

10



DAYS  
WITH  
MY  
STEP  
SISTER

Ghost Mikawa

illust Hiten

Days with my Step Sister

presented by  
ghost mikawa



# DAYS WITH MY STEP SISTER



10

Ghost Mikawa

illust Hiten

Nodding, I glanced to the side. What I saw caught me by surprise, and my heart started racing.

"It's hot today, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it sure is."



Erina Kozono

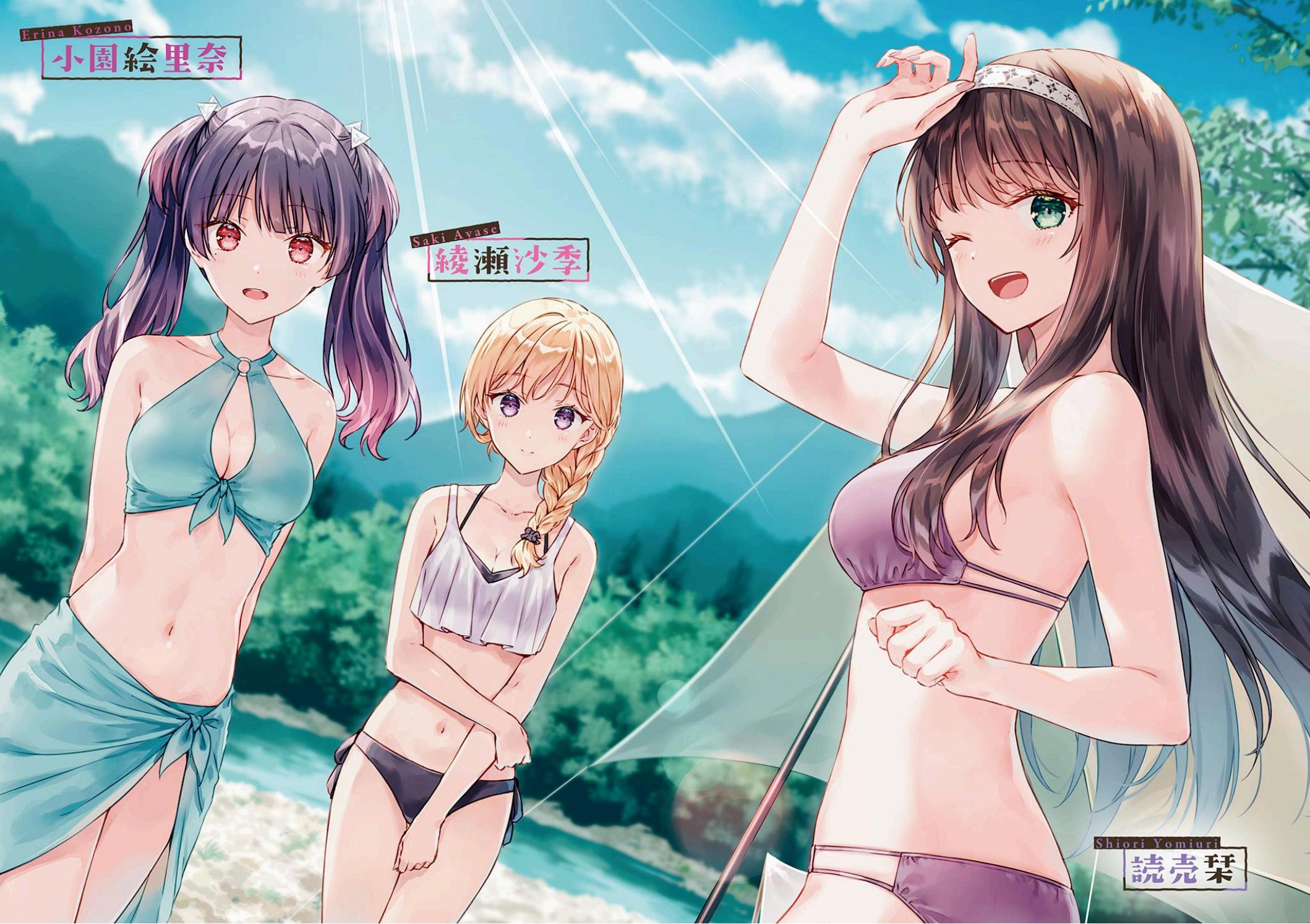
小園繪里奈

Saki Ayase

綾瀬沙季

Shiori Yomiuri

読壳栞



"Mind if I hit  
the gas?"



# BREAK ROOM CHAT AT WORK



Urggg, job hunting is killing meee. You youngins' are so lucky.  
You get to live an easy, carefree youth.



Ayase-san and I are facing uni entrance exams this year...



Been there, done that.  
I've already faced those hardships, so obviously my struggles are worse. Ahem.



That's just splitting hairs...



If we're talking about hardships... I might not even qualify to compete.



Whaddya mean?



I have the pressure to study hard for the exams, but it's not that painful.  
Actually, I feel like I'm getting closer to my goal. I'm actually eager to get to the real thing.



Wow, how stoic.

You sound like an athlete! That's really cool!



Ahh, no need to flatter me... stop, you're making me blush.

Classic Ayase-san.



But that makes Erina-chan the youngin' I'm most I'm jealous of.  
A high school first year, farrr from any exam worries.



Hmph. That's not fair. I just got through my high school exams I'll have you know!



By the way, Erina-chan, which high school was it again?



Aoki International, the one over in Meguro.



Oh, that place. Makes sense why you can do whatever you want with your hair!



It's known for its free-spirited school culture. Their festival's supposed to be a blast every year.



That's exactly right! It would've been great if Asamura-senpai went there too.  
With piercings and dyed hair, he would be super popular.



I'll hard pass on that... doesn't sound like my kind of popularity.



By the way, which school ranks higher, Suisei High, where the other two go or...?



Ugh.

Don't go there, Yomiuri-senpai. That's just asking for trouble.

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## Prologue: Asamura Yuuta

*There is no such happy person who is loved just by existing—why do you think so?*

---

The third and final summer vacation of my high school life had begun.

I was walking towards Shibuya Station, where the bookstore I worked at could be found.

Ayase-san, my step-sister and also my girlfriend, was walking beside me. We weren't exactly holding hands, but we were close enough for the backs of them to brush occasionally.

Shibuya Station square spread out before us. The sky above it was blue, and though it was only morning, it was hot, with the sun's rays already beating down. The glare reflected off the asphalt alone was enough to hurt my eyes.

“Asamura-kun?”

Ayase-san's voice brought me back to the present with a start.

I realized then that the scramble crossing traffic light had turned green, and Ayase-san had started walking. I hurried to catch up with her.

We crossed and entered the bookstore.

As I walked into the building, I was wrapped in cool air, making the oppressive heat outside feel nonexistent. I let out a relieved sigh.

After swapping into my uniform in the men's changing room, I popped into the office. There, another part timer who was on the earlier shift, sat eating lunch. It was the new girl, uh... Erina Kozono-san. I hadn't seen her for a hot minute as our shifts hadn't lined up.

“Hey, Kozono-san.”

“Asamura-senpai, hello!”

“Are you on summer vacation too, Kozono-san?”

“Yes! You too, Asamura-senpai?”

I nodded.

“You were on the early shift, huh?”

“Yes, so I’ll be leaving soon. It’s a shame you’re just starting, Senpai. I kinda wish I’d taken a later shift. There’s still so much I want to learn from you,” Kozono-san said with a friendly smile.

“There’s nothing left for you to learn from me, Kozono-san. The manager even complimented you for being a quick learner.”

“That’s not true though.”

“Hello,” Ayase-san said as she opened the door and walked in.

“Ah... Ayase-senpai, hello.”

“Huh, oh, um, hello Kozono-san.”

*That’s odd, I thought.*

I couldn’t be sure because I’d quickly turned around when Ayase-san came in, but when I glanced back, the usually cheerful Kozono-san seemed a little more reserved, and her voice sounded quieter than normal.

Ayase-san also sounded a bit hesitant.

“What’s going on? What’s up?”

Hearing another voice, I turned around again. Ayase-san quickly stepped aside to reveal Yomiuri-senpai, wearing the store’s uniform and also holding a bento. *Guess she’s on her lunch break too.*

“Ooh, would ya look at that, all the Yomiuri juniors are here.”

She said it like she was talking about a sports team.

True, though. Kozono-san, Ayase-san, and I were all Yomiuri-senpai’s juniors at work.

“Being surrounded by young and energetic juniors makes me feel younger too,” she said, putting her bento down on the long table.

She poured herself some tea at the dispenser with practiced hands, before taking a seat.

Ayase-san and I had about ten minutes before our shift started, so we sat down too.

“Yeeep, the aura of youth sure is blinding. Basking in the glow of my juniors is a real pick-me-up. It’s like the elixir of youth. It’s the perfect side dish for my lunch, don’t you reckon?”

“Should we start calling you Carmilla-senpai or something?”

“Don’t you worry, I won’t suck your blood! Ah, but if I *were* Carmilla, you’d be safe, Asamura-kun.”

“I don’t think that’s the issue here.”

Carmilla was a female vampire who preyed on beautiful young girls. Not that I *want* to be a beautiful young girl or am unhappy with not being treated as one, mind you.

Ayase-san and Kozono-san, apparently not that into fantasy literature, both tilted their heads in confusion at the same angle.

Yomiuri-senpai’s jokes were, as usual, too niche, more often leading to head scratching rather than laughs. Though, it was rare for her to crack those kinds of jokes with anyone who wouldn’t get them (except when she was *trying* to confuse them).

Sure enough, I was the only one to smile, albeit wryly.

“I don’t really get it, but, um, thank you very much, I suppose.”

Kozono-san bowed her head, and Yomiuri-senpai seized the chance to pat the head of the junior sitting next to her.

“So cuuute. You don’t need to get it. Your onee-chan<sup>1</sup> will teach you step by step, hand by hand, and even waist by waist, okay?”

“Y-yes.”

“That’s some Showa-era<sup>2</sup> level sexual harassment. Definitely against workplace laws.”

“I just *mention* the word ‘waist’ and you think it’s dirty? My, how lewd, Junior-kun.”

*Who’s the lewd one here?* Yomiuri-senpai, as always, spouted dirty jokes as naturally as breathing. While I wanted to accept her senpai-like quirks, I wasn’t really keen on learning from this aspect of her.

The strange tension that’d filled the air when Ayase-san came in had pretty much dissipated, though whether or not that was an effect of Yomiuri-senpai’s efforts was anyone’s guess.

“Well, enough about that. More importantly, Junior-kun, have you gotten a tan since I last saw you?” Yomiuri-senpai said with a sly smile, making a tiny magnifying glass with her thumb and index finger.

“Have I?”

I didn’t think I’d gotten noticeably tanned. I didn’t see any difference when I looked in the mirror anyway. Yomiuri-senpai stared at me intently, then turned her gaze to Ayase-san next to me and did the same thing.

“Maybe just a little bit, but you can’t fool the eyes of this great detective. C’mon, fess up. You’re about as tanned as Saki-chan, which means you two went somewhere together, didn’t ya?”

Despite feeling oddly accused, I decided to explain.

“We went to support our school’s baseball team at the Koshien district qualifiers.”

“Saki-chan went too, huh? You two are as close as ever.”

“Well, we *are* classmates.”

I had to be careful not to deny things too much here. After all, we *were* closer when we were outside. Ayase-san, by keeping up the act of being a stranger when we were together, ended up creating a bit of turmoil in her heart.

Catching my drift, Ayase-san added, “Lots of people from our class went too. It was a match where a mutual friend of ours was giving it his all.”

There was a hint of embarrassment in her voice, and if someone really wanted to, they could’ve read more into it. Luckily, though, Yomiuri-senpai didn’t probe any further.

“That’s so nice~. Being in the same high school sounds so enviable,” Kozono-san said.

She didn’t seem to be implying anything more than that.

But Yomiuri-senpai took the chance to jump in right as Kozono-san finished speaking.

“I know right!? Makes you super jelly, doesn’t it!?”

“Yes. I’m jealous. Are you knowledgeable about baseball, Asamura-senpai?”

“Not particularly. Just an average amount I guess.”

“I don’t know anything about it. I wish I could have gone with you to learn more.”

“Junior-kun and Saki-chan are good at explaining things, aren’t they? You can feel it when they teach you, right?”

“Umm… Yes.”

“Totally, totally. Ahh, I wish I could’ve gone to high school with you guys.”

Holding her chopsticks, Yomiuri-senpai shook her head and pouted childishly, despite the fact she was a talented student attending the prestigious Tsukinomiya Women’s University. She kept glancing at me, seemingly trying to communicate something with her eyes.

I sighed. Clearly she was about to ask me for a favor.

“Say what you want, Yomiuri-senpai, but you’re not just a uni student, but also about to become a working adult. You can’t go back to your high school days now, can you?”

“That’s why I wish to cherish the time that remains,” she said like some heroine out of a drama.

“How exactly do you want to cherish it?”

“I wanna go to the beach, and have a barbecue.”

“You do know I’m taking uni entrance exams this year?”

“But this is my last year at this job, y’know? My last summer memories?”

“What, you’re quitting, Yomiuri-senpai?”

A look of surprise crossed Kozono-san’s face, quickly followed by sadness.

*Come to think of it, I never mentioned that to her.* Her reaction suggested she must’ve grown pretty attached to Yomiuri-senpai in the past month and a half. And sure, it’d definitely be sad to have no memories of the last summer with the senpai who’d taken me under her wing…

“You don’t have to invite *me*, Yomiuri-senpai. There are plenty of other part-timers you can ask, aren’t there?”

Yomiuri-senpai was the longest-serving student part-timer at the store. Hearing me point that out, she deliberately staggered, dramatically leaning over as if she was about to faint. Kozono-san hurried to hold her up.

*No need to do that, it's just an act.*

“No way, I’m not looking at it like that, okay? I totally wasn’t thinking that you’d be the easiest to sway, Asamura-kun, and if I just tempt you a bit, you’ll probably say yes. Orrr that you’re a caring person, so you’ll probably handle all the bothersome stuff too. Orrr that if you’re in, it’ll be a breeze, and I bet I could reel in all the other juniors too. Tooootally wasn’t thinking anything like that *at all!*”

“Could you at least *try* to hide your true intentions a bit?”

I let out an exasperated sigh.

*This girl, seriously.*

“See, see! Look at those puppy dog eyes Little Garden-chan<sup>3</sup> is making. It’s like she’s saying, ‘I wanna hang out more with senpai’.”

“If it’s not a bother, I’d like to go somewhere with you, Yomiuri-senpai, and Asamura-senpai too!”

“Oooh, what a lovely girl,” Yomiuri-senpai said, embracing Kozono-san’s head and rubbing it affectionately.

She shot glances at me again.

I crossed my arms and groaned. Well, she *had* helped me a lot, so maybe hanging out with her for a day wouldn’t be *too* bad. While mulling it over, I threw a glance Ayase-san’s way, wondering what she thought.

*Hmm? What kind of emotion is that?*

Ayase-san was watching Yomiuri-senpai and Kozono-san with an expression that you might call jealousy.

I remembered how Ayase-san had once pretended not to be interested in the pool, even though she liked it. That was almost a year ago. Maybe she also liked the beach and barbecues too.

*It’s a possibility.*

“It’s true Yomiuri-senpai has taken care of us, but...” I glanced at Ayase-san, silently asking her opinion.

“Since Yomiuri-senpai has helped me a lot, I guess... I wouldn’t mind.”

Apparently Ayase-san wasn’t entirely opposed to making memories with Yomiuri-senpai either.

Balance in everything is important, and taking breaks is essential. And more than that, I realized during the sports festival that there are joys and experiences that you can only get by taking a step forward. Though Yomiuri-senpai described me as a “caring” person, I think of myself as a homebody and a tad lazy. I prefer staying in my room reading books, so the idea of being caring is a big misunderstanding.

While watching Kozono-san, a small animal-like girl sitting next to Yomiuri-senpai, the OG small animal girl came to mind—Ayase-san’s friend Maaya Narasaka-san.

Isn’t the term “caring” meant for someone like *her*? She ran around a lot for Maru’s sake and even organized a cheering squad to go to the stadium during summer vacation. Narasaka-san’s care for others comes with both planning skills and the ability to take action.

Even for the pool meetup last summer, I merely went along with Narasaka-san’s plan, and I could count on one hand the number of times I’d invited Ayase-san somewhere myself. Thinking about it, my own laziness almost brought me to tears.

Plus, it’s not like I *didn’t* want to make summer memories with Yomiuri-senpai, and Ayase-san too. *No, let’s be honest, I really do want them.*

“Well, a trip is definitely out of the question, but I could at least plan a barbecue nearby.”

Yomiuri-senpai suddenly turned to me, her eyes sparkling.

“Wow! When did Junior-kun rack up so much good virtue?”

“You know, If you keep messing around, I might change my mind.”

“No, no, just kidding! Yayyy! A day camp barbecue!”

“Day camp... so, like a camping trip just for one day?”

Yomiuri-senpai, with a beaming smile, explained that it was the latest trend. *That really true?*

“A啊, I wanna go too! I wanna have a camp barbecue!”

Kozono-san was the first one to jump on board.

“Whoa. Newbie-chan is pretty assertive, huh?”

“It’s about making memories with my senpai!”

“Hmm. And which senpai is that?”

“Wha—?”

“Nah, it’s nothing, really nothing. Don’t worry your little head. But Newbie-chan, you really have such cute reactions. You’re a genius at being loveable. You’re so cute that just by breathing, you’re already loveable!”

I noticed Kozono-san’s expression stiffen slightly when Yomiuri-senpai said that. It was just for a second, and she quickly regained her smile.

“No way, that’s not true at all. Yomiuri-senpai, you’re praising me too much!”

I figured from the way her face hardened that Kozono-san didn’t like being told she was loveable just by existing. It seemed to bother her, though she quickly masked her feelings since she was dealing with a senpai. But Yomiuri-senpai also wasn’t the type to thoughtlessly offend someone she was talking to... *I wonder why she deliberately said something like that.*

Keeping her smile plastered on, Kozono-san added, “I actually put a lot of effort into being loveable, you know.”

Yomiuri-senpai gave her a knowing nod, as if she’d cottoned on to something.

“Well, I’ve got a pretty good idea of what’s going on. So, I guess I’ll step in and lend a hand too, ’kay?”

“Um... so if you’re going to lend a hand, does that mean you’ll help with the planning too, senpai?”

“Nah, I’ll leave that entirely up to Junior-kun as he already agreed to take care of it~” Yomiuri-senpai said while playfully sticking out her tongue.

*This girl.*

I slumped my shoulders at having the whole thing dumped on me, eliciting genuine smiles from both Kozono-san and Ayase-san.

Still, since Yomiuri-senpai had brought up the idea, she agreed to research potential locations for the day camp. We could finalize the details once she found a suitable place. We also needed to ask other part-timers if they wanted to join, but a big event might be difficult without leaving gaps in the shift schedule. Taking the entire staff would likely result in a stern talking to from the manager later.

Fortunately, my exam prep had been going pretty well lately. Taking a little time away from it by going on a day camp seemed manageable. Plus, I figured the time lost on studying would be offset by a bit of stress relief.

“What about you, Ayase-san?”

I didn’t want to assume she’d join just because she seemed interested, considering she had exams too. There’s a certain etiquette, even among close friends. I had to make sure.

“If you’re going, Asamura-kun,” she said, agreeing.

I checked something with Yomiuri-senpai.

“We can’t stay out too late, so we’ll go, eat, and come back. That okay?”

“Of course!”

Seeing Yomiuri-senpai’s happy face, I decided to go ahead with the plan. I’d reduced my work hours to attend more cram school classes, so my free time was limited. My last summer of high school life was shaping up to be a busy one.

\*\*\*

We were on our way home after knocking off.

The long day had finally ended, giving way to the darkness of night. But the heat still persisted, probably meaning another humid night. The air felt heavy and sticky, making it feel like I was wading through water with every step. Ayase-san, walking beside me, seemed a bit out of breath too.

“You okay? Let’s get home quickly and cool off under the air con.”

Ayase-san nodded and lightly wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. Maybe the sweat trickling down her face had stung her eye, as she squinted with one eye.

“But, Asamura-kun, you sure you can handle planning the barbecue? When does your study camp start again?”

“From August 2nd. It’s still more than a week away, so it should be fine.”

I was set to participate in a study camp organized by my cram school. It was an environment where I could concentrate on my exam studies without any distractions. It was only for a week, but being in a place with nothing but studying to do, I hoped to get ahead of my rivals.

“I see. We won’t see each other for a week.”

“Well, I definitely want to have the barbecue before the camp. Yomiuri-senpai said she’ll look into the location—oh.”

Just then, my phone vibrated..

Pulling it out, I saw it was a message from Yomiuri-senpai. Speak of the devil. Quickly glancing over it, it seemed she’d found some options for day camp locations suitable for a barbecue. *Efficient as always.*

“Yomiuri-senpai?”

“Yeah. She’s found some places. Once we decide, she said she’ll make a reservation.”

Yomiuri-senpai and Kozono-san had an earlier shift, so they left soon after we started ours, meaning we hadn’t had a chance to hash out the details since then. I had the impression that camping usually requires reservations months in advance, so I looked it up thinking we’d need to go on a cancellation waiting list. But found that some places accept last-minute bookings, and there are even spots for day camping that don’t require reservations at all.

*I guess there’s always a gap between perception and reality.* It’s important not to jump to conclusions about anything.

A breeze blew as we passed through the park. The leaves rustled with a whispering sound, making me forget the heat for a second. I took a deep breath.

I turned my head toward a barking sound, and saw a person walking a puppy through the park. As we passed by, the puppy seemed to want to come towards us, prompting the owner, a woman, to hurriedly pick it up. She apologized and bowed her head, but both of us smiled and said it was alright. When Ayase-san commented on how cute the puppy was, the woman smiled happily through half-closed eyes. After bowing deeply again, she continued on her way with puppy in tow.

“It was cute, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, it was.”

That small, white, fluffy puppy was undeniably adorable—anyone would have said so.

I suddenly remembered the conversation from earlier that day.

*“You’re so cute that just by breathing, you’re already loveable!”*  
Yomiuri-senpai had said.

*Loveable just by breathing, huh?*

I wondered about that.

*How about me?*

I felt cherished by my old man. Being able to joke around was precisely because we had a good rapport. When I first met Akiko-san and Ayase-san, and the sudden talk of remarriage was brought up at a family restaurant, I didn’t complain because I felt a trust built between me and my old man. But when I thought about my biological mother, my heart still felt cold. She drifted away more and more as my old man worked harder for the family. I sometimes wondered what he could have done to avoid losing her love.

That thought started spinning around in my head.

Yomiuri-senpai was a fellow bookworm, and with her dirty old man mindset, I’d never really been conscious of her gender. It was after meeting Ayase-san that my circle of friends changed drastically. Starting with her friend Narasaka-san, then Fujinami-san, Professor Kudou, and Kozono-san—my female acquaintances noticeably increased.

*...No, it wasn’t just them.*

I also made male friends too, like Shinjo and Yoshida.

That meant that in just one year, the number of people I’d become close to had noticeably increased. For the seven years prior to that the only person I could confidently call a friend was Maru. It felt like, ever since my old man’s remarriage, my surroundings had suddenly become livelier. But personally, I didn’t feel like I’d transformed into someone who was easily loveable. The shadow of my estranged mother kept my heart cold.

How does someone keep the love of a girl? I longed for a clue. Currently, I believe Ayase-san loves me, but people’s feelings change.

*Feelings change.*

Even Shinjo, who supposedly liked Ayase-san, now had someone else he liked more. If there was such a thing as a loveable personality, I wished I had it. Looking at Kozono-san, she definitely seemed like that type. Just like the puppy we passed and just as Yomiuri-senpai initially said, simply being present made her lovable.

But something bothered me.

*"I actually try really hard to be loveable, you know."*

Kozono-san had said that herself.

*Trying hard to be loveable, huh?*

I didn't have confidence. A part of the little boy from elementary school remained inside me. I remembered when my mother left after cheating. How lonely and empty the house felt, and the tears welling up in my eyes from the feeling of loneliness.

I glanced at the girl walking beside me.

Ayase-san and I had similar circumstances. In her case, it was also her father who left. Her relationship with her mother, Akiko-san, was good, but I could detect a hint of distrust towards men in her words and actions.

*Being loved just by breathing, huh?* How easy life would be if I could believe in that.

Our apartment building came into view.

"Over there, look. The lights are on, so Taichi-san must already be back home," Ayase-san said, pointing at the apartment.

*Back home.*

My heart warmed at the thought. It was delightful that Ayase-san referred to the flat where my old man and I lived as "home."

"Which means he's probably cooled the place down with the air con. We can finally cool off."

"Yeah."

Ayase-san smiled.

Ah, I see. I don't know what to do to keep being loved by her, to continue being told "I love you."

Many of the rooms in the tall buildings of Shibuya still had their lights on. A “family” was living in each of those rooms. Are they making an effort to be loved, to maintain their families? It was still hard for me to even imagine that.

---

<sup>1</sup> She's calling herself onee-chan (big sister) here in a playful way.

<sup>2</sup> Showa era (1926-1989). I assume Yuuta is referring to the latter, post-WW2 half when he mentions sexual harassment.

<sup>3</sup> She deliberately says her name as “Little Garden-chan”, written in katakana as “リトルなガーデンちゃん.” Kozono is spelt with the Kanji’s 小, meaning small/little and 園, meaning garden; though as mentioned in Volume 9 園 is usually spelt その(sono) but when 小 is added before it, it's spelt ぞの(zono).

## July 25th (Sunday) - Asamura Yuuta

---

All I grabbed from the breakfast table was a cup of coffee and a plate of toast.

“I didn’t make as much progress as I thought yesterday. I’ve gotta study before my shift starts, so I’m taking this with me,” I said as I stood there holding them.

My schedule had been thrown off a bit because I’d been sifting through the barbecue spots suggested by Yomiuri-senpai on the net. I didn’t want to slack off just because it was still only July.

My old man, reading the news on his tablet, looked a bit concerned.

“That’s all you’re eating? Studying hard is good, but skipping a proper breakfast isn’t good for you, you know. I don’t want you to overdo it.”

“Ah… Yeah, got it, I’ll be careful.”

“Is one slice of toast enough? Do you wanna take something else?”

Ayase-san, eating across from my old man, looked at me with worried eyes too.

“It’s got cheese and ham on it, so I’m good. Eating more makes me sleepy, so this is plenty. I’ll clean up, so just leave the dishes.”

“Thanks. Hope that’s enough. Good luck with your studies.”

That smile of hers made me feel even more motivated. But all the motivation in the world wouldn’t fix the delay in my schedule.

I’d realized too late that the scope of the entrance exam covered *all* of the high school curriculum, and even just brushing up on first-year material was tough. Plus, I’d forgotten most of it.

And, even if I *did* understand the math and physics calculation problems, I needed to keep practicing them repeatedly to master them, or I’d run out of time.

I should be able to put my head down at the study camp, but there was still the barbecue right before that. I figured before I started worrying if it’d be able to manage, I might as well get stuck in now.

Back in my room, I switched off my phone and tossed it in the desk drawer. I glanced at the clock by my pillow and psyched myself up to focus for an hour.

While nibbling on the toast, I first flipped through my vocabulary book and memorized English words. My plan was to remember the English vocab I was supposed to have committed to memory yesterday, starting from the Japanese side.

I flipped to the sticky noted part, the word “seika<sup>1</sup>,” and racked my brain.

“Um, ‘*outcome*,’ maybe? The spelling is...” I mumbled to myself and checked the vocab book.

Yeah, that’s correct. “kekka, seika,” huh? Didn’t “kekka” also mean “result<sup>2</sup>”?

I was curious, but I didn’t have time to look up every single word in the dictionary or I’d *never* finish.

Next is... “kasuru, kyouyousuru<sup>3</sup>.”

“‘*Impose*.’ The spelling is—”

My nail clicked against an empty plate. *Huh?* I looked down to see only crumbs. I’d been so focused that I didn’t realize I’d finished my toast. *Oh, it’s all gone*, I thought as I put away my flashcards.

I moved on to the math problems, sipping my now cold cup of coffee and trying to solve them within the time limit, then checking answers. Sine, cosine, and tangent problems swirled in my head. I felt great when I could solve them, and frustrated when time ran out. But since all problems could be solved by looking at the answers, in that sense, studying math was fun.

If I told Maru that, he’d probably say something like, “That’s because they only give you solvable problems at school.” Actually, he *had* said that before.

After losing focus for the umpteenth time, I glanced at the clock—almost noon. Though I’d cut back my hours, my July holidays were still packed with shifts at work. *Time to get ready to head out.*

I picked up my empty plate and cup and was about to take them to the kitchen, but paused at the door when I thought I heard footsteps on the other side.

“...Saki?”

There was no reply, and when I opened the door, nobody was there.

*Was it just my imagination?* I thought for *sure* someone was there just now. Not my old man, because he wouldn't hesitate to knock... so it must've been Ayase-san.

Mulling over if it'd just been in my head, I washed the plate and cup in the sink, carefully drying them off with a dishcloth, and put them away in the cupboard.

It was just before 12. My old man had said he was going out for lunch with Akiko-san when she woke up. The dishcloth won't be needed for a while, so I left it out to dry.

*Well then.*

“Yuuta-niisan, I’m ready to go, are you?” Saki said as she walked into the kitchen.

She seemed the same as always.

“Um, you know...”

“Hm?”

“Nah... it’s nothing. Ah, I’m good to go.”

Just like yesterday, we both set out toward the bookstore for a shift together. By that point, I’d totally forgotten about the presence I’d felt behind my door. It probably *was* just my imagination.

I walked side by side with Ayase-san down the same street, the sun blazing down on us. And like yesterday, the weather was beautiful. The mercury had probably pushed past 23°C by that point, and the sun’s rays toasting my skin felt even fiercer.

“It’s hot today, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it sure is.”

Nodding, I glanced to the side. What I saw caught me by surprise, and my heart started racing. Ayase-san was wiping the nape of her neck with a hand towel, beads of sweat glistening on her pale skin. The little “fuah” she let out told me how hot she felt. Even though I saw her in casual clothes all the time, there was something about her beautiful collarbones peeking out from her top that drew me in.

I lived with her, so I should've been used to seeing her dressed like that, but just seeing her shining sweat, her breathing, and even the simple act of wiping off sweat made my heart race.

*Are my thoughts right now too lewd?*

“...right?”

“Huh?”

I apologized, saying I hadn't been listening, and Ayase-san gave me a puzzled look.

“I just repeated ‘it’s hot’, though?”

“Oh, yeah. You’re right. It’s hot.”

*What a conversation. Just talking about the weather, with zero substance.* I fixed my gaze in front of me again, panicking internally. I was worried I would start having even *more* lewd thoughts if I kept looking at her.

I realized that although we were close enough to touch hands yesterday, today I’d subconsciously kept a bit of distance between us.

Ayase-san glanced at me, looking like she wanted to say something.

Was she upset about the distance between us? Or was she thinking I wasn’t being considerate enough to put *more* distance between us?

I didn’t have a clue. But I mean, how could I?

So I stopped walking.

“Wait.”

Ayase-san stopped too.

“Hm?”

She looked confused.

“I just want to make something clear.”

“O-okay. What?”

“I kept some distance today because it’s hot. I didn’t want you to think I’m sweaty and smelly. There’s no other reason.”

“Huh?... Oh.”

Ayase-san measured the distance between us with her eyes, swinging her right hand aimlessly. “Oh, that’s why,” her lips alone seemed to say. She offered me a wry smile as if she got it and waved her hand dismissively.

“It’s fine, it’s fine. I don’t care at all. I don’t want to get too close when I’m all sweaty either. It’s always hot and sticky outside this time of year, so it can’t be helped.”

“Well, that’s what I thought.”

“It’s okay. Don’t worry about it,” she said softly as people were around. We were approaching the busy main street in front of the station.

She smiled at me, and I breathed a sigh of relief. Even little things like that needed to be cleared up. I felt relieved, having dodged a bullet.

Weaving through the crowd, we came to a halt just before scramble crossing, across which was the bookstore.

I casually glanced towards the famous Hachiko statue<sup>4</sup> in front of Shibuya station. Behind it, a couple sat super close to each other on a pipe bench—which was just two iron bars set parallel to each other.

Their bare shoulders were pressed together, and their cheeks were almost touching. They were holding hands and whispering to each other. Despite a bit of greenery, there wasn’t much shade, so they were in direct sunlight. *They must be sweating buckets.* How can they be so clingy? Don’t they mind each other’s sweat?

But then I thought, *maybe I’m seeing it this way because of what Ayase-san said.* She didn’t want to get close when she was sweaty. Maybe my view of that couple was skewed by her opinion.

If Ayase-san had instead said she didn’t care about the sweat and wanted to hold hands, how would I have felt about that couple?

The light turned green and we crossed the street.

“It’s hot, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it is,” I replied for the umpteenth time.

When you’re trying to get on the same page, you need to be honest. But grasping your own feelings isn’t always so simple.

I genuinely hate being told I smell sweaty. But that doesn’t mean I don’t want to hold hands. At Palawan Beach I’d been running around all over the

place and had been drenched in sweat. Yet, I still hugged Ayase-san tightly, and we even kissed.

What was different now? If asked, I'd probably say I was more level-headed at the moment.

*Ah, I get it. Those lovers are probably just caught up in the moment right now.*

Walking into the air-conditioned building, I felt a bit more composed, which helped me get my head straight. First thing's first, I needed to focus on work.

Around 3 pm, the manager told us we could both take a break. Just like yesterday, Yomiuri-senpai and Kozono-san were just knocking off.

“Won’t the register get busy?”

“There aren’t many customers coming in now. If anything, the next shift workers are already here, so you should take your break while you can,” the manager said.

Ayase-san and I nodded in understanding and were about to head to the office when Kozono-san, done with her shift, came up to the manager and asked, “May I go shopping?”

After talking for a bit, she practically scurried over to where we were idly watching. *Ah, she really does move like a small animal.*

“Asamura-senpai, may I have a moment?”

“Huh? Me?”

“Yes. Um, I’d like you to come with me for a bit. There’s something I need your help with.”

I almost reflectively glanced at Ayase-san, but managed to resist the urge. I tilted my head at Kozono-san.

“What do you need help with?”

It wasn’t about work, obviously. If she needed work advice, she’d have asked during her shift. So, what could it be *now*, after she’d finished?

It turned out she wanted to know more about camping before we went.

“When you say ‘camping,’ I have no idea what I should bring.”

“No, no, it’s just a day camp, so you don’t have to think so hard about it.”

“Day camp?”

Oh right, Kozono-san might not have understood. To be fair, I only had basic knowledge from the internet myself.

“It’s a day trip camp. There’s less prep than an overnight one.”

“Oh, right. You *did* say we wouldn’t be staying overnight.”

“Yep, yep.”

One of the day campsites Yomiuri-senpai had suggested was in Tochigi Prefecture<sup>5</sup>. When I checked the website, it looked like we could have a barbecue there too.

“That so? But still, we need to prepare *something*, right? Uhm, then, could you recommend some books or magazines I should read beforehand, Asamura-senpai?”

I rummaged through my memory. A book suitable for beginners on camping? Even if it is a day camp, it’s still technically camping...

“Probably books or magazines about outdoor activities would be good. You know where those are, don’t you, Kozono-san?”

“Oh, yes. I know where they are. But I’m not sure which ones are best for beginners, so I wanted you to pick them out... You seem knowledgeable about this stuff, and I trust your recommendations, Asamura-senpai.”

“That’s not really...” I started to refuse, but that upward glance and puppy dog eyes made it hard to say no.

“Um...” I looked at Ayase-san for help.

“Asamura-kun. I was also looking for the same info, can you help me too?”

She went and stood on the opposite side of Kozono-san.

*Ayase-san’s interested too? Can’t be helped then, I guess.*

“Alright, I’ll send some resources to our LINE group later, and you can also check out some articles online and YouTube videos.”

Sandwiched between the two, and feeling a bit of an odd atmosphere, I led the way to the Hobby/Outdoor section of the shelves.

“I think getting information from books is more reliable,” Kozono-san said, probably referring to my earlier suggestion of using online resources.

I knew that a lot of people these days relied on the net to find information, so I didn't expect her to be so keen on using books. That said, I personally found it easier to retain info when I read it in a book.

"I find it easier to read when it's written on paper too," Ayase-san, walking on my left, commented.

Apparently she was the same type as me.

Reaching the shelf, I picked out an introductory camping book (quickly checking the table of contents to make sure they included sections on day camping) and outdoor magazine. Ayase-san picked up the same book and magazine.

As we were about to check out, I noticed Yomiuri-senpai in her store uniform on the other side of the counter. Apparently she'd remembered some paperwork just as she was on her way out the door.

Yomiuri-senpai looked pleased when she saw the camping magazine and guidebook that Kozono-san had put on the counter.



“Taking having fun seriously! High points. Lovely, lovely. Did you pick these out, Junior-kun?”

“Well, yes.”

“Gotcha. Yep, Junior-kun does have a good eye for books. Don’t you reckon, Erina-chan?”

“Yes, I think so too!”

“Yep, yep. Alright let’s get you checked out.”

After paying, Kozono-san bowed slightly and thanked Yomiuri-senpai, who affectionately patted her head over the counter.

“Thank you very much, Asamura-senpai. I’ll be heading home now.”

Kozono-san waved and left the store.

Ayase-san took her place in front of the register.

“Oh? Saki-chan, you’re buying these too?”

“Huh, ah, yes.”

Ayase-san put down the exact same book and magazine as Kozono-san.

“Ooh, Saki-chan’s buying them too. Ah I see, I see, they’re the same. Everyone’s so fired up about camping, it makes me so happy~”

“Ah, yes. Oh, but… I’m still on my shift.”

Break time or not, it was still during work hours. She’d clearly realized she could have bought them later instead.

“Sorry. I should probably bring these back later, right?”

“You’re on break, so you don’t need to worry your little head. It’s okay, right, Manager~?”

He said it was fine, but Ayase-san, ever conscientious, went to return the book and magazine to their shelf.

“The same book that you chose for Kozono-san, huh? Hmm~, interesting, interesting.”

“Well, I was asked to help.”

Yomiuri-senpai stared at me and grinned knowingly.

“Alrighty, I’m off for real now.”

“Oh, you’ve finished the paperwork, I see.”

It made sense why the manager had offered her a full-time job after she graduated. It was impressive how quickly she handled paperwork that’d bog me down for ages.

“*Hehe*. Can’t wait for the camping trip! It’s going to be fun, pure youth!”

Yomiuri-senpai made her exit, leaving behind those enigmatic words.

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<sup>1</sup> Seika (成果) = outcome.

<sup>2</sup> Kekka (成果) also refers to results or outcomes, but in a neutral way, neither bad or good. Seika carries a positive connotation.

<sup>3</sup> Kasuru (課する), meaning “impose” in English, is used for official or formal situations, like by schools, workplaces, or governments. kyouyousuru (強要する), meaning “enforce”, is more negative, where someone is forced to do something they don’t want to, potentially under threat or duress.

<sup>4</sup> The Hachiko statue is a bronze monument in Tokyo, Japan, honoring a loyal Akita dog named Hachiko. Hachiko faithfully waited for his owner at a train station every day, even after his owner’s death. The statue symbolizes loyalty and devotion, capturing the heartwarming bond between humans and their pets.

<sup>5</sup> Tochigi Prefecture is a scenic region in Japan’s Kanto area, known for its natural beauty, hot springs, and cultural sites like Nikko Toshogu Shrine. It’s popular among Tokyo residents for day trips and weekend getaways.

## July 25th (Sunday) - Ayase Saki

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After quickly fixing my hair in front of the mirror, I gave my reflection a nod of approval.

Then, I headed to the kitchen to whip up some breakfast.

Weekends, and summer vacation, meant that I could take my time making breakfast, which was nice. Plus, Taichi-san, my Stepdad, tended to take it easy waking up.

I tied my hair back and fastened the apron strings around me. *Alright then.*

It'd been a while since it was my turn to cook.

Asamura-kun always preferred light meals for breakfast, and since he had work later, I figured something simple would do the trick.

Then I remembered, just before bed last night, he'd told me, "You don't have to make breakfast for me tomorrow. I wanna get some studying done. Just toast for me."

*Oh right, he's not eating much. In that case—*

I put the loaf of bread (cut into eight slices) on the dining table so it was easy to grab. With that done, I decided to whip something up for me and Taichi-san.

As I was dishing out the salad onto a deep plate, I heard Asamura-kun getting up. I decided to toast the bread and make some coffee while he was freshening up in the bathroom.

Pouring the coffee, I stared at the lonely piece of toast on the plate.

*This probably isn't enough nutrition on its own.*

I had a brain wave and pulled open the fridge. I took out some thin sliced ham and cheese and slapped it on the toast. I wanted to add some veggies too, but didn't want it to be a hassle for him to eat with one hand.

*Damn, I should've just made a sandwich instead.*

As I kicked myself for not doing that, Asamura-kun came in, and just like he said he would, he only grabbed the toast and coffee before saying he was heading back to his room. *Did he make that face because he was surprised to see the ham and cheese on top?*

Taichi-san seemed worried that it wasn't enough breakfast, and Asamura-kun obediently replied that he'd be careful. *He's really caring, isn't he?*

“You sure one slice is enough? Should I bring you something else?”

But Asamura-kun insisted it was plenty and even said he'd take care of the dishes. Honestly though, it's actually easier for me when he doesn't eat as much, because I have fewer plates to wash. I told him as much, and watched him retreat to his room.

“I'm glad he's studying, but I'm worried he might ruin his health, you know,” Taichi-san said quietly, and I nodded in agreement.

“Does him being so motivated mean he's found something he wants to do? Did he mention anything to you, Saki?”

I found myself at a loss for words.

What was Asamura-kun aiming for in the future? I couldn't remember him ever mentioning anything... But, he was studying so hard, so there must've been *something* he wanted to achieve.

“He hasn't told me anything.”

“Well, it's good that he's motivated,” Taichi-san repeated.

*I wonder if there's a reason for him to be worried.*

“Is there something you're worried about?”

“Hm? Yeah, well...”

Taichi-san opened up a bit while we sipped on tea.

It turned out Asamura-kun's biological mother was an education obsessed mom<sup>1</sup>. She pushed him to take elementary school entrance exams, and the same for junior high too<sup>2</sup>.

“I didn't care about that much since I went through public school myself. But she had a tough time with it and wanted more for him.”

“So that's what happened, huh?” I replied, not fully getting her way of thinking either.

I went to a public school all the way through to the end of junior high too. My family wasn't rich enough for me to go to private elementary and junior high schools.

“But, Yuuta didn’t have the knack for studying. He tried his best to meet the expectations, but ended up failing and going to public school.”

I tilted my head in puzzlement at the odd phrase “knack for studying.”

“But I think Yuuta-niisan is pretty smart, isn’t it?”

“I’d like to think so. Well, that might be a parent’s wishful thinking though.”

“No, that’s not true.”

“Thanks. But yeah, he was all over the place with grades back in elementary school.”

That was surprising to me.

Taichi-san explained how failing those exams really hit Asamura-kun hard and he became sulky. Worried that he’d grow to hate learning altogether, Taichi-san tried to cheer him up by taking him around a bunch of places—the zoo, museums, libraries, and so on.

He didn’t want to pressure Asamura-kun; he just hoped that learning could be something other than a pain for him.

It just so happened that one of those places sparked an interest in him—the library. More specifically, Asamura-kun developed an interest in novels. He transformed into a kid who wouldn’t let go of books.

But Asamura-kun’s biological mother wasn’t the biggest fan of this.

“What? Why? I think being able to enjoy reading is amazing.”

I struggled a lot with understanding novels until I got the hang of it. If he was already diving into regular books and not just picture books at that young age, I’d say that was a pretty good alternative to studying.

“She was the type who thought if he was reading, it should be textbooks. She didn’t look too happy when Yuuta was reading stories about colorful striped dragons, or strong girls wearing big socks, or a boy wizard with a scar on his forehead. She said they were all nonsense.”

Although Asamura-kun learned to read early, his grades in elementary school were up and down. That led to him flunking junior high entrance exams.

By then, Taichi-san and Asamura-kun’s biological mother had grown apart emotionally, ending in divorce.

Ironically, though, continuing his reading habit into junior high boosted his critical thinking skills, and Asamura-kun's grades began to noticeably improve.

"I think having more knowledge and being able to organize and apply it to problems in front of him made a difference."

"Does that mean he got better at studying?"

"I'm not sure if that's the right way to put it... Ah, maybe it's more like he learned how to use his brain."

"That kinda makes sense when you put it like that."

And so, Asamura-kun nailed the Suisei High entrance exam.

"But I remember his elementary and junior high exams. He'd study so much he'd skip meals, pushing himself too hard. I see shades of that version of him now..."

After slurping his tea, Taichi let out a long sigh.

"I wonder why he started pushing himself so hard. Don't get me wrong, as a parent I'm happy my son is so diligent, but it's pointless if he ruins his health. Saki-chan, do you have any idea why he's like this?"

I shook my head. I didn't have a clue.

But seeing Taichi's worried face made me feel like I had to say *something*.

"Oh, but he's been talking about going camping with me and our coworkers."

Taichi-san looked up at me with a "Hmm?"

"We haven't set a date yet. Um, but I was planning to ask for permission later. Oh, it's just a day trip. We'll just go, have a barbecue, and come back."

"That sounds nice. Yeah. Very nice."

"I was gonna tell you once it was all decided. Um... so, is it okay if we go?"

I figured I should've talked it over with Asamura-kun first before bringing it up together, but I had a strong urge to clear away Taichi-san's gloomy expression. *But then, what if he shoots it down right now?*

"Of course you can go. It's important to take a break once in a while."

I felt relief wash over me.

I promised to share the detailed plans and location later. I needed to tell Asamura-kun that I'd brought up the camping trip ASAP.

“If only he could learn to relax a bit more.”

“I’ll keep an eye on him.”

Taichi-san looked over his shoulder at me while taking his teacup to the sink.

“And you shouldn’t overdo it either, Saki-chan. Make sure to take breaks too,” he said, looking serious.

I’d lost count of how many times I’d thought it, but my Mom really did find a good partner. Warmth spread through my chest.

“I’ll try not to push myself too hard, Stepdad,” I replied with a nod.

Taichi-san’s eyes narrowed and he smiled happily.

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I closed the door to my room, a place I’d grown completely used to by now.

As the sound of the knob turning faded away, I let out a quiet sigh.

I sat down at my desk and spread out my study materials, thinking back on my earlier conversation with Taichi-san.

Maybe I *was* pushing myself too hard. Maybe I should take it easy for a bit.

It was like the words he’d said out of concern for Asamura-kun were meant for the me from last year. I was definitely overdoing it back then.

Meeting Yuuta Asamura due to our parents’ remarriage had made it impossible for me to go back to living life the way I did before. His presence had just become too big a part of my life.

But it was also Asamura-kun who saved me from the way I was back then.

I couldn’t do something as simple as going to the pool with friends—something *anyone* could do—back then. I couldn’t imagine inviting others to things myself, and the only friend who would invite me was Maaya. And I even stubbornly tried to refuse *her* invitation.

Asamura-kun had patiently reached out to me at the time. And on one hot summer day, I played around in the water with Maaya, Asamura-kun, and some of Maaya's friends I was meeting for the first time. Despite a bunch of strangers being there, I managed to have a good time and felt more at ease.

*If Asamura-kun is under the same kind of stress I was back then, I want to be the one to help him relax.*

A thought surfaced all of a sudden. Maybe Yomiuri-senpai sensed how stressed Asamura-kun was and that's why she'd acted like a spoiled kid wanting to go camping. If so, shouldn't I have been the first one to notice? I am his girlfriend, after all.

The thought made me feel a little down, but if the camp could give him a breather, it didn't matter who invited him.

Ultimately, Asamura-kun agreed to go camping because Yomiuri-senpai asked. And then, Kozono-san, the newbie at work, said she wanted to go too, so I ended up having no choice but to go as well.

I mean, well, you know—just the thought of someone else soothing his stress bugged me a bit.

I hated this ugly jealousy, but knowing that didn't make the feeling go away.

*Inviting someone to hang out myself, huh?*

My phone made a silly *boop* sound. A message from Maaya.

I ran my eyes over it. It was an invitation to a fireworks festival happening in about two weeks. She suggested we both invite some friends and go watch it together.

“She really is such a social butterfly...”

The timing of her message was uncanny, as if she was reading my mind. I shook my head, half-expecting to find surveillance cameras, though I knew that wasn't the case.

*Boop.*

Hm?

**Maaya:** 【You should invite Asamura-kun too, of course!】

*There's no way she's actually spying on me, is there?*

“Okay, okay,” I muttered as I started to reply, then paused, thinking.

Going as a group. Sure, that's nice too. Like the pool outing last year, and the upcoming camping trip with our coworkers. We also went to watch Maru-kun's game together as a big group.

But, it wouldn't be just the two of us—Asamura-kun and me.

With this little time left of our high school years, this last summer, I wanted to make memories that were ours alone.

That being so, shouldn't I hold off on joining Maaya and the others?

*Just the two of us.* The thought made my heart race. But...

**Saki:**【Give me some time to reply.】

I shot off that short message.

Inviting him to hang out myself. The reason I shied away from it was a fear of rejection.

*...No that's not quite it.*

It feels like a reality check that I'm not good enough. But honestly, someone saying no to an invite isn't a big deal (though it can be). Everyone's got their own schedules, maybe plans with others, or just needed some alone time.

That's me to a tee. Turning down invitations from Maaya was pretty much routine, and if things were going well I accepted even one out of ten invites...

I suddenly felt very inconsiderate. Maaya invites me over and over again, never giving up. Maybe she's a reincarnated saint or something.

Maybe I should accept her invitations more often... *No, wait, I'm getting sidetracked.* I mean yeah, being turned down doesn't mean I'm being rejected myself.

*I hate this lack of confidence.*

Why did my fear of rejection always come first? It's like a broken record.

I wanted to muster up the courage and ask Asamura-kun to the fireworks festival. Say something like, "There's a fireworks show... Wanna go with just the two of us?"

If he said yes, I'd apologize and turn down Maaya's invitation.

I got up from my chair and found myself walking to Asamura-kun's door. Standing there, I took a deep breath and I practiced what I'd say in my head a few times—"Wanna watch the fireworks alone together?"

Pumping myself up, I was about to knock when I froze, fist still raised.

*Oh right, Asamura-kun is studying.*

He holed up in his room wanting to get ahead before work. He had his study camp coming up too, and the camping trip he'd agreed to—provided it wasn't an overnight thing.

Thinking it over, maybe Asamura-kun didn't want to waste his study time on yet another outing?

Hesitation crept in. But it's not good to push yourself too hard either... so this could be for Asamura-kun's own good.

But then again, I might've just been *assuming* Asamura-kun was pushing himself too hard.

*Maybe I'm just trying to cover up my own loneliness by making this suggestion? Isn't that selfish?* I didn't want to steal his precious time just because I felt that way. But the thought of having no summer memories with him was unbearable.

Just then, I heard the sound of a chair move and someone standing up, followed by footsteps heading towards the door.

Panic set in. I hadn't made up my mind about asking him yet. I lowered my fist and quietly slinked away, praying he wouldn't hear my footsteps. I dashed back into my own room, which had the door open, grabbed the knob, and carefully inched it closed without making a sound. I slowly let go of the knob, and it returned to its original position with a faint *click*.

I heard Asamura-kun's footsteps pattering down the hallway. *Phew.* He probably headed towards the kitchen.

"He didn't notice me, right?"

I put my hand on my racing heart. As I sat on my chair, my heart rate slowly returning to normal, the realization hit me that I didn't need to run away.

The next thing I knew, it was almost time for work, so I hurriedly got ready.

"Yuuta-niisan, I'm ready to go, are you?"

I left my room innocent faced and called out to Asamura-kun in the kitchen. Then we left the flat at the same time as yesterday.

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Halfway through my shift, Shiori Yomiuri and Kozono-san, who'd finished early, headed to the changing room.

Only Kozono-san came back, asking for help to pick out camping gear. It felt like she specifically sought out Asamura-kun, though I tried to tell myself it was all in my head.

Self-consciousness? Overthinking? Maybe.

Or maybe it was because I had a bit of a hang-up about Kozono-san, and she sensed it, choosing to rely on Asamura-kun instead.

*If so, I feel bad.* I should've been the most reliable senpai to her, given I was a girl too and close in age, but I wasn't.

At the same time, though, part of me felt annoyed that she had to make it so obvious... *No, wait. Maybe it's just my distorted way of seeing things that makes me feel that way.* It's just that, you know, Asamura-kun happened to be one step closer to her than I was...

When Kozono-san asked for help, Asamura-kun shot a glance my way to gauge my reaction.

I blurted out an excuse to join in.

“Asamura-kun. I was also looking for the same info, can you help me too?”

I positioned myself on the opposite side from Kozono-san as we set off toward the outdoor section.

Kozono-san and Asamura-kun were walking so close that their shoulders were practically touching, and I nearly yanked Asamura-kun away to the other side without thinking. Seeing Kozono-san so openly close to Asamura-kun stirred a nagging jealousy in me.

When she handed Asamura-kun a book and magazine he recommended, I grabbed copies myself.

When I went to pay for the book, I saw Yomiuri-senpai—who was meant to have finished her shift—back behind the counter, reminding me I was still on the clock.

Though I *was* technically on break, snagging my own books wasn’t the best look, now was it? Especially right in front of a junior. Feeling a bit down, I went to return the book to the shelf. I’d memorized all the titles anyway. I figured I could grab them after my shift; it’s not the type of thing that sells out.

Kozono-san left, and Yomiuri-senpai, who’d forgotten to finish up something, did the same not long after. Our shift wrapped up a couple hours later.

Walking home with Asamura-kun, I replayed the day’s events in my mind.

Kozono-san, scattering her cute, small-animal-like gestures this way and that, definitely seemed like the type to be “loveable by just breathing,” just as Yomiuri-senpai said.

I couldn’t see myself being that way. Being loveable. I can’t say I’ve ever had that quality. Or that I’ve somehow managed to pick it up.

Even when it came to fashion, I aimed for a sort of keep-your-distance vibe, not the other way around.

For me, fashion and makeup were a form of armament<sup>3</sup>, not allure. Like when my nails are perfectly polished, and the sparkly sheen makes me feel stronger. Or when my outfit is just right, and I can strut into places I usually dread, feeling like there’s a backbone holding me up.

It’s about feeling strong and standing tall on my own.

That’s my “armament.”

I do want appreciation for my fashion skills, but I don’t see them as tools for being loveable.

I picked up makeup and fashion from my Mom, but in the end, she lost my biological father’s love.

It’s all give and take. I’m of the mind that the world works on an exchange basis. To get love, you’ve gotta give something in return.

But then... How is it that my Mom lost his love even after dedicating her success to him—becoming the main breadwinner by bartending and keeping us

afloat after my father's business tanked, losing his job and income? It almost seems like she lost it because she gave too much.

So then... what the heck do you have to give to get love? Or is it just something you're born with, like Kozono-san, where it just happens without you trying?

*What do I need to give for Asamura-kun to love me?* Thinking about it, I should've just asked him straight up instead of stewing over it. That really needed to be cleared up between us.

Still, back then, I couldn't step back and look at us from the outside. Love is blind, as they say.

After getting home and eating dinner, I flopped down on my bed. I'd already taken a bath, finished my exam study drills, and now all that was left was to sleep.

### 〔Getting guys to love you〕

While fighting my heavy eyelids, I found myself googling something I shouldn't have on my still-plugged-in phone.

A whole list of results popped up.

*...There's so many.* "How to be loved by men" and "Essentials for being loved," the kind of searches that catch your eye but also reek of scam.

If it weren't for the fact I was about to sleep, or if my brain wasn't mush from tiredness, I might've ended up going down that rabbit hole. It's the kind of thing that normally would've made me feel embarrassed.

But Erina Kozono-san would be at the camp, someone Yomiuri-senpai said was naturally loveable. And today, she was really close to Asamura-kun.

*No, trying to downplay the situation by saying it's just Kozono-san or something doesn't make any sense.*

Even if Kozono-san was out of the picture, if another cute girl popped up next to Asamura-kun, I'd be back to feeling the same way. Logically, there's no dodging it.

On a rational level, I get that, but...

Just then, one article in the search results caught my eye.

### 〔Common misunderstandings between men and women〕

My heart skipped a beat. I started reading through it.

『When you're aiming to communicate, asking for opinions as if you want a solution makes the other person think they're being asked for a solution and will try to find one on their own. If the purpose is communication itself, asking for an opinion can be a negative thing.』

It was a bit wordy and hard to grasp at first. It took me a few reads, but it finally clicked.

Basically, it meant don't go looking for logical agreement when you're trying to get on the same page emotionally.

When I'm wanting to set my mind at ease, what I want is to share my feelings, not dig into the why's or how's.

Say I went up to Asamura-kun with, "I feel anxious seeing another girl next to you!" Him coming back with, "Okay, then I won't work at places with women then," wouldn't cut it.

That'd give me peace in a logical sense, but wouldn't resolve the anxious feeling I had. Because I already knew it was an irrational emotion.

Those kinds of feelings aren't fair, and it's unreasonable to expect a new part-timer not to rely on their senpai.

But feelings don't listen to logic.

That's why so many couples end up arguing and breaking up, without even realizing this.

I got the point, but also, that mix-up seems to happen because whoever started the conversation doesn't lay out what they're really after.

*But, I mean, how I'm supposed to share this feeling with him is beyond me.*

Misunderstandings, huh...

If it looks like we're heading in that direction, I'll be careful—I think.

That was my conclusion as my eyelids grew heavy and the soft embrace of sleep took me.

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<sup>1</sup> Saki uses the expression Kyouiku mama (教育ママ) here, which literally means “education mama,” a term used in Japan to describe a mother who is very focused on her children’s education. It usually results in the child having a lot of pressure put on them from a young age.

<sup>2</sup> Usually Japanese kids go to a public school that doesn’t have an entrance exam, but Yuuta’s mother wanted him to go to private elementary and junior high schools, which require an entrance exam.

<sup>3</sup> Saki uses 武装 (busou) metaphorically here. Busou can include both defensive gear, like armor, or offensive weapons. In previous volumes (including the licensed translation) it was unclear what she meant by this. In essence, I think she’s arming herself (as if for battle), to both defend herself and go on the offensive as each social situation dictates.

## July 30th (Friday) - Asamura Yuuta

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After lining up everyone's schedules, our day camp was set for July 31st.

We decided on it early in the week, and until now, the weekend, I'd been researching day camping between study sessions.

I figured I'd do nothing but study over summer break, but the research gave me a bit of a breather.

And the camp was finally tomorrow.

I didn't have work today, so If I focussed on studying in the morning, I could go shopping for the necessary camping stuff in the afternoon.

I spent the morning on exam prep, and during lunch, I asked Ayase-san if she wanted to go shopping with me. As I was doing so, my phone beeped. It was a message from Yomiuri-senpai in the LINE group we'd made for the camp. Ayase-san and I peeked at our phones.

**Shiori:**【You've probably already checked, but the site has a waterfall and outdoor sauna! Don't forget your swimsuits~】

Say what? Ayase-san and I looked at each other in surprise.

"I didn't know we were planning to use the sauna."

"Looks like we can also go in the river. There's a place where the river is sectioned off next to the sauna to serve as a cold bath."

"I didn't even notice."

"Apparently campsites by the waterside are a thing."

"Seems like it."

I had seen that there was a sauna and river where we were going, but I'd just been thinking about the barbecue side of things.

*Well, I can just wear the trunks I got last year since my size hasn't changed, so I don't need to go out and buy anything.*

"I can just use the one I wore when we went to the pool last year, so it's no problem for me. What about you, Saki?"

“Yeah... makes sense. Hmm, lemme think about that for a bit,” Ayase-san said a little hesitantly before falling silent.

She was mulling over something.

Caught up in the moment, my thoughts also unconsciously drifted.

The word “pool” brought up memories of the time we went to the pool at the end of August last year. I pointed things out about her that Ayase-san hadn’t noticed. And she’d complimented me on the way I acted at the pool back then.

At the time, though, my self-esteem wasn’t exactly sky-high, so I struggled to accept such one-sided praise from her.

*No, maybe that’s still the case.*

That’s something Maru always tells me. That my self-esteem is too low. But I feel like it’s better to be humble than to risk inflating my ego by taking someone else’s evaluation of me at face value.

“...leave.”

“What?”

I hastily yanked my mind back into the present.

“I said that if you’re going shopping, let me know before you leave.”

“A-ah, okay, got it.”

Our conversation over lunch ended there. After I finished eating, I went back to my room and took a look at the camping details on my PC.

Not only had Yomiuri-senpai sent me info about the place itself, but also a whole list of things needed for camping. I’d done my own research of course, using books and searching the net, but after comparing notes, it looked like just following her list was the best option.

I ran my eyes over the “things needed on the day” list:

#### 〔For Camping〕

- Tarp (Yomiuri will bring)
- Folding table (Yomiuri will bring)
- Folding chair

#### 〔For Barbecue〕

- Barbecue grill, fuel (charcoal), tongs, knife, cutting board (at the site)
- Cooler box
- Ingredients and seasonings

〔Consumables & Rain Gear, etc.〕

- Rainwear, raincoat
- Alcohol spray
- Insect repellent
- Trash bags, plastic bags
- Kitchen towels
- Dishes (paper cups, paper plates, etc.)
- Sponge, detergent
- Food storage bags, cling wrap, aluminum foil

It seemed like a lot, but Yomiuri-senpai was renting a car, so transporting everything wasn't going to be a problem.

We could divide the stuff we needed into 〔Camping Gear〕, 〔Barbecue Gear〕, and 〔Consumables & Miscellaneous〕.

You'd usually need to include tents in your camping gear, but since we weren't staying overnight, we didn't need to bring them. It was a relief, honestly.

“Tarp” had me stumped at first. When I looked it up, it turned out to be a large piece of fabric you could stretch out to protect against sun and rain, kind of like a makeshift roof.

While I got the gist of what it was online, I still wasn't sure how to go about setting one up. It seemed easier than pitching a tent, but might require some know-how depending on the model. Anyway, since Yomiuri-senpai had one, she'd probably know how to do it. She was bringing that tarp and a folding table.

I wasn't sure why she had camping gear. Maybe she had a lot of outdoor camping experience. It wouldn't be surprising if camping was one of her hobbies.

Folding chairs were just what they sounded like: small, foldable chairs. Each person needed to bring their own (it'd be weird if one person had multiple chairs). *Looks like I'll have to buy one.*

Hands<sup>1</sup> or somewhere like that probably sold them.

“Folding chair” went on my shopping list.

Next was things we needed for the barbecue. Going off Yomiuri-senpai’s message and the campsite’s website, we could borrow most of the necessary stuff there—like the grill, charcoal, tongs, knives, and cutting boards.

*Camping sure has gotten way easier these days.*

We had a small cooler at home, but not a big one for storing food. When I mentioned this in the LINE group, Yomiuri-senpai said she’d bring one. Why would a girl in university living alone have such a big cooler box?

*...Well, it is Yomiuri-senpai we’re talking about, so I guess it makes sense.*

**Shiori:**【I’ve already bought the meat and put it in the freezer too~!】

A barrage of smiling cat stamps came with her message, and I could practically see her grinning face from here.

The term “carnivorous girl<sup>2</sup>” popped into my head. Obviously the meaning was totally different in this context, though.

What else did we need? Rainwear was important, but I already had some, so I didn’t need to buy that either.

So, my shopping list, narrowed down to just the essentials, looked like this:

- Folding chair
- Food and seasonings
- Alcohol spray
- Insect repellent
- Trash bags & plastic bags
- Kitchen towels
- Disposable dishes (paper cups, plates, etc.)
- Sponge & detergent
- Food storage bags, cling wrap, & aluminum foil

We'd probably end up buying that stuff by coordinating through LINE.

After jotting everything down, I went to knock on Ayase-san's door to see if she was ready to go shopping.

Just then, I heard some scrambling noises from behind the door.

"J-Just a minute," came a flustered voice.

She seemed rushed, so maybe I'd accidentally woken her up from a nap or something.

After a short wait, she opened the door.

"I was thinking of heading out to the shops now—"

"Ah, yeah, shopping. Um..." she said in a soft voice. "About that, can I... buy a swimsuit?"

"Huh? But couldn't you just wear what you wore to the pool last year?"

In hindsight, that was an incredibly insensitive question. I hadn't thought of swimsuits as fashion, more like school uniforms or gym clothes—something you don't change year to year.

"Wearing the same one two years in a row is a bit, you know... Trends change."

"Trends.... Got it."

That made sense. If someone was into fashion, they'd think about that. Plus, the only overlap between last year's pool group and this year's camping group was me, and I had no clue what patterns or colors were trendy back then. But Ayase-san wasn't one to compromise on her sense of style.

"Yep, that's how it is. Think about it in terms of equipment—it's a bit of a downer when your gear's level drops."

"Got it. Let's make time for that then."

Ayase-san let out a relieved sigh.

"I'll go get ready real quick, so wait for me at the entrance."

\*\*\*

Despite the afternoon heat, we set off to shop for camping supplies.

Our destination was the well-known lifestyle goods store about 400 meters northwest of the Hachiko statue: Hands Shibuya.

Its entrance was at the corner where Organ-zaka meets Inokashira-dori. A cool breeze hit our skin as we stepped inside, a welcome relief from the sweltering heat outside. Though Ayase-san did draw in her shoulders and shrink down a bit.

“Cold?”

“A bit.”

She slipped her arms into the sheer outerwear she had draped over her shoulders.

*Now, where are the outdoor goods?* Looking around for a map, we found one near the entrance that read, 『1A: Outdoor.』

“So it’s on the first floor?”

“Which way is A?”

This store had a weird layout, with floors staggered in half-level increments. The first floor was particularly confusing, being divided into 1A, 1B, and 1C, but fortunately, the 1A was right near the main entrance.

The shelves were lined with a colorful array of outdoor apparel, bags, rain gear, lanterns, flashlights, headlamps, and other items for nighttime. We could ignore those, as we weren’t staying overnight. There were also tumblers, cutlery of all varieties, disposable plates, and paper cups.

Ayase-san spoke up as she happily browsed the shelves.

“What do we need again?”

“I wrote it all down, just in case.”

I showed her the list on my phone.

“That’s quite a lot,” she said, looking over the memo.

“Well, Yomiuri-senpai is taking care of the ingredients, since you know, she’s the only one with a big cooler.”

“Oh, right.”

“Besides, most of these items aren’t just for camping. Things like trash bags, kitchen towels, and detergent are useful everyday.”

She nodded in agreement.

We had agreed to split the cost, so I’d have to save the receipt.

“Hey, can you send this list to my LINE as well? And then, I’ll go this way, and you go that way, Asamura-kun. If we tell each other what we find, we can finish in half the time, don’t you think?”

She pointed to the left side of the floor as she said “this way,” and the right side of the as she said “that way.” She’d suggested a divide-and-conquer strategy, attacking from both the left and right sides of the 1A floor.

I remembered how effortlessly she navigated store aisles when picking out clothes for me. Maybe her mind mapped out the most efficient shopping routes instantly. She might even be able to crack the traveling salesman problem<sup>3</sup> no sweat.

Anyway, putting aside my fanciful thoughts, I found her idea practical and quickly sent her the shopping list via LINE.

We each took a basket and split up in opposite directions. I found one of the items, dropping it into my basket and shooting off a 【Found it】 message along with the item’s name. Ayase-san’s reply was a cat stamp holding a 【Ryo!】 sign.. I hadn’t seen that stamp before. “Ryo” meant “acknowledged,” didn’t it? It was a bit out of character for the usually cool Ayase-san to use a playful stamp like that. *Maybe Narasaka-san or someone else is rubbing off on her.*

Picturing Ayase-san sending those stickers with a completely serious face made me smile. I covered my mouth with my hand, glancing around nervously to see if anyone noticed. Of course, they didn’t.

Ayase-san found an item too and sent 【Found it.】 I replied with a simple 【acknowledged】 of my own, sans cute stamp. I didn’t have any of them, so it couldn’t be helped. *Maybe using the same one she did would make her happy?... Well, I’d think about it later.*

Messaging back and forth on LINE, we efficiently covered the floor from both sides. Teamwork makes the dream work.

We met back in the middle.

“Phew. I think we’ve got everything now.”

“It’s quite a lot, isn’t it?” Ayase-san observed, looking down into the baskets.

“Let’s share what we’ve got with the group on LINE before we check out.”

I sent a message listing everything we were about to buy.

A notification pinged immediately with a reply from Yomiuri-senpai.

**Shiori:**【Just bought the ingredients. Got extra meat!】

Her message came in her usual style. It really drove home for me that her way of speaking wasn’t an act.

A “Yay!” stamp featuring a puppy with meat in its mouth popped up from Kozono-san.

Ayase-san responded with a serious question.

**Saki:**【What should we do about the seasonings?】

**Shiori:**【I’ll bring those too!】

**Erina:**【I found unopened pepper and salt at home, so I’ll bring them.】

I nodded after seeing Yomiuri-senpai and Kozono-san’s replies. With that, we had all the necessary supplies.

“Umm, did we forget anything?” Ayase-san asked while checking the stuff in our baskets.

“We just need to grab those folding chairs now.”

“Oh, I saw some back there.”

“Let’s go take a look then.”

She led me to the corner where the folding chairs were on display. Ayase-san picked out a cute red folding chair. I reached out for the chair next to it—but then it hit me.

“Ah... maybe matching colors isn’t the best idea.”

It wouldn’t bother Yomiuri-senpai, who knows we’re family, but I wondered what Kozono-san, who doesn’t know the full story, would think.

My comment made Ayase-san pause.

“Now we’re on the topic, Asamura-kun, what are we telling Kozono-san about us?”

“Do you mean whether or not to tell her that we’re step-siblings, or that we’re actually a couple?”

Just saying “couple” made me glance around the store nervously. I hadn’t checked if anyone was close enough to hear before saying it, and the thought of someone we knew overhearing us made me feel a little embarrassed.

“Thats... um, but y’know, since Kozono-san works in Shibuya, it wouldn’t be weird for her to see us here, would it?”

“Yeah, that makes sense.”

“So, if we don’t want Kozono-san to find out that we’re a couple, maybe we shouldn’t act coupley in public either.” Ayase-san’s voice got quieter with each word.

I got what she was implying. That meant we’d have to ditch our “siblings at home, lovers outside” strategy and just stick to being siblings *all* the time.

*But if that happens, that’s like being just regular siblings, isn’t it?*

While my old man and Akiko-san might be relieved, what about the feelings that’d grown between us? Could we really keep going like nothing’s changed under those circumstances?

“But Kozono-san doesn’t go to Suisei High, and she did say her closest station wasn’t Shibuya when we were setting up where to meet tomorrow, didn’t she?”

“Yeah, true. So, the chances of her seeing us together are slim, and even if she does, we don’t have to stress about school gossip?”

I nodded, and a slight look of relief played across Ayase-san’s face.

But even as I agreed, I realized this wasn’t really solving the core problem. Wanting to act natural outside meant always risking being seen by people close to us. We hadn’t really talked about what we’d do if that happened.

How would we explain it to Kozono? She wasn’t the only problem. There were plenty of people out there like her.

Behaving like lovers naturally do meant being ready for someone to find out eventually, and when that time came, we’d probably be forced to make a decision.

It's not like you go around sharing your relationship status with everyone, but avoiding that talk isn't some magic solution either.

"Well, for now, let's not buy matching chairs. You don't like being questioned either, right, Ayase-san?"

"I don't... but..." she trailed off.

"Something bothering you?"

Ayase-san pouted.

"When they were doing that special on infidelity, they said that cheating husbands like to pretend they're single outside."

"Ugh."

*Maybe it's time to quit watching those daytime talk shows, don't you think?*

"I wouldn't do something like that."

"I know. I know you're not that type of person, Asamura-kun, but still..."

*I kind of understand the point of wedding rings now.*

"Anyway, let's talk about this later when we have more time. We clearly don't have enough time to figure it out by tomorrow."

"Yeah..."

We still hadn't found a smooth, casual way to let people know about us. Us being step-siblings who became lovers after our parents' remarriage.

As we headed to the register, I thought about how we would answer if someone directly asked us about it. It seemed to me we might have no choice but to dodge the question with some vague answer or other. We really didn't have a clear response ready.



“So, we’re just looking for a swimsuit now, right? But it doesn’t look like they sell them here.”

Well, not that they *don’t* sell them, but knowing her, she wouldn’t settle for just *anything* wearable.

“That’s... fine.”

“Oh, and of course, I’ll carry half of the bags.”

I wanted to say I could handle it, but didn’t want to make her feel bad for offering. So, I handed her one of the bags. The lighter one.

We left Hands with our green-logoed paper bags and headed towards Center Gai in Shibuya.

We ended up at a beachwear shop. It seemed to be an Italian brand store that even had swimsuits and legwear displayed outside, making it hard to know where to look. It felt a bit intimidating to go near it.

Ayase-san mentioned in passing that Italian clothes are more about being elegant and sexy than just casual. But, she added, there are many exceptions. Still, I personally couldn’t really tell the difference.

“Okay then, I’ll just wait here.”

Ayase-san gave me a questioning look as I tried to wait diagonally across from the store.

“What’re you talking about?”

“Huh, but...”

I thought back to when we brought swimsuits separately last year. But at the time we weren’t a couple yet, were we? *Wait, does being a couple mean shopping for swimsuits together?*

“Mm.”

I had no choice but to grab hold of her hand when she offered it to me, and I followed her into the store like a cow being led by a herder. No turning back now. I did a quick check to make sure we didn’t run into anyone we knew.

Fortunately, the heat had died down, so I didn’t have to worry about sweaty palms.

“Outside, remember?” Ayase-san muttered as if casting a spell. “...Act like a couple.”

After biting back a response, I gave in.

Walking past racks of women's swimsuits wasn't exactly comfortable for a male high school student, but I couldn't say that out loud. I desperately tried to convince myself not to look away or down. I wasn't doing anything wrong.

Ayase-san's pace through the store was decisive, as if she knew exactly what she wanted. She picked up a swimsuit, then another, asking for my opinion each time, like, "What do you think?" and "Does this suit me?"

If it were a flashy red bikini, maybe I could comment on it being too bold, but...

Her choices weren't overly flashy or skimpy, just selected purely on design, leaving me unsure what the right response was.

"Uh, I don't know much about women's swimsuits, so asking me for my opinion... I mean, I dunno how to answer..."

My fumbling response made her look troubled for a second, but then she seemed to hit on something.

"Um, how do I put this... It's not about right or wrong answers, I just wanna have a conversation. Your opinion on swimsuits is just a conversation starter."

I tilted my head in confusion. I'd never thought of questions like "What do you think?" as just fodder for conversation.

"So I don't have to give my opinion?"

"Just your impressions are fine."

That seemed like a tall order.

Noticing me tilting my head in confusion, Ayase-san made another troubled face, then scrunched up her eyebrows in thought. After a "*hmm*", she held up a hanger with a blue swimsuit on it between us.

"Um, so, how does *this* look to you?"

It had a unique design, transitioning in gradient from light blue at the top to a deeper blue towards the bottom. It was reminiscent of the transition from the sky blue of shallow water to the deep blue of the deep sea. I told Ayase-san as much, and she listened silently, nodding along.

"And also, I'm worried it might come undone if it's only tied at the waist on both sides."

Ayase-san burst out laughing at that addition.

“I think it’ll be fine as long as you’re not swimming competitively.”

“Is that how it works?”

“Some ties are decorative, so if you’re worried, you could choose one of those. This one needs to be tied properly, though.”

“Oh.”

*I see. So that’s a thing.* I was genuinely impressed, but Ayase-san looked at me and laughed again.

“I mean, it’s not like I would know that.”

“Yeah true, I can’t recall any men’s swimsuits with ties on the sides.”

“See?”

“It’d be nice though. Cute, even.”

Sadly, the trend of valuing cuteness in men’s swimwear hasn’t really taken off yet.

“So, is this the kind of feedback you wanted?”

“Yep, that’s what I wanted to hear. I didn’t ask to find the ‘right’ swimsuit but to share the fun of shopping together.”

*Ah, I get it now.* So, it’s less about exchanging information and more about sharing feelings.

As we continued, Ayase-san would pick up swimsuits she liked, show them to me, and I’d share my immediate thoughts. She’d offer a word or two in response, then move on.

After a while, I realized this was similar to discussing a movie after watching it. There wasn’t a “correct” answer when you discussed them. Obviously opinions do exist though, like saying, “This could have been better” or “That would have made it more exciting.” Conversations might veer in that direction among filmmakers or movie buffs, but a conversation over coffee after watching a movie with a close friend is different. It’s all about swapping impressions and enjoying the time spent watching the movie together.

*A conversation for sharing feelings, huh?*

As we repeated this process, the initial awkwardness of being in a women's swimwear store faded.

Ayase-san's brightly colored hair sparkled under the store lights. I liked how serious her face was as she picked out swimsuits.

We fed off each other's excitement as we chatted.

We left the store and were heading home. Ayase-san stretched her arms up towards the sky, the paper bag swinging from her shoulder.

"Ahhh, that was fun."

The sky was already dark, signaling it was time to head home for dinner to avoid being too tired the next morning. I was glad I'd finished studying early.

Looking up at the moon racing through the gaps between buildings, I nodded to Ayase-san.

"It was fun for me too."

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<sup>1</sup> He's talking about Tokyu Hands, a popular home goods chain.

<sup>2</sup> Nikushoku joshi (肉食女子) translates literally to "carnivorous girl." This term is used in Japanese to describe a woman who is proactive in pursuing romantic interests, as opposed to being passive. It metaphorically compares assertiveness to the carnivorous behavior of going after what one wants.

<sup>3</sup> The traveling salesman problem (TSP) is an optimization challenge in computer science, aiming to find the shortest route visiting each city once and returning to the start. It's known for its easy-to-understand problem statement but difficult solution.

## July 30th (Friday) - Ayase Saki

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During lunch, Asamura-kun invited me to go shopping with him tomorrow.

Just then, both our phones beeped.

**Shiori:**【You've probably already checked, but the site has a waterfall and outdoor sauna! Don't forget your swimsuits~】

Reading it, I made a weird sound in my throat without meaning to.

Given I was studying for entrance exams this year, going out and having fun was the *last* thing on my mind. Obviously that extended to wearing a swimsuit... and I'd felt relieved thinking it was just a barbecue.

While eating lunch alone with Asamura-kun (my Mom was asleep, and my Stepdad was at work), I started to worry and got distracted.

I returned to my room after I finished eating. I rummaged through my wardrobe and pulled out the swimsuit I bought last year.

“It should be fine, it should be fine... I hope.”

I hung it on the back of a chair and stripped off my T-shirt. Just as I went to take off my underwear too, I had a moment of panic and checked if the door was locked. *Yep, locked securely.*

Alright—

To check what I wanted to check, I didn't need to take *everything* off; just the top would suffice. I swapped my clothes with the swimsuit hanging on the chair, then slipped the neck over my head and held it against my chest. Then, I reached behind my back to hook it... *Ugh.*

I felt a trickle of sweat slide down the inside of my heart.

I could feel a tightness from my chest to my back, making it slightly difficult to fasten the hook... or so it seemed.

I bravely picked up the bottom part of the swimsuit that was spread out on the floor.

*It must just be in my head.*

But reality was cruel. I noticed that the area around my hips was slightly snugger.

*Wait, could it be... No, did I actually get... fat?*

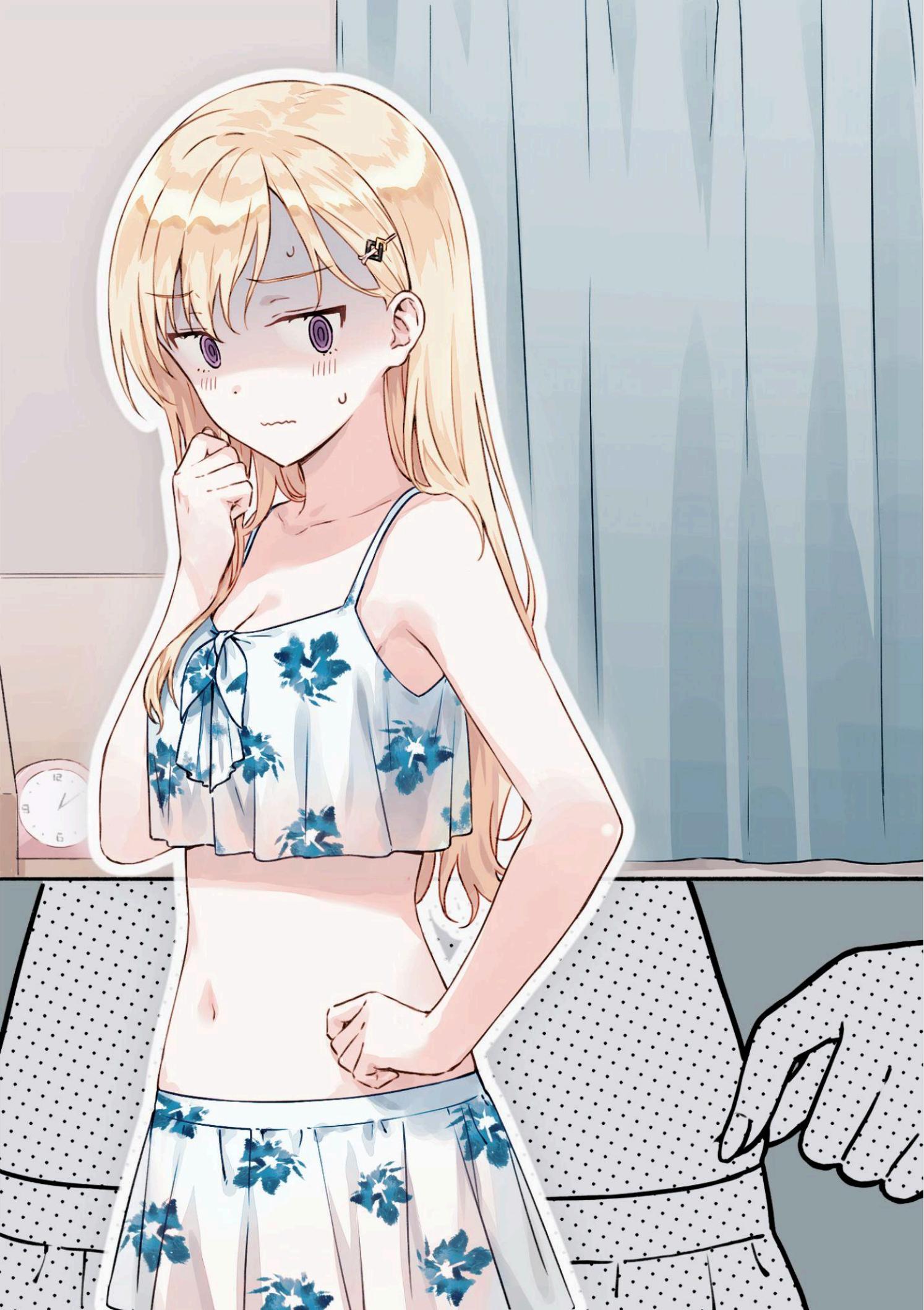
I'd been pretending not to notice, but truthfully, I was a little aware of it. I weighed myself every day, so I did think I'd put on a bit of weight.

However, I'd chalked it up to gaining muscle mass from all the exercising I did preparing for the sports festival and put it out of my mind.

But I couldn't deceive myself when it came to my chest and hips. I might've let myself go a little...

As I stood looking at myself in my full-length mirror, I couldn't help pinching the fat around my belly, even though I knew better. Just being able to pinch it said it all, really.

*No good. I can't wear this swimsuit. I have to buy a new one...*



Right when I was taking a deep breath to settle my internal cold sweat, there was a knock on the door. I nearly let out a yelp.

I definitely couldn't go and open the door in this outfit.

"J-Just a minute."

Making Asamura-kun wait at the door, I quickly got dressed and tossed last year's swimsuit onto the bed. I covered it with a futon and then opened the door.

I wasn't planning to let him in or anything, and I didn't think he was the type to peek, but I still didn't want to risk him seeing through the gap in the door.

Asamura-kun suggested it was about time to go shopping. I agreed, but asked if I could also buy a swimsuit while we were at it.

He remembered I'd bought a new swimsuit last year and said it should be fine just to wear that. I was happy he remembered, but it was out of the question. There was no way I could agree to that.

Trying not to let him sense my agitation, I came up with some flimsy excuse and forcefully persuaded Asamura-kun. Something about an item's level dropping, which didn't make any sense. But apparently he accepted it as if it did.

*I'm sorry. I just don't want you to realize I've gotten fatter.*

We headed to Hands in Shibuya to buy camping gear. Central Shibuya in summer was the last place I wanted to be walking around during the hottest part of the day, but we had no choice because going later could interfere with tomorrow's camping plans.

Stepping inside the building, I immediately felt the cool air against my skin. Instinctively, I wrapped my arms around myself and started rubbing them for warmth.

"Cold?"

"A bit," I replied, slipping on the outerwear I'd brought just in case.

The outdoor goods section was right at the entrance. I scanned the shelves, planning the most efficient route in my head as I always do.

"What do we need again?" I asked Asamura-kun.

He showed me the list he'd typed up on his phone. There was a heap of items on it, given it was just a day camping trip.

I scanned the section again. Since there were two of us, I figured it'd be quicker to split and search for things separately. I suggested as much and had him send me the shopping list.

We each took a shopping basket and separated to the left and right. While browsing through the shelves, it dawned on me: why rush this precious alone time shopping together in the name of efficiency? Wouldn't it have been more fun to browse the shelves together, side by side?

*Argh... Maybe I made a mistake.*

As I walked around feeling a little down, my smartphone beeped. Asamura-kun had sent【Found it】indicating he'd found the insect repellent spray.

Thinking we would finish shopping in no time, I found myself tapping a stamp I normally wouldn't send—it was a cat-themed one from a set Maaya had talked me into buying the other day. The cat was holding a sign that said "Ryo!", which is supposed to mean "Got it." Whenever I sent a message to Maaya lately, she'd immediately send this stamp back to me. So, I got roped into it too, and my finger tapped it by impulse.

I realized what I'd done and felt embarrassed. While cringing inside at how out of character it was, I continued browsing the shelves. This time, I was the one to find something and told Asamura-kun. He replied with a plain【Understood】message. His serious response was so like him that a smile unconsciously crept onto my lips. I glanced around to see if anyone noticed. *No one did, right?*

I went around the shelves and exchanged short messages each time I found an item on the list. Having already used the cat stamp, I continued to use it in my replies.

My screen was filled with cats holding signs in no time.

It started feeling more fun as we shot short messages back and forth, even though we were wandering around different parts of the store. It made it feel like we were shopping together.

Browsing the shelves was fun too. A variety of LED lights for nighttime caught my eye. I particularly liked the ones designed to look like old-fashioned lamps, with a handle, transparent glass cover and a wick inside—well, the wick

itself wasn't cotton like a real oil lamp, replaced with an LED. It seemed like something out of a fairy tale. I wanted one for my room. *Maybe I'll take my time to look around more when I'm free.*

As we efficiently ticked off each item on the list, Asamura-kun and I eventually bumped into each other in the middle of an aisle. We checked each other's baskets, and saw we had pretty much everything—only folding chairs left.

I remembered seeing them when I was going around the shelves, so I led Asamura-kun to them.

I chose a perfect red folding chair from among the ones on display. I said I was taking it, and Asamura-kun reached for the matching one next to it, but immediately pulled his hand back.

I wondered why, but then heard his muttering, and it clicked.

*Ah, I see, he's worried about us having matching stuff.*

It reminded me that Kozono-san had a knack for picking up on things where you least expected it. She'd sensed something was off just by Asamura-kun and I both saying our bentos were "made by my family."

Back then, Asamura-kun's and my lunch bags matched, just in different colors, so I'd quickly moved mine out of sight.

I got what Asamura-kun was worried about. So, I asked him directly, "What are we telling Kozono-san about us?"

She was clever and had good intuition. If we showed up with matching camping gear bought from the same store, she'd likely suspect we were a couple. *I mean, it wouldn't be just a suspicion; it's actually the truth.*

I didn't really have a specific plan in mind right then and there. I just don't like the idea of someone who doesn't know me well making assumptions about my life. That was pretty much all I was thinking about.

When you really think about it, it's kind of a strange situation. Because, really, even people walking passed us when we were holding hands probably pictured something about us in their minds.

But reason and emotion are two different things. I just don't like it, that's all there was to it.

After hearing me out, Asamura-kun thought for a while, then suggested we decide how much to reveal about our relationship to Kozono-san. Should we tell her that we're step-siblings? Or tell her we're step-siblings *and* a couple?

The former was something Yomiuri-senpai already knew, so it seemed safe to bring it up during our little trip. But we'd be exposing our romantic relationship to her too if we did the latter. That'd be pretty embarrassing.

And the jury's out on whether Kozono-san would be satisfied with us only telling her we were step-siblings.

So then, should we just keep it under wraps and not say anything at all?

That's what I thought, but... "Since Kozono-san works in Shibuya, it wouldn't be weird for her to see us here, would it?"

If we were trying to avoid being caught, wouldn't that mean we also couldn't hold hands in Shibuya? That'd just make us regular siblings.

That probably wouldn't have been an issue a year ago, but now, I knew it was impossible for me. After finally confirming our feelings for each other, not being able to hold hands, let alone kiss, would lead to a "Yuuta Asamura deficiency." He was basically a vital nutrient for me now, like vitamins to the human body. Without my dose, it could cause serious health problems.

While my mind was racing off in all the wrong directions, Asamura-kun calmly listed off the reason why we probably wouldn't bump into Kozono-san in Shibuya. It made me feel a little relieved for the moment.

But we couldn't decide how much to tell Kozono-san. Either way, it'd be pointless to continue the discussion inside Hands.

Asamura-kun had apparently decided against buying matching folding chairs for now.

He probably didn't like being suspected of things when he hadn't done anything wrong.

Despite the fact he was trying to avoid getting his business pried into, a very unreasonable thought suddenly popped into mind. *Maybe if Kozono-san knew we were a proper couple, she wouldn't cling to Asamura-kun as much. Maybe it'd be better to tell her everything...*

I shook my head to dispel it. It's wrong. Kozono-san being overly clingy with Asamura-kun was just my perception, and I didn't have any proof. It might just be a delusion born from my ugly jealousy. Dragging Asamura-kun

into my iffy feelings, and pushing him into revealing something he wanted to keep private was wrong.

We landed on a wishy-washy agreement to keep our relationship ambiguous for the time being, using the upcoming camp as an excuse to put off an *actual* decision.

I suppressed the inner voice telling me that decision might've been what the two of us needed to discuss the most. Feeling frustrated, I shoved those feelings down deep inside.

Buying clothes always makes me feel better. I didn't want to waste such a fun time. I mean, the actual reason I was buying clothes was because my current swimsuit was too tight, but let's not harp on that.

It was utterly baffling. I didn't particularly mind wearing the one piece swimsuits we got for school. Who'd have thought I'd be buying a new swimsuit two years in a row? It was a painful expense, but needed to be done.

There was a pleasant surprise, though: being able to shop together. Asamura-kun was technically already my brother last year, but he wasn't someone I could open up to completely, so we shopped for swimsuits separately.

When we finally got to the Italian brand store I had my eye on, and I was all set to go in, Asamura-kun suddenly said he'd wait outside.

"What're you talking about?" I blurted out without thinking.

"Mm."

I reach out the hand not holding the Hands bag towards Asamura-kun.

"Outside, remember?" I practically whispered as a reminder. "...Act like a couple."

Asamura-kun reluctantly went along with it, taking my hand. I wanted to enjoy shopping with *him*. I regretted separating at Hands and prioritizing efficiency over being together.

The brightly lit shop was crammed full of beachwear. Um, what's the word again... oh right, "mankanshoku." My world history teacher taught us about that. Apparently it's what you call something that's heavily decorated.

The swimsuits displayed on mannequins and hangers seemed to cover every color imaginable, creating a dazzling array of visuals that was a joy just to look at. My smile widened, and my mood lifted with it.

But as we walked around holding hands, I noticed Asamura-kun looked pale. He seemed a bit uncomfortable.

Maybe it was because we were walking in silence.

So, I deliberately let go of his hand, picked up a swimsuit that caught my eye, and showed it to him. I asked him things like, “What do you think?” and “Does this suit me?” in the hopes of starting a conversation. I figured that if we had a reason to talk, we could chat and distract ourselves.

But Asamura-kun hardly gave any feedback. Instead, he started saying he wasn’t knowledgeable enough about this stuff to have an opinion.

*No, I wasn’t asking for that,* I thought—but then it hit me. Was this like what I read online a few days ago, the thing on “Getting guys to love you”? There was a section on “Common misunderstandings between men and women,” advising against seeking logical agreement when you want emotional connection.

Reflecting on my questions—“What do you think?” and “Does it suit me?”—I realized my mistake.

*Ah, so that’s it.*

When choosing clothes, I’ve always taken others’ opinions with a grain of salt. Even if someone likes it, if I don’t, I won’t wear it, and vice versa. Why? Because I don’t want to blame the outcome on someone else’s opinion. I hate making my actions dependent on others. I never want to say something like, “You said it was good, but I was embarrassed wearing it.”

So, my approach was off. I’ll have to approach it at a different angle.

“Um, how do I put this... It’s not about right or wrong answers, I just wanna have a conversation. Your opinion on swimsuits is just a conversation starter.”

Asamura-kun looked predictably surprised.

What I wanted was his thoughts, and my goal was to share this fun shopping trip with my boyfriend, Yuuta Asamura. So, how should I have phrased that?

I stared at the face of the boy in front of me.

Everyone might be different, but it was a challenge getting genuine feelings, not opinions, out of him. Yuuta Asamura, despite being better at understanding characters in novels than me, tends to think too logically about everything...

Then it dawned on me.

“Um, so, how does *this* look like to you?” I asked while holding up a blue two-piece swimsuit.

It was the same type of question from before, but focused on appearance rather than judgment.

Sure enough, he described it as he saw it. *Yes, yes, that's exactly what I wanted to hear.* And his concern about whether the swimsuit would come off while swimming was just like him. Probably because he couldn't imagine a trip to the beach that only included a stroll along the shore, without a dip in the ocean.

And if it was a fake ribbon, that wouldn't be a concern. But how could he have known that?

Come to think of it, I'd seen boys' clothes with fake chains or buttons, but not ribbons.

*I think it would be pretty cute if they did have them.*

What kind of swimsuit did Asamura-kun wear last year? The thought of it having ribbons on the sides was amusing. When I told Asamura-kun as much, he just looked puzzled.

But I felt like I'd gotten the hang of conversing with Asamura-kun.

He's too pragmatic, so when he's asked something as if there's a problem to solve, he'd want to find a solution.

To get someone like him to share their plain view, I shouldn't abbreviate my words.

Preparation is key, after all.

After browsing the store, we headed home, chatting all the way.

It was fun.

He seemed to avoid my gaze when he saw the swimsuit I'd liked and bought, but he said it wasn't because he didn't like it, so I took that as a good sign.

I returned home feeling content.

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## July 31st (Saturday) - Asamura Yuuta

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On the morning of the camping trip, just as we were about to set off around 5 am, Akiko-san returned from work.

“Take care and have a good time, Yuuta-kun. And Saki too.”

Despite being visibly tired, she still saw us off.

My old man was still in bed. He was pretty worried about us when he went on his honeymoon (well, second honeymoon), but this time he seemed chill about it. Maybe it was a sign that he’d started trusting us more as time went on.

We told Akiko-san we were heading out and left the flat.

As we stepped out of the entryway, I saw that the sky was white. A little bit of the night’s color still lingered in the west.

We were heading to Shibuya Station. We’d arranged for Yomiuri-senpai to pick us up in her car in the alley next to the bookstore.

Shibuya station at 6 am was still quiet, with the familiar crowds nowhere in sight.

We made our away across the scramble crossing and turned down a side street.

*Yomiuri-senpai’s car...*

“Isn’t that it? Look, she’s waving.”

Ayase-san was pointing at the car parked facing us. It was a bright red minivan, which looked like it had plenty of room in the back for luggage.

I saw a familiar face through the windscreens; a beautiful black-haired girl who looked like a traditional Japanese doll—Shiori Yomiuri-senpai. Kozono-san was already sitting in the back seat.

We’d invited our other coworkers too, but in the end, only the four of us could make it. Most university students on summer break already had plans to go to festivals or on trips, and the veteran part-timers said they simply couldn’t keep up with the energy of youth. There *were* a few people who seemed interested, but due to shift conflicts, they regretfully couldn’t come along. In the end, only us—the organizers—were left.

Yomiuri-senpai rolled down the window and greeted us with a “Good morning.”

“Junior-kun, you sit in the front, and Saki-chan, you sit in the back.”

“Eh?”, Ayase-san uttered, hesitating at Yomiuri-senpai’s direction for a moment.

*Huh? Does she not want to or something?* But that expression on Ayase-san’s face vanished in an instant, making me wonder if I’d seen it wrong. Just like that, she gracefully hopped into the back seat.

I tilted my head in confusion, but did as I was told and got in the passenger’s seat.

“Ehh, Yomiuri-senpai, are you trying to keep Asamura-senpai all to yourself?” Kozono-san said from the back.

*But what would she actually gain from monopolizing me?* Maybe as a distraction to keep her awake, but that’s about it.

“Cause if all three of you were in the back, it’d be like Asamura-kun got himself a cozy little harem, right? As your Onee-san, there’s no way I’m letting such a jealousy-inducing setup happen,” Yomiuri-senpai casually justified herself.

“Is that something to be jealous of?”

To the contrary, being packed in like sardines for a long distance car ride sounded nothing but uncomfortable.

Plus, the fantasy of being up close and personal with women is something guys can only enjoy in stories. That’s because there’s an unspoken rule that if a protagonist found himself in that kind of situation, the girls wouldn’t dislike it.

But reality isn’t that simple.

Well, to be fair, if that girl was limited to Ayase-san and we were in a relationship, it might be a different story...

“Junior-kun, you’re making that face of yours again. Like you’re making things unnecessarily complicated in your head.”

“...Maybe you’re just too carefree, Senpai.”

“Your respect for the driver is found lacking.”

“Yes ma’am, it’s as you say, my honorable lord.”

It'd be a problem if she got upset and started driving erratically.

"Indeed. Worry yourself not," Yomiuri-senpai, or should I say the honorable lord, said pompously, and started the car.

Kozono-san giggled from the back seat.

I hadn't expected to be part of a comedy routine this early in the morning, but it couldn't be helped. Yomiuri-senpai was the only one among the four of us who could drive. If I became the butt of the joke but it made her happy to drive, I could tolerate a bit of teasing.

"Your virgin purity is as charmingly innocent as ever, Asamura-kun!"

*The heck...?*

"W-what... why're you casually blurting out dirty jokes like that!? This is different from when we're at work, you know."

The car was full of girls. *I wish she wouldn't be so full on with this stuff so early in the morning.*

If she kept her mouth shut, she was charming and friendly—a paragon of traditional Japanese beauty skilled in customer service, and popular among the regulars. But what's to be done with the little old man in her who shows his face whenever she's around people she knows?

"Yomiuri-senpai, you say things like that, huh~?" Kozono-san said in an admiring voice.

*Please don't learn from her.*

"That's not all! I say stuff like *this* and *that* too."

"Don't say it."

"Hehehe, you don't have to be a gentleman just because you're surrounded by girls, y'know? Trying to look cool isn't bad, but it's a privilege of the young. All human beings become old men as they age."

"It's not 'old man' for women, it's old wo—"

"How mean! Calling a young girl an old woman!"

"Ah... my bad. I apologize for saying that part...."

*I can't win. If I point one thing out, three comebacks fly back at me.*

“Anyways, the male-to-female ratio in the car is three-to-one, so almost all women. A little dirty joke here and there is totally fine!”

“Don’t say ‘almost’ all when it’s seventy-five per cent. A quarter is still male. Are you the type to insist a ‘few’ means less than ten, Senpai?”

I didn’t want to name names, but I was talking about Yoshida. Despite nearly scoffing a box of *ten* souvenir manju<sup>1</sup> by himself, he insisted he only had a ‘few,’ and got told off by Maru.

“Now, now. Don’t sweat the small stuff. Even exam-takers need to unwind. Let’s forget all the unpleasant things today and just have fun!”

“Yep!”

The first one to respond was Kozono-san, a first-year high schooler who’d *already* finished her entrance exam.

“Alright, I’ll forget about exams for today.”

“Yep, yep, relax, relax. If you keep your head down, all the happiness will escape.”

Reflecting on what Yomiuri-senpai said, I leaned back in the passenger seat and exhaled.

She was definitely right.

It’d be a waste to end this day camp with the lame excuse of wanting to make memories with the senpai who looked after me.

*I need to enjoy this a bit more.*

And we might not have been alone, but it was also a trip with my girlfriend.

Staring at the blue summer sky and white clouds beyond the front windscreens, I took another deep breath and relaxed my shoulders.

The car slowly pulled away from Shibuya station.

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We arrived at a clearing in the mountains, which looked like a portion of the trees had been cut away to form it.

It was the place we'd booked for our day camp—Nasu-Shiobara campgrounds<sup>2</sup>.

After parking the car, we first went to the reception desk to check in. We checked where we could borrow stuff like a barbecue grill, fuel, tongs, knives, and cutting boards, and so on, then started unloading our things from the car.

We'd reserved a space not far from where we were parked. It looked like they'd simply roped off an area on ground, indicating we were free to use anything within its bounds.

“When you’re moving around, don’t go into other people’s spots, even if they’re empty right now, okay? Be mindful,” Yomiuri-senpai warned us, and we all nodded.

After laying down a picnic blanket, we unloaded all the things from the car onto it.

“Ahhh, it’s a perfect sunny day for camping,” Yomiuri-senpai said, looking up at the sky.

We all followed her lead and looked up too.

The sky above was blue, with two or three fluffy summer clouds floating lazily by. The air tasted fresh, and the occasional breeze blowing through felt pleasant.

It really felt like we were in the mountains. I let out a deep breath.

“Alrighty, then let’s start by setting up the tarp~”

We spread out a large brown piece of cloth on the grass.

“This is the tarp. We’re gonna stretch it over our heads as a sort of roof or shelter. We’ll set up poles and pull it tight with ropes.”

“It’s big, isn’t it?”

It must have been about four meters long on one side, equivalent to eight tatami mats or so. That meant it was about the same size as my room.

“The sun’s pretty strong, so let’s get this set up quickly. I think I sent you a tutorial video on how to do it, did everyone watch it?”

All three of us nodded.

“Well, I’ll be giving specific instructions, so let’s put it together quick.”

Following Yomiuri-senpai's instructions, we managed to set it up. Somehow.

It was a bit scary when it came time to hammer the pegs into the ground, as I felt like I might accidentally hit my hand with the small hammer.

We placed our folding chairs under the tarp, which now hid the blue sky, and took a load off.

As I sat listening to the wind mingling with the rustling of leaves, time seemed to slip away unnoticed.

It was almost noon.

"Alright, I'll go borrow the barbecue equipment," I said as I stood up from my folding chair.

"Meat! Everyone, let's eat meat!" Yomiuri-senpai said in agreement.

"Yay!"

Kozono-san seemed to be in high spirits.

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While the girls were prepping the ingredients, I was in charge of firing up the grill.

"Ah, Junior-kun. Here, here."

"Yes?"

"Here's the lighter fluid and torch for lighting it. If you follow the tutorial video I sent you just like before, you should be able to handle getting it going. Lemme know if you get stuck on anything. Well, I'll be watching from over here anyway."

The makeshift cooking table was behind me, opposite the grill, so I couldn't see what she was doing, but she could clearly see *me*.

"Take these too. Some gloves. They're old ones, so don't worry about using them."

"Thanks."

I put on the gloves and worked on getting the fire started. I thought I had a grasp on it from watching the video, but it was different actually doing it. I'm pretty sure it took twice as long for the charcoal to properly ignite. *I guess it's a good thing that none of the girls are impatient types who'd get angry over my dawdling, huh?*

Compared to my fumbling, Ayase-san, in charge of cooking, was truly amazing. It really showed that she was used to working in the kitchen every day. Even just glancing at her out of the corner of my eye, I could see that her movements were precise and efficient. Both Yomiuri-senpai and Kozono-san let out impressed "ooh's."

"You're really good with a knife, aren't ya, Saki-chan?"

"Well... I just use it a lot."

"You cook at home, huh? So, does that mean you make those bentos you always bring yourself?"

"Wha—?"

Apparently it wasn't just me who flinched at that question. I was only listening, but even *my* heart picked up its pace as I wondered how Ayase-san would answer.

"I mean, sometimes. But my family makes it for me too."

"Ah, there it is."

"*Hm?* What's that, Erina-chan?"

"The last time I asked, Ayase-senpai said, 'my family made it for me.' I thought it was a unique way of saying it. Asamura-senpai also said it the same way... Is it a trend or something?"

"*Hmmm.* I see, I see. Indeed, that's an interesting observation, Watson-kun."

"Watson? Who's that?"

"Oh, it's nothing. Just talking to myself."

Kozono-san, not much of a bookworm and therefore not a Sherlockian, tilted her head in confusion at the reference, but Yomiuri-senpai didn't explain any further. Given that Yomiuri Holmes-senpai knew Ayase-san and I were step-siblings, she'd probably have a hunch about what the phrase "made by my family" implied.

“Sigh. Uhm, so, my mother makes mine. I was just wondering if it’s different for Ayase-senpai.”

“Well, there are families where everyone takes turns cooking, y’know~?”

“Ah, got it. So that’s the case here?”

“Something like that,” Ayase-san answered vaguely.

“Anyway, it’s obvious Saki-chan is a whizz in the kitchen. Now, that should be enough veggies. Hey, Erina-chan, go cut that meat!”

“Huh, ah, yes. It’s a big piece of meat, isn’t it?”

Kozono-san apparently never cooked at home, so her knife skills were pretty sketchy. It seems she was struggling with the piece of meat.

Cutting meat might *seem* easy—just slice through it—but if you didn’t cut it to a uniform thickness, it’d cook unevenly, and you needed to make sure to cut against the grain for tenderness. There was *a lot* to be mindful of. I didn’t know any of that until I started cooking myself.

Yomiuri-senpai was nitpicking on how to do those things, and it sent Kozono-san into a mini panic.

When I glanced over, I could see her forcefully pressing the knife down on the cutting board, which split the meat in two and nearly launched it off the board.

Ayase-san, who clearly couldn’t bear to watch any longer, stepped in to teach her the proper way of using a knife.

Still, she kept at it with her usual earnestness; flustered but continuing her battle with the meat.

“I did it!”

Ayase-san, who’d been watching her out of the corner of her eye, let out a small sigh of relief.

“Yes, yes. Good girl, good girl. Now, let’s do the next piece.”

Kozono-san’s eyes narrowed in pleasure as Yomiuri-senpai patted her head.

“Ayase-san, I think it’s about time to start grilling.”

“Ah, yes.”

She put the vegetables on a paper plate and brought them over to the grill.

“I think it’s better to start grilling the things that take longer to cook, like onions and shiitake mushrooms. Bell peppers and eggplants can go last since they cook quickly,” she said while showing me the plate.

“What about the corn? I thought it took a while to cook.”

“I think if you face it towards the fire, it should cook faster. It takes longer if you stand it up on its axis, though.”

Standing it up on its axis... she meant standing it up like a tower and grilling it. I hadn’t thought of that.

According to Ayase-san, onions take a long time to cook, and corn is a bit of a hassle to grill.

“Corn takes a bit of effort because you have to keep rolling it to avoid uneven grilling. Also, be careful not to let it roll off the grill.”

“Okay.”

Just as I said that and placed it on the grill, it almost rolled off right away. I hastily pressed it down with tongs to prevent it from falling, but Ayase-san gave me a look of dismay.

“Told you so.”

“Sorry, sorry.”

While apologizing, I continued to arrange the vegetables on the grill.

“I also cut some veggies that can be eaten as they are.”

Looking in the direction Ayase-san was glancing, I could see carrots, cucumbers, and bell peppers, all cut into sticks and lined up at the edge of the folding table.

“I figured we might want something refreshing.”

“Much appreciated. But wow, these are cut so neatly.”

The onion rings were skewered without losing their shape, and the eggplants were cut to the exact same thickness.

“Really? I think it’s just normal.”

“No, no. I think it’s more than enough to deserve a head pat,” I muttered, recalling the exchange between Kozono-san and Yomiuri-senpai earlier. Ayase-san responded with a quiet “idiot” under her breath.

“What’s this about a head pat?”

We both tensed up as we heard Yomiuri-senpai’s voice.

*Please don’t stand behind us like some ninja.*

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

“Nothing much. I came to grill some meat. You two seemed to be having such a deep conversation, so it felt hard to interrupt.”

“No, no, no. Tell me what you were talking about.”

“We were just discussing how to grill vegetables,” I said as Ayase-san moved away from me and retreated to the opposite side of the grill.

Yomiuri-senpai stood on my right, and Kozono-san on my left, boxing me in. It definitely felt pretty cramped with them crowded around that like.

Yomiuri-senpai handed me a plate of meat.

“Ah well, whatever. Everything else is trivial in the face of meat!”

“Yup!”

“Alright, let’s grill!”

“Alright!”

Kozono-san’s loud cheer overlapped with a timid “alright” from Ayase-san.

*You don’t have to force yourself to match her, you know?*

Surrounded by passionate calls of love for meat, I found myself fully absorbed in the task of grilling the meat on the plate.

Grill. Eat. Grill. Eat. Meat. Vegetables. Meat. Vegetables. And more meat!

This wasn’t like the barbecues I remember. Did we always eat this much?

“It’s super tasty and all... but now I feel like I want rice.”

“We didn’t bring a rice cooking pot. If we had an electric car that could supply power, we could cook rice with a rice cooker. But it’ll be fine without it for one meal.”

“It’d be handy if we could cook rice too. Actually, at that point, would we even need a tent anymore?”

“We’d be all set even if we got isekai’d<sup>3</sup>!”

*No, it wouldn't work without charging stations, would it?* Besides, bringing an electric car to another world seemed like too much of a cheat code.

"We *do* have rice, you know," Ayase-san chimed in.

*Huh?* The three of us turned to look at Ayase-san in unison.

"I thought something like this might happen, so I brought some."

Ayase-san took out her usual bento box from another box we'd packed the food in. When she opened the lid, it was stuffed full of onigiri, not even wrapped in nori.<sup>4</sup>

She handed the bento box to me. It was still cool to the touch.

"When'd you find time to make this?" I blurted out, then instantly regretted how unnatural it sounded.

It implied I was in a position to know about Ayase-san's camp prep.

Luckily, though, Yomiuri-senpai and Kozono-san were too fixated on the lumps of rice in front of them, and my careless slip up apparently went over their heads.

"It's just rice, I didn't put anything inside. Oh, I made it into salted onigiri 'cause I thought it might go bad in the summer heat. I froze them and brought them as is. I just took them out of the cooler a while ago."

"*Oooh.* That means we can make grilled onigiri," Yomiuri-senpai said excitedly, and Ayase-san nodded.

There were exactly four pieces, one for each of us. Since Ayase-san usually rolled a full bowl of rice into each onigiri, it seemed just the right amount of rice to finish off the meal.

"Alrighty, time for the rice finale. Ah, I kinda wanna drizzle a little soy sauce on mine."

"Me too! I wanna do that too!"

"Okay, I'll grill them. What about you, Asamura-kun? Soy sauce, yeah?"

The way Ayase-san asked made it clear she knew I always put soy sauce on everything, but the other two didn't seem to pick up on that slip up either.

It hit me again. When you're together every day, your actions and words naturally reflect that closeness, unless you make a concerted effort to be mindful of them.

“Yes please.”

We broke apart the grilled rice balls with chopsticks and ate them, and the barbecue ended without a hitch.

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After a short break to let the food settle, Yomiuri-senpai declared, “It’s finally swimsuit time!”

“I sort of panicked when you told us to bring a swimsuit at the last minute.”

“I mean, we’re camping by a river with waterfall views, aren’t we? Plus, there’s an outdoor sauna. It’s normal to want to enjoy everything to the fullest in a swimsuit! That’s the plan, right? It’s gotta be!”

“Yep.”

Yomiuri-senpai was unusually excited. Was she really looking forward to it *that* much?

“We’ve already booked a time, so we should get a move on.”

“Ah, yes.”

“Alright, time to change into our swimsuits~!” Yomiuri-senpai said with a pump of her fist.

She came closer to me and whispered, “You’ve been lookin’ forward to the swimsuits, haven’t ya?”

“No, I haven’t.”

Saying “yes” would definitely be used as teasing ammunition later. Not that I was complaining, though. I made sure to bring my swimsuit, just like she asked.

With all said and done, I changed in the dressing room and made my way to the sauna.

By the looks of it the sauna room, built like a modified bungalow, was unisex.

It was by reservation only, and we could use it for an hour or so.

Having changed, I decided to wait inside. Generally, guys change faster as it's pretty much just stripping down. The staff had already started the stove inside the sauna. It was a simple, utilitarian design you'd rarely see outside of colder regions. Stones were piled up in a metal box on top. They were heated up so much that carelessly touching one would probably earn you a nasty burn. The stove's chimney, extending upwards, was bent midway to protrude outside the cabin.



A short wait later, the three girls entered.

“It’s so hot!”

“It’s surprisingly spacious...”

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Junior-kun.”

“Ah, yes.”

Yomiuri-senpai made a face and pouted.

“Junior-kun! That reaction won’t do.”

“Huh?”

“That’s not how a high school boy should react when he sees young girls in swimsuits. You shouldn’t just say ‘Ah, yes.’ You should be drooling and leaning forward, staring intently while exclaiming, ‘Wow, what a spectacular view!’”

*What’s this senpai of mine on about?*

“It’s worrying that you think *that’s* a typical high school boy’s reaction. Also, your phrasing is outdated.”

“Leaning forward?”

“You don’t wanna know, Kozono-san,” Ayase-san warned her.

Kozono-san tilted her head curiously.

“So, whaddya think, Junior-kun?”

“I’m not sure what to say... *sigh*, well, I think they suit each of you.”

Kozono-san was wearing a brightly colored cross neck halter swimsuit. While a fashion model might look sexy wearing it, it gave her an age-appropriate, youthful look. Not that I’d say that out loud, of course. The bottom part was a fluttery short pareo, so I didn’t have much trouble finding a place to look. Though, given the amount of exposed skin, I hoped she didn’t make any flashy movements.

Yomiuri-senpai was wearing a classic bikini, looking the most grown-up of the three. Considering her usual reserved and bookish style, seeing Yomiuri-senpai in a daring bikini was surprisingly unexpected. A black-haired beauty in such a daring swimsuit would be intimidating, especially if she threw on some sunglasses. Was that what she was going for?

“Mm? You’re thinking something rude, aren’t you? Unassuming pervert-kun<sup>5</sup>. ”

“No, no.”

Ayase-san’s swimsuit choice wasn’t a surprise since I saw her pick it out. She was wearing a two-piece, blue like the one from last year.

The top part was designed to expose one shoulder—something she occasionally incorporated into her everyday fashion too. Seeing her like that gave me a strange sense of familiarity. She’d also wrapped a pareo around her waist, which had an asymmetrical shape on either side.

It suited her well, considering how much she’d ummed and ahhed when choosing it out.

“Well, it’s not bad, right?”

“That kinda lukewarm reaction is so like you, Junior-kun.”

“Asamura-senpai, Asamura-senpai. What’s with the stones on top of the stove?”

“Hm? Oh, you use them like this.”

I scooped up some water with a nearby ladle and sprinkled it on the stones. Steam instantly billowed up when the water touched the heated stones.

“Uh, Senpai, you’re putting on too much water!”

“Oops. Sorry, sorry. The steam is more intense than I thought.”

The room was quickly filled with white steam, causing a moment of panic.

Yomiuri-senpai said it was usually the staff’s job to pour water on the stones in this kind of sauna. It made me think twice about trying it myself again.

The steam dissipated pretty quickly, but the humidity increased significantly.

We sat on the wooden benches on either side of the room, placing towels down to avoid getting our butt’s burnt.

As we chatted away and sweated it out, it felt like the toxins in my body were being purged at the same time. Despite the mixed opinions about saunas these days, the undeniable fact remains that simply sweating it out feels pleasant and refreshing.

I snuck a glance at Ayase-san sitting next to me. Just as I did, a bead of sweat that'd formed on the nape of her neck slid down from her shoulder to her upper arm.

She'd twisted her hair up and was squeezing it with a towel. A few strands of stray hair near her ears were damp with sweat, drooping down. I was oddly captivated by a few that'd stuck to her cheek. I could feel my heart beat faster.

I remembered feeling something similar when we were walking together the other day. *Do I have some kind of sweat fetish?* What a ridiculous thought.

“Mm?”

Ayase-san turned to me with a questioning look on her face, and I quickly looked away.

“I-I think I’ve reached my limit.”

What limit, you ask? No longer being able to handle the heat of the sauna, obviously. Let’s go with that.

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I stepped out of the sauna on my own.

There was a river nearby, maybe four-to-five meters wide, and several proper chairs were set up along the bank for relaxing. They looked more comfortable than our folding chairs.

There was a cold-water bath next to the sauna, but taking a dip in the river instead seemed to be the norm here.

Thinking about finding a good place to cool off, I walked into the river by myself.

The gravelly riverbed was a little rough on the soles of my feet, but it wasn’t so painful that I couldn’t walk. The current was gentle, and didn’t sweep me away. The water was cold, but pleasant given it was summer. I found a large, flat stone and decided to sit down on it, slowly submerging my body.

As my body cooled down, my head cleared too. That was a close call earlier. It wasn’t the time or place to be having lewd thoughts like that... *I need to get a grip.*

Breathing out, I lazily gazed up at the sky. The gentle flow of the water against my body was a sensation I couldn't experience in an ordinary bath, and made me feel like I was truly in nature.

A little while later, Ayase-san, Yomiuri-senpai, and Kozono-san came out of the sauna cabin.

Yomiuri-senpai rushed past Ayase-san with enough momentum that it looked like she was about to dive in, only to stop just at the water's edge. She scooped up some river water and splashed it onto her toes, letting out a yelp.

“Uhyaa, it’s so cold!”

Yomiuri-senpai hastily retreated to solid land.

“I mean, it *is* a river.”

“I haven’t played in a river for years... It feels nostalgic,” she said as she started flipping over stones by the riverbank.

“Oh, they’re here!” she said delightedly as she watched the small bugs that’d been hiding underneath scurry away. Kozono-san was timidly peeking over her shoulder. It looked a bit like an exchange between elementary school boys and girls.

“Phew... it was so hot.”

Ayase-san slowly sank down next to me.

“Good effort.”

“Yeah. I’m tired now,” Ayase-san said as she gently leaned closer to me.

She came so close her swimsuit almost touched me, and I was worried she might be able to hear my heart racing.

Glancing sideways, I thought in passing, *Her shoulders are so delicate.*

Ayase-san had a slightly resigned look on her face as she started to speak.

“I wanted to come out earlier, ‘let’s have a test of endurance, a healthy one!’... and I ended up being stuck there.”

“Haha...”

Isn’t that kind of a contradiction? A “healthy” endurance contest.

Also, doesn't that mean the order they came out was the order of who lost the contest first? Kozono-san was more competitive than I thought. I also thought Ayase-san, despite appearances, was pretty stubborn too.

"I don't wanna waste the time we can spend together on some endurance contest."

*...Thank you.*

As I savored the happiness those words brought, I heard Kozono-san's delighted voice and looked up.

"If you look closely, they're kinda cute."

"Ooh, there's a lot of centipedes over here~!"

"Hehehe. They're all wriggling around!"

They'd turned into full-blown elementary school boys in a blink of an eye.  
*Kozono-san, do you actually like bugs? Or are you just going along with Yomiuri-senpai?*

"Yomiuri-senpai, let's stop frightening them by flipping every stone you find."

"Nah, if you come out to nature, you've gotta enjoy it to the fullest. I hardly see any bugs in my daily life, so I can't help but feel excited and a little nostalgic. Look, look, Kozono-san, there's a little crab over here too."

"Crabs are nice and all, but... I think I'd like to cool down too."

She glanced over at us.

Then, she made her way over to where Ayase-san and I were sitting.

"It looks so comfortable. I wanna join too—"

Just as the last word left her lips, Kozono-san stepped on stone by the riverbank in front of us and started to lose her footing.

"Whoa!"

Her small body was about to fall into the river, so I shot to my feet and caught her as she stumbled forward. I managed to prevent us from full-on hugging by grabbing hold of her shoulders. Still, it was different from when my elementary school-aged cousin clung onto me—it was soft, and bad for my heart in a whole different way.

“Th-that scared me!”

“You okay?”

I continued to support her and helped her stand up again. Hand on my chest and still looking flustered, Kozono-san squeezed out a shaky, “Y-yes.”

“Thank you, Asamura-senpai.”

“No, don’t sweat it… Just be careful, alright? The riverbank is slippery.”

“Yes.”

“Hey! You alright!?”

“I’m fine.”

Kozono-san smiled at a worried looking Yomiuri-senpai as she came rushing over.

“Here you go, Kozono-san.”

“O-oh, my towel. Thank you, Ayase-senpai.”



Ayase-san had swiftly grabbed the towel just as it was about to get swept away.

The towel, which had been dropped when Kozono-san stumbled, was the one she used in the sauna. I was fully occupied with catching Kozono-san, so I was grateful for the assist. If not, it would've been carried away by the river.

Ayase-san and I had put our own towels on a big rock on the bank. Since it was a river, not a hot spring, it'd look funny and not make much sense to soak with them on our heads. Plus, it'd be a hassle if we dropped them like Kozono-san did.

“Really, thank you, Asamura-senpai. You saved my life.”

“That’s an exaggeration.”

It’s completely normal for someone to instinctively try to catch someone when they’re about to fall in front of them.

Yomiuri-senpai nodded her agreement.

“Well, all’s well that ends well. It’s meant to be a fun thing, and I want it to end with only fun memories. Let’s all watch out, okay?”

“Yes!” Kozono-san energetically replied.

“That goes for you too, okay, Senpai?”

*Sticking out your tongue with a “tehe” won’t fool anyone, you know.*

Yomiuri-senpai and Kozono-san then sat down on rocks along the bank, just dipping their feet in to cool off while they started chatting.

*Wait, where’s Ayase-san?*

I thought she was right next to me just a second ago. I couldn’t see her anywhere. Where is she?

My gaze wandered over the river’s surface.

A little away, Ayase-san suddenly burst from the water. She’d just been diving. I breathed a sigh of relief. I didn’t think she’d actually been swept away, but not being able to see her had made me panic for a moment. If I’d just stayed calm, I would’ve realized the river was too shallow to drown in.

Apparently she’d been diving in a slightly deeper spot.

Still, I couldn’t stop myself silently watching her as she repeated her dives.

After doing it a few times, she seemed to notice I was watching her and stood up, walking over to me.

“What?”

“Ah, nothing...”

“Hey! You two, let’s hit the sauna again!”

As we’d been called, Ayase-san and I reluctantly left the river. Before heading back to the sauna cabin, I quietly called her name.

“Um...”

“About earlier... that was... an unavoidable accident. I didn’t touch any weird places or anything.”

“What?”

“No, I mean...”

These days simply helping someone could be misconstrued as sexual harassment, so you had to tread lightly.

I figured it was important to clarify—

“Because the one I love is you, Ayase-san,” I whispered just loud enough for her alone to hear.

I’d spoken from the heart, but Ayase-san couldn’t help herself and burst out laughing at my attempt at a serious face. A wry smile spread across her face.

“I know that without you saying it.”

Her gentle tone made me sigh in relief.

“Well, if that’s the case, then it’s all good.”

“It’s more like, I’m annoyed at how hopeless *I* am,” she muttered.

“Huh?

But Ayase-san made no attempt to elaborate, and quickly ducked into the sauna cabin. And so, I spent our second sauna session dwelling on what she’d said... and ended up overheating.

Returning to the cold river, this time it was my turn to dunk my head under the water.

After leaving the sauna and having fun in the river some more, we all relaxed for a bit until the sunlight started to dim.

We folded up the tarp, finished preparing to leave, and then went to the reception to say, “Thank you!” as we completed the check-out process. Talking about how much fun we had, we all got into Yomiuri-senpai’s car.

As we bid farewell to Nasu-Shiobara, the sun was sliding down the sky, looking like it was about to touch the edge of the mountains to the west. Though sunset was still a ways off, dusk arrives early in the mountains.

The seating arrangement on the way back was the same as when we set off.

Sitting next to Yomiuri-senpai, who was humming along to the music, I found myself absentmindedly gazing at the scenery as it faded into dusk.

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With the mountains behind us, we merged onto the freeway.

The surroundings were completely enveloped in twilight. I watched the passing scenery, the mountains and far-off towns sinking into darkness, and yet unharvested summer rice fields blending into a muted green with the sunset hues.

Our conversations reflecting on how fun the day was started out lively, but pettered off as the comfortable vibration of the freeway lulled us. After a couple of pit stops, everyone eventually drifted into silence, probably all worn out.

More and more buildings began to appear as we got closer to the city. By the time we exited the freeway, it was pitch black around us.

The pair in the back seat had gone quiet, and a quick glance in the rearview mirror revealed they’d apparently fallen asleep.

“Thank you for today, Junior-kun,” Yomiuri-senpai murmured softly.

“I didn’t do anything special.”

“No way. You think I didn’t realize that you carried the heavy stuff for me?”

“Well, it’s not a big deal...”

*She* had booked the campsite, and brought out a bunch of camping gear to boot. And—

“Right back at ya, thanks for driving us there and back.”

“I mean, that’s the least I could do. I *did* drag you along for this outing, after all. Plus I enjoyed the drive too.”

“But we got caught in traffic at the very end.”

Sure enough, as we got closer to Shibuya, the traffic got more congested. The car’s GPS route lines had been red for a while now. Just when I thought we were finally moving again, we got caught at another traffic light.

“This light takes ages to change, doesn’t it?”

“Oh really?”

Maybe she’d been through here a few times before.

“So, um,” she started saying, tapping my knee with her left hand. “I’ll keep it a secret, so just tell me, Junior-kun. No, Yuuta Asamura-kun.”

She leaned in a little closer and whispered to me, as if sharing a secret. Her voice was more serious and sultry than usual, and I reflexively swallowed.

“What is it you want me to tell you?”

“Are you and Saki-chan dating right now? As in, a couple?”

I was floored for a second, my voice catching in surprise. That question had come out of nowhere. There’d been no sign she would ask something like that. *Why now?*

“Um, well...”

I wasn’t sure how to answer. I glanced back through the rearview mirror to check on Ayase-san and Kozono-san. They were out cold, not moving an inch.

“You’ll probably be way too busy studying for entrance exams after summer vacation to have time to chat like this. I *could* ask when I’m working with you and Saki-chan isn’t around, but... I’m quitting this year, so I at least want to know the answer to something that’s been tickling my curiosity while I still can.”

She looked at me and smiled in a way that implied we were confidants sharing a secret.

“You want to know... because?”

*Why did she?*

“Why do you think?”

“Uhm...”

She was giving me an unusually serious look. I was suddenly all too conscious of her crimson lips, starting to form words, close to my face. Her lipstick was a slightly darker shade of red than usual. *Ah, she really is a university student.* It made me realize all over again how much more grown-up she was than me.

If I were to answer, “Ayase-san is my sister,” what would happen? I couldn’t pry my eyes away from her captivating lips.

Just then, I was filled with intense regret.

It was just yesterday that Ayase-san and I discussed how best to reveal our relationship to Kozono-san. We decided to take a rain-check and think it over at a later date. Together. I knew somewhere inside that the time would come when I’d have to confidently tell the people close to me. I couldn’t afford to make the wrong choice. Alarms were going off in my head.

“Ah...”

“Ah?”

“Ayase-san and I are... dating.”

We fell silent for a moment.

Unbeknownst to me, the signal had turned green.

“Gotcha.”

By the time she spoke, Yomiuri-senpai had already turned her face forward, and the car had started slowly rolling forward.

“Mind if I hit the gas?”

What does she mean? The car’s moving because she’s *already* stepping on the accelerator.

“Let your senpai give you a piece of advice. Wanna know something?”  
Yomiuri-senpai continued, still facing forward.

“What?”

“Men are more attractive when they have a girlfriend. If you cherish your girlfriend, beware of temptations.”

I didn’t get it. Why would having a girlfriend change how people see me?

*...No, to say nothing has changed would be lying.*

It’s true that as my relationship with Ayase-san deepened, I felt more comfortable talking to other women. Experience is a powerful teacher. And my looks had probably improved since I’d been taking fashion tips.

But I still didn’t get why that would make me more popular. But Yomiuri-senpai’s tone wasn’t her usual one hundred percent playful one, now sounding half serious.

Also, Ayase-san seemed enough of a jealous type to be bothered by TV segments on cheating. I didn’t want to make her sad, hurt her, nor cause any misunderstandings.

So—

“...I’ll keep that in mind.”

—I decided to take Yomiuri-senpai’s advice to heart.

With a satisfied smile, she gave me a “good”, before focussing on driving.

She didn’t say another word until she pulled over and woke up the others.

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<sup>1</sup> A traditional Japanese sweet treat made from flour, rice powder, and filled with various fillings like sweet bean paste or fruit. It’s often steamed and enjoyed as a snack or dessert.

<sup>2</sup> A popular auto camping ground in Tochigi, about 2.5 hours from Shibuya.

<sup>3</sup> A genre of fiction where characters are transported to or reincarnated in a parallel world, often featuring fantasy or science fiction elements.

<sup>4</sup> *Onigiri*: Rice balls, *Nori*: Seaweed.

<sup>5</sup> Shiori is making a joke that Yuuta is someone who appears innocent but actually has lewd thoughts.

## July 31st (Saturday) - Ayase Saki

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“Ehh, Yomiuri-senpai, are you trying to keep Asamura-senpai all to yourself?”

That’s what I heard as I opened the rear door and climbed in next to Kozono-san.

She was making a pouty face and booing.

Monopolizing Asamura-kun... driving alone together... sitting side by side... playing our favorite songs on the car stereo—those kinds of fantasies danced through my mind.

*What am I thinking?*

Today we were just going for a barbecue as colleagues from work, nothing more and nothing less. And since Yomiuri-san would be graduating—and therefore quitting her student part-time job—this was our last chance to make memories with her.

*I shouldn’t bring my own fantasies into something like this.*

Yet, until Kozono-san brought it up, the idea of all three of us sitting in the back hadn’t even occurred to me. It’d be cramped, and it’d be weird to ask Kozono-san to move specially. Surely it was obvious that either Asamura-kun or I should sit in the back?

Where’d the idea that Yomiuri-senpai was trying to monopolize Asamura-kun even come from anyway?

Though, I had to admit, I recoiled a bit when I realized Kozono-san would be the one sitting next to me.

While I was clipping in my seatbelt, a thought suddenly struck me; People can’t truly know what others are thinking. When we claim “you’re thinking this,” we’re not actually reading the other’s mind, but projecting how we would think in the same situation. It’s just, “if it were me, I’d think this”, coming out.

So, does that mean *Kozono-san* wants Asamura-kun all to herself?

*Hmm.*

Sure, Kozono-san seemed pretty fond of Asamura-kun, but that doesn't mean feeling possessive of him was a good thing. Asamura-kun has his own will, too.

But wait. A second ago I was thinking about driving alone with him too.

*Hmmmm.*

What a realization. I was possessive. *When did I turn into such a petty person?*

As I sat there with my mind in shock, Yomiuri-san's soothing words caught my ear.

"Now, now. Don't sweat the small stuff. Even exam-takers need to unwind. Let's forget all the unpleasant things today and just have fun!"

Though I didn't follow the conversation, Yomiuri-san's words reminded me of what Taichi-san had said to me.

*"If only he could learn to relax a bit more."*

That's right. It wasn't just about creating memories with Yomiuri-san. One of my personal goals for this day camp was to help Asamura-kun unwind, so I wholeheartedly agreed with Yomiuri-san's suggestion to have fun.

But Kozono-san was the first to pump her fist and cheer, "Yeah!" I was too embarrassed to openly do the same, so I murmured a quieter "Yeah" to myself. No one probably heard it.

I sighed internally.

On top of being an Asamura monopolist, I couldn't even honestly express my feelings.

*Have I always been like this? I feel like I've become such a troublesome person.*

I leaned back against my seat and closed my eyes.

My emotions have been all over the place lately.

If I'd continued with my diary, there'd be too much to write, wouldn't there?

That journal, now discarded so no one would ever see it, began to include Yuuta Asamura's name more and more over the past year, with the entries about him growing day by day. It was obvious just by reading it how my

feelings for him had deepened. That diary of my life as a step-sister was one *no one* could ever lay eyes on.

Now I just record my feelings each day in my heart.

I sighed internally for the second time.

*Stop it.* I couldn't afford to be gloomy. If I were, how could I possibly help Asamura-kun relieve his exam stress?

I brought my mind back inside the car, and tried to join the conversation. As I strained my ears to catch what the conversation was about, it seemed they were talking about Yomiuri-san. Her full name, Shiori Yomiuri, suggested a deep connection to literature<sup>1</sup>, making it the perfect fit for someone working at a bookstore. She was a book lover, kind, beautiful, and occasionally cracked obscure jokes, but was definitely intelligent.

Even now, she was showing off her knowledge about her own name.

“You both know a lot about words, Asamura-kun and Yomiuri-senpai. You both really love books, don’t you?

I genuinely thought that.

That said, Yomiuri-san was quitting her job at the bookstore, despite being offered a full-time position after graduation. Maybe she had other aspirations.

The conversation naturally flowed into a comedy routine between Yomiuri-san and Asamura-kun, with me lost among strange terms like “holy maiden” and “demon lady.<sup>2</sup>” I couldn’t figure out how to chime in.

But Kozono-san jumped right into their banter.

“Don’t, Asamura-senpai. You shouldn’t tease Yomiuri-senpai.”

Asamura-kun protested in feigned indignation while Yomiuri-san laughed, encouraging Kozono-san to keep telling him off.

“Saki-chan, feel free to lay into this good-for-nothing lout more, too,” Yomiuri-san suddenly tossed the proverbial ball my way.

Suddenly thrust into the conversation, I didn’t know how to respond.

“Uh, ah... yes,” I finally mumbled.

I’m not crash hot at this kind of witty banter. I’m not used to engaging with or being engaged by others.

*I might be the good-for-nothing one here.*

“Alrighty, we’re getting on the freeway now,” Yomiuri-san announced.

Trapped in this confined space for the next three hours, I wondered if I could keep up with their conversation.

Feeling fed up with my poor conversational skills, I’d been keeping quiet, when I finally noticed something during our first pitstop: Kozono-san was avoiding talking to me.

It’s not like she never made eye contact; she did glance over at me occasionally, as if something was bothering her, but she never once initiated a conversation.

I was wondering if she hated me, when I realized something. *I rarely looked at her or started a conversation myself either.*

Yeah, for whatever reason, I felt a bit uneasy around Erina Kozono.

Maybe it was all a reflection of my own behavior. Maybe she was only keeping her distance because I’d been doing the same.

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After setting up the tarp, I sought refuge under its shade.

I was finally able to take a breather, freed from the glaring sunlight.

Sitting down on my folding chair to take a load off, I could hear the faint babbling of the river. The wind, filtering through the forest, carried the moist scent of greenery along with the chirping of birds.

After a brief rest, we began preparing for the main event of our outing—the barbecue. Asamura-kun took charge of starting the fire under the grill, while the rest of us handled the ingredient preparation.

Mind you, when I say “preparation,” I really just mean cutting.

We couldn’t cook elaborate dishes since we were outdoors. We could only do what was possible with a cutting board and a knife on a rented folding table. That said, all we had to do for a barbecue was to make sure all the meat and vegetables were uniform in size and thickness so they’d cook evenly.

With that in mind, I started cutting the vegetables. I'd brought some from home to eat raw, my thinking being that if we were going to eat a lot of meat, we should balance it with plenty of veggies. Peppers, cucumbers, and carrots, all washed and ready, were cut into thin sticks and put in a plastic cup.

It didn't take long to finish all the cutting, leaving me with nothing to do. Glancing over at Kozono-san, who was cutting meat, I noticed her handling the knife with a rather dangerous technique.

She gripped the meat with her left hand and forcefully pressed the knife down with her right, sliding off the fatty surface.

*Wait, wait.*

“Don’t run away from me, you!”

*Scary, scary, scary. She might cut her finger!*

“Kozono-san, your hand, your left hand! You learned that in home ec, didn’t you?”

She stopped cutting for a second and looked up at me.

“A cat’s paw, right? C’mon Ayase-senpai, even I know at least that much. I’m not some clumsy heroine in a manga who can’t cook.”

She said it as if emphasizing that this was the real world, reassuring me she had at least the basic cooking knowledge. Though, I *had* to ask.

“Then why are you gripping the meat like that?”

“It’s so lively it tries to escape.”

“It won’t run away. That meat is already dead.”

“Huh? Isn’t that obvious? There’s no way I could butcher a *live* cow. But since it’s fresh, it’s super lively.”

I didn’t expect the expression “lively” to be used to describe meat slipping away as if it was trying to escape.

“And besides, isn’t it hard to cut such thick pieces of meat?”

The meat Yomiuri-senpai bought was definitely thick and chunky. But I also thought Kozono-san’s smaller hands played a part in it.

I mean, it’s possible the meat was sliding around on the cutting board because of its fat.

While watching her struggling away with my head tilted, I noticed something. The legs of the rented folding table were too high for Kozono-san. Or more like, Kozono-san was considerably shorter than other people, so it made it difficult for her to apply proper force with the knife.

“What’s up?”

After finishing giving Asamura-kun instructions and setting up the plates and cutlery, Yomiuri-senpai came over to check on Kozono-san’s progress.

“I’ve used a knife before, but... it’s just kinda difficult at the moment.”

“Ah, it might be a bit too much for you, Erina-chan. If you’re struggling to do it, I can take over.”

“But... I wanna do something too,” Kozono-san said, looking frustrated.

I could see a simple workaround to the problem. This was within my area of expertise, after all. So, I found myself saying things I normally wouldn’t.

“Um... can you let me have a go for a second?” I asked, taking the knife from Kozono-san.

“First, removing the fat that sticks to the knife frequently helps keep it sharp, especially when cutting meat or fish. If water is scarce, like when you’re outdoors, just wiping it with a paper towel is fine. Also, if your hands are slippery from holding it directly, do this—”

I demonstrated using a paper towel to grip the meat. I didn’t do this at home because it was too much trouble and I never dealt with such big pieces of meat.

“Start by making a small incision. You don’t need to apply much force for this, okay?”

Kozono-san nodded with a “yep, yep.”

*She really is a nice, obedient girl when it comes to stuff like this.*

“Then place the knife back in the cut and either pull or push it, letting the weight of the knife do the work. They say to cut by pulling it, but for amateurs, whatever works is fine. Please do what feels easier for you.”

“You’re skilled yet so laid-back about it, Ayase-senpai.”

A wry smile spread across my face in reaction to her frank comment.

“Well, my methods are all self-taught. They’re not textbook, so you might wanna learn the proper techniques or read a specific book on the topic.”

“But you’re good at it!”

“Thanks.”

I’d been cooking since I was a kid. Mom did work at a place that served food, but she isn’t the greatest teacher. More like, she’s not good with words.

Whenever I asked about cooking know-how as a kid, she’d just say, “*Just quickly chop it, toss it in the pan, and stir-fry it real quick~*”

“See, it’s cut now.”

“Wow, you made that look so effortless! It sliced so smoothly without you even using much pressure. Ayase-senpai, you’re really good at handling lively things!”

*That phrasing!*

“You’ve got some skills. Saki-chan, I wanna wife you.”

*Uhm... that’s a compliment, isn’t it?*

“Anyway, that’s pretty much the gist of it.”

“Yes. I understand! I’ll take it from here!” Kozono-san replied energetically.

“Alright, then I’ll keep an eye on you and make sure you aren’t doing anything dangerous. If it comes to that, I’ll take over.”

“Yes. I’ll do my best!”

“I’ll be cleaning up the vegetables.”

After handing back the knife, I returned to my own tasks. Concerned, I kept glancing at Kozono-san out of the corner of my eye. She seemed to get the hang of it, diligently chopping the meat as I’d shown her. There were a few sketchy moments, but it was obvious she was trying her best.

“I did it!”

“Yes, yes. Good girl, good girl. Now, let’s do the next piece.”

Kozono-san’s eyes narrowed in pleasure as Yomiuri-senpai patted her head.

*Ahh, that must be nice...*

I found myself shocked that I’d thought that.

Just when I couldn’t bear to watch Yomiuri-san and Kozono-san’s exchange any longer, Asamura-kun said something to me.

He was always like this. Maybe he wasn't aware of it, but he always spoke to me when I was about to lose myself amongst gloomy thoughts.

I brought the veggies over and stood next to him.

I'd learned to cook out of necessity. Everything was self-taught, so I wasn't even sure if it was the correct way to do things.

Nevertheless, I'd probably cooked more than others my age, naturally acquiring cooking skills as a result. But at the end of the day, I was still just a novice, and my skills were nowhere *near* a professional chef's.

"No, no. I think it's more than enough to deserve a head pat."

Asamura-kun complimented my cooking skills, which made me happy. But Kozono-san was receiving praise just for *trying*. It made me feel jealous—which left me feeling disheartened in turn.

And then the self-loathing set in over my twisting thinking.

Even though Asamura-kun had been so kind to me, I ended up having such twisted feelings.

*Enough. Switch gears. I need to be more composed.*

After we finished eating, it was time for Yomiuri-senpai's eagerly awaited sauna session.

*Alright, I'll reset my mood in the sauna. I'll cast away all my bad thoughts.*

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...That was the plan, anyway.

"I-I think I've reached my limit."

Watching Asamura-kun leave the sauna, I found myself grappling with those pesky thoughts again.

All he'd said about my swimsuit was, "Well, it's not bad, right?"

I mean, he'd been with me when I picked it out, and did say it looked good on me at the time. But still, I wanted him to say it again when it was time to show it off.

*Stop, stop. These are definitely bad thoughts.*

But I did get a good look at his face when he left the cabin. *Oh, Asamura-kun, you're blushing right now. I guess it's hard to know where to look, huh? Kinda cute.*

“Saki-chan, you seem happy.”

*What?* I forcibly tore my gaze away from his back and met Yomiuri-san’s eyes.

“Does it look that way to you?”

“Mhm. Does indeed.”

“Me too! I’m having fun too!” Kozono-san piped in.

Yomiuri-senpai had said I seemed “happy,” not “having fun,” but Kozono-san apparently didn’t notice the difference in nuance.

“Erina-chan, you *always* seem to be having fun, dontcha?”

“Yes! Oh, that’s right,” she exclaimed, then looked up at Yomiuri-senpai with a slightly upturned gaze.

“By the way, Yomiuri-senpai, doesn’t your boyfriend get jealous when you hang out with Asamura-senpai like this?”

“Whoa, Erina-chan, cutting right to the chase. Girl talk time, huh? You like talking about love?”

“I do!”

“*Ahaha.* Honest, aren’t we? But too bad. I don’t have a boyfriend to begin with.”

“Whaaat!? But you’re so beautiful, kind, and funny! How is that even possible!?”

“It’s possible alright. Here I am, living proof.”

“Unbelievable.”

“Well, here’s the thing about the men of the world; they love it when a girl is beautiful and kind, but they don’t look for funny in a girlfriend.”

“Oh really?”

“Think about it. Have you ever heard a guy bragging, ‘My girlfriend is so funny’?”

Kozono-san put her pointer finger on her chin and looked up at the roof of the sauna.

“Hmm.”

“And by bragging, I mean *really* bragging about it. Have you ever seen a guy puff out his chest and proudly say, ‘My girlfriend’s dirty jokes are the best!’? Have you?”

“...I haven’t!”

“See?”

“I wonder why. If I were a boyfriend, I’d totally brag about that.”

“I wonder why too. Anyway, that’s precisely why I don’t have a boyfriend.”

“That’s such a waste.”

“Thanks.”

With a gentle smile, Yomiuri-senpai patted Kozono-san on the head again, maybe because she was just at the right height.

And though it seemed to go over Kozono-san’s head again, Yomiuri-san didn’t say, “That’s why I don’t have a boyfriend,” she said, “that’s precisely why I don’t have a boyfriend.” What she meant was, “That’s why there’s no one who can *become* my boyfriend.”

Yomiuri-san’s condition for someone to be her boyfriend is that they need to like her for who she is. And since no one has met that criterion yet, she didn’t have one.

Honestly though, Yomiuri-senpai<sup>3</sup> insisting a guy like her for her humor was a pretty rare thing...

...But maybe Asamura-kun would say something like that.

I shook my head to clear that sudden thought.

*Stop that. That’s also a twisted thing to think.*

“Ah, okay then, what about you, Ayase-senpai? You have one, don’t you?”

“Huh?”

*What is she talking about?*

“You know, a lover. A boyfriend.”

I'd caught a stray.

Kozono-san, who loved talking about love, looked at me with curiosity, her small eyes twinkling like stars. Her gaze was dazzling. *What do I even say?* It's not like I could just be honest...

"Um, why are you asking me that?"

"...Huh? Ah. Wha—?"

I might have replied a bit coldly. How childish of me.

"There's no deep meaning behind it, but... Ayase-senpai, you're beautiful and seem popular... so, I figured there's no way you wouldn't have one."

"Um... well, that's nice of you to say, but..."

"Saki-chan might come off as a bit hard to approach, yeah. Her usual outfits have a pretty high attack power too."

"Clothes have an attack power?"

"Yup. Saki-chan's outfits have like, an attack power of 2.56 million."

"2.56 million?"

Kozono-san tilted her head in confusion, and I did the same. While I could understand the idea of fashion being an armament—as it was something I personally always thought—where was she pulling that specific number from?

"It's 'cause it's a nice round number."

*How is that oddly specific number considered "round"?*

Yomiuri's joke flew way over both our heads. We honestly just didn't get it.

But thanks to Yomiuri-san's misdirection, the slightly awkward mood from earlier had vanished. We managed to avoid getting too serious. Honestly, I was grateful.

At the same time, I felt like something was wrong.

I'm becoming a worse version of myself. It's been a while since I felt this disturbed by my own thoughts.

I glanced at Kozono-san. It was because *she* was here. Why did we mesh so badly? It felt like her presence was leading my thoughts into darkness.

*I just want to spend time with Asamura-kun right now...*

But then Yomiuri-senpai started some strange endurance contest, so I couldn't just go after him right away. After all, if I said "I'll pass", and left the room, it'd definitely leave an awkward mood behind.

I toughed it out for a little while before leaving ahead of the other two.

I glanced around after coming out of the sauna. *Where could Asamura-kun be?*

I walked towards the riverbank and found him in the water just past some reclining chairs, sitting up to his waist in the current. I put my towel down on a big rock next to his before stepping in myself.

I dipped my toes in first. The flowing water was cold even for summer, but provided the perfect counterbalance to my hot post-sauna body, making me want to dive right in. I slowly poured water onto my body to acclimatize myself before moving closer to Asamura-kun.

I let out a long sigh as I sank down beside him.

"Phew... it was so hot."

"Good effort," Asamura-kun replied, and I returned it with, "Yeah. I'm tired now." I told him how Yomiuri-senpai's challenge stopped me from coming out sooner. He teased me for being one of the first to leave, apparently thinking of me as fairly stubborn—true, but still.

"I don't wanna waste the time we can spend together on some endurance contest."

Words like that slip out so easily when I'm with him. *Why is it that I can't speak my mind like this all the time?*

I could hear Yomiuri-san and Kozono-san's excited voices behind us.

"I think I'd like to cool down too," I heard Kozono-san say and walk in our direction.

"It looks so comfortable. I wanna join too—"

Just as she entered into the water in front of Asamura-kun—tentatively stepping on a slick, flat stone—she started to wobble...

"Whoa!"

Kozono-san slipped and almost fell. I was about to cry out in alarm, but Asamura-kun bounced to his feet and caught her before she could fall. Only her

towel suffered that fate—flying into the air and landing on the water’s surface, before starting to sink as it was carried away by the current. I quickly snatched it from the water and wrung it out.

“Th—that scared me!”

“You okay?” Asamura-kun said gently to Kozono-san, whose face was tense.

Yomiuri-senpai rushed over in a panic.

“Hey! You alright!?”

“I’m fine.”

“Here you go, Kozono-san.”

I handed back the towel I’d retrieved from the river.

I shuddered at the thought of a water-related accident happening in a place without lifeguards keeping a constant eye out, like at a public pool. I was glad our fun outing hadn’t been ruined by one. I didn’t like seeing anyone getting hurt, regardless of who they might be. That said…

The truth is, I felt a bit… annoyed when I saw Asamura-kun catching—not hugging—Kozono-san as she almost fell.

If Kozono-san’s startled “Whoa!” had been more of a “Kyaa~,” I might’ve suspected she did it on purpose. It just wouldn’t seem real. You don’t even see girls doing the whole fake-trip-into-their-boyfriend’s-arms thing much anymore. I hated the fact I even thought that up.

*Argh, I shouldn’t think like that!*

Driven by self-loathing, I dove into the river as if trying to escape from the situation, hoping the chilly water would cool my heated brain.

I dove as deep as I could, then snapped open my eyes—something you could only do in a freshwater river with no salt.

*Wow…*

The flowing water was crystal clear, and I could see colorful pebbles and large rocks along the riverbed. A small fish darted right in front of me. I reached out my hand, but it shot up and escaped through the gaps in my fingers.

I flipped over and lay on my back, looking up at the surface.

*Wow, it's bright.*

The river was shallow, only deep enough to reach my face when standing up. I reached my hand out towards the mirror-like surface about one meter above me. The shimmering surface filled my entire field of vision, light dancing in rippling patterns.

*Beautiful...*

As I alternated between diving to see that view and surfacing for air, my head gradually cooled off.

When I surfaced for the umpteenth time, I noticed Asamura-kun looking at me.

He tried his best to explain himself about catching Kozono-san.

“I know that without you saying it.”

Yeah, I knew that already.

*Honestly, I'm more frustrated with how much of a mess I am.*

I hadn't expected my emotions to be so all over the place even after we'd confessed our feelings and were officially together—more than before we even started dating. I always thought of myself as someone with a cold heart, unmoved by anything.

I got annoyed or felt relieved at every little thing he did. My emotions swung this way and that, and my mind constantly drifted in unpleasant directions. I *have* to do something about it...

“*Because the one I love is you, Ayase-san.*”

The turmoil in my heart stemmed from not fully believing those words.

In essence, I lacked confidence in being loved.

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By evening, when we started packing up, I'd managed to calm down a fair bit.

Or it might be more accurate to say I'd simply grown tired of overthinking things.

With my head cooled off, I realized how self-centered I'd been, and my sense of reason sluggishly started to shake itself awake.

I regretted my immaturity and took the lead in folding the tarp and cleaning up the camp site.

Kozono-san was my junior, after all. I was two years older, and she only entered high school this spring. Half a year ago, she was still in junior high school. She's basically still a child, isn't she? It's one thing to be jealous of her, but to treat her unfairly is not who I want to be as Saki Ayase.

After finishing the cleanup, I did one final check to make sure nothing was left behind.

"Camping's not over until you're home. Let's get pumped for the ride back!"

"You don't need to get pumped, but you're right. Let's be careful on our way back," Asamura-kun responded seriously, eliciting a pout from Yomiuri-senpai.

Kozono-san laughed at that.

As we started walking towards Yomiuri-san's car, I stopped on my own and looked back.

Dusk was approaching. The sun was setting beyond the western mountains. The sun, now close to the ridge, was coloring the clouds floating at the mountain's edge with the hues of sunset.

I stared at the spot where our tarp had been. Wind off the mountain quietly blew through the now empty rectangular piece of land. The treetops swayed, making the whispery sound of leaves brushing against each other.

As I stared out, it was almost like I could hear the echoes of our laughter. It was as if the day's adventures were playing back like a mirage. The tarp we put up while dripping in our sweat, the BBQ we managed to enjoy despite sometimes choking on smoke, the sauna, splashing around in the river as a substitute for a cold bath, and me gazing up at the light dancing on the water's surface. It'd been like looking through a kaleidoscope, light and darkness shifting with the current.

It was fun.

Despite some frustrations, it was a day filled with joy.

I hope Asamura-kun feels the same.

"Ayase-senpai?"

Turning around, I saw that the others had walked quite far ahead, and Kozono-san had come back to check on me, looking worried.

“Did you forget something?”

“Ah, yeah.”

“Oh, did you find it? Want me to help you look for it too?” Kozono-san asked with a worried look.

*She's a kind girl.*

“It's okay. I found it,” I said, smiling at her.

The connections we make with people are often a once in a lifetime thing. It occurred to me that perhaps this group of four might never go somewhere like this again in our entire lives.

With that in mind, the moment felt all the more precious.

As Kozono-san and I walked to catch up with the others, I mustered up the courage to speak up.

“About the barbecue...”

“Huh? Yes?

“You said it was your first time cutting meat that big, didn't you?”

“Ah, yes. It was. It was huuuge, wasn't it~? Yomiuri-senpai said she knows a store that sells those big cuts of meat for cheap.”

“Oh really?”

“The meat ended up weirdly shaped, didn't it?”

I shook my head.

“You cut it nicely. The thickness was even, and you did a great job.”

Kozono-san looked surprised for some reason. *Did I say something strange?*

“Ah, yes... Thank you.”

We caught up with the other two near the car, and Yomiuri-senpai chided us for being slow.

The ride home was a blur as I succumbed to sleepiness, and when I woke, the scenery had changed to the urban landscape of the city. Apparently I'd been pretty exhausted. Makes sense since I was tense all day.

We went our separate ways near Shibuya station, basically the reverse of when we met up in the morning.

Asamura-kun and I, being locals, said our goodbyes to Yomiuri-san and Kozono-san and headed off together. Well, not only were we heading to the same area, but the same *house*.

As we strolled home, rolling along our now much lighter luggage, we chatted about the day. As far as I could tell from our conversation, Asamura-kun seemed to have enjoyed himself too.

“Being exam students, guess this could be our last event this summer, huh?” Asamura-kun said solemnly.

That reminded me of the fireworks festival Maaya had invited me to. Hadn’t I wanted to go, just the two of us?

“But... don’t you wanna go to something with just the two of us?”

Truthfully, it was a way of hinting at going out together one more time this summer.

“Yeah. After we graduate, let’s get our driver’s licenses and go somewhere together.”

I was a little disappointed. To be fair, I *had* daydreamed of going on a drive together too. I also planned to get a license once I was in university. People say it’s expensive, but I figured it’d be useful to have one no matter what job I ended up doing.

But I was hoping for something a little sooner—

“Doesn’t seem like there will be many more chances this year, with my study camp coming up and all.”

“Oh, yeah.”

That’s right, Asamura-kun was heading off on a week-long study camp this coming Monday.

“I feel refreshed after that, so I think I can really put my head down and study now.”

Suggesting more fun activities felt awkward after hearing him say that. Seeing Asamura-kun so focused and serious, I just couldn’t find the words.

*What should I do?*

I feel like I'm the only one constantly pausing, looking to the side instead of moving forward.

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<sup>1</sup> The kanji for Shiori (栢) means “bookmark” and Yomiuri (読壳) means “reading”.

<sup>2</sup> “Saintess/holy maiden” (聖女) and “demon lady/princess” (悪魔令嬢) are popular fantasy archetypes.

<sup>3</sup> It's unclear why she keeps switching between -san and -senpai.

## August 2nd (Monday) - Asamura Yuuta

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We were walking the usual route to Shibuya Station, with me rolling my suitcase beside me.

“A whole week, huh?” Ayase-san asked as she walked next to me.

I nodded.

Technically, it was eight days, from Monday to the next Monday. Well, on the last day we only had to do stuff in the morning, and since it didn’t start until this afternoon, we had the luxury to take it easy today as well.

“I see...”

She seemed to want to say more. Come to think of it, my old man also threw in a “Don’t push yourself too hard,” as we were leaving.

*I guess she’s worried about me.*

“We won’t see each other for a while.”

“I *can* bring my phone apparently, so we might not be able to talk during the day, but I’ll message you on LINE before going to bed, and right after I wake up in the morning.”

“Okay... But, don’t stress if you’re too busy. I can handle it.”

“No worries. Honestly, just hearing your voice kinda makes me feel better, or maybe calms me down, you know?”

*Did I just really say that in broad daylight?*

“If that’s the case, then great. But yeah, I guess I’m just worried you might be overdoing it.”

*So she is worried.*

“I’ll be fine. It’s only a week, anyway. I’m not about to work myself sick.”

“You think so? I get the feeling you tend to work too hard, Asamura-kun...”

Ayase-san walked with her hands clasped behind her back. She was wearing a slightly bigger hat as the sun was strong today. The hat shaded her face and hid her eyes, so it was hard to read her expression.

“You’ve really been hitting the books hard since spring, haven’t you?”

“Uh... have I?”

“You were always pretty good at studying. Your rank wasn’t too shabby either.”

“I couldn’t compete with Maru, though. Or you, for that matter.”

I managed to edge out a win in total scores back when Ayase-san was struggling with modern literature, but now, she doesn’t seem to have any weak points.

“I still have a lot to improve on...”

I’d never asked her directly about what university she was aiming for, but from what I gathered at last year’s open campus visit, she probably wanted to get into somewhere like Tsukinomiya Women’s University. If so, she definitely couldn’t afford to let her current grades slip.

“I have to work hard too.”

It was just an offhand remark, but Ayase-san suddenly turned to look straight at me.

“Why?”

“What?”

“Like I said... why?”

“Huh, uh, what do you mean?”

I reflexively slipped into formal speech, not expecting that kind of question.

“I personally have a university I wanna go to, and I think it’ll be hard to get in with my current grades. That’s why I’m pushing myself.”

I nodded.

“But why do *you* need to, Asamura-kun?”

“Uh, but—if you’re working hard, Ayase-san, then I should be too.”

“Isn’t that kinda pointless? It seems a bit weird, doesn’t it? I’m working hard for my *own* sake.”

*What? Why does she look a little pissed off?*

“Well, I’m doing it for myself too. Because if I’m not worthy of you, then...”

*...I wouldn’t be able to stand beside you.*

That was just how I saw it.

But hearing that, Ayase-san reflexively looked away. She stared straight ahead, looking like she was lost in thought. Even as we walked side by side, she didn’t look at me. That was a first.

One word slipped from her lips.

“...Worthy?”

But she didn’t say anything more, leaving me wondering why she’d gone silent.

As Shibuya Station came into view, she finally looked up.

“Alright, I’ll go do some shopping and head home.”

It hit me that with me being away, she’d have to take over my cooking duties.

“Sorry I won’t be able to help with cooking.”

“It’s fine. There’ll be times when I’m away too, or maybe too sick to do anything, so you can make it up to me then.”

“That’s a given.”

I’d planned to do that anyway without being told.

Hearing her say, “There’ll be times when I’m away too” felt like she was assuming we’d be family for the long haul, which made me happy.

“Alright, good luck with your studies.”

I nodded.

“I’m off.”

“Take care.”

We parted ways in front of the station, and I took the train from Shibuya to the study camp.

The cram school’s summer special program was held at a hotel specially designed for academic training, right by the coast.

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I took the train line south through the city center, and got off at a station lined with towering hotels built on reclaimed land along the bay.

It looked like there weren't just students from my cram school joining the camp, but a lot from other branches too. Meaning, students had come from all over the country.

I figured I'd left home with time to spare, but it was already past noon.

After checking in and getting my room key, I was aimlessly browsing through a pamphlet filled with various instructions in the lobby when I realized the opening ceremony was about to start. The crowd in front of the elevators was massive. Go figure, since all the students were trying to get there at once. *Shoot.* I wanted to drop off my heavy luggage in my room first...

With no other choice, I headed to the opening ceremony with my luggage in tow. The venue was a pretty large hall. There were no assigned seats. The hall was already about eighty percent full, but I managed to find a spot to settle down in.

Looking around, I was struck again by the scale of this camp. The attendees were about the same age, with a nearly equal number of boys and girls—probably slightly more boys. Many were still in their school uniforms, giving the whole thing the vibe of a school assembly.

From what I could see, the dominant feeling in the opening ceremony hall was a tense, charged atmosphere. People weren't talking much to each other, and any chance they got, they were either flipping through flashcards or glancing over cram school textbooks.

Soon enough, the opening ceremony began. A person who appeared to be in charge stood at the front, talking about the dos and don'ts during the camp.

As the ceremony ended and I was about to head to my room, I heard a familiar voice.

“Oh, there you are.”

Turning towards the voice, I saw a familiar face.

“Ahh, hello Fujinami-san.”

It was Kaho Fujinami. Though there was a chance of running into each other since we attended the same cram school, I hadn't really thought about it until now.

Fujinami-san and I headed to the elevator as we chatted, but it was so crowded we both returned to the lobby, still lugging around our bags.

"There were *so* many people."

"Yeah, there aren't enough elevators. We'll have to be careful moving to the lecture halls. Well, there's still some time before the afternoon classes anyway."

We both plonked down in lobby chairs.

"I didn't expect you to be at this camp, Fujinami-san."

Obviously she planned to go to university, since she was attending cram school, but I realized I'd never asked her what one she was aiming for.

I wasn't a fan of prying into people's lives, but I felt like asking her this time.

"Do you mind if I ask what your preferred uni is, Fujinami-san?"

First, I needed to make sure it was okay to ask.

"No, not at all. I mean, I don't talk about it with just anyone, but my first choice is Waseho."

"Waseho, huh?"

It was one of the top private universities in Japan. It made sense she'd aim high, considering she was attending a study camp.

"The Law School there is my first choice."

I was surprised again by her answer. I knew the Law School focused on law and politics, but I didn't picture Fujinami-san being interested in those fields.

"Why Law School?"

"Because I wanna be a politician."

"Seriously?"

"That was a joke."

It was hard to tell if she was joking or serious when she kept a straight face like that.

“I’m half serious, though. Well, I might not become a politician, but I *do* want to get involved in law or politics.”

“Um...”

“You think it’s strange?”

Honestly, the image of politicians and Fujinami-san seemed pretty far apart to me. But that’s just surface level. When you get down to it, you shouldn’t judge a book by its cover.

“Nah, I kind of get it... I think.”

“I have my reasons for it, you know.”

She didn’t usually talk about this stuff, but after that she shared why she was aiming for the Law School.

I’d heard it a few times, but Fujinami-san stopped living with her biological parents at a young age. There were a bunch of reasons she couldn’t stay at home, and she ended up under the wing of a lady in Shibuya—one who operated on the fringes of legality, a so-called gray area.

“But there are people in this world who can’t survive unless they’re in places like that. They’d die under the harsh light of day, their eyes scorched and skin charred. It’s only by curling up in the darkness of night, hugging their knees, that they can finally catch their breath.”

“I can’t really say I get it... but I guess I can sort of picture it.”

When I first got to know Fujinami-san, she took me for a walk through Shibuya’s streets at night. It was a place I’d normally never venture into, filled with drunks stumbling about and women dressed in flashy outfits standing in narrow alleys. I was doing my best just to keep up and not get left behind as Fujinami-san led the way.

It was a completely different side to the city I knew, compared to the bustling main streets crowded with young people during the daytime on weekends. And that’s where Fujinami-san grew up.

“They’re pretty much on the losing side when it comes to politics. If the law were strictly enforced, they’d have nowhere to go. People say not being able to live cleanly and properly is just laziness. But really, the only places they belong are in the gaps between the law’s net. They’re barely scraping by, sort of on a mutual understanding<sup>1</sup> with those around them.”

“...So that’s why you chose the Law School?”

Fujinami-san nodded.

She wanted a society where people barely hanging on without slipping into the underground, those just managing to stay on “this side,” weren’t politically excluded—a society where the loose “mutual understanding” kept going.

“But, for better or worse, the world is always changing, right? Nothing lasts forever.”

“That’s true.”

Looking back through human history, from prehistoric to ancient times, from ancient to medieval times, from medieval to modern times, and now to the present day; the reason for those distinctions in history comes down to something changing from one era to the next. Of course, history will continue beyond the present day, and eventually, even our current times will become a part of the past with some new name attached to it.

“I hadn’t thought about it on such a grand scale, but that’s an interesting perspective, isn’t it?”

That earned me a wry smile.

“So, anyway, if the societal currents seem to be moving in a troubling direction for those people, I don’t wanna just stand by and do nothing, so I more or less think I want to be in a position to resist. I owe them, after all. That said, becoming a politician is another thing. I don’t feel the need for that right now.”

“So, what’s the *actual* plan?”

“For now, I guess becoming a lawyer. Going to a good university, and having legal knowledge won’t make employment difficult, and graduating from Waseho would make it easier to build connections for the future, so there’s also that practical judgment.”

It finally clicked, and I nodded.

At the same time, I was impressed by how well-thought-out it all was.

“So, you’ve heard my deal, now what about you?”

“Huh? Ah, right... yeah.”

I hesitated. After hearing Fujinami-san's detailed plans for the future, it was a bit embarrassing to talk about my own.

"I haven't thought about it as concretely. I'm kind of just aiming to go to a better university and then get into a good company."

"You have a specific uni in mind?"

I couldn't exactly say I didn't. The moment Fujinami-san mentioned Waseho, the name of the other major private university instantly popped into my head.

"Keiryou, maybe?"

"Ooh, that's nice."

"Ah, wait a second."

I'd forgotten about the high tuition fees of private universities. My old man would probably try to help pay even if it was difficult, but I'd prefer to avoid that.

"Ichise University, maybe?"

"A national university? That's also good," Fujinami-san nodded along.

Though as a person who'd said it on the spur-of-the-moment, I couldn't help feeling a bit embarrassed receiving praise like that.

But I did think it'd be hard to seriously compete in the entrance exams without a concrete goal.

"Well, I don't really think my grades are good enough to get in."

"So, why Ichise?"

This time I was *really* at a loss for how to answer. I reluctantly told the truth.

"I just wanna expand my future prospects. I only have half your motivation, Fujinami-san, so it's embarrassing to even mention it."

"Embarrassing?" Fujinami-san murmured quietly.

That murmur gave me a sense of *déjà vu*. Hadn't I heard someone say something similar not too long ago?

Fujinami-san, having listened to my response, tilted her head a few times before suddenly standing up, saying, "It seems to be clearing up now," before quickly making her way to the elevator without looking back at me.

I hurriedly got up to follow, but by the time I caught up, the doors were closing, and the elevator she was on started moving up just as I got there.

*Well, we're in the same camp, so we'll probably meet again.*

I went up to my assigned room, set my luggage down, and started preparing for the afternoon classes.

I remembered to check the pamphlet and found out Wi-Fi was available in the hotel, so I shot off a LINE message to Ayase-san to let her know I arrived safely.

*She might be worried.*

To be fair, it wasn't like I was going abroad or to some countryside mountain, so she probably wasn't *that* worried.

"Oh right, the elevators get crowded."

It seemed wise to leave early to avoid the rush. Lectures were packed until dinner time at 8 pm.

It meant having a late dinner, but it was similar to when I had shifts at the bookstore, and since they were longer breaks than what we got at school, I could always grab a snack if I got peckish. There was even a café in the hotel lobby.

Now, a truly study-intensive schedule awaited me.

Maybe it was because I'd declared I was aiming for Ichise, but I felt like my once vague goal had become more focussed. Just saying it out loud made a difference. Ayase-san was probably aiming for Tsukinomiya, and if her efforts were anything to go by, she'd likely achieve that goal.

*I can't afford to lose.*

Ayase-san's words of encouragement as we parted echoed in my ears.

*"Alright, good luck with your studies."*

I psyched myself up, renewing my determination.

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8 pm. The final class of the day had ended, and it was time for dinner.

I met up with Fujinami-san again in the cafeteria for dinner and we sat together, but we didn't really talk much and just quietly finished our meals.

By the time I returned to my room and took a bath, it was already time for lights-out.

I checked my phone and saw I'd received a message from Ayase-san, replying to the one I'd sent saying I'd arrived.

**Saki:**【I'm glad you arrived safely.】

**Saki:**【What's the place like?】

**Yuuta:**【First day's over. I think it's a good environment. There's really nothing to do besides studying. I've even managed to grasp some things I didn't get before.】

After typing all that, I realized I was just rambling on about myself. I added another message.

**Yuuta:**【How was your day, Ayase-san?】

**Saki:**【Just spent it studying and working.】

*So nothing out of the ordinary happened, I guess.*

After a short wait, another message came through.

**Saki:**【Nothing special. Just the usual.】

All's quiet on the western front, it seemed. Ayase-san also didn't have anything noteworthy to report.

The conversation ended with a 【Good luck with the camp】 from her. Well, it was getting late anyway.

I sent a "good night" stamp and then laid down on the bed.

Although today's lectures started in the afternoon, tomorrow's schedule was packed from the morning. I planned to wake up at 7 am, since I needed to finish breakfast in the cafeteria before the 9 am lectures started. That meant I had to get up by 8 am at the absolute latest.

*I need to get some sleep now.*

I lay down and closed my eyes.

Just that quick message exchange had recharged my batteries quite a bit—*looks like I'll sleep well.*

As I drifted off to sleep, I thought about going all out again tomorrow.

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<sup>1</sup> Kaho uses “naa-naa” (なあなあ) here, which is used in Japanese to describe a situation or approach that is handled in a perfunctory, nonchalant, or half-hearted manner. It implies an attitude of mutual understanding among the parties involved to overlook minor details, rules, or problems without causing conflict.

## August 2nd (Monday) - Ayase Saki

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“A whole week, huh? I see... we won’t see each other for a while.”

I blurted that out as I walked beside Asamura-kun on our way to the station.

*A week is so long. Too long.*

Though I knew I shouldn’t show it, the thought was overwhelming. And it wasn’t like Asamura-kun was leaving to go have fun; he was off to a study camp to bury himself in books.

—Sixty percent of cheating partners do it with a coworker!

*No, no, no. What are you thinking, Saki Ayase? Sure, people say a student’s job is to study, but that’s just a figure of speech. A metaphor. An exaggeration.*

Studying’s just studying. And there was no “coworker” in this scenario, was there? It was just him from our class going to this camp. No one to cheat with. So, there was no reason for my mind to race with all these wild thoughts.

I was overthinking it. If I kept fretting over what he’s doing or whether he’s thinking of me every second, I’d wear myself out. I didn’t want to be the kind of high-maintenance girl you’d find in a romance drama.

But I’ll miss him.

Asamura-kun responded by assuring me he’d LINE me at night. I couldn’t bring myself to tell him that messages and stickers alone weren’t enough.

Instead, I found myself saying, “don’t stress if you’re too busy,” practically the opposite of what I was feeling inside.

I knew how dedicated Asamura-kun had been with his studies since spring, because I’d been watching him closely. I, of course, intended to push myself too.

But it dawned on me that I’d never actually asked him about what university he wanted to get into. Somehow, we’d ended up not prying too much into each other’s private lives, even though we were family.

*No, maybe it’s because we’re family.*

We were afraid to delve too deep and discover the true feelings of the person inside.

Asamura-kun's grades were already pretty good. So why the extra effort now? Personally, I'd set my sights on Tsukinomiya University. I knew to achieve that I needed to boost my average scores a bit more. I needed to dig into more past exam questions, especially for my weakest subject, modern literature.

"I still have a lot to improve on..."

Those words of self-doubt slipped from my lips before I could stop them.

"I have to work hard too," Asamura-kun responded, catching me off guard.

"Why?" I blurted out.

I watched Asamura-kun tilt his head, looking surprised.

*I should be the one making that face.*

"Like I said... why?"

"Huh, uh, what do you mean?"

"I personally have a university I wanna go to, and I think it'll be hard to get in with my current grades. That's why I'm pushing myself."

I hesitated for a moment before continuing.

"But why do *you* need to, Asamura-kun?"

"Uh, but—if you're working hard, Ayase-san, then I should be too."

*Huh?*

That didn't sit right with me.

"Isn't that kinda pointless? It seems a bit weird, doesn't it? I'm working hard for my own sake."

I understood working hard towards a goal. But the idea that Asamura-kun was working hard because *I* was? That didn't make sense to me.

Did that mean if I didn't push myself, he wouldn't either? And if he didn't, did that mean I didn't have to? *That's weird, isn't it?*

I didn't care whether Asamura-kun pushed himself or not. I wanted to get into Tsukinomiya for *me*, not him.

It wasn't something worth getting worked up over, yet I still felt bothered by what he said.

“Well, I’m doing it for myself too. Because if I’m not worthy of you, then...” Asamura-kun said, and the feeling inside me that something was off only grew.

“...Worthy?”

*What does that even mean?*

A haze of unease hung inside me. But just then, the scramble crossing leading to the station came into view. *I shouldn’t do this; dumping my mixed-up feelings on Asamura-kun right before he was about to buckle down and study.* It’d just be a nuisance to him.

“Alright, I’ll go do some shopping and head home—”

My goodbye was a bit cold, but I managed a smile to send him off.

“—Good luck with your studies.”

“I’m off.”

“Take care.”

I turned on my heel, crossed the scramble crossing again, and retraced my steps back the way I came.

*One week, huh?*

Letting out a long sigh, I lost myself in thought.

*What is it about what Asamura-kun said earlier that bothers me so much?*

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Caught up in the hustle and bustle of everyday life, that tiny seed of doubt that’d taken root in my mind quickly faded away.

After finishing my shopping and heading home, I dove into my own exam prep, and before I knew it, it was time for work.

And, as luck would have it, it had to be on a day like this that I ended up working with—

“Ayase-senpai, hello. It’s been a while since the day camp, hasn’t it?”

“Hello, Kozono-san.”

*This is awkward.* No, there shouldn't be anything to be nervous about, yet for some reason, I just couldn't quite figure out how to deal with this junior of mine, Erina Kozono. And that's even with Yomiuri-san endorsing her loveable personality.

It was probably because I'd been keeping my distance, and Kozono-san, sensing that, hadn't tried to get any closer. Even the tiny space between us behind the register felt miles wide.

This has been going on for a while now.

It was around 3 pm.

Customers had stopped coming in, probably because it was afternoon tea time.

There weren't any kids around, which should be the norm during summer vacation, and I hadn't used the cash register for a good ten minutes already.

Just as I was considering tidying up the shelves during the lull, Kozono-san suddenly spoke.

"Asamura-senpai isn't here today, is he?"

"Oh, yeah. He's off today."

"He doesn't seem to have many shifts for a while, do you know why?"

"He's at a study camp for cram school. Apparently he'll be gone for about a week."

*Did I come off as too blunt?*

I needed to bury my emotions more carefully under logical thinking. See, Kozono-san went quiet again. Awkward.

*Hmm. It's not great for me, being two years older, to act this way.*

Kozono-san hadn't done anything wrong, and it wasn't fair to treat her like she was a delicate object.

"Is that right? That's too bad..." Kozono-san murmured in a soft voice after being quiet for a little while.

"Are you that interested in Asamura-kun?"

*...What am I even saying?*

Was this conversation really heading in a direction that warranted asking that kind of question? What am I even asking—

“Is it okay to ask that kind of direct question when we’re working?”

She got me there. My junior just schooled me.

“Just kidding. No, Senpai, if you make a sad face like that, it looks like I’m bullying you.”

“Sorry.”

“And you apologized too.”

“Yeah... well, we *are* at work.”

“But there’s no one here.”

The store was so quiet you could almost hear a pin drop, except for a junior high girl browsing the dictionary section. It was rare for the store to be this empty, even after the year I’d spent working here.

“Well... I *am* a bit curious,” Kozono-san admitted.

I was about to ask “About what?” before realizing she was answering my earlier question.

*Curious... about what exactly?*

“Honestly, he was super reliable at the camp, and I kind of started to like him a bit. Just kidding.”

That definitely made it sound like she was interested romantically.

Before I could even be surprised by that, I started to feel jealous about how open she was. She was two years younger than me, and had *just* become a high school student.

I wondered if I’d feel better if I could just outright say, “back off, he’s *my* boyfriend,” in situations like this. I envied Kozono-san’s boldness.

“Senpai... your face, your face!”

“Wh-what?”

I frantically rubbed my cheeks with my hands. Was there something on my face?

“You’re making a really intense face. Maybe you should go look in a mirror.”

*Huh?*

*Huuuh?*

“But Asamura-senpai was really cool, wasn’t he?”

“What?”

“Oh, I thought I made that a question.”

“...Are you teasing me, Kozono-san?”

“Course not. I mean, Asamura-senpai *is* really cool. Don’t you ever think it’d be nice if a guy like him was your boyfriend? Like, to walk around with such an amazing boyfriend, being all lovey-dovey and showing off to everyone?”

“If your boyfriend is amazing, doesn’t that mean the amazing part is about him, not you?”

“It’s like pulling an SSR character in a gacha game. You’d want to take a screenshot and show it off on social media, right? Or like bragging about a brand-name bag you bought. But that would make it seem like you’re treating your boyfriend like an object, which is a bit weird.”

“Sorry, I don’t really get it,” I said, and got a “huh” from her in response.

*Why am I getting “huh’ed”? Was what I said that strange?*

Kozono-san didn’t seem inclined to explain her reaction, and just then, the junior high girl who’d been browsing the dictionary shelf earlier timidly approached the register with a hefty Kanji dictionary, effectively ending our conversation.

“Welcome. Will this be all for you?”

“Yes.”

“Do you need a bag for this?”

“Ah, I’m fine.”

She showed me the tote bag she had hanging on her arm.

*Oh, she's well-prepared,* I thought with a smile. Then, with a shy and hesitant smile, the girl handed over the money. A Kanji dictionary at this time of year... maybe she was a first-year junior high student who'd missed buying one in spring? Maybe she thought she didn't need a dictionary, but then the end-of-term exams turned out to be more difficult than she expected, so she felt the need for one and hurriedly came to buy it? How cute.

After paying, she said thank you and left the bookstore.

*Hmm. That's how junior highschoolers are, aren't they?*

"What's up? You're staring so hard."

"I was just thinking it's amazing how much people can grow in a single year."

"Geez, Senpai, I've only been working here for a little over a month, y'know?"

Watching Kozono-san tilt her head in confusion, I smiled and nodded along. She really had just started high school. As her senpai, I should be more composed.

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Tired from work, I climbed into bed early.

Just as I was about to fall asleep, my phone dinged.

It was from Asamura-kun.

I remembered I'd replied to his message from earlier that afternoon, letting me know he'd arrived at the camp.

The message said that he was making good progress since there wasn't anything else to do besides studying.

*See, Saki? Asamura-kun went to the camp strictly for exam prep. There's nothing to worry about.*

And here he was, still finding the time to check in on me.

Asked about my day, my exchange with Kozono-san came to mind unbidden. She had said she was interested in Asamura-kun. But obviously that wasn't something I could tell him.

After some thought, I simply told him my day was filled with studying and work, implying nothing significant had happened.

Yet, the truth was, I'd be working the same shift with Kozono-san again tomorrow. The thought of facing the same awkward atmosphere made me dread it, though I also despised feeling gloomy over such trivial stuff.

The lingering anxiety caused by those small triggers still hung around. I wished I could outgrow my immaturity already. I was two years older than her for Pete's sake. How many more years would it take for me not to be affected by trivial stuff?

*"It's amazing how much people can grow in a single year."*

That'd come from my own mouth, but I didn't feel like I'd grown at all.

Like a bamboo leaf boat floating on the waves, I'm easily overturned by the slightest breeze.

I couldn't see an end to this fragile phase, and I couldn't help wondering how everyone else managed to become adults.

Lost in those thoughts, I drifted off to sleep.

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## August 3rd (Tuesday) - Asamura Yuuta

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The sense of urgency hit me during the second day's mock exam.

According to the schedule, these tests, designed to assess our understanding of recently covered material, were set every other day. Today's focus was mathematics.

When I got a look at the test paper as it was handed out, I got a real sense of how intense this summer camp was. Just skimming through the problems, I could tell they were challenging. Even using all the time allowed for the test, I wasn't sure if I could finish all the questions. In fact, there *wasn't* enough time.

Understanding a problem and being able to solve it under exam conditions are entirely different beasts.

This was made all to clear when I arrived at the third problem.

『Find the limit of the following sequence.』

I stared at the symbol  $n \rightarrow \infty$  written in the equation. This means that any number can be substituted for n, but as it gets larger and larger, what value does it approach? I'd definitely learned this; it was even in the reference books I'd recently reviewed.

The math instructor from yesterday's lecture had a unique approach, and the first thing he said was "Entrance exam math is the easiest and therefore the most boring part of math." According to him, it was because, "The questions always have definite answers."

In response to the students' murmurs of "Isn't that obvious?", he listed some unsolved problems that exist in mathematics (the so-called "Millennium Prize Problems"), insisting that it's entirely possible to create endless unsolvable problems if one so wishes. In other words, exam questions are meticulously crafted to ensure that students can solve them. They're guaranteed to have an answer.

"You guys should take it easy for the exam," he had declared.

*Well, I guess he meant not to stress.*

Easier said than done, especially with the problem in front of me. Although I remembered the method for deriving the answer, involving transforming and simplifying the expression, I noticed something alarming—everyone else seemed to be working through the questions faster than me. I would write one line and then stop to think, but I could hear the constant sound of pencils gliding across the paper, as if they'd memorized the steps to the solution.

I couldn't see their faces, but I imagined them looking cool and composed, effortlessly jotting down answers.

*This is bad. Are these guys my rivals?*

This realization brought a wave of panic with it.

After the test, we were given the solutions and explanations for self-grading. After finishing the day's lessons, I returned to my room and went through the model answers. I could understand *most* of them and felt I could have solved all the questions given more time.

But time was the issue.

Understanding a problem and being able to solve it are two different beasts.

I barely managed to tackle the last three application questions, spending too much time just to figure out the approach. It was clear I hadn't practiced enough. I scored zero on those last three, surely placing my overall score far behind the others.

Dinner that evening was a blur. Even as I ate, my mind was preoccupied with how to catch up to everyone else.

When I got up to return to my room, I crossed paths with Fujinami-san.

“Oh, you’re done eating already?”

“Ah, yeah. Um... good night.”

Barely engaging, I hurried to the elevator.

When I got back to my room, it was already time for lights-out. Now in a dark room, I kept going over the next day's lecture topics under the dim light beside my bed. Sacrificing sleep was a small price to pay for catching up during this one-week camp.

I even set my alarm thirty minutes earlier than the hotel's wake-up call, ensuring it would go off multiple times to rouse me. I set it to ring several times every five minutes.

I thought I was motivated, but seeing the sheer volume of study material my peers were managing made me feel inadequate.

I also cut my LINE conversation with Ayase-san short, telling her I had to wake up early tomorrow.

She'd said, "*Good luck with your studies,*" and I wanted to live up to that expectation.

Ayase-san—without going to cram school—managed to score as well as I did, or maybe even better, just by studying on her own. If I wanted to get grades good enough to make me worthy of being her boyfriend, especially seeing how hard she worked, I had no choice but to step up my game.

For the sake of her support and belief in me, I couldn't afford to fall behind the other students, no matter what.

The camp's bedtime was supposed to be 10 pm, but there was no shot that was happening, and it wasn't until past 3 am that I finally drifted off.

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## August 3rd (Tuesday) - Ayase Saki

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“You don’t have to force yourself to eat it all. It’s okay to leave some.”

Hearing Taichi-san’s voice, I snapped back to reality. My chopsticks were gripping a thoroughly charred *mezasashi*<sup>1</sup>. One-third of it had turned to charcoal, and the bamboo skewer that impaled the eyes was burnt beyond recognition.

“Sorry. I took my eye off it for a second and that’s how it turned out.”

“It’s okay. There aren’t that many burnt parts,” I said, before popping it in my mouth.

*Bitter.*

But I toughed it out and chewed.

I couldn’t *not* eat the fish that my Stepdad, still new to cooking, grilled for me during the busy morning rush.

“It cooks surprisingly fast, doesn’t it? I did a better job last time I grilled it.”

What he said got me thinking—*Have we had *mezasashi* recently?*

I couldn’t remember.

“Maybe you mean *shishamo*<sup>2</sup>? ”

“Yeah, that’s the one.”

“They look pretty similar, but *mezasashi* is dried fish, so it has less moisture to begin with, which means it cooks faster.”

“Now that you mention it... that does make sense.”

“It’s delicious though,” I said, picking up another *mezasashi* from the plate next to me and popping it in my mouth.

For clarification, *mezasashi* is not a specific type of fish but a term for dried small fish, like *urume iwashi* or *katakuchi iwashi*<sup>3</sup>, skewered and dried.

This morning's menu included mezasashi, natto, and a little simmered hijiki<sup>4</sup>. The miso soup was made from freeze-dried blocks rehydrated with hot water. I recently learned that even without taking the time to make dashi from scratch, it could still taste good. Never underestimate modern preserved foods, I guess.

“You’re up early today.”

Taichi-san had already finished his food and washed his dishes.

“I need to leave early to get some work done, since I won’t be able to do overtime today. Oh, you’re on dinner duty tonight, right, Saki-chan? I’ll eat out at a drinking party.”

“Ah, okay.”

*That’s rare.* Taichi-san almost never came back late from drinking parties, except on weekends.

Reading my expression, he added, “I’ve gotta give some advice to a subordinate. I also have to take care of those below me because of my position and age. Since Yuuta isn’t here, you’ll be alone for dinner tonight.”

“It’s okay. I’m used to it.”

Taichi-san’s eyes dimmed slightly at that last part. Then, apologizing for not being able to clean up after the meal, he left for work.

I’d always eaten dinner alone. Ever since my biological father left and my Mom took up night shifts, I always cooked and ate my meals alone after getting back from school. It was normal for me.

“Right. Asamura-kun isn’t here, is he?”

Those words unconsciously slipping from my lips made me all too aware of that fact again.

Feeling down about it, I also remembered I had another shift with Kozono-san later. The junior I didn’t get along with.

But before I met Asamura-kun, I probably wouldn’t have even *considered* going to a place where someone like that was. I would’ve just quit on the spot. Cutting ties was just easier, which was why Maaya was the only person I could call a friend.

If I was going to keep working and stressing out over a junior I didn't get along with, I might as well quit and focus on studying for my exams. After all, when autumn rolls around in a few months, I'd have to concentrate solely on my exams anyway.

It suddenly hit me.

That meant the bond I was finally starting to build with her would only last for a few more months.

We would part ways, with me carrying a lingering sense of guilt.

*Are you fine with that, Saki Ayase?*

After all, Kozono-san hadn't done anything wrong.

She tried her best during the day camp. I'd never seen her slack off at work either. So, avoiding her just because I felt like she was difficult to deal with didn't seem right.

With Asamura-kun leading me along, I'd slowly started growing my social circle since that day at the pool last summer. I had a new senpai, Yomiuri-san, and now a new junior, Kozono-san. *Come to think of it, she's actually the first junior I've ever had.*

*"I also have to take care of those below me because of my position and age."*

I replayed Taichi-san's words over and over in my heart.

I had to face Kozono-san properly. I didn't want to regret it later.

*Click.* My chopsticks hit the rice bowl. I hadn't noticed it was empty.

There was only one burnt mezashashi left on the blue plate for fish.

So lost in my own thoughts, I'd left the side dishes untouched. I reluctantly picked up the last mezashashi with my chopsticks.

*I'll eat this and go to work. I'm going.*

The mezashashi was bitter when I bit into it, but I chewed and swallowed it all the same.

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The bookstore was fairly busy.

Meaning, there was no chance for us staffers to chat about trivial things.

Just when I'd psyched myself up for it, I hardly got any chance to talk to Kozono-san.

When my break time finally rolled around, and I was brewing tea at the office's hot water dispenser, Kozono-san conveniently walked in.

As soon as she peered inside and saw me, her mouth formed an "oh" shape. She probably anticipated the awkwardness of being alone with me. But, after showing her face, she didn't want to blatantly avoid me by turning around, so she timidly entered the room.

She was just a normal junior in situations like these.

"Want some tea?"

"Oh... Yes, please. Thank you."

I grabbed another paper cup and brewed tea for Kozono-san too.

I sat down one seat away from hers, cradling the paper cup with both hands. It wasn't hot, but I blew on it anyway just to avoid the unbearable silence.

*Now, how should I start the conversation?*

As I was waiting for the right moment, Kozono-san spoke up first.

"Um, can I ask you something?"

"Mm, sure. What is it?"

I turned my whole body towards her and set the paper cup down on the table.

"Are you, by any chance, dating Asamura-senpai?" she asked, looking up at me.

My breath caught in my throat.

She'd come right out and asked.

*What should I say?* About my relationship with Asamura-kun. About being step-siblings due to our parents' remarriage, and about us also being lovers... How much of this private stuff is it normal to share, anyway?

Thinking about it again made me all the more unsure.

For instance, if hiding as much as possible about your private life was common, then things like wedding rings or matching outfits wouldn't exist. Meaning, there were people in the world who wanted to visually show off that they were in a relationship.

And then there are people like me who believe in wearing what they *want* to wear.

My armament was mine alone. I didn't plan to make Asamura-kun wear anything specific, nor did I intend to match whatever *he* was wearing.

Well... I guess I wouldn't mind us matching *occasionally*. If it would stop girls hitting on him—and it'd stop these indescribable feelings of anxiousness whenever there were other girls around him—then yeah, for my own sanity, I'd be willing to wear matching headbands and stroll around some dreamy theme park.

My thoughts were getting away from me. Back on topic—

"If it looked that way to you, why are you trying to get closer to Asamura-kun?"

Generally, responding to a question with another question wasn't a great way to communicate, and not to mention doing it in a way that's pretty rude made me feel like the epitome of a snarky senpai. Even as I beat myself up over it, I realized that this was exactly the kind of thing that bothered me.

"Wha—... it looks like I'm hitting on him? It really looks that way?"

I nodded.

"For a while now?"

I nodded again. Yeah, for a while now... since she started working here.

"No, no, no... Really?"

"Yeah, that's how it seemed."

“No way, if that’s what you think… ugh, please wait. Is *that* why you don’t like me, Ayase-senpai? Wait, what? Do you have a one-sided crush on Asamura-senpai?”

“What gave you that idea!”

I was floored. How’d she come to *that* conclusion?

“Cause. Why would you think so deeply about it otherwise?”

*So deeply!?*

“It’s annoying, in other words.”

“…May I ask why you think I’m annoying?”

“Ahh… the way you say ‘may I ask’ like that is exactly what’s annoying, but yeah, um, let’s see…”

Kozono-san thought for a moment before looking up.

“*Hmm.* Do you have time after your shift, Ayase-senpai?”

“Huh?”

“Would you mind hanging out for a bit? It looks like it’s going to be a long talk.”

In other words, she was asking for more time because it’d be a complicated discussion.

*What should I do?* Luckily, I didn’t need to cook dinner for Taichi-san tonight. My Mom would head off to work soon, and Asamura-kun was away, meaning the only thing I needed to do tonight was study for exams.

Obviously studying was important, but…

“Okay.”

“This is exactly the kind of hassle I try to avoid by reading the situation and acting accordingly. But oh well, can’t be helped, I guess,” She muttered as if to herself.

*...Did her character just change slightly? Or is it just my imagination?*

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After our shift, we made our way to the Shibuya Sky observatory.

We actually paid for tickets so we could head up to an observation deck where we could see a night view of the city.

To get to Shibuya Sky, you entered on the 14th floor of Shibuya Scramble Square, and went all the way up to the top floor.

Up on the observation deck 230 meters in the air, you can walk around and get a 360-degree view of the surroundings, seeing as far as the edge of Kanto. To the northeast, you can spot the city's skyscrapers, and to the north, you can see the high-rise buildings in places like Ikebukuro and Shinjuku. They say, on a clear day, you can even catch a glimpse of Mt. Fuji to the west. That's what the brochure said, anyway.

When we got there, it was the awkward time right between day and night. In the east, the curtain of night had already fallen, and the lights in the city center were beginning to twinkle, while in the west, the red hues of sunset still hung in the sky.

“Wow, it’s so pretty~” Kozono-san said, glued to the wall and peering down at something.

“Look, you can see the Scramble Crossing from here! There’s so many people!”

A quick glance confirmed that you could in fact see the intersection in front of the station that we passed through almost every day. The people coming and going were smaller than grains of rice, to the point where they didn’t even look like ants. They were just tiny black dots. They’d probably vanish into the twilight before long.

I wasn’t planning on being particularly buddy-buddy, but watching Kozono-san getting excited over the breathtaking view, I felt a bit of my edge softening.

As we went around the observation deck, Kozono-san kept pointing things out to me, and I ended up throwing in a comment or two. *What’s up with this situation right now?*

We’d just finished going full circle and arrived back at where we first saw the Scramble Crossing.

“I really wanted to be like this with you, Ayase-san.”

She’d dropped the “senpai” for “san.”

Was it because we’d left work and were no longer senpai and junior, just acquaintances? Or maybe...

“You mean, like friends? But it seems like you have plenty of friends, Kozono-san. You don’t really need to make friends at work, do you?”

Maybe that came off a bit harsh.

But Kozono-san didn’t seem to take it badly.

“Nah, you’ve got it wrong.”

*Wrong? How so?*

“It’s not about wanting friends; I just wanted to be close.”

“? How’s that any different?”



“I just wanted a relationship where we could hang out without any stress. I think having a place where I fit in is generally more advantageous in life.”

“A place where you fit in...?”

“Ah, you don’t get it, do you?” Kozono-san said while leaning against the observation deck wall.

Shibuya’s northwest sky spread out behind her. The sunset was slowly blending into shades of blue. It was like the sky behind Kozono-san was reaching out, slowly expanding from her right hand to left.

“Y’know, you’re strong, Ayase-san.”

“Strong...?”

“I mean, Senpai, you’ve never thought that you absolutely can’t beat someone, have you?”

“That’s—”

I was about to say that wasn’t true, but then stopped to quietly ask myself the question.

True, if it came to a physical contest, I—being a girl and without any special training—probably couldn’t beat a guy. My grip strength was about average, and I wouldn’t be confident in winning an arm wrestling match. I’d probably lose to half the women too.

*But would that make me feel like others were beating me? I don’t think so.* Whether it was studying hard or being fashion conscious, it all stemmed from not wanting to be beaten.

“—Probably true.”

Kozono-san’s eyes went wide before she let out a sigh-like breath.

“Thought so...”

“Is it different for you, Kozono-san?”

Kozono-san made a face like she’d bitten into a bitter bug—or maybe more like she realized the rice she just put in her mouth was burnt.

“I’m, like, this tall.”

She punctuated the “this” by patting the top of her head with her right hand.

“The average height for sixth-grade girls is 148 centimeters, and for boys, it’s 146 centimeters, right? Girls are taller than boys in elementary school. But once you hit the first year of junior high, boys start getting taller. So, during elementary school, girls with an average height can look down on more than half of the boys and feel good about it.”

“Y-yeah.”

*Feel good about it? Is that so?... Guess I haven’t really thought about it much.*

“Up until then, I spent every day like you, Ayase-san; feeling unbeatable, with no enemies in sight.”

“I didn’t have *that* much confidence.”

Wow. That’s pretty aggressive. I *did* refer to my outfits as “armaments”, but I hadn’t gone as far as treating the boys around me as enemies. But Kozono-san simply brushed aside my retort.

“Well, you get overtaken in junior high anyway—” Kozono-san shifted her gaze away a little, staring out at the indigo-dyed sky as she continued. “I think it’s something most girls feel, y’know. The first setback in life. After puberty, even boys who aren’t that athletic surpass you in height, beat you in arm-wrestling, and when you punch their thicker chests, it’s *your* hand that ends up hurting. You bite your lip in frustration, thinking, ‘Damn, from now on, I can’t physically beat *half* of humanity.’”

“...Well, that’s just how biology works, I guess.”

To be fair, there *are* female fighters who, with enough training, can even beat boys.

“Being this short?”

“Uh.”

“*Sigh...* It wasn’t just the boys either, I was overtaken by other girls too. I stopped growing at that point. Every day was a reminder of that. I can’t reach the straps on the train, my view is blocked, crowded trains are suffocating. Even when I’m walking with other girls, they leave me behind because my steps are smaller, and I can’t reach the top shelves in stores by myself.”

“Ah... yeah. That’s... tough.”

“Yep. It *is* tough. Everyone around me looks like a monster. I’m over here feeling like a gnome or a kobold, and they’re like orcs or ogres, or worse, trolls or giants. If it came down to a battle, I’d definitely lose!”

“Sorry, that last part went over my head.”

*It’s probably some sort of jargon.*

“Anyway, the point is they’re huge enemies. It’s do or die.”

“Oh, got it.”

*Does she treat everyone around her as an enemy?*

“Ah, just now, you didn’t think I was being too quick to pick a fight, did you?”

“That’s not—”

“Well, it’s fine anyway, because it’s true. I really do have a bad personality. I’m aware of it myself. A while back, Yomiuri-senpai called me ‘a genius at being loveable,’ but that’s not true at all...”

While we were talking, the curtain of night fell, and the northwestern sky of Shibuya, which Kozono-san was facing away from, turned pitch black.

With no buildings obstructing the view, it looked as if she was carrying the darkness on her back.

“I don’t think for a moment that I’m loveable just by being present. I’ve been working extremely hard trying to be loved,” she said with a hint of self-mockery.

“Working hard...”

“Yes, working hard. Because if I showed my true self in front of others, they’d definitely hate me. I have a bad personality. I’m confident in that. Being hated is like being killed to me, since everyone is an enemy and it’s obvious I can’t win if we actually fought.”

Kozono-san was saying she was sure other people would hate her, and that’s why she was working so hard to be liked by those around her. It was a way of doing things I’d never thought about myself.

Kozono-san opened up to me. She explained how even if she didn't like reading books, she'd pretend to if someone else likes them. She actually likes sour things, but in front of her friends, she says she loves sweet things. She's scared of ghosts. She likes cats. Crepes and macarons are her favorite foods, and she hates homework and getting lectured. That's the act she put on.

Because everyone loves that version of Erina Kozono.

She figured that as long as she adapts to the other person's preferences and always does things to make them happy, they won't hate her.

Being hated was like a death sentence to her. So she acted in a loveable way to avoid getting "killed."

It was all about staying liked so she didn't feel trapped and could be part of any group she was in. She never let the *real* her slip through. She covered that girl up completely and only showed the cute Erina Kozono everyone expects to see. That's her level of dedication.

It really was all an act. Everything she did, the whole lovable persona, was purely for her own sake.

"Do you think that makes me a bad person?"

I found myself seriously thinking about it. It was a hard concept to wrap my head around.

"So, you always adapt to the other person and behave as if your own preferences are the same... is that what you mean?"

"Exactly."

"But I don't see how that's possible."

Kozono-san's face clouded over for the first time.

"It's not impossible."

"But I mean, um, in that group you belong to, what if there are people who love cats and others who hate them."

There *can* be cat lovers and dog lovers in the same group, and that's not a problem since it's not a direct conflict. You can just say you like both. But loving cats and hating them can't really coexist.

Kozono-san seemed taken aback for a second. But she quickly shook it off, and insisted it wasn't an issue.

“In that situation, I’d just adapt to whoever has the strongest position in the group.”

I nodded.

*That’s really her only option.*

“So that’s why you sidled up to Asamura-kun, wasn’t it?”

“...Yes. You got it... Ayase-san.”

Talking about someone being in a “strong” or “weak” position is tricky. It’s not always about where they stand in the pecking order. In this case, it’s probably closer to “a person with influence in the group.”

Asamura-kun was only a student part-timer. The hierarchy in the bookstore went store manager, then full-timers, then senior part-timers, and finally juniors. So if *that* was all you went by, Asamura-kun’s position would be considered weak.

But then you had people like Yomiuri-san, a student part-timer entrusted with managing inventory. The manager even offered her a full-time position. Yomiuri-san was probably one of the staff the manager trusted the most, so her position was actually pretty strong. A simple part-timer or not, there were definitely people like her.

From what I could see, Asamura-kun ranked the second highest in trust behind Yomiuri-san among the student part-timers. So when I started keeping my distance from Kozono-san not long after she started working there, she had no choice but to cozy up to either Yomiuri-san or Asamura-kun in that group. Faced with double standards, she was forced to make a choice.

But with Yomiuri-san cutting back her hours as she neared graduation, Asamura-kun became Kozono-san’s *only* choice.

“Trying to get close to Asamura-senpai was part of that strategy. It wasn’t exactly flirting, but since it seemed you didn’t like me, Ayase-san, I felt I had to make sure at least *Asamura-senpai* didn’t end up hating me, so I tried really hard.”

“Is that really trying hard?”

“Huh?”

She made a face as if to say, “What’re you talking about?”

“Um, maybe I phrased that wrong... What exactly do you consider ‘trying hard’?”

“...It means giving it my all.”

“Are you really giving it your all?”

Kozono-san made a sulky face.

“Ah, sorry if I upset you. I didn’t mean it like that... um...”

I get what she meant. But—there’s a subtle difference between being serious about something and trying hard.

“Ever since I was little, I had to cook for myself because my parents weren’t around during meal times.”

Kozono-san’s face shifted into a strange mix of surprise and confusion.

“I’ve been cooking since elementary school. Eating out or ordering in was too expensive, and microwave meals just don’t fill you up. So, I guess I’ve ended up cooking way more than most people to start with.”

“That explains why you’re so good at it.”

“I didn’t hate cooking or anything, but more than that, I was forced to do it out of necessity. I did it because I had no other choice. If I couldn’t make something edible, that’d be a problem, so I just got to the point where I could cook something decent enough to eat.”

“I wouldn’t have guessed.”

“And, um, recently, there’s someone who’s been complimenting my cooking a lot... like, ‘It’s amazing,’ or ‘I’ve never tasted anything this delicious’.”

*No, wasn’t it more like, “when’s the last time I had miso soup so delicious”? Ah well, the details don’t matter much.*

“Uh, are you trying to show off that you’re good wife material?”

“N-no, that’s not it. I was just surprised since I didn’t expect the compliments, that’s all. Getting praised made me realize that, while I am serious about it, I’m not exactly ‘trying hard.’”

Of course, I’m always on my game when I’m cooking. There’s no doubt that I’m serious about it. But digging up recipes on the internet or in magazines whenever I had a spare moment had become such a routine part of my life that I didn’t think of it as doing anything out of the ordinary. *Yeah, that’s exactly it.*

I knew I was putting in the effort when it came to studying for exams. But I didn't really feel like I was trying that hard with cooking. Mostly because I wasn't planning on getting better at it or becoming a chef or anything. I did it because I felt like it was something I *had* to do. I wasn't aiming for anything more.

I chalked up Kozono-san's "adapting to others" thing as being the same thing.

Can you really say someone who does something reluctantly—out of necessity—has a bad personality?

"Even if you say that, I'm still getting something out of it."

"Or maybe you're just feeling guilty because you think that way?"

"Guh."

I also felt a little guilty when my cooking was excessively praised. *Isn't it the same for her?*

"People who make a living from cooking probably put a lot of effort into it from around my age, so I find it tough to say I'm working hard at it."

"Well, that might be true."

"And also... you dyed your hair when you started high school, didn't you, Kozono-san?"

"...Yes."

"Isn't that strange? What if they'd said you *needed* to have black hair?"

Kozono-san let out a little "uh", clearly stumped for the first time in this conversation.

If she *was* going to go all out, that's what you'd expect her to do. Shiori Yomiuri-san keeps up her long black-haired, traditional Japanese beauty aesthetic because she knows that's what everyone around her wants to see.

*Yeah, Yomiuri-san is the sort of person who pulls stuff like that off naturally.*

I didn't really know if she preferred the traditional Japanese beauty style *or* if she simply wanted to look beautiful. They were two different things. She might be like Professor Kudou, who likely wouldn't even care if leaves were stuck to her clothes. I feel like chronic bookworms often seem to have that trait.

So it kind of bugged me that Yomiuri-san didn't see through Kozono-san's tactics to make herself loveable... but, maybe that's not what I should be fixating on right now.

"You might not be consciously aware of it, but I think you know it in your heart, Kozono-san."

"What do you mean?"

"Pretending to like what the other person likes as if you like it yourself. Trying to get everything you want by behaving like that. There's no way that works. You didn't add those highlights to your hair just to get others to love you, did you?"

Kozono-san thought for a while after I pointed that out, and then seemed to give up.

"Someone said something similar to me."

Apparently Yomiuri-senpai had said something along those lines to her. She shared her reason—which was the same as the answer she gave back then. Her motives seemed slightly spiritual, and that's precisely why they felt so intensely real.

*"I dyed my hair because I felt like the person reflected in the mirror wasn't me."*

Despite having a job interview coming up and the risk of standing out too much.

"If you fail the interview, you can just look for another job, right?"

"...Yes."

"Doesn't that mean you're only doing it because you *have* to, Kozono-san? If you were actually serious, wouldn't you decide your hair color based on what those around you prefer?"

But she didn't want to do that. Kozono-san said she tried to adapt to others, but only up to a certain point. There were times when she didn't do that, which meant she wasn't using her love-me tactics purely for her own sake.

Like, if she wanted to be an actress in the future and was studying to do that, you could see it as her practicing for a role. And she'd probably change her appearance to fit that role, right?

“You were really eager to learn stuff at work, and even during the camp, you were eager to learn how to handle a knife in a way you’d never used it before. Was all that just to get people to love you?”

“Pretty much.”

“Oh really? I thought both of those were just you showing your seriousness.”

Kozono-san suddenly looked away.

“That’s the thing I miscalculated about you, Ayase-san!”

She let out a sigh.

“What thing?”

“So, like… um, y’know, during the day camp the other day, I kinda started to like Asamura-senpai. Pretty seriously.”

I found it odd that she brought up Asamura-kun right now, but I didn’t want to interrupt her story, so let it go for now.

“And you’re saying it wasn’t for making a better environment for yourself or anything like?”

“Yes. Because, look, when I was about to fall, he was watching and caught me, right?”

“Asamura-kun’s kind, isn’t he?”

“I thought if a cool guy like him protects me, maybe I don’t need to force myself to fit in with others.”

“A cool guy…?”

“Why do you sound so skeptical?”

“Sorry. Yeah, he’s kind and reliable.”

I’d pay that—I also thought he was cool back when he went all out to support his best friend. But for some unknown reason, whenever other people said Asamura-kun was cool, I found myself questioning it. *Why is that, I wonder?*

“But saying that means you know you’re forcing yourself, doesn’t it?”

“That’s not important right now! The important thing is, if I’m serious about chasing after Asamura-senpai, I’d be worried about rivals.”

“Ahh.”

That solved the mystery of what she meant during the work break.

“So, that's why you asked ‘Are you dating Asamura-senpai?’”

“Yep, exactly. If you were dating Asamura-senpai, you'd want to swat away any flies that come close, wouldn't you?”

*Why's she so aggressive?*

“So basically, if I try getting close to Asamura-senpai, you'll hate me.”

Choosing one side meant alienating the other. She couldn't be friends with me and win over Asamura-kun at the same time.

“To be honest, until recently, I thought you didn't like me, Ayase-san. So, I figured, maybe it wouldn't be so bad to get closer to Asamura-senpai.”

“Me hating you and Asamura-kun liking you are not the same thing.”

“Ouch, hit me with the hard truth. Yeah, that's true. But you see, I think I've already secured my spot as the cute junior, dontcha think?”

“I guess so.”

“Not buying it *at all*, huh, Senpai? Dammit.”

“Well, you're free to make a move if you want.”

“Can you stop with the ‘you're free to do it’ comebacks? It's fine, but you know. Anyway, that's why I was looking for a chance to get closer. And then, at the day camp, you suddenly started being nice. And just a while ago too. Like why praise me out of the blue? That's where I miscalculated.”

*Ohh, so that's what she meant by she miscalculated.*

But as for me—

“I just gave credit where credit's due, that's all.”

I finally felt like I was beginning to understand Kozono-san.

She was definitely the opposite of Maaya. Maaya was always looking out for the people around her, not for her own sake. She'd probably honed that sense of consideration from always taking care of her many younger brothers.

Kozono-san, on the other hand, was more like me. Though, *unlike* me, who tried to distance myself from social circles, she just tried to survive within them. Even though our core personalities were the same, our differing stances—me deciding to live independently and her realizing she couldn't live independently—is what set us apart.

Kozono-san and I both placed our own environments as our top priority.

“To answer the earlier question—”

This wasn't something Asamura-kun and I had decided together. We hadn't come to an agreement. So, blurting it out all on my own probably wasn't the best move. Even still...

“Asamura-kun and I are dating. We're a couple<sup>5</sup>. ”

Kozono-san spun to face me. Her small eyes stared up at me.

“It's... it's fine. I kinda guessed already. I wasn't planning on snatching him away or anything. It's free to have feelings, right? Though, legally, until you're actually married, I guess it's within the rules to try, at least in my opinion.”

“So, you want to make a move?”

Kozono-san moved away from the wall. She tried to slip past me and keep walking.

“You probably already know, but I'm a total egotist. I probably won't lose to someone who's overly concerned with keeping the right distance and stressing over trivial stuff,” she said, and headed for the exit.

“Confident words, yet you said ‘probably’.”

She turned back to face me, looking straight into my eyes.

I felt like today was the first time I'd made proper eye contact with her.

“I hate that about you, Ayase-senpai!” she said, sticking out her tongue as she left.



She left without another word.

“What a mess.”

It looked like Asamura-kun and I had some figuring out to do.

Beyond the exit where Kozono-san left, the lights of the skyscrapers in the heart of Tokyo had already illuminated the dark night sky from below.

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That night, I swapped LINE messages with Asamura-kun, but it was brief. I had things I wanted to talk to him about, but he mentioned needing to get up early... On second thought, he was probably in a phase where he wanted to focus on studying right now, so I backed down, thinking it was probably wrong to distract him with my personal stuff.

*I think pulling back is the right move.*

It was only day two of the camp—just two days I hadn’t seen Asamura-kun—yet my heart felt like it had a gaping hole in it.

*I want to see him. I want to hear his voice. I want to touch him.*

A part of me wanted to say, “Why aren’t you here now? I want you to be here.”

Time ticked away as I lay in bed, tossing and turning, sleep eluding me. The digital clock by my pillow had ticked a few minutes forward each time I opened my eyes and looked at it.

*Crap, I need to sleep, or I won’t be able to get up in the morning.*

I kept replaying my conversation with Kozono-san in my head. She said something along the lines of, “I’m an egotist, so I won’t hold back when it comes to love,” but if I were to say that, I’d also be showing my ego.

During our shopping trip, I remembered Asamura-kun and I discussing how we’d explain our relationship to Kozono-san. *“Anyway, let’s talk about this later when we have more time,”* we decided.

But I went ahead and spilled the beans to Kozono-san without talking to Asamura-kun about it first.

Analyzing my feelings at the time, I think I was afraid of what might happen if someone made a move on him. I hadn't realized that until then.

So, I just blurted out that we were dating.

*I guess I'm quite an egotist too.*

But I just can't show that side to Asamura-kun.

I'm totally lost when it comes to dealing with someone who's become an irreplaceable part of my life.

*Is it okay to make demands? What happens if they aren't met?*

The fear of our relationship getting awkward and falling apart scared me.

But, it feels like that's part of how love works... I guess.

Something like—I want to desire it, so I want you to desire it too.

In love, it seems like it won't work out until both sides actually express what they want, even before reaching mutual agreement.

If this was just some summer fling, it'd be simple. A beginning and end, and that's it.

But we're both siblings and lovers. Love weaves through our day-to-day lives, meaning it's not just a one-time thing, but continuous.

It's like we're living a love life, so to speak.

*What should I do?*

As I lay there worrying, my eyelids grew too heavy to lift, and I soon fell into the depths of sleep.

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<sup>1</sup> Skewered fish usually consisting of fish fillets on bamboo sticks and then grilled or fried.

<sup>2</sup> Small, saltwater fish native to Japan. It is often grilled or fried whole.

<sup>3</sup> *Urume iwashi*: a small fish used to make mezashi. It's commonly known as Japanese anchovy or Japanese anchovy sardine. *Katakuchi iwashi*: another type of small fish used to make mezashi. It's also known as round herring or Japanese round herring.

<sup>4</sup> Edible seaweed used in Japanese dishes, with an earthy flavor and chewy texture.

<sup>5</sup> She says *koibito* (恋人), which directly translates to "lover" or "sweetheart." However, here she is making a point to Erina that they are dating, and lover in native English doesn't necessarily mean you are dating someone.

## August 6th (Friday) - Asamura Yuuta

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I woke up early on the fifth morning of the study camp.

I glanced at my phone—5:57, not even 6 am yet.

Despite going to bed after 3 am, my mind felt surprisingly clear. There were still two hours until breakfast.

*I feel like I've been waking up earlier with each passing day.*

But this worked out perfectly for me. I threw off the blanket, washed my face, and immediately started preparing for today's lessons.

There was a test yesterday as well, but I still couldn't solve the problems like I wanted to.

Even now, the sound of my peers' pencils briskly scribbling away lingered in my ears.

And it wasn't just that. With every lecture, I felt the gap between me and the others widening. During breaks, they would eagerly throw pointed questions at the instructor. They weren't just listening and taking notes like me.

I needed to understand more, to solve problems faster. Otherwise, I feel like there's no way I can beat them. If I don't do that, I'll fail. Getting into Ichise University was no walk in the park. Besides, my family wasn't exactly rich. With both Ayase-san and me wanting to move on to higher education at the same time, becoming a ronin<sup>1</sup> was out of the question.

But if I lowered my aim to a worse university, I don't feel like I could stand beside Ayase-san. So, all I could do was try harder.

When I lost my focus for a moment and checked the time, it was almost 9 am. The lecture would start in a few minutes.

I rushed out of my room. Being late for a lecture because I was preparing for it would be a bad joke.

The elevator was crowded again today, but I managed to make it into the room that was being used as a lecture hall just in the nick of time.

No sooner had I caught my breath than the instructor entered, starting the first class of the fifth day. It was halfway through the study camp now, and today marked the start of the second half.

The lectures continued for two periods until 12 pm, leading into lunchtime. No surprise, skipping breakfast was taking its toll, and my stomach was growling with hunger. The cafeteria was buffet-style (with all meals included in the camp fees), so I could go to town. But stuffing my face in this situation would only make me sleepy.

I settled for just bread and milk to fill my stomach, eating it while reviewing my vocabulary book and preparing for the next class. My meals had been like this for a while now.

I attended the afternoon lectures. There were four 90-minute ones with breaks in between, going from 1 to 8 pm.

When they were all over, it was finally time for dinner. Given I'd only been eating light meals all day, my stomach was audibly rumbling.

"Maybe it's time for some curry," I muttered to myself while wandering the cafeteria.

I put a bowl of curry and a glass of orange juice on my tray and looked around for an empty seat.

Just then, I heard someone call out to me. I looked up to see Fujinami-san waving me over. There was a seat open across from her. I thanked her and sat down, apologizing for my rudeness as I continued looking through my vocabulary cards as I ate.

I finished eating in about five minutes. Fujinami-san looked surprised when I said "Well then" and went to stand up.

"You really think you can get by with just that?"

"I mean, I'm full enough."

For some reason, Fujinami-san stared intently at my face as I answered.

"Um... I hope this isn't rude to ask, but are you getting enough sleep?"

"Huh, of course I am."

"You have bags under your eyes."

I rubbed around my eyes. It's hard to believe that just cutting back on sleep for a few days could show that much, but her comment did make me a bit concerned. *I think I'll be fine, though.*

I wanted to get back to my room ASAP and resume studying. I felt particularly productive today.

"Alright. I'll be careful. See you," I said, standing up with my tray.

"Where are you going with that?"

"Oh, right. This isn't a school cafeteria, is it?"

We were allowed to leave our trays on the table when we were finished eating here. I forgot.

I left the tray on the table and was about to leave when Fujinami-san spoke up again.

"Asamura-san, do you happen to have an English dictionary with you?"

"Huh? Ah, yeah, I did bring one just in case."

"Could I borrow it later? I need it for a bit of prep."

"Sure, no problem. I can bring it to you *now* if you want."

"No, later is fine. I don't want to trouble you with something so small. Coming to your room shouldn't be a problem if it's just for something like borrowing a dictionary."

Men's and women's floors in the hotel were separated, but apparently borrowing things was allowed if you told them the reason.

I gave her my room number, making a mental note to get the dictionary out.

"Alright then, good night."

"...Yeah. See you."

I stood up from my seat, thinking her response had been unusually hesitant for her.

As I left, I realized it'd been a while since I'd had a real conversation with her, despite being in the same dorm and seeing her around from time to time. It'd been several days since I talked to *anyone*, for that matter. I hadn't even called Ayase-san; we just exchanged short messages.

"I want to hear her voice."

I was surprised by my own words.

*No, I shouldn't have the luxury to think like that. I should focus on studying, every minute counts.*

It was just past 8 pm, meaning I had at least two more hours to study. Back in my room, I opened my math workbook.

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A *ding* from my phone broke my concentration.

Glancing at the pop-up that flashed up, it seemed to be from Ayase-san.

*Weird, she usually messages just before bed, but it's not time yet.*

Has something happened? I was about to reach for my phone when I heard a soft knock on the door.

*...Who could it be?*

I peered through the peephole suspiciously, and saw Fujinami-san standing there.

I hurriedly opened the door. Oh, right, she mentioned wanting to borrow a dictionary. *Uhm...*

“Sorry, I’ll grab the dictionary right now.”

“No, rather than that, may I come in for a bit?”

“Oh, sure. I don’t mind.”

“Thanks. Standing in the hallway for too long might draw suspicion. I appreciate it,” she said as entered the cramped room.

“You needed the English dictionary, right? Just a sec—”

“Oh, no rush. It was just an excuse, anyway.”

*Come again?*

“An excuse for what?”

“I was hoping we could talk a little. Normally, I try to stay out of other people’s business as much as possible, but we’re not exactly strangers to each other, right?” Fujinami-san said as she came closer and peered into my face.

“Ah... this is terrible.”

“What is?”

“*You* look terrible. How many days have you not slept?

“No, I *have* slept.”

“Today?”

“Two hours.”

“And yesterday?”

“... Two hours, no, maybe three.”

“I’m appalled. That’s hardly sleeping.”

Fujinami-san let out a deep sigh, placing a hand on her forehead and shaking her head.

I couldn’t understand why she was so exasperated. I really wasn’t feeling sleepy. Not during lectures either.

“But I’m not feeling sleepy.”

“So, it’s not that you’re *not* sleeping, you *can’t* sleep.”

“I feel good. It’s rare for me to be able to concentrate on studying this much.”

“Oh really? Then that must mean your mock exam scores have gotten better. We haven’t gotten the results back yet, but you’ve done a self-assessment, I presume?”

“Well...”

That forced me into silence.

It was the second mock exam during the camp, but judging from my self-scoring, yesterday’s test was probably my worst one yet. I completely blanked on the formulas I thought I knew, and I screwed up the timing, leaving half the questions unsolved.

“*Sigh.* Well, you probably don’t want to hear this, but—”

“Ah, no, uh... feel free to take a seat if you want.”

Seeing Fujinami-san looking like she had more to say, I offered her the chair I'd been sitting in.

But she replied, “I don't plan on staying long, so I'll stay like this,” and remained standing in front of me.

“So, why are you in such a rush?”

“Huh?”

*Me, in a rush?*

“Your goal is Ichise University, right? It's definitely competitive, but in your current state, have you really fully grasped what you've learned? You might be more efficient if you relaxed a bit more.”

“But I have to do this much to catch up with everyone else, no, to get *ahead* of them.”

“Everyone else... you mean the people at this study camp?”

I nodded.

“High schoolers who attend camps like this are the cream of the crop. It's understandable if you can't beat them easily. Is there really any point in comparing yourself to them?”

“There *is* a point. Because exams are competitive, it's only natural to compare yourself. Plus, if I can't beat people at this level, I won't get into Ichise.”

I didn't think everyone here was a rival for getting into Ichise, but it was clear that the level of competition was high.

“I see. Let me ask it a different way then. Why do you want to get into Ichise?”

“Huh, because—”

“What faculty do you want to get into? How does it relate to the career you want to pursue? Is there any reason it *has* to be Ichise?”

“Th—that's... there might not be any... particular reason.”

“That's why I'm baffled. If there's no specific reason, you don't necessarily have to go to Ichise. So, why the rush?”

She directed a scrutinizing gaze down at me. We stared at each other in silence, and I was the first to look away.

“You’re right... There’s no reason it *has* to be Ichise. But, there’s someone... I want to live with in the future.”

Fujinami-san nodded along to the last part.

“Ah, the person you talked about before. Got it, so she’s someone you’re seriously considering a future with. That’s pretty rare these days.”

“Is it?”

“I think so. Not many high school students think that far into the future.”

“Future...”

“Yes, It’s far off, isn’t it? Nowadays with everyone marrying later, isn’t the time for teenagers to think about marriage practically as far off as eternity?”

*That’s a strangely poetic way of putting it.*

“Also, you’re planning to continue studying, right? What about your girlfriend?”

“She wants to go to uni too.”

“In that case, unless you have a shotgun wedding, it’ll probably be after graduation. So like, four or five years from now. Ah, but if it’s just about living together, that might be possible right away.”

*We’re already living together... but no, that’s not what this is about.*

“It’s not about the living arrangement.”

“I was just ribbing you. I get it. You mean you want to get married.”

“Ma—”

The word “marriage” still felt far too abstract for me. Just trying to say it out loud made my heart race.

“Well, some people don’t care about making it official. But you seem conservative in that way, Asamura-san, so if you say you want to live with someone, it means you want to marry them, correct?”

“Well, yeah... I guess.”

I hadn't thought about it in such specific terms before. But there is someone I want to support. I think our trust in each other is strong *now*, but feelings don't last forever.

Who knows what could happen as time goes on? Even Shinjo stopped liking Ayase-san romantically in just six months.

To continue earning her trust, I needed to aim higher. To be worthy of her and to support her, I wanted to go to a better university and secure a better job.

I shared my honest feelings.

Fujinami-san listened silently until I was finished.

"If I don't do that, I feel like I won't be worthy of her."

"...Worthy?"

I blinked at the sight of Fujinami-san tilting her head, feeling a sense of *déjà vu*.

"Is being unworthy unacceptable? Ah, wait. I feel like we've had this conversation before..."

She looked up at the ceiling for a moment before returning her gaze to me.

"I remember now. You said something similar on the first day of the camp. It was when I asked why you were aiming for Ichise. You said it was 'embarrassing' because your motivation was only half of mine."

"I did say that... but..."

"Why did you feel the need to compare yourself to me?"

"No, because..."

Fujinami-san, who'd been staring at me intently, nodded as if she'd realized something.

"I see, so your self-esteem is low."

She threw me for a loop.

"Self-esteem is the sense of affirming one's own existence, right?"

"In rough terms, yes."

"Being told it's low is kind of..."

Honestly, I didn't fully grasp what she meant.

As I tilted my head in confusion, she began to explain.

“It’s about whether you can believe someone would love you even if you’re a worthless piece of trash and have nothing to offer. ‘Worthless’ can be replaced with ‘poor’ or ‘cowardly’ or any negative word, really. It’s about accepting yourself as you are.”

“Accepting myself as I am...”

“It’s about whether you can view yourself objectively. That’s the first step. Can you do that? And can you affirm that?”

I was stumped.

Seeing things objectively, without bias, was something I’d always tried to do.

At the very least, I thought I made an effort not to judge others unfairly.

But what about when it came to myself?

“Asamura-san, I think you’ve got a skewed view of yourself. I’ve always thought you were the type to have low self-esteem.”

“Low self-esteem... My friends have mentioned that before, too.”

“Figured as much. I mean, looking humble can be socially advantageous, but when we first met, you said you weren’t that great, and you didn’t really compare yourself to others that much, did you?”

“You think so?”

“Because even though you were going to cram school, you were the kind of person who’d still join me for late-night walks around the streets of Shibuya. It never seemed like you were freaking out because you thought everyone else was beating you. Basically, you weren’t stressing out about comparing yourself to others.”

I clenched my jaw and groaned.

True, I’d been trailing behind Maru and Narasaka-san on the regular exams, but I wasn’t exactly scrambling to rack up more study hours because of it.

Looking back, I don’t remember ever comparing myself to others and feeling down about myself. Though it wasn’t always like that, by the time I entered high school, I’d developed a mindset of “others are others, I am me.”

Truthfully, I *had* to; otherwise, after failing both elementary and junior high school entrance exams, I would've drowned in my own rock-bottom self-esteem.

Making “seeing the world objectively” my motto was largely influenced by the diverse novels I read, where weaknesses turn into strengths and dire situations flip to entertaining outcomes.

So, had I lost the ability to view things objectively?

“When I showed you around Shibuya at night last year, I intended to show you a world where even the so-called losers have a right to live.”

“I think that’s obvious. After all, people’s evaluations change depending on the criteria, and it’s not that you deserve to live because your life has value, but rather, living itself is valuable, so everyone who is alive deserves to live—right?”

I was struck by my own words as they left my lips.

*Then why am I suddenly panicking about my low self-esteem?*

“You try to view others objectively, Asamura-san. But the way you see *yourself* is distorted. Your self-esteem is too low. I don’t know why.”

“It’s because...”

I had an inkling why. My low self-esteem stemmed from my past grades, which only served to make my biological mother angry. I did so badly that I felt like I didn’t deserve her love anymore. I felt like my value was so low that I deserved to lose her affection.

“Isn’t that what’s dragging down your self-esteem now, and continuing to lower your self-confidence?”

I was speechless.

“But...”

*But that doesn’t mean I can be content with the status quo; I won’t be able to catch up to Ayase-san that way.*

“Still with the ‘but’?”

Sighing, Fujinami-san did something unexpected. She stepped closer, reached out, and pushed hard on my chest. Sitting on a bed without a headboard, I helplessly fell backward.

My arms flailed in the air as she grabbed my wrists, clasped them together as if handcuffing me, then bent them so my own wrists were pressed against my chest. It was like I was in a praying position, but the situation was more akin to—

“In a cop drama, this would be where they shout, ‘Suspect secured!’” she said with a grin.

Leaning over, her refined face loomed closer to mine. I could see the fire alarm on the room’s ceiling just past her face. Her breath almost touched me as she spoke.

“Now you can’t study even if you want to.”

“No way, you’re just kidding, right?”

“Just listen. I know doing this is meaningless, but I want you to imagine something for a moment,” she said as she tightened her grip on my bound wrists.

*Ow, ow, ow.* Not only was Fujinami-san taller than me, but she also seemed to have decent strength and grip too. True to her word, I was effectively detained.

“Imagine what...?”

“I mean, how would you feel if the person unpleasantly disrupting your studies was someone important to you?”

Did she mean if Ayase-san was in her place right now?

“I don’t think Ayase-san would do something like this.”

“Ah, so that’s her name... if this Ayase-san girl were to—”



“No, that’s her last name.”

“Huh?”

Fujinami-san’s face went blank and she released her grip—probably unintentionally.

Rubbing my wrists, I sat up.

“Her first name is Saki. Well, I guess that’s not really the issue here though...”

“...You’re calling the person you want to marry by their last name?”

“Yeah, so what?”

“...Really? You’re kidding, right?”

“Nope.”

“...She doesn’t get angry?”

“She calls me by my last name too.”

At home, we call each other Yuuta-niisan and Saki, but since students spend less time at home, we probably end up calling each other “Ayase-san” and “Asamura-kun” more often. In my head, I still call her “Ayase-san.”

Fujinami-san sighed for the umpteenth time today, the biggest one yet.

“I’ve been told never to meddle in other people’s love lives, and I don’t want to say this, but what *exactly* are you two doing? That doesn’t sound like the behavior of a man and a woman considering marriage. Don’t tell me you haven’t even kissed yet.”

“Of course we have.”

“Anything beyond that?”

“...Do I really have to say?”

“No, it’s fine. I can guess from your answer. But back to the earlier point...”

Fujinami-san stepped away from me.

“What if *she*’s the one who gets in the way of your studying?”

I gave it serious thought.

First of all, she probably wouldn't do something like that, but if Ayase-san burst into my room and tried to forcibly interrupt my studies... I mean, it doesn't have to be physically restraining me; it could be as simple as taking away my pencil or tossing my textbook aside.

"I'd think she had her reasons and listen to what she has to say."

"Well, given your reaction to me just now, saying 'you're just kidding, right?' and not getting angry, I guess I can see that. Maybe I was too gentle. What if she slapped you across the face?"

"I'd do the same. I'd think she had her reasons and hear her out."

"But if a stranger did that, you'd be angry, right?"

"Obviously."

Though I'd be more shocked than angry if someone randomly slapped me while I was walking down the street.

"Alright so, you wouldn't get angry at her. Meaning, you wouldn't hate her for it. Then, say you did something she doesn't like, why would she start hating *you*? Why do you think she'd hold it against you?"

"Uh..."

I honestly didn't know how to respond. I'd never thought about it like that.

"Say you studied so hard you collapsed and couldn't take the exams, or got sick and failed. Would she be the kind of girlfriend who would get angry without even asking about the circumstances?"

"That's..."

I wanted to say "different," but I hesitated for a moment. I suddenly wasn't sure.

I'd tried my best during the elementary and junior high school entrance exams—or so I thought at the time. I hoped passing would make my biological mother happy. I wanted to please her.

But the reality was my efforts weren't enough. As exam day approached, I lost my appetite, couldn't sleep properly, and remember taking the exam feeling pretty dizzy. My old man told me it'd be pointless if I ruined my health, but I was too scared to rest.

I failed the exams.

I lost my mother's love.

When I failed the junior high entrance exam, she looked at me with, "not again" expression, let out a very big sigh, shook her head, and said she didn't want to see my face before sending me to my room.

Some time later, the divorce was finalized, and my mother left.

I learned that to receive love from others, I had to show results that met their expectations. I became keenly aware of that. I hated being expected to do well, so I stopped getting close to other people.

"Can't answer? Then think about someone other than her... like your friends or parents."

"Friends..."

Take Maru. For whatever reason, he thinks highly of me, so he'd probably just ask, "What happened?" and worry about me. As for my old man... he'd probably say, "If you did your best like before, it can't be helped. Don't worry about it."

At the very least Maru and my old man would probably ask me the reason if they saw me acting differently than usual.

"If you can imagine someone who wouldn't get angry at you, but would actually support you for who you are right no, it shows you've got some self-esteem. If you can't think of anyone, that probably means you're really hard on yourself. How 'bout it? Can you think of anyone?"

"Well... a few."

"That's good. Better than none. For me, it was zero."

I was speechless.

But then, it dawned on me that Fujinami-san had been rejected by her own family.

"No one ever told me it was okay for me to be alive. When I was taken in by my current foster parents, I was completely broken. I was a twisted child with a terrible glare in my eyes. I had bad skin, and I swore a lot. I hated being photographed next to the other kids in class. I couldn't imagine that someone could ever love me in that state."

She took a breath before continuing.

“And what did my foster mother, who took me in, say to console me? She just cut straight to the point and said, ‘Don’t expect anyone to love you’—just like that.”

It was right after she’d been taken in. The woman who took her in, a formidable figure in Shibuya’s backstreets, had said, *“This city is heartless, so don’t expect anyone to love you.”*

She said it in a tone that didn’t sugarcoat the harsh realities of the world to a then-junior high schooler.

*“If you let your heart be shaken by others, you won’t survive here. It’s useless to rely on love from others. Don’t even expect it. If you really want love, just love yourself—and that’s enough.”*

And so, Fujinami-san stopped expecting anything from others.

“Don’t you think deciding your actions based on how you’re viewed by others means handing over the reins of your life to them? Until junior high, I also tried hard to meet others’ expectations. Unfortunately, that led me to leave home.”

*We’re the same.*

We both struggled trying to meet other people’s expectations, even though we might have struggled to different extents.

“Once I started thinking my actions were just for myself, it made things easier. Since it’s all for my own sake, I don’t need to worry about what others think of the outcome. And that means I can lecture someone not much younger than me, like yourself, without worrying about whether you’ll hate me for it.”

For someone else.

For a stranger.

For others.

For family.

For a lover.

“You might want to stop thinking that way. At least, it’s because of that mindset you’re stuck in a rut now. If the person you’re with hates and rejects the results of you living for yourself, then what’s the value of being with someone like that?”

“I’m not with her because there’s value in being together,” I blurted out.

Fujinami-san grunted and clamped her mouth shut.

I got what she was saying, but—

“I mean… I understand what you’re trying to say, but trying to meet someone’s expectations and working hard isn’t necessarily a bad thing.”

I can’t just brush it off like she does.

Maybe it’s because I still remember—

The joy on my old man’s face when I passed the entrance exam for Suisei High.

The way Ayase-san’s face lit up when I rushed toward her when she was waiting for me at Palawan Beach.

The expressions of those happy to see their expectations met were still vivid in my mind.

“It’s *your* life.”

“It’s *because* it’s my life. It’d be boring to live just for yourself, wouldn’t it?”

We both paused, searching for what to say next.

Just then, my phone made a stupid *blip* sound, notifying me that I had a message.

I glanced over and saw Ayase’s name on the pop-up. Oh right, there was another notification just before Fujinami-san arrived. She must be worried since I hadn’t replied.

“You can check it.”

I silently picked up my phone.

“A link to a video…?”

It seemed to link to a video sharing site. But what did she want to show me?

**Saki:** [I recommend this.]

“If it’s from your girlfriend, go ahead. Don’t mind me, whether you want to talk or reply to her. I’m leaving—”

“Ah, no, it’s probably nothing important.”

I tapped on the video. Soft music flowed out, resembling rain sounds—a bit crackly.

“Lo-Fi Hip-Hop?”

“I told her it’s good for studying... But this is...”

The song had an easy flow to it, with a relaxed melody line and not too many notes. I’m not sure if this is the right comparison, but it felt like you were listening to classical music.

What was her intention? I looked at the message from before.

“I found a charm for a good night’s sleep. I know you’re working hard, but don’t push yourself too much’...huh.”

The nostalgic tune flowed from my phone and drifted around the room. The sound entered my eardrums and seemed to seep into my being, before vanishing.

Closing my eyes, I pictured Ayase-san’s smiling face.

I opened them again.

I finally felt like I could look at Fujinami-san’s face calmly. I realized, albeit belatedly, she had the same concerned expression as Maru, Ayase-san, and my old man when they say, “Don’t push yourself.”

“Thanks for the valuable advice. It’s helped me cool my head.”

“Oh really? Well it’s not like I did it for you. I just came to say what I wanted.”

It was pretty obvious Fujinami-san just wanted to say something because she saw a friend looking terrible. But maybe she’d felt similar pain in the past, or it reminded her of her own past experiences.

“Hand it over then.”

She extended her hand.

“Huh?”

“The dictionary. The English one. I need an alibi.”

“I thought it was just an excuse?”

“Even lies need to be believable. Neglecting to provide evidence removes credibility. I don’t want to be accused of sneaking into a boy’s room late at night.”

Nodding, I handed over the English dictionary, and she said, “I’ll return it tomorrow” before leaving.

I whispered a quiet “thank you” as her figure disappeared out of view.

Left alone in the room, I sat on the bed and continued to play Ayase-san’s video on loop.

Fujinami-san’s words had hit home.

I don’t think wanting to meet Ayase-san’s expectations is wrong, but thinking she’d hate me if I failed was just my own assumption.

Ayase-san’s different from my biological mother. People are different. More than wanting to meet others’ expectations, the real issue is not really thinking through what I was *actually* aiming for by taking the exams.

I reflected on what Fujinami-san said about living for yourself. While I do think that’s a lonely way to live, first I had to work hard for myself. That should’ve come before anything else.

“Maybe I was too hasty...” I muttered, staring up at the ceiling.

The lullaby-like music from my phone eventually lulled me to sleep.

On the other side of a dreamless sleep, I saw the smiling face of the girl I couldn’t meet right now.

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<sup>1</sup> In an academic context, “ronin” (浪人) refers to a student in Japan who has failed entrance exams for a university, typically after completing high school. The term “ronin” literally means “wave person” or “wave man,” suggesting someone who is adrift or without direction. These students often spend a year or more studying intensively to retake entrance exams in hopes of gaining admission to their desired institution.

## August 6th (Friday) - Ayase Saki

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It was just past 3 pm.

“I’m home~”

I heard the door opening along with my Mom’s voice calling out.

Today was a rare day off for her. She’d taken a nap, went shopping at Shibuya Station, and had just returned.

“Welcome back,” I called out to her after opening my door and poking my head out.

“Were you studying?”

“Yeah, but...”

What else would a student facing exams be doing? *Why does she look so surprised?*

“You must be tired. Let’s have some tea.”

“Well, I was just thinking about taking a break anyway.”

“I found some delicious scones.”

“I’ll make the milk tea then.”

I hurried into the kitchen, flicked on the kettle, and began preparing for our afternoon tea. I wasn’t sure if milk tea and scones normally went together as I hadn’t looked it up. I was pretty sure I’d heard it *did* somewhere, and regardless, my Mom had always loved the combination.

Warm scones with special clotted cream, sweet jam, and milk tea—that’s her favorite.

Ever since I was little, it was my job to make the tea whenever she bought scones. While I did that, she’d always get the jam and cream ready. But since clotted cream doesn’t usually last in the fridge, we’d find something to substitute it with if we didn’t have any.

To my surprise, she’d even bought clotted cream today. She must’ve found some exceptionally delicious scones.

I brewed the tea and sat down across from her at the long kitchen table. I warmed the scones in the toaster oven until they were just warm to the touch. I could've used the microwave, but my Mom and I preferred our scones to be a little crispy on top. Once warmed, I popped them on a plate and set them in the center of the table.

“Thanks for the food.”

“Yes. Please help yourself.”

We both took scones from the plate and started eating.

I split open the soft center of my scone and spread cream on it with a butter knife. I carefully nibbled it, holding it with one hand and using my other like a plate underneath to avoid dropping any crumbs.

A nice crunchy bite. Crumbled bits spilled into my mouth, delicately breaking apart and blending with the cream. The scent of baked flour mingled with the sweetness, drifting to the back of my nose.

It was comforting.

“These are *so* good.”

“I know, right?” Mom said with a smile, looking chuffed.

My Mom and I shared the summer afternoon moment together, quietly nibbling on scones and sipping tea, the sound of the air con in the background.

“By the way—” she suddenly said.

I looked up with a “hm?”

“It’s been a while since we’ve had tea together, Saki, just the two of us.”

True enough. Since she remarried and we moved into the Asamura household, I couldn’t remember us having afternoon tea alone together.

“It feels nice to do this once in a while, don’t you think?”

Looking at my Mom’s gentle smile, I felt uneasy again.

Compared to how unstable I felt, she’d been incredibly calm lately.

“There you go again.”

“What?”

“That big sigh. You’ve been doing that a lot lately.”

“Really? I’ve been doing it that much?”

“Yes, really. You haven’t noticed, have you? Is something worrying you?”

I hesitated, unsure of how to proceed.

“Believe it or not, I’m at that age where I’ve got plenty of worries.”

“Oh? Like what?”

Her tone was light, but her question made me hesitate even more.

*Can I say it? There’s no way I can.*

That her daughter had fallen in love with her new stepson, became his girlfriend, and was now in a relationship where hand-holding, hugging, and even kissing were commonplace? And that I was stressed about a junior who saw me as a love rival, and we’d just had a showdown about it?

*Impossible.*

I didn’t even know where to begin or what to say.

“Your Mom is pretty good at giving advice, you know?”

Given her decade-plus experience as a popular bartender in Shibuya, I didn’t doubt it. But still…

“Umm… This is just a hypothetical, but…”

“Sure, sure.”

“Hypothetically speaking, okay?”

“Yes, yes.”

“When two people are in a romantic relationship, it isn’t good if it turns into a battle of egos, right?”

Behind this was my recent dilemma about wanting a romantic fireworks date with Asamura-kun. I wanted to deepen our relationship without allowing any space for intruders.

But I was worried that it’d be selfish of me to express that desire when he was studying so hard. That kind of worry was always in the back of my mind, but that’s beside the point.

I just wanted to ask the expert—*hypothetically*—what she thought.

I asked it in a round-about way, but my Mom responded with something unexpected.

“That depends on how you define ego.”

*What?*

What was she talking about ?

“Recently, I’ve had a regular who works in philosophy or ethics at a university. So, I’m brushing up on those topics. I need to keep up with our conversations.”

Ah, I see. My Mom was in bartender mode now.

“Ego... means selfishness, right?”

“There are roughly three major types. One is ‘self’ as in the sense of one’s own identity, another is the psychological term ‘ego’ used by Freud, and then there’s ‘self-centered thinking’, like you touched on, Saki<sup>1</sup>. ”

“The self... um, like the “process of establishing one’s self” that we learned in health and PE class?”

“Yeah, you’ve got it,” Mom said as she sipped her tea.

She slowly exhaled before continuing.

“But I think you meant the last definition. Generally speaking, whether it’s between lovers, parent and child, siblings, or coworkers—”

Kozono-san’s face flashed in my mind at the mention of coworkers, and I tensed up.

“—Generally speaking, being self-centered isn’t really seen as a good thing in relationships.”

“I think so too.”

“Thought you would, but...”

“Huh?

“So, let’s think about it the other way around. When *wouldn’t* ego be a problem?” she said, raising one finger.

*Ugh.* This was her way of teaching, asking me to think for myself when I just wanted a quick answer. It was a tad stressful. On the rare occasions she switched to this “instructional mode,” it was futile to resist.

I racked my brain.

*When could ego not be a problem?*

As I was holding my head in my hands, my Mom threw me a lifeline. Even when she told me to think things through, she was always pretty soft on me.

“Imagine a husband who insists on having rice for breakfast and refuses to eat anything else. That’s being selfish, isn’t it? He’s disregarding his wife’s preferences to prioritize his own tastes.”

“Yeah, that’s true.”

If someone said that to me, I’d definitely get annoyed. *Is there actually a situation where an ego like that wouldn’t be a problem though?*

After mulling it over for a bit, an answer dawned on me.

Warm scones with special clotted cream, sweet jam, and milk tea—that’s her favorite. I’d never objected to that. *Ah, I get it.*

“If the wife also insists on just having rice for breakfast.”

“Correct. So, ‘any ego won’t become a problem if all members of a group share the same ego’.”

“Like if everyone wants stew for dinner, there won’t be a fight over what to eat?”

“Right, right. Oh, but even if everyone’s ego is pointing the same way—like wanting to monopolize something—it’s a different story if not everyone agrees, so let’s shelve that for now.”

I see, since ego is defined simply as self-centered thinking, it doesn’t necessarily determine whether the other person will dislike it or not. It just happens to be the case *most* of the time.

“That makes sense... But situations like that—”

“Are unrealistic, right. Different strokes for different folks. Everyone is different. It’s practically impossible for all egos to align perfectly in every situation, but...” my Mom continued. “It doesn’t mean it’s impossible in all cases, especially when the group is small. So, to your question about whether a battle of egos in a romantic relationship is bad, the precise answer would be ‘it depends’.”

“Uhm...?”

“Wanting to hold hands, kiss, whatever it might be. In romantic interactions like that, if one person tries to force it, even among lovers, it’s considered harassment. That’s common sense nowadays, right?”

“You need consent.”

“Spot on. That’s why being egotistic in a relationship is frowned upon, unless both people just happen to want the same thing at the same time.”

“I can’t even picture what kind of coincidence would make that happen.”

It’d be like flipping a switch to suddenly have the same ego.

“Yeah. Since both parties are individuals with their own egos, it’s unrealistic to expect their desires to align perfectly at the same time.”

Hearing that made me remember something. Something I thought about the night I had that showdown with Kozono-san.

Nothing starts unless both people desire it.

*Something like—I want to desire it, so I want you to desire it too.*

Romantic moments only happen when both people’s desires align at just the right time.

“That’s why it’s so important to get on the same page, to adjust to each other. Without that, you can’t even share a kiss, no matter how much time passes.”

*Makes sense...*

“Also, there’s one more exception to your question earlier.”

“Huh?

“If the other person has no sense of self. If they have no preferences or dislikes at all. If the wife simply obeys every demand her husband makes without question, there won’t be any conflict, so no problems arise.”

What she said was so outrageous that it left me speechless.

“That means... the lack of conflict itself is the problem, isn’t it?”

“You’ve caught on. Exactly right.”

*Hmmm.*

“And this applies regardless of gender. If a boyfriend said he wanted to meet all your demands, it might make things easy, but from a woman’s perspective, it’d be troubling to see a man with no sense of self.”

“I’d definitely find that troubling. It means you can’t tell his likes and dislikes.”

“Absolutely right. Well, I guess we don’t need to dwell on exceptions like that for now. After all, Saki, *you’re* not like that. And I think whoever ends up as your partner probably won’t be like that either.”

*Yeah, that’s right... Argh! Wait, wait.*

“Hypothetically speaking.”

“Yes, yes. Hypothetically. Of course.”

“...But going back to the topic. So, even if it’s selfish, if the other person is willing to accept it, it won’t be a problem?”

“Yes, exactly. But since you can’t read the other person’s mind to know if they’re willing to accept it or not, it usually ends up causing trouble.”

*Ah, right.*

Since each person has their own unique ego, it’s impossible for their desires to perfectly align all the time—that’s just how it is.

“Okay so, pushing our egos on each other is bad after all....”

“That’s what I’ve been getting at from the start.”

“Guh.”

*That’s kinda unfair.*

My Mom smiled at me.

“Is someone pushing their ego on you, or are you trying to push *yours* onto someone *else*? ”

“Um... I mean, not really either—no, it’s just a hypothetical!”

“Right, right.”

“I’ve always said that pushing things on each other isn’t a good thing. I just couldn’t bring myself to like that part of that person.”

Her expression darkened as soon as I said that, and I quickly lowered my voice.

When my Mom and I talk about “that person”, we mean my biological father.

“I think it’s unbelievable he just focused on his own pain without considering you, Mom, and then took his anger out on others. I could never come to love someone like that.”

Once I started, I couldn’t stop myself, even though I knew it’d make her sad. I knew it was too much to say about someone my Mom once loved. But to me—as a child in elementary school at the time—it was that upsetting.

“You hated him, didn’t you?”

She let out a resigned sigh.

“But the reason I divorced him wasn’t because he was selfish and my love for him faded. It wasn’t like that. I knew about his selfish side even when we were dating.”

She knew he was selfish and egotistic before they got married. But whether you fall in love with someone doesn’t really depend on whether they have negative traits. My Mom said it’s not like you can’t love someone if they have bad traits, and it’s not like you love someone just because of their good ones either.

“It’s not that I loved him because he’s flawed. It’s about whether those flaws are within what I can tolerate.”

When you’re with someone, you’ll inevitably see parts you don’t like about each other, big or small. Whether a relationship lasts depends on whether you can look past these flaws. It’s unrealistic to expect someone to be flawless, and having a few shortcomings doesn’t necessarily change your feelings for them.

“Loving someone isn’t about gaining something. I think the act of loving is beneficial in itself. Just being able to love someone feels like a big win for me, so a little problem here and there doesn’t really bother me.”

“Mom, I didn’t know you thought about love like that...”

For some reason, she looked happy when I said that.

“Hehehe.”

“Why are you laughing?”

“Because, it’s been my dream to have this kinda conversation with my daughter. I guess you’ve grown up enough to talk about love now, Saki-chan.”

“I’m not talking about myself here though.”

“Right, right.”

*I feel like I’m being led by the nose.*

“But I hated that person’s ego. I didn’t know how you could stand it, Mom.”

“Personally, I think *everyone* is selfish to a certain extent. Him and me included. So it comes down to whether you can accept the other’s selfish parts.”

“Didn’t it bother you?”

“I don’t mind giving in on things that don’t matter to me. But that person wasn’t selfish about *everything*. He didn’t oppose it when I started working as a bartender.”

That surprised me. I hadn’t realized it until she pointed it out to me just now.

My Mom paused the conversation to refill our tea. As she did so, I thought back on the past.

My biological father’s business had failed when I was in the early grades of elementary school, and money became tight for our family. My Mom decided to work, and the job she found was at a bar in Shibuya.

Dealing with drunk customers in a night job would make many husbands uncomfortable. My biological father wasn’t exactly jumping for joy about it, but I remember he didn’t outright oppose it either. The fact that he grudgingly allowed my Mom to work there, despite his sour face, was true. If he’d opposed it and stopped her, everything that happened afterward would’ve turned out differently.

I hadn’t cottoned on to that until my Mom just pointed it out.

“Like Taichi-san, I’m the type of person who finds it easier to get along with people who can clearly say what they like and dislike. Of course, if someone pushes too hard on something I can’t tolerate, I probably couldn’t stay with them.”

But she continued by saying that person didn’t fall into that category. And she even said she still didn’t hate him to this day.

“Ah, but keep that a secret from Taichi-san, okay?” she said with a playful wink.

So, why did they break up?

“Hmm, rather than running out of patience, I guess it was because it seemed like it would be harder for him if we stayed together any longer. I didn’t want to quit the job I was starting to enjoy. So in that sense, I guess I found an area where I couldn’t compromise.”

After chewing on her words, I understood.

“I see. Sometimes you end up clashing over things only after you get married...”

“People change over time. If we can’t adjust to those changes, breaking up might be the only option. Also, a big part was it seemed like it would make you cry more often, Saki. I couldn’t turn a blind eye to that.”

“Me?”

“That person just doesn’t understand children. He’s never been in a vulnerable position himself.”

He never experienced failure as a child. He passed the entrance exams for a prestigious private elementary school, then junior high school, and naturally moved on to a top university straight out of high school. Then, he quickly established his own business after working for a while. His life had been completely smooth sailing.

That’s why he wasn’t used to being vulnerable.

“Not used to being vulnerable...”

*What a strange way to put it.*

“Having only experienced being strong, that person lived without recognizing his own weaknesses. His business tanking was probably his first real setback in life. He couldn’t accept his own vulnerabilities.”

Because he’d never been in a losing position, he didn’t know how to act in situations like that. He couldn’t understand that everyone faces setbacks, so he was merciless, even to a child.

“When I told him that you were still just a child and he couldn’t treat you like he treated me, he just didn’t seem to get it.”

“All I remember is that person getting angry at me.”

“I couldn’t stand that either.”

*So that’s how it was, huh...?*

“Anyway, going back to the first question—”

I’d been lost in thought, but looked back at her when she started to speak.

“—It depends on the kind of ego, but in romance, showing it openly isn’t an issue. Actually, if you’re lovers, you have to show it. Otherwise, how would they know what you want? Humans can’t read minds.”

“I get that, but... isn’t it embarrassing?”

*Selfish desires in a romantic relationship... I mean, it’s not something you can easily talk about in public, is it?*

“Still, you need to talk it over at least *once*, right? After that, you can work out a code or something.”

“A code?”

“Like, tapping their shoulder three times means you want a kiss. You can just decide on something like that.”

*No, no, no. What the heck is she saying?*

“Mom... have you been reading too many spy manga?”

*Wait. Surely she doesn’t have an arrangement like this with Taichi-san, does she?*

“Who knows? Maybe I do, maybe I don’t~”

As I watched my Mom sway from side to side, wearing a grin, I couldn’t help but shout, “Are you a kid!?”

“Anyway, moving on...”

“*You’re* the one who started saying weird stuff.”

I was dumbfounded.

“Like I was saying, ego becomes a problem when it’s imposed on someone. Especially if it’s one they don’t want, forced on them against their will. That’s obviously not good,” my Mom said firmly.

This might've been the first time I ever heard her lay things out so clearly and logically. Maybe she thought I was mature enough to handle discussions like this now.

But—

“I’ve been meaning to ask, why did you buy a whole leg of prosciutto?”

“It was highly recommended! Don’t you think it’d be a waste not to buy something when it’s guaranteed to be delicious?

“Mom, you know you’re not supposed to buy expensive things without the family’s consent, don’t you?”

“Mmm?... How expensive is considered ‘expensive’?”

She placed a finger on her chin and tilted her head.

“Let’s just say a whole leg of prosciutto is borderline.”

“*This* should be fine then,” she said, pointing to the box of scones. *No way...*

“They recommended that too?”

“Yep, yep. And they said this clotted cream goes perfectly with these scones.”

“*And* you bought them together!?”

“It was sooo delicious though. Right, right? It was delicious, right?

“Well, that’s... yeah.”

If it’s just scones and clotted cream, then it’s probably fine.

“Oh, and by the way, everything we talked about applies regardless of gender. Nowadays couples aren’t just exclusive to being a man and woman.”

I understood, but since we were only speaking hypothetically, we didn’t need to go into the nitty gritty, did we?

“Your partner doesn’t necessarily have to be a boy, Saki-chan.”

Oops. I almost spat out the scone.

“*Cough, cough.* Ugh. The scone went down the wrong way...”

“Oh my, oh my. Hit the nail on the head, did I?”

“No, it’s not like that.”

"I was just wondering if you might be in love with someone, Saki."

Not—like—that!



I mean, *that* part isn't wrong, but the whole conversation was meant to be about love in general!

Pressed by her intense stare, I found myself instinctively looking down and taking a sip of my tea. *What should I do? Did I put too much emphasis on it being "hypothetical"?*

I glanced up at my Mom.

Wow, what's with that expression? It reminded me of the looks Maaya and Satou-san have when they're eager to hear about romance stuff.

"Um..."

"Yes, yes, go on, you can tell your mother anything."

*Help me, Asamura-kun. There's a love expert here with the eyes of a hunter; trying to extract information about her daughter's love life!*

But I mean, it'd put her in a difficult position if I told her the truth, wouldn't it? It'd cause her trouble, right...?

Part of me also thought it was best to let sleeping dogs lie.

I'd have to tell her at some point. But I couldn't just blurt it out without Asamura-kun's consent. I didn't want things to get awkward by saying it now. Ah, but there's also the chance things won't work out between us, and staying silent might let us return to just being regular step-siblings...

*What are you thinking, Saki Ayase?*

I was thinking about the end when nothing had even started yet.

"Well, even I can fall in love. Yeah."

"Oh my, is it happening as we speak?"

"That's... up to your imagination. Maybe, maybe not."

*Ba-dump, ba-dump, ba-dump.*

I ended up hinting at it.

Despite never bringing up even a hint of romance in front of my parents, to avoid suspicion about our relationship, here I was.

My heart pounded painfully loud.

But even after hearing what I said, my Mom just kept smiling and didn't really say anything... She just stared at me intently.

"I-I'm going back to study," I stammered, clearing the empty plates from the table, and retreating to my room.

Slamming the door shut, I flopped onto my bed.

My heart, which felt like it was about to burst, had calmed down a bit, though the pounding hadn't completely stopped yet.

"Wahhh... I said it."

*Sorry, Asamura-kun. I let it slip.*

Even though I knew I shouldn't have just blurted it out, feeling my heart race like this made me realize I strangely enjoyed the thrill. Maybe this is one of my bad sides... a darker part of me.

I wasn't as rational as Asamura-kun. I didn't hate this kind of excitement over our secret romance...

When I buried my face in the pillow, it felt like my thumping heartbeat was ringing in the depths of my eardrums.

Closing my eyes, I pictured Asamura-kun's face, thinking about what my Mom said earlier.

*"Showing your ego openly isn't an issue. Actually, if you're lovers, you have to show it. Otherwise, how would they know what you want?"*

Can I really say it?

I want to go to the fireworks festival with Asamura-kun.

But with how little we've been talking lately, not even a phone call, I can't just bring it up out of the blue.

Just by looking at his message I can tell he's been pushing himself hard. The study camp was halfway finished, and he might be tired. *Is he getting enough sleep?*

Something suddenly came to mind and I reached for my phone, bringing up a video sharing site. I pulled up one of my favorited songs. A quiet melody that sounded like rain started playing.

Lo-fi Hip-hop was usually my study companion, but this particular track was actually my favorite relaxation music. It'd put me right to sleep.

*Asamura-kun must be tired; I should share this with him.*

I checked the time on my phone. It was already late afternoon. But according to his study camp's schedule, he'd still be in a lecture.

"I should get back to studying too..."

I returned to my desk to do just that.

Later, when I figured Asamura-kun had finished dinner, I sent him a short message with a link to the song.

That night, no reply came.

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There was a new message when I woke up the next morning.

**Yuuta:**【Thanks. I slept really well. It helped a lot.】

It'd been sent early in the morning.

*Good. I'm glad I was able to help.*

My breath caught when I read the second message.

**Yuuta:**【Wanna talk a bit tonight?】

I was really happy. I couldn't wait for the night to come.

And that night, during our LINE call, I took a leap and suggested going to the fireworks festival together.

There was a momentary pause, a sharp intake of breath.

My heart started pounding again.

*He probably wants to focus on his studies. I might be bothering him.*

But if we want to move forward together, we need to do more than just be considerate of each other's feelings. We have to figure out how to balance our egos too.

If he said no, I'd just wait for the next chance. It's better than holding onto stress and worry.

*Please, let our feelings align.*

The seconds it took waiting for an answer felt like an eternity.

But Asamura-kun's response came much quicker than I anticipated.

『Yeah, I want to go to the fireworks festival. I want to spend time alone with you too, Ayase-san.』

Relief washed over me as I let out a sigh. Apparently I'd been holding my breath the whole time without realizing.

Then I noticed he didn't just say, "I'll come to the fireworks with you," but "I want to go." He wasn't just going along with it; it was his own desire.

"Me too! I want to spend time alone with you too, Asamura-kun, so..."

『Yeah. Let's go. Send me the details later. For now, I'll plan around going.』

"Don't push yourself too hard," I said, unable to stop smiling.

After that, we chatted a bit about what had been going on with each other, before hanging up.

Hearing his voice after so long made me incredibly happy.

*Oh right, I have to let Maaya know that I won't be joining her.*

**Saki:**【Sorry. Asamura-kun and I won't be joining you guys at the fireworks festival.】

It only dawned on me after sending it that we might run into each other at the venue. I'd need to discuss this with Asamura-kun later.

*Right, I should ask Mom to get my yukata<sup>2</sup> ready.*

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<sup>1</sup> Saki and Akiko are discussing "ego" (エゴ) versus "jiga" (自我). In Japanese philosophy, ego refers to the individualistic self, often associated with self-importance. It's used in psychological contexts about self-awareness. jiga represents a broader concept of self, encompassing existential reflections on one's identity in relation to society and the universe, and is less centered on individuality.

<sup>2</sup> A yukata is a casual, lightweight Japanese garment worn in summer, resembling a robe. It's simpler than a kimono and worn for informal occasions.

## Epilogue: Asamura Yuuta

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I stowed my luggage in the trunk by my feet and stood staring out the window of the swaying train.

The weather was clear, without a cloud in sight.

We only had a morning lecture on the last day of the study camp. After the closing ceremony, we were sent home right then and there.

Now I was on the train back to Shibuya.

*It was a good study camp...*

I savored the feeling of fulfillment deep in my chest.

That night—the night I fell asleep listening to the music Ayase-san introduced me to—felt like a turning point, as if all the tension had suddenly dropped from my shoulders.

I was able to focus incredibly well in the latter half of the camp.

The self-esteem talk I got from Fujinami-san was a real eye-opener. Coupled with my inherently low self-esteem, I'd completely lost confidence. And I convinced myself I'd lose Ayase-san's love if I didn't work myself to the bone and get good grades—despite her never once saying she wanted that from me.

As if to prove that, the first words in her message had been worries about my health. Yet, I was pushing myself without even caring about my own physical condition. *It's so embarrassing.*

More than anything—

“Live life for yourself, huh...”

Even Fujinami-san, who insists on that point, is choosing her university for the sake of her benefactor and others in similar circumstances. It's just that she doesn't use the excuse of doing it for someone else when choosing that path.

*Why am I studying?* I decided to stop using others as an excuse. Otherwise, if I were to lose Ayase-san (as unthinkable as that is), it would mean I could just give up on studying for entrance exams. That'd be absurd, whatever way you look at it.

Good and bad things happen in life. And life goes on even after things come to an end.

Even if I grow old, die, and decay someday, my life should primarily be for me until then. If I lose sight of that and start saying it's for others, I might end up using my own failures as excuses or a way to blame others.

I finally realized. That was what my biological mother had been doing. She took my failing the entrance exams as her own fault, even though *I* was the one who took the exams and *I* was the one who failed.

That night, after a good sleep, I woke up feeling refreshed, as if a curse had been lifted from me.

The next day, I could concentrate solely on what the instructor said, and no longer cared about what the other students around me were doing during the mock exam.

That evening, when Ayase-san invited me to the fireworks festival, I immediately replied, "I want to go."

Had I not realized the strangeness of my behavior and continued making excuses for Ayase-san's sake, I might have said no.

The fireworks festival was tonight. *I need to hurry home and prepare, or I won't make it in time.*

There was no time to rest, but the slanted sunlight through the train window gave me a thrill distinct from fatigue.

*I want to create summer memories with Ayase-san, just the two of us, for my sake.*

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### Komae-Tama River Fireworks Festival.

The event, held every year in early August, has spots to watch from both the Komae and the Kawasaki side of the river. Ayase-san and I decided to go to the Komae side.

From Shibuya, it takes about 40 minutes to get to Komae if you transfer to the Odakyu Line at Shinjuku Station.

When I got home, Ayase-san was already waiting, dressed in a yukata.

*Ah right, you need to wear a yukata for a summer festival*—I realized belatedly. I did own one, but being a homebody, I hardly ever wore it. I wondered where I put it, but Ayase-san had already asked my old man and had it ready for me. I had to hurry and change.

Despite it being a whole week since I last saw Ayase-san, there was no time to soak in the joy of our reunion. I was so rushed I didn't even have time to appreciate the pattern of her yukata.

By the time we reached the riverbank of the Tama River, it was already packed with people, and we had to walk along the riverbank looking for a place to watch the fireworks. Although the best spots were probably already taken, you could still see fireworks filling the sky from anywhere.

We walked through the festival grounds to the clattering of our *geta*<sup>1</sup>. We visited the stalls while waiting for the fireworks.

The sun set just after 6 pm, and the surroundings gradually darkened. The landscape lost color, as if washed by diluted ink. The Night Queen's black hem slowly enveloped the sky.

The crowd grew thicker, and our pace slowed to a crawl. The cacophony of people buying and selling things was loud, and I had to raise my voice so Ayase-san—walking beside me—could hear.

“Ayase, hold my hand. We might get separated.”

She reached out and took my hand. I tightly squeezed her hand in return and walked slowly, matching her pace.

A crackling sound came through the speakers strung up on either side of the street, followed by an announcement. It told everyone the fireworks would be starting soon.

Almost immediately, the first firework shot up into the sky. With a *boom* like a canon, the ball of light soared into the sky. It burst open, blooming like a flower across the night sky.

There was a collective, “ooh!” from the crowd.

Somewhere, a man shouted the nostalgic cry of “Tamayaaa!<sup>2</sup>”

Children's laughter and exclamations of “beautiful!” and “amazing” could be heard from all around.

Then, as if on cue, fireworks of all sizes and colors began to burst one after another in the sky. The smell of gunpowder hung in the air, and you could see smoke particles reflecting the light from the ground, following the wind as they drifted along the river's surface.

Ayase-san tugged at my hand, trying to say something. It was hard to make out over the noise, so I leaned in to hear her better.

“Um, sorry, I did some things on my own without asking.”

“Huh?”

“I forgot to tell you because things were so hectic...” Ayase-san whispered into my ear.

She confessed to telling Kozono-san about our relationship and hinting things to Akiko-san without asking me.

She dropped her gaze.

“Sorry,” she muttered towards the ground.

This time, I leaned in to whisper in *her* ear.

“Then I’m sorry too.”

She looked surprised.

“I told Yomiuri-senpai about us too. I forgot to tell you, sorry.”

“Oh, I see.”

But it might be getting too difficult to keep our relationship a secret anyway. This probably won’t be the last time. So we had to make a decision.

“I don’t mind that you told them. We’ll have to tell Akiko-san and my father eventually too.”

And that time wasn’t far off.

“Yeah... you’re right. I don’t mind that you told her either. But, I might do things on my own again. So... if you don’t like it, please tell me.”

I’ll do the same.

*Ah, now I get it. She thinks she was being selfish and caused trouble for me, but what she did was no big deal.*



"It's not like I'll get upset over something like that, at least not now. Ah, no, that's not right—"

That's not the right thing to say at a time like this. I uttered two words, the only right ones to say. Words that'd become so commonplace for us that it would be tasteless to even put them into writing.

She suddenly raised her head again, the fireworks blooming in her eyes as she looked at me. I would see my face reflected there, as if blocking the brilliance of the lights shining in the night sky.

I gazed back at her, accepting her existence just as it is, just like she accepts mine.

On the cusp of summer's end, Ayase-san and I savored a fleeting eternity.

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<sup>1</sup> Geta (下駄) are traditional Japanese wooden sandals with elevated wooden bases and fabric thongs worn with traditional attire such as kimono or yukata.

<sup>2</sup> During the Edo period, fireworks displays gained popularity in Japan. The Tamaya clan, a prominent fireworks factory, dominated the industry. In 1810, a rivalry led to the formation of the Kagiya group. Annual fireworks "battles" ensued, with spectators cheering "Tamayaaa!" and "Kagiyaaa!" This tradition became the standard way of expressing delight at fireworks displays.

## Afterword

Thank you for purchasing Volume 10 of the *Days With My Stepsister* light novel series. I am Mikawa Ghost, the author of both the YouTube and novel versions of this work.

Marketed as a romance story, this series, which delicately depicts the relationship between two characters, has now impressively reached double-digit volumes. It's astonishing how much time has passed since the release of the first volume, but how are all of you, the readers, doing?

This volume features a ton of fun events unique to the summer vacation. There's a camping trip with coworkers that involves a long car ride, and scenes that include swimsuits, making this one of the more heart-racing volumes in the *Days With My Stepsister* series, especially with its many illustrations. I hope you enjoyed the cute and appealing aspects of the characters that I've managed to show.

On the other hand, there are scenes depicting Yuuta's unique struggles as a student preparing for exams. Despite having a traumatic past related to studying, he confronts his issues in his own way, overcoming them and moving forward. This represents one of many possible answers to the challenges of exams and life decisions. While it's not the right solution for everyone, if you are currently facing exams or at a crossroads in life, I hope you can see this as a possible way to approach such challenges and wish you a happier life.

By the way, the series has now surpassed a total circulation of 600,000 copies. Thanks to the passionate support from fans who have been with us since the first volume and those who have recently become interested, we truly appreciate it.

Details about the TV anime adaptation will be announced soon. Please look forward to further updates.

Now for the acknowledgements. I would like to thank illustrator Hitensan, voice actors Yuki Nakashima-san, Kouhei Amasaki-san, Ayu Suzuki-san, Daiki Hamano-san, Minori Suzuki-san, director Yusuke Ochiai-san, and all the staff and companies involved, my editor O-san, and mangaka Yumika Kanade-san. Thank you always.

And above all, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to you, the readers, for making it this far. That's all from me, Mikawa Ghost.

## Ebook Bonus: Original Short Story

### ‘Summer Afternoon Moment’

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I was so at a loss that I accidentally blurted out, “Why am I even here?”

“Relax, Ayase Saki. This is my treat.”

“No, that’s not what I’m worried about... Thank you, though,” I said, looking at the three-tiered stand set with plates set in front of me.

They were loaded with everything from salad to cake.

“Isn’t it a splendid sight? This menu is everything in one.”

“I don’t think that’s something you say about an afternoon tea set, but I agree with your sentiment.”

On the top plate of the three-tier stand, there were salads, salmon sandwiches, and egg sandwiches—appetizers, it seemed. The middle plate had three freshly baked scones: plain, chocolate chip, and one other. Probably the main dish. The bottom plate held desserts—pudding, tart, mousse, and Mont Blanc, each a type of cake.

This was more than just a snack; it was a meal in itself.

And the *price* was certainly fitting for the sight before us. Not something a high school student could afford on their allowance, that’s for sure.

The place we were sitting in was also suitable for such a luxurious tea set—a pricey hotel lounge just a little over five minutes from Shibuya Station. The large windows, sectioned off with lattice work facing the garden, let in bright sunlight that filled the entire cafe. The elegant supports of the three-tier stand gleamed silver in the light.

“Go ahead, eat without restraint. Ah, you can choose your tea from thirty varieties, so you’ll surely find a flavor you like,” she said, but didn’t show me the menu.

The woman in front of me—no, I knew her name—Professor Kudou was reading off the names of teas, mixing in her own knowledge. She probably didn’t give me the menu to spare me from seeing the prices and feeling intimidated.

I chose an Assam tea with milk, while Professor Kudou ordered a Chinese tea. Fenghuang Dancong. I think?

The tea was brought over to us. My red colored tea was served in a Wedgwood cup. It was summer, so there was no steam, but a fragrant aroma wafted up. Each teapot was covered with a different colored cozy, and it looked like there was enough for two cups each. The milk had been warmed up too.

“So, why am I here?”

“I invited you for tea.”

“Why did you invite me?”

I was surprised when she called out to me; I’d almost mistaken her for someone else because she wasn’t in her usual white lab coat but was instead wearing a tight blue suit that suited her slender body, giving her a handsome yet still womanly look.

“Why I invited you? That’s obvious, isn’t it? Because it seemed interesting.”

“Oh, right. My bad for asking.”

*That’s right. She might be a university professor, but this is the kind of person she is.*

“So, Saki-chan, how are things going?”

“What do you mean?”

“The forbidden love with your brother, how’s it progressing?”

I almost spat out my tea. I quietly glanced around at the other tables. Professor Kudou’s voice was a clear alto, easy to hear, but that also meant others could hear her too.

“You forgot to add the ‘step’ before it...”

“Oh! So you’re worried about that now. Well, having a blood relation would have made it more interes—I mean more eccentric—but of course, I’m a person of common sense. I don’t have such wild expectations.”

*You almost just said it’d make it more interesting, didn’t you?*

“Nothing special… We get along normally. As brother… and sister.”

“That’s good. Well, as long as you’re careful and using birth control. You’re still high school students, after all. Take care of your bodies.”

“Cough! Cough!”

Coughing and tearing up, I glared at Professor Kudou with an upward glance.

*What a thing to say. Ethics are running away barefoot.*

“Hmm. Still nothing. Boring. Isn’t there anything else? You live together, so you must at least kiss good morning and good night.”

“No we don’t...!”

“How about hugging? I’d bet you’ve done it twenty times, right? No, every day, so a hundred times!”

“We haven’t.”

“Really? What a terrible boyfriend, not even hugging you *once*.”

“That’s not...!”

She grinned, realizing I’d slipped up.

I ended up talking about a bunch of stuff after that, and even received some good advice on my study troubles as an apology. *How frustrating.*

So I snatched the menu and ordered the most expensive tea for a refill.