged. When she’s like this, nobody can stop her. Still... Asamura-kun and I are going to get to walk around the zoo together today. ...Huh.

When we arrived at the zoo entrance, Asamura-kun’s group had just made it there, too. Even though I hadn’t seen his face for barely a

day, I felt a wave of relief when I saw him from a distance. Since both of our groups will be sticking together today, it'll be 12 people at once checking out the zoo and the night safari next to it. Now that I think about it, it's been since last summer and the day at the pool that we've been in as a group as big as this. Asamura-kun's friends Maru-kun and Maaya took the leading role today as they looked after the two groups. And not only that, Maaya would even throw conversation starters our way from time to time.

"Hey, Asamura-kun, Saki, what animals do you two like?"

We were walking around inside the zoo when Maaya asked us that question. Asamura-kun went first and responded with "Sloths." Um... sloths?

"That's unexpected. You seem like a devoted person to me, Asamura-kun. I figure you'd readily help make food if the need arose. Don't you agree, Saki?"

"...I think he's like a sloth."

Wait, no. She asked us what animals we like, not which animals represent us as a person. Won't he think I'm insulting him? But it's true that I can relax when I'm with him. It's like time passes much slower. In that way, it does suit him, but it's not like...

"I'm not calling you lazy or anything."

"I know that."

"Okay, good."

Phew, that made me panic. I don't know why, but talking with Asamura-kun in front of everyone makes me so restless. Even though I can relax perfectly fine when we're at home. And I don't think I was alone in that feeling. It seemed like Asamura-kun was also holding himself back when we were talking. Because of that, we felt so

distant, even though we were right next to each other. And once the sun began to set, we headed over to the night safari.

After watching the various animals and their life at night, we moved to a restaurant and eat dinner there. The menu was set up like a buffet, so after we grabbed all the food we wanted, we headed to a table. After all that walking, I was feeling especially hungry.

“What a beautiful voice,” Maru-kun said.

He must be talking about the woman playing the guitar up on that stage. Once her performance was over, she grabbed all her belongings, headed to the nearby bar, and started talking to the bartender. She ordered something and received a cocktail glass, only to suddenly come our direction. Our eyes met and she smiled at me. She looked like she was either Japanese or from South Asia. If I had to guess, she was around twenty, maybe a bit older. Her tied-up blonde hair reached down to the shoulders, which were open and uncovered by her red dress. Since the dress had deep cuts on both sides, you could sneak glances at her legs. Even as a girl, I found myself staring for a moment. She then looked at all our faces once and started speaking English.

*“My name is Melissa Woo. Where did you boys and girls come from? Japan?”*

It wasn’t anything too difficult, but because she was speaking so fast, everyone else in the group started staring at her in confusion.

*“You were watching me, right? How was I? I don’t want to interrupt your trip, but I’d love to hear your impressions of my performance.”*  
She said and smiled.

However, nobody from our group said anything. I guess it must be how fast she was speaking. She waited for a moment, but then seemed disappointed. Maybe she thought that we had just ignored

her. I don't think she's aware of the fact that our English might not be very good. Even I barely managed to catch what she said. While everybody else hesitated, Asamura-kun spoke up.

"Maybe she's saying stuff like 'Who are you?' or 'Where are you from?' and so on?"

Yeah, exactly.

"*Um, Melissa-san? We're students who came from Japan for a field trip.*" I responded, and Melissa turned toward me.

*"A field trip! Then you must be in middle school? Six boys and six girls, I can tell you're good friends! And judging from your age, you probably haven't heard that type of music before, no? What did you think? Maybe something more popular would have been better? Like anime music?"*

M-Middle school...? Do we look that young to her?

*"We're in high school. Our second year, actually. And we came from Tokyo, Japan."*

I just replied with that for now.

"You're amazing, Saki!"

"Ayase-san, you can speak English?"

I mean, all of you would have been able to understand it if she just spoke a bit more slowly. And Asamura-kun seems to have grasped the meaning, too. I just waved my hands left and right as I played down their praise.

"I used relatively simple vocabulary. Asamura-kun's assumption was fairly spot-on, too. She's asking where we came from."

That's all I told them, but Maaya made some weird joke that made Maru-kun angry at her. I swear... Look, Melissa-san's looking at us in

utter confusion. And Asamura-kun seems worried that she may have gotten the wrong idea.

“I said that we’re from Japan and currently on a field trip. Don’t worry.”

“Boooring!”

“Maaya, I swear... What if she gets the wrong idea? And on that note, her name is Melissa Woo-san.”

And then she asked us about our impressions of her performance, so I translated it for her. It seems like I’m playing the role of interpreter now.

“What about you, Asamura?”

My heart skipped a beat. I didn’t think I’d have to even translate what Asamura-kun said. And actually, I feel like he should be proficient enough to say it in English himself as long as he keeps it simple enough... But more importantly, I need to listen properly. I took what he said and reformed it in my head into English words. I think because I’ve been listening and thinking English a lot these days, my thoughts immediately changed to English without much of a hindrance. This made me realize that keeping a balance between two languages in my head at the same time was a lot harder than just translating something.

*“Melissa-san, he mentioned that he listened to your performance yesterday, too. He was asking if that was folk music. And he said that he enjoyed listening to your voice.”*

Asamura-kun tried to keep his impressions short and concise, which made it easier for me.

“Let’s see... Was he at the museum yesterday?”

*“I think so.”*

*“Ah, I see. That means this must have been his second time hearing me play. And yes, the song I played is fairly popular around here. And I’m happy that he appreciates my voice that much.”*

I repeated what Melissa told me in Japanese. And even before I could do that, some people in our group had begun nodding to themselves. I’m guessing they were slowly catching on to what she was saying. The other people at least understood that Melissa was thankful, and then they started saying so many things that Maru-kun couldn’t keep them under control. I once again tried my best to convey it in English as accurately and correctly as possible. Though sometimes it took me a while to find the right English expression or idiom.

Once everyone was done, Maaya suddenly raised her head, held her phone towards Melissa, and tapped on the screen. When she did so, an electronic female voice started speaking in English. It was a fairly long text, too. She probably typed it all into a translator and played it out loud. Melissa was surprised at first, but she listened earnestly.

As for the content, it was pretty much what you’d expect from Maaya. How she perceived the performance, what she thought of Melissa’s voice, and all that. Listening to that, Melissa started grinning about midway through. Granted, I don’t know how well it conveyed everything from the original text since I couldn’t read it, but there wasn’t anything weird about what I heard, which made me realize that we really lived in a convenient day and age. Then again, it would take quite a while to type in everything just like that.

*“I guess we should have just asked Maaya from the start.”*

I had a moment of weakness and grumbled to myself, but Maaya immediately denied that. She argued that it may be quick and easy,

but it lost all nuance and human emotion in the process. That makes sense.

“Exactly! And she seems thankful, too,” Maaya said, as Melissa stood up from her chair to walk behind me, embracing my shoulders.

“*What’s your name? Is it Saki?*”

“*Ah, yes. I’m Saki.*”

Oh, she picked up my name through all that?

“*Mmm! What a cute name. Thanks to you, I got to hear what all you cuties thought about my performance, so I’m really thankful!*”

She slapped me on the shoulder with a bright smile, which honestly hurt a bit. But when I saw her smile happily, I realized that this was just typical physical contact for her.

“*Hey, Saki. I haven’t heard your impressions yet.*”

Ah, right.

“*I thought it was wonderful.*”

“*I see, I see! Thank you. What’s your impression of Singapore? A great place, right? Are you having fun?*”

“*Yes, I didn’t think it’d be such a beautiful city. Though it’s a bit too hot for my taste.*”

“*Haha! That’s right, it’s still mid-winter over in Japan, right? Say, Saki, you seem to be going along with everyone here... but do you have a special someone in this group? A lover, maybe?*”

“*Huh?!*”

L-Lover?!

*"You must have one, right? You're so pretty. There's no way people would leave you alone. So tell me, who and who are the lucky person?"*

Huh? What? Who and who? Did I just mishear things right now?

*"That reaction... There's someone, right?"*

I happened to glance over at Asamura-kun, only to quickly avert my eyes. Why is she just bluntly asking such embarrassing things? Or am I just misunderstanding her? Granted, her English was a bit on the harder side of things. Maybe it's because this is a genuine conversation, or maybe it's her accent. I don't know what the secret ingredient is, but I never really struggled to understand her up to this point. But she's speaking a lot more frankly right now, so maybe I'm just mistranslating what she's telling me...



*"I-I don't have somebody like that!"*

*"Really?"* She narrowed her eyes with a smirk.

It's almost like she saw right through me and is just telling me to confess. And I realized that with just her words alone, that wouldn't have come across... Maaya was right! But that's not the problem right now. I broke out in a bit of a panic as Melissa let go of my shoulders. A man approached us, calling Melissa's name. She then jumped into his arms and they exchanged a passionate kiss right in front of us. Honestly, I thought my heart was gonna leap out of my chest. My instinct told me to turn my back towards it, which caused me to see everyone's faces. They all were just as shocked as me, but they kept on looking.

*"You boys! Stop staring!"* Maaya leaned forward.

I slowly turned around again to look... But they were still at it. Melissa and the man were tightly embracing each other, as if trying to suck up each other's warmth. Eventually, they moved their heads away from each other and Melissa turned to me again.

*"Where are you people staying?"*

I was spacing out and didn't listen properly. Only after a brief moment of silence did I realize she asked me where we were staying during our field trip. I discussed this with Maaya and told Melissa about the nearest bus stop we had to take. That shouldn't be a problem, at least. Upon hearing that, Melissa mentioned that her home was in the same direction, asking if we should head home together. And since we had to get going soon, we decided to agree. While we sat on the bus ride, Melissa and I talked almost the entire time.

I didn't think I'd have to rely on my practice in such an odd circumstance, but I'm happy that my efforts paid off, at least. Granted, Melissa used some slang and other terms I didn't know, so I couldn't pick up every little thing she said, but what she tried to convey definitely came across. As for our topics, it was honestly a bit of everything. What's popular right now in Japan, our favorite songs, and since Melissa was a huge fan of anime and manga, we talked about some series here and there, but as I wasn't so much of an avid reader, so I couldn't contribute much.

Maybe I should have asked Maaya for help. But she was busy talking with everyone else, as she usually did. Melissa's boyfriend (?) didn't come with us. They separated at the restaurant. Apparently, they live in different areas. We then got off the bus near the hotel and Melissa went her way, saying she hoped we'd meet again if the chance arose.

The rest of us entered the hotel, and I talked a bit with the girls from Maru-kun's group in the lobby. Since I remembered their names and faces after just meeting today, I guess I've made some progress myself. But at the same time, I realize that this usually happens when Maaya is around.

As we headed deeper inside and back to our rooms, my phone started being flooded with new messages. It was from the group chatroom, with people saying 'Today was fun' or 'Good night everyone.' It wasn't anything out of the ordinary, but looking at it made me feel fluffy inside. That's probably why I responded with 'It was fun,' myself. Then things moved to the girls' only group, where I sent a sticker of a smiling cat. It's the one that Maaya loves to send. In response came a flood of stickers. They each were themed around smiles, but everybody used different characters or motifs. I think this really shows the differences between people. Maaya, for example, sent some kind of weird sticker of a robot laughing. What even is that?

After arriving at our room, we changed into something more comfortable. I wanted to make sure that my uniform didn't end up with any wrinkles, only to realize that my skirt had been tattered a tad bit. Luckily, there weren't any holes that needed fixing. Nothing more than a frayed spot. It must have happened when we were walking through the zoo or the night safari. There were a lot of bushes or branches that it could have gotten stuck on. It wasn't significant enough that it stood out but I couldn't just leave it alone, either. But to get it fixed completely, I'd have to take it to a tailor back home in Japan.

I looked through my suitcase, only to realize my blunder. I didn't bring a sewing kit with me. What do I do... I should ask if I can borrow it from someone else. I feel like Maaya or Satou-san should have one.

"Um..."

I raised my head and tried to speak up, but I realized that Satou-san was busy with a phone call. It must be that girl 'Mio-chan' from Asamura-kun's group. They were probably discussing what happened today. Normally, she was always very docile and introverted, but when talking with her friend, she seemed so happy and energetic. I didn't want to bother her for my own reasons. As for Maaya... she was doing something on her phone. Yeah, I'd rather not get in their way.

I checked the time on my phone. I could still head outside if I needed to. And by 'outside,' I was referring to the convenience store here on the hotel grounds. They might have a sewing kit there. I put my wallet into my purse and told Maaya I'd be heading to the convenience store real quick. On the way, I explained the circumstances to the vice-principal and headed to the first floor of the hotel.

Although it was located on the hotel premises, this convenience store was big enough to have two entrances. One for the front outside the premises, and one for the hotel visitors. I immediately went to look for the sewing kit when a familiar voice called out my name. When I turned around, I spotted a woman smiling at me with a plastic bottle in hand—It's Melissa. She had a basket hanging from her arm, filled with drinks and potato chips.

*"Oh, wow! This is the hotel where you're staying? What a coincidence. Do you have some time to talk?"*

"Um..."

I hesitated for a moment but saw it as a chance to practice my English further, and I had no reason to decline in the first place. So I agreed for a bit longer. Melissa finished paying for her goods, handing them to the man standing next to her. Looking at him, I was confused, as he wasn't the man we met at the restaurant. The man she kissed had an Asian look with straight black hair, but this one here has red hair, is a bit smaller, and gives off friendly vibes. I don't think he's family, either, they look too different. The man accepted the plastic bag, kissed Melissa on the cheek, and left the convenience store.

"Are you sure?"

"About what?"

"*Making your friend wait, I mean.*"

*"It's okay. We'll spend the rest of the evening together, anyway. Also, he's not my friend, he's my boyfriend."*

...Come again? Maybe I misheard her? Did she just call him her boyfriend? I was confused, but still somehow managed to buy the sewing kit, as well as a can of coffee while I was at it. After that, I moved to the rest area in the lobby with Melissa. I think it should be

fine if we talk here for another ten minutes or so. We weren't alone either, so no problems there. But right as I sat down, my phone vibrated. Taking it out, I saw that I had gotten a message from Maaya.

*"Did I interrupt you?"*

Melissa asked me with a worried expression, but I reassured her I was fine. She just had invited me to play cards with them, so joining in later shouldn't be a huge issue. Though I did respond with a quick message. In the meantime, Melissa opened a can of beverage she had at her feet. Bubbles came gushing out, and she put her lips to it, drinking a good sip. It must be beer, or something else with carbohydrates. It does smell of alcohol, at least.

*"Want a sip, Saki?"*

*"No thanks. I'm still a minor."*

*"Oh? I thought Japanese people were regarded as adults at 18?"*

I'm surprised she knows about that. But that's also not quite right.

*"Not when it comes to drinking or smoking. Also, I'm still 17 anyway."*

*"Oh, really? I'm sorry. I guess I can't even invite you out for a drink then."*

*"And I've got a curfew, too. Though I'm happy for the invitation."*

*"A curfew! Wow, I had no idea... Then that means you only get to see your lover during the day."*

For some reason, she showed sympathy and regret. And then she said that we won't get any time to indulge in sexual activities during the day... Wait, what?

*"Hm? Did you not understand me? Maybe my pronunciation was off."*

No, that wasn't the problem. I just thought... I heard some unorthodox vocabulary mixed within her statement. Melissa narrowed her eyes, assuming I didn't understand her.

"*Hm, I think you'd be just fine, Saki.*"

"...For that?"

I asked in English, but...

"Like, intercourse. Jumping into the box. Deepening your bonds. That kind of thing?"

Out of the blue, she started speaking in Japanese.

"Wh-What are you saying?! Keep it down!"

Melissa saw my reaction and covered her mouth with both her hands.

"But you're a lot louder than me."

I gasped and looked around me. Luckily, only a few people were around, and none of them were paying us any attention. Phew... that made me panic for a second.

"Melissa-san, you're speaking Japanese...?"

"Ah, yeah. I do understand a bit. I'm half-Japanese, after all."

"...What?"

When she told me that, I once again looked closely at her. I always felt like she had Asian looks, but with blonde hair and tan skin, it was really hard to be sure.

"Specifically, my mother is from Taiwan and my father from Kyushu. They got to know each other when she was studying overseas."

“I had no idea.”

We then switched to Japanese, and she told me about her life. She said that her mother, born in Taiwan, came to Japan to study, where she met her father. After she graduated, they went to get married, and Melissa was born in Japan. That’s why she had a Japanese birth certificate. She spent a few years in Japan, so she can at least speak the language.

“My real name is Woo Meishen. That’s what he called me just now, remember? Melissa is just my English name.”

She must be talking about the man who was with her in the convenience store. Though I didn’t remember what he called her.

“Then should I call you Meishen instead?”

“I’ll leave it up to you. Though I would prefer Melissa,” she said as a faint shadow appeared on her face.

...Maybe there’s something going on behind the scenes? I can’t help feeling curious. And I’m guessing Melissa saw this, as she asked me another question.

“How many lovers would you like to have, Saki?”

Did she just ask... How many?

“Isn’t it normal to just have one?” I answered, and Melissa sighed.

“So that’s gonna be your answer...”

I mean, I was the one who was surprised.

“Could you elaborate?”

“I want more than two, at least.”

“Excuse me?”

“Is that really so shocking to hear?”

“To me it is, yes.”

“But... there’s not just one singular reason why you would fall in love with people, right?”

Her words made me think. Reason to fall in love with someone... Because they’re kind. Because they’re cool. Because they’re handsome... Those sorts of things, right?

“Exactly. Because your hobbies align. Because your personalities match.”

“Ah, because you’re a good match with that person—”

“Because your bodies are a perfect fit.”

...Guess not.

“And there’s no guarantee that one person fulfills all those various requests you may have.”

“That... is true, but...”

I’d love to meet a person like that.

“And going with that, it’s not normal to only love one person, right?”

“Erm...”

I think that’s a bit of a leap.

“For example, my taste in alcohol is similar to that man you just saw.”

“So... he’s your drinking buddy?”

“Our bodies are a great fit, too. In bed, of course. He does everything I love having done to me.”

*You really don't need to go into so much detail... I could feel my cheeks growing hot.*

"So that person at the restaurant..."

"He's also in the music scene. And our taste in music matches. I want more people to listen to his music. But no matter how much love he may whisper to me, he's not interested in my body."

That... happens, I guess?

"If there's only one reason to like, then you can just pick who feels better. But with many various reasons to love someone, you can't just keep yourself limited to just one person."

"I get where you're coming from, but..."

"You also think it's weird, right?"

"Well..."

Denying something just because I can't grasp the logic would speak against my ethics. I don't want to force my views and principles onto other people. Especially when it comes to skinship and how other people love.

"...I won't deny how you feel, but I'm curious. Going with that logic, it means that the other person can choose as many other lovers as they want, right?"

"That's true," Melissa responded bluntly.

She looked at me like I asked something weird.

"Um, so... Are all those men you're dating actually..."

"I know. It wouldn't be fair otherwise. Though, both parties have to agree to this, of course," she said with a smile, which left me speechless.

It was a set of values I hadn't encountered before, which made this even more baffling. Compared to Melissa's argument, Professor Kudou's endless barrage of logic and reason was much easier to grasp.

"Saki, I'm happy you didn't call it weird."

I gasped. Melissa dropped her gaze.

"When I was living in Japan, nobody understood what I was talking about. Nobody would even listen to me. That's why I came here. But when people heard that I came from Japan, a lot of people expected chastity and virtue from me. Despite my hair and skin color."

"That's why you chose an English name?"

Melissa nodded. She dyed her hair, put on makeup, and chose an English name, which allowed her to finally find people who agreed with her logic. A place where she could communicate as she wanted. According to her, she learned English, Chinese, and Japanese. However, she usually keeps everything in English. Upon hearing that, it felt like I understood her at least a bit. The reason I dye my hair and pay close attention to my clothes is that my own body is slightly different from who I wanted to be. Everyone said that it fit with who I was. If I was as strong as Yomiuri Shiori-san, I may have been able to do what she does. Being true to herself while also retaining her typically Japanese beauty. But I knew I wasn't as strong as her. And so that I don't get dragged in a direction I don't prefer, I chose to build up my armament.

"When I saw you, Saki, I had a hunch."

“Huh...?”

“That we resemble each other.”

I remembered earlier when she smiled at me in the restaurant.

“That’s why I decided to talk to you. I think I was half correct, and half off the mark. You tend to hold back when it comes to a lot of things, right?”

“Does it... look that way?”

“At least to me, it does.”

It’s easy to deny that. But what good would that do?

“Saki, you’re extremely bothered when it comes to the gazes of others and the pressure from society, right?”

“That... is true.”

During this entire trip, I hadn’t mustered up the courage to talk to Asamura-kun even once. No matter what I say, that fact can’t be denied.

“It’s so constraining, right?”

When she said that, I felt the urge to fire back.

“But limiting yourself to the choice of not speaking Japanese isn’t?”

“I’m saying that you need to find a place where you can be as selfish and free as you want, or you’ll break apart.”

Despite my outburst, Melissa continued to speak with kind words, making me realize how she just hit the nail where it hurt. And that made me feel embarrassed.

“You must find a community that lets you live freely without trying to block off and restrain every single thing you do.”

It wasn’t about living carelessly and as I wanted, but more about finding a safe space where I was allowed to do that... is probably what she’s saying. And that was all she told me. She left and returned to where her boyfriend was waiting. They planned to have some drinks and snacks and watch anime all night. I also gulped down the rest of the canned coffee I bought. A faint sweetness danced on top of my tongue and remained there. If I’d known that would happen, I would have chosen black coffee.

When I got back to the room, Maaya was still getting absolutely beat up by Satou-san in the card game they were playing.

“That’s why I wanted you to join us, Saki!”

So she wanted me to join simply so that she wouldn’t end up with only losses under her belt?

“I mean, you’re bad at this game, too! You’re always about to win, only to forget you gotta call it.”

I mean... that’s not wrong. But that just happens from time to time.

“Um, should we play one more game, then? I promise I’ll hold back.”

“Winning such an easy game won’t make me happy at all!”

“Ah... I’m sorry...” Satou-san made a saddened expression, which made Maaya panic.

What a rare sight.

“N-No, you don’t have to apologize, Ryou-chan. You’re not at fault! It’s all because of this boring lady over here!”

“Who’s a boring lady?”

“You?”

“Don’t phrase it as a question.”

“If you had been here, I would have won a few rounds without Ryou-chan having to hold back!”

That might be true logic-wise, at least...

“You can’t know that for sure.”

“Oh, now you said it. Let’s have one final match!”

“If we don’t take a bath soon, it’ll be lights out before we get to, you know?”

“Just one more round! Please!”

I swear... Maaya began distributing the cards before I could even say yes or no. But in the end, we played one more round, and Satou-san won. In the final round, I managed to barely win against Maaya, who ended up in last place again.

“Oh...Hm? This is weird...” I smirked.

“You two, it’s bath time,” Maaya said, trying to escape reality.

“I already took a bath,” Satou-san said.

How admirable.

“Then let’s go take a bath together, Saki.”

“Why together...?”

“We won’t make it in time otherwise, right?”

I glanced at the time, and just as she said, we couldn’t afford to take turns.

“C’mon, c’mon.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Luckily, the bath here in this room was relatively spacious, allowing us both to use it at the same time. It felt like it was designed for Japanese traditions, which I was grateful for. Once I finished my shower, I continued washing my body. Meanwhile, Maaya hopped in the bath.

“Took you some time to get back, huh? What happened?”

“Ah, about that...”

I told her what happened while I washed myself off. That I met Melissa in the convenience store, and that we had been talking in the lobby until now.

“Oh, I see. So she’s got two hot buds, eh? Well, I get where she’s coming from. If there are various reasons to come to like someone, and if these reasons don’t co-exist in two people at the same time, then you would have to rely on having several lovers.”

“That’s pretty much it, but why’d you phrase it that way?”

“I mean, it’s fair if permission is involved. The real problem is the matching.” Maaya said as she stood up from the bathtub.

Her towel fell off into the water, allowing me to see her navel and the area around that. I swear, use your towel properly... After I finished my shower, I switched places with her and stepped into the bathtub. Allowing yourself to sink as deep as possible into the water really is what makes this feel like a Japanese bath. It’s like all the exhaustion of the day was being washed away. As my head started feeling fuzzy from the heat, I asked one more question.

“What do you mean by matching?”

“I mean, one side might like it, but the other doesn’t. And that goes both ways. If both sides agree and there’s no actual harm, then just let them do as they please, really.”

“Harm...”

What a violent choice of words.

“Think about it in extreme ways. What about a world where there’s only one man left but many women, or vice versa? The idea of having only one partner would lead to the ruin of humanity.”

That... is an extreme example, yeah. But I get where she’s coming from.

“In other words, if you try to abide by the morals and ideas of having only one partner as it’s common in Japan, then there may be a problem.”

Morals change as does the world. As expected, you could say. And if Professor Kudou was here, she’d move on with exactly that rebuttal.

“Exactly. Of course, the opposite can be the case, too. However, the sign of a grown world and society would be that, as long as your morals aren’t injuring or hurting anybody else, you should try to keep them.”

“Right...”

“A character in a science-fiction anime I watched before said that, actually.”

“Does all your wisdom come from anime, Maaya?”

“I’ve got sound effects, too.”

“How trivial.”

“It’s not. Want me to tell you?”

“I’ll pass.”

I’d never get a wink of sleep if she started on that.

“Anyway, if the people involved are happy, what’s it matter? As long as they accept it. But, Saki, in your case—”

I was indulging in the hot and pleasant bath so much that my brain was lagging behind.

“—You wouldn’t want Asamura-kun to be stolen from you, right?”

“Of course I wouldn’t,” I blurted out without hesitation but realized it too late.

I looked over at Maaya in shock, who grinned at me. It’s not like it matters much, but the way the shampoo on her head formed bubbles made her smile look even more devious.

“Now you’ve said it.”

“Agh... Um...”

“Hee hee hee! You don’t need to hide it anymore, for real!”

“B-But... We’re supposed to be siblings... It’s weird, right?”

I was worried about what she’d think about it.

“I mean, you’re basically strangers who became non-blood-related step-siblings. Of course, that doesn’t mean that all step-siblings in the world will necessarily end up the same as you two.”

“Y-Yeah...”

“But in the beginning, you didn’t look at him the way you do right now, did you? You planned to remain in a plain and dry position as his younger sister, I bet.”

Absolutely. How does she understand me so well?

“You’re just like an open book.”

“R-Really?”

“To me at least.”

I had no idea.



“I had a feeling like you two might have ended up in a relationship like that.”

“Ugh... Was it that obvious?”

Honestly, I was so worried about what she'd think if she found out, but now that the cat's out of the bag, I just feel exhausted more than anything.

“So?”

“So... what?”

“If you don't want him running around cheating, you should probably keep him tied down. Are you doing it?”

“D-Do what?”

“Like, going on dates.”

“Ah, that's what you meant.”

Wait, what did I think she was asking me? Gosh...

“That's fine, too. But I'll have you tell me all about that later during some pillow talk.”

“Nothing of that sort has happened, okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. Anyway, you're on a trip, remember? You've gotta use that to your advantage.”

“But it's not just us two. We're on a school field trip.”

“Then how about you two youngbloods go on a date tomorrow? Luckily, Asamura-kun's group is also touring Sentosa Island. And we can move freely tomorrow.”

“Is that...”

...really something we can do?

“If you leave him to himself, he might walk around with the girls from his group.”

*Hmph.*

“And lately, he’s been a lot more conscious about his outfits. People have been more interested in talking to him, too.”

*Mhmpf...*

“Really?”

“Well, that’s what I say.”

“Just you...”

Stop scaring me like that.

“Anyway, it’s my job to ensure that my group gets to have fun and returns to Japan with a bunch of great memories. And you’re part of my group, Saki. So tell me... What do you want to do?”

Maaya rinsed the shampoo off her hair and then looked at me. She was grinning, too. No fair. If she asks me like that...

“I want to walk around with Asamura-kun...Just the two of us.”

Maaya let out a snort.

“Good girl. Well said.”

“Ugh, this is so embarrassing.”

But when I look at Maaya, and how she allows me to easily talk about what’s on my mind... Then maybe she is one of those

communities that'll accept me fully... just like Melissa told me about. Though I'd be happy if I could be someone like that for Maaya, too.

"Then you have to tell Asamura-kun that, okay?"

"Will do."

I almost died from the embarrassment, so I dove deeper into the bathtub so that only my eyes and upper head were visible. 'Thanks, Maaya...' My mumbling turned into bubbles and dispersed as they reached the surface of the water.

We finished our bath, and after I was finished drying my hair, I immediately slipped into my bed. Before the drowsiness got the better of me, I quickly thought about my plans for tomorrow. We'll be spending the whole day at Sentosa Island, and although we were supposed to stay in our groups, Maaya said it was fine to explore independently. And I think the same was true for Asamura-kun's group.

Since this sounded like another lucky coincidence, I bet Maaya set this up with Maru-kun. And since Satou-san is friends with a girl from their group, she won't mind. In fact, she might want to walk around with her. I wonder what Maaya will do. I grabbed my phone which was currently charging. I'll just send Asamura-kun a message. I think all this heat and passion from today is making me go crazy. And because Maaya pushed me like this. She even found out, too. I have to tell him about that, too.

*'I'd like to walk around alone with you on Sentosa Island tomorrow. Do you think that's possible?'*

I even added the excuse that we didn't have to walk around as a big group as long as we didn't leave the island. There are going to be so many 2nd-year students from Suisei High on the island. However, as long as we stay away from crowded places and pay attention, we

shouldn't run into anybody that knows us. That should allow us to meet up.

I got a read notification attached to my message but the time spent waiting for his response felt like an eternity. I grew worried that maybe I was putting too much pressure on him. When the message notification came in, I felt my chest tightening.

*'Got it. I'll tell the people in my group, so I'll let you know if we can meet up and everything else tomorrow.'*

A sigh escaped my lips. It wasn't an OK or a no, but it could be worse. Honestly, there's no guarantee we can always be alone. At least he didn't decline so... the rest depends on tomorrow. I was so relieved that I started feeling sleepy immediately. But as my consciousness started drifting away, another message came in. I rubbed my eyes and checked my phone.

*'I also want to walk around with you, Ayase-san.'*

...Huh? Oh, that makes me really happy. How should I respond? After a lot of worrying, I just went with a sticker. I didn't want to be too happy in case something comes up and it makes it harder for him to decline. All I could do was pray that we could walk around the island together as I closed my eyelids.

## **Chapter 9: February 19th (Fri) – Field Trip Day 3 – Ayase Saki**

In order to read a letter written on paper, you need light. However, a message on the phone can be read in darkness without any issue. Even a message from Asamura-kun could stay hidden from anybody else as long as I cover my head with my blanket. It doesn't attract another person's curiosity. As for how I look at other people from the outside—I wasn't thinking about that at all.

The very first thing I did after waking up was grab my smartphone and pull my blanket over my face, checking my LINE app... However, there was no reply. Well, it's still 6 am. Breakfast is at 7, so he might still be asleep. Maybe he's telling his group that he wants to walk around alone today. The answer might come any second. There's no need to rush.

“Puwah!”

I pushed the blanket off my head and sighed. Next to my bed, Maaya was busy combing her hair, as our eyes met.

“Oh, Saki. Were you doing some blanket diving championship?”

I don't think a championship like that exists.

“It's pretty hot, huh?”

“...I wonder why,” Maaya gave me a cold stare.

I was aware that I must have looked like an idiot. That's why I shrugged it off completely. I put on my clothes, ate breakfast at the cafeteria, and checked my phone again, but there was still no response. I started growing worried, thinking that maybe I shouldn't have asked him. Maybe I should send him another message? But I don't want him to think that I'm being clingy. And while I hesitated,

we prepared to head off. Then again, we're going to the same place, so while we're together as a group, we should be able to see each other once or twice, right? There's no need to panic... or so I made excuse after excuse as we departed.

Sentosa Island is a small island located to the south of Singapore itself. It was well-known as a leisure resort that had a lot of popular tourist spots, such as Universal Studios Singapore, Mega Adventure Park, and Palawan Beach. We can't enter them, but there are casinos, too. It was connected to the main island of Singapore by a large bridge, which could be traversed by car, bus, taxi, foot, monorail, cable car, and so on. However, you had to pay an entrance fee for entering. Our group chose the bus. There were four lanes on the bridge just for one side, as we were focused entirely on the wide blue ocean to the left and right of us. Just looking at the bridge connecting the islands, it wasn't much different from the Tokyo Bay Aqua-Line—Actually, that's not true. There are four car lanes for just one side here, and the color of the ocean felt more... southern? Everyone was excited as they stared out of the window, but as for me, I was staring at my phone. I sent Asamura-kun a message.

*'Let me know when you can make some time.'*

Of course, after we made it to the island. Right now, all of us students should be traveling to the island. Maybe... I looked up and gazed out of the window. There were several cars lined up next to ours, but I didn't see another bus. Maybe he already made it onto the island, or maybe he's only just now making his way there. I sighed yet another time as my phone vibrated, bringing me back to reality. I hurriedly stared down at my phone.

*'Sorry for the late reply! I'll make sure to slip out this afternoon, so we can meet then!'*

It was a relatively brief response, but it made me feel relieved. Thank goodness. He's trying to make it so that we can be together, at least. But he still hasn't told his group? Well, Maaya already knows about my relationship with Asamura-kun, so I've got her full support as the group leader. However, the same can't be said for Asamura-kun. Even if he told them that he wanted to walk around the island alone, they might just get angry at him for being a lone wolf. Since he said he wanted to make it out this afternoon, I should just trust him.

He probably wants to stay with his group at least for the morning. I don't want to get in the way of his friendships, and if we get to see each other this afternoon, then I have to be happy with that. I can't be greedy. And I realized that this exchange sounded oddly familiar to me. It felt like a heavy stone landed deep inside my stomach. I was reminded of the regular exchanges between my father and Mom. She works at a certain bar in Shibuya as a bartender, coming home late every day.

This was all job-related, so it couldn't really be helped, and my father should have known that. Yet when he was robbed of his company and lost his trust in other people, he only viewed others with doubt and distrust. Each and every single day, he would complain. "Late again?" he'd ask Mom. His angry voice made me curl up in fear, and I felt genuine terror as a child. Wondering how he could say these things and be mad at Mom. Back then, he was the unreasonable one. The root of all evil. I wanted him to stop blaming Mom for everything. And Mom just took it all in silence. She probably realized that talking back at him wouldn't get us anywhere. Because it wasn't based on logic. It was all centered around his feelings.

I looked at my phone again. Asamura-kun hadn't responded. But he had his own friendships and relationships, and we were still on a school field trip, so he didn't have unlimited free time. I'm just being selfish for expecting an immediate response. I understand I shouldn't

feel this way. It's not fair to be annoyed that he couldn't make time for me yet. I don't want to be like my father who just blurted out whatever nasty thought crossed his mind. I ran my fingers along my phone screen, typing a new message.

*'You don't have to force yourself to make time. Just let me know when it's best for you.'*

After sending that message, I raised my head.

"Hey, Maaya."

"What's up, my darling? Need to go to the toilet?"

"W-Will you shut up?"

We're surrounded by people. What potty mouth is saying these rude things, huh?

"Fwaf fwurfs!"

"I hope it hurts! No more joking around, okay?"

Ofay ofay, fwof fwuwing!"

I stopped pulling on her cheeks and cleared my throat to get back on track.

"I was just wondering if your tummy hurt because you had such a stern expression. Ah, are you congested?"

"...I will pull your cheeks again."

"I'm sorry!"

"Enough with the jokes. I was just wondering what our plan of action is once we get to the island."

“Ah, right. As long as we meet up at the right place at the right time, they’ll let us do pretty much whatever we want. But that leaves us with too many options to choose from, so I looked up a few recommended spots and added them to the notes on LINE.”

“Oooh!” The other members of our group let out a groan of admiration.

Satou-san even joined in. “That’s a huge help! Wow,” she muttered. And she’s right. Since we were given this much freedom, she could have very well just slacked off. And yet she considered every possibility. This is the sort of thing that makes her such a reliable person.

“The Universal Studios is right after we get off the bridge. And a bit further west, there’s the Mega Adventure Park.”

“Hm. Which do you think would be better?” I asked, and Maaya crossed her arms and started thinking.

“No matter which we go with, there’s way too much to see in just the one day we have. Unless you guys have a specific attraction you’d like to check out.”

“I see.”

“And we’ll be taking the same bus home later, so we’ll be on a relatively tight schedule. If anything happens, be sure to stay in contact. Everywhere around here has free wifi, at least as far as I know.”

All of us group members said ‘Okaaay!’ in unison, like little children after having listened to a safety instruction. It was clear we all had great trust in our group leader. Then again, I was the same.

“But in theory, we should start with the one furthest away. Walking around with souvenirs after buying them too early would be a drag.”

Everyone nodded. Soon after, we got off the bus, and after careful consideration, the boys decided to head to the Mega Adventure Park, whereas we three girls would meet up with Satou-san's friend Mio-chan midway, and then we'd all head to Universal Studios Singapore together. I guess the boys couldn't win against the charm of 'Adventure' as the name said.

"Not to mention that it isn't just any regular adventure! It's mega!" or so they said, but I didn't know what was so great about that or why they'd even make such a big deal out of it. Maaya said that boys like terms such as 'mega' or 'giga.' And considering she had multiple younger brothers, that argument sounded even more convincing. We girls started walking to the ticket gate for the Universal Studios building. It was relatively easy to see, as the front was decorated with a large blue globe that had 'Universal' written in alphabetical letters on it. But when we got closer to it, Maaya gently whispered into my ear.

"Are you sure about coming with us? I don't think you'll be able to leave quickly after entering."

She probably was asking me about my rendezvous with Asamura-kun. However, I haven't gotten a response since we got off the bus, either. Just standing around doing nothing would only make me restless.

"It's fine. Let's just have fun."

That's what I needed the most right now. I can just think about the rest once Asamura-kun actually messages me. He should be walking around somewhere himself. It's fine. He said he'll let me know. We bought the tickets and then entered through the front entrance.

The sun had reached its zenith. The sunlight felt even stronger than yesterday, and the temperature had risen accordingly. It made me

forget that we were still only halfway through February. We were told that it could rain practically any day because Singapore was currently going through its rainy season, but there was no cloud in sight. I just hoped that my sunscreen worked as we walked around inside the theme park. Until now, we had just been having fun. I think I could relax a bit more since it was just us girls. What surprised me the most was the fact that Satou-san of all people had the most fun on the rollercoaster. She wanted to ride it several times, so I took shelter under a roof and sent off the girls who wanted to enjoy the rides some more. My semicircular canals aren't going to survive at this rate. I get dizzy even when playing 3D games on a big screen. And... I'm really scared, too.

I welcomed back the girls and we decided to eat something at the park's restaurant. I figured we'd then check out some more attractions in the afternoon, but Maaya said she wanted to do some more sightseeing. With that decided, we headed to Palawan Beach. At around 3 pm, after the sun had begun moving west, the sunlight grew a bit weaker. I pretended to check the time on my phone but instead looked at my messages. I think I've been doing that a lot more frequently as soon as noon passed. And yet no message came in.

Granted, we could rely on the free wifi sponsored by the government, but I didn't know when it'd just randomly cut off, so I booted up LINE and sent Asamura-kun another message.

*'We're heading to Palawan Beach right now.'*

Time-wise, the best we can do is probably shop for souvenirs later. And if we wanted to make some memories together, the beach is the best place, too. I was scared that maybe we'd pass by each other without noticing. It wasn't that huge of an issue, but it's one I wanted to avoid. I waited a minute, but he didn't even read my

message. I grew a bit concerned, wondering if something may have happened.

*'I'll be waiting there, and I'll let you know if we move.'*

I really hope my messages reach him...

"All right, let's move!"

When Maaya said that, I stood up. And then we started moving toward our last spot of the day.

Sentosa Island was shaped like an inverted triangle, with the southern area sticking out, although that could be hard to see on the map. And the Palawan Beach in question was located in the southwestern area (stretching from top left to bottom right). On a map, it looks like a shore in the shape of a 3. And from Universal Studios, the beach was a distance of 2km away, which was roughly a 30-minute walk. We saw that it was a distance we could travel by foot, so we immediately started our journey. We might as well enjoy the scenery on the way.

"If we get lost, we can just have Saki ask someone for directions."

"Me?!"

"You're the most proficient English speaker out of all of us, after all," Maaya said and Satou-san nodded.

I-I'm not that good... or so I wanted to say, but thinking back on it, I was the only one who actually talked with Melissa yesterday. We made our way towards the beach walking behind the Universal Studios we had just come out from. The exit we used was like a shopping mall with lots of restaurants. Though since we had already eaten lunch, we didn't have any intentions of checking that out, but we could still hear cheers coming from the attractions.

We left the area and walked down the path that was probably the main road. We could once again see the clear blue sky above us. The sunlight was definitely less intense than before, but it was still plenty strong, which made my eyes hurt when I looked up, and sweat started building up on my skin. The temperature's gone up, too.

"With weather like this, I'd love to have an umbrella," Maaya said and Satou-san nodded once more.

Yeah, this weather definitely brought the risk of heatstroke. Especially since we were just walking alongside the road like this. To our left and right were forests, and it felt like we were walking through a jungle, with no stores or other resting areas in sight.

"I heard there's a giant hotel across the forest here," Maaya said.

She must be talking about the five-star hotel that we could see on the map itself. Though the trees are blocking the view right now. And amongst the rows of trees were palm trees growing as if they had always been there since the start, just mixing in.

"Ah, the sea..."

When I heard Satou-san's voice, I quickly turned my head to look straight ahead. In the distance, I could see a different color of blue, and waves crashing against a beach periodically.

"Wow!" Maaya gasped.

"It's the sea! Should we start running towards it and then jump at the same time?"

"Please don't. You'll just hurt yourself."

The scary part about Maaya is that she'll actually do things like that if you don't tell her off quickly enough.

“It’d feel very youth-like, though.”

“And what would all the residents and tourists think if they saw a young girl screaming something in a foreign language as she ran down the street?”

“How peaceful it is, probably?”

“I won’t deny that, but still...”

“Narasaka-san, you shouldn’t—”

“C’mon now, Ryou-chan, you can call me Maaya already.”

“...Maaya-san. That’s something you do when setting foot on the sandy beach, right?”

“Oh, right! Ryou-chan, you’re a genius!”

Maaya created a peace sign with her fingers and held it out toward Satou-san. Satou-san’s friend mentioned that she’d never seen her open up this quickly and that she was almost a bit jealous.

“Let’s start a cheerleading dance on the sandy beach with our shoulders together!” Maaya suddenly came up with another of her weird ideas.

“Not gonna happen.”

“If you stretch your leg up and snap a pic, I bet your brother will be quite happy, too.”

“No way!”

...Ah, I didn’t mean to scream like that.

“So you do have an older brother, Ayase-san? Or is this... more talk about having the little-sister attribute?” Satou-san said.

“Well, um... I do have one.”

“How nice. I’m an only child, so I’ve always wanted siblings.”

“And she reaaally likes her brother.”

“I’m a bit jealous.”

“This has nothing to do with anything!” I protested and tried to end the conversation, but Maaya grinned at me.

“...He hasn’t contacted you yet, eh?”

“Ugh...” I faintly nodded.

She really sees through everything. The more we walked, the bigger the sea began to look. The scent began drifting over toward us, too, and it tickled my nose. Whenever you’re in a southern country, you always get this rocky scent. Then again, that makes sense. It’s connected to the sea, after all. Finally, the beach spread out to our left and right.

“Wow! It’s pure white!” Satou-san said with admiration.

Beyond the beach were the blue sea and the blue sky. And diagonally to the right, we spotted a small island.

“That’s Palawan Island. You can even see the famous suspension bridge.”

There was a small and narrow bridge connecting our side to the island. It looked to be... around 50 meters long. It also was barely hanging above the water’s surface.

“Is it famous?”

“Well, there’s always pictures of it, no matter if you check the guidebook, pamphlet, or the Palawan Beach website.”

“That bridge... doesn’t look too reliable.”

“It’s no problem, Ryou-chan. It’s barely one meter deep there, and there are ropes on both sides to make sure you don’t fall, either.”

Just as Maaya said, there were rope-like nets on both sides that looked like a guide rail.

“I... see?”

I guess she’s got a point.

“Anyway, let’s go! Since Palawan Island is so small, we should be able to take a quick tour and then walk back!”

“O-Okay.”

But are we really going to walk across that bridge? After we walked the path along the sandy beach, we reached a billboard with rules and listened to the guide there. The tall gate in front of us then opened, as we walked along the green pathway, reaching the beginning of the bridge. This sudden reveal made my heart skip a beat. Was it built like this on purpose?

“Running down here could be dangerous, so let’s take our time, okay?”

Should you really be saying that, Maaya? You’re the person who keeps running ahead. But she’s not wrong. Each time a person made a step on the bridge, it gently shook left and right. To me, this entire ordeal was a lot more terrifying than any rollercoaster I had ridden today. When passing someone who came back from the island one had to either lean to the left or right to avoid them, which made the bridge shake even more. And you’d even bump into them from time to time. I could feel my heart racing painfully fast, and even though I knew I couldn’t fall, I really didn’t like this sort of thrill. Eventually, we finally reached the shore, and having solid ground beneath my

feet caused me to sigh in relief. As we walked along that shore, we could already see the sea on the opposite side.

“This sure is a small island!”

Maaya was right. It was honestly pretty underwhelming. Just walking around the whole island shouldn’t take too long, at least. We went on our way, grabbing some sand from the sandy beach, and we spent some time gazing at the waves with the breeze blowing against us. The heat had receded a bit, but I was exhausted so I sat down on a random chair that happened to be sitting around.

“We’re already going home tomorrow, huh...?” Maaya said.

“It almost feels surreal. But we’re definitely traveling outside of Japan,” Satou-san said as she took a picture of a large boat traveling down the open sea.

She seemed a bit disappointed that the light from the sun wasn’t quite enough to reflect everything properly.

“We didn’t even get to see very many places either, right? I’d love to come again!”

“Would we really be able to?”

“If the traveling costs weren’t that big of a problem, we could come every week. But it’s a great place. It’s beautiful and safe, but it really hurts when you suck at English.”

“Which you don’t, right? You just can’t hold a proper conversation,” I retorted to Maaya.

“I’ll just have to employ the services of a guide.”

“You’re not referring to me, are you?”

“Say, Saki, do you want to have your honeymoon here in Singapore?”

“You’d better not be using someone else’s honeymoon as a reason to come with them for a trip.”

What even are these ideas she’s brewing? After a quick break, we decided to head back to the main island. After reaching the beach, I turned around one more time. The sun had begun sinking beneath the horizon, but the sky was still blue. In Japan, it’d be slowly turning dusk right about now.

“Still bright out, huh?”

“Even after 7 pm, the sun’s still high up.”

“I heard that sunset in Singapore happens at around 7:20pm,” Satou-san told us.

“Hm? Ryou-chan, did you look that up online?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, you’re right! We’ve got wifi here... Ah!” Maaya suddenly looked like she remembered something and turned toward me. “You wanna stay here?”

“Huh?”

What’s she talking about?

“There’s one bus stop from here to the meeting point, so can we go on ahead? We’ll wait at the souvenir shop.”

Maaya’s words made me remember the messages I had sent to Asamura-kun.

*‘We’re heading to Palawan Beach right now.’*

*‘I’ll be waiting there, and I’ll let you know if we move.’*

I said I'd let him know if we move again. But on Palawan Island, we were out of reach of the free wifi. If I don't let him know now, I'd have to wait here the entire time.

"I think this is probably the last place we'll get to see with such great scenery."

"Ah, are you planning on meeting someone?" Satou-san's words caused my heart to skip a beat.

"How did you...""

"Well, you've been restless this whole time."

Maaya burst out laughing when she heard that.

"I guess it's time to drop your 'Dry girl' act, Saki!"

Dry... What kind of nickname is that? I never saw myself as a dry or distant person. I just tried to live my life the way I wanted without being shaken left and right.

"There's still some sunlight left. You'll be able to spot them easily if you stay here. But be sure to be back in time for the meet-up."

"And I'd like to buy some souvenirs, too," said Satou-san.

"We can do that, no biggie! Anyway... we'll catch you later, Saki."

"Have fun."

"...Huh? Are you sure?"

Before I could even say a thing, the two walked away, with Maaya giving me a thumbs-up and moving her mouth saying: "Good luck." I swear, she couldn't be any more forceful... Watching the two walk towards the main road, I sighed and took out my phone. She was right, I still had a wifi connection. But I didn't get any calls or

messages. I looked around me and then went back to the suspension bridge again. Upon reaching the center, I stopped.

The sun was moving down the sky and towards the horizon. It began to look smaller and smaller. And as I stood in the center of the bridge, surrounded by nothing but water, it felt like I had entered a world of my own. I could hear the sounds of the birds flying way above my head, the waves crashing against each other, and the wind hissing through the bridge's net. From time to time, I could hear a whistle from a boat in the distance.

Time-wise, it seemed like most tourists had made their way home for the day, and no one else came to walk across the bridge, allowing me to focus solely on the sounds around me. When I looked over at the beach, I saw that there were still groups of people loitering about. And then I heard voices approaching. A man and woman came from Palawan Island, so I hurriedly made some space for them. It must be a newlywed couple. They were holding hands as they smiled at each other, passing me by with a quick "*Excuse me.*" When they passed me, I caught a quick glance at them again, as they looked at the setting sun in admiration.

With the sea on both sides, seeing the sunset at the horizon definitely was a rare sight. I'm sure that'll be a great memory for them. And after they walked a few steps, they looked to the west like I had before. The man moved over to tightly embrace the woman's shoulders, as they looked at each other, and—I realized I was staring too much and frantically averted my gaze.

It's not very polite to stare like that. Eventually, the two of them separated and walked further down the bridge, causing me to sigh in relief. They didn't even seem to care that I was there. It made me realize that I had come a long way from Japan. Is this because we're

overseas? Or because the two of them were so absorbed with each other? Maybe my sense of values is just old-fashioned?

“How nice.”

I realized what I’d just said and quickly covered my mouth in shock. And I looked around frantically to see if anybody heard me. A balance between desires and reason—no matter the time and period, it almost always ended up as two parallel lines.

***Shirakawa no kiyoki ni gyo mo sumikanete***

***Moto no nigori no Tanuma koishiki<sup>1</sup>***

I remembered a bit of superficial knowledge I had picked up during Japanese history class. When I think of people like that doing as they please in front of others, I’m also reminded that humans are animals too and that it’s their instinct. Compared to that, I’m still hesitant when it comes to Asamura-kun. I’m afraid that I’m too forward with my desires... No, that’s not it. I’m scared of simply revealing what my own desires really are. Even though we said how important it was to adjust to each other.

And for that to be possible, I need to openly reveal my hand from the very start. It’s okay if other people start to dislike me. I have to reveal my own desires. What comes after... I’ll worry about that later. I’m getting ahead of myself. I clenched my phone and walked down the bridge. Upon reaching the beach, I made sure I still had a wifi connection.

*‘I’m waiting on the suspension bridge at Palawan Beach. Please come.’*

I made our meeting spot as obvious as possible. But instead of simply saying ‘I’ll wait here,’ I decided to be more assertive and asked him to come. Right afterward, I got a read notification on my message.

*'Sorry for making you wait. I'm on my way right now.'*

...What? I quickly raised my head, but I couldn't see him in the distance. Right now... When will that be? Worried, I rushed back to the suspension bridge. I could see my shadow from the sun as it slowly disappeared behind the horizon. It felt like the darkness of night was slowly creeping up on me. Agitation and narrow-mindedness were part of it.

Then, the suspension bridge shook slightly. Footsteps were approaching. I looked away from the setting sun and turned around. I spotted a boy running towards me, gasping for air, and my chest tightened. I could tell who it was just by his silhouette alone. Breathing heavily, drenched in sweat, Asamura-kun ran towards me and spoke up.

"Sorry... It took me so long..."

Seeing him filled me with relief, and all the anxiety and worries filling me were blown away. What happened that caused him to take this long? Why did he end up getting here this late? There were countless questions filling my head even though I knew Asamura-kun must have had a valid reason for it to be this way. Logic dictated this thought. However, I realized that just holding back all the time will leave things not conveyed. I can't just erase the agitation and narrow-mindedness that just filled me. And all these feelings... my father just blamed Mom for. He clashed with her, threw tantrums at her, and put her down. And that's how everything ended.

"I waited a long time," I said, and Asamura-kun's expression grew stiff in regret.

I could see my mother's facial expression from all those years ago in his. That's why I continued.

“You came for me, so...” I told him and remembered that there was something even more important that I needed to say.

I walked up to him and embraced him with both my arms.

“I’m happy that we get to see each other.”

And just as the setting sun’s color melted into the sky above us, our silhouettes turned into one.

[1](#)A comical tanka from the Edo period, and after thorough analysis (through Google) and a bit of help, it basically boils down to “Rather than the current Matsudaira, I prefer the former Tanuma.” They were both rulers, and whereas Tanuma was a bit looser in terms of political decisions, the people preferred that over the strict Matsudaira who came after.

## ***Chapter 10: February 19th (Fri) - Field Trip Day 3 – Asamura Yuuta***

I knew Maru and Yoshida were quick to get up after what had happened yesterday. And the fact that they'd immediately embark on their adventure, too. Though that only involved going to the convenience store here on the hotel grounds. I knew I'd be left alone in the room, which was why I set an alarm—And yet it didn't ring. When my eyes opened, I glanced at the clock on the table... and realized it was 7 am. But when I realized that it was time for breakfast, I panicked.

Already 7 am?! My head still felt a bit drowsy as I frantically looked for my phone. And because the curtains were closed, probably something the other two did to not wake me up, the room was dark, and even as I ran my hand along the table where I thought I placed my phone, I couldn't find it. Weird. I turned on the lights in the room and eventually found my phone on the ground together with my charger.

Maybe I happened to push it off in my sleep, or maybe an earthquake moved it while I was... No, there shouldn't be many earthquakes in Singapore. That means it must have been an accident. I tried to turn on the screen, but it remained black. I'm guessing I didn't charge it and I now had a solid 0% battery. I started panicking even more. That means that, even if I get a message or something like that, I won't see it. And if Ayase-san responded, then I had no idea either—Okay, calm down. I connected my phone to the charger and waited for it to boot. A familiar logo appeared on the screen, and my heart skipped a beat when I saw that I had a message.

“...Just Maru, huh.”

He let me know that it was time for breakfast, but that was the only message I got. Just to make sure, I checked if LINE had updated since yesterday and then left the room. Since my phone was out of juice, I had to leave it on the charger for now.

“Yo, Asamura. Late bird today, aren’t we?”

“My phone ran outta battery,” I responded as I began working my way through the buffet.

While eating my breakfast, I started thinking. I don’t think it’ll finish charging during this small timeframe. That being said, I can’t wait in my room until it’s fully charged. Granted, we were given pretty much free rein within our groups, but if I just stay in my room the entire time, people will think I’m sick.

“Maru, do you think we’ve got time to stop at the convenience store after this?”

“We’re not too stressed on time today, so should be fine. What’s wrong? Is your stomach acting up?”

Even if it was, I really wish he wouldn’t just blurt that out.

“I’ve got some bitter pills if you need any.”

“No, I’m fine. I need a portable charger. I was wondering if they sold one there.”

“Time won’t be an issue. There’s plenty of ways to and from Sentosa Island, so as long as we’re not late to the meeting point, it’ll be fine.”

“Got it.”

“I have some batteries on reserve. Wanna use them?” Maru offered, but I declined.

He’ll probably need them in an emergency.

“By the way, where are the girls?”

Yesterday, the six of us definitely ate breakfast together. Maru motioned with his chin and told me to look to my side. When I did, I spotted a large gathering of girls sitting at three tables joined together, holding some sort of meeting. They were from various classes, too. Not just ours alone.

“They’re gonna walk around together?”

“Seems like it.”

“That’s nice.”

It’s always great to have plans.

“Well, Shinjou’s as popular as always, too.”

“Shinjou?”

Maru’s comment made me look at the group once more, and then I spotted several boys mixed in, too. In the midst of them was Shinjou from the class next to ours. When he raised his head, his gaze met mine, and he waved at me. I did the polite thing and waved back.

“Hold on... You two know each other?” Yoshida stared at me in shock.

“Well, somewhat.”

“Seriously, I wonder how he can just fit into a group of girls so easily. I’m jealous.”

“Really?”

Isn’t it because they’re on good terms? Well, being part of such a large group would just be more exhausting for me.

“Don’t give me that. Why the heck are you so relaxed? You’re acting like you have a girlfriend or something!”

“Huh? I can’t?”

“It’s not that you can’t. That’d leave me with fewer rivals. But Asamura... Why are you keeping such a calm viewpoint? Or... do you actually have a girlfriend, you bastard?!”

I panicked and shook my head several times. What’s he being so angsty about? We’re still having breakfast right now.

“I swear... All I wanted was to hang out and have fun with a girl myself... But my youth is ashen-grey. I wanna run around in the world of dreams and chase after a mouse while holding hands.”

Don’t chase that poor mouse around. She did nothing wrong.

“Hey, Maru. Can’t you draw upon your vast knowledge to tell me a good curse or two? Something that’ll make him go bald in twenty years, or that he’ll get fat. Anything goes.”

Those are very specific curses.

“I don’t know about any curses... But maybe something like Eko Eko Azarak<sup>1</sup>, Elohim Essaim<sup>2</sup>, or “I shall exact and accomplish my resentment!”<sup>3</sup> maybe? Anyway, I think you should quit it while you can.”

“Why?”

“Think about it. You never know what could happen. What if we run into another group like yesterday? Are you just gonna curse them?”

“That... is true!”

Yoshida’s expression lit up instantly like he felt much more at peace. I guess that worked.

"Asamura, he's just grumbling normie nonsense. Ignore him."

"Really?"

He sure seemed to resent them, though.

"Remember: Those who freely speak their mind and desires are what you call normies. Those who live in the darkness like us don't have the courage to speak our minds."

Right. Somehow that makes sense, but also not really.

"...The same goes for you then, Maru?"

"No comment."

After we finished eating our breakfast, Maru and Yoshida returned to the room and I headed to the convenience store and bought a portable charger. It works just fine and takes batteries, too. And since I bought a few of those, it should keep me steady for the rest of the day. I went back to my room and checked my phone, which had just made it past 20% charge. As I thought, I don't see this finishing by the time we leave. And I hadn't gotten any messages from Ayase-san, either. I imagine she's busy this morning, too.

Our bus was heading for Sentosa Island right now. On the way there, I got another message from Ayase-san.

*'Let me know when you can make some time.'*

She probably wants me to contact her when I find a chance to slip out of the group. If I had to guess, they're probably also crossing the bridge to head to Sentosa Island right about now. She might even be in one of the buses ahead of or behind us. Public transport like this has the free wifi, after all. She should get a response right away, right? And will she be in a state where she can look at it?

“Asamura,” Maru, who was seated next to me on the bus, suddenly called out to me, which startled me enough to make me almost drop my phone.

“What?”

“I did say we were free to move around today, but what are your plans?”

“Huh? Didn’t we already decide?”

“Oh, right. Hm, hmm,” Maru mumbled as he looked down at his phone, swiping on his screen.

“Did you already buy your souvenirs?”

“Huh? I was thinking of doing that tomorrow.”

Our schedule for tomorrow was pretty loose, since we just had to go home. However, we were given some extra time at the airport so we could buy souvenirs. I was thinking of buying something for my parents, but since I don’t really see any of my relatives too much, I won’t have to buy too many. Though I’ll have to buy something for my work colleagues. Such as my senior who carefully (?) looks after me.

“Not that,” Maru lowered his voice as he continued. “I mean for your sister.”

...Huh? To be perfectly honest, that thought hadn’t even crossed my mind. At first, he only knew about me having a new little sister, who I thought was a lot younger. But by now he should know that this sister in question is Ayase-san.

“Why would you buy souvenirs from the place you both end up visiting...?”

Souvenirs are to grant the other person a fragment of an experience for something they haven't experienced. I don't see the reason for buying any souvenirs for Ayase-san, who's on the exact same trip to Singapore as me.

"I guess I didn't make myself clear enough. I'm asking if you're gonna buy anything for her. I'm sure it'll turn be a great memory."

"Ah."

That's what he meant. I get where he's coming from. Back in middle school, you'd buy each other wooden swords or pennants or something. Thinking back on it now, I probably bought those in the heat of the moment. However, each time I look at the pennant in my room, it reminds me of my classmates back then. And it makes me smile about how stupid we were. Memories of this trip, huh? I think that's something we should both buy together. Or I could give it to her as a present. It sounded fun, at least.

"Do you have any recommendations?" I asked Maru.

"Good question. Yoshida and I are gonna head to the USS now and there's a lot of stores inside and outside of that."

USS referred to 'Universal Studios Singapore.' It probably tops the list of things to see on Sentosa Island. There are going to be a lot of students who'll head there immediately. In fact, the girls in our group said they would be, too. Maybe Ayase-san will be there, too. If so, slipping out and meeting her should prove easy.

Based on our current rate of travel, we should get to the island around noon. I don't know where she'll be eating lunch, but it's probably a good idea for me to finish mine before we meet. And getting a present for her would probably be best if it's a surprise, so I won't tell her anything until then. With all of that decided, I sent Ayase-san a message.

*'Sorry for the late reply! I'll make sure to slip out this afternoon, so we can meet then!'*

She immediately read my message and responded.

*'You don't have to force yourself to make time. Just let me know when it's best for you.'*

After reading that, I turned towards Maru and said I'd join them on their trip to USS.

At the entrance, I split up from Maru and Yoshida. I went to the shopping mall to grab a bite and then walked around the inside to look for a present. I wonder what Ayase-san would be happy to get. A plush toy? Some jewelry? Maybe some stylish perfume? No, that's not it. The keyword for this time should be 'Memory.' Namely, something that will remind her of the time we came to Singapore together (technically) when we were 17. If I bought her anything too directly related to USS, she might just mistake it for some kind of Osaka merch. Meaning that it should also be something unique to this country...

I looked around and spotted a keychain of the Merlion.<sup>4</sup> It really feels like the perfect souvenir to bring from Singapore, but... it also feels no different from the pennant I got in middle school. In the end, I decided to buy two of them anyway. Better have something in case I walk around and come back empty-handed. I finished the payment and decided to make my way out to do some genuine present-hunting when my phone vibrated. When I took it out, I saw that I had a message from Maru. Not to mention a phone call. I figured it must be something urgent.

"Yes, this is—"

Before I could even finish my sentence, Maru spoke up.

*'Can you come back to the entrance?'*

"—I can."

I immediately stormed out of the store and rushed back through the mall.

*'Then please do. Someone collapsed from anemia.'*

"Who?"

*'I don't know their name. Hm?'*

Someone must be speaking to Maru.

*'—Makihara. A girl from a neighboring class' group. I saw a group of people and asked what happened when—'*

"Got it. I don't need the details right now. Is she okay?"

*'Yeah. It's nothing majo—'*

Maru's words were cut off. I looked at the phone and saw that the call had dropped. Either because Maru walked somewhere or because I ran out of range. I got the gist and that was enough. I looked up at the translucent ceiling above us. Supposedly, Singapore should be in the rainy season. However, the sky couldn't be any bluer. And the temperature was dangerously high. It was even making my throat hurt a bit. Definitely a case of heatstroke. I looked at my phone, but no follow-up message came from Maru. After around ten minutes, I reached the place we initially split up. I could see Maru's large body across the gate, with the girls having worried expressions and Yoshida carrying someone on his back. That must be the girl that collapsed. I went for a final jog for the last few meters, as Maru spotted me and spoke up.

"Sorry about this, Asamura."

“No worries. So, what’s happening?”

“We got her to rest in a cooled room for a while. An employee came to check up on her, but she’s back with us, and she’s feeling a lot better. They just called the homeroom teacher.”

The girls nodded to that.

“The same thing happened elsewhere, so Tsuji-sensei went there first...”

According to what I was told, Makihara-san has never been too good with hot weather. She seemed to have recovered a lot, but they decided to bring her back to the hotel.

“I’m sorry...” The girl apologized with a weak voice.

I figured out why Maru called me over here and nodded.

“So you want me to make sure she gets back to the hotel safely?”

One of the girls spoke up. “...No, we should be the ones doing that. Yuka’s part of our group, and we can’t bother you with this.”

So the problem is about who’s going with them, huh? Going back to the hotel now means that you probably won’t make it outside again. That being said, the teachers are busy elsewhere, and we can’t just make her go home by herself in her weakened state.

“I knew you had other plans so I wanted to avoid asking you for help, but...”

“I get it. You’re the group leader.”

Today, our group is at USS. Maru should stay back in case anything else happens. And it’d be a waste to force someone to leave after they paid for the tickets. Luckily, I’d only checked out the shopping mall next to the studio, so I didn’t have to pay the entrance fee. And

there's also the concern of paying for a hefty taxi fare. I understand why he called me for this.

"Yeah... Can I ask you for help here? I'll repay you later."

"Don't worry about it."

"I'll carry her the rest of the way back. Asamura, you grab her belongings."

"Huh? Ah, Yoshida!"

Before I could even say anything, Yoshida walked through the ticket gate without hesitation. The one who was flustered the most was the girl he was carrying.

"Um! I can walk, so..."

"No worries, no worries. I'm well-trained for this stuff. And I left already, too. Sorry to leave you behind, Maru."

"I don't mind... Oh, well. Asamura, here's Yoshida's belongings. And what stuff belongs to her?"

One of the girls handed me the backpack which presumably belonged to her. Inside were a few bottles of water and regular household medicine. The group leader for the girls said she'd tag along, too.

"I can carry her if it gets too tough, you know?"

"I can handle this no problem. You should focus on getting us back home."

"Ahhh."

Right, English. Yoshida wasn't too good at speaking English. Compared to him, I should at least be able to communicate well

enough. And the girls' group leader didn't seem too confident in her English skills, either. For starters, we searched for the taxi area, which wasn't too far from the front ticket gate. As you'd expect from a popular tourist spot. I remembered that the taxi doors here in Singapore don't open automatically, so I opened the door in the back first and then sat inside with the other three. As the cold air from the AC blew against my skin, I found myself sighing in relief. I heard a faint apologetic voice, followed by Yoshida trying to cheer the girl up.

I spoke to the taxi driver and gave him directions to our hotel, and we quickly set out down the same road we initially came from. Throughout the entire taxi ride, the girl who had collapsed apologized again and again, but Yoshida just said that we have to help each other in times of need. After a while, we reached the hotel. Thanks to Maru contacting the hotel beforehand, a teacher was already waiting for us and accepted the girl. Understandably so, as the floor the girls stayed on was off-limits for us boys. When we separated, the girl called Makihara Yuka-san, whose face was still a bit pale, and the group leader of the girls apologized once more and thanked us. The teacher and the group leader then took the girl to her room.

"It should've been fine for me to carry her to the room, at least."

"I can smell the disappointment and ulterior motive from over here."

"Well, I'm not gonna lie."

"How obvious."

"Anyway, I'm just glad we got her back safely," Yoshida smiled and I nodded. "What are you gonna do now, Asamura?"

Yoshida said that he was tired, so he wanted to take a nap. After all, he had been carrying the girl the whole time except for our taxi ride. He did a great job. But as for me... I realized I'd forgotten something

and took out my smartphone. I had two new messages. They were both from Ayase-san.

*'We're heading to Palawan Beach right now.'*

*'I'll be waiting there, and I'll let you know if we move.'*

Oh, crap. How many minutes has it been since then?

"I've gotta go."

"Huh?"

"I'm going back to the island. I'll contact you later, so let Maru know!"

"...What? Hey, Asamura?!"

I heard Yoshida call after me, but I just sprinted out of the hotel.

I opened my map app and checked to find the shortest route to Palawan Beach. Walking the whole way would take me two hours and ten minutes—That's out of the question. Using the underground railroad and monorail... Would also be an hour.

"Getting a taxi would be fastest, no?"

I looked it up, and it said it would take me around thirty minutes. So when I left the hotel, I hailed the next taxi I saw, asking them to bring me to Palawan Beach on Sentosa Island. I don't know where exactly she was waiting, but this was probably my best shot. Thankfully, I hadn't bought a present for Ayase-san yet, so I had enough money leftover for—Ah. I'd only bought the keychain! I grit my teeth in regret and gave up on the present.

What's more important right now is that Ayase-san was waiting for me. While glaring down at my phone, I periodically glanced out of the window. No wifi, after all... Ever since Ayase-san sent me the

message that she's at Palawan Beach, I haven't gotten any update. Maybe she's still there, or maybe she's moved already? I don't know, but I had to hurry.

Time felt like it was passing much quicker than usual, but the car felt so slow. Was the bridge to Sentosa Island this long before? Finally, we got on the island, and I could see the USS to my right as the taxi kept driving. Then, the driver suddenly asked me something. I tried to translate his words directly, just as Ayase-san would. I didn't think that our practice would pay off here. If I had to guess, he wanted to ask where to drop me off at the beach...probably.

*'Drive until you can see the beach.'*

*'We already can.'*

Huh? I looked where the driver pointed. To the left and right, I could see the blue sky a bit ahead of us, and the color of where it hit the ground slowly started to grow thicker. It's the sea.

*'Then right down this road. Until you can see it.'*

The driver nodded. Slowly but steadily, the sea in sight grew bigger. We reached the terminal and I was let off the taxi. After paying the fee, I stood on the pedestrian walkway. Not knowing where to go, I checked my phone and saw that I had wifi. Which was good, but no more messages had come in since.

For starters, I opted to explain to Maru where I was heading. He probably didn't know that I came back to the island. And since he didn't know I was off to meet Ayase-san, he might start worrying about me. While I fought my desire to just start running around randomly, I finished telling him and then checked Ayase-san's messages. If she had moved already, then I had to catch up to her once more. But at that moment, a new message popped up.

*'I'm waiting on the suspension bridge at Palawan Beach. Please come.'*

I panicked and responded.

*'Sorry to make you wait. I'm on my way right now.'*

And then I started running. A single Japanese high school boy was frantically running along the street towards the sea, wanting to meet a fellow classmate; If people saw this, I wonder what thoughts would fill their minds? I just felt bad that this might negatively impact the good name of Suisei High. The phone in my pocket vibrated and I took it out while I kept running. It was from Maru. Yoshida probably let him know. He just wrote me a single line.

*'All people in relationships do this, so don't worry. In fact, sorry for asking you for help.'*

He mentioned a relationship, which caused me to gasp for a moment, but I didn't have time to ask Maru for an explanation. I just stuffed the phone back into my pocket and kept running. I remembered Ayase-san's message. She directly asked me to come. I've never seen her be this direct about a request before. When I thought of how she must have felt when sending this message, I couldn't stop running.

All couples do this—I don't know if that's true. But at the very least, I can't make Ayase-san feel this lonely and sad just to try to look cool. I kept running towards Palawan Beach, and the closer I got, the more people I could see. Each time I passed the locals, other tourists, or even couples, they turned around to look at me. I could feel their gazes as I passed them by. But all of that didn't matter. Maybe some of the people I passed could have been my classmates... But so what? Let them have their doubts. I don't care if our relationship gets found out. What matters the most—**is that I made a promise to Saki.**

Since the temperature had cooled down a bit, I managed to run all the way there. When I reached the beach, the sun had already started setting beneath the western horizon. So where is the suspension bridge? I looked left and right and spotted a narrow line that connected the main island to a smaller one in the distance, barely hanging above the water. As I made my way closer, I could tell that it was less of a line and actually a suspension bridge, and I saw a familiar girl's silhouette standing in the dead center of it.

The vicinity of the bridge was covered by trees, which covered up the bridge for a brief moment. Some tourists had gathered in front of these, but none of them tried to cross the bridge. Only the employee standing next to a billboard marking the starting point of the bridge remained. They greeted me and asked me to be careful... I think. I gave them my thanks and continued further. Finally, I stood at the start of the bridge.

The girl who stood in the center, watching the setting sun, now turned towards me. Her short but bright-colored hair shone brightly against the green of the small island behind her. She was looking at me, and our gazes met. I wanted to run to her side, but when I stepped on the bridge, I could feel the shock and vibration. I didn't want to scare her off, but I also couldn't take it slow, either. With each rhythmic step, I could feel the faint vibration beneath my soles as the bridge shook. Saki's facial expression changed from surprise to joy in a moment, only for her to look away. And then I reached her.

"Sorry... It took me so long..." I said between breaths.

She raised her head and looked at me.

"I waited a long time," she said as she looked at me with her eyes flashing.

She's angry. I get it. The eyes speak more than the mouth does, as they say. No translation software in the world could have conveyed her emotions more accurately than what I could perceive right now. Narasaka-san was right, after all. Even back then, her expressions spoke for themselves. Much more than any words could. However, her angered gaze immediately disappeared as she averted her gaze once again.

"It's not fair of me to just force all my feelings on you, huh?"

"No, I'm happy you're being honest with me," I said and approached her.

I could see her small shoulders quivering slightly, allowing me to directly feel how lonely she must have been.

"Sorry," I whispered as I placed my hands on her shoulders, and she shook her head.

"You came for me, so..." She said as she also walked a step toward me—wrapping her arms around my back. "I'm happy that we get to see each other."

She buried her face in my chest, making it impossible for me to know what expression she was making. I also embraced her and pulled her closer. She raised her head, looking up at me from only a small distance apart. We nodded, and then stopped thinking. Other than her earring glowing a faint red from the setting sun, I don't remember a thing. I simply focused on our lips overlapping as we shared a long kiss.



1 A manga

2 <https://anime.stackexchange.com/questions/14760/what-does-elohim-essaim-elohim-essaim-i-impose-you-mean>

3 Catchphrase from the manga “Matarou ga Kuru”.

4 The official mascot of Singapore

## **Chapter 11: February 20th (Sat) – Field Trip Day 4 (Final Day) – Asamura Yuuta**

Rain was pouring endlessly at Changi Airport today, like it was some kind of payback for the clear weather we had over the past few days. The sky was now filled with grey clouds, and silver droplets of water fell to the ground. That being said, this won't have any influence on our flight, so we simply underwent the same procedures when we first departed in Japan and started making our way from the waiting area. After passing through the gate, we then boarded the plane.

I'm sure it's a coincidence that I had the same seat as on the way here, but when I gazed out of the window, the view was entirely different. Or rather, I couldn't even see the sky. The raindrops just hammered against the window, and everything beyond the window looked blurry. I was counting the drops I could see and leaning against the seat when a voice spoke up from next to me.

“You seem pretty chill today, eh?”

“I feel like I could pass on smoothly even if we fell to our deaths.”

“Stop lying.”

“Too obvious, huh?”

“I would rather bet on the fact that the devil himself would tell you to go home.”

“So you've already decided that I'll end up in hell?”

“If Yoshida knew about this, he'd definitely say that,” Maru said and glanced to his side.

Just as when we arrived on our first day of the field trip, we sat in rows of four, starting with me next to the window, followed by Maru

and Yoshida. The latter was currently busy talking to his female neighbor—

“So you say, but he seems pretty fulfilled if you ask me?” I whispered back to Maru.

The reason for that was pretty simple.

“They even exchanged LINE IDs,” Maru said.

He did work hard, so I think the reward is more than deserved.

“But then why are you lashing out at me like this?”

“Now listen here. Should I tell you the line of the owner of the inn from the world’s most famous game?”

“And what would that be?”

“Thou hadst a good night’s sleep I.—”

“I didn’t come back *that* late, okay?!”

I think I must have said that a bit louder than I thought because even Yoshida and the people around us turned to look at me. What a regrettable picture he painted for me. I wish he didn’t poison my mind like that. All we did after that was watch the sunset together in silence and then head back to the hotel together. And with the way he phrased that, he must have realized what kind of relationship Ayase-san and I have. He even used the word ‘relationship’ in his message to me earlier. And he wasn’t done yet. He narrowed his eyes as I cleared my throat.

“So, what happened?”

...I figured things would go down this path. Then again, with so many people around us, it’s not anything I could declare loudly and with confidence. That’s why I kept it as vague as possible.

“Well... everything worked out.”

“I know that.”

Maru’s comment caused me to nod in resignation, but it started me thinking about how he even knew that. I never once had mentioned that I went to see Ayase-san. How does he know? It can’t be from Ayase-san herself.

“Can I ask how you found out?”

“I sadly cannot tell you any personal information about my client.”

“What kind of detective bureau are you working at?”

“Anyway, I’m just happy everything worked out. Are you finally willing to admit that much?”

“Well...”

On the way home, Ayase-san and I discussed a few things. She apologized for making the blunder of letting Narasaka-san find out about our relationship, but I just mentioned that Maru was probably not in the dark anymore, so we were both equally clumsy. And then we decided that we’d stop trying to force things to stay hidden. Our relationship may not be something we can flaunt in public, but it’s not something we should have to sacrifice our desires for to hide.

Our relationship as siblings and lovers might be met with a gaze of contempt by the other couples in this world. Even so, we’ve both walked this path to the point that we don’t want to turn around anymore. The warmth we felt while embracing each other on that bridge is something we both came to cherish.

“I’ve gotta step in where it’s necessary, right?”

“You’re not some kind of prophet... I didn’t think things would end up this way.”

“Really? Well... everything you’ve warmed up will probably cool down a bit when entrance exams roll around the corner.”

He made it sound like that’s why he gave me a push. It feels like I was just a pawn in a play directed by Suisei High’s top catcher in the baseball club. Though I hadn’t been aware of that in the slightest.

“I’m sure you’re aware, but try not to overdo it. You’ll be examinees starting next April.”

And now he’s telling me not to overdo it... Just what does he think Ayase-san and I are up to?

“You’re not my mother.”

“My good friend, you might seem rational now, but that’s because your past experiences have caused you to pump the brakes when necessary. Don’t speed up too much now.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Hey, what were you guys talking about?” Yoshida turned towards us.

“That I helped Asamura with his entrance exam studies.”

“Ack, you’re worried about that already?!”

“Yoshida... You’re aware that all of us will be examinees in a bit more than a month, yeah?” Maru said, and Yoshida groaned.

“I don’t wanna think about that!”

“Time doesn’t stop for anybody.”

And now he went for a job change from prophet to sage. The machine we were in rattled briefly, accelerating down the runway. The lines of water became more and more horizontal. By the time I felt myself getting pressed against the seat, we had already leaned backward, and we stormed upwards through a black cloud. The plane shook a lot more than it did on our trip here, and the signs for the seatbelts didn't turn off.

"I really wanted to remember the final moments before we left this place behind us..." Maru said with a regrettable tone, and Yoshida answered without a worry in the world.

"You can just come again, right?"

Upon hearing that, I agreed. We can always come again. Ayase-san and I... together. And once the plane made it through the black cloud, we were greeted with an endless blue sky. The sign for the seat belts was turned off, too. Right below us, you could still barely see the shoreline of Singapore. And during the entire flight back, I didn't even sleep a minute. I was finally able to enjoy the famous plane food I had heard so much about.

By the time we reached Japan, the sun had already begun to set. After the whole school year split up at the airport, Ayase-san and I waited for our train and boarded it. Compared to when we headed off a few days ago, it was a lot more crowded, but since this was the first stop, we easily found a place to sit. With a strong shaking sensation, the train began moving. As you'd expect, we were both exhausted. We were mostly just yawning, and no proper conversation came up.

After a brief silence, I realized that a bit of weight was on my shoulder. When I looked to my side, I saw Ayase-san breathing gently as she slept. I've seen her doze off a few times from a distance, but I think this might be the first time I've gotten to see her sleeping face

from up close. The scent of her hair drifted up to my nose. And her eyelashes are so long... All these little things caught my attention.

Along with her faint breathing, her chest slowly moved up and down. I could almost feel her pulse being transmitted toward me, which made my own heart rate spike. When I became aware of this, I grew worried that Ayase-san might be able to feel it, too. Oh yeah, when we visited my family, we slept in the same room, but even then, I didn't get to see her sleeping face. Right now, it looks so defenseless. And realizing how much closer we'd gotten made me feel warm and happy inside.

*—But that's because your past experiences have caused you to pump the brakes when necessary.*

Maru's words came back to mind. Brakes, huh? Did I open up my heart to her just as much as she did to me? Maybe I should try to bring us to an equal level? After all, relying on others in times like these is very important. Each rattle of the train fused together to create a pleasant rhythm as my body was gently shaken left and right. Though I bet it'd be a lot more pleasant if it remained calm altogether.



1A reference to an inn owner in Dragon Quest 1, as well as the title of a [manga](#) which references that

## ***Chapter 12: February 20th (Sat) – Field Day Day 4 (Final Day) – Ayase Saki***

All that was left on the agenda was to head back. I finished buying my last souvenirs at the airport, and while waiting to get all the checks done, I opened up my YouTube app. When I typed in ‘Melissa Woo,’ I immediately found a channel, and I could see her in the thumbnail. She has 837 subscribers—or 838 now thanks to me. But I had no idea if that was a lot or not, honestly. I usually don’t go out of my way to subscribe to channels. All I know is that there are 800+ people in the world listening to her songs.

That’s more than the 3rd-year students we have at Suisei High. Compared to that, I get nervous just singing in front of a few people at karaoke. And she didn’t have any problems even singing on that huge stage at that restaurant. I decided to watch one of her videos. Looking at the upload dates, she usually puts out a new song every three months. I listened to a few, but each one was sung with such passion. Contrary to her personality and demeanor, she seemed extremely diligent when it came to music. The newest song of hers was uploaded just two days ago, probably right after she had parted ways with me. Even though she’d said she was leaving to watch some late-night anime.

Through meeting her, I learned how important it was to find a place that gave me absolute peace and relief. Where I could open up about everything. And for that, I added a comment on the video, saying “I could listen to this forever. Thank you for giving me courage,” in English. Keeping it vague about the things I left behind and the things I took with me. I wonder if she’ll realize it’s me. My username is ‘saki,’ but it’s fine if she doesn’t.

“Sakiii! We’re gonna move!”

Maaya's voice made me raise my head. She was seated in a row of other classmates, jumping up and down as she waved her hand at me. I showed a wry smile, but, oddly enough, didn't feel too embarrassed—Okay, maybe a bit. She didn't have to go that far. I was still gonna be careful of my surroundings.

At Narita Airport, everybody went their separate ways home. I contacted Asamura-kun and decided on a place to meet up. We got on the train and sat down next to each other. We then told each other about our trip. What was fun, what was stressful... and how beautiful the setting sun was that we watched together at the suspension bridge. As that sun set, it illuminated the horizon to create a beautiful white shine, coloring the blue sea a deep violet. And as the color of the sea changed, we gazed at it, warm in each other's arms.

But since we were both tired from our trip, we began talking less, and I couldn't tell what he even said anymore at some point. With the air conditioner creating a cozy temperature inside the train, I began spacing out and became drowsier and drowsier. My left shoulder leaned against his right shoulder, allowing me to feel his warmth. And all this felt so comforting that I couldn't fight my sleepiness—until I was gently shaken and woken up.

"We're here."

"Ah, sorry."

I panicked a bit and grabbed my suitcase, only to almost fall over. If Asamura-kun hadn't supported me, I may have landed face-first in front of the door. My face was beet red as I pulled my suitcase after me. What a blunder. And I even slept while leaning against his shoulder the entire time.

By the time we stepped out of the ticket gate at Shibuya station, the sky had turned dark. On this ordinary Saturday, the train station and vicinity were filled with people everywhere. A lot of people must be heading out to have fun right now. And while we tried our best to avoid them, Asamura-kun and I walked our familiar path home.

During that time, I remembered once again that I slept next to him without a care in the world, and I felt the blood rush to my head. I felt awfully sweaty all of a sudden. When we had to switch trains and he woke me up, he must have seen my sleeping face. And I think I even had some drool stuck to the side of my mouth then. I don't think he'd stare at me, but I also didn't think I would be this careless... I can't even look at him anymore. Then again, we were heading back to the same home, so that much is probably impossible.

"We're home, huh?"

"Sure are. I'm tired, but it was fun."

"You're right."

We looked at each other and smiled. We really came home... to the place we spend our days. Together, we stepped through the entrance. Stepdad should be off work today, and Mom's work hasn't started yet, so they'll both welcome us home. They'll greet us and welcome us back as we return. Over the past few days we were gone, Asamura-kun and I have gotten a lot closer. We were close enough to stand next to each other, but even that small gap has vanished. Because we've decided that we'll be as we want to be.

"We're home, Mom, Dad."

We spoke up at the same time, and the Merlion keychains dangling down from our suitcases shook in unison as we did so.

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