

# 義妹生活

三河ごーすと

illust Hiten



Days with my Step Sister

presented by  
ghost mikawa

# ***Table of Contents***

[Illustration](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1: 16th of July \(Thursday\)](#)

[Chapter 2: 17th of July \(Friday\)](#)

[Chapter 3: 18th of July \(Saturday\)](#)

[Chapter 4: 19th of July \(Sunday\)](#)

[Chapter 5: 20th of July \(Monday\)](#)

[Chapter 6: 21st of June \(Tuesday\)](#)

[Chapter 7: 22nd of July \(Wednesday\)](#)

[Epilogue: Ayase Saki's Diary](#)

[Afterword](#)

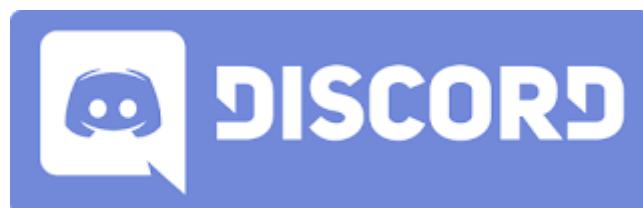
[Short Story](#)

[Credits](#)

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2 義妹生活



# Suisei High End-of-Term Results

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Modern Japanese	96	Math II	88
Classical Japanese	77	Physics	70
Japanese History	81	Chemistry	85
Math I	92	English	90
English Communication	79		
Overall Total	758	/	900

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Modern Japanese	??	Math II	86
Classical Japanese	90	Physics	89
Japanese History	100	Chemistry	81
Math I	80	English	84
English Communication	80		
Overall Total	???	/	900

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Modern Japanese	90	Math II	92
Classical Japanese	92	Physics	90
Japanese History	94	Chemistry	82
Math I	96	English	90
English Communication	94		
Overall Total	820	/	900

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Modern Japanese	92	Math II	82
Classical Japanese	92	Physics	84
Japanese History	94	Chemistry	86
Math I	86	English	96
English Communication	96		
Overall Total	808	/	900

真夜中は  
私だけの時間



「すごい。奈良坂さん、

家庭科の先生みたいだ」

「えーっ、もっとカッコいいのがいいなあ。

フランス帰りの一 流シェフとか」



「それだと、教え方が上手な人の

表現じゃなくなるような

「確かに！」

あはは、と奈良坂さんは屈託なく笑う。

「でも浅村くんもすごいよ。

めっちゃ物覚えがいいから、

モリモリ教えてくなっちゃう」





「キミは、おもしろいし、  
ほんとに優しい」

「どうしたんですかいきなり」

「うん。ええとさ……」

躊躇うように口筆もる。俺は待った。

光っていた自販機の明かりが落ちて先輩の顔に影が落ちる。  
ふたりともが口を閉じてしまうと真夜中の公園には静けさだけが満ちてくる。  
佇む先輩の向こうには黒く墓標のように聳えるビルが見えていた。

「ねえ後輩君。

キミに言わなきやいけない  
ことがあるの……」

# **Prologue**

A step-sister is nothing more than a stranger. The experience I have amassed speaks to the certainty of that fact.

Our parents suddenly decided to get married. As a result, we've been practically forced into a relationship as siblings, with no affinity that should be born from our genes, and no overlapping birthdates. Being strangers as a result is quite possibly the most natural thing that could happen.

However, now that a month has passed since my old man and Akiko-san decided to remarry and the four of us started living together, I'm starting to realize that this odd position of having a step-sister who is basically a stranger is quite incorrect. I can't exactly treat her like a stranger, since we live in the same house. That being said, if you asked me what kind of relationship she and I have, I'd be stuck trying to think of an answer.

School ended for the day, and I arrived at my house and turned the doorknob the same as I always would.

"Welcome back, Asamura-kun."

"I'm home, Ayase-san."

Right after opening the door, my step-sister greeted me with the same words she had been using for the past month. Because of a mere one-week difference in age, I was the older brother, and she was my little sister. Naturally, that hierarchy had practically no bearing on our interactions, as we are practically strangers to each other who had dropped the normal honorifics.

There's no adorable 'Welcome back, Onii-chan~' welcoming me here, nor any verbal abuse like 'Can you not make such a disgusting face,

you lame big bro!?' either. Luckily, you could say. However, as of late, at the end of our greeting, we've been adding a few more words. For example, something like...

"Your part-time work starts again today, right?"

"Same for you, Ayase-san?"

"Yup," she gave a brief response.

Of course, it's a frank and pretty altruistic exchange no matter how you look at it, but it shows that there's been a change born between the two of us, albeit a small one.

The week before the end-of-term exams, I took time off work temporarily. As for Ayase-san, my old man and Akiko-san told her to hold off of making food for a while, or rather, they urged her to. Today, our exams came to an end, and we had just confirmed this fact with that little exchange.

This caused me to ponder the fact that I now had a little step-sister, who is both a stranger as well as a member of my family. It might have felt short, but a month is still a long time depending on the circumstances.

For example, if we were lovers who had been living together for a month, we would start to see all the negative aspects of each other, and our relationship would possibly start becoming awkward, which on the flip side would help us know each other better, and we'd become even closer than before. That's about the levels of changes that I would expect to see happen in a month.

Of course, I had never lived with a lover of my own. This is merely a deduction I've made from knowledge I've gathered reading books.

So what would it be like if she was my actual blood-related sister? Indeed, nothing severe would change in a mere month. That would

be the correct answer. If we ended up spending decades together, a single month wouldn't change much at all. This means that there shouldn't be any drastic variation to our behaviors in such a small time frame.

A younger step-sister isn't someone close enough to irritate me and make me feel stressed whenever she's around, but she's also not someone I'm familiar with to the extent where it feels like she's always there, like the air I'm breathing. I would argue that I've read a fair amount of books in my day, and yet I still can't come up with an expression to describe this sense of distance that we have. Yet, that is.

I started going to my room to change clothes when Ayase-san called out to me.

"I got some cheap chicken today, so I'll be making Yurinchi chicken."<sup>4</sup>

The name of that dish could only come from Chinese cuisine, so I found myself poking my head out of the room before I even took off my uniform.

"You can make that at home?"

"Of course." Ayase-san gave me a wry smile. "It doesn't even take that long."

"Really now?"

Since me and my old man didn't even bother with delivery too much, we just lived off convenience store lunch boxes, so I had no familiarity with exquisite dishes like that. As a result, my cooking knowledge hasn't improved much from the compulsory cooking classes in home economics.

"Well, it's only Yurinchi chicken, so no worries. I won't go too crazy with it."

She was basically trying to say that it wouldn't be too much of a burden for her.

"All right. If you say so."

Whenever Ayase-san is stuck in a corner, she tends to go above and beyond what's required of her. Even though we had barely lived together for a month, there were a lot of things you could learn about someone in that period of time. This reminded me of the night, roughly one month ago, when she came up with the idea of a high-paying family-intern part-time job (with me as the employer). Honestly speaking, that was terrifying.

"Should you really be taking your time here?"

"A-Ah, yeah. Then I'll be going... Oh, right." Right when I opened the door to leave, I turned around one last time. "Can you teach me how to make that? I'd like to try it myself."

"...There's no need to force yourself, okay?"

This time, I was the one making a bitter smile. She had definitely seen through me. Current society is based on a contract system. Sadly, though Ayase-san has been preparing meals for us, I have been unable as of yet to introduce her to a high-paying part-time job, which is my side of the bargain. Ayase-san said that she's always been more give than take, but I also need to show some results.

Pondering about what I could do, I started making my way to the town of Shibuya on another summer day with the sun still high in the sky. The cicadas also seemed to be reminded of their duties, and they were chirping to create a soundscape befitting the season. Through the gaps between the buildings, I could see cumulonimbus clouds that were colored scarlet red.

1 Chinese-style fried chicken topped with chopped scallions and sweet vinegar and soy sauce

## ***Chapter 1: 16th of July (Thursday)***

On this summer morning, my still-sleepy body felt like it was covered by a thin, invisible membrane. My senses felt dulled by the humidity and heat. Giving in to the inertia caused by the A/C I had just turned on, I moved like a mechanical puppet devoid of any emotions, simply wiping the white wooden dining table over and over.

As was often the case, my parents weren't home this morning. Ayase-san made her way in from the kitchen with two plates in hand and set them down on the table that I had just finished wiping. Instead of our usual white rice, sodden-looking toast was upon these plates.

“...Bread with soy-flavored boiled greens?”

“French toast.” Ayase-san gave me the dish's actual name with an indifferent tone.

Still lost as to what that meant, I just muttered a confused ‘I see’ in response. Of course, I knew what french toast was. I hadn't eaten it before, but I knew of its existence thanks to the fact that it appeared in some of the books I had read. That being said, the tragedy of this situation was that even if I knew the term, I was still unable to have an actual physical reaction to its existence in the real world, since I had never seen the real thing.

“Judging from its name, is it some French dish?”

“It originated in America.”

“You sure know a lot, Ayase-san.”

“At least I think that's what it said on the menu at a family restaurant I ate at once.”

It was probably one of those seasonal menus that describes each of the dishes extensively. But the origin of the dish didn't really matter at this point.

"How do you even eat this?"

"I put them there for you. Don't you see them?"

"With a knife and a fork?"

"Yup. Then again, you could eat it with your fingers or with chopsticks. It's not like anybody's watching; we're at home." Ayase-san spoke nonchalantly, but I couldn't see her completely as a member of my family yet. I'd probably embarrass myself if I made a mess while eating.

She's like a stranger to me, not to mention that she's a girl in the same year as me. She's really beautiful on top of that, so I can't exactly show an unsightly side of myself.

"Cutting bread like it's some kind of steak sure feels odd, doesn't it?"

"Really? It's not as bad if you tell yourself that it's just cake, in my opinion."

"Now that you mention it..."

Being able to look at things from every angle like that sure is an impressive mental feat. With this philosophical argument out of the way, we focused on our meal. I got a taste of eggs and salt, which combined to create a sweet sensation on my tongue. I was thinking about how to convey my impression of the food when Ayase-san glanced at me.

*Oh?, I thought to myself.*

When I looked at Ayase-san, who was sitting directly across the table from me, she had a face devoid of any expression as always. However, her movements when handling the knife and fork lacked her usual skill and refinement, which made me think that maybe she was concerned about something that was pulling her attention away from the meal.

“What’s wrong?”

“Eh?”

“I don’t know. It looked like you were pondering something.”

“...How perceptive.” Ayase-san gave a bitter smile as she looked over at the calendar hanging on the wall.

It was a calendar Akiko-san had brought with her when they moved in with us. It had a picture of a cat rolling around, which was probably intended to have a calming effect on the person looking at it. I think she got it as an insurance trade when she arrived at the bar she worked at. Since both my old man and I basically lived off our smartphone calendars, we had never had one hanging around, but she had put this one up last month next to the dining table with the reason ‘This wall looks lonely’. Ayase-san glanced at this proof of women living in our household and opened her mouth.

“I think it’s today, right?”

“What is?”

“The day where they announce the results of the end-of-term exams. My class is today, I think.”

“Ahh, right, they still aren’t done announcing those yet.”

“Yeah. Though there’s only one subject left.”

Naturally, the fact that both of us had a new family and the resulting changes to our lifestyles weren't enough to excuse us from our normal student life at Suisei High. We still had to focus on our end-of-term exams, which happened in the beginning of July like every year. Naturally, Ayase-san and I didn't pay much attention to each other's studies; we focused solely on our own. We had promised each other to not be too pushy with each other, nor too distant, so of course we didn't know anything about each others' exam results, and we didn't try to find out, either—Until today, that is.

"Hey, Asamura-kun, can I ask a crude question?"

"Go ahead. If it were the kind of question that would make me need to cover my ears or make me feel uncomfortable, I don't think you'd even ask it in the first place."

Just the fact that she had asked permission to ask the question made me able to tell that it would be something reasonable. That's a conclusion I was able to come to thanks to spending time with her up to this point.

"How'd you do on your exams?"

The question she had was even more normal than I anticipated. Then again, this could be a delicate topic for other people out there, which yet again made me realize how considerate Ayase-san is.

"Um... 81 points in Japanese History, 92 in Math I, 88 in Math II, 70 in Physics, 85 in Chemistry, 90 in English, 79 in English Communication, 96 in Modern Japanese, and 77 in Classical Japanese... So like 758 total, I think."

"That's amazing, Asamura-kun. Your grades are really good."

"Thanks. I'm happy to hear you say that. But, personally speaking, there's a few subjects I need to work on, like Physics and Chemistry."

“I think having a 96 in Modern Japanese is pretty amazing in itself.”

“What about you, Ayase-san?”

“I have 100 points in Japanese History, 80 in Math I, 86 in Math II, 89 in Physics, 81 in Chemistry, 84 in English, 80 in English Communication, and 90 in Classical Japanese.”

“So you’re above 80 in all of them! You have far better grades than I do.”

“So far, yeah.”

“You just have one subject left, right? Even if your Modern Japanese score is a bit lower than the rest, your total sum should definitely be higher than mine.”

“I wonder. I don’t have much confidence in Modern Japanese.” Compared to her usual dry and indifferent tone, I could sense a bit of vague anxiety in her voice, and Ayase-san sighed again. “If possible, I wanted to start working part-time this summer break, but depending on my grades in Modern Japanese, I might have to put more time into my studies.”

“Sorry. It’s all because I couldn’t find a high-paying part-time job for you.”

“You really don’t have to apologize for that, Asamura-kun.”

“No, that was just the terms to our agreement.”

On the days both of our parents are out working, Ayase-san and I take care of breakfast and dinner. If time allows, my step-mother Akiko-san makes some food for us, but generally speaking we’ve been responsible for our meals. Ayase-san is trying to live independently so that she won’t be looked down upon just because

she's a woman, and she's trying to achieve this by attending a prestigious university.

At the same time, because she doesn't want to be a burden when it comes to our family's finances, she wants a high-paying part-time job that doesn't take too much of her precious studying time, so she requested that I help her gather information, offering to cook breakfast and dinner for me in return. However, as much as it pains me to admit, I've failed to have any worthwhile results in that endeavor for this past month. I'm sure that this is just Ayase-san being considerate and not wanting me to feel guilty about it, but she has yet to utter a single complaint about it. The only thing she's done is make a vague bitter smile.

"I know that what I'm asking you to do here is selfish, and I'm reflecting on it. For now, I'll look for a normal part-time job."

"Then I'll take care of my own food as well."

"Huh? There's no need."

These were the conditions of our contract, so this was an obvious response from me as far as I could tell, but Ayase-san seemed oddly hung up on it.

"I can keep doing it."

"But..."

"Cooking's pretty fun, and it helps me relax. It's a nice change of pace."

There's a psychological reaction called the 'Norm of reciprocity'. If someone receives something, they feel the urge to return either it or something else of equal or greater value. If you receive something, you give it back to the person you got it from, and if you receive

something back, you give it back again. By repeating this over and over, human relationships gradually create a circle.

I'm well aware that I'm not attractive and charming enough of a human being to be showered with limitless and free love, and if someone is overly friendly with me without any merit in it for them, I immediately doubt their intentions. And even if there's no ulterior motive behind this affection, I still don't feel very comfortable only being on the receiving end.

Since Ayase-san is a similar kind of person as I, she must be aware of how I feel and how I'm pondering about how to make this a give-and-take.

"Then I have an idea." She raised her hand, like we were in class.

"Now that we've searched for an entire month, our chances of finding anything are most likely hopeless. We can agree on that much, right?"

"Yeah. I don't want to admit it, but as long as we don't rely on immoral and illegal methods, I think it's pretty hopeless."

"In order to get into the university I want, I need to save money, so a part-time job over summer break is necessary, no matter how much time it demands from me. I'll probably be forced to sacrifice sleep so that I can have more time to study."

"Doesn't a lack of sleep lower your academic efficiency?"

"That's right. That's why I have a proposal. You can help me look for ideas that can increase my studying efficiency."

"Increase your studying efficiency, huh? So like looking for good reference books, or preparing an environment that allows for comfortable studying?"

“I’ll leave the methods to you. Can I ask for your help?”

I never thought I would experience such a selfish request from a little sister in my life. Though this is different from the stereotypical thing where an older brother is forced to put up with a selfish little sister, I still felt the odd duty to agree to it nonetheless.

“Got it. I don’t know if I can find anything that’s a good trade for this french toast, but I’ll try my best.”

“Thanks. I’m looking forward to it.”

She spoke with no authenticity in her tone, merely speaking in a dry voice with a cool expression. Yet again, she gave off the feeling that, no matter the result, she wouldn’t complain or blame me. When I saw her make that face, it made me want to change that expression in a good way. I need to find ideas for how to increase her studying efficiency. Pondering this, I enjoyed the sweet taste of french toast, my pre-reward, as I ate it.

After spending a joyful morning, the two of us went to school together, as the friendly and peaceful siblings we were—Of course, such a light novel or manga-like event didn’t happen, as per usual. Instead, I headed to school alone. But I didn’t feel any doubts or sadness from that fact, so I must have already gotten used to this relationship with my step-sister.

Both Ayase-san and I have yet to reveal to anyone at school that we’re step-siblings, and we act like we’re strangers at school. The only exception to this is Narasaka Maaya, Ayase-san’s good friend. I’d even kept it a secret from Maru Tomokazu, one of my few friends. It’s not that I don’t trust him, but there’s weird rumours going around in the baseball club he’s in, so I wouldn’t want him to worry about me if it ever gets leaked in any way.

“Yo, Asamura. Don’t look up porn sites while you’re at school, would ya?”

This very Maru Tomokazu was now calling out to me with a teasing grin on his face. I sat inside the tranquil atmosphere of the classroom right before homeroom. Since I had finished preparing for my classes, I just sat on my phone, researching stuff.

“Maru, did you know that the insults you make towards other people are actually a mirror of your own insecurities?”

“The heck does that mean?”

“The instant you come up with the idea of accusing someone else of doing something, it really just means that you would do the same.”

“That’s an interesting conclusion.”

“Basically, you just confessed to visiting porn sites yourself, Maru.”

“That’s a pretty harsh accusation, bro.”

“So you don’t visit any?”

“...I do sometimes.”

Judge, I plead guilty for the sake of the accused Maru. Then again, I have to give him credit for honestly admitting it without there being any need for him to do so. It just shows that he really is a great guy.

“I wouldn’t dare look at that kinda stuff at school. I was just looking into some things.”

“Oh, checking anime reviews? Yesterday’s shows were really great. The ‘Project DJ Mic’ episode last night was godlike.”

“Oh yeah. You got sucked into that, huh?”

“They have such great sense when it comes to theme songs and OSTs. They’ve got BGM music from 90’s games. It makes it feel so nostalgic.”

“The 90’s, huh? That’s pretty old.”

“It is, but you know what they say: Don’t make light of the old. They’re using songs that were made with techniques and sound design popular around that time. At the same time, they focused more on the game-esque feel to the music rather than the artist’s personal style, which is pretty revolutionary.”

I could tell that Maru was slowly getting more into it. I gave my otaku friend a warm gaze and responded to him so he wouldn’t complain about my lack of interest.

“I see, so your otaku heart is tickled by the great music, huh?”

“Exactly. They don’t completely ruin the FM synths. Instead, they arranged them into a more modern style. Not to mention that game BGM doesn’t use Japanese lyrics, so you don’t run into any sort of language barrier. It crosses the ocean, spreading out into the world. I’m pretty sure that the peeps behind ‘D Mic’ are geniuses.”

“That’s pretty unexpected.”

“What is?”

“Seeing you getting passionate about music of all things. I knew you were knowledgeable about a lot of different genres, but aren’t your tastes a bit too diverse?”

“You only feel that way because we talk about stuff I know a lot about.”

“Ah, now that you mention it...”

“I just take the reins in the conversation. Of course I’m an all-knowing deity when it comes to the conversations I’ve created.”

“Is this some kind of trick to commit fraud?”

“In essence it’s the same thing. The kind of crime you end up committing only depends on the trick used.”

“And how are you using it?”

“To make the conversation as enjoyable for me as I can.”

“So peaceful.” I gave Maru a sarcastic response as he openly blathered absolute garbage with a smug grin on his face, like he was the ruler of the planet.

I considered pursuing that train of thought and bluntly telling him that his logic was total nonsense, but that would have been a lame retort, so I decided against it.

“Even if I can’t call you omnipotent, you are pretty clever, Maru. Your grades for the end-of-term exams must be pretty spectacular.”

“So you’ve figured it out? You see, I’ve kept it a secret all this time, but I’m actually a genius.”

“I knew that.”

Since Maru was acting too confident for his own good, I decided to ask for his results, but the numbers that I got back were about as nonsensical as I expected. 90 points in Modern Japanese, 92 in Classical Japanese, 94 in History, 96 in Math I, 92 in Math II, 90 in Physics, 82 in Chemistry, 90 in English, and 94 in English Communication—820 points in total. After hearing them all, I could only let out a baffled ‘Ohh’ in the face of this genius-level savant.

“Isn’t that pretty crazy? 90+ points in almost all subjects.”

“I just know how to swim with the tide.”

“I don’t think that’s all there is to it. We’re already a pretty high-level school, and we’re already preparing for university, which makes the exams a lot harder than at other schools nearby. You’re even active in the baseball club, and your hobby is watching anime. What kind of cheats are you using to give you the time to study and get these grades?”

“I ain’t using anything.”

Of course, I knew that there were no cheats or anything like that, but I would have preferred it if he had some kind of secret technique that I could use. If Maru knew of some kind of convenient method to raise one’s academic efficiency, and if he could tell me about it, I could have helped Ayase-san... Then again, there’s no way the world would be as easy as that.

As for Maru, he seemed to have seen right through me. He stared at me with stern eyes through his glasses’ lenses. He let out a sigh, like a wise man indifferently answering the question of an inquisitive person.

“Though there is one primary factor to my success.”

“What?”

“The main premise is that I’m a short sleeper.”

“Your constitution allows you to feel healthy and awake despite how little sleep you get, right? I remember you telling me about that.”

“Pretty much. But I’ve been like this ever since I could remember. Since that’s pretty much decided by my genes, I can’t recommend it to anyone else.”

“Don’t think anyone could copy that, yeah... Wait, you’re giving recommendations?”

“You wanted to know about my studying tricks, right?”

“Your level of insight is terrifying.”

“Haha, it was obvious.” Or so the mind-reading esper said with a peaceful smile.

This is why the catchers from the baseball club are all freaks... Which is a pretty bad prejudice to have, I know.

“Well, hiding anything from you seems pointless anyway, so I’ll be honest. I’m actually always looking for ways to increase my own efficiency when it comes to studying. But methods that only work for geniuses won’t help me much.”

“Don’t be jumping to conclusions like that, young Asamura. This is where the real thing starts.” Maru said arrogantly. He took out his smartphone, booting up a music app.

“Music?”

“Exactly. This is my secret technique for focusing. Pretty much one of those super-easy measures you so desperately want.”

“That sounds like a stretch.”

“It actually helps, you know? Humans act according to their habits. When I listen to this music, my brain cells are telling me to study, and if I hold a pen, it won’t stop until I’m either satisfied or exhausted. Skipping studying makes me feel restless.”

“I see... so it’s a type of self-hypnosis, like some kind of life hack. I guess that relaxing music and environmental noise really has beneficial effects.”

“Depends on the person. Personally, I focus best when I listen to club music or heavy metal.”

“I don’t think that’d work for most people...”

“Everybody has their own type of BGM they use when trying to focus. You just gotta search for what suits you best, Asamura.”

“Wha? ...Ah, yeah. I’ll search for what works for me.” I was taken by surprise for a second, but I still managed to give a normal response.

I guess even a sharp and perceptive catcher from the baseball club wouldn’t guess that I was actually asking this for Ayase-san’s sake, not my own. Then again, using some kind of BGM while studying was most likely something Ayase-san had come up with herself already, so I doubt telling her about it would do her any good. This, in the end, is just the starting point.

For Ayase-san’s sake, I need to gather even more information. While steeling my mental resolve to do so, I gave vague answers to my good friend who continued gushing on and on about how great ‘Project DJ Mic’ is.

*That reminds me, what was Ayase-san’s final result in Modern Japanese again?* Right as I made it to my home’s front door, my hand on the doorknob, this question came to mind. However, I immediately discarded the thought. It’s definitely not that I wasn’t curious about her results, but forcing my own curiosity on her was definitely bad manners. As soon as Ayase-san decides to tell me, let alone wants to tell me, that’ll be the time when I listen.

“I’m home.” I opened the door, and seeing a pair girl’s shoes at the entrance, which confirmed that someone was home before me, I raised my voice.

Since I had no part-time work today, nor had I taken any detour on the way home, I figured I must have been home fairly quickly, but Ayase-san had beaten me home again. I wonder if her homeroom class just ended early or if she hurried home. I couldn't help but grin to myself at the thought of Ayase-san half-running home.

Since I didn't have to worry about my part-time job, I immediately headed to my room and was about to start looking into good work BGM when the door in the hallway I had just passed a few seconds ago flew open. When I turned around, I saw my step-sister almost stomping the ground as she rushed towards me.

"Asamura-kun."

"Uh, I'm back? Ayase-san, is something wrong?" I let out a flustered voice as Ayase-san walked up to me so close that we almost bumped into each other.

Her beautiful eyes were right in front of my nose. Her face, which was so charming that it looked like it had been handcrafted, made me immediately tense.

"Teach me Modern Japanese."

"You're kidding." I said. She had spoken with her usual calm expression, but there was a definite waver of uncertainty in her voice. I found myself blurting that response out on reflex.



It's not like I doubted her seriousness. Instead, I took a second to puzzle out the meaning behind what she had said, and what unexpected and impossible reality lay beneath this truth. As a result, an utterly dumbfounded reaction escaped my mouth. My expectations got the better of me, so I asked her about it. I judged that beating around the bush would be more rude than anything, so I asked her straight.

"How many points?"

"38."

"That...is quite the severe result."

"I felt like this would happen. I've never been good at it, so I figured I wouldn't be any good even here."

"Even though you have such great scores in all the other subjects? Then again, there's things that people are naturally good or not good at."

"I can't even understand how the characters who appear in the story feel." She said, averting her gaze.

I couldn't help but blink in confusion when she said this.

"Since Modern Japanese asks you to determine the meaning of the sentences and answer questions about it, I don't think you need to understand the feelings of the characters?"

"For novels, the meaning of the text basically equates to the feelings of the characters who appear in it, right? ...Well, I'm aware that I get hung up on parts that aren't even relevant."

“Even if that’s the case, I can’t see how you’d have problems like that. You’re always so considerate of other people.”

“Does it seem that way?”

“Yeah, at the very least it does to me. You understand my stances, my opinions, and try to adjust accordingly.”

“It’s the opposite, Asamura-kun.”

“The opposite?”

“I don’t understand other people’s feelings, so I need to adjust to them.”

“...I guess that does make sense.”

As I mentioned before, I find it troublesome and exceptionally hard to deal with people who have a sudden change in mood and ask me to figure out how they’re feeling. This of course is a result of me watching my old man being toyed around with time and time again. I find myself guessing other people’s intentions all the time. Keeping up with this kind of uncertain communication is like a dice throw with 10% odds that you completely brick your relationship. It’s just a game based on pure luck.

That’s exactly why I was so relieved when she proposed that we ‘not have any expectations of each other, merely live together while adjusting to each other.’ Both of us will immediately reveal our honest feelings, like playing a card game with both hands visible. By playing each card in turn, we can continue this card game forever without ever hurting each other.

While this is definitely a kind form of consideration for the other person, if you turn things around, it’s simply a stiff and demanding strategy to attempt to use fragile words to satisfy them.

“Honestly speaking, this might be pretty bad. I knew that it would be tough, but it was far worse than I anticipated.”

“38, huh...? Isn’t a failing grade in Modern Japanese 40 points or lower?”

“Correct. There’s a makeup exam on the 21st, right before summer break. If I don’t pass that one with more than 80 points, I’ll have to take supplementary classes throughout summer break.”

“Supplementary lessons that aren’t relevant for university entrance exams... That’s something I’d like to avoid.”

“Right. That’s why I want to pass that exam no matter what. Asamura-kun, your best subject was Modern Japanese, right?”

“Thanks to my hobby of reading books, yeah... So that’s why you want me to teach you?”

“Would that be too much to ask?”

“Of course not. I’m still in your debt for everything you’ve done, so I want to repay the favor.”

“That’s great to hear.” Ayase-san gave me a relieved smile.

I could see the tension vanish from her shoulders, and she left a brief “I’ll be waiting in the living room, then,” and stepped out of my room. I couldn’t help but think *Yeah, this is very much like her*, when I thought about it. Rather than losing her calm and sulking in bed without telling anybody, she was actively trying to fix the situation, and was acting accordingly.

...But that was exactly why I was plagued by a feeling of discomfort. Why would she ignore this problem until now, when it was definitely going to cause trouble for her, despite usually being on the frontlines trying to better herself ahead of time. This doubt stayed in my mind,

but I quickly realized that I was wasting my time. Instead, I left my school belongings on my studying desk, taking only my writing tools and smartphone with me, and headed out.

When I entered the living room, I immediately spotted Ayase-san sitting at the dining table surrounded by workbooks and notes. There were even barely-opened answer sheets in front of her. She held a pen in her left hand, staring down at the objects in front of her. As a side note, and I heard this from her herself, but Ayase-san is actually left-handed. As a result of her parents' education, she ended up holding the chopsticks with her right hand, but because she's used to writing with her left hand, she uses it more actively.

If this was some type of manga, she'd invite me to her bedroom, and some kind of erotic development would happen, but this is reality. It was a perfectly normal situation, and Ayase-san was focused solely on the problems in front of her, which told me that even the thought of something more than that happening was utterly ridiculous. After pondering about it for a second, I eventually sat down on the opposite side of the table, facing Ayase-san.

"You aren't sitting next to me?" She asked.

"I thought it'd be a bit weird if I did that."

"When Mom and your Dad are home, we always sit next to each other, right?"

"I feel like the conditions of that situation are totally different if you compare them to this one."

"Really?"

"Really," I answered without hesitation, and was actually pretty confident in that. But when I looked at her blank and dry expression, I started to have doubts.

I was trying to be considerate, showing her that I wouldn't use this opportunity for any indecent ideas or fantasies, but maybe I was just being inconsiderate and in the process. I figured that not showing any awareness or consciousness of her being a member of the opposite sex would be for the best, but the person in question is just a tad bit too attractive for me to actually pull that off.

Naturally, I'm not just rambling out my personal interests, but this is a reality based on objective discussion. Despite all those awful rumours circulating around school, there's still a lot of boys who fearlessly confess to her. This should surely be enough proof to justify my conclusion.

The memories from last month are still fresh in my mind. She came to a rather strange conclusion while rationally considering ways to earn money quickly and easily. The appearance of her closing in on me while wearing nothing but underwear still occasionally pops up in my mind.

Naturally, during my daily life, especially with her around, I'm not that conscious of her (because if I kept thinking about that 24/7, I'd be nothing more than an ape driven by carnal lusts), but when it's just the two of us at times like these, and our distance shrinks beyond a certain threshold, these memories just come rushing back. I can't help it.

"Hey, despite that promise of forgetting about it, why is it still a problem?"

"Huh, really?" It seemed like my mind was being read by Ayase-san, and I let out a dumbfounded response.

I don't remember promising anything. I only swore to myself that I would try my best to forget, but Ayase-san shouldn't know anything

about that. Thinking that something was off, I glanced at Ayase-san, who was staring at me, visibly confused.

“Of course. Then again, it was pretty short and abrupt overall, so it might be a bit hard to remember.”

“I’m sorry, Ayase-san. I haven’t the foggiest idea what you’re talking about.”

“Pull yourself together. You’re good at Modern Japanese. Right, Asamura-sensei?”

When she said that, I realized that she had been pointing at a certain part of the question sheet in front of her, which made me understand what was going on.

“...I see. The topic changed without me realizing.”

“It didn’t? I’ve been working on this problem the whole time.”

“Sorry, I was just on the wrong train of thought there. Let’s start, shall we?”

It appears that she had already started studying. She wasn’t reproaching me for the indecent visions and memories filling my mind, but had instead asked me about a portion of the problem she didn’t understand.

“Thanks. Then, as for this question...”

“Ah, hold on. I want to start by proposing another way of studying. Can I do that?” I asked.

“Of course. Anything that will help improve my grades would be very much welcome.”

“Then I’d like to check what parts of Modern Japanese you’re having problems with. Can I see your question and answer sheets?”

“Yep. Here you go.” Ayase-san offered me the papers with no hesitation.

Compared to her outer appearance, looking like a delinquent with blonde hair and ear piercing, she was actually an honest and proper student. Seeing that paper with a giant red ‘38’ written on it was really a sight out of the ordinary. I can’t pretend to think that this is some lack of understanding, lack of ability, or lack of effort. I believed that there must be a much deeper explanation as to why she was unable to get the points she would normally get, which was why I cross-referenced every little nook and cranny of the paper to find this reason. And then I found it.

“You’re perfectly fine when it comes to reading comprehension and the kanji used in papers and articles. You’re losing the most points when it comes to the reading comprehension part of novels.”

“...Yeah, that’s what I have problems with.”

“This was probably the first time you’ve actually gotten a failing grade like this, right? Since the point distribution is weighted more heavily towards the novel reading comprehension.”

“Correct. Then again, I knew that myself.” She shrugged. “I just couldn’t come up with a way to deal with it.”

“Your accuracy in terms of correct answers is higher in the beginning when working on the papers and articles, but two novel-related questions later, when there’s another paper question, you left that empty. Is that because you used up all your time on the novel-related questions prior to that one?”

“You’re talking like you were there when it happened.”

“So am I wrong?”

“Right on mark. It felt like you stabbed me where it hurt, and left me a bit agitated.”

I could see a bit of that despite her otherwise empty expression.

“Sorry, I guess I was a bit insensitive.”

“You are forgiven. Then again, I asked you to teach me, and you’re being serious about it, so I shouldn’t sulk like that. I’m sorry.”

“All good, now we’re even.”

We’re still keeping up the promise that the two of us shared when we had just become a family. Don’t ignore anything, don’t beat around the bush too much, just adjust to immediately fix any errors. That is the relationship we have established. We don’t show changes in our emotions with just our facial expressions alone, we immediately explain any unpleasant emotions or situations, which has made it very easy for both of us.

“And the biggest problem was Natsume Sōseki’s ‘Sanshirō<sup>1</sup>'. You couldn’t solve a single question related to that, and it even led to a lot of blank answer spaces afterwards.”

“You’re right...”

“You weren’t aware of it?”

“I was too busy actually trying to solve the question. I remember feeling like that was much more difficult and harder to do than the other questions.”

“So you didn’t realize that this was the critical part of it, I see.”

An exam is pretty much about establishing rhythm when solving problems. As long as you’re a human who works by hand, your mental state can drastically affect your results. If you’re blasting

through problems, your brain is in a state of ecstasy, your hand starts moving faster, and naturally, your pen flies across the paper.

On the flip side, if you're getting stuck on one part, your hand comes to a halt, as does your brain and thought process, which then causes a rush of stress, and this stress leads to a downfall of your ability to think rationally. In other words, in order to achieve the greatest results in exams and tests, you have to stabilize your own mental state and solve the questions and problems without breaking out of your rhythm.

—At least that's what I read in a book before. Since I was so easily influenced, I've always worked on exams exactly how that book told me. I categorize the problems I can solve right away, the problems that will take a bit of thinking time, and the problems I have to do a lot of thinking for, then I create a comfortable rhythm as I work through the question sheet.

“Since you’re a very logical and clever person, Ayase-san, I think that unless you don’t fully understand a question or a problem, you will probably feel uncomfortable. You quickly work through the problems you can answer easily, but you can get hung up on other ones forever.”

If this assumption is correct, then it could explain why she’s been this bad at Modern Japanese without having to fix or correct anything else. Her head judged that she was trying to solve the problems the right way, and it was a misjudgement.

“I see.” Ayase-san nodded. “When it comes to other subjects, I feel like I’m subconsciously solving the questions instantly.”

“Basically, when it comes to Modern Japanese, and analyzing novels in particular, there’s a reason why you can’t deal with it.”

“A reason, you say...”

“If we find out that reason, we can come up with measures to deal with it. First, let’s look at ‘Sanshirō’ and try to figure out what this problem is.”

I checked over the section they used in the exam. Since making the entire book part of a question would be too much to ask of the students, they only asked questions about a particular excerpt of ‘Sanshirō’. In all the works of the famous Meiji Era author, Natsume Sōseki, this has especially strong touches of a romantic novel, which makes it well-known as one of the easier novels for high school students nowadays to read.

Even for people who aren’t too well-versed with literature, because it deals with a citizen’s problems and reality as a stage, the sympathy is what makes it stand out. You could call it a trendy drama at the time it was written. At its core, it’s not that different from a typical modern romance novel.

If you had to name specific differences, then it would be the acceptance and sincerity towards the time it was written in, which makes it even accepted as material used for historical studies, to a level where even problems related to it have been implemented into students’ workbooks, and it’s used as an educational novel. Of course, it wasn’t the only example of this, but becoming an educational novel is a great feat in the world of literature. It’s worthy of respect, to be honest.

“Honestly speaking, it was pretty difficult. Though all the other people from my class were having no problems dealing with it from what I could see.”

“‘Sanshirō’ is quite advanced, and it contrasts one’s own freedom in love with the norm of love at the time, which mainly consisted of political marriages. At the time it was written, it was still a new view

of love, but people nowadays find a lot of aspects to it that are easy to understand.”

“Really? ...I wonder what’s so easy to understand.” It must have been subconsciously, as Ayase-san gently bit her finger.

“I think it’d be faster if you just tried to put into words what exactly you didn’t understand, Ayase-san. Can you give me something?”

“What the protagonist Sanshirō is thinking, and what the main heroine-esque Mineko is thinking. Let alone their thoughts, I don’t get why they act the way they do.”

“For starters, you’re aware that Sanshirō has feelings for Mineko, right?”

“Really?” Ayase-sasn blinked at me in confusion.

She seemed like she genuinely hadn’t anticipated that, but I should be the one making that face right now. I’m fairly certain that even without a lot of reading experience like I have, a normal person would be able to figure that out by reading casually. Especially a girl like her whose results even surpassed mine in all the other subjects except Modern Japanese. This is just way too unnatural.

“If you’re stuck there, that makes things much more complicated. Hmm... How should I explain it?”

“Feelings... Basically, he likes her in the romantic sense, right?”

“Exactly. Though the writing goes a bit above and beyond with the depiction, staging it greater than it actually is. Just look at the times other men approach the main heroine. You can piece together that the protagonist is jealous, right?”

“Jealous... So he hates the idea of Mineko talking to another man?”

“That’s at least how I see it.”

“But he’s not telling her to stop, right? He could just say that he dislikes the idea.”

“Well, he’s got this insecure and awkward personality that doesn’t allow him to do that. Also, when you’re talking with the person you have feelings for, I think the psychological hurdle and exhaustion is just far greater.”

“Keeping your honest feelings secret without ever saying them... I don’t really get it. Maybe because I don’t do that at all.”

“Let’s imagine a situation where you can’t openly state your honest feelings. Like your feelings for your first love. Have you had any experiences when your heart was in such disarray because of romantic feelings that you couldn’t find the right words to say?”

“No. I don’t have any experience with love to begin with.”

“I see...”

“What about you, Asamura-kun?”

“...Now that you mention it, I think I’m the same way.”

More accurately, before I could even acquire a proper mind for love, I heard that I proposed to my kindergarten teacher. Then again, that was just what my old man told me, so whether or not that really happened is up for debate. Thus, I’m not going to count that. After moving up to grade school, where I still have a few things that I can remember, the only thing I remember seeing was my parents fighting most of the time, which caused me to never really dream of having a romantic relationship with a girl that could lead to marriage and building a family.

“Hmm, so you don’t.”

“...Is that bad?”

“Not really. I was just thinking that, if you had no experience in love like I do, it might explain that this is completely unrelated to my scores in Modern Japanese.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty weird to think about where things start to differ between us.”

Maybe it’s just my otaku tendencies? I don’t remember ever really imagining going out with a girl in reality, but thinking that a heroine of a manga or novel I’m reading, even anime I’m watching, is pretty cute and charming has been something natural for me. It’s like I’m making up for my lack of realistic experience with fictional experience instead.

That being the case, I feel like it would be a grounded hypothesis to assume that this accumulated knowledge led to my greater ability of grasping the depiction of romantic feelings in certain media. That being said, this conclusion won’t help me in increasing her learning ability to a level where the supplementary exams would be possible. On the contrary, if I told this to her, it’d make me a failure of a private tutor. My only choice is to come up with a constructive method for her to progress.

“Then, let’s give up on understanding their emotions. If you can’t figure out their emotions, then there’s no use wasting time on it.”

“So what, are we going to start guessing randomly instead?”

“Not quite. Confirm the contents of what’s written on the paper as a single stream of information, and answer it mechanically. Basically, you have to change your perception of it.”

“Change my perception? Why?”

“Because if you push yourself when it comes to the questions that require you to read and understand a human’s heart, it results in you ending up in trouble. Compare it to math, where you apply the mathematical formula to solve the problem, working through it like a puzzle. Ayase-san, you had pretty good results in History, right? So you must be somewhat informed about that?”

“Well, I guess. You just have to learn everything by heart. There’s also a few parts that are very interesting.”

“The thing is, if you put a contextual thread on the historical background that is written in the works of Modern Japanese, and associate the two of them, then it might be easier to understand what exactly is written in them. If you’re good at history, and you create a logical connection between the two, you instill in yourself a way of thinking that benefits this process, and you might just be able to understand what the questions are asking from you.”

Of course, that is much easier said than done. However, considering her basic stats and specs, it’s worth considering this possibility.

“Yeah, that might be a better fit for me.”

“For now, let’s practice with Sanshirō. I don’t know if they’ll use it again for the supplementary exams, but the questions and overall amount of them should follow a similar pattern, so if you have your own way of dealing with these problems, you should be ready on the day of.”

“...Can I really make it?” She spoke with an indifferent tone, but I could pick up a certain level of doubt in her voice.

I should be able to say this exactly because I’ve gotten better at understanding the person that she is, so the second she said that, she was clearly showing a certain amount of anxiety. Of course, that makes total sense, since she’s always been aware that this is one of

her most problematic subjects. But at the same time, this very reaction just confirmed that it would all work out in the end.

Ayase-san isn't so naive as to assume that everything will turn in her favor merely because she figured out a trick to dealing with her problems. On the contrary, she's the type of person to take detours to reach her final goal in the end.

"You can do it, Ayase-san."

"Yeah. I'll trust in you, Asamura-kun, and try my best."

Of course, there's no basis or proof for anything here. However, there was no doubt or scathing remarks at all to be seen from Ayase-san's reaction. Instead, she said it like she really meant it, and she proceeded to look up the historical background and commentaries regarding Sanshirō. Now that the plan had been set in motion, all that was left was to push through with it.

After that, her focus on her work was almost astonishing to me. She didn't blink once, she merely looked through anything related to Sanshirō like a machine searching the internet. Well, that would be a bit of an overstatement, but her dedication made me picture something like that.

As she studied, I would get up to prepare some drinks or look up something else on my phone, and yet she never glanced at me in the slightest. She merely focused on the task at hand. If you think about typical events that happen in fiction, there would be a little sister who has yet to get her basics down, working you through hell and back. Or there'd be another little sister who'd start giving you a bit of service since she can't sit still for a long period of time. But the real step-sister in front of me right now was passionately working on her studies.

Even so, even without any erotic development like that, I quite enjoyed the tranquil atmosphere that reigned between us, as I merely listened to the sound of her pen scratching across the paper.

To start from the conclusion—This studying method brought forth immense results. After she finished poring over all the information regarding Sanshirō that she could find, I asked her the same questions from the exam, with the exam sheet in hand, and Ayase-san succeeded in giving me an answer every single time, all of them correct. She really is clever. Once she knows how to solve a problem, she immediately goes above and beyond.

“Congrats. If you use the same method on all the novels that are part of the subject, you don’t have to be afraid at all.”

“Thanks. Your teaching really helped.”

“...!” Ah, well, it wasn’t that big of a deal.”

For a moment, my head turned blank and I reverted back to polite language. The corners of her mouth went up a little bit as she thanked me, which took me by surprise.

“Did you just smile?”

“I wonder. I’m not too sure, myself.” Ayase-san shrugged, seeming slightly bewildered.

Ironically enough, this mysterious gesture which I was unable to understand the origin of greatly resembled one that the heroine of Sanshirō would make. The same Sanshirō that had given Ayase-san such a hard time before.

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<sup>1</sup> [Sanshirō](#)

## ***Chapter 2: 17th of July (Friday)***

Morning. I got off my bed, my head still in a sleepy daze, and stepped out of my room. As I walked down the hallway towards the bathroom, I subconsciously found myself walking quietly so that I didn't disturb any family members. This is one of the many changes I have come to terms with after the arrival of a step-sister—Namely, the morning routine.

When it was just my old man and I living here, I didn't have to worry about my appearance. I just carelessly trotted down the hallway with bed hair, bleary eyes, and a disheveled pajama appearance. However, I can't be that careless now.

Now I have to be mindful of both Ayase-san and Akiko-san. Since they were still technically strangers to me, and female at that, I sure as hell didn't have the courage or confidence to let myself show any shameful appearance in front of them.

After confirming that the bathroom was indeed empty, I checked my face in the mirror. Freshening up my dried throat with a bit of gargling, I washed my swollen cheeks and used the razor to shave the small stubbles of a beard that had started to grow.

Perfect—would be a bit of a stretch, but at the very least I don't have to be afraid of showing myself in front of others, so I confidently made my way to the living room.

“Good morning, Ayase-san.”

Of course, just like every morning, she was perfectly prepared. Her hair was styled with not a single strand of bed hair to be found, her makeup was placed with the utmost care without a single flaw, and she was already wearing our school uniform, ironed with no

wrinkles, with an apron on top to protect it. As always, I have yet to see my perfect step-sister show any kind of opening.

I'm sure she must have been up late reading her Modern Japanese material and novels to gather all sorts of reliable information, and yet I had run into her at the exact time and with the exact same appearance as every other morning, which yet again reminds me of her immeasurable self-restraint. On top of that, her workbooks and smartphone were lying on the dining room table, like she was still in the middle of studying at this very moment.

When I called out to her, Ayase-san slowly raised her head, standing up from the table like it was the obvious thing to do.

"Good morning, Asamura-kun. Can I make something easy like fried eggs today?"

"Ah, I don't need any breakfast today. I'll just make some toast."

"Huh, why?"

"You want to focus on your studies, right?"

In the corner of my eye, I could see two plates in the kitchen that looked like they had just been washed. One of them probably belonged to my old man, who had made some quick breakfast this morning since he had to leave before everyone else. The other, naturally, was Ayase-san's. She probably didn't want to wait for me, so she went ahead and ate something light before securing as much time to study as possible.

"But we promised..."

"Right now, my debt's much bigger than yours. If you can focus on the makeup exam for now, then I don't have any room to complain." I responded without leaving her room to complain.

As a matter of fact, if she fails her makeup exam, she has to take supplementary lessons, which decreases the time she'll have to search for and work at a part-time job, and her overall studying efficiency will decrease as well. As a result, the condition of our agreement, which is her cooking food for me, will have to be dropped, and I'll have to worry about my own cooking.

Ayase-san must have realized that I didn't want to unnecessarily burden her, so she didn't argue back.

"Thanks. I'll take you up on that offer, then."

"You're welcome... or so I'd say, but it's not that big of a deal."

"...Okay." Ayase-san faintly smiled and sat back down again, facing the table.

After watching with a satisfied gaze as my step-sister went back into studying mode, I headed to the kitchen. All right! I guess I'll go all-out for once. I think I'll just have to use my secret technique of putting sliced cheese on my bread. Heh, heh, heh.

I started getting excited all by myself, pretending that I felt joy about such a mundane task. I guess highschool boys are simple in their search for happiness. Then again, maybe the girls are the same? I guess I'll have to ask Ayase-san another time. Another time when she's not busy studying, that is.

The toast ended up perfect. The cheese was a beautiful golden color. As expected from my artistic cheese-grilling skills. Even while I was fighting with the melted cheese stretching endlessly from the toast, Ayase-san kept her focus on the work in front of her. Once again, I can't help but admire her level of focus. Is it even possible for her to raise her academic efficiency more than this? I feel like any kind of work BGM wouldn't do anything, except maybe bother her.

“Mmmm...~”

By the time a good portion of my toast had disappeared into my stomach and I was in the mood for some coffee, Ayase-san stretched her arms far above her head, letting out quite a suggestive voice. No, wait, it just sounded suggestive to me. She herself surely had no intention of making it out to be that way. I’m sorry, Ayase-san.

The problem is that because she’s wearing the thin summer uniform, when she stretches her arms like that, her sleeves fall down a bit and I can see her white skin. It practically forces me to become more conscious of her.

I shouldn’t look at her in that way. That would just be rude—or so I kept telling myself while trying to calm my breathing, so I tried to strike up a more casual topic.

“Done for now?”

“Yup. Then again, I have to get going now.”

“That’s pretty early.”

“It’ll be much more efficient if I go batting first. I’ve already finished eating and preparing myself.”

“Batting first” here referred to leaving the house first. Leaving the house at the same time to head to school together would make us stand out way too much, and my efficient step-sister wanted to avoid that.

“Makes sense. Take care.”

“See you later.”

“...Ah, wait a second!”

Right when she picked up her things and was about to leave the living room, I called out to her.

“What is it?” She turned around towards me.

“About studying while on your way to school...”

Last month, she was doing some English listening practice on her way to school, and she almost got run over by a truck. I don’t like the idea of warning her because of past mistakes, but I couldn’t help but worry about her even if it made me sound too meddlesome.

“I won’t.” She said while turning forward again.

After that, her face turned a bit red, and it seemed like she was sulking.

“I won’t make the same mistake again.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Sorry for nagging you.”

“Don’t worry about it. See you.” She averted her gaze and left the living room.

It seemed like she was trying to run away. I guess I shouldn’t have said that. The faint bitter taste of coffee still lingered on my tongue as I reflected on my failed communication. That incident was a bad memory for Ayase-san, and she was embarrassed by other people seeing her work hard. I can’t blame her for having that reaction.

I guess I’m still far away from being a respectable older brother. I gulped down the rest of my coffee like I was trying to wash away bitterness with more bitterness. Then I realized something.

“In the beginning, she never let me see how hard she was working, right?”

What had she been doing for the past few minutes? What kind of appearance did she have yesterday? Even though I was right in front of her. The change was so minuscule that I hadn't even noticed, but compared to when we first met, she's been gradually showing me more sides to her, even her weaknesses. It's just a small step, but I feel like we've gotten closer as siblings.

Even though it was almost the beginning of summer break, a high-level school like ours cut us no slack. Under the pretense that we wouldn't even be able to remember all of it, the teachers practically rushed through the workbooks, getting as much time in as possible, and then stopped the classes whenever they saw fit. After that followed self-study and self-practice, or in the worst-case even idle chatter. All in all, it made for an atmosphere that wasn't conducive to any kind of diligent studying.

That's why nobody noticed me using my smartphone beneath the desk. I was busy searching through the vast ocean of the internet for any work BGM that I could send to Ayase-san, who was probably the one person studying the most in this entire school. Time passed by, and lunch break soon arrived. After I finished eating the bread I had bought previously, I silently stood up from my desk. Maru heard my chair moving behind him and turned towards me, away from his own phone.

"Oh? Where are you going, Asamura?"

"The library room." I gave a vague response.

I wasn't actually planning on heading there at all, but if I told him that I was going to be loitering around the school for a bit, he'd only pester me more due to his endless curiosity, so I came up with a white lie.

“Aight, gotcha.” Maru answered, dropping his gaze down to his phone again.

This was what usually happened during recess, for both of us. Although both of us are indeed friends, we don’t always talk with each other, let alone act clingy. We both respect each other’s personal space, spending a lot of time on our own as well. Since both of us dislike being overwhelmed by other people, that’s probably how we’ve managed to stay friends for such a long time.

I stepped out of the classroom and headed towards the library room. That wasn’t my final destination, of course. I was merely walking down the hallway towards said library room. My Senpai at work, Yomiuri-senpai, recommended me a book once that said people come up with better ideas while walking around instead of just sitting down on a chair.

Ever since I read that, I’ve been trying it out. As you can probably tell, I’m terribly easy to influence. While searching for some good BGM, I was silently hoping that some great idea would suddenly hit me. I let my feet carry me down the hallway. Right when I arrived in front of the actual library room, someone suddenly tapped me on the back.

“Heeey! What’s wrong, Onii-chan?!”

“...!”

I was so taken by surprise that I forgot to breathe for a second. When I turned around, I was greeted by a familiar female student. She gave me a warm smile brimming with curiosity. Her bright hair was styled up with light curls, giving her a stylish atmosphere. She’s the secret popularity winner of the student year, as well as Ayase-san’s classmate, Narasaka Maaya. And she’s the only student here who knows that Ayase-san and I are step-siblings.

She gave off the impression of a cat that loves to tease its owner by hiding inside the dresser as she looked at me with several books in hand. It looked like she had just come out of the library room.

“Oh, it’s just you, Narasaka-san. I thought you were some sort of Tōrima.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?! There’s no way we’d have something like that at this school.”

“You never know when you might run into one, which is what makes them so dangerous, right?”

“Ehh, I thought this was totally normal~ Skinship and all that.”

“Are you always like this, Narasaka-san?”

“Sure am.”

“Even towards Ayase-san? I can’t see that at all.”

“Yup! With Saki as well! She always calls me annoying, but she’s secretly happy about it.”

I don’t think she is.

“I would conclude that she finds you annoying.”

“The deeper the annoyance, the deeper the love, as they say!”

“Nobody says that. Also, if you follow that line of thought any further, you’ll get arrested for sexual harassment.”

“Ehh? Why am I, a girl, being lectured about sexual harassment by a boy?”

“Sexual harassment works in both ways, see.”

“Hmph. You sound just like Saki, Asamura-kun.”

If someone already told you, then why didn't you give it careful thought?

"Also, you were walking while looking at your phone, Asamura-kun! Guilty! Guilty!"

"Ah, yes. Now you're blame-shifting."

"Hey now, we're not in class. You don't have to sound so intellectual!" Narasaka-san pouted.

Surprise attacks, skinship, an open-minded attitude, and a mentality to ignore every complaint and warning. All of these things should be enough for anyone to hate her, and yet I can't muster up any anger at all. Is it because of her small stature, or the way she talks? I don't know, but that is probably her own kind of charisma. If someone else tried to pull off what she does, they'd eat a stun gun to the gut. I can see how she's popular with the boys, at least.

"You read books?" I felt a bit guilty constantly complaining to her, so I brought up a different topic.

Judging from the covers of said books, they seemed to be novels targeted at a female demographic.

"These? They got the newest releases I've been looking forward to. Summer break's close, too!"

"You're the borrowing type, huh?"

As a part-time jobber at a bookstore, I really wish she'd buy them instead, but to each their own, I guess. People have different circumstances and allowances that dictates what they can buy, so I don't feel too comfortable forcing my own values on them.

"Exam period is always a time of restraint, so I just wanted to read them all! You feel me?"

“Ahaha, I get it. Judging from that reaction...”

“No supplementary exams for me! I didn’t get a failing grade anywhere~”

“I see.”

“I got a total of 808 points! How’s that~?”

“Eh...?” I let out a dumbfounded voice.



As a result of that, Narasaka-san's expression of confidence and arrogance quickly distorted into one of discontent.

"Ah! You were shocked just now! You didn't expect me to get an average of 90, did you?!"

"...I'm sorry, you're absolutely correct." I confessed my sins.

"That hurts. I'm in the upper ranks of the student year, you know~"

"I shouldn't judge people based on the impression they give off... I will reflect on it."

"That *impression* basically amounts to me being an idiot, right!? Asamura-kun, are you some kind of airheaded S?"

"I didn't..."

*Mean it that way*—sounded like a weak excuse. When she uses the word 'airhead,' I can't talk back at all. Narasaka-san seized the opportunity my silence gave her to bring her face closer to mine.

"If you feel bad about it, then tell me one thing~"

"Eh? I mean... sure?"

"While you were walking and looking at your phone like that, you were flirting with Saki via text, right?"

"Um, no."

"Ehh, really? Saki's been on her phone all day, too. I was really jealous. I thought that you two were getting along super well."

“What a horrible misunderstanding to have.”

I’m pretty sure she was probably just looking at novels again. Also, how does she even come up with that kind of ridiculous conclusion, despite knowing what kind of relationship we have? There’s no way love would bloom between two people who just became step-siblings.

“I was looking something up.”

“Really now?”

“Here’s your proof.”

Since Narasaka-san didn’t sound satisfied at all, I showed her my smartphone screen.

“Work BGM? Why would you look for that?”

“Um, you see...” I immediately switched to polite language, trying to come up with an excuse, but quickly changed my mind. “I wanted to find some for Ayase-san.”

“For Saki?”

I explained the details. After talking to Narasaka-san a few times, I realized that she’s prone to misunderstandings. If I keep it a secret, or try to talk my way out of it, she’ll just get the wrong idea about it again. If I give her the boring truth, that curiosity of hers wouldn’t come to bite me in the ass later.

Of course, I left out the part about Ayase-san working harder than anybody else to fix her flaws, and just mentioned that she simply wanted to increase her academic efficacy. That way, I can respect her wish.

“Huh. You’re looking for music for Saki’s sake. Hmm.” She grinned.

“I think it’d be better for you to voice your true feelings in order to create a more favorable environment of conversation with other people.”

“Ohh, so you say~ Asamura-kun, so you have confidence in your own communication skills?”

“.....I’m sorry.”

She hit me exactly where it hurt. Since I had practically dug my own grave, I chose to apologize instead of fighting back and pouring more salt into my wound.

“You’re a great Onii-chan, you know. There’s no need to be embarrassed. Hold your head high in pride.”

“I don’t think I deserve that title just because I’m helping her out a bit...”

“Phew, how upright~ I’m a great Onee-chan just by making food, you know.”

“You have a little brother, right?”

I think I heard something along those lines from Ayase-san before.

“I do. A ton of them.”

“A ton? You must be a big family.”

“About 100.”

“Huh?”

“Just kidding~ We’re a normal family.”

So how many little brothers does she have? I was pretty curious and wanted to ask, but the runaway train Narasaka-san wouldn’t wait for me to hop on. She changed the topic before I could say anything.

“You really are upright, though. Looking up BGMs and searching for a good one? That’s super sincere.”

“Isn’t that normal?”

“Hmmm?” As if she was unable to grasp my words, she tilted her head in utter confusion.

...Oh lord, she sounds serious about that.

“I mean, how else would you search for music if you’re not looking into the material?” I asked her.

“Hmmm... I never really thought about it. I just pick whatever’s playing, going by gut instinct.”

“I mean, going through the recommendations section is useful, but...”

Recent music apps and streaming sites often offer you a list of recommendations created by an AI on the home screen, showing you similar songs to ones you’ve enjoyed before, or songs based on your search history. Even an antisocial type of person like me, who doesn’t really follow mainstream media or jump on the bandwagon, uses the recommendations feature from time to time.

“But that’s not all, right? You look up some music on your own, don’t—”

“I don’t, no?”

“Ah, I see... Is that so...?”

Since she showed utter confusion and disapproval in response to my own values and ideas, I could only droop my shoulders in defeat. Everyone has their own way of going about things, and I don’t have

the right to blame her for hers, yet I couldn't help but feel a bit bothered.

"You seem a bit disappointed."

"I know I don't have any right to be. It just comes about when your values don't match up with someone else's."

"Well, I'm more than happy with all the recommendations I get, you know~ If anything, I'm more curious as to why you would go out of your way to search for music."

"Only listening to the stuff recommended to me makes it feel like I have no will of my own."

"Huh~"

"...I know that I have a twisted personality."

So don't look at me with such an innocent gaze. It feels like I'm a vampire being bathed in sunlight. Unable to look her in the eyes, I covered my face and looked up at the ceiling. However, the reaction she had to that caught me completely off guard.

"That's great! I love that kind of thing!"

"You're making fun of me, aren't you?"

"Of course not! I think it's wonderful that you have that kind of self image!"

"...Thanks."

It's rare to find a person who's this skilled at praising others. It makes me wonder if all the outgoing people in the world are like that. When it comes to manga, anime, and games, any normie or outgoing person who appears in fiction always has some dirty secret, and they're depicted as some kind of evil guy.

Cheesy delinquent guys who try to pick up the heroines, the leader of a female clique in the classroom who always bullies the pretty girls, you always see evil stereotypes like these in media. Of course, I understand these characters are purely there for the sake of plot. Even if people like that actually exist in reality, as long as I look at Narasaka-san, who is clearly an outgoing person as well, I can't help but think that there are people who act purely out of goodwill as well. She's cute, clever, and kind to others. No matter what metric you judge her by, she's practically perfect.

"I'd like to listen to some other music as well!"

"Ohh!"

So she's awakened to an interest in the same consumer-oriented method of listening to music? What a wonderful thing.

"I'll check out the songs you found, Asamura-kun, so tell me about them later!"

"Aren't you just switching who you're relying on for music? I'm not a song-recommendation AI, okay?"

"Looking it up myself is a pain, you see~"

It seems like a shared interest was non-existent from the very beginning. Real sad stuff, man. The only difference is whether you get the recommendations digitally or physically. In the end, she's still being swept along by other people's interests. But I'm the only one who actually feels discouraged by that, as these are my own personal feelings. I guess that there's different ways of looking at it, huh?

After school ended, I headed to my part-time job with a pretty melancholic mood. Everyone who had the late shift on Friday, basically any time after 6pm, would be forced through absolute hell. After changing into my uniform and stepping into the office, I was

met by the manager and the other staff, who looked like soldiers about to head off to battle. There was only one exception—Yomiuri Shiori-senpai, who noticed that I had entered the room and walked towards me with a gentle smile, even waving her hand at me.

That's the 'My Pace Monster' for you. We're about to enter the deepest layer of hell, and yet she's acting like she's out for a night stroll to the convenience store. This is the city that never sleeps, the city of youth. Shibuya isn't called that for no reason; there's always some kind of trouble happening 24/7. Of course, that isn't just some kind of prejudice or rumor. It's the actual truth, and yet people still come here in waves.

Saturday aside, of course. Then the city turns into a landscape of young people walking through the streets, but Mondays and Fridays especially are absolute hell. Monday is the magazine industry's greatest day of the week, since their new magazines release then, and we as a bookstore suffer the most from that.

As for Friday, the circumstances are especially crucial for our bookstore. Besides being the city of the young, a large variety of office buildings with a lot of famous IT companies are lined up next to the other here, making this one of the few Office Cities in the entire country.

In the latter half of the 90s, when office building rent was still cheap, a lot of new startups and younger companies moved into the suburbs, turning it into a bitter valley<sup>2</sup> resembling America's Silicon Valley. It's also called the Bit Valley.

These companies and enterprises found success back at the time, and grew to their current size... or so it said in a book Yomiuri-senpai recommended to me. Either way, this is a store a lot of salarymen often visit on their way home from work. It's general knowledge that the store is filled to the brim every Friday.

Even when we're busy, we still need to try our best to always be friendly towards the customers. Even if the store is packed full, we have to be careful of any possible theft. Even if the store is always bustling, we have to make sure to keep it clean and appealing. After we confirmed these ideals, our battle began.

"Haaah... Cash register today, huh...?"

"Aren't you a poor fellow, Junior-kun."

Before I made my way to the cash register, Yomiuri-senpai noticed me sighing and tapped me on the shoulder.

"Of course, with more people in here, the number of troublesome customers also goes up."

"Hey now. Should you really be saying that about our valued customers?"

"I'm pretty sure I've heard you've complain about that before. In front of a customer, in fact."

"I have no idea what you're talking about~" Yomiuri-senpai put her index finger on her mouth, signaling for me to keep it a secret.

For a second, I wondered what she was on about, but after seeing the other staff members giving us dubious glances, it finally clicked. It wasn't just the two of us here today, so our usual mood was forbidden. As always, she's feigning ignorance.

She had long black hair, reminding me of a Yamato Nadeshiko, and she lived under the image of a docile book girl. Nine out of ten people would think that Yomiuri-senpai is a prim and proper Japanese beauty, but that is a grave misunderstanding. On the inside she's practically a middle-aged old man who loves telling dirty jokes. Of course, since she loves books, reading is one of her biggest

hobbies, and she's a full-fledged literary girl, but it's honestly terrifying how inaccurate that stereotype is here.

"You really don't show other people your actual self, do you?"

"I've been disappointed one too many times at my university. You're the only one who knows everything about me, Junior-kun. Did you know that?"

"Can you stop saying things with weird phrasing already?"

"I was just stating the truth, though!"

She immediately started to tease me. Then again, the reason she takes this attitude towards me was my fault to begin with, so I can't exactly complain. I know that it sounds weird coming from me, but I have the deposition to not have any expectations from the women around me, and for her I'm probably the person she can get along with the easiest out of all the other male staff here.

Even if she shows her real self, I won't get discouraged or disappointed in her, and whenever she feels like teasing me to vent some stress, I won't actually get angry at her. It's convenient and reliable. This is probably the easiest explanation of what kind of relationship Yomiuri-senpai and I have: Co-workers who are comfortable around each other.

"Also, why are you this relaxed? You used to always hate working during Friday's peak hours."

"Hehehe~ The thing is, I'm actually responsible for selling area maintenance and location placeholding today."

"Ah, not fair."

Now it makes sense why she's so indifferent. Location placeholding basically means securing enough space in the bookshelves in the

selling area for the books and magazines that'll arrive tomorrow. It's our routine here to take care of everything the evening prior, so that the newest deliveries can be arranged on the display shelves first thing in the morning. This prevents any customers from arriving only to not be able to find the book or magazine they were looking for. It increases sales a tiny bit, but the store's convenience doesn't really matter at all. To us part-time jobbers, the most crucial thing is that we aren't assigned to the cash register.

"It's not unfair at all. Preparing for the new releases is another part of our job."

"Well, I can see how location placeholders has its own fair shares of troubles... Yomiuri-senpai, would you like to switch with me?"

"Why would you say something as cruel as that?!"

"And there's the proof that it's unfair."

If you weighed both against each other, the cash register is still much more troublesome. I totally get it. As a result, Yomiuri-senpai started humming to herself as she took the newest arrivals list out from behind the register and made her way to the selling area. Curse you, senpai of mine.

Grumbling half-heartedly to myself, I headed towards the cash register. As you might imagine, the next few hours were hell. Customer, customer, customer, payment, payment, payment. Enquiry, enquiry, enquiry. My eyes felt like they were spinning from the overload of information, but I already had my own strategy for conquering this.

Entering a state of complete trance. Like I was assembling parts that came towards me from a conveyor belt, left to right, I kept an expression devoid of any emotion on my face, dealing with each customer absolutely indifferently. It might sound like I was being a

bit impolite towards the customers, but I was already trained to mimic proper customer service even in this state, and I received not a single complaint for my service. Eventually, the clock reached the 9pm mark, and it was time for me to head home.

“I’ll be taking my leave.”

“Huh, you’re going home already? ...Oh, it’s already this late, huh? Time always goes by in a flash on Fridays.”

“Yeah.”

“I guess I’ll take a break as well. Junior-kun, once you’re done changing, come to the break room.”

“Huh, why?”

“Because I’m bored.”

“Ehhhh...”

“Come on now. Eating lunch all on my own is too boring. Let me use all your juicy experiences with your little sister as my side dish.”

“Don’t spice up someone else’s life more than it actually is, would you? ...Sheesh.”

Yomiuri-senpai begged me with watery eyes, and I could only sigh in resignation. I guess I’m much weaker to assertiveness than I thought.

“I understand. However, there aren’t any interesting stories I could tell you, so instead hear me out on something, okay?”

“Oho? That sounds mighty interesting.”

I’ll at least make this a give & take where we both profit. That is the most resistance I could muster in that situation.

The back area of the bookstore had a storage room, an office, a men's and women's changing room, and a break room. This location was quite a bit away from the actual selling area, so any voices or BGM were drowned out by the thick walls, but here you could observe the inside of the store thanks to the security cameras and the monitors that were set up. When I returned to the break room after changing into my comfortable casual clothes, I immediately spotted Yomiuri-senpai leaning over the desk, looking like melted ice cream.



“Melting, huh?”

“Of course I would. The population density inside the store completely renders the A/C useless.”

“The air feels pretty thin as well. But you ran away from the cash register, so you don’t have any right to complain, you know that?”

“Ehh, I didn’t run away from it~”

“I know that, I was joking.”

“You’re so cheeky, Junior-kun. You do know that you have to be kind towards girls, right?”

“I am an advocate of gender equality, see.”

She might seem like a stylish, beautiful Japanese Onee-san, but Yomiuri-senpai can actually act quite like a childish girl at times, so I treat her accordingly. If someone’s constantly shifting between two moods, then I can only act accordingly. Taking her too seriously would result in me getting teased and toyed with, so I have to be careful of that. That’s the note I keep in my mental Yomiuri-senpai instructions, which I followed right now as I sat down on a chair facing her.

...Physically taking her at face value is totally fine, so I don’t have to be mindful of that.

“Aren’t you underestimating the physical work when doing location placeholdering? It’s difficult for different reasons than the cash register.”

“I’m aware of that. I also know that taking care of that is much more comfortable for you, see.”

“No no no, it’s pretty tough, you know? You have to crouch down, stand up, crouch down, with heavy books in your hands. It’s absolutely ruining my hips like you wouldn’t believe.”

“What an exaggeration...”

“It’s the truth. I feel like I’m living through the morning after a passionate lover’s bed-creaking night, my legs still wobbly from all the ramming.”

“I won’t bite even if you use weird examples, okay?”

“Tsk, boring.” Yomiuri-senpai pretended to click her tongue in a cute fashion.

She’s being intentionally misleading as always. I’ve dealt with her enough to be able to figure out what is a trap and what’s not. If my reaction to such a dirty joke is too serious, she’ll tease me and say ‘You’re thinking about it too much~ What exactly are you being conscious of, Junior-kun~?’ . If I ask her ‘Do you have any experience?’ out of curiosity, she’d just grin at me in silence. Basically, having any reaction means that I lose. In a situation like this, it’s best to completely ignore her.

“I mean, if it’s that tough on your hips, then how about a massage? I’ve heard about them from the establishment Akiko-san works at, so I could teach you.”

“Akiko-san?”

“Ah, right. She’s my step-mother, the mother of my step-sister.”

“Ahh, I see I see.”

We've spoken here and there of my new lifestyle caused by the arrival of a new step-sister, but we've never talked about my step-mother. Since Akiko-san is practically always working or sleeping, proper essential maintenance of her body is absolutely crucial, and whenever we get the chance to talk in the living room, she teaches me a thing or two about it. Using the health card in my deck of conversation cards sure is useful at times like this.

"There's a shiatsu<sup>1</sup> establishment right in Dougenzaka... Ah, right here. She apparently recommends this one."

"Hmph, pretty complicated."

"Is it? Looking at the map, it doesn't seem too hard to find."

"I'm not talking about how to get there. You do know that I'm a university girl bursting with youth and energy, right? I'm not at an age where I want to rely on a massage parlor. That'd hurt my pride."

"You are aware that this 'bursting with youth and energy' expression isn't something that young people would use at all, I hope."

"You found me out, huh? I've kept quiet about it for a long time, but I'm actually cursed to stay young forever. I'm an old lady living inside a young woman's body."

"Can you stop making up crazy crap for no reason?"

"Ahaha, Junior-kun, I should call you 'Razor-sharp Retort Logic King.'"

"What kind of nickname is that? Aren't you the same, Endless Stream of Lies Blabber-san?"

"Hmm, 70 points, I guess? I like how you mentioned constantly talking about lies like how some girls constantly talk about love, but I don't think the average person would get the reference, so I've gotta deduct some points."

I'd really appreciate it if she didn't start grading my insults mid-conversation. Since she's using actual logic to debunk my nickname, despite this being a nonsensical conversation, it only hurts me even more. It seemed that Yomiuri-senpai, as cheeky as ever, noticed my internal conflict. It probably showed a bit on my face. She let out a happy snicker as she opened her lunchbox.

Although you could hardly call it a lunchbox. It was basically rice balls and salad bought at a convenience store. I found myself worrying if that was even enough for her, but then I realized that, without Ayase-san's cooking, I'd be pretty much eating the same thing.

"Now that you've started eating, can we finally start our consultation time?"

"Sure~ What's rocking, hot pocket?"

"The thing is..."

I felt a bit bothered by Yomiuri-senpai acting oddly arrogant and confident, but I swallowed down a retort and explained my situation. Of course, I kept as much of Ayase-san's privacy as possible, carefully choosing what information to share. After I finished the explanation, Yomiuri-senpai grinned at me again.

"Oho? You're searching for ways to raise your little sister's academic efficiency, huh?"

"Do you have any ideas? Since you managed to pass your university entrance exams, I figured you must have some sort of advice that you could give her."

"You just told me you were looking into some work BGM, right?"

"Indeed. Though I've been without success up until now. I feel like I have a safe selection, but none of them really felt like they'd be suited to raise her academic efficiency."

“Then I have a recommendation of my own. I was looking for some music that could help me study as well, so I looked into it.”

“Ohh, find anything good?”

“Let me look for it... Ah, I found it. This is it.” After fiddling with her phone for a moment, Yomiuri-senpai showed me a Youtube channel page.

The cover page of this channel, which she apparently was subscribed to, had Japanese-style drawings on it. However, all the words on there were English, so I figured it wasn’t actually operated by a Japanese person. Rather than trying to attract actual otaku, it seemed like a subculture, giving it the feeling of a stylish lounge.

“Wow. They have more than ten million views. Even more at times.”

“Amazing, right? There’s people who replay the video a few times, but they have a constant 30,000 people watching their 24/7 live streams.”

“Woah, you’re right. Not to mention that all the comments are English.”

“That’s right, this isn’t too popular with us Japanese people.”

“There’s still genres I haven’t heard of, huh? How is it different from usual music?”

“Seeing is believing, as they say... or hearing, in this case.” Yomiuri-senpai smiled, taking a small case out of her bag that contained wireless earbuds. “Here you go.” She handed them to me.

“Eh?” For a second, I froze up.

It took me a second to realize what that action meant. Sharing objects with another person exists in countless variations, but having

someone else use your own earbuds is probably the one with the biggest hurdle to overcome. Although we share food from the same large plate, use the same bath, and use the same washing machine, Ayase-san and I haven't shared our earbuds yet. Yomiuri-senpai, for her part, showed absolutely no hesitation or doubt, acting like it was the most natural thing in the world.

"The better the audio quality, the easier your ability to judge how good it is, right?"

"Ah, yeah, right..." I realized that I was the only one being oddly conscious about this, and started to feel embarrassed.

Though it didn't seem like she was trying to tease me about it. If I hesitated any longer, I might feel guilty for making her wait, so I accepted the earbuds like I was a primitive man looking at fire for the first time. That being said, I'd feel bad for stuffing them right into my ear, so I merely held them in front of my ears where I could still pick up the music. My ears should have been fairly clean, but I didn't want to risk anything.

However, right after that thought drifted through my head, the second the music touched my eardrums, it happened.

"This is it..." I muttered subconsciously.

All of my bad thoughts were washed away in an instant. The first thing I heard was the sound of rain pelting against mid-summer leaves. Along with this environmental noise, I could hear a chill type of music playing. Speaking of sound quality, it's pretty much on the bad side. It felt like I had gone back in time to a culture I have no experience with, and it also sounds like I'm watching an old movie.

"This is amazing. I've never listened to anything like this."

“It’s lofi hip hop.” Covering her mouth with one hand as she swallowed down a piece of her rice ball, Yomiuri-senpai told me the exact genre.

As expected, I hadn’t heard of it before.

“Hip hop... so like HEY YO stuff?”

“Ahaha, not quite.” Yomiuri-senpai let out a snicker when she saw me making a kind of rapper-esque pose.

I guess I was wrong.

“I think they call it ‘hip hop’ because the music is heavily reliant on the beat. Lofi is different from the hip hop you would normally imagine.”

“I see.”

“It’s seen as a *chill* type of music, but the effects are fairly old, which makes it have some kind of *healing effect* when you play it on *loop*.”

“With words I can understand, please?”

“Basically, it’s good music.” She said simply, giving me a proper (?) explanation.

I’m an average Japanese guy who isn’t too familiar with English and its loan words, so I appreciate a brief summary like that.

“It seems to be a genre that’s popular overseas. It purposefully uses low sound quality, which makes your heart relax through the nostalgic effect it has, which is especially useful when you’re studying or trying to sleep.”

“Ohh! This is exactly what I was looking for. You really know a lot, Yomiuri-senpai.”

“That’s because I’m an old lady, ho ho ho.”

“How long are you going to keep that joke up?”

“Until it gets stale.”

“It was never funny from the beginning.”

“I’m talking about my own satisfaction. Your opinion doesn’t matter at all, Junior-kun~”

“Can’t argue against that.”

“If you’re going to challenge someone as magnificent as me to a debate, you’d best come prepared, Junior-kun.”

“...Sure.”

The knowledge she keeps boasting about does in fact make her sound like an old lady, and yet she doesn’t act like one at all.

“But how did you even find this? If it’s only popular overseas, it must be hard to even stumble across.”

“No, it’s not that big of a revelation. It just popped up in my Youtube recommendations. Ever since then, I’ve been using it when I’m studying.”

“Even though the comments on the side are all in English... I can tell that they’ve got a warm feeling to them.”

“You can?”

“Yes, somewhat.”

“That’s Junior-kun for you. You have a great sense of intuition. You’re correct, too. This channel’s become pretty popular online, see. It’s relaxing, somewhat like a bar.”

“A bar? Like one that serves drinks?”

Of course I’d be sensitive to a word like that, since my new step-mother was working at exactly such a location.

“They have them in TV dramas sometimes, right? If an adult’s facing some sort of trouble or hardship, they immediately drift towards there. The bartenders listen to their worries and troubles in the midst of this relaxing atmosphere.”

I wonder if the first encounter between my old man and Akiko-san happened kind of like that? I’ve only heard anecdotes from the two of them about it, but apparently it all began with Akiko-san showing affection for my old man, who was drunk at the time and poured out his wounded heart. It was an encounter at a place that could heal you. And to be honest, such a fated encounter sounded like them.

“I’ve always admired that, but it really doesn’t get as romantic as you might think.”

“I can’t agree with you on that since I don’t drink alcohol.”

“Tsk.”

“Why are you clicking your tongue?”

“I wanted you to confess to illegal drinking and understand your weakness because it’d be funny. But you didn’t fall for my leading question.”

“Seriously, why?”

I looked over at Yomiuri-senpai, who was sucking on the straw to her tea carton, and realized something.

“That reminds me. You’re old enough to drink alcohol, aren’t you, Senpai?”

“How rude. Are you saying that I’m not allowed to drink alcohol despite the fact that I’m an old lady?”

“I mean, you might be at an age where drinking alcohol could be harmful to you, right? What if you had some sort of disease?”

“Hm... Not bad, you’re becoming a better debater.”

“Also, bringing up the old lady joke again is futile now, so I’m gonna ignore it.”

“Booo.” She clicked her tongue at me.

Why are you this adamant on acting like an old lady? I won’t make any comments like ‘Don’t worry, eventually you’ll grow old and wrinkly’. I’ll keep that answer to myself. Maybe for another time.

Following that train of thought, I went ahead and subscribed to several of these lofi hip hop channels. Yomiuri-senpai must have been enjoying them quite a lot. She kept explaining this and that with a tone one octave higher than usual, which made me smile.

“Ha ha...”

“Hmmm? Why are you laughing while looking at my face?”

“I’m sorry, don’t mind me.”

Yomiuri-senpai isn’t to be blamed here. The reason I laughed is simply because I became aware of something pathetic. Right now I’m picking out songs that she’s recommending to me. I’m choosing songs that were recommended to me by Yomiuri-senpai, who had them recommended to her by YouTube. I’m not different from Narasaka-san at all. I can’t even argue against her anymore. I’m sorry, Narasaka-san. You were right from the beginning.

My legs taking me home from work hadn't felt this light in a long time. After all, I had a perfect present for Ayase-san. So far, I had been unable to really repay her for making my food day in day out, and being on the take side of our give & take relationship had been weighing on my conscience quite a bit. Now I can eat Ayase-san's cooking without any restraint. When I opened the front door, I was greeted by a delicious scent, like I was being welcomed home in celebration of my great achievement.

"I'm home, Ayase-san."

"Welcome back, Asamura-kun." Ayase-san was wearing an apron on top of her clothes, warming up the hot pot.

As of late, that's been a normal sight for me, but I still can't get used to the idea of a girl I'd previously never met suddenly living and cooking in the same house as me. Part of me is still nervous, but more than anything, I feel bad because she's basically doing my job for me. Of course, if I told her that, she'd argue and say 'We're the same', or 'Don't worry about it', but I still can't help it.

"Have you still not eaten dinner yet, Ayase-san? Sorry if I made you wait for me."

"It's fine. I was studying, anyway."

"I see. I'll set the table, so wait a second."

"Yup, thanks."

This isn't me helping her, or being kind. To me, it's the natural thing to do, and Ayase-san didn't insist on doing it herself, so she just gave a word of gratitude. My thought was that, if we didn't work on this together, we wouldn't have an equal balance between us, and Ayase-san seemed to have understood my idea, which is why any further exchange was unnecessary.

After stopping by my room to drop off my belongings and washing my hands thoroughly, I trotted back to the living room.

“Two rice bowls, normal bowls, and big plates, I guess?”

“No big plates. As for the normal bowls, I need ones that are big enough to fit udon, not just miso soup.”

“Gotcha. That means we’re having pork miso soup?”

“Not quite. It’s motsunabe.<sup>4</sup>”

“Wow, you can make something like that? Also, that doesn’t really seem like a summer dish.”

“I’ve heard it works wonders against summer fatigue. You must be exhausted from your job, so I figured this would be a welcome change.”

“Motsunabe during the summer, huh? It does smell great. I feel hungry already.”

“Right. I’ll bring the hot pot, so could you take care of the rice?”

“Sure.”

I handed Ayase-san the two udon bowls and started putting the steaming rice from the rice cooker into the rice bowls. During that time, a distinct scent of soy sauce filled the room, which made me even hungrier. Ayase-san had always been a great cook, but thanks to her doing it on a daily basis, I feel like she’s gotten even better. After we finished setting the table, we sat down across the table from each other and clapped our hands together.

“Thanks for the food.”

“Thanks for the food.”

Even though we didn't time it all, our voices overlapped. It might just be my imagination again, but we tend to overlap with these sorts of gestures quite a bit as of late. Either I'm being influenced by her, or she's being influenced by me. I don't know how, but it just naturally happened. While I was pondering the influences of our shared lifestyle, I scooped a bit of the motsunabe up and raised it to my mouth.



“Ah, delicious. It’s sweet and mellow.”

“I see. I’m glad to hear it. It’s a Hakata-style dish, so I was worried that it’d be a bit too rich and thick in flavor, but I guess it should be fine.” Ayase-san made a relieved smile.

I wasn’t just being polite, either. The taste filling my mouth really was quite to my liking. If my old man were to eat this, it’d probably weigh heavy on his stomach, but since he informed us that he’d be eating out tonight, there was no need to worry about that. Ayase-san had probably kept that in mind when she came up with this menu.

“You were adjusting it to my tastes, right? Thanks.”

“.....Well, pretty much. After hearing your impressions daily, it just naturally became a way for me to reference things.”

“I feel bad for forcing you through so much effort... at least that’s what I would have said yesterday.”

“Eh?”

When I spoke brimming with confidence, Ayase-san had an oddly baffled response. I booted up the YouTube app on my phone and opened up the channel page of the lofi hip hop channel I had subscribed to previously. From there, I tapped on the 24/7 live stream that had “*radio*” written on it. Calm, relaxing music started to play. It was the opposite of any powerful and energetic genre. Instead, it was the kind of music that enwrapped you in a sense of rationality, like you were being swallowed up by the ordinary. It felt like I had suddenly been transported into a deep forest, far away from the rest of civilization.

Ayase-san must have agreed with my feelings to a certain degree. Her eyes were fixated on my smartphone, wide open like a camera lens during a photoshoot.

“This is...”

“Just listen to it for now.”

“Ah, yeah.” Ayase-san gently closed her eyes.

A bit of time passed, the two of us merely listening to the music. Ayase-san let out an astonished sigh.

“This is great. What genre is this? It’s a lot different from normal calm music.”

“It’s called lofi hip hop. I thought that maybe this would be great music to listen to when you study.”

“Ah. I see, that’s why.” She made an expression like she finished a puzzle inside her head.

Apparently she figured out why I had suddenly started playing music despite us being in the middle of dinner.

“It’s the first time I’ve heard of the genre. I’m surprised you have.”

“I only learned of it today. A Senpai at work told me about it.”

“Ah, that person, right? That literary girl Onee-san.”

Oh right, I think we talked about Yomiuri-senpai last month. I still remember Ayase-san teasing me that she sounded pretty similar to me. I mean, both of us enjoy reading books, so that much does make sense. But going along with her usual nonchalant attitude on a daily basis sounds fairly tough to me. I’m sure that, in her eyes, I’m someone she can tease and be herself around, but I doubt I’m anything like boyfriend material. Not to mention that I’ve never even

heard her talk about her tastes in people, so there was no way I could be the judge of that.

"Right. It's not an overstatement to say that she's well-informed in almost every area."

"You're pretty close, huh?"

"A lot of our shifts overlap, but that's about... Ayase-san?" I felt like something was off, so I stopped mid-sentence.

Even though we were looking at each other, face-to-face, for a brief moment, it felt like she averted her gaze.

".....Huh, what?" After a bit of a time lag, she reacted.

"Are you okay? You seemed to be spacing out a little. You're not overdoing it with your studies, right?"

"Ah, no, I'm fine. I was just entranced by the music."

It's true that the lofi hip hop music was still playing, but was that all? I know that Ayase-san tends to overreact to things, so I can't help but be worried. If that's just a baseless fear, though, then I appreciate it.

"Yomiuri-senpai, was it? So she's got good sense for music, too, not just books."

"She must have a lot of experience as a university student, I guess. I can't even tell how deep her knowledge goes."

"Cool."

"Her actual personality is the absolute opposite of that, though."

If anything, the word 'cool' suits Ayase-san much better. Yomiuri-senpai is more of an airhead, or a humorous person, something like that. When I clarified that, Ayase-san let out a snicker.

“She seems like an interesting person.”

“That I can guarantee.”

It’s a shame that I probably won’t get a chance to introduce Yomiuri-senpai anytime soon. Since we don’t hang out in private, I can’t just invite her to our home like Narasaka-san visited us before. It truly is a shame. With these thoughts in mind, I realized that Ayase-san was pointing her phone screen at me.

“I subscribed right away.”

“You’re right. That was a quick decision.”

“I’m the type who trusts in her instincts. I’m sure that this lofi hip hop will be the greatest BGM for studying.”

“If it doesn’t help at all, you can quit anytime.”

“I know. I wouldn’t listen to it just because you recommended it. I’ll try it out, and if it works, I’ll keep it.”

“Great. That attitude helps me as well.”

Being frank and honest is the best kind of distance I can ask for. If our relationship were too thick, it’d be heavy on the stomach, so in a way, this motsunabe could be a perfect allegory for it. Then again, if I said that out loud, I’d get more points removed by Yomiuri-senpai for my metaphor.

The first one to finish eating was Ayase-san. She must be trying to find as much time to study as possible. She ate up her share in a rather quick manner, putting away her dishes after she stood up with phone in hand.

“I’ll try it out tonight. Thanks for the tip, Asamura-kun.”

“Don’t sweat it. Also, I’ll take care of the dishes, so you can just put them in the sink.”

“I appreciate it.” She carried the empty rice and other bowls to the kitchen, putting them into the sink, and then headed to her room.

I hope that this helped increase her studying efficiency a bit. With this thought in mind, I finished eating the last bit of food on my plate.

—*Do your best, Ayase-san.*

1 A demon who brings misfortune to houses or people he passes by.

2 Bitter Valley = Shibuya. If you’re interested in more info on this, feel free to read [this article](#).

3 Basically acupuncture but... Japanese style?

4 Hot pot stew made with offal, vegetables and (often) miso

## **Chapter 3: 18th of July (Saturday)**

Feeling a faint pain in the deeper part of my eyes, I blinked in confusion. It seems that I forgot to close the curtains last night, and the summer sun was shining through the opening right into my face. Luckily, thanks to the A/C, it wasn't too hot. It was just... bright.

When I turned my gaze towards the clock next to my pillow, the last digit just changed, showing that the time had just turned to 8:30 in the morning. I wonder why the time on digital clocks always seem to round up conveniently right when you wake up..... Hm? 8:30am? That's a time I'd consider late. Although there was no school today, I guess I overslept a bit.

*Maybe everyone already finished their breakfast?* My thoughts got that far before I noticed my usage of the word 'everyone'. This meant that I, absolutely naturally and automatically, had included my step-mother Akiko-san and step-sister Ayase-san in this term. This conclusion left me slightly baffled. Even though we've only been living together for about a month, I mentally already found this normal.

I finished changing, snuck into the bathroom to wash my face and fix my appearance, and then opened the door to the living room. I found my old man and Akiko-san sitting across the table, drinking some coffee. When my old man turned around, he made a bit of a perplexed face.

"Morning... Or rather, you're pretty late, Yuuta."

"I overslept, yeah. Ah, don't mind me."



The latter half of my sentence was directed at Akiko-san, who had already put down her cup and was about to stand up. However, before my words could reach her, she had already put the ham-wrapped eggs on a plate and in the microwave.

“There’s no need to hold back, Yuuta-kun.”

“No, um... Thank you.” I sat down at the table with the warmed ham and eggs in front of me.

There was already toast on my plate, with butter and jam next to it.

“Huh?” I realized that there was another empty plate on the table in front of mine.

I also couldn’t see my step-sister anywhere. Does this mean that she hasn’t eaten breakfast yet?

“Saki is still asleep.”

“Ah, is that so...? How rare.”

“Well, she’s a bit of a sleepyhead today, it seems.”

Judging from Akiko-san’s reaction, I could tell that Ayase-san oversleeping was a rare circumstance. And I had to agree with that, as I had never seen Ayase-san getting up later than me, at least not in recent memory. According to Akiko-san, who had checked in on her bedroom just earlier, she was still sound asleep.

“She’s got the A/C on, but she’s sleeping with her belly out in the open. I’m worried she might catch a cold like that.” Akiko-san said with a sigh. “How troublesome.”

I was troubled as to how I should respond to that. If she was just a classmate of mine, maybe I could fantasize for a bit about her

current appearance? I couldn't exactly ignore that thought if it were about the top beauty of the school year. However, having that same thought about my actual step-sister would only alarm Akiko-san, so I can't do that.

"It seems like summer this year is going to be a hot one, doesn't it?" After thinking and hesitating for a bit, I chose a safe and inoffensive response.

"You be careful too, Yuuta-kun. It'd be troublesome if you ended up getting too cold, but the heat can be scary as well. Make sure to set your A/C properly, okay? There have been cases of people getting heat stroke in their rooms at home, after all."

"Okay," I nodded and started eating my breakfast.

It's been a while since I had Akiko-san's breakfast. The fried eggs had a small bottle of soy sauce next to them, showing just a small hint of Akiko-san's consideration. Just like Ayase-san, she doesn't forget other people's tastes after hearing about them even just once, so it must run in the family. Right when I was wondering if eggs and ham were all there was for breakfast, while I was still eating with my chopsticks, a cup appeared in front of me.

"Here, let me know if you want more."

"Thank you very much... Is that potage?" I could see some small ingredients swimming in the white soup.

"It's clam chowder. If it doesn't suit your tastes, you don't have to eat it."

"No, it's fine."

Clam chowder. Is that what I think it is? Milk stew with manila clams, right? I've heard of it before. I've even had it before in some cup soup, I think.

“It’s Akiko-san’s homemade version, you see.” Dad said.

“It’s not that big of a deal. Not to mention that it’s pretty simple to make.”

There’s one thing I’ve realized over this past month. Whenever Ayase-san or Akiko-san say ‘It’s simple to cook,’ my old man and I can’t comprehend it at all, since neither of us have any skill when it comes to cooking. Figuring out the taste, preparing for the cooking... Ayase-san has taught me about it at times, so I’ve been learning as I go along. There’s no drawback to learning more, after all.

When I took a peek inside the cup, I saw something red, something white, and even some transparent ingredients inside, all of which would probably be hard to eat with chopsticks. Using the tips of my chopsticks, I gently stirred up the contents of the cup, tilted it, and carefully let a bit of it pour into my mouth.

The lumpy texture danced between my teeth. When the consommé-based milk-flavored soup touched my tongue, a fulfilling taste spread inside my mouth. A strong flavor resembling bacon and carrots, meat and vegetables, was mixed in there as well.

“It’s delicious.”

The seasoning isn’t too powerful nor too lacking. In all honesty, it was delicious.

“I’m glad to hear that.” Akiko-san said with a gentle smile.

My old man grinned at me like he was the one who had made the food. Why are you acting so arrogant? Are you indirectly bragging about your wife? I really don’t like the idea of a 40-year old man watching me with a shit-eating grin on his face while I’m eating breakfast on a school-free morning, so I instead focused on my food. While I did so, my old man and Akiko-san started up another

conversation. The topic of their discussion was Ayase-san's nightly activity.

"It seems like she was studying really late into the night."

Now how could she say that for sure despite only taking a peek inside Ayase-san's room this morning? That was because her notes were still open on the desk, her earbuds looking like they had fallen right out of her ears, completely neglected, laying on top of the notes themselves. Ayase-san disliked the idea of having someone else see her notes, and her personality didn't allow someone to hear the music coming from her earbuds either, so this was strange for her.

Akiko-san saw the notes and earbuds in that state and determined that she kept studying until the desire to sleep eventually won over her desire to study more. Once this desire to sleep got the better of her, she must have been unable to pursue anything but the easiest and fastest way to receive this slumber, which caused her to leave everything scattered on the desk and flop onto the bed.

This was detective Akiko-san's deductions, and if you asked me, I doubt there's much discrepancy from reality. She must have been really absorbed in her studies, huh? I just hope that the lofi hip hop helped in some way.

My old man suddenly piped up.

"Hey, Yuuta."

"Hm?" I directed my gaze towards him, still enjoying the dense taste of ham in my mouth.

It's bad manners to talk with food in your mouth, after all.

"It's been a month now. How do you feel? You're not inconvenienced in any way, are you?"

“Inconvenienced...? No, not really.” I responded after swallowing.

“How are things going with Saki?” This time, Akiko-san was the one who spoke.

“Ehm...”

“Come on, Yuuta-kun, you and Taichi-san have been living together by yourselves up to this point, and we suddenly barged into your daily life, right? I’m sure it must be troublesome in a lot of ways.”

Troublesome, huh? When she said that, I was reminded of that one night when I was cornered by Ayase-san wearing nothing but her underwear. That really was troublesome, I guess. I was lying on my bed, inside the dark room, when Ayase-san approached me, revealing her white skin only barely covered by her thin underwear. Her long, brightly-colored hair fell down from her shoulders, as if to cover her chest that was hidden behind a dark-colored bra. Her almost drenched eyes were looking down at me...

...As soon as I remember one part of it, it’s like the entire lid opens up, and everything else comes rushing out as I am forced to remember that sight yet again.

“What’s wrong, Yuuta?”

“A-Ah, yeah, everything’s going okay, don’t worry.” I answered my old man. I gave Akiko-san a warm nod as well—feeling a bit guilty while I did so.

“I see. I’m glad to hear that.” Akiko-san seemed like she wanted to say something, but didn’t question me any further.

Instead, she asked me if I wanted some after-breakfast coffee. When I nodded, she pressed the switch on the coffee machine. They seemed to have put grounds in it for me already. The sweet scent of Hawaiian Kona coffee wafted across the dining table as the coffee

was poured into the cup bit by bit. I spent this summer break morning in peace along with the scent of my coffee.

This Saturday, the Saturday right after the week where we receive our end-of-term exam results is quite possibly the beginning of the holidays that causes us high school students' hearts and minds to clear. I was different, however. I finished my homework in the morning, and by the time 11:30am rolled around, I started preparing for my part-time job. To me, holidays are days that allow me to work full-time.

After I finished getting ready, right before I left the apartment, I glanced over at the door to Ayase-san's room. It was almost noon, and yet she still hadn't gotten up. Since I didn't want to wake her, I quietly told my old man and Akiko-san that I'd be leaving and opened the door.

After I stepped out of the house, the strong sun rays immediately stabbed into my skin. It's hot. So hot that it legitimately hurts. For a second, I wondered if I had moved from Japan to the subtropics. I rode on my bicycle to Shibuya's train station. A comfortable breeze blew against me as I did so, but the instant I stopped, sweat started gushing out of every pore of my body again. When I looked at the temperature of a thermometer on the street, I could see that it was already over 30°C. I stormed inside the bookstore where I worked, like I was trying to run away from the heat.

"Phew... So cool and refreshing..." I took a towel out of my sports bag, wiping the sweat off my face.

I headed to the store's back room, changed into my uniform, and put on my name tag. I exchanged a few words with the other part-time jobbers that had just got in as well and stepped out onto the floor.

“Ah, Asamura-kun. Could you start by putting all the new releases onto the shelves?”

“Yes, sir.”

The store manager gave me an order while pointing at the trolley. Normally there aren’t any new book arrivals on Saturdays. However, since the bookstore where I work is on the larger side, putting all the books onto the shelves and on display was pretty much impossible. I walked towards the trolley and peeked inside the cardboard box on top of it.

“Paperback books, huh?” I confirmed the labels on them and pushed the trolley towards the forest of shelves.

The paperback book aisle was a bit further back from the magazines and oneshot releases, near the comics section. Since this is noon on a weekend, most of the customers entering this building are looking for food or drinks. We’re using the gap in customers to fill the bookshelves. Of course, we always do this before the store opens as well, so this is the second time today.

“Ah, you’re starting for the day now too, Junior-kun?”

A woman who was currently busy arranging a bookshelf turned towards me. Her long and silky hair brushed against both sides of her face as she did.

“Yes, starting now.”

“Then we’re in the same shift.” Yomiuri Shiori-senpai said.

As always, her graceful appearance looked impressive enough to be painted on a canvas, and I couldn’t help but think that Japanese clothing would look much better on her than this store’s uniform.

“Are you arranging the shelves right now, Senpai?”

“Yup, that’s right. Are these the new releases? Do you have the book there?”

“What book exactly?”

“From this publisher here.” She pointed at the shelf in front of her.  
“It’s called ‘Azure Night’s Interval’, see.”

I peeked into the cardboard box.

“Is this it?”

“Ah, yeah, that.”

It’s from a genre called ‘light literature.’ The cover of said paperback book is drawn by a popular illustrator, depicting what looked like a highschool boy and a girl. It was much more detailed than in a manga drawing. They stood back to back, the moonlit night sky behind them. They were facing the reader, holding hands like they were lovers. This must be some kind of romance novel, huh?

“How many do you have?” She asked.

“Um... two copies.”

“Only two? I was thinking we’d need something like twelve.”

“That... has to be an exaggeration.”

“I figured they’d send the majority back anyway.”

“Makes sense.”

“But now I can’t stack them flat and face up...”

Stacking them ‘flat and face up’ means to stack them in front of the bookshelf on a small platform that reaches up to your knees, with the covers facing upwards. The other way to display them is to put the book in the bookshelf with its spine facing outwards.

“That one came out a month ago, right? Not to mention that it’s turned paperback. Are they still selling this?”

‘Turning paperback’ means that a novel which had previously been sold as a full hardcover volume was now being resold as a paperback book. In other words, it’s a cheaper edition. Since most people had already bought the former version, it’s pretty rare to still see it on sale a month later. Now that I think about it, I think I remember hearing of this title before.

“Is it that good?”

“Probably. The biggest reason is probably because it got adapted into a movie.”

“Ahh... I remember now.” I had been wondering why the title sounded familiar.

I think I saw in the news that this movie was airing. When I took a closer look at the cover, I could see pictures and characters from the movie on the paper wrapper. I actually planned to give this a shot, but thanks to Ayase-san’s arrival and end-of-term exams, I didn’t have much time to check it out.

“They’re still selling it, yeah. But I only have one here on the shelf already.”

“Only three total, huh... Yeah, you really can’t stack them.”

Since you need to keep at least one volume in the bookshelf aside from the author-specific volumes, we’d only be able to stack two in front of the shelf. That’s the bare minimum, and once one of them is bought, it’s not even a stack anymore. There will be too much of a difference compared to the other books next to it. At times like these, it’s much more rational to put them all on the shelf.

“I don’t really want to do that.”

Since Yomiuri-senpai is being that adamant about it, it must be a title she's a big fan of. The important part of this job is noticing what books sell best, and putting them in locations where they're more noticeable. Even people who don't read books very often buy these kinds of publications, so if you put them in a more conspicuous location, it'll look more friendly, and they won't be found otherwise. People new to this media form won't walk deep into the store to look around. On the other hand, faithful readers of a certain series will search through places that are more concealed to find what they want.

"That's just like you."

"It's not that this kind of book is the only one I read..."

It's just that the more books I read, the more of this genre I happen to come across. She's not thinking I'm into weird things, is she?

"What should I do about this?" She asked.

"Maybe we should display it face-out on the other shelf? It's not like it's a new release."

"Sounds good~"

Basically, we'd go to the shelves where you could find other works from the same author and create space there. There's enough space here for three books with their front cover facing outwards. Since the books could fall out when they're stacked like that, there's a notch underneath them to keep them in place. Since this book seems to actually be fairly popular, all three copies might be gone by the end of the day, but that's not our fault.

I set the paperback books on the shelves and on the small platform, and Yomiuri-senpai helped place the novels she liked on display.

"This should do it."

“Oh right. This movie’s screening is going to end soon.”

It’ll be summer break starting next week, and the summer season movies will start screening. In other words, this weekend is the last chance you’d have to watch it. It’s a shame, but I had already booked myself for a full-time shift today. Man, how careless of me. I really wanted to watch that one. I mentally grumbled about it as I returned with Yomiuri-senpai to the back room. Yomiuri-senpai must have caught on to my lingering regret. She spoke up.

“Hey, if you still haven’t watched the movie, how about we go to the late-night showing today after work?”

“The late-night showing? I see.”

I completely forgot about that option. Though starting it at 9pm would mean I’d be out until midnight.

“My shift ends at 9pm. Same for you, right?”

“Yep.”

From the sounds of it, Yomiuri-senpai had practically the same shift as me, and because she had off tomorrow morning, she could tag along.

“Saturday’s the perfect day to enjoy the nightlife!”

“Phrasing!”

“Aww, we’re going to watch a movie, so who cares~?”

She really loves to make double entendres with everything she says. Not to mention that she gave off the feeling that there was some hidden meaning to what she said.

“We’re just going to watch the movie, right?”

“Of course!” She smiled at me with a bright grin.

Am I just being teased again, I wonder? Then again, I’m interested in seeing the movie, myself.

“Okay. I wanted to watch that movie myself, so I’ll contact my parents after my shift.”

“Contacting your parents! What a wholesome high school student you are!”

“Weren’t you still in high school not too long ago?”

“Now that I’m a university student, I’m an adult~”

“And not wholesome at all.”

“Phrasing!” Yomiuri-senpai burst out laughing. “But Junior-kun.”

“What?”

“If you’re going to contact someone, isn’t there someone more important than your parents?”

“Huh? .....Who?”

“Your little sister. She’d worry about you, right?”

“Worry about me? ...No, I doubt it.” I really couldn’t imagine Ayase-san being worried about me not coming home, so I gave an honest response.

“Huh, is that so?”

I feel like she’s hinting at something with that suggestive tone, but it’s not like worrying about it will do anything for me. Not to mention that if our positions were swapped, I think it’d be pretty rude to worry about every little thing Ayase-san is doing, so I’m sure she

must feel the same way. I'm sure that Ayase-san wouldn't do anything to trouble Akiko-san.

.....I was yet again reminded of that incident a month ago, but that was an exception, so I shook my head to clear it.

During my break, I contacted my old man, letting him know that I was going to be watching a movie with a Senpai from work.

*'You're going on a date with a girl?!"* I immediately heard that voice from the other end of the line.

"We're only watching a movie."

*'I guess Yuuta's a young man at heart~'*

Can you not focus on that one detail? Also, I've always been a young man.

*'But you're still in high school, so don't go too far with your nighttime fun.'*

"That's not gonna be a problem, okay?" I gave a brief response and ended the call.

My old man sounded like he was poking fun at me, with a very laissez-faire mentality, but that just shows how much he trusts me. I have no intentions of betraying that trust. I don't want people to have expectations of me, but this trust I have from the father who raised me is something I don't want to look down on.

After I hung up, I looked at my phone, considering for a second if I should send Ayase-san a message. Nah, I think that would just be meddling too much. Our parents should both still be at home, so telling only one person should be enough. I'm just going to watch a movie with a Senpai from work. There's no reason to make such a big deal out of it. Ayase-san is busy with her studies, so I might just

interrupt her. That'd probably be even more bothersome than not telling her at all.

The end of the shift arrived, and I changed into my casual clothes. Without giving me much of a choice in the matter, Yomiuri-senpai dragged me away from the bookstore towards the movie theater.

The breeze was still fairly warm, causing me to start sweating again. It'll probably be a muggy night. The sky filtering through the gaps between Shibuya's buildings was turning black, and yet the lights inside the buildings didn't turn off. I guess you could call it the city that never sleeps. To an antisocial person such as myself, even the nighttime in this city is too bright for me. It made me almost feel uncomfortable.

Normally I'd be riding my bicycle home, but somehow I ended up walking through these streets with an older beauty at my side. Now that I think about it, this might be the first time I've seen Yomiuri-senpai wearing casual clothes. She was wearing a lightly-colored, comfortable-looking top with a flared skirt and black tights underneath. Compared to all the outgoing characters here in Shibuya, she was more of a calm and collected person—A Yamato Nadeshiko—and yet her clothes stood out in their own way, with a stylish feeling completely different than the usual characters here. On top of that, from my point of view, she seems a lot like an adult, since she's a university student and all.

I was reminded of Ayase-san's own clothes she wore at home. Her blonde hair was flashy, of course, but when she wasn't at school, she didn't wear any accessories or ear piercings, let alone make-up. And yet, and she must be doing this on purpose, but even when it's just the two of us at home, she never wears any kind of casual jersey or anything at home. There's absolutely no openings or gaps that you would often see in manga or anime.

It's the same as ever. I guess the clothes I saw yesterday, the deep red one-piece with white collar and sleeves, is actually something she can wear outside as well. To her, clothes are like a weapon, so she probably wants to keep her attack and defense maximized at every moment in time. While I was thinking that, my Senpai walking ahead of me stopped suddenly and turned around.

"Hey, hey, when you're walking with a woman, you shouldn't be thinking about anything else."

"Ah, is that so?"

When I responded, I noticed that Senpai made a serious expression for a second, only to smirk again.

"I love that reaction~ Makes you look like a real highschool boy."

"I was fake before...?"

What exactly is supposed to be realistic about that? I don't get it.

"You're like a Prince, but you're not making the Princess happy at all. That's what I mean!"

"...Are you indirectly telling me to apologize?"

"Not really? Being calm and down to earth suits you best, after all. It makes it easier for me, too, since I don't have to act considerate all the time."

I didn't really know how to respond. It's true that I didn't particularly enjoy being considerate of others, nor did I care about being treated with consideration. However, nobody had ever really said it to my face like that... No, I guess Ayase-san has.

"Come on. We don't have much time. Let's go." Senpai started walking ahead again.

After walking through the crowd for a few minutes, we arrived at the movie theater.

“Junior-kun, I’ll buy the tickets, so could you take care of the drinks?”

“Sure. We can split the bill later. What would you like?”

“A diet coke..... What are you grinning for?”

“You’re getting popcorn and diet coke at the movie theater?”

“You’ve gotta get the basics.”

“Fine by me. What flavor popcorn?”

“Caramel!”

When I let out a faint snicker, Yomiuri-senpai pouted ever so slightly and turned to walk towards the ticket machine. I guess she has an unexpected sweet tooth? Or is she being influenced by something? After watching her walk off, I ordered the food and drinks. I was holding a small cardboard tray with popcorn and some drinks when Senpai walked towards me, waving.

“Theater 4.”

“Okay.”

“Should I help you carry something?”

“It’s fine. Could you just take care of the tickets?”

“Okaaaay~”

We walked through the ticket gate and searched for signs for the 4th theater. When I looked at the people near us, I could see a lot of boy-and-girl couples. Senpai seemed to notice it, too.

“There’s a lot of couples around, huh~?” she whispered to me.

“It is a romance movie after all.”

We walked through a large door, entering a wide open space that made feel like we had just stepped outside, and my conversation with Senpai stopped abruptly for a second. It’s odd, really. Maybe it’s because we entered the theater. The volume of our conversation dropped drastically.

We worked to find our seats, which were located in the middle of the cinema. We took one step up the stairs from the front row, and entered the row behind that. Being mindful of the legs of the people who were already seated, we finally arrived at our seats.

“You can almost kick the seat in front of you, huh? I don’t really like being considerate like that. Maybe this wasn’t a good seat after all?” I said.

“No, it’s fine.”

“Glad to hear that.” I answered. I put the drinks in the holders and handed Senpai the popcorn.

“Heh, heh. A full bucket, huh? You really know me well!”

“Is it too much?”

“You’re going to eat some too, right, Junior-kun?”

“I’m fine not eating anything while watching a movie, so eat as much as you want. If anything’s left, I can eat it later.”

“Come on now, let’s eat some together~” She said, tilting the bucket on her lap towards me.

As a result, past the popcorn, I happened to glance at Yomiuri-senpai’s thighs below her skirt.

“Thanks for the food.”

Of course, this is no big deal. I just have to focus on the popcorn. Reality is often condensed into what I want it to be. When I lifted the first piece of popcorn to my mouth, I tasted a burst of sweetness. But it wasn't so sweet that it made me want to stop eating. I generally don't eat anything while watching movies, but I made a mental note that the popcorn here wasn't half bad. Keeping a bucket of popcorn as a companion is definitely within the realm of possibility for my next movie visit.

The lights in the cinema suddenly dimmed, and I was taken by surprise, returning my gaze towards the screen. Senpai and I stopped talking, since we came here to watch a movie in the first place. Right after that, the advertisements started. First, they showed footage of a dubbed live-action movie depicting a robot and ninja fighting for some reason.

"Seems interesting..." I muttered in a quiet voice, and Senpai responded quietly as well.

"Yeah... It's the fourth part of a trilogy..."

"Fourth part... of a trilogy? Huh?"

"Don't question it. It's not worth it. Oh, the movie is starting." Senpai put her index finger on her lips.

We both grew silent, and the movie started. According to the posters I'd seen beforehand, this movie was supposed to be a tearjerker. The movie opened with a lot of laughter, though, which made me think that it was some sort of comedy. Around five minutes into the movie, though, the tone suddenly changed.

Whether I wanted to let it or not, my attention was swallowed by the movie. After making it through the first climax, a short breather followed in the form of a brief comedic section. I breathed a sigh of relief during that time and happened to glance over at Senpai.

Her eyes were glued to the screen, her face showing no change in expression whatsoever. Basked in the glow of the light coming from the screen, her face was devoid of any laughter, crying, or even fear. She was merely staring at the screen in front of her. It was a face I would have never expected to see her make, considering that her expressions usually changed drastically in a matter of seconds. I guess this is what she meant by ‘simply watching a movie’. Even I must have disappeared from her mind, every fiber of her being observing the scene on the screen.

*Must be nice*, I thought to myself. And then I was reminded that I was watching a movie together with a beautiful Senpai. Isn’t this something normally never happens to an antisocial person like me? Am I really sitting here? Everything suddenly felt surreal, and I turned towards the movie again. I’ve gotta watch it all the way through since we’re already here.



There was a buzzing sound as light returned to the cinema. I blinked a few times, relaxed my tense body, and let out a sigh.

Yeah, the movie was great. The ending was totally unexpected and I even felt like crying for a second. Now I guess I'll have to buy the source material.

"I guess I'll skimp on food tomorrow."

"Huh?"

When I turned towards my side, Yomiuri-senpai showed me the popcorn bucket, which was completely empty. She ate all that on her own?

"Your hands just keep moving automatically when you're absorbed in something, don't they?"

"I kind of get it, but not really."

"I really wanted to give you some, Junior-kun."

"I wouldn't have been able to eat that much on my own. Ah, I'll take it."

Senpai was about to pick up her bag, so I put my sports bag over my shoulder and accepted the large container. You've gotta throw away your trash.

"Thanks."

"Hand me the cups as well."

I took the empty caps she handed me and threw it all away as we stepped out of the theater. Without taking much of a detour, we left the cinema. While on our way back to the train station, we

exchanged our impressions of the movie. Of course, the streets were still crowded, which made me wonder if this city was ever going to sleep.

On the way, I picked my bicycle up from the parking lot where I had left it and escorted Senpai to the train station.

“Since it’s already late, I’ll be on my way now—” I tried to say goodbye for the day.

“Tag along with me for a bit longer.” Senpai said.

Without waiting for my response, she just started walking. Naturally, I hesitated for a moment, but eventually followed after her, pushing my bicycle next to me. We walked around the train station, observing the giant object<sup>1</sup> to our left as we slowly made our way away from there.

“Where are you taking me?”

“I parked my car over here.”

“Ahh.”

That reminds me, Yomiuri-senpai comes to work by car, doesn’t she? I think you can get your license once you’re 18 here. Since Senpai’s in university already, it’s not weird for her to have a license, and she’s definitely above 18... though I don’t know if she really counts as an adult. I see. Once my birthday rolls around next year, I’ll be able to get a license myself. I’d never really thought about it.

“Are you going to get a license?”

“Hmm... I’m not sure.”

“Youngsters today sure don’t seem interested in cars, huh?”

“Youngsters? ...Senpai.”

“But nowadays, only about one out of two men actually get a driver’s license, you know? How do you feel about that?”

“If one out of two men have it, then you can just pay them to have you drive around.”

Right after I said that, Senpai’s mouth opened. She looked like a shocked manga character that had seen something out of this world.

“What a shocking Pandora’s Box...”

Sometimes, Senpai says things that don’t resemble anything a typical university student would say. Even someone like me who reads books all the time can’t tell what she’s talking about sometimes. Senpai, where did you hear that word?

“Is it that weird? I’m pretty sure my thought process is fairly rational.”

“I mean, it is almost *too* rational.”

“Is that so? Well, you don’t want to come across as shameless, so it’s important to compensate the driver and be considerate of them.”

“Compensate them? No, that’s not the problem. Think about it. A car’s really convenient for bringing your girlfriend home.”

That idea had never even occurred to me.

“For that to make sense, I would first need a girlfriend. That’s already asking too much from an antisocial background character like me.”

“If you had a car, they might approach you instead?”

“I don’t think I would be too happy if women approached me just because of that.”

"Aha, ahahahaha. That's true! I'd have to agree on that!" Yomiuri-senpai burst out laughing.

As the two of us continued our conversation, I could see a small forest in front of us—Or rather, a public park.

"There's a parking lot next to the park. I parked my car there."

"It's pretty far from the store, huh?"

"There's no convenient places to park in Shibuya, see. Sheesh, the sun has already set, but it's still so hot." Senpai fanned herself with her small hand to cool herself off.

The trees growing in the public park were filled with abundant-growing leaves. However, in this darkness of the night, the green leaves weren't as black thanks to the lights of the city behind us, only creating a slight dimness lurking overhead. As we got closer to the parking lot, the lights started to grow more sparse, less and less people were around us, and I finally felt like Senpai was taking me somewhere. Promptly, Yomiuri-senpai slipped past the parking lot's entrance and entered inside.

Street lamps dotted the paved path here and there. These cones of light stretched out in front of us, illuminating the path beneath our feet. The breeze passing us by caused the leaves on the trees to shake, making the heat that had baked us ever since the afternoon a bit more bearable. The two of us walked through the empty parking lot, and Senpai suddenly stopped.

"Wait a moment."

"Ah, yes." I stopped as I was told.

"I still need to thank you for sending me off."

"Eh, you don't need to."

“Now, no holding back.” Yomiuri-senpai said, approaching a vending machine that stood at the side of the path.

The vending machine’s vertical screen suddenly lit up, and a mechanical voice spoke. “Welcome!”

Senpai took her smartphone out from the bag hanging down from her left shoulder. She pressed a button for a drink and held the smartphone against it, which resulted in a dull sound as the can of juice fell down. She repeated that once again, and came back with two aluminum cans in her hands, offering me one.

“Here.”

“I’m sorry. Thank you very much.”

I supported my bike with my left hand and accepted the can with my right. The can was cold despite the vending machine standing in the sun all day long.

“I guess both of your hands are full. Should I hold it until you kick out the kickstand?”

“It’s fine. This is no problem.” I skillfully opened the can’s pull tab with one hand.

After that, I turned it halfway so the opening faced me and took a sip. I felt the cold liquid and foam washing down my throat, right into my stomach, which caused me to let out a sigh after everything was washed down. It was delicious, indeed.

“Ohh, how skillful.”

“I’m used to it.”

Putting down the kickstand every time I buy something to drink from the vending machine is too much trouble, so I often buy it on the fly and drink it with one hand.

“Ah, I forgot to take a picture.”

“What were you planning on doing with said picture, Senpai?”

“I want to take a video as well, and upload it.”

“Would you mind respecting my privacy? Also, it’s not that big of a deal. Really.”

“Really? I feel like it’d get a lot of views.” Senpai smiled, only to grow silent for a moment. “You’re really fun and kind, after all.”

“Where did that come from?”

“Well...” She spoke with a hesitant tone, so I waited.

The light from the vending machine created a shadow on Senpai’s face. As we both stayed quiet, silence filled this public park, since this was the middle of the night. Behind the standing Senpai were towering buildings that looked like black gravestones.

“Hey, Junior-kun, there’s something I need to tell you...”

“...Something you need to tell me?”

“Yep. Something I want to tell you.”

In the end, I could only wait for her to speak. But because her light and cheerful tone was gone, it made the atmosphere feel heavy, making it harder for me to breathe.

“The thing is... I only have half a year more to live...”

For a second, I was unsure what to say, so I froze in place. My mind, however, simulated every possible outcome depending on what

answer I would give. That's a lie, right? Why? What happened? My thoughts were so busy trying to figure out the meaning behind what she had said that I couldn't process her actual words. At a loss for words, I merely stood still, staring at Senpai's face.

She gave me a glance like she was testing me, but after two or three seconds passed, a bit of an uncomfortable expression started to form on her face.

"...Sorry, that was a lie. I was only joking. You don't need to look so depressed."

"Did I really have that kind of face?"

"You totally did. You almost made me worry that you had lost years off your lifespan because of me. I was trying to reenact a scene from the movie, but I guess I took it too far."

Only then did I realize it. That proclamation that Senpai had said just now was the exact same line I had heard not too long ago.

"Ah... from that scene..."

"Right. I thought that the scenery tonight was almost like an exact copy of that."

"I see... it was a park at night, yeah..."

Why did I not realize it? It was right in front of my eyes.

"Well, I can't reenact the scene after all."

"I sadly don't have time travel powers."

Senpai laughed in response to my joke.

“I thought you were maybe expecting me to make a move like the heroine in the movie did, but judging from your reaction, that doesn’t seem to be the case.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You were constantly glancing at me during the movie, right?”

“Huh?”

“What part of me were you looking at? My face? My chest? Or was it even..... Come on, be honest~”

“No, um...” I was at a loss for words.

It was true that I had been entranced by her for a moment during the movie.

“Ah, so you really *were* looking at me~”

“Wha!?”

She set me up?! Right, Senpai had never torn her eyes away from the screen during the entire duration of the movie.

“I don’t know how to feel about you staring at a woman who’s in the prime of youth like me~”

“Ugh... I mean... I’m sorry.” I confessed my sins and lowered my head.

“Ahahaha, I’m only joking. You don’t need to apologize.”

“But...”

I felt like I had done something rude and needed to apologize, but Senpai just waved her hand at me and brushed it off. After that, she slowly offered me her other hand.

“Ah, thank you very much.” I gave her the can I had just emptied.

“You did it for me at the movie theater, so this is me returning the favor.” She said and put the empty cans into the dumpster next to the vending machine.

When she approached the machine again, the lights lit up and the robotic voice played again... yet this time it sounded much more idiotic than before. It was like it had swallowed up what Senpai wanted to tell me. That being said, I hesitated to bring it up again.

Senpai started walking again, and I hurriedly pushed my bike after her. Neither Senpai nor I said anything until we reached the space where she had parked her car. I had been searching for a topic of conversation, but I couldn’t say anything until Senpai told me “Here is fine.” The best I could do was give a vague goodbye.

“Ah, thank you for the music you told me about. Ayase-san was really happy about it.”

“After thinking about what to say, that was what you came up with, huh~?” Senpai laughed.

“Huh?”

“Don’t mind me. Give my regards to that little sister of yours.”

With these words, she disappeared into the parking lot. I saw her off until she completely vanished, then hopped on my bicycle to ride home. I reminisced about the last exchange we had as I pedalled my bicycle. I still had no idea what would have been the right thing to say in that situation, though.

When I arrived back home, I saw that the light in the living room was still on. When I peeked in, I saw Ayase-san sleeping at the table. It looked like she had been studying right before falling asleep. She was deep asleep, with one cheek resting on her opened notes. I could

hear her faint breathing, quieter than the rumble of the A/C unit. I wondered why she had studied here instead of her own room, but then I grew worried that she might catch a cold from the running A/C.

I thought of waking her up, but she might just be bothered if she knew that she fell asleep while studying. In the end, I just put a towel over her shoulders. Then I realized that one end of her earbuds had fallen out of her ears, still playing lofi hip hop music.

I see. So she's listening to that while studying. Though I don't know if it actually helped increase her academic efficiency. I don't want to force my own values or feelings onto other people, but I would be happy if she actually enjoyed the music I recommended to her. I think I might have just realized this now, but what I really wanted the most was to be of help to Ayase-san. Although I still haven't done nearly enough to really earn myself that delicious French Toast.



I turned the A/C a bit warmer, just to a level where she wouldn't get a heat stroke, and prepared for my own bedtime. I took a bath, brushed my teeth, drank some water, and headed to the toilet. Before going to bed for good, I peeked inside the living room again, but Ayase-san was still sound asleep. I thought of waking her up, thinking that the running A/C might make her throat dry over the course of the night, but I decided against it in the end. She probably won't sleep like this all the way until morning. It's already past midnight, after all.

As expected, right when I entered my own room, I heard the alarm of a smartphone. I heard a bit of rustling from the living room as I went to bed. I figured she wouldn't like the fact that I had seen her sleeping face. I had originally planned to only pretend that I was asleep, my long day at work and the late-night movie caught up to me and I fell asleep quicker than anticipated. In my dreams, music mixed with time-worn noise played in my ears.

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1 Isn't specified, but quite possibly the Hachiko Statue

## ***Chapter 4: 19th of July (Sunday)***

Right after waking up, I confirmed the time on the clock next to my pillow: 7:30am. I was relieved. It's a pretty early time to wake up on a Sunday morning, but I resolutely got up. I did go to bed a bit later than usual the day prior, but my head feels fresh and clear, so I must have gotten a pretty deep slumber.

When I went to the living room, my old man and Akiko-san weren't present. They were presumably still sleeping. However, as I had anticipated, Ayase-san was awake already. She had freshened herself up, showing up absolutely no weaknesses or openings even at home. She was wearing a light fabric pullover overtop of her shoulderless shirt.

“Good morning, Ayase-san.”

“Morning, Asamura-kun.”

With these words, Ayase-san stood up. When she did so, I could see a ribbon made of similar fabric to her pullover right above her waist, with red hot pants beneath.

“Ah, I can take care of it myself. You've already finished eating, right?”

I would have felt bad having Ayase-san take care of my breakfast when she was already sitting on the table with a coffee, which was why I asked her to remain seated.

“I've barely finished mine, though. This one is yours, Asamura-kun.” She pointed at the food on the table.

“I just have to heat it up, right?” I went to carry the soup bowl Ayase-san pointed at to the microwave, only to pause halfway.

Do I warm this up? Or eat it while it's cold? I started pondering that question, because I felt a certain gentle coldness from the thin soup bowl.

"Just like that is fine. It's a lot better cold. I actually just took it out of the fridge."

She must have heard me getting up and gotten it ready for me when I did so. As always, she's considerate about the smallest things. When I looked at what was inside the soup bowl, I could see some yellow-ish thick soup.

"What kind of soup is this?"

"Pumpkin."

"...Isn't pumpkin season between summer and fall? So you can get them already, huh?"

"Really?"

"Yeah, I remember reading that you harvest them in the summer and eat them during fall. Just after harvesting them, they're still sweet, so you let them age a bit. On Halloween you hang up pumpkin lanterns and wait for the Great Pumpkin to arrive."

"The heck is that?"

"Don't you know 'Peanuts'? Snoopy? Charlie Brown?"

"Ah, Linus with the security blanket."<sup>1</sup>

"Why would that be the first thing that comes to mind?"

Linus, a friend of Charlie Brown, is always carrying this blanket with him. They called it 'blanket syndrome' or something like that, but in the end, everyone has something in their life they can't ever let go of, I think. Some people might keep worthless junk like it's

irreplaceable treasure. I'm sure even Ayase-san has something she holds onto like that. If an adult thinks that it's trash and throws it away, the attachment grows even stronger. My mother's angry expression suddenly came to mind, but I shook my head and freed myself of that thought.

"...Well, no matter what season it is, you can pretty much eat vegetables all year round. I'm just a bit surprised to see such beautiful pumpkin soup."

It looked like sacred sake. It was a faint, almost transparent color.

"I heated up the pumpkin and some onions, added milk and raw cream, and threw it into the food processor." Ayase-san saw that I was interested and explained the recipe to me.

Of course, just because I was a bit interested didn't mean I'd start enjoying making food myself. Even if my lunchbox lifestyle doesn't change, it might be useful somewhere down the line. I took a mental note of the recipe as I stuffed some bread into the toaster.

"It's rare for you to put two slices in... Ah, sorry for prying like that."

"Both you and Akiko-san are always considerate about the smallest of things, not just about food, so I wouldn't ever take it that way." I answered, which caused Ayase-san to make a rather uncomfortable expression.

Ayase-san might not forget about another person's preferences, but everyone else isn't the same. That's true of friendships in particular. You don't act that way because you want other people to like you, but because you treasure the other person. Even if she only treasures me as the son of the person her mother got married to, I don't think it's a bother at all.

"I just felt like asking that." She muttered in a quiet voice.

Is it just my imagination, or is she acting a bit bashful? If you just looked at the scene itself, it seemed like something from a light novel or anime, but reality is not that sweet. If you mistake a reaction from someone close to you as bashful or kind, you might have misfortune or even sorrow from this one-sided misconception.

As for me, I'm always careful to not get the wrong idea from Ayase-san's actions. I certainly won't here. Then again, I know that it can't be helped if some people misread situations like this. Reality isn't any anime or manga. But if you were to experience a situation similar to a scene that you've watched or read before, it's easy to get the wrong idea. It is an unfortunate habit that all human beings share. Even I blanked out for a second when Yomiuri-senpai made the joke about her life expectancy. Surprise attacks are the worst of all.

"So, about the slices of toast. I worked all day yesterday, so I got hungry pretty early. I only had one slice of toast yesterday, so my stomach was growling all the way until break." I said with a casual voice as I sat down on a chair.

"Good work on your job."

"Thanks."

Thanks to this exaggerated conversation, the atmosphere slowly turned back to normal, as flat as how it always was. I guess this is something people do to rid the air of awkward moods like this.

Along with the two slices of toast and pumpkin soup, a large bowl with chicken salad inside stood on the middle of the table. The morning sunlight entering from the windows caused the bowl to shine with a green hue.

"Use whatever dressing you prefer."

"Thanks."

Ayase-san looked back down at her smartphone, coffee in hand. Since she's not listening to anything on her earbuds, she must be looking something up. Anyway, I guess I'll try out the pumpkin soup first.

I scooped up a bit with a spoon and had a taste. I could pick up a bit of scent when I raised it to my mouth, but once it was on my tongue, the taste of pumpkin became even more obvious. Boiled pumpkin was always soft enough, but thanks to the food processor, it had almost turned into a smoothie. Although it was sweet, it went down easily. Eating this cold was the right choice after all. I had always thought you needed to eat soup warm.

"Hey."

When I was stuffing my cheeks with the chicken salad, Ayase-san suddenly spoke up. I looked up at her.

"You put a towel over me last night, didn't you?"

"Ah, well..."

If I answered honestly, she'd find out I saw her sleeping face. But I was aware that beating around the bush here would only make it worse. Last month I just happened to spot Ayase-san's underwear drying in her room, which caused me to sweat buckets in panic. That being the case, saying 'Well, yeah', would be a little too painfully honest. It'd make it sound like I was hiding something.

"I figured."

"I know you really want to avoid supplementary classes, but ruining your health for the sake of the exam is not an option either, you know?"

"Right. Yeah... thanks."

“You don’t need to thank me.”

If you start thanking me, then I’ll feel the need to thank you for constantly making food for me. Of course, I came up with the conclusion that I should help her, but Ayase-san flat-out declined my offer. She has to do both, or she doesn’t mind doing both. It really helps, but can you really keep that work-life balance going? She says she likes to give more than take. I know that’s easier said than done. I really need to look into another method to increase her academic efficiency other than music.

“I heard you went to watch a movie yesterday?”

Ayase-san’s sudden question caused my voice to stick in my throat.

“Um... Well, I watched a late-night movie that was going to end screening this weekend. Where did you even hear that from?”

“Taichi-san seemed really happy. During dinner he said ‘This is Yuuta’s first time going to play around at night! I was really worried because he’s too diligent for his own good, and he’s a bit boring to be honest, but I guess he’s grown up now!', and such...”

“Phrasing! Again!”

Also, how do you remember all of that word for word? How is your memory that amazing?

“You were with your Senpai from work, right?”

“That’s true, but we weren’t playing around or anything. We just wanted to watch the same movie. And without Senpai telling me about it, I wouldn’t even have come up with the idea of watching it at a late-night screening.”

“Hmm.”

“Have you heard of the novel ‘Azure Night’s Interval’?”

“Ah.” Ayase-san nodded. “I’ve heard of it. I feel like I’ve even seen an ad for the movie.”

“I’m surprised you have, despite not even watching that much TV.”

“It was on the internet.”

This time, I was the one to nod. Advertisements and announcements should be shown where the greatest number of people can see. Even if our generation doesn’t watch much TV, we use the internet. In that case, you just have to put it all over the internet.

“How was it?” Ayase-san asked.

I guess she’s asking for my impression of the movie?

“Ehhh... Well, it wasn’t half bad.” I told Ayase-san what I remembered.

The source material was a so-called light literature novel, which told of a romance between a highschool boy and a girl who ran into each other. There’s funny parts to the story, but it eventually gets a bit more serious, and the final plot twist is still stuck in my head.

“There’s a girl the protagonist can meet with only once a week at midnight in a public park. She’s actually a student at his highschool, but whenever they meet at noon, she acts like they don’t know each other. They can only meet at midnight, and she acts like an entirely different person. The more they meet, the more attracted they become to each other. And then, one night, she tells him—” I paused for dramatic effect. “‘I only have half a year more to live.’”

Ayase-san swallowed her breath. Yeah, it was a pretty big surprise. I mean, look at my reaction when Yomiuri-senpai told me that.

“The climax is from there on out, but I don’t want to spoil you too much, so I’ll just leave it at that.”

I’m not on Maru or anything, but I tend to keep blabbering on about something if I’m in the mood. That just shows how the movie wasn’t ‘half bad’, but actually left me with a deep impression. It also shows in that I’ve been thinking of buying the source material.

“Thanks. It sounds interesting.”

“Right? If not for your supplementary exam, I’d recommend you to watch it today.”

“After the exam is over.”

“Right.”

“If there’s source material, then I might just read that instead. Since I want to help my Modern Japanese grades, I need to read more books as well.”

“I don’t think a light novel will appear on the exam.”

I don’t really know if light literature is technically light novels or literature.

“I’ve never really read novels or manga. Maybe there’s something I might be able to learn from them.”

“Maybe.”

However, strictly speaking, Ayase-san isn’t bad at understanding the contents of literature. She just has trouble dealing with works that depict emotions other than her own. If someone loves someone else and yet insults them, or if they scream to kill someone else despite their actual feelings, it might be lost on her. When I told her about that, she seemed slightly bothered.

“They should just be honest about things like that.”

“People act differently than each other. That’s how drama is born.”

If two people who have fallen in love with each other could put their honest feelings into words, the story would be over. Of course, there are plenty of stories that are like that. Discrepancies happen when people don’t adjust to someone else. Both tragedies and comedies are born from this. A dramatic love story uses misunderstandings and discrepancies to advance its plot.

“I really don’t get it.”

“That’s why I think we should leave that as a black box, and focus only on the few works that could come up in the exams, as well as correlating information for those. By the way, do you feel like you’re making any progress?”

“I’m just working on the mock questions, but I feel like I’m getting more points than before. It seems like what you said was true, Asamura-kun. If I just remember the historical background and its relation to the work, I feel like I can answer a lot of questions.”

“Because it’s an exam after all.” I felt the urge to stress that.

“What do you mean?”

“Since we’re doing an exam, there won’t be any questions or problems that don’t have an answer. Ayase-san, have you heard of the term ‘*open ending*’?”

“Like an open conclusion?”

“That’s a different name for it, but yeah.”

Then again, she must be taking this seriously. Is that why it sounds so weird? I doubt Ayase-san is playing dumb.

“It happens a lot in movies. The movie ends without you knowing what happened to the protagonist. It’s basically an ending that leaves the conclusion up to the imagination of the audience.”

“I hate that. It’d probably stress me out.”

“I figured you’d say that. Anyway, the point is that this won’t happen in an exam.”

And this isn’t constrained to open endings in particular. There are a lot of other places where an author doesn’t explain everything in detail, instead leaving it up to the interpretation of the reader. I could list a lot of examples of this. However, these don’t appear in exams either. You can’t grade someone on their opinion about something, after all, especially if it’s different from person to person.

“That makes sense.”

“Exactly, which is why they’ll make questions about things where the reader’s experience won’t be any different... at least not to a level where it could impact your grade. A famous cram school teacher once said ‘There will not be a problem where you can’t pick a choice at a multiple-choice question’.”

Aside from questions where your creativity, originality, or knowledge of a topic is being tested, of course.

“It’s a bit direct, but it makes sense.”

“Right?”

However, I have to agree that keeping it vague at times is what makes books so charming. In such a case, the lack of clarity stimulates your imagination. I might prefer flat relationships that omit guesswork in real life, but I can gain more viewpoints on different things by reading books and increasing my knowledge. Not only am I escaping narrow-mindedness by reading books, but I can

also train my imagination and creativity, broadening my horizons. That's why I don't want Ayase-san to read books solely because of a thirst for knowledge... Though I wouldn't really complain if she did.

"So are you going out with that Yomiuri-senpai?"

I nearly spit out my coffee. What do you mean by that, huh? When I realized she was staring at me, I subconsciously straightened up and answered like I was the defendant being interrogated by a public prosecutor.

"We aren't like that."

"Really?"

"Really. She's just a senior at work."

"Hmmm."

"She likes books, so we get along. That's all."

"You read a lot of books too, don't you? That difference is pretty significant, I guess... I see. I should read books too after all... I might have to go shopping." Ayase-san said, only to suddenly stop herself, fumbling over her words. "Big emphasis on '*might*.'"

"I'm more than happy to see the birth of another book lover. Though your exams are more important right now."

"Huh? Ah, yeah... You're right." Ayase-san sounded a bit flustered, and she directed her gaze down towards her phone again.

She put her wireless earbuds in her ears and opened her notes, signaling that she had gone into studying mode. I cleaned up after I finished eating breakfast, loaded the dishwasher, and then headed back to my room. I have another full-time shift at work starting around noon today. Since I went straight to bed after coming home

yesterday, I needed to finish up my homework. Since tomorrow is the deadline for said homework, I was panicking a bit. I became so focused that I was working on it until my phone's alarm rang. Thanks to that, I yet again wasn't able to eat a proper lunch.

When I stepped out of our air-conditioned house, the summer heat hit me like a wave. I was forced to blink a few times from the strong sunlight hitting my face. Our dear sun was really motivated today. I could even pick up the faint scent of scorched asphalt. Although it was barely noon, the temperature had already passed 30°C. This was the third consecutive day of mid-summer.

Despite the fact that it was a Sunday, a large crowd had gathered in front of the Shibuya train station. I somehow made it through there, arrived at the store, changed into my uniform in the back room, and stepped out into the front. Today, my shift lasts to 9pm.

“Yo, Junior-kun.”

When I entered, Yomiuri-senpai called out to me. She acted the same as ever, almost like that event last night didn't even happen. Of course, that made it easier for me, and I was very thankful for it. She must be good at reading the room.

“Hello Senpai. Are you filling up the shelves?”

“That's right. Could you help me?”

“Of course.”

Yomiuri-senpai was pushing the trolley with a cardboard box in front of her. When I took a peek inside, I could see some heavy magazines in there. Luckily, I could avoid the cash register today, so instead, I focused on filling the empty spaces on the bookshelves and organizing the other shelves. If I had a spare moment, I would fix any

bent covers as well, or put any returned goods into a cardboard box. When you work at a bookstore, there's always something to do.

Of course, I can't tell the store to order any books for me from printers, but I can tell Yomiuri-senpai about them, and she can recommend them in my stead.

"Women's magazines, huh... Seems tough this month."

"Righto. Probably in my top 3 list of books that are bothersome to deal with."

"Oh yeah, the extras are crazy."

For magazines targeted at modern women or housewives, there are always limitless extras appended to such volumes. Thanks to that, the magazines are always thick and heavy. These extras often contain eco-bags, makeup samples, or even stylish pouches. Whenever you have these large extras, you need to make sure that they don't end up all over the place.

To achieve that, you either tie them together with string or tape, or you use rubber bands. Both of these have their merits and demerits. Keeping them together with string or tape is always a secure way to attach them together, but in the event that you use too much, it can damage the magazine in the process. Rubber bands are easy to put on or remove, but if someone gets a magazine without the extra, you'll get complaints.

Of course, you could seal them together in the same plastic wrap, but sealing already-thick magazines along with the extras is something barely any bookstores do. At the very least, I doubt the cost of doing so makes it really worth it.

“I wish they’d at least make it the same size as the magazines themselves. They really don’t care about how difficult it makes them to stack. Here, hold this.”

“Woah! Don’t just throw it at me. ...Wow, this really *is* pretty unbalanced.”

“You can say that again.”

This time, they had added a small paper box about the same size as the magazine, which offset the heaviness from the other magazines.

“What’s even inside there?”

“Some kind of treasure box.”

“Huh?”

When I looked at the cover, it said something about some kind of accessory inside that box. They wouldn’t put actual jewels into a magazine extra, and yet the cover made it seem like something extravagant.

“Isn’t this... false advertising?”

“It should be fine. It says it’s ‘something like a treasure box’.”

“But...” I doubt that’d hold up in court.

“The outside box is fairly big, but the inside is maybe a third of that at best. That’s why they’re impossible to balance.”

“Why didn’t they just put it in the middle?”

“I guess they made the box first. Then the box ended up bigger in the end.”

“Ahhh...”

I didn't know what was really going on, but Senpai's logic made sense.

"It's heavy already, but it weighs so much more on one side than the other..."

"It'll be pretty hard to stack, yep."

"This magazine sells quite well, though, so we have to stack it somehow."

"Let's give it a try."

However, once we got to the platform in front of the magazines, it was as bad as I had expected, and I cursed to myself. When we started stacking the magazines, we could only stack them about two-thirds as high as the tower next to it. Any more than that would make it lean and eventually fall. Since magazine covers are generally smooth and slippery, they slide and fall over particularly easily.

"This ain't doing it."

"Indeed. It might be possible if we alternated every other one upside down."

"Then you won't be able to see the front cover once one is sold. You can't do that."

"Right~"

This is quite troublesome. In the end, we decided to stack the bottom half of them upside-down, with the upper half stacked on top showing their covers. Even if some copies of these magazines are sold, they shouldn't reach the place where the covers are upside-down, at least not before we could add more copies on top of them. Once we're completely out of them, we can just flip the lower ones back over. It's more work, but that'll at least give the magazines

proper treatment. After that, we built the other stacks of magazines up around them.

“All right. That should do the trick.”

After slowly working through the mountain of books in the cardboard box, I raised my head when I didn’t get a response from Yomiuri-senpai. She wasn’t even looking at me. Her gaze was fixated at a point near the corner of the bookshelf.

“That girl seems like she’s looking for something. I guess I’ll go ask her if I can help.”

I followed Senpai’s gaze. She wasn’t looking at the magazine shelf, but rather at a point in front of one a bit further away. A girl about my age stood there, acting confused. She had light hair and an ear piercing that sparkled thanks to the interior lights shining down on it. Right when I thought to myself *Wait, she looks familiar*, Yomiuri-senpai had already started walking towards her, talking to her in her employee mode.

“Are you looking for something by any chance?”

The girl twitched in shock and turned towards Senpai. “Umm, I’m searching for a book...”

“Huh? Ayase-san?!”

When I raised my voice, Yomiuri-senpai turned back towards me, and the girl gave me a glance from a distance. It seems like she didn’t realize it was me for a second. I guess that makes sense. This must be the first time she’s seen me wearing this store’s apron. Her mouth was wide open and round, and when Yomiuri-senpai saw this, she started running towards her like a cat chasing its prey. She’s definitely going to use this for some kind of blackmail later.

“So you’re searching for a book. Let me help you!”

“Um, thank you very much.”

“Leave it to meeee!”

Oddly uncomfortable polite language came from the usually outgoing girl as the diligent literary girl employee brimmed with curiosity. Yomiuri-senpai, you’re showing your true colors here. I approached the two of them, pushing the empty trolley.

“Hey, you’re this kiddo’s little sister, right?” Yomiuri-senpai asked Ayase-san, pointing at me.

“Ah, yes, that’s right. So, um, who are you...?”

“Yomiuri Shiori. Nice to meet you.”

Ayase-san made a satisfied expression. “Ah, so you’re...”

“Wow! You really are a beauty, just like Junior-kun said! So cutesy wutesy~”

“Are you some kind of drunken old man, Yomiuri-senpai?”

“How could you tell, Junior-kun? Did you perhaps visit a bar before, Mr. Underage?” She retorted mercilessly as I approached the two of them.



If I had any kind of reaction there, it'd be my loss, which is why I kept talking with an unfazed expression.

“More importantly, what brings you here, Ayase-san?”

I had assumed she would be focusing her time on studying, so I asked it like it was odd behavior, despite it actually being fairly ordinary.

“I came here to buy a book...”

“Junior-kun, go and put these away, would you?” Senpai asked me, pointing at the trolley.

Now that I think about it, we’re still at work, so that should have top priority. I pushed the trolley back to the back room, though slightly reluctantly—and ran back at full speed. When I returned, the two of them were still talking like before.

“I see. That big, huh?”

“Isn’t that normal?”

“I don’t think it’s quite something you could call normal...”

The heck are they talking about?

“Oh, you back already, Junior-kun? That was barely two minutes.”

“Haaaa, huff, y-you timed it...?”

How good is she at multi-tasking like that?

“Just going with my gut.”

“You mean intuition? Also, you were the one who brought out the trolley in the first place, right?”

“I don’t like it when my junior has such good perception.”

“Tell that to an alchemist<sup>3</sup> some other time... Sheesh. So did you ask Ayase-san what she was looking for?”

“Not yet.”

Do your job, would you!?

“Um, Asamura-kun, I’m looking for a reference book. There was a place where I got stuck... and also, that movie you watched yesterday. I thought I’d buy the source material for that while I’m here.”

I see. That explains why she’d take a break from studying—or so some anime or manga protagonist would say, and would already agree with her. However, humans aren’t so pure as to act because of a single motive. Having only one motive is almost unrealistic. I don’t think she was lying per se, but... if that were true, then the chance of her being interested in what one of her family members was doing at work must at least be plausible. Not to mention that she had always been curious about Yomiuri-senpai.

“Oh my, you’re interested in that movie, little sis? Today’s the last day it’s showing. Should I come with you for the late-night screening?”

“Ah, that’s a bit...”

“Ayase-san has to study. Could you please not drag her down the wrong path?”

“A sinful flower grows by sucking the blood of beautiful people...”

“How awfully inefficient. Flowers relying on light and water to grow usually end up being far superior.”

“That’s quite the harsh criticism you’re making of me. Well, let’s leave the jokes aside.”

“I was being serious, though.”

“We have our job as shop employees.”

“I was doing my job. How about you?”

“Junior-kun, we don’t have time for idle talk during our shift. We need to put our utmost into satisfying our customers!”

“...I don’t have any objections there.”

I mean, the other customers are laughing at our conversation. I want to get away from here as quickly as possible.

“So, little sis, the book you’re searching for is—”

“It’s Saki.”

“Hm?”

“Ayase Saki.”

“Ayase?”

“You can call me Asamura Saki, too, but that would make it hard to differentiate between us, so feel free to call me whichever you like.”

I think this might be the first time Ayase-san has referred to herself as ‘Asamura Saki’. This name was fairly unfamiliar to my ears, making it feel quite fresh. But I guess that makes sense. Going by that logic, there’s a possibility that I’ll end up as ‘Ayase Yuuta’. If I introduced myself like that, I wonder if she’d feel the same way as I am right now?

“Hmm, I see. That’s why Asamura-kun has been calling you ‘Ayase-san’, huh? Then I’ll call you Saki-chan. So, about this reference book, that should be in the learning corner. We should start with the novel first.”

“Yes. And... Asamura-kun.” Ayase-san said, looking over at me. “If you have any other recommended books, please let me know. I think that the books you like might be a good starting point.”

“Mine?”

Ayase-san nodded.

“I figured that if you recommended something to me, it’d be good. Watching movies all the time is a bit too expensive, but if it’s just paperback books, I could buy a few, and reading will surely help with my studies as well.”

“I see. One of the good things about novels is how far your money goes! You really get it, Saki-chan!”

“There’s even the recent movie subculture as well.”

I guess that makes sense. The price is the biggest factor when deciding to buy a book or not. Since working part-time is securing me enough money to spend, I don’t worry about the price as much. Not to mention that books aren’t that expensive to begin with. But I probably only think that because I like books.

Maru even told me before that “You really don’t care about anything but books, huh?” with an exasperated tone. It’s true that I’m not interested in making myself look good like Ayase-san does. I’m the type of person who thinks brand-name clothing is way too expensive. But everyone has their own set of values. Just look at Maru. He buys anime BD boxes as soon as they come out. That’s why I was a bit bothered when he said that to me.

“But even if you ask me for recommendations, it’s not that easy. I don’t know what kind of interests you have.”

“If she’s curious about ‘Azure Night’s Interval’, why not recommend something along those lines? After that, you can make recommendations based on those sorts of tastes.”

“Ahh, that makes sense.” I was a bit thankful for Yomiuri-senpai throwing me a helping hand.

That’s a senior bookstore employee for you.

“Then I’m choosing one from the light literature genre. I think something more realistic would be better for starters... Ah, before that, the source material. Do we still have one of the volumes?”

“I don’t think it’s still up on the front display despite you setting it up so well before. It should be on the shelves now, and there might be an offchance that a customer can’t find them there, so...”

Then the vice store manager called out to Yomiuri-senpai. He asked her to take care of the register, as she’s practically perfect for the job thanks to her looks and appearance. With an expression consisting of resignation and acceptance, she accepted. Giving a brief farewell, Senpai headed to the register. Senpai, I won’t ever forget what you’ve taught me. Please live strong.

“Is the cash register a lot of trouble by any chance?”

“I think it is. It basically requires a lot of brief communication with people who generally don’t bother considering your circumstances.”

When I said that, Ayase-san’s face tightened, and she hugged her body with both her hands. Come on now, it’s not **that** scary. Anyway, I took her to the light literature shelves, and we started looking for that light novel. Maybe it was thanks to it being on the shelves, or maybe because it was still early in the day, but there was a single copy left.

“Around here...”

“Ah, I read the manga for this. So it was based on a novel, huh?”

“I figured that a novel receiving a media mix<sup>4</sup> would be a good starting point.”

Though it depends on personal preferences if you’ll enjoy a particular novel or not.

“The learning books corner is over there. There’s a pillar with a large ‘Hiring part-timer’ poster hanging on it right in front of it. Though it might be hard to read with the dim lighting. Anyway, the shelf is to the right of that.”

“Ahh, I see. I got it... I think.”

“If you’re having trouble, feel free to ask an employee around there, or come back and I’ll take you there.”

“It’s fine. I should be able to find it by myself. You’re working right now anyway.”

“Got it. Then I’ll be going back to work.”

“Going back, huh? Oh yeah, that apron looks pretty good on you.”

“That’s... Thanks.”

Suddenly receiving that compliment left me more bewildered than happy, to be honest. If possible, I would have preferred to take her to the corner myself, but I had already spent a lot of time dealing with Ayase-san, so any more than this would probably be considered slacking.

With the source material of the movie and two books I recommended to her in hand, Ayase-san headed towards the corner. After gazing up at the poster, she headed to the right, disappearing

towards the bookshelf. After seeing her off, I returned to my own duties of organizing the shelves.

After a bit of time had passed, Ayase-san called out to me from behind me. When I turned around, she was carrying another heavy book, which seemed to be some kind of reference book.

“I’ll buy this and then go home. Thanks for helping me during your shift.”

“I was happy that I could help. Don’t worry about it.”

I watched Ayase-san walk off to the cash register, when suddenly someone called out to the side of me.

“Excuse me, where is the cash register?”

When I turned towards the voice, I saw an elderly woman carrying a thick magazine. The arm she was holding it with was shaking. Although she had a bag with her, she probably thought that putting the book in there before paying it would get her in trouble, which was why she was carrying it with one hand.

“The cash register is to the left after you walk down this aisle... But do you want me to help you carry that?”

“I shouldn’t, but... can I ask you for that?”

“Yes, of course.” I accepted the magazine, which turned out to be the heavy one with the small box added to it.

I escorted the elder lady to the cash register, and since it was open right now, I could take care of the actual purchase as well.

“You really helped me. Thank you very much.”

“No no. Thank you very much for your purchase!”

The elder lady stuffed the magazine in her bag and left after giving a brief goodbye.

“Please wait a moment.”

There, I heard a familiar voice from the cash register next to mine, belonging to Yomiuri-senpai. Coincidentally enough, the customer she was currently dealing with was Ayase-san. They seemed to have finished the paying process. Senpai put the change into a silver platter in front of Ayase-san and slid the books into our store’s original paper covers.

“You’re pretty fast.” Ayase-san said, speaking with a tone of admiration in her voice.

The two of them hadn’t realized that I could hear them.

“Mm, well, I’m used to it. Yuuta-kun’s pretty fast, too.”

“Yuuta-kun...? Ah, Asamura-kun.”

“Right. It would just be confusing if I called him ‘Junior-kun,’ wouldn’t it? Here, your three books... Um, dear customer, would you like me to put a cover on your reference book as well?”

It’s a bit too late to go back to polite language, Senpai.

“No need, thank you.”

“Understood. Then again, he’s the only one who started working after me, so he technically is my only Junior-kun. Oh, and here is your completed purchase.” Senpai put the four books into a vinyl bag and gave it to Ayase-san.

“Thank you very much.”

“Likewise. Thank you very much for your purchase! If you want to watch Yuuta-kun at work again, stop by whenever!”

“That’s not why I...”

“For you, Saki-chan, I’ll throw in a free smile for 0 yen!”

So you’re taking money from other customers, Senpai? Ayase-san, however, ignored that comment and stepped out of the store. The next customer immediately moved up in line at the cash register, and I returned to the shelves.

Around when our shift ended, Yomiuri-senpai came to talk to me.

“Your little sis sure is cute~”

“Are you still going on about that?”

“Once you’re my age, you need to absorb the essence of the youngsters, or you’ll end up rotting faster~”

What are you, some kind of vampire?

“I don’t think you’re that far apart in age.”

“We’re talking about high school and university here. It’s a huge difference. You really don’t get it, Junior-kun.”

“I feel like I never will, to be honest.”

“She really was cute, though. She had such lively reactions. Whenever you came up, her expressions would change ever so slightly. Junior-kun, this one might be big money.”

“Big what?”

“Big money~!”

For a second, I was unable to grasp what she was talking about. However, when I saw her bright grin and sparkling eyes, I figured it out. Basically, she’s saying that Ayase-san’s reaction hints at romantic interest.

“No, that’s definitely not...”

“Really? Are you sure?”

“Ayase-san’s just my sister, okay?”

I can’t look at her in any other way, and I’m certain that Ayase-san feels the same way. She must.

My shift for the day ended, and I made my way home straight away. Both of my parents were still awake, so we ate dinner together. Although it was pretty late, 10pm, they had waited for me all the way until then. Akiko-san had gone all-out for the first time in a while. She had made some excellent fried chicken. While we ate, my old man kept babbling on and on about how great it was, munching it all down. How can he have this much energy despite already living with her for a month?

Ayase-san wasn’t with us at the dining table. She apparently had finished eating earlier, and was now in her room studying. I didn’t see Ayase-san again that evening.



1 Linus

2 Looked up the exact quote, but I couldn’t find it.

3 This is a reference to Fullmetal Alchemist, a quote from the guy who made a chimera out of his dog and daughter. Of course, altered to fit context more.

4 Media mix

## **Chapter 5: 20th of July (Monday)**

It was Monday morning of a new week. Upon entering the school's classroom, I could feel my vigor physically leave my body. It all looked like a black and white movie to me. I could hear bits and snippets from my classmates' conversations, but their voices seemed much more quiet than before. An idle atmosphere reigned.

The reason for this was simple. Halfway through this week, summer break will start. It's different from the mentality of **next week will be summer break** which was the case last week. The end-of-term exams were over, and summer break was right in front of our eyes. It's pretty much impossible to ask for people to show any kind of motivation for a throwaway match.

While I observed the passage of time inside the classroom moving a tad bit slower than usual, a single male student sluggishly walked into the room.

“Morning, Maru. Morning practice must be tough.”

“Yo, Asamura...” Both his voice and even his expression were out of steam.

Although not many of our sports clubs compete on a national level, there's a lot of them who put in enough effort to at least reach the middle of the road solidly. My good friend Maru Tomokazu keeps up a competitive position in the baseball club, which is why he has morning and after-school practice practically every single day. Normally, he isn't as exhausted as how he looks right now, so maybe something else has happened.

“You're like a dried-up tree without your usual energy there. What happened?”

“We lost the second match in the local preliminaries.”

“So you’re depressed.”

“No, not really. It just means that practice will be even harsher during summer break.”

“Not the opposite? Normally, you’d practice even harder if you made it further in a tournament.”

“Even if you put everything into your practice, there’s a limit on how much actual skill you can acquire in a short period of time. You can take a break to improve your physical condition, you can avoid any risks or injuries from practice, that sort of thing. They rarely really go all out in terms of practice during big tournaments.”

“I see. That sounds logical.”

“Indeed... Mm.” Maru sat down on his chair, devoid of any energy, and observed the inside of the classroom with narrowed eyes.

While watching our classmates making plans for the summer break in the midst of this sluggish atmosphere, Maru let out a mutter.

“Must be nice to be able to enjoy summer break.”

“Are you the kind of person who’d get jealous about that, Maru?”

“Of course I am. Your free time is the greatest fortune you can have. Then again, I was the one who decided to pour my time into the baseball club, so I can’t complain.”

“Then what are you jealous of?”

“That I don’t have much time to visit the movie theater. They release a lot of big titles during summer break, trying to target the free time families and young couples have. Since I’m stuck at practice, I can’t enjoy them.” Maru let out a deep sigh. It made me mentally let out a snicker, since this was very much like him.

I don't know how to feel about someone watching movie after movie because practice is slow during a big tournament, but that's how Maru Tomokazu is. His thought process is always a bit different from common sense.

"There's a lot of movies I was interested in as well."

"Like 'Azure Night's Interval'?"

"Huh? That's a standard tearjerker, dude. It might be good for girls who want their daily share of depression, or couples that need an excuse to flirt in public, but a movie maniac like me won't be satisfied by something like that."

"Are you seriously judging it without seeing it? That makes you a failure of a movie fan. I'll have you know it was pretty good."

"Wait, you've seen it, Asamura?"

Ah, I think I messed up. It'd be bad if he asked me *Why?* *With Who?* *In what situation?*, so I had to choose my words carefully.

"I was interested in the source material since I saw it at work, so I went to watch it alone after work."

"Asamura... You went on a date, didn't you?"

"Huh? No, what are you talking about?"

"I didn't even ask, and yet you specifically mentioned that you went alone. You always act independently, so there was no need for you to clarify that."

"What are you? Some kind of detective? You're reading too much into it." I tried to remain calm, but I could feel the sweat building up beneath my shirt.

Maru was looking at me through his glasses like a bird of prey would look at its next meal. It felt like he was staring directly into my soul, which made me feel really uncomfortable. It makes me think that I might be better off just confessing that I watched the movie with Yomiuri-senpai. Is this how a criminal feels when he's backed into a corner? Then again, he doesn't have any concrete proof for any of this.

"With Narasaka, Ayase, and now... Asamura, aren't you a bit too sexually frustrated?"

"I'm telling you, you've got it all wrong."

"Really now? I've heard reports of people saying you've been talking with Narasaka here and there. When was it, in front of the library room a while ago?"

"Huh, what, am I being stalked? It's a bit scary that you know about that."

"People have eyes everywhere. Your sins shall be revealed."

'The walls have ears', 'the sliding doors have eyes'; 'people will talk'—these are all sayings that suddenly sound much more credible than ever.

"I think calling the fact that I talked to Narasaka-san a 'sin' is taking things a bit too far."

"For the men who've fallen for her, it's a serious crime... You didn't watch the movie with her, did you?"

"I didn't go with..... anybody."

I was about to say 'with Narasaka-san', but I quickly corrected myself. In response, Maru clicked his tongue. What a terrifying way

of guiding me to answer the question in the way he wants. This guy is dangerous.

"Well, you know. If you awaken to your desires to experience sensual love, just let me know. I'm the number one when it comes to human relationships, and I'll support your love as much as I can." He flashed his white, healthy teeth in a smile and gave me a thumbs-up.

In all honesty, Maru's resourcefulness is impressive enough to make any enemy his friend, but I don't feel comfortable at all having him as an ally.

"If that happens, I'll be relying on you."

"Aighto."

When I gave a brief response, Maru showed no intentions of questioning me any further. Thanks to his sensitivity and knowledge of other people, he must know that I actually went to the movie theater with someone else, but instead of letting his curiosity get the better of him, he instead is prioritizing my own feelings on the matter. Knowing when to give up is very mature of him. He really is a great friend.

...Though telling him that to his face would be pretty awkward, so I won't do that.

Classes ended for the day. Maru quickly left for baseball practice, and the other classmates slowly but steadily filed out of the classroom shortly after. I watched them all as I remained seated. I held my phone in hand, spending my time reading up on social networks or news, waiting. Shortly after, the last group of two students, who had stayed behind chatting about this and that, finally left as well, leaving me alone in the classroom.

A raw summer heat blew in from the half-opened window, and the chirping cicadas in the distance assaulted me with a sense of nostalgia. I guess that all Japanese people have this feeling under the right circumstances. Maybe Japanese people have an automatic reaction in their genes to reminisce about their hometown as soon as summer rolls around?

Or so I hypothesized to myself, and eventually stood up from my seat with a sigh. I wasn't just wasting time, of course. Ever since Ayase-san and I became step-siblings, we decided that we should go home at times as far away as possible. Since we both had to go back to the same home, our path home would overlap. If we ended up walking next to each other, it'd just be awkward, so I want to avoid that sort of thing.

...However, this decision decided to stab me in the back today.

“Ah, Asamura-kuuuun!”

“Huh?”

After I put on my outdoor shoes and was about to step out the entrance, someone called out to me. When I turned around, a girl with a bright hair color tapped me on the shoulder.

“How you doin'? What a coincidence meeting you here!”

“Narasaka-san?”

This female student was Narasaka Maaya. And past her shoulder, I could see another student—Ayase-san. Huh? Why is she still here? The second that question popped up in my mind, Narasaka-san spoke again.

“Let's go home together!”

“Eh... Um, why?”

“Huh? Why? I mean... since we’re here already?”

“I don’t know what that is supposed to mean. Do you need to go in the same direction?”

“Totally the same. After all, I’m visiting Saki’s place.”

“Huh?”

I glanced over at Ayase-san, seeking an explanation. She put her hands together in apology.

“She’ll be teaching me.”

“Ahh, I see. But... are you fine going home together, Narasaka-san?”

“Totally. Why would I be against it?” Narasaka-san said with no hesitation whatsoever.

That’s the king of normies with a hundred friends for you. There’s absolutely no psychological hurdle for her to talk with a member of the opposite sex. It’s true that in my life so far, I’ve never had much contact like that, but it’s not rare for groups of boys and girls to head home together. Since both Ayase-san and I had to hide our relationship to avoid any misunderstandings, I was probably just being worried for nothing.

“Since you go to the same place, there’s no need for us to leave at different times. Right, Saki?”

“Well, that’s true...” Ayase-san glanced over at me.

...I guess it can’t be helped this time around. I nodded in resignation, and Ayase-san sighed.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have asked Maaya after all.” She muttered.

After that, the three of us stepped out of the entrance. The awkwardness of walking home with two girls next to me made my throat dry up. I can't shake off the anxiety that someone might be watching us. In the end, Narasaka-san's conclusion was more accurate. When we stepped out of the school gate, we still encountered a few students here and there, but none of them turned towards us, let alone stared at us. Seeing a single boy and two girls walking down the street must be something that's so normal they don't even pay attention to it.

Maru mentioned that someone saw Narasaka-san and I together, but now that it's the three of us in a group, we probably don't stand out as much. After leaving the school behind us, we walked down the road from Shibuya to Daikanyama, which was known here in the area as the 'Peculiar Hill' road. Even though school had already ended, the sun still stood high, which caused the asphalt to boil. Sweat started building beneath my clothes, which caused me to feel a bit dejected.

Ayase-san walked next to me, wiping her neck with a handkerchief. Even though she's a normal human just like me, I've never seen her breaking a sweat or making a face, so I feel like I've made the discovery of a century.

Then I heard an electronic sound, resembling something like a click. When I turned around, I saw Narasaka-san a bit behind us, grinning to herself with phone in hand.

"Ah, don't mind me. Just keep walking naturally like that!"

"Are you taking pictures? Even if you're a friend, I won't allow candid photos." Ayase-san said.

"No no no, not in the slightest~ I'm taking a video. Totally different."

"The idea behind it is the same. Give that to me. I'll delete it."

“Ahhhhh! Don’t take it from meeeee! My smartphoneeeee!”  
Narasaka-san begged, but Ayase-san snatched it away without hesitation.

She checked through the camera roll and deleted the video.

“You really hate having pictures taken of you, Saki. There’s no need to go crazy like that. I was going to delete them anyway~”

“Don’t wanna. I don’t like it. If you decided to not delete one, I’d have to complain to you. That’s lame, and I don’t want to doubt you, so I’ll just delete them all myself.”

“I’m in big trouble, Asamura-kun! Saki is bullying me with logic!”

Why are you expecting me to back you up? I don’t mind joining in on your conversation, but at least do so when the topic is a bit more comfortable. Of course, my answer was predetermined.

“Pretty sure I’m siding with Ayase-san here.”

“You betrayer, Onii-chan! You don’t need to agree with her just because you resemble each other as siblings!”

“I don’t remember becoming your ally, and could you stop calling me ‘Onii-chan’?”

That kind of thing is something you’d say to blood-related siblings. Of course, since we’re not blood-related, we’re very different from each other, but thanks to us living together, I feel like our senses of values and habits have started to overlap ever so slightly. Maybe that’s what she’s talking about?

“Also, you’re not making any sense. Why did you suddenly start taking pictures?”

“I thought you two walking next to each other would make a buzz online. How about you become one of these YouTuber couples? ‘A blonde-haired gal and an antisocial boy became siblings’, or something along those lines? It’d definitely go viral.”

“There’s no way we’d do that. There’s no way anybody would enjoy watching that.” Ayase-san said with no hesitation, and I nodded.

“Agreed... Also, Narasaka-san, even if you’re right, hearing you call me ‘antisocial’ to my face hurts quite a bit.”

“Ah, don’t get the wrong idea, I wasn’t saying it to insult you. I just saw a lot of these ‘Bad Boy’ tags on Insta, and they’re all super handsome and very popular with the girls.”

“Now you’re calling me super handsome? That just sounds fishy if you ask me.”

“Ahhhh, that’s where you’re wrong. You’re not a handsome guy by nature, but you’d definitely become hot if we put makeup on you, see.”

I feel like she’s going to fall no matter which direction she goes. I’m sure that Narasaka-san has no ill intentions, but it’s really hard to single out one thing there to tell her she’s wrong about.

“Also, there’s a lot. A lot of people watch these YouTuber couples’ live streams. Like, a whole lot. It’s hard to get a lot of viewers right now since there’s so many people doing it, but siblings doing livestreams together is rare! Let’s try to make enough money with ad revenue to buy a mansion!”

“Ad revenue... You can earn money?”

When this money-related word appeared in Narasaka-san’s passionate speech, Ayase-san showed a slight bit of interest.

“Of course! Once you’re popular, it just comes rushing in!”

“Rushing...”

“Wait, Narasaka-san, Ayase-san, calm down.”

I immediately stopped the two girls, who had suddenly started to drive in the same lane. I know I shouldn’t bother them when they’re having a friendly chat, but I’d feel guilty remaining quiet while they’re chasing a feeble dream.

“There’s a lot of people who are uploading videos like that, and celebrities and even corporations are joining in as well. This world isn’t so kind that it’d let you make it big that easily. ...At least that’s what someone who’s familiar with the Internet said in their video.”

When Ayase-san asked me to search for a well-paid part-time job, I looked into this video service thing and the ad revenue you get from it. The ones who make it big make boatloads of cash, and streaming ranks really high in polls for what profession grade schoolers want to be when they grow up. However, as brightly as you may shine temporarily, it is a cruel and harsh industry, to the point where everything depends on your view count. It slowly eats away at you, leaving you frustrated and depressed.

Similarly, even if you do a couple’s stream, there’s potential problems you can’t avoid precisely because of that premise.

“Even if you succeed, constantly having success is much more difficult. You hear stories about that sort of thing a lot lately. The couple breaks up, and the channel they built together falls apart immediately.”

“I mean, that’s true, but that’s exactly why I’m saying this.”

“Huh?”

“Unlike lovers, you two are siblings, so you won’t break up! It’ll be a channel where people can watch you flirt! Could there be any greater type of relationship!? I say no!”

“Now that you mention it...”

“It’s not happening. Asamura-kun, why are you suddenly letting yourself be influenced by her?”

“Sorry.”

Ayase-san gave me a sharp scowl, and I apologized immediately. Those who are successful advocate for you to move quickly when faced with a challenge, but I feel like these words are much more accurate when you’ve failed in any way. If you feel even a slight bit of an uncomfortable atmosphere, swallow your pride immediately and apologize. I want to live with the motto ‘Apologize in an instant’. I might be contradicting myself, though, since discontent and grumbling are just how some conversations work.

Ayase-san ran her fingers through her hair, letting out a sigh as she continued.

“There’s no way we’d do that. It’s not like it’ll actually work out.”

“I’m sure it’d do great! Both you and Asamura-kun are really clever.”

“That doesn’t feel like praise since it’s coming from you, Maaya. You got better overall scores than either of us.”

“No no no, I’m not talking about exams. How do I put it... It’s like Zhuge Liang clever!”

“Still impossible. Even if we tried to do it for real, we don’t know how much time it would take, and I’ll miss out on time to study.”

“Booooring. I can guarantee you’d be popular. Also more importantly, I wanna see you two being lovey-dovey!”

“So it’s all for your own benefit. I keep telling you that it’s not like that.”

“Either way, it’ll never work out. There’s a lot more problems beyond that, as well.”

Right now, the only person at school who knows about the relationship Ayase-san and I have is Narasaka-san. If we actually were successful with our channel, it’d basically reveal it to everyone. Also, we’re siblings, so how would we explain to my old man and Akiko-san that we’re acting like a couple on camera?

Of course, you have to keep in mind that Ayase-san is beautiful, logical, and always considerate, which gives you the distance when you need it, so she’s very comfortable to live with. If there were a lover’s relationship that stemmed from this, it might end up in bliss and happiness.

That being said, she’s my step-sister. On top of that, this isn’t the world of fiction, but reality. She’s my real step-sister. I can’t even see any other option other than having things stay like they are currently.

“I see, what a shame. Well, you don’t have to become YouTubers. You can try anything! Finding something you’re good at can lead to a job with high pay, you know! You should try Insta, Asamura-kun.”

“Why? I don’t have any skill for taking stylish pictures.”

“You just have to upload pictures that’d be good under the ‘Bad Boy’ tag! I’m sure it’d be perfect for you!”

“No thanks.” Or so I said with my back to her, but I was actually downloading the Insta app on my phone.

While Narasaka-san and Ayase-san walked ahead of me, I followed a little ways after them, setting up my account. I was guided through the tutorial screen and created a profile. If this really could make you popular quickly and efficiently, and let you make easy money, then I'll definitely tell Ayase-san about this.

...But on the way home, thanks to bad cell reception, I couldn't tell which users were popular right now. I had gone out of my way to create the account, but I feel like it'll rot away in the passage of time.

We arrived at our home. When I opened the door to our apartment, my tense muscles relaxed, and I could feel my fingers suddenly lightening up like I had put down something heavy I had been forced to carry. Walking home from school as a group of three was totally different from my usual routine. Telling me to relax would have been a waste of breath.

For the random offchance that Narasaka-san would accidentally wander into my room, I locked the door. I turned on the air conditioning, loosened my necktie, and took off my uniform. The cold air blowing against my sweat-drenched body felt good indeed, but I kept myself from carelessly saying anything out loud.

Right now, Narasaka-san was here. Even if I blurted out something embarrassing, Ayase-san would ignore it out of consideration, but I don't want a total stranger hearing it. Following that train of thought, I realized something. I had naturally assigned to someone the label '*total* stranger'. Basically, that required the premise that there were other kinds of strangers out there.

Ayase-san is a stranger, and there are other strangers different from her. The fact that I'm making this distinction means that she's gradually moving closer to becoming 'family', right?

I finished changing out of my uniform and stepped out of the room. When I went to the kitchen to grab a drink, I saw Ayase-san in the living room, staring at her workbook, with Narasaka-san teaching her. Ayase-san was still wearing her uniform, probably out of consideration for her friend.

Both of them had serious expressions on their faces. Even after joking around on the way home, Narasaka-san was now diligently teaching Ayase-san. I quietly opened the fridge, trying not to bother them, and poured myself some barley tea. Trying to not be too loud, I returned back to my room.

I sat down cross-legged at the table, putting the cup down in front of me, and booted up a manga app on my phone. Since I've been so busy with exams, I didn't have much time to catch up with what I was reading, so I'm using that time now to catch up on a manga series. I didn't have any part-time work today, so I had some precious free time for myself.

After about an hour had passed, I had caught up with most of the series I wanted to read. I considered checking out that new series Maru had recommended, and was about to tap on the search button when my finger stopped. In the top left of the screen, I saw the time: 5pm.

I figured that this time would be when dinner preparations would start, so I stood up with my smartphone in hand. That'd normally be Ayase-san's duty, but since she has an important Modern Japanese exam tomorrow, she needs to study as much as possible. I headed to the living room, and Ayase-san raised her head.

"Ah, sorry, it's about time, right? Can I make something that won't take much time today?"

"It's fine, I'll do something myself. You keep studying."

“Eh. Really...?”

I tried to make a reassuring smile as I entered the kitchen, and Ayase-san relaxed her posture from almost standing up moments before.

“I don’t have to worry about part-time work today, so don’t worry about me. Go ahead and focus on your studies.”

“...Thanks, that’s a big help.” Her voice had a faint trace of hesitation to it, but she did thank me properly.

Narasaka-san watched this exchange happen, put her palm beneath her chin like a detective analyzing a crime scene, and narrowed her eyes like a curious cat.

“How nice. You’ve got a great husband atmosphere to you, Asamura-kun.”

“What kind of character are you acting like now?”

“An art critic!”

“I don’t get it.”

While holding a conversation that made absolutely zero logical sense and exchanged no real information whatsoever, I opened up a recipe site. When I was alone before, I would always make some instant curry from a powder, but I checked the contents of our shelf to be sure. I found a package in there which I had actually bought before Ayase-san and Akiko-san joined us, with the words ‘Extra spicy’ written on it, in deep red.

Since they had taken care of most of the cooking ever since they moved in, the number of instant or microwavable meals we ate had gone down drastically. Basically, I don’t know how well she handles spicy food. When I thought back to the times the two of them

cooked, they never used anything spicy. They even made dishes that relied on spices more on the sweet and savory ends of the spectrum, so I doubt they can handle too much spiciness.

Of course, this would be no problem if I could just ask her about her preferences. However, since Narasaka-san is here, I was hesitant to ask her bluntly. There's this saying 'Kid's tongue', which is used to make fun of people who can't handle spicy food. Announcing your own ability or inability to deal with spice has a good chance of hurting someone else's pride depending on their own.

So no curry tonight. I shall rely on the wisdom of the greatest housewives of history instead—and use one of the greatest blessings of the world, the Internet, to look up other recipes.

"Alright, this should do." I decided on a recipe and started working on it.

Spoiler alert: It ended in failure. Well, not quite. It's not strictly about success or failure. I overestimated my own ability, which was practically nonexistent. Every single term in the recipe was abstruse to me. The hell is cake flour? Is that any different from wheat flour? Season to taste? What kind of process is that? Get the hot plate ready? I don't even know how you're supposed to heat a plate. Boil it for five to ten minutes? How imprecise can you possibly be? How can you even tell when it's done?

As I should have guessed, my basic cooking knowledge was too low. I can't even read the recipe properly. I feel like this recipe is much more complicated than the Modern Japanese exam Ayase-san is dealing with. For now, I'll cook the rice. Even I know how to wash rice and put it in the rice cooker. Worst-case scenario, I can serve the cooked rice with tsukudani<sup>1</sup> and somewhat hide my incompetence.

I postponed the hard work until later and focused on what I *could* do. With these thoughts, I started washing the rice. Of course, I know that I'm basically running away from reality. Ahh, the cold water feels good on my hands.

After I finished that, I set up the rice cooker, and someone walked into the kitchen.

"Asamura-kuuuun~"

"Narasaka-san? There's some drinks in the fridge, so help yourself."

"I came here to check up on you, Asamura-kun~ Aren't you having a hard time?"

"Did you set up cameras somewhere in here?" I looked around the kitchen.

"I'm not spying on you! I just realized you were cooking the rice, so I figured you might be having a hard time."

"I-It's not normal... to cook the rice first?"

"Depends on the family. In mine, we take care of the side dishes and everything else at the end."

"I see... But to be honest, this is pretty embarrassing to admit."

I resigned myself and explained everything to her. Namely, that I looked at the recipe and figured I might be able to pull it off, only to end up so stupid that I didn't even understand most of the words written on it—Yeah, explaining that would have taken way too long, so instead I said I wanted to start with something even I understood. Narasaka-san muttered a quiet 'I see~' with a nod, and then went back to the living room.

"Hey, Saki, you can do the rest with some repetition, right?"

“Yeah, thanks to you.”

“Great, then you can fight this battle alone! I’ll help Asamura-kun with the cooking.”

“Eh? I mean, sure, but... I can’t force you to take care of that.”

“Don’t mind me. It’s time for Maaya-chan to show her wifey power, fufufufu~”

“I-I see. I’m looking forward to the result.” Ayase-san gave me a bewildered glance.

Of course, my expression was equally confused.

“Alrighto, it’s time to teach cooking-beginner Onii-san how to hold the reins! I’m looking forward to your guidance!”

“Ah... Y-Yeah.”

Narasaka-san rolled up her half-sleeves even further to reveal her two arms. She approached me brimming with confidence and energy, so I could only nod. Normally I should be the one asking for guidance, but I didn’t even have the energy to point that out.

“Then let’s get this started. What’s your basic goal for the dish?”

“The goal...? I don’t really know, but I want something that’ll let Ayase-san’s head work properly during her exam tomorrow. So something with decent nutrition and protein.”

“Gotcha. Sweet-and-sour pork is probably the best bet here. Let me see... Ah, found it.” She opened the fridge and took out some pork.

A question came to mind.

“Huh? Do we have meat for sweet-and-sour pork in there? Don’t you use that floppy kind for that?”

“Yup. It’s easy to do with pork cutlet. But ribs work just fine. A lot of recipes actually use them.”

When I looked up recipes with that, I found a lot of sweet-and-sour pork recipes that used ribs.

“What’s important is the way you cut the meat.” Narasaka-san puffed out her chest like a teacher teaching their pupil, but just this once I couldn’t say anything back.

As a matter of fact, Narasaka-san’s cooking skills were flawless. She took out the ingredients and seasonings from the fridge without even looking at the recipe, showing great progress unbelievably quickly. After that, she cleaned the meat and ingredients, all the while teaching me every step along the way.

The reason she could teach a beginner like me with no problem is because she had everything down to a T. She showed me firsthand what was important to consider so I’d be able to do it myself.

“You’re crazy, Narasaka-san. You’re almost like a home economics teacher.”

“Can’t you come up with a cooler example? Maybe a first-class chef who just came back from France?”

“That’d lose the part about you being a good teacher, though.”

“Oh yeah!” Narasaka-san laughed without a care in the world. “But you’re just as amazing, Asamura-kun. You learn everything so fast. It makes me want to teach you even more.”

“I do think it’s because of your ability to teach... Also now that I think about it, Ayase-san is a great cook, too... Am I the only person in our school year who can’t cook?” My voice was filled with tension at the thought of me being the most sheltered out of everyone. Considering that the sample size for the test was only two

individuals, it doesn't hold much statistical value, but the odds weren't zero.

"Ahaha, I doubt that~ I know it'll sound like humblebragging, but I do think I'm fairly skilled when it comes to cooking."

My faint glimmer of anxiety was blown away by Narasaka-san's energetic laughter... Thank goodness. I found myself sighing in relief from being able to avoid a serious injury to my pride.

"I have a lot of younger brothers. Since our parents are always working, I have to take care of the housework. Mom's at home today, so that's why I can visit Saki's place, but that's pretty rare in itself."

"That reminds me, you came here last month as well... But never since."

"Yeah. I guess once a month is the limit."

Only being able to enjoy one free day a month must be hard for a high school student her age. Not to mention her grades. She's either even cleverer than Maru, or she's a harder worker than she lets on. Because of her high tension and energy, I always thought she was a weirdo, but it seems like I need to reevaluate that assumption.

"Say, Asamura-kun, is there really nothing going on between you and Saki?" She suddenly asked out of the blue. She had finished preparing the ingredients for the sweet-and-sour pork and prepared the miso for the miso soup, teaching me the ropes the whole time.

"It'd be bad if there were, right?"

"I mean, you're practically strangers. No blood relation and all that."

“As long as we have a connection in the family register, it’s totally not okay. Also, why are you this curious about my relationship with Ayase-san?”

“Why? ...That’s a pretty hard question to answer. I just felt like Saki had changed.”

“Isn’t that just your impression of her?”

“It is, yeah? How can you have an opinion without having a personal impression of something?”

“...I guess you have a point.”

She defeated my argument with her feelings and emotions. Only people with weak communication skills like me need logical adjustment. Someone like Narasaka-san probably doesn’t need to adjust at all. She just works with intuition and reacts to the conversation.

“For example, Saki’s been using more perfume as of late. Did you know that?”

“I had no idea.”

“Thank God. If you did, it would have been pretty gross.”

“Can you not ask me a trick question like that?”

I’m glad I answered correctly the first time. Of course, I am conscious of girls my age, particularly someone who’s practically a stranger who’s living in the same house as me, but I wouldn’t stare at her all the time, let alone be conscious of what she smelled like.

“So, what can you tell me about how much perfume she’s wearing?”

“It’s summer right now, right? You start sweating just from walking around, so it’s a troublesome season for us girls. Since we don’t want

to smell nasty from the sweat, we put on more perfume, use a lot of sweat wipes, and use shampoo with a stronger scent. Girls do a lot... At least those of us who have interest in the opposite sex."

"I see."

"Last year, Saki used wipes at most. Then again, she never sweated all that much, so using the wipes was enough."

"So you're saying she's using more this year."

"Right! It's like she's using everything at her disposal! Her actions must be influenced because of someone she's interested in! Or so I, Private Detective Maaya-chan, have deduced based on my intuition, Watson-kun!"

"Huh."

"What do you mean 'Huh'!? You don't feel anything after hearing that such a cute girl might be conscious of you!?"

"Even if you say that... I mean, it makes sense that she'd be conscious of me..."

"See! I knew it was in the romantic sense!"

"Again, no." I completely denied her assertions before she could get more excited. "She's living with someone of the opposite sex who had been like a stranger to her up until now, so of course she'd be conscious of her smell. She's trying to not be rude towards me."

I'm the same way. When it was just me and my old man living here, I could walk around the apartment with messy hair, baggy eyes, and smelly pajamas no problem. But that won't do anymore. Ayase-san and Akiko-san are here. Since there's the ever-present possibility of being seen by these two women, I don't have enough courage to

show myself with a sloppy appearance. That's something I've been thinking about just recently, myself.

"Huh~ I guess that is true~"

"You'd feel the same way in her position, Narasaka-san."

"Hmm... Ah." She pouted and glanced over at the living room, but caught her breath upon seeing something.

She gently poked her elbow at my side and spoke with an energetic voice.

"Did you see that just now? Saki looked over at us."

"Ayase-san did?" I looked over at the living room myself.

Because of this, Ayase-san and I made eye contact. Her mouth opened for a second, and she averted her gaze right after. Aside from that odd reaction, neither her expression nor the color of her face changed. She just looked down at the reference book in front of her again.

"Maybe she just heard us talking about her? Your voice is fairly loud, Narasaka-san."

"Ehhh? I totally think it was a gaze of LOVE."

"Aye aye, let's keep the gossip at that. Even someone as nice as her will get tired of you after a while."

"It's a shame, but she's always annoyed at me, so annoying her more won't change anything~"

"Then why are you trying to agitate her even further?"

I really don't understand this normie's attitude. She's not a bad person, but sometimes she takes it a tad bit too far. While I was

thinking that, the miso soup finished cooking, and so did our preparations for dinner. When I looked at the time, it was half past 6pm, and the rice cooker let out a sound to indicate that the rice was done.

“Nice timiiin. This concludes Maaya Cooking.” She said ‘Nice timing’ with a weird intonation, took off Ayase-san’s apron that she had been wearing this whole time, and headed towards the living room. “Studying suspended. Replenish your nutrients, Lieutenant Colonel Saki.” She said, jumping onto Ayase-san’s back and clinging to her.

Ayase-san must have been listening to music. She took out her earbuds, speaking up with an annoyed tone.

“Why did you assign me a rank at the end? ...But thanks. I feel bad for having you help with dinner even though you’re a guest.”

“No worries, no worries. It’s time for me to head home, anyway.”

“Huh? You’re not going to eat with us?”

“Mom is taking care of everything at home, but I should at least eat dinner with them. I want to enjoy her food when I can.” Since she can say that with a smile on her face, they must be a happy family.

To someone like me who has grown up while watching my parents always fighting, she looked so dazzling that it made me want to cover my eyes. She packed up her things with a soldier-like speed and stepped out of the living room with a ‘See you~’. Right when she passed me at the front door, she flashed a grin and leaned in to whisper with a voice only I could hear.

“I’ll give you some alone-time~”

“Again, that’s not...”

“Anyway, bye-bye~”

I tried to object, but I was given the chance to do so, and she just waltzed out the door with her hand waving at me. I stood at the door in a daze, watching after her. Ayase-san stood up and approached me with a questioning gaze.

“What’s wrong? Did she tell you anything weird?”

“No, it’s fine. It’s just...”

“Just what?”

“I think she’s a weird girl.”

“You can say that again.”

She actually agrees with me? This might honestly be the first time we’ve shared so much empathy since we started living together.

“Ah, delicious.”

7pm arrived. In the end, the two of us wound up eating dinner alone again. Ayase-san stuffed a piece of sweet-and-sour pork into her mouth, and her eyes opened wide. Rather than pure ‘Heck yeah!’ happiness filling my chest, I was relieved more than anything.

“I’m glad you like it.”

“I feel like you chose sweet-and-sour pork out of consideration for something.”

“...You sure are perceptive.”

I guess someone who cooks every day can pick up the intention behind the choice of menu.

“Thanks. I’m really happy.”

“You’re welcome. That being said, Narasaka-san deserves the most gratitude.”

“Maaya made all of this?”

“Honestly speaking, I made it. She taught me practically every step of the way, but she made me take care of the main parts... I really feel like she has enough talent to be a teacher.”

“Totally. If it were me, I’d just take care of everything if the other person was taking too long.”

“I know, right? I feel like that would be the safer choice as well.”

Yet Narasaka-san did not break her teacher’s stance all the way to the end. I feel like she’d be a great grade school teacher, or considering her grades, even a teacher in higher education. I felt warm inside imagining Narasaka-san taking care of children with a smile.

“How are your studies coming along?”

“Thanks to your help, I solved all of Maaya’s mock exam questions.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“When I told Maaya about my Modern Japanese studying method, she was all ‘Isn’t taking detours like that really inefficient?’, you know.”

“Well, it’s probably one of the more time-intensive studying methods, for sure.”

Even if you can’t fully understand the text in front of you, as long as you understand the contents at the most fundamental level, you can puzzle it out. However, this way of solving problems is most beneficial to those who possess the actual know-how, but that only works if there’s a definite answer to the question that the majority of people can understand.

Any thorough, rational level of thought equates to a lack of flexibility. Since Ayase-san is that kind of person, if she encounters questions that allow for vague answers, she'll probably freeze up automatically. That's why this roundabout drastic treatment was the only way for her to succeed in Modern Japanese, without forcing her to accept vague answers.

Earlier, Ayase-san had praised her friend Narasaka Maaya-san's flexibility. She attributed this as the reason she was so popular in class. They say that people are attracted to people who are the exact opposite of them. That would explain why Ayase-san got along so well with Narasaka-san. And it's not just that. This also shows that she accepts diversity at a mental level. She doesn't rely on stereotypes, instead having an attitude that allows appropriate conversation.

I figured that this was because of her father's prejudice, since she had seen her mother being suppressed mentally by him, but that probably isn't all there is to it. Everything following this is just my own assumption. I can't confirm this with her directly, so these are my deductions as an outside observer, so to speak.

If I had to guess, she's fighting and resisting: Against the blood of her father, which she cannot respect. Her train of thought is solid, written in stone, which doesn't allow any vagueness, allowing only black and white, consenting to everything from her own perspective, which drives her to this tendency of wanting to do everything herself.

That's why, in order to keep this stern flexibility, she wears this thick armor... Of course, this is all just conjecture on my part.

"There's no need to worry. Everything's going fine. I should be okay for the real exam tomorrow."

“...I see.”

Ayase-san gave me a reassuring smile. She must have guessed the reason why I suddenly became quiet. Since I couldn't tell her about my thought process just now, I don't have much proof for that, though.

“I'm sure you can do it, Ayase-san.”

“Thanks, Asamura-kun. Man proposes, God disposes, as they say.” Ayase-san gripped her chopsticks tightly and carried some more pork to her mouth. “Delicious.”

Until we finished eating dinner, she kept repeating herself, thanking me and telling me the food was good.

The fated exam is tomorrow. Will she be able to achieve freedom for summer break, or will she be restrained by supplementary classes? The conclusion draws near. Oddly enough, despite the fact that this wasn't my problem at all, it felt like my own fate depended on this event. But I put a lid on these arrogant feelings and wished all the best for my step-sister.

—*Do your best, Ayase-san.*

1 Preserved food boiled in soy

## ***Chapter 6: 21st of June (Tuesday)***

There must have been a significant problem with earth's gravity today. Since the flow of time was so much slower than usual, I was certain of it. If someone told me that this was a reality-changing phenomenon caused by the progress of humanity's scientific standard, then I might actually believe them and become an environmentalist as a result.

Classes finally ended, after I'd felt like they'd never arrive. In other words, it was time for the supplementary exams. Since tomorrow was the end-of-term ceremony, everything we discussed in class went into my left ear and out of my right. I don't even remember what I talked to Maru about during recess, let alone the taste of the bread I ate. I suppressed the urge to immediately ask Ayase-san about her results, and I remained alone in the classroom until I finally came to my senses.

...No, this is definitely too much meddling. I'd just be a bother. Over these past few days, I tried my best so that Ayase-san would do great for this exam. That being said, immediately running over to ask her for the results was bad manners. I'll meet her at home anyway. It's not like I only see her at school, so there's no need to rush.

"I've got my part-time work as well, so time to head home." After my head calmed down a bit, I muttered these words to myself in the empty classroom.

Of course, I don't often talk to myself like that, but it was necessary to get me to move from this classroom. Feeling a bit bashful, I grabbed my bag and left the school.

In the end, even during my time at work, I was unable to focus on anything, which ended awfully. I made mistakes at the register, and I made other novice mistakes, which hasn't happened since I started

working here. It's been a while since I've had to apologize to a customer.

"Junior-kun, are you okay?"

"...Probably. I'll be taking my leave now."

Even when Yomiuri-senpai called out to me with a faint glimmer of worry in her voice, I gave a brief response, nothing more. Of course, I knew that I had to be a bit more careful when riding home on my bicycle, but I somewhat made it home safely. Even so, I found myself pedalling harder, almost like I was trying to get home as quickly as possible. I wonder why? I wasn't even that curious about my own exam results.

With these thoughts in my mind, I arrived at the apartment complex, headed up the elevator, and headed towards my own home.

***—Clack!***

When I pulled on the doorknob, I felt like my shoulders were about to give in, and a dull sound reached my ears. The door that should be open didn't move an inch, the lock preventing me from opening it. *Weird*, I thought.

Whenever I came back from part-time work, Ayase-san would leave the front door open. She always told me to keep my key with me to help prevent crime, but the entrance to this complex already had an auto lock, which made it almost impossible for anyone not authorized to enter, and it'd just be annoying for both parties if I had to ring the bell because I forgot my keys or lost them. We had both agreed that this was much more efficient.

In the end, it seemed like she was just being considerate of me, not forcing me to remember to bring a key to unlock the door after a hard shift at work... but that might just be my imagination. Either

way, the door was locked, so I took my key out and unlocked it. It seems like the lock itself is working.

"I'm back..... Ayase-san?" I called out to her as I stepped inside.

The inside of the apartment was pitch black. I turned on the lights and walked down the hallway towards the living room. Until I turned on the lights there, it was dark as well. I couldn't pick up the presence of anyone except for me. When I took a peek inside the kitchen, there weren't any traces of someone else having dinner, let alone preparations for one. I assumed that she may be sleeping, so I went to her room, but the door was closed, so I couldn't check up on her.

When I checked the shoe rack at the entrance, her shoes were nowhere to be found. Of course, nor were those of Akiko-san or my old man, meaning that I was the only one at home right now. When I checked the clock, it was half past 9pm. Not once had Ayase-san still been out this late.

I felt a chill run down my back. What if her exams had been so awful that she was dealing with the shock? Maybe it's because of a certain romance movie with a tragic ending I had watched recently, but my mind immediately jumped to the worst possible conclusion. I wanted to believe that she was at least safe. However, her stoic personality might even be a risk to her own wellbeing. The reason I had been restless all day, wanting to know how her exams went, was probably related to this feeling.

A thorough and almost pathological rational thought process. Hating her own disposition, she wants to keep up flexibility to the level where it turns abnormal. This kind of self-denial is definitely not healthy. From her point of view and method of doing things, relying on Narasaka-san or I for her studies was out of the question. Now,

what would happen if, after she stretched herself to such an extent, the exam results were not good enough?

“.....!”

Before I had even thought about what I was doing, I had already sent her a LINE message.

*‘Where are you right now?’*

Of course, these words were utterly ridiculous. In order to guarantee a smooth family relationship with Ayase-san, these were the words I had never wanted to use. But, in this situation, these words were the only ones I could rely on, no matter how much I might hate them. I don’t want to regret anything, so even if I embarrass myself, that much is fine.

Five seconds—Ten seconds—Fifteen seconds—And then one minute. She didn’t even read the message. No change showed on my LINE screen.

This won’t do. I can’t wait. I can’t sit still. I dashed to the entrance, threw on my shoes, pulled open the door with a force I wouldn’t expect of myself, and jumped out into the hallway. I pressed the button to call the elevator, which was at ground floor, and waited. ***Tap, Tap.*** I found myself tapping the toes of my foot on the ground. It was laughable how nervous I was. The longer the elevator took to get to my floor, the faster I tapped my foot on the ground.

I’m aware that I’ve just been influenced by too many novels, and watched too many movies. Young people nowadays get ridiculed for things like getting drunk on vague heroism. In reality, such tragic developments hardly ever happen. However, it’s also true that nearly 200 highschool students each year choose to take their own life. Irresponsible, unrelated people would question their reason for

doing so, but for the person themselves, it could be enough of a reason to give up on life.

It's 'only' 200 out of more than three million high school students. Nothing but a small fraction at best. But if you argue that, is Ayase-san really someone who's part of a majority? Clearly not. Maybe I feel this way because I barely have any experience dealing with strangers, but her personality and her actions seem different. To a degree where joining the ranks of 200 people wouldn't be too unrealistic.

**Ding!** An ordinary sound pulled me out of my panicked thoughts. The elevator arrived. The door opened, and when I was about to rush inside, I almost bumped into the person stepping out of it.

"Woah."

"Ah..."

We both tried to dodge each other, which is why we ended up taking our distance with an odd pose. The other person moved back further into the elevator, and I took a detour to the side, stepping inside as well. In the end, both of us ended up in the elevator. We both fixed our postures, and when we confirmed each other's faces, our mouths opened in shock.

"Um... Ayase...san?"

"Asamura-kun? Where are you going at such a time?"

Standing deeper in the elevator was a highschool girl, with her student bag in one hand, and a shopping bag in the other, still wearing a school uniform. This girl, Ayase-san, looked at me with wide eyes.

"Ahh, well, um, you know, how do I say this?"

The words wouldn't come out of my mouth. I couldn't tell her that I had been influenced by a movie that drove me to act like a hero, and I was worried sick for her. All I heard was the sound of the elevator door closing, like it was making fun of me.

That's right, just like how the cool and dry Ayase-san in front of me isn't a little sister character out of some fictional world, the incidents that happen in reality are most often barely anything to even consider, which was why a wonderfully romantic scene of the hero running to save the heroine would never happen in this world. This reality wasn't one offered on the highest floor of a high-rise building with a beautiful view, nor on a small hill with beautiful night scenery, but rather the dull inside of an elevator at the apartment both of us lived in.

"You weren't home, and I couldn't get in touch with you, either. I thought the exams were so awful that you were crying to yourself..." I chose my words carefully.

Confessing that I was worried her life had been in danger would make me embarrassed for the rest of my life.

"Ahaha, so I made you worry. I'm sorry about that." Ayase-san faintly snickered and apologized.

And then she cast her face down slightly.

"The exams, huh? Well, honestly speaking... the results weren't that great, I guess."

"Huh?"

So that's why she was out this long? When I started thinking that, Ayase-san put down her shopping bag, opened up her student bag, and took a single piece of paper—94 points. If I remember correctly, the number of points you needed to pass was 80.

“So you passed. Don’t scare me like that.”

“You had 96 points, right? I couldn’t win, so I’m a bit frustrated.”

“That’s what you mean? Sheesh.”

Ayase-san was pouting in annoyance, but I could only sigh in relief. Still, she wanted to beat my score in a subject she was at a distinct disadvantage at. Ayase-san’s stoic attitude really is something else.

“Sorry that I made you worry. I was out shopping... at a different store from usual.” She lifted up the shopping bag she had put on the floor, showing it off.

Shown on there was the logo of a department store in Shibuya.

“You went all the way to the department store?”

“Yup. They had a sale on some high-class ingredients, cheaper than at the supermarket. Don’t worry, even if I buy cheaper food, the quality won’t suffer.”

“I’d expect no less from you.”

“I’m a provisional housewife after all, so it’s the least I can do.”

“That’s a weird thing to call it.”

“I thought that this might be the best title for what this feels like. I don’t plan on only doing housework for the rest of my days, but right now, I’m basically doing the work of a housewife.”

“That does make sense, yeah.”

That being said, I never thought I’d hear Ayase-san use that exact term. It’s almost like I was talking with Yomiuri-senpai, so I’d prefer some kind of lead-in. Then again, even if I’m mentally prepared, Senpai is still hard to deal with.

“But why did you go to the department store in the first place? Were you trying to celebrate how well you did on the exam?”

“50 points. You got half of it correct.”

“So what would be the correct answer?”

“It’s my way of thanking you, Asamura-kun... That way of phrasing it might make me sound condescending, but I wanted to be honest for once.” Ayase-san averted her eyes trailing off into a mutter.

“I didn’t do anything that would deserve any gratitude. It was just part of our exchange. I wasn’t really able to grant any part of your wish.”

“Just for this one exam, you did a lot for me. You found this lofi working BGM music, you helped me find a way to study my Modern Japanese problems. You even made dinner yesterday.”

“You’ve made food for me practically every day for the past month, so I don’t think I’ve made up for anything yet.”

“I told you, I’m more on the giving side of give & take. A famous bank worker said to pay back any favor double, right?”

“Wasn’t that used in the context of revenge?”

“The only difference is between positivity and negativity. In the end, it’s the same as revenge. I want you to enjoy something really delicious today.”

“Ayase-san...”

She really is upright. From my point of view, I would have to come up with even more to really repay her for everything she’s done. But Ayase-san is trying to pay me back instead. Just how much do I have to do in order to end this endless giving from my step-sister and have

her accept something from her older brother? Of course, from the perspective of an older brother with an actual little sister who's constantly troubling him, this might be a rather good problem to have, but it is what it is.

While I was thinking to myself, Ayase-san spoke up, her tone having dropped compared to before.

"Or... is it that you won't rely on other people unless they're an older Senpai of yours?"

"Huh?" I was forced to return a dumbfounded voice, unable to process the words I had just heard.

Of course, there is only one name that popped up in my head when I heard 'older Senpai': Yomiuri Shiori, my Senpai at my part-time job.

.....Huh? I wonder why. Something hazy like a gloomy feeling started to rise from the depths of my heart. I don't really understand why, but just looking at Ayase-san's expression assaulted me with an awkward feeling.

"Yomiuri-senpai? Why would you bring Senpai up now?"

"She's the person you entrust your back to, Asamura-kun. As far as I know, she's the only one."

"I mean, we have a lot of shifts together at work."

The more I spoke, the drier my throat became. Even though I was only speaking the truth, it made me feel like I was lying. I shook my head. What am I thinking? Is this some kind of side effect from worrying about Ayase-san? My heart is beating uncomfortably hard. For a second, yet another stupid thought entered my mind. *Maybe I'm the character in the movie who's about to die.* My mental state is helpless, I know.

"You can rely on me. Just like you rely on that person at work. You can rely on me at home. How about you just consider this a selfish request from your little sister?" Ayase-san gently tilted her head, like she really was a younger little sister.

I was shocked to see such a devilish gesture coming from her, but the thought of this request being more altruistic than anything caused me to make a wry smile to myself. But, as an older brother, this is where I should give in.

"So for today, if I accept the cooking honestly, it'll be mission clear?"

"Yup, I'd be happy if you did." Ayase-san said, nodding in a satisfied manner.

I personally think it's kind of weird to be on the giving end and yet feel this happy about my positive response. But this is reality, not some story, which is why cause and effect aren't portrayed quite so clearly. Our intentions aren't openly written in a text bubble in some manga. Just like manmade objects and objects of nature can create a distorted dichotomy, this mismatched feeling is exactly what makes reality feel like reality.

"...How long are we going to stand here?"

"I know, right. I'm glad nobody else called for the elevator."

The elevator had stayed in this same position the entire time, making it seem like we were trying to prank someone else. Reminded of this ridiculous and secretive situation we found ourselves in, we both laughed, and managed to escape our confines with a single press of a button. The fact that we didn't get into a quarrel either only emphasized the reality we lived in.



We entered our home, and while Ayase-san started preparing for dinner, a certain question popped up in my mind.

“That reminds me, there is one more thing I wanted to ask.”

“What is it?”

“I sent you a LINE message. Why didn’t you respond?”

“Ah, that.” Ayase-san spoke like it was nothing special, taking out her smartphone.

It seemed to be out of battery. The screen remained blank even after she pressed buttons on it.

“I got addicted to lofi hip hop music after listening to it while studying. It’s been eating away at my battery, so there’ve been a few times it’s run out of juice.”

“Ahh... so that’s why.”

As expected, reality is boring. And all too dull.

If I had really been calm at that time, I would have realized the lie she had told me, and the reason for the sense of discomfort that plagued me. I think the reason my thought process came to a complete halt was because it was overwritten with a sense of relief.

Later that night, right before I fell asleep, this doubt came to mind, but since I had already wasted my opportunity to ask, the truth I should have known sunk deeper into an eternal abyss. The only way to find the answer would be to read Ayase-san’s diary, I guess.

The department store at Shibuya is farther away than our neighborhood’s supermarket. But, even taking that into account, **wasn’t it still a bit late for her to get home at 9:30pm?**

## ***Chapter 7: 22nd of July (Wednesday)***

A large cumulonimbus cloud filled the sky, as if it were trying to cover Shibuya's tallest buildings. Behind these white clouds was the blue sky, looking like a blue screen on a PC. Summer had fully begun, announcing the ending of Suisei High's first term. Today was the end-of-term ceremony. Even the sluggish atmosphere inside the classroom had gone elsewhere, replaced by excitement running through the air. It didn't even quiet down after the teacher's sharp rebuke.

"Alright, this concludes the class! Don't go too crazy during summer break, you hear me?"

With these words as the trigger, summer break stormed into the classroom. The teacher shook their head in disbelief, but nobody was even looking at them.

"I'll be leaving first." I told Maru and stood up.

"Oi now, why are you in such a rush?"

"Because I have my part-time job right after this."

"Right after? It ain't even the evening yet." Maru opened his eyes wide in surprise.

"I got a shift one hour earlier. A veteran Senpai happened to quit, so they asked if I could come in more."

"Sounds rough."

"That's why I decided to go home early, and get everything prepared."

"Ayo, you do you, diligent lad!" Maru didn't ask anything else, so I quickly left the classroom behind me.

It really is only one hour, so there might not be any real reason to rush like that, but whenever you do something for the first time, there's always unexpected things that are bound to happen. I really didn't want to come in late after asking to move the shift earlier. However, contrary to my worries, I made it to the bookstore perfectly on time. I changed into my uniform, walked inside the store, and realized something.

There were no customers. When I checked the time, I saw that I was here exactly an hour earlier than before. Does the atmosphere of the store change that much just from a small change in time? When I looked around inside the store, I could hardly even see any salarymen on the way home from work. Which makes sense, of course, since it wasn't that late in the day. They'd only start coming in later on.

"You're pretty early today, Junior-kun."

Turning around, I saw Yomiuri-senpai walking towards me with her hand in the air.

"Ah, Senpai. Yes, I have an earlier shift today. Also, I didn't expect to see you here."

"My department has summer break starting Monday~"

"That sounds like something a university would do."

"A friend of mine has lab all through summer break, though. The physics department has it rough."

"In other words, you have a lot of free time on your hands."

"That's why I'm here. By the way, are you working full-time during summer break, Junior-kun?"

"Well, for now."

After hearing my response, Yomiuri-senpai made a faint smile. I'll get the wrong idea if you keep smiling at me like that, so could you not?

"Well aren't you passionate about your work. Your Senpai is happy to spend more time with you, Junior-kun."

"Don't tease me, please."

"No no no. I'm not teasing you at all~ I'm just trying to show how happy I am to have a pure coworker pal who I can spend time sweating with. Well, you might be busy drenched in the sweat of youth with your cute little sis."

"So you're teasing me after all."

"You figured me out, huh?" She stuck out her tongue with a grin, which resembled one of those devilish teasing heroines in the works of fiction, but as soon as a Senpai of hers called her up to the register, she made a face more like an exhausted office lady.

Of course, I've never seen a tired office lady outside of fiction, so I can't say much. But now that Yomiuri-senpai mentioned it, this is the first long school break I'll be spending with Ayase-san. Since we're in different classes at school, we barely see each other. The only difference was our classes before the sports festival. However, both of us will be at home most of the time this summer break, so we might actually see each other more often.

No, I guess not, since I still have work. I filled my calendar with a lot of full-time days. Basically, I was the one who decreased any chances of us meeting, and I planned to spend less time at home. Of course, it's not that I *want* to spend time with her that much, okay? You understand, right?

I shook my head to rid myself of these thoughts and shifted into working mode. For starters, I have to take care of organizing the shelves and setting out the new releases.

After a few minutes passed, my back raised screams of agony. Working at a bookstore can really do a number on your hips and back, which only gets worse when you have to lift heavy books, carry them somewhere, or put them on shelves while crouching down.

I let out a long sigh, stretching both my arms. I heard cracks coming from my back as I did so. While I was stretching my shoulders a bit, I saw familiar-looking bright hair moving from the corner of my eye. I immediately directed my gaze over there, and I saw a girl wearing familiar clothes walk into the staff office. That is...

“Asamura-kun, if you’re tired, you can take a break.”

When I turned around, the store manager greeted me.

“Um... the person who just walked in there...”

The store manager followed my gaze and nodded.

“Yeah, she’s got an interview for a part-time job here.”

We were short on staff, after all, so this is pretty great news.

She’s a highschool girl looking for a part-time job over summer break.

“Oh right, I think she attends the same school you do, Asamura-kun.”

I faintly heard the store manager blabbering on and on.

“What’s her name?”

But I immediately heard the answer to the question I had asked on reflex.

“She’s called Ayase Saki.”

# ***Epilogue: Ayase Saki's Diary***

## **16th of July (Thursday)**

I really blew it. I never had any confidence in Modern Japanese, but I didn't think I'd actually do that badly. I'm just bad with all these novel-related questions. Of course, I didn't want to just ignore the problem and leave it at that, so I bought a lot of reference books and worked through a lot of mock questions, but when it comes to the real thing, I always break down.

I'm thinking about too many unnecessary things, I guess. I should just focus on the actual meaning of the text, and move on when I come across problems I can't solve, just like Asamura-kun told me. Any discrepancies and troubles the characters go through are just so unclear to me. I can't understand at all what they're trying to say when they talk on such vague terms.

They should just be honest and directly state their feelings to each other. If you hide your honest feelings and keep your own desires in check, you won't be able to bring your romantic feelings to fruition... Of course, I know that this is just my twisted way of thinking.

Still, Asamura-kun is really good at teaching. To be honest, I nearly gave up, but I think I might have found a small ray of hope.

Thanks.

## **17th of July (Friday)**

This lofi hip hop Asamura-kun recommended to me is great.

The noise like rain pattering against the windows is really calming.

Oh, yeah. Now that I think about it, I've always liked the sound of the rain.

Maybe I'm someone who focuses better on rainy days?

I had no idea that genres like this were popular overseas.

I really need to thank Asamura-kun for going out of this way to look it up for me.

This isn't good. I was focusing too much. It's going to be morning soon.

I need to prepare for bed and get some sleep.

I know that the less sleep I get, the more it'll actually hurt my learning ability, and it'll impact my health as well.

Still, it's impressive that I'm able to focus like this.

This music sure is effective.

Weird.

After getting into bed, unnecessary thoughts started running through my head.

I should be giving my brain some rest, but they keep drifting in an odd direction.

Lofi hip hop.

The one who told Asamura-kun about it was a charming Senpai at his work, right?

It's not like it matters.

But why am I writing about it in my diary?

I don't get it.

## **18th of July (Saturday)**

I know it sounds weird, but I don't understand why I am going to write the following in my diary.

It makes no sense.

There's no benefit to what I'm about to write.

Yet I will write about it.

How great, isn't it? Satisfying myself and using a dairy to store these emotions.

Asamura-kun got home late.

Since his work ends at about 9pm, he usually gets home by 9:30, maybe 10pm. That's how it's always been.

Yet it's past 10:30pm, and he's not home yet.

When I went to get a drink from the fridge, I asked Mom and Dad-Taichi-san about it.

In a rare occurrence, they were both home, talking as they watched TV.

I didn't want to bother them when they could finally enjoy some time together, since they were finally able to act like a married couple, but I couldn't stop myself.

So I asked them about Asamura-kun.

'Isn't he late? Is he going to be fine?' I asked.

Then I got my response.

**Yuuta's watching a movie with a girl from work.**

A girl from work.

I didn't hear about this.

I mean, I get it. There's no reason for him to contact me about it.

Horsing around at night without contacting your family isn't something I can exactly appreciate, but since he told Dad-Taichi-san, expecting anything more would be kind of selfish of me.

Even Asamura-kun has relationships that I don't know of.

It's not weird for him to talk with a girl or two on a regular basis.

Maybe it's her?

The beautiful Senpai at work who told him about lofi hip hop.

If so, I'd hate that.

Ah, let me take that back. Writing it down is different than just thinking about it. The words carry a different weight to them.

The word closest to what I'm feeling is 'hate', but it's not like I have any actual hatred for this girl I don't even know.

This is the worst.

I don't even know anything about her, and yet I'm forcing my negative feelings into words that I'm direct at her. I hate myself for that.

I'm getting impatient.

I decided I might as well give Asamura-kun a 'welcome back' once he gets home, so I decided to study in the living room instead of my own.

Even after my parents went to bed, I kept studying in the living room.

\*P.S. from the following day.

I messed up. I totally fell asleep.

It's probably because I slept all night yesterday, without even getting up until noon.

It's the unfortunate influence of a lack of sleep.

In the end, I didn't wake up even after Asamura-kun came home. I couldn't even greet him.

Now that I think about it, I woke up with a towel on my shoulders. That was probably his doing, right?

Thinking about that, these gloomy and hazy feelings I had yesterday started to clear up a bit.

As for why, I don't know.

What is this?

### **19th of July (Sunday)**

So that's the rumoured beautiful Senpai. I have to admit, she has the beauty to match the title.

Even though I was only looking for some reference books and a few novels to buy, I subconsciously made my way to Asamura-kun's part-time workplace. It seemed like he was really considerate of me because of that, so I'll try and reflect on it.

Yomiuri Shiori.<sup>1</sup> It's a charming name, for sure.

She loves books, is loved by books, and is loved by people who love books.

Maybe it's because she's a university student, but she feels more like an adult, and yet she has kept this cuteness on top of her adult charm.

Asamura-kun seemed like he had fun around her as well.

I really think they're a great fit. Asamura-kun would definitely be happy if he was with her.

That reminds me, that store had a poster asking for part-time workers hanging on that pillar.

Working part-time at a bookstore, huh?

It definitely isn't an efficient job that'll let me earn money quickly, but it feels like something I could do.

But there's one thing I wonder about. I don't think he'd be too happy about his step-sister having a job interview at the place where he works. I can't do that.

Wait, no no.

I can't be thinking about anything but the exam right now.

I need to pass that first.

Focus, Ayase Saki.

### **20th of July (Monday)**

Today is the final day before the exam.

I'm really thankful to Asasmura-kun and Maaya. Both of them helped me.

I'll go to bed early so I'm fresh in the morning, which is why I'll keep it short for now.

The sweet-and-sour pork was delicious.

Thanks, you two.

### **21st of July (Tuesday)**

I passed the exam.

I know that it's easy to say now that the results are out, but to be honest, I was pretty sure I'd pass yesterday.

It felt like a blockade inside of me had opened, making it much easier for me to answer questions.

It's thanks to Asamura-kun. And Maaya as well, of course.

Either way, now I'll be able to use my summer break freely. I can earn money while keeping my studies in check.

Before going home, I took a detour in Shibuya.

I wanted to visit the place where Asamura-kun was working at one more time.

I wanted to have a better look at the poster where it said they were searching for part-time workers.

As for Asamura-kun, he was nowhere to be seen. He might have been working elsewhere right now, but since I didn't want to run into him, I stayed away as far as possible from the cash register so an employee wouldn't find me.

I don't want him to think that I'm a stalker or anything, after all.

I carefully walked around the store and spotted the poster.

Right when I did, a person who seemed like the store manager came to talk to me.

'Are you interested in working part-time?', he asked.

Did I make that kind of face? I have confidence that my expression doesn't really show much about what I'm thinking.

Without thinking about it, I said 'Yes'.

There's no turning back now.

I was told to come the next day for a job interview, bringing my curriculum vitae.

Since I've never had a job interview before, I figured I needed some practice, so I went to a karaoke box.

I guess I could have done it at home, but picturing Asamura-kun at home with me while I did so made me feel awkward.

If someone heard me practice for a job interview, I'd probably die a bit inside.

It's not like I could explain it away well, either.

If he asked me why I was interested in working at that bookstore, I wouldn't have an answer.

I don't even know, myself. Don't ask the impossible of me.

I looked up template questions on my phone and started practicing all on my own.

There were a few times when an employee walked in, which made me feel awkward because I wasn't actually singing. But strangers are strangers, so it doesn't matter.

I'm sorry that I made you worry like that, Asamura-kun.

Since I figured I'd be making it home late, I wanted to contact him earlier, but that would require me to make up a reason as to why I had been out longer.

'I went to the bookstore where you work and practiced for the job interview I have there tomorrow'—that's definitely not something I could tell him.

I feel like I'll have to face this gloomy and hazy feeling inside of me sooner or later.

But, at least for today, I decided to treat Asamura-kun to some great food.

Since I was in Shibuya already, I stopped by at the department store.

I bought high-quality food without stepping out of my financial boundaries too much, since I figured cooking something delicious would still be allowed.

And, if it wasn't, then... I could only accept my mistake.

I'll just use this detour to the department store as an excuse for why I ended up getting home this late. As for why I didn't contact him, I used the standard excuse that my phone had run out of battery. It's a fairly white lie, all things considered.

In the end, Asamura-kun was really worried. That might have been the first time I've seen him that flustered.

After the doors to the elevator closed, it was just the two of us, and we talked about a lot.

Inside the narrow place, just as the two of us.

An apartment's elevator is a place like any other, but even I was nervous while we were together in that secluded room.

I at least hope he didn't think I was smelly, since I was sweating quite a bit.

I used the excuses I came up with. I'm glad he believed me, but the more I lied, the bigger the feeling of discomfort grew in my heart.

Am I not acting exactly the same as a character who'd appear in a novel?

These gloomy and hazy feelings. I can't bring myself to explain them to him. I bottle them up inside me, put a lid on them, wrap lies all

around them, and stuff them into the furthest reaches of my consciousness.

Even though it doesn't make any sense.

If I could just voice my honest feelings, adjust to them, and avoid any discrepancies, I might be able to find the right path.

I'm scared.

Scared about what I'm feeling right now.

Because I'm slowly starting to understand what is happening to me, and what I'm thinking about him.

Yet I find myself unable to even leave this simple word behind in my own private diary.

How ironic.

I really am turning into a character from a novel.

## **22nd of July (Wednesday)**

Now I did it. I really messed up. I didn't think about it twice.

I didn't expect they would accept me as a part-time employee that quickly.

I even ended up coming in for an interview during the same shift as Asamura-kun and Yomiuri-san. I left as soon as I could, in hopes of them not seeing me, but I wonder if that worked out.

No, I'm just buying time at this point.

I can't run away forever.

I have to explain this to Asamura-kun. About me working at the same bookstore as him.

I'm... scared of explaining.

I'm scared, but at the same time, I find myself relieved.

Of course I'd feel that way, since I can finally clear up these gloomy and hazy feelings that I have.

The Asamura-kun I don't know.

The relationship between Asamura-kun and Yomiuri-san that I don't know.

If I'm able to flesh that out only a little bit, this gloomy and tortuous feeling might soften up a bit. That's what I think at least.

Unbelievable...

Why is the initiative in my own actions being taken by him?

Asamura-kun isn't even doing anything. I'm putting these chains on myself, restraining myself.

What a comical emotion this is.

Since nobody is going to read this, I guess I could just write it all down here to remind myself.

Since I'm keeping it in the back of a locked drawer, it should be safe, right?

Here is a question for you, me. For you, Ayase Saki.

Q: Choose a single word to express the identity of this unsightly emotion plaguing you.

**A: Jealousy.**



[REDACTED]

1Her name basically consists of three kanji. Yomi (Reading) Uri (Selling) Shiori (Bookmark), so you get the point here.

# **Afterword**

Thank you very much for picking up the second volume of the novelized [Gimai Seikatsu] series. I am Mikawa Ghost, responsible for the original script of the Youtube version, as well as the author of this novelized version.

This volume portrayed the story of the always calm and rational Ayase Saki slowly realizing a weakness in herself and dealing with that. Since she's too serious for her own good at times, maybe it wouldn't hurt her to once a while look at her own heart. In order to support her during this hard time, Asamura Yuuta introduces her to lofi hip hop. As a matter of fact, I considered releasing this music Saki was listening to on the official [Gimai Seikatsu] Youtube channel, so if that is available right now, I would be happy if you checked it out.

At the same time, a comicalization has been decided! Kanade Yumika-sensei will be responsible for that, and I am already burning with excitement. For further information, please keep a watch on our official twitter.

Now, my thanks. To my illustrator Hitensan, Nakashima Yuki-san as the voice actress for Ayase Saki, Amasaki Kouheisan as the voice actor for Asamura Yuuta, Suzuki Ayu-san as the voice actress for Narasaka Maaya, Hamano Daiki-san as the voice actor for Maru Tomokazu, Suzuki Minori-san as the voice actress for Yomiuri Shiori in the added bonus, video director Ochiai Yousuke-san as well as all the other YouTube staff, to everyone who has been involved in this project, and most importantly, to all of the readers and active YouTube followers, thank you very much. I would be delighted if you continued your support of [Gimai Seikatsu].

**IMPORTANT NOTE: This technically isn't a short story, but rather the script of the extra Shiori ASMR added to volume 2, which isn't in the original volume, hence the one-sided dialogue.**

## **Short Story**

Sorry for the wait, Junior-kun~ It took me a bit longer than I expected~

I didn't think that the toilet would be this crammed.

I guess I was looking down on Shibuya's movie theaters.

Phew... The trailers haven't started yet, right?

I'm glad I made it in time.

It's our date, so it'd be a waste if we didn't get to talk a bit~

Then again, we shouldn't be too loud, manners and all.

So... there should be no problem if I talk to you like this, right?

Hehe. Despite this being good manners in consideration of the others around us, it somehow feels like we're doing something forbidden instead.

Still... As I expected, there are a lot of couples around. Maybe because it's a romance movie?

It was a good choice for us to sit near the front row, right?

If these couples suddenly started flirting in front of us, I might feel like kicking their seats!

Hey now, why do you look so disappointed? I'm just joking!

Not to mention that we can't really complain, considering how we look right now~

Oh my? Junior-kun, don't tell me you weren't aware of it?

You have such a beautiful Onee-san right next to you, whispering into your ear.

There's bound to be a lot of boys who'd be jealous of you right now.

You'd rank number one in the 'Back I want to kick' opinion poll.  
Congratulations~

Oh right, Junior-kun, before the trailers start, there's a little request I have. Would you mind hearing me out?

The thing is, I'd like to switch seats with you. I'd rather sit in the middle rather than closer to the entrance.

You seem like you're confused, huh? Very well, I shall tell you the truth~

If some terrorists suddenly barged in from the entrance, I could at least use you as a shield, Junior-kun~

Just kidding! Hehe, don't take it so seriously. I was only fooling around a bit~

You're gonna put the popcorn in the middle, right? I wanted to sit closer to it so I don't make much noise during the movie.

Come on, it's no biggie, right? No objections? Great, time to switch~

Yup, much better. This way I can grab it much easier.

Mm? What's that face for? Are you thinking that I'm some sort of glutton?

How rude. You might not know it, but I'm fairly careful of my diet, okay?

Look at my drink. See? It's a normal diet coke.

Yeah yeah, I get it. Resistance is futile. It doesn't hold much credibility when I ask for caramel popcorn.

But I can't give up on the caramel! Won't you forgive this weak lil' me? *Sniff sniff*

*popcorn crunchingASMR.mp3*

Mmm, delicious~ Should I feed you some, Junior-kun?

If you open your mouth like a small kitty, I'll toss it right inside.

Here, open wide~

Nom~

*evenmorepopcorn crunching.mp3*

Hehe, delicious~

What, did you think I'd really feed you? What a shame~ I ate it myself instead!

Sorry for teasing you like that~

Your reactions are so cute, I just can't help myself.

There's no need to worry. I wouldn't force you through some couple-like thing like that.

If we go around flirting too much, your new little sis might start getting jealous~

Eh? She won't get jealous? Hmm, I see.

Then... could you tell her one thing?

If the position of your lover is still open, I might keep it all to myself~

Just kidding~ You're always so calm. I felt the urge to see how far I could take it.

As I figured, you're still Junior-kun no matter what.

Calming and reassuring Asamura Quality!

The fact that you're so easy to deal with is relaxing.

Wait, doesn't make me sound like some kind of playful woman!?

I'll treat you to some delicious food another time, so could you just forgive me for today? Okay?

Oh, it's getting darker. I guess it's about to start.

Just so you know, I'll be taking some of your time after the movie is over~

I'd like to walk around for a bit and talk about our impressions of the movie.

A movie is still a movie in the post-movie analysis, right?

Now then, let's see for ourselves what this movie has to offer, shall we?

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